



the sea of
Tranquility

KATJA MILLAY

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by

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*In memory of my father
Because he said so.*

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Prologue

I hate my left hand. I hate to look at it. I hate it when it stutters and trembles and reminds me that my identity is gone. But I look at it anyway; because it also reminds me that I'm going to find the boy who took everything from me. I'm going to kill the boy who killed me, and when I kill him, I'm going to do it with my left hand.

CHAPTER 1

Nastya

Dying really isn't so bad after you've done it once.

And I have.

I'm not afraid of death anymore.

I'm afraid of everything else.

August in Florida means three things: heat, oppressive humidity, and school. *School*. I haven't been to school in over two years. Not unless you count sitting at the kitchen table being home-schooled by your mom, and I don't. It's Friday. My senior year starts on Monday, but I haven't registered. If I don't go in today, I won't have a schedule on Monday morning, and I'll have to wait at the office for one. I think I'd rather skip the bad 80's movie scene where I walk in late on the first day and everybody has to stop what they're doing to stare at me, because while that wouldn't be the worst thing that would ever happen to me, it would still suck.

My aunt pulls into the parking lot of Mill Creek Community High School with me in tow. It's a cookie cutter high school. Except for the putrid color of the walls and the name on the sign, it's an exact replica of the last one I attended. Margot—she made me drop the aunt part because it makes her feel old—turns down the radio she's been blaring the entire way here. Thankfully it's a short ride, because loud sounds make me edgy. It's not the sound itself that bothers me; it's just the fact that it's loud. The loud sounds make it impossible to hear the soft ones and the soft sounds are the ones you have to be afraid of. I can handle it now because we're in a car, and I usually feel safe in cars. Outside is a different story. I never feel safe outside.

"Your mother expects a phone call when we're done here," Margot tells

me. My mother expects a lot of things she's never going to get. In the scheme of things, a phone call is not much to ask, but that doesn't mean she'll get one. "You could at least text her. Four words. *Registered. All is well.* If you're feeling really generous, you could even throw one of those little happy faces on the end."

I look sideways at her from the passenger seat. Margot is my mother's younger sister by a good ten years. She is the opposite of my mother in almost every way. She doesn't even look like her which means that she doesn't look like me, either, because I am a carbon copy of my mother. Margot is dirty blond with blue eyes and a perpetual tan that she easily maintains by working nights and napping by the pool during the day; even though she's a nurse and she should know better. I have pale white skin, dark brown eyes, and long, wavy, just-this-side-of-black hair. She looks like she belongs in a Coppertone ad. I look like I belong in a coffin. People would have to be stupid to believe we're related, even if it is one of the only things about me that's true.

She's still got that cocky smile on her face, knowing that even if she hasn't convinced me to placate my mother, then at least she's planted a little guilt. It's impossible to dislike Margot, even when you really, really try, which makes me hate her a little, because I'll never be one of those people. She took me in, not because I don't have anywhere else to go, but because I don't have anywhere else I can stand to be. Luckily for her, she really only has to see me in passing, because once school starts, we'll rarely ever be home at the same time. Even so, I doubt taking in a sullen, bitter, teenage girl with more issues than National Geographic is at the center of the vision board for a single woman in her early thirties. I wouldn't do it, but then I'm not a very good person. Maybe that's why I ran like hell from the people who love me the most. If I could be alone, I would. Gratefully. I'd rather be alone than have to pretend I'm okay. But they won't give me that option. So I'll settle for being with someone who at least doesn't love me as much. I'm thankful for Margot. Not that I tell her this. Not that I tell her anything. I don't.

When I walk in, the main office is a mass of commotion. Phones ringing, copiers running, voices everywhere. There are three lines leading up to the front counter. I don't know which one to get into so I pick the one closest to the door and hope for the best. Margot sweeps in behind me and

immediately pulls me around the side, past all of the lines, and up to the receptionist. She's lucky I saw her coming, or the second her hand was on my arm, she would have found herself face down on the ground with my knee in her back.

"We have an appointment with Mr. Armour, the principal," she says authoritatively. Margot, the responsible adult. She's playing my mom's part today. This is a side of her I don't usually see. She prefers the cool aunt role. She doesn't have any kids of her own, so this is a little out of her depth. I didn't even realize we had an appointment, but I see the sense in it now. The receptionist, a fiftyish, unpleasant-looking woman, motions us to a couple of chairs next to a closed, dark wood door.

We only have to wait a few minutes and no one notices or acknowledges me at all. The anonymity is nice. I wonder how long it will last. I look down at myself. I didn't get decked out for the visit today. I expected to come in, fill out some paperwork, hand over some immunization records and be done with it. I wasn't expecting the swarms of students crowding the office. I'm wearing jeans and a black v-neck t-shirt, both a little – ok, a lot – tighter than they need to be, but otherwise completely non-descript. The shoes are where I made the effort. Black stilettos. Four-and-a-half inches of insanity. I'm not using them so much for the height, even though I seriously need it, as for the effect. I wouldn't have bothered with them today, except I needed the practice. My balance on them has gotten better, but I figured a dress rehearsal wouldn't hurt. I'd prefer to avoid eating ass on my first day of school.

I look at the clock on the wall. The second hand is bouncing back and forth inside my head, even though I know I can't possibly hear the ticking over everything else going on. I wish I could tune out the noise in this room. It's disconcerting. There are too many sounds at once and my brain is trying to separate them, to sort them out into neat little piles, but it's almost impossible with all of the machines and voices melting together. I open and close my hand in my lap and hope we get called in soon.

A few minutes that seem like an hour later, the heavy wooden door opens and we're ushered inside by a forty-something man in an ill-fitting shirt and tie. Attire aside, he's not a bad-looking guy. Too good-looking to be a principal. He smiles warmly before sliding back behind his desk, into an oversized leather chair. The desk is imposing. Too big for this office.

Obviously the furniture is meant to intimidate, because the man does not. Even before he's said much, I peg him as soft. I hope I'm right. I'm going to need him on this.

I settle back into one of two matching burgundy leather chairs opposite Mr. Armour's desk. Margot sinks into the chair next to me and launches into her spiel. I listen for a few minutes as she explains my "unique situation" to him. *Unique situation, indeed.* As she goes into detail, I see him glance over at me. His eyes widen just slightly as he looks closer, and I catch the glimmer of recognition in them. Yes, that's me. He remembers me. If I had gotten further away, this might not even be necessary. The name wouldn't mean much of anything. The face would mean even less. But I'm only two hours from ground zero and if even one person puts it together, I'll be right back where I was there. I can't take the chance, so here we sit, in Mr. Armour's office, three days before the start of my senior year. Nothing like last minute. Though this, at least, is not my fault. My parents fought the move until the end, but they finally relented. I may have Margot to thank for some of that. Though I think the fact that I broke my father's heart helped the cause a little, too. And, probably, they were all just tired.

I'm completely zoned out on the conversation now, and I'm busy checking out Armour's office. There's not much to distract, a couple of houseplants that look like they need to be watered, along with a few family pictures. The diploma on the wall is from the University of Michigan. His first name is *Alvis*. *Huh*. What kind of crap name is *Alvis*? I don't even think it means anything, but I'll definitely check later. I'm running through possible origins in my head when I see Margot pulling out a file and handing it to him. Doctor's notes. Lots of them. As he looks over the paperwork, my eyes are drawn to the old-school metal hand-crank pencil sharpener on his desk. It strikes me as odd. The desk is a rich, fancy cherry number, nothing like the crap industrial ones teachers get. Why anyone would mount such an ancient pencil sharpener on it is beyond me. It's a complete contradiction. I wish I could ask about it. Instead, I focus on the ring of adjustable pencil holes and wonder idly if my pinky finger would fit into any of them. I'm contemplating how much it would hurt to sharpen it, and how much blood there might be, when I hear Mr. Armour's tone shift.

"Not at all?" He sounds nervous.

“Not at all.” Margot confirms. She’s got her put-on, no-nonsense demeanor in full swing.

“I see. Well, we’ll do what we can. I’ll make sure her teachers are informed before Monday. Has she filled in a class request form?” And like clockwork, we’ve gotten to the part where he’s started to talk about me like I’m not in the room. Margot hands him the form and he peruses it quickly. “I’ll get this to the guidance department so they can have a schedule drawn up by Monday morning. I can’t promise she’ll get these electives. Most classes are already full at this point.”

“We understand. I’m sure you’ll do whatever possible. We appreciate your cooperation and, of course, your discretion,” Margot adds. It’s a warning. Go Margot. I think it’s kind of wasted on him, though. I do get the feeling he genuinely wants to help. Plus, I think I make him uncomfortable, which means he probably hopes to see as little of me as possible.

Mr. Armour walks us to the door, shaking Margot’s hand and nodding almost imperceptibly at me with a strained smile that I think might be pity, or possibly, disdain. Then, just as quickly, he looks away. He follows us back into the chaos of the front office and asks us to wait a moment while he heads down a hallway to the guidance office with my paperwork.

I look around and see that several of the same people I saw earlier are still waiting in line. I thank whatever god still believes in me for appointments. I’d rather clean the inside of a Port-O-Let with my tongue than spend another minute in this cacophony. We stand against the wall as far out of the way as we can get. There are no empty chairs now. I glance to the front of the line where a dirty-blond Ken doll is tossing his most panty-dropping smile in the direction of Ms. Unpleasant on the other side of the counter. Ms. Unpleasant is now positively glowing in the aura of this boy’s flirtations. I don’t blame her. He’s the kind of good-looking that transforms once self-respecting females into useless puddles of dumbass. I struggle to separate out their conversation. Something about an office aide position. *Aahh, lazy bastard.* He cocks his head to the side and says something that makes Ms. Unpleasant laugh and shake her head in resignation. He’s won whatever it is he came here for. I watch the slight shift in his eyes. He knows it, too. I’m almost impressed. While he’s waiting, the door opens again and a psychotically cute girl walks in and scans the room until her eyes land on

him.

“Drew!” she yells over the commotion and everyone turns. She seems oblivious to the attention. “I’m not going to sit in the car all day! Come *on!*” I check her out while she glowers at him. She’s blonde, like him, though not exactly; her hair is lighter, like she spent the whole summer in the sun. She’s attractive in the most obvious way possible, wearing a pink, well-filled out halter top and carrying an obsessively color-coordinated, pink Coach purse. He seems mildly amused by her displeasure. Must be his girlfriend. A matching set, I think. *Panty-Combusting Ken comes complete with Piqued Princess Barbie: unachievable measurements, designer purse and annoyed scowl included!* He holds up a finger to her to convey that he’ll just be a minute. If I were him, I’d choose a different finger. I smirk at the thought and glance up to see him smirking right back at me, his eyes alight with mischief.

Behind him, Ms. Unpleasant quickly scrawls something on his form and signs the bottom. She passes it back to him, but he’s still looking at me. I point to her and raise my eyebrows at him. *Aren’t you going to get what you came for?* He turns and takes the form from her hands, thanks her and winks. He winks at the menopausal office lady. He’s so blatantly obvious, it’s almost inspired. *Almost.* She shakes her head again and shoos him toward the door. *Well-played, Ken, well-played.*

While I’ve been amusing myself with the office drama, Margot’s been whispering with a woman who I assume is the guidance counselor. Drew, who I desperately want to keep calling Ken, is still standing near the door, talking to a couple other guys who are waiting at the back of the line. I wonder if he’s purposely trying to piss off Barbie. It seems easily done.

“Let’s go.” Margot re-emerges, ushering me toward the front doors.

“Excuse me!” a woman’s raised voice shrills, before we make it to the exit. Everyone in line turns in unison, watching the woman hold up a file folder in my direction. “How do you pronounce this name?”

“NAH-stee-ya,” Margot enunciates, and I inwardly cringe, acutely aware of the audience around us. “Nastya Kashnikov. It’s Russian.” She tosses the last two words off over her shoulder, obviously pleased with herself for some reason. We head out the door with everyone’s eyes on our backs.

When we reach the car, she lets out a sigh and her demeanor noticeably shifts back to the Margot I know. “Well, that hurdle’s cleared. For now,” she adds. Then she smiles her dazzling, all-American-girl smile. “Ice cream?” she asks, sounding like she might need it more than me. I smile back, because even at 10:30 in the morning, there’s only one answer to that question.

CHAPTER 2

Josh

Monday, 7:02 AM. Pointless. That's what today is going to be, along with the 179 school days that come after it. I'd contemplate the waste of it all now if I had the time, but I don't. I'm gonna be late as it is. I head to the laundry room and yank some clothes out of the still-running dryer. I forgot to turn it on last night, but I don't have time to wait; so now I'm stuck pulling on a pair of damp jeans while I walk and trying not to trip over myself. Whatever. It's not like I'm surprised.

I grab a coffee mug out of the cabinet and attempt to fill it without spilling it all over the counter and burning myself in the process. I put it on the kitchen table, next to a shoe box full of prescription bottles, in time to see my grandfather coming out of his room. His white hair is so disheveled that he momentarily reminds me of a mad scientist. He walks alarmingly slow, but I know better than to offer to help him. He hates that. He used to be so badass and now he's not, and he feels every bit of that loss.

"Coffee's on the table," I say, grabbing my keys and heading for the door. "I laid out your pills and logged them already. Bill's coming in an hour. You sure you'll be ok until then?"

"I'm not an invalid, Josh," he practically growls at me. I try not to smile. He's pissed. Pissed is good. It makes things seem a little bit normal.

I'm in my truck and down the driveway in seconds, but I'm not sure it'll be enough. I don't live far from school, but the back-up to get into the parking lot on the first day is always a bitch. Most teachers will look the other way today, but I wouldn't have to worry about it anyway; no one's going to give me a detention, late or not. I floor it, and a couple of minutes later, I'm waiting to get into the lot. The line of cars snakes out onto the road, but at least it's periodically moving. I'm running on four hours of sleep and only one cup of coffee. I wish I had had time to grab another one for myself, but I didn't, and it probably would have ended up in my lap by the time I got

to school anyway.

I pull out my schedule while I'm idling and check it again. Shop isn't until fourth period, but at least it's not all the way at the end of the day. The rest of it I don't give a shit about.

When I finally make it onto campus, Drew is out front with his usual followers, regaling them with any number of BS stories about his summer. I know they're all BS because he spent most of the summer hanging out with me and I know for a fact that we didn't do crap. Apart from the time he spent disappearing with whatever girl he was hooking up with, he was on my couch. Looking at him now, I don't think there's anyone happier to be back at school. I'd roll my eyes if it didn't seem such a chick thing to do, so instead, I just stare blankly ahead and keep walking. He nods in my direction as I pass, and I return the gesture. I'll talk to him later. He knows I won't go near him when he's surrounded. No one else acknowledges me and I pass through the rest of the crowds, into the main courtyard, just as the first bell rings.

My first three classes could all be the same. All I do is listen to rules, pick up syllabi and try to stay awake. My grandfather was up five times last night, which means I was up five times last night, too. I really have to start getting more sleep. *In a week you will*, I think bitterly, but I won't dwell on that now.

10:45 AM. First lunch. I'd rather just head straight to shop. Eating this early sucks. I make my way to the courtyard and park myself on the back of the bench farthest from the center, the same one I've sat at for the past two years. No one bothers me because it's easier to pretend I don't exist. I'd rather spend the half-hour sweeping sawdust than sitting here, but there isn't any sawdust to sweep yet. At least it's early enough that the metal benches aren't scorching under the sun. Now I just have to wait out the next thirty minutes, which will probably be the longest of the day.

Nasty

Surviving. That's what I'm doing now, and it hasn't been quite as horrible as I expected. I get a lot of sideways looks, probably because of the way I'm dressed, but other than that, no one really talks to me. Except for Drew, the Ken doll. I did run into him this morning, but mostly it was a non-event. He talked. I walked. He gave up. I've made it to lunch and this is the test. No one's really had much of an opportunity for socializing yet, so I've been able to skate below the surface, but lunch is just a highly unsupervised hell dimension. Avoidance seems the best option at first, but I have to face the looks and the comments at some point. Personally, I'd rather shove a cactus up my ass, but apparently that option isn't on the table, so I might as well just rip the Band-Aid off now and get it over with. Then, I'll find an empty restroom and check my hair and fix my lipstick or as we cowards like to call it—hide.

I try to surreptitiously check out my clothes and make sure nothing's where it shouldn't be and that I'm not flashing anything more than I'd originally planned. I've got on the same stilettos as Friday, but this time I went with a low cut black tank top and an almost non-existent skirt that my ass doesn't look half-bad in. I left my hair down so it falls past my shoulders and covers the scar on my forehead. My eyes are rimmed with thick black eyeliner. It's slutty and probably only attractive to the basest of human creatures. *Drew*. I smile to myself as I recall him looking me up and down in the hallway this morning. Barbie would be pissed.

I don't dress this way because I like it so much or because I want people to stare at me in general. But people are going to stare at me for the wrong reasons anyway, and if they are going to stare at me for the wrong reasons, then at least I should get to pick them. Plus, a little unwelcome staring is a small price to pay for scaring everyone off. I don't think there's a girl in the school who will want to talk to me, and any boy who's interested probably won't be much for conversation. And so what? If I'm going to get unwanted attention, better it be for my ass than for my psychosis and my effed-up hand.

Margot hadn't gotten home by the time I left for school this morning or she might have tried to talk me out of it. I wouldn't have blamed her. I think my first period teacher wanted to nail me on a dress code violation when I first walked in; but once he checked my name on his roster, he ushered me to a seat and didn't look at me again for the rest of the class.

Three years ago, my mother would have had a fit, cried, lamented her shortcomings as a parent, or possibly just locked me in my room, if she saw me at school like this. Today, she'd look disappointed but would ask if it made me happy and I'd nod my head and lie so we could pretend it wasn't a problem. The clothes probably wouldn't even be the biggest issue, because I'm not sure she would mind the streetwalker uniform nearly as much as the make-up. My mother loves her face. It's not out of arrogance or conceit; it's out of respect. She's grateful for what she was born with. She should be. It's an awesome face, a perfect face, an ethereal face. The kind people write songs and poems and suicide notes about. It's that exotic kind of beauty that men in romance novels obsess over, even if they have no idea who you are, because *they must possess you*. That kind of beauty. That's my mom. I grew up wanting to look just like her. Some people tell me I do, and maybe it's true, under there somewhere. If you scrape off the make-up and dress me to look like a girl as opposed to what I look like now—a profanity-spewing guttersnipe being dragged out of a crack house on *Cops*.

I imagine my mother shaking her head and giving me the disappointed look, but she chooses her battles these days and I'm not sure this one would make the cut. Mom's beginning to believe I may be a lost cause and that's a good thing. Because I am, and I left her house so she could accept it. I was a lost cause a long time ago. That thought makes me sad for my mother, because she didn't ask for any of this. She thought she'd gotten her miracle, and I was the only one who knew she hadn't, no matter how much I wanted to give it to her. Maybe I was the one who took it away.

Which brings me back to the courtyard, where I am still waiting on the outskirts like a guest on an episode of *Extreme Avoidance: High School Edition*. I planned to get here early enough to make it across before lunch was in full swing, but I got sidelined by my history teacher, and that three minutes meant the difference between a half-empty courtyard and the one teeming with students that I'm staring at right now. I'm focused, at the moment, on the brick pavers covering the entirety of said courtyard, and seriously questioning the wisdom of my four-and-a-half-inch stilettos. I'm gauging my odds of making it across with both my ankles and my dignity intact when I hear a voice to my right call out.

I turn instinctively, but I know immediately that it's the wrong thing to

do. Sitting on a bench, a couple feet away, is the owner of that voice and he's looking right at me. He's leaning back casually, with his legs spread farther apart than they need to be in a blatant display of wishful thinking. He smiles, and I can't deny that he knows he's good-looking. If self-adoration were cologne, he would be the boy you couldn't stand next to without choking. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Like me. We could be brother and sister, or one of those really creepy couples who look like they should be brother and sister. I'm pissed at myself for looking. Now, when I turn and ignore him to make my way across the battlefield, I can be certain that his eyes—as well as every other set of eyes on that bench with him—are going to be trained on my back. And when I say my back, I mean my ass. I re-contemplate the unstable surface of the pavers. No pressure or anything. I avert my eyes back to the task at hand in time to hear him add, "If you're looking for someplace to sit, my lap is free." And there it is. It's not even clever or original, but his equally wit-free friends laugh anyway. There go my hopes for our burgeoning sibling kinship. I step off the ledge and start walking, keeping my eyes trained straight ahead as if I have some purpose outside of simply surviving this walk. I'm not even halfway through the day. I still have four of the seven classes left on the schedule that shit gave birth to.

I got to school early enough this morning to stop in the office and pick up my schedule. Of course, if I'd known at the time what I'd find on it, I might have put off the inevitable. It was crazy in there again, but Ms. Marsh, the guidance counselor, had given instructions for me to go to her office and pick up my schedule from her personally—just another one of the many perks of being me.

"Good morning, Nastya, Nastya," she said, repeating my name with two different pronunciations and absent-mindedly looking to me for confirmation, which I didn't give her. She was far too cheery for the first day of school or for seven o'clock in the morning in general. It was definitely unnatural. It's probably a class for guidance counselors only—*How to Emit Inappropriate Joy in the Face of Adolescent Horror*. I'm fairly certain they don't make

teachers take it, because they don't even bother to pretend. Half of them are as miserable as I am.

She motioned for me to sit. I didn't. My skirt was way too short for sitting in a chair that didn't have a desk obscuring it. She handed me a map of campus and my schedule. I scanned it, mostly looking for the electives, because I knew what all the required courses were going to be. *You've got to be kidding me.* For a minute I was convinced she must have handed me the wrong schedule, so I checked the top of the paper. *No, that's me.* I wasn't sure what the right reaction was in that situation. You know the one, where the universe decides to put its steel-toed boot up your ass yet again. Crying was out of the question and a screaming hissy-fit laced with maniacal laughter and profanity was, most definitely, off the table, which left me with my only other option—stunned silence.

Ms. Marsh must have caught the look on my face, and I'm betting it was pretty expressive, because she immediately launched into a detailed explanation involving graduation requirements and over-filled electives. She sounded almost like she was apologizing to me and maybe she should have been, because it seriously sucked, but I almost wished I could have told her it was okay, so she'd stop feeling bad. I'd survive it. It would take more than a few shitty classes to break me. I took my schedule, my map, and my abject horror and made my way to class, reading it again and again as I went. Unfortunately, it stayed the same every time.

At this point, I've made it almost to the halfway mark. It hasn't been so bad, relatively speaking, and everything in my life is relative. My teachers aren't horrible. My English teacher, Ms. McAllister, actually looks me in the eye like she's daring me to expect her to treat me differently. I like her. But the worst is yet to come so I won't start pouring the champagne just yet.

Plus, I still have to navigate the trail of tears that is this courtyard. I'm nothing if not a coward, but I can't put it off much longer. I'm about six feet in and not doing so badly. I'm focused on my goal—the beacon that is the double-door entrance to the English wing—on the opposite side of my brick-

lined square nemesis. I take in everything I can with my peripheral vision. It's packed out here. And loud. So unbearably loud. I try to let all of the separate conversations and voices melt together into what I imagine is one continuous hum. There are small groups around all of the benches, piled on top of them and standing next to them. Some students sit on the outer edges of the garden boxes that are placed incrementally throughout. Then, there are the smart ones who sit on the ground in the shade of the walkway that runs around the perimeter. There aren't enough places to sit, there's barely any reprieve from the sun, and it's hotter than hell out here. I can't imagine the utter craphole the cafeteria must be that this many people would rather sweat their asses off out here to avoid it. My old high school was the same way, but I never had to deal with the lunch period madness or any of the decisions that came along with it, like where to sit and who to sit with. I spent every lunch period practicing in the music room and that was the only place I wanted to be.

By now, I'm almost there. So far I've only seen a few faces I recognize: a boy who was in my history class, sitting by himself reading a book and a couple of girls from math, who are giggling with angry Barbie of front office-tirade fame. I can feel some of the looks I'm getting, but other than the ego-addled asshole with the free lap seating, no one else has spoken to me. There are two more benches I have to pass to get to the doors and it's the one on the left that catches my attention. It's empty, save for one boy, sitting right in the middle. It might not seem strange except for the fact that every other bench in this place, in truth every other place where a person could justifiably put their ass, is filled. Yet there is no one sitting on that bench, except him. When I look more closely, there's no one even hanging around in the immediate vicinity. It's like there's an invisible force field surrounding this space and he's the only one inside it. Curiosity claims me, and I momentarily forget my purpose. I can't help but look at the boy. He's perched on top of the backrest, his worn-out brown work boots planted firmly on the seat. He's leaning over with his elbows resting on his knees in a pair of faded jeans. I can't see his face very well. His light brown hair hangs tousled over his forehead, and his eyes are cast downward at his hands. He's not eating; he's not reading; he's not looking at anyone. Until he is. And then he's looking at me. *Crap.*

I turn away instantly, but it's still too late. It wasn't like I just glanced at

him. I was at a dead stop, in the middle of the courtyard, full-on staring. I'm only steps away from the asylum beyond those double doors and I take the risk of quickening my walk as much as I can without drawing attention. I make it to the relative obscurity of the building's overhang and reach for the door handle and pull. *Nothing*. It doesn't give. And I repeat, *crap*. It's locked. It's the middle of the day. Why would they lock the doors from the outside?

"It's locked," a voice from below me says. *No shit*. I look down. I hadn't even noticed the boy with the sketchbook, sitting on the ground right next to the doors. Where he's positioned, he's blocked by a large planter box, invisible from the main courtyard. Smart kid. His clothes are a mess and his hair looks like it hasn't seen a brush in a week. He's sitting shoulder to shoulder with a brown-haired girl wearing sunglasses in the shade and holding a camera. She looks up at me briefly before turning her attention back to her camera. Other than the sunglasses, she's entirely non-descript. I wonder if I should have gone that route, but it's too late to second guess now.

"They don't want anyone sneaking in to smoke in the bathrooms during lunch," sketchbook boy with holes in his concert t-shirt tells me.

Oh. I wonder what happens if you're late to class. I guess you're just SOL. I'm trying to figure out some other escape route, when I notice he's still craning his neck up and looking at me. It's a good thing I'm not a couple of steps closer or I'm quite sure he could see right up my nearly non-existent skirt. At least I'm wearing cute underwear; they're the only thing on me that isn't black. I glance at the sketchbook he's holding. His arm is draped over the top so I can't see what he's drawing. I wonder if he's any good. I can't draw for *crap*. I nod my head in thanks to him and turn to see if I can find somewhere else to go. Before I can walk away, two girls come barreling out of the door, almost running me down and knocking me off of my awesome shoes. They're talking a mile-a-minute and don't even notice me there, which is fine, because I'm able to slip through the doors just past them. I wander into the cool, empty reprieve of the English building and remember how to breathe.

CHAPTER 3

Josh

Fourth hour can't come soon enough. I'm sweating already from sitting out in the sun at lunch, but there won't be much in the way of air-conditioning in the workshop. When I walk in, I immediately feel at home, even though the space looks entirely different than it did in June. There aren't tools and pieces of lumber on every surface. No carpet of sawdust covering the floor. No machines running. It's the quiet that's initially unnerving. It's not supposed to be quiet in here and this is the only time of year when it is. The first couple weeks are a rehash of rules for equipment usage and safety procedures that I could recite verbatim if anybody asked. Nobody asks. Everybody knows I know them. I could teach this class if I wanted to. I throw my books down on the far corner work table where I sit every year, at least during the time we're expected to sit. Before I can pull the stool out from under the table, Mr. Turner calls me over.

I like Mr. Turner, but he doesn't care whether I like him or not. He wants my respect and he has that, too. What he tells me to do, I do. He's one of the few people who don't mind expecting things from me. At this point, I think I've learned as much from Mr. Turner as I did from my dad.

Mr. Turner's been running this program for as long as anyone can remember, years before I got here, when it wasn't anything more than a cop-out elective. Now it's one of the premier programs in the state. He runs it like a business wrapped around a master class in craftsmanship. In the advanced classes, our work raises the money for the materials and the equipment. We take orders, fill them and that money gets filtered back into the program.

You don't get into the advanced classes without going through the introductory levels first and even that isn't a guarantee. Mr. Turner only takes the students who live up to his expectations in terms of work ethic and ability. That's how he keeps the upper level classes so small. You need his approval to get in, and in a school with overflowing electives around every

corner, he's still able to get away with it because he's that good.

When I get to his desk, he asks about my summer. He's trying to be polite but he knows me well enough that he doesn't have to bother. I've been in one of his classes every year since ninth grade. He knows my shit and he knows me. All I really want to do is build stuff and be left alone and he allows me both. I answer in as few words as possible and he nods, knowing we're done with the pretense.

"Theater department wants shelving built in their prop storage room. Can you head over there, take the measurements, plan it out and make a list of what we need? You don't need to be here for all this." He picks up a stack of papers, which I assume are handouts on rules and procedures, with a measured amount of boredom and resignation. He just wants to build, too. But he also doesn't want someone losing a finger. "Bring me what you come up with at the end of class and I'll get you what you need. You can probably have it finished up in a week or so."

"No problem." I hold back a smile. The preliminary crap is the only part of this class I don't like and I've just been freed from it. I get to build, even if it is just shelves. And I get to do it away from everybody else.

I scrawl my signature across the bottom of the waivers and hand them back to him. Then I grab my books in time to see a couple other kids coming in. There shouldn't be many—probably only about a dozen or so students—in this section. I know everybody who's come in so far, except for one person; the girl from the courtyard—the one who was watching me. She can't possibly be in this class. She must agree, judging by the look on her face as she scans the room, taking in everything from the high ceilings down to the industrial power tools. Her eyes narrow just slightly with curiosity, but that's all I see of her because this time she turns and catches me looking.

I watch people a lot. Normally it's not an issue because no one really looks at me, and if they do, I'm pretty adept at looking away fast. Very fast. But damn if that girl wasn't faster. I know she's new here. If not, she's made some drastic, unfortunate transformation over the summer, because I'm more than aware of most of the people on this campus, and even if I wasn't, I'd remember the girl who comes to school looking like an undead whore. Regardless, I'm out the door about ten seconds later and I'm pretty sure

they'll have worked out her schedule before I get back.

I hole up in the theater prop room for all of fourth period, measuring and drawing up plans and material lists for the shelving they need. There's no clock in here and I'm not ready when the bell rings. I shove the legal pad with my notes on it into my backpack and head out towards the English wing. I get to Ms. McAllister's room and walk past everyone still milling around in the hallway, eking out every last second to socialize before the bell rings. The door is propped open and Ms. McAllister looks up when I walk in.

"Aah, Mr. Bennett. We meet again." I had her last year. They must have moved her up from junior to senior English.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Polite as always. How was your summer?"

"You're the third person who's asked."

"Non-answer. Try again."

"Hot."

"Still loquacious," she smiles.

"Still ironic."

"I suppose we are both nothing if not consistent." She stands up and turns to pick up her roster and three stacks of papers off the top of the file cabinet behind her.

"Can you bring that desk up to the front for me?" She points at a lopsided desk in the corner of the room. I drop my things on a desk in the back and walk over to pick up the broken one and move it to the front. "Just put it there." She motions in front of the whiteboard. "I just need something to put all of this on so I can talk." She drops the stacks of papers onto the desk as the warning bell rings.

"You need a podium."

"Josh, I'm lucky to have a desk with a working drawer," she notes with forced exasperation, walking over to the open classroom door without

missing a beat. “You fools better get in here before that bell rings because I do believe in giving detention on the first day of school and I give morning detention not afternoon.” She sing-songs the last couple of words as a mass of students barrels into the room just before the tardy bell goes off.

Ms. McAllister doesn’t do bullshit. She’s not intimidated by the popular kids or the ones with the rich parents and she doesn’t want to be your friend. Last year, she managed to convince me that there was actually something here that might be worth learning without ever once making me talk in class.

Generally, I have two types of teachers. There are the ones who ignore me completely and pretend I don’t exist, and there are the ones who call me out and force attention on me because they think it’s good for me—or maybe just because it gives them some sort of control-freakish thrill to know that they can. Ms. McAllister isn’t either of those. She leaves me alone without ignoring me; so as teachers go, she’s damn near perfect.

She pulls out the doorstep just as Drew slips through the opening.

“Hey, Ms. McAllister.” He smiles and winks because he has no shame.

“Immune to your charms, Mr. Leighton.”

“Someday, we’ll recite poetry to one another.” He slides into the only empty desk, right in the front of the room.

“That we will. But the poetry unit isn’t until next semester so you’ll have to stow your sonnets until then.” She retreats to her desk and pulls a yellow slip of paper out of the drawer and walks back to him. “Don’t be too disappointed. We do have a date tomorrow morning. Six forty-five AM. In the media center.” She winks back at him as she lays the detention slip on his desk.

Nasty

Fourth hour shop class wasn’t so horrible. Mr. Turner didn’t pay much attention to me at all, which in a class of fourteen is pretty hard to do. He did check my schedule right off the bat to make sure I was in the right place and

then asked me why they put me there. I shrugged. He shrugged. Then he handed it back, telling me I wouldn't be up to speed with everyone else, but if I really wanted to stay, he could let me be an assistant or something like that. It's obvious he doesn't really want me participating, but I think I'll stay. It's a small class where I can probably be left alone, which is as much as I'm prepared to ask on day one.

I make it all the way through to fifth period before being faced with one of those inane get-to-know-you games in my suckfest of a music class—a class which I will soon be clawing my way out of by any means necessary. The teacher, Miss Jennings, a cute, twenty-something woman with a blonde bob, pale skin and hatefully-perfect piano-playing hands makes us sit in a circle. An elementary school, duck-duck-goose-style *circle*. This affords each of us the best possible vantage point for studying, and subsequently, dissecting one another. Oh, and getting to know each other, of course. That, too.

As get-to-know you games go, this isn't the worst I've endured. Everyone has to say three things about themselves and one of those things has to be a lie. Then the class tries to figure out which one is the lie. It's kind of sad that I'm not actually going to take part in the game, because if I was going to play, it would be fairly awesome. I'm pretty sure I would hand over large quantities of cash to listen to my classmates and the adorable blonde pixie teacher debate the possible veracity of each of my responses:

My name is Nastya Kashnikov.

I was a piano-playing prodigy who doesn't belong anywhere near an Intro to Music class.

I was murdered two and a half years ago.

Discuss.

Instead, when they get to me, I sit stone-faced and silent. Ms. Jennings looks at me expectantly. *Check your roster.* She's still looking at me. I'm looking at her. We have a weird staring thing going on between us. *Check your roster. I know they told you.* I'm trying to will her telepathically now,

but I am sadly lacking in the superpower department.

“Would you like to share three things about yourself?” she asks as if I am simply a moron with no clue what’s going on around me.

I finally throw her a bone and shake my head as slightly as I can. *No.*

“Come on. Don’t be shy. Everyone’s done it so far. It’s easy. You don’t have to reveal your darkest secrets or anything,” she says lightly.

That’s a good thing, because my darkest secrets would probably give her nightmares.

“Can you at least tell everyone your name?” she finally asks, obviously not one to engage in a battle of wills. Her patience is running low and she’s covering.

Again, I shake my head. I have not broken eye contact with her yet, and I think it’s starting to freak her out a little bit. I kind of feel sorry for her, but she should have read her paperwork before class. All the other teachers did.

“O-kaaay,” she drags the word out and her tone changes. She’s really starting to get annoyed now, but then, so am I. I check out the dark brown roots coming through in her hair because it gives me something to focus on while her head is down, scanning what I assume is the class roster on a clipboard in front of her. “We’ll use process of elimination. You must be,” she pauses, her smile wavers just a little, and I know this is where it clicks because she’s all sorts of aware when she looks back up at me and says, “I am so sorry. You must be Nastya.”

This time I nod.

“You don’t talk.”

CHAPTER 4

Nastya

By the time I pull into Margot's driveway at just after three o'clock, I'm literally drenched in relief, or maybe it's just sweat because the humidity here is ridiculous. Either way I'll take it because, for the first time today, I feel like I can breathe. All in all, it could have been worse. Word traveled fairly quickly after fifth hour but at least the day was almost done. I figure by tomorrow it will all be out in the open and then we can just get on with it.

Even seventh hour, the cruel joke that is my Speech and Debate elective, went as well as could be expected, which is saying a lot, seeing as how I'm at a disadvantage with the whole speech part. We got to do the infinitely cool circle thing again, but by that point I was desensitized to both my dread and the whispers that had already begun to follow me.

My good pal, Drew, was also there. He didn't sit next to me, which I was glad for, because his comments were amusing enough and easily ignorable, but I was afraid I might have to fend off his hands, too. My relief only lasted so long before I realized that he had positioned himself directly across the circle from me so that, every time I lifted my head, I couldn't help but see him and his I-can-make-you-a-woman eyes and his I-know-what-you-look-like-under-your-clothes smirk. I bet he practices in the mirror. I think he could teach a class. I looked down at my desk and traced the names carved in the surface to keep myself from smiling, not because I found him attractive, which he undeniably was, but because he was entertaining as all hell.

I'm actually kind of thankful that he's there. He's something to focus on other than the things about that class that suck; for example, *everything*. I should also mention that *everything* includes the dark-eyed, dark-haired, refreshingly charm-free jackhole from the courtyard, whose name is, apparently, Ethan. Fortunately, there were plenty of free desks in the room so I didn't have to take him up on his infinitely appealing lap offer. Not so fortunately, one of those free desks was next to mine so that's where he sat.

He didn't make any more comments, but he smirked a lot, and he wasn't nearly as good at it as Drew.

I get inside and throw my backpack on the kitchen table and pull out everything that needs a signature so Margot can sign it before she goes to work. Before I can get it all unpacked, my phone vibrates, and I have to stop to dig it out. I don't bother keeping it accessible. It's not like I need it that often. It can only be one of two people. My mother or Margot. No one else uses the number; not even my dad anymore.

I only keep the phone for the most necessary of communication—texts, mostly one-way, from them to me. When I have to, I'll use it to let Margot know where I am or if I'm going to be late. That was part of the deal for me staying here. It's understood that that's all the information I'll part with. No *How was your day?* No *Did you make any friends?* No *Have you looked for a therapist yet?* Just basic logistical facts. Talking has never been the issue. Communication is the issue.

The message is from Margot. *Went to grab take-out for your first day. Back in a few.* I'm still trying to get used to eating at four o'clock. Margot works the night shift, which means we eat dinner early so she can shower and get to work. Then again, apparently lunch here is at ten forty-five in the morning, so I guess it all works out.

I kick off the torture devices and change into running clothes so I can go after the early bird special. I'd go now, but it's hot and I make sure never to be outside at this time of day when the sun has a way of stalking me, searing memories into my skin. I won't even go out to check the mail if I don't have to. My phone vibrates again. I look at the screen. Mom. *Hope your first day was good. Love you. M.* I put the phone back on the table. She doesn't expect a reply.

Margot gets back with all manner of Chinese food. We won't need to cook for a week. That's a good thing, because I can't cook real food to save my life and I get the feeling, from the drawer full of take-out menus, that Margot can't either. I've been here for five days and I don't think the kitchen's been used once. At least meals aren't awkward with Margot. She has no problem talking enough for both of us. Whatever I fail to bring to the conversation, she dutifully makes up for. I'm not even sure she needs me

sitting here.

After less than a week, I know who she's dated for the past three years and who she's dating now. I know all of her workplace gossip, even though I have no idea who any of the people she mentions are. I'm sure Andrea would not appreciate the fact that Margot is telling me about her financial problems and Eric would not want me know that his girlfriend cheated on him and Kelly would be appalled to learn that I am aware of her bipolar disorder and every medication she takes for it. But the more Margot talks, the less awkward it is that I don't, and I prefer conversations about people I don't care about. The times she brings up my family are worse, because I don't want to think about them, and I can't tell her to shut the hell up.

After we eat, she rushes to shower off a day's worth of sweat and suntan oil and I pack up container after container of leftovers and wait for the sun to fade so I can run.

I never even make it out the front door because the sky turns black before sunset and opens up in torrential rain. I don't mind running in rain but this is even a bit much for me. It's too difficult to see and impossible to hear anything through this kind of downpour. When I look out the sliding glass door at the back of the house, it seems like it might be raining horizontally, and even I'm not desperate enough to go out in this kind of lightning. I kick off my sneakers and sit and then stand and then sit and then stand again. My brain is on the spin-cycle right now.

I have no treadmill here so I do jumping jacks in place until I get bored, switch to alternating sets of chest presses and mountain climbers, move on to weighted squats and lunges and then do as many push-ups as I can before my arms give out and I drop my face into the carpet. It's not the kind of soul-draining exhaustion I'm looking for, but for tonight, it will have to do.

I pull out clothes for tomorrow and pack up all of the signed paperwork and shove it into my backpack. I almost wish I had homework, but I don't, so I wander around the living room. Margot's got a stack of newspapers piled up next to the front door and I realize that I haven't checked the birth announcements for nearly two weeks. I grab the papers and sift through them until I find the right section. The first one is disappointing. Nothing new. All of the overused classics and the same trendy crap that I wouldn't saddle a cat

with, much less a kid. My name, of course, is never there, but it's not my name I'm looking for. I scan four papers; there are three Alexanders, four Emmas, two Sarahs, a crapload of names ending in -den (Jaden, Cayden, Braden, *gag*), a bunch I don't remember, and one worthy of going on my wall. I cut it out and grab my laptop. I pull up the internet and wait for my start page to load. Within seconds, I'm staring at the lovely, pink-and-blue-splattered baby name website that greets me every time I get online.

I type in my newfound query, Paavo, which turns out to be nothing but the Finnish version of Paul. It's kind of a letdown.

I like names. I collect them: names, origins, meanings. They're an easy thing to collect. They don't cost anything and they don't really take up any space. I like to look at them and pretend that they mean something; and maybe they don't, but the pretending is nice. I keep most of them on the walls of my bedroom at home—home where I used to live. I keep the ones that echo. Good names with significance. Not the crap everyone seems to be using these days. I like foreign names, too; the unusual ones that you rarely see. If I ever had a baby, I'd pick one of those, but babies aren't really something I see in my future, even the far off one.

I fold up the papers to put them away, glancing down one more time. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch one of the *Sarahs* again, and I smile. It reminds me of the one amusing part of my day.

I was running to my locker between classes and had to duck around the corner and wait when I saw Drew in a heated exchange with Barbie, two lockers down from mine. I decided that if I had to choose between being tardy to class or walking into the middle of that verbal smackdown, the tardy was the lesser of the evils. It wasn't that difficult dodging Drew's not-so-subtle come-ons when I ran into him by myself, but I certainly didn't want to take the chance that he'd proposition me in front of his girlfriend. That would definitely make my ever-growing list of things I do not need. So I leaned against the wall and waited for them to move on.

"Give me twenty bucks." I heard Drew say to her.

"Why?" Apparently *annoyed* is the only quality her voice possesses.

"Because I need twenty bucks." His tone indicated that this should be enough of a reason.

“No.” Then, what must have been the sound of her slamming her locker. Hard.

“I’ll pay you back.” *No, you won’t.*

“No, you won’t.” *Smart girl.*

“You’re right. I won’t.” I peered around and caught him flash that cocky smile at her. “What? At least I’m honest.”

“Why don’t you go ask one of your whores?” *Damn.*

“Because none of them love me as much as you do.”

“That stupid grin might work on every other female in this school, but you know it won’t work with me, so forget it.”

“Sarah, you know you’re going to give it to me, so come on.”

Sarah. I smiled. I couldn’t help but appreciate the absolute perfection of the name; bland, common, and wholly unoriginal. Best of all, it means *princess*.

She exhaled loudly and I leaned around to see her digging in her purse. *Seriously?* She’s going to give him money? He’s better than I gave him credit for. Maybe I just gave her too much credit. My self-respect may not be off the charts, but hers must be nonexistent. She took out a twenty-dollar bill and shoved it at him.

“Here. Just so I can get you to leave me alone.” He grabbed it and started walking away, but not before she yelled after him, “If you don’t pay me back, I am so telling Mom!”

Mom? *Oh.*

That little revelation was fun, though it does make me wonder if my observation skills are failing me. Did I really miss that? My brother, Asher, and I used to bicker with the best of them, but our animosity threshold was several levels lower than theirs.

I toss the last of the newspapers back on top of the pile and return to the computer, trying to come up with anything else I can do online to kill time. I’m not on Facebook or anything else anymore, so there’s no point in that. I could torture myself by using Asher’s name and passwords to check up on people I used to be friends with, but I decide against it. There’s isn’t anything I want to know.

The lightning is flashing incessantly outside the window, taunting me every time it lights up the sky. My phone is on my bed, whispering in my ear like a bottle of scotch to a recovering alcoholic, while the rain continues cackling at me through my window. I may actually be desperate enough to go out in this weather. I need to run that badly. More jumping jacks. Lift some weights. More push-ups. Lift more weights. I may not be able to get a treadmill in here, but a punching bag I think I can manage, even if it's just one of those portable ones. I don't think Margot will let me hang a heavy bag in her living room, but I'm not that picky. I'll take anything I can hit right now.

Cookies. I need to bake cookies. It's the next best thing to running. Not really, but I do love cookies and I don't like the shit that they sell in packages, which is what Margot buys. Oreos are acceptable. Because they're Oreos and no matter what you do, you can't replicate them. Trust me on this one. I've spent more than a few days in my kitchen, trying to do just that. It's never going to happen. So Oreos get a pass, but factory-sealed chocolate chip cookies that are shelf-stable for up to six months are another story. Life really is too short for that. Believe me, I know.

I rummage through Margot's kitchen and I have no idea why I'm surprised that she doesn't own any flour or baking soda or baking powder or vanilla or just about any ingredient that could possibly be required for baking. I do locate some sugar and salt, and miraculously, a set of measuring cups, but that won't get me very far. I resolve to head to the grocery store this weekend. I won't make it long without cookies. Or cake.

I give up, eat half a bag of jelly beans, leaving the black ones because they suck, and head to the shower to wash the shit that was this day off of me. I have a riveting conversation with myself while letting the conditioner set in my hair. I talk about my crap schedule. I tell myself about the unfortunate irony that is my music class and wonder if that tops the ridiculousness of Speech & Debate. I ponder, out loud, whether any female in the school, student or teacher, is immune to the charms of a certain blond named Drew. Then I answer—ME. Oh, and Sarah of course, though he seems to be able to badger her into submission. I have these conversations periodically, just to make sure my voice still works in case I ever want to use it again. Returning to the world of the vocal was always the plan, but some days I wonder if I

ever will. Most of the time, I don't have much exciting news, so I repeat names or random words, but today was noteworthy, so it warranted full sentences. Sometimes I even sing, but I save that for the days when my self-loathing is at peak levels and I want to hurt myself.

I crawl into my bed, which is covered in a sage green floral-print comforter, just like the one in my bedroom at home. It was probably more my mother's doing than Margot's. I think she has trouble grasping the concept that I was trying to get away from that place, not bring it with me. I lift up the mattress and pull out the composition book I've hidden there. I'll have to find a better place for it soon. The rest of them are in the back of my closet, packed in a cardboard box, underneath old paperbacks and my middle school yearbooks. The one in my hands is black and white with the word *Trig* written in red marker across the cover. Like all of the others, the first few pages are filled with fake class notes. I grab a pen and I write. Exactly three and a half pages later, I slide the book back to its hiding place and turn off the light, wondering what fresh hell tomorrow will bring.

CHAPTER 5

Nastya

I live in a world without magic or miracles. A place where there are no clairvoyants or shapeshifters, no angels or superhuman boys to save you. A place where people die and music disintegrates and things suck. I am pressed so hard against the earth by the weight of reality that some days I wonder how I am still able to lift my feet to walk.

On Friday morning, the first thing I do is pick up my amended schedule from the Guidance Office. Ms. McAllister signed off on my teacher aide position for fifth hour, so I have now officially dropped Intro to Music, which means I get to spend that period making photocopies and handing out papers instead of wanting to bleed myself dry.

At this point, I've gotten better on the shoes, even though they're too cramped at the front and my toes unleash a string of expletives at me when I put them on. I chose my second most appalling outfit for today's endeavors – more black on black, because that's really all I have anyway. I keep the thick black eyeliner, the red lipstick and the black nail polish. The stilettos, as always, are the exclamation point on an ensemble that screams *Hideous!* I am a slutty horror show. I think of pearl buttons and white eyelet skirts and wonder what Emilia would be wearing if she were alive today.

I've been successfully hiding in hallways and bathrooms during lunch all week. The disheveled artist boy, whose name I have since learned—by surreptitiously glancing at the cover on his sketchbook—is Clay, was kind enough to give me an unsolicited short list of my best bets for solitude when he caught me trying the doors to the English wing again on the second day. I've checked out most them. Give me a few more days and I'll probably be

able to draw a map and star the best places for disappearing. Then I can sell it to other losers like me.

I find, from my daily walks, that the layout here stays pretty much the same. You would think there was a designated seating chart for the courtyard. No one strays from the place they planted themselves the day before. I recognize more of the faces at this point, but even the ones I know don't acknowledge me. I am left blissfully alone. I've scared, offended or made everyone uncomfortable enough to stay away. Mission accomplished. It's even worth all of the discomfort of the shoes. If I don't do anything wrong, it should stay this way.

I'm considering which direction to head today, when I pass the boy in the force field. I wonder how he does that. Maybe I can find out his secret, because I would love to get one of those for myself. Sometimes I think he's invisible and I'm the only one who sees him, but I guess that's not the case, because if it was, I'm sure someone would have grabbed that bench by now. Maybe he's a ghost and no one goes near the bench because he haunts it.

He always sits in the same position and he's completely motionless. Ever since he caught me on Monday, I've been trying not to stare more than a couple of seconds each day. He hasn't looked up at me again. I still get the feeling he's watching, but maybe I just kind of want him to be. I shake that off quickly. The last thing I need is anyone's attention.

Still, he is extremely nice to look at. Nice arms. Not douchebag workout arms, just *work* arms. I saw him on the first day in my shop class, but only for a second, and then he left and never came back. Now the only time I ever see him is at lunch. That handful of seconds I spend crossing the courtyard becomes the most intriguing part of my day. If I'm being honest with myself, those precious seconds are the only reason I still walk across this damn thing every day. I walked it on the first day to make a point. I walked it on the second day to see if he was still there and still alone. I walked it on the third and the fourth to see if he'd look up at me again. He didn't. Today, I just wanted to look. So that's what I'm doing when the pointed end of the heel of my shoe ends up lodged in the crack between two brick pavers. Beautiful. Fortunately, since I was walking pathetically slow to make the most of my stalking experience, I don't end up face first on the ground. Not so fortunately, I am now stuck directly between his bench and that of Princess

Sarah and her ladies in waiting. I try to nonchalantly wiggle my heel out from where it's ensnared, but it won't budge. I'll have to maneuver my way down to kneeling and try to pull it out with my hands, which will be a feat of balance, but bending over in this dress is so not an option.

I kneel down slowly and slip my foot out of the shoe. Then I grab the heel with my right hand and yank it. It comes out easier than I expect and I stand up and slip my foot back into it. I glance to my left and see that statue boy still hasn't moved. He seems utterly oblivious to my shoe debacle. It's a small miracle, but small miracles are the only kind I can hope for right now, so I'll take it. Too bad I haven't gone completely unnoticed, because the next thing I hear—

"I think those are made for street corners, not school." *Sarah*. This is followed by giggles and then another female voice—

"Yeah, does your dad know you left Hell dressed like that?"

"I thought her dad was in Transylvania." More giggles. Seriously.

The insults here are really subpar. At least they could throw something mildly entertaining at me if they're going to make me turn around. I look to my right to find the fountain of wit that spewed that gem at me. Several girls surround Sarah and are looking at me and, yes, still giggling. I guess I congratulated myself a minute or two too soon. I mentally run through my options A) Hurl said shoe at them B) Hurl insults at them C) Ignore them and walk away D) Smile my most demonic and unhinged smile at them. I've chosen D, the only real option of the bunch. I won't ignore this, at least not in the slink away with my tail between my legs way. Besides, since I'm apparently the spawn of Satan, or possibly Dracula, depending on who you ask, it can never hurt to throw a little crazy out there just to drive the message home before the weekend. I stare them down for a few more seconds, debating whether to unleash the smile all at once or just let it subtly drift across my face, when I'm interrupted by a voice behind me.

"Enough, Sarah."

Sarah's mouth, which was open in what I suspect was the formation of another display of her scathing wit, clamps shut so fast I think I hear her teeth clash. I turn around, even though I kind of know that the only person in that general vicinity is the last one I would expect to be all knight-in-shining-

armor. Not that the situation even called for it. It was hardly an attack. It was more like a sort of lame insult version of karaoke. A performance by amateurs. Something you mock rather than fear. I can tell these girls wouldn't have stopped there, and if I was the type to care it might have hurt my feelings, but I don't care and my feelings haven't been hurt in a very long time.

At this point, I'm completely turned around and mine aren't the only eyes on the boy in the bubble. In fact, there are quite a few sets of eyes watching him now, waiting to see if anything else comes out of his mouth. I feel like I've found myself in the middle of a Twilight Zone episode, where everything around me has frozen and I'm the only one who can move. But I don't.

The boy's eyes are trained on Sarah, giving her a look that matches the don't-fuck-with-me tone in his voice. His glance flicks to me for a second and then he's back to staring at his hands like nothing at all happened. I'm contemplating moving now but I can't seem to find my legs just yet. I turn away from the boy and catch Sarah staring at me now. The look on her face isn't carved out of jealousy or even bitterness, which is what I kind of expect; it's forged out of one-hundred-percent-pure, rock solid, WTF. As much as I'm trying to keep my face blank, I have a feeling that my expression quite possibly looks a lot like hers, but probably for very different reasons.

She seems perplexed as all hell that he said something. I don't really know this kid well enough to know if his interference is the most surprising element of this whole situation. If you ask me, the weird part about it is how everybody reacted. They all shut up. They didn't question him, didn't laugh or ask why, they didn't ignore him and continue with the ridicule, and they didn't turn their derision on him. They just *stopped*. He said *enough* and that was that. Because I said so. End of story. Don't make me have to tell you twice.

In the mere seconds that I have been standing here, everyone else has gone back to what they were doing and maybe it's my imagination, but the decibel level seems to have dropped just a bit, as if no one wants to be heard discussing what just happened. What the hell did just happen?

I'll think about it in a few minutes, or after school, or maybe never, but

right now I want to get the hell out of the middle of this courtyard. I make it across without any more shoe malfunctions, and mercifully, someone has stuck a book in the door to the English building so I'm able to walk right in. I glance down as I push through the door and see that it's an art history book and sitting next to it is a smirking Clay, sketchbook, as always, in hand. I really want to ask if he knows what that was about, but I can't, so I slip into the building. I make it halfway down the corridor and turn off into the stairwell and lean up against the wall, grateful to be alone in the quiet.

Before I can turn recent events over in my mind, I hear the door open again. I press my back to the wall of the stairwell, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. If I press hard enough, maybe I can make myself disappear. I concentrate on the direction of the footsteps which are getting louder by the second. The cadence is slow and one foot falls ever-so-slightly heavier than the other. The steps are solid, but soft. They aren't clumsy or awkward. It's a graceful walk. Whoever it is, they're taller than me; it doesn't take them near as many steps to get to the alcove where I'm loitering. I wait for the footsteps to pass, but they don't. They turn right at me and now I'm just hoping that whoever it is will simply ignore me. I look down at the floor so I won't have to make eye contact and I wait for it to be over.

And then, before I can remember to hold my breath, a set of well-worn work boots stops in front of me. Steel-toed, if I'm not mistaken. I don't need to look up to know who they belong to. I've been looking at those boots on the seat of an industrial metal bench for five days now. Apparently confusion and curiosity have turned me momentarily stupid, because against my better judgment, I do look up and it's the closest I've ever been to him.

"I won't do that again," he says, impaling me with his sickeningly perfect blue eyes like he wishes I didn't exist. But the way he says it isn't angry. It's just matter-of-fact. He's completely calm. There's almost no tone in his voice at all. He doesn't wait for any sort of acknowledgement or response, even though right now I just might be pissed off enough to give him one, and it certainly wouldn't be a thank you. Then he's crossed the alcove and walked out the door on the other side of the stairwell as if he was never here at all.

I won't do that again? No one asked you to do it this time, asshole. Does he honestly think he just did me a favor? That, by calling attention to me and

pissing off a bunch of vanity obsessed girls on my behalf, girls who will no doubt be seeking to save face when he is not around, he has helped me. He's more delusional than I am. I'd like to tell him so. Too bad I don't even know his name. And if I had a list of questions, *what's your name?* probably wouldn't even make the cut.

What I want to know is why anyone listened to him. They shut up like they were being reprimanded by an angry dad, because that's exactly what he sounded like. It's the same tone of voice he used with me just now. I'm almost surprised he didn't throw a *young lady* on the end of it for good measure. Clearly, I'm the only one here who doesn't understand why I'm supposed to listen to him. It's as if he commands some sort of respect or reverence. Maybe his dad is like the principal or the mayor or a mob boss and no one wants to piss him off. Who knows? All I know is that *I'm* pissed off.

CHAPTER 6

Josh

I've gotten through the rest of the day without seeing the girl again. I've mentally flogged myself for opening my stupid mouth at lunch. If there was a reason for it, I might cut myself some slack, but the girl really didn't seem like the helpless type. Maybe I was just trying to stop her from making enemies of those bitches. Maybe I just wanted Sarah to shut the hell up because I know she's better than that. Maybe I just wanted the girl to look at me again.

The halls are already emptying out as I push my way towards the back of the school, against the flow of the rest of the students. I want to get to the theater wing before they lock the doors so I can pick up my level. I left it there earlier and I need it this afternoon. Plus, I won't leave it overnight, anyway. It's mine. It was my father's. It's old and wooden and archaic but I won't use another one and I won't take the chance that it'll disappear if I leave it here; so I go back to get it. When I get there, it's sitting where I left it on one of the unfinished shelving units I've been working on all week. I check my progress and run my hands along the edges. I'll be done with the whole thing by next Wednesday. I could drag it out until Friday, but I'm hoping Mr. Turner will be done with the preliminary procedure crap before that. I'd like to get back to shop and work on something more interesting than shelves. I grab the level and head back out to the parking lot.

I'm almost to my car when I hear my name.

"Bennett! Josh!" Drew corrects himself almost instantly because he knows he sounds like an asshole calling me by my last name. He's standing in the next row of cars and he's not alone. He rarely is, so it's not surprising to see a girl standing next to him as he leans against his car in the pose I have grown accustomed to seeing; the one where he tries to look casually indifferent while he works out the path of least resistance into a girl's pants or down her shirt or up her skirt. Whatever the case may be.

What's surprising is the girl he's talking to. It doesn't take more than a glance to know who she is; crazy-long black hair, tight black dress that barely covers her ass or her chest, black spike heels, black shit all over her eyes. Eyes that are turning to glare at me right now. As I get closer, the blank expression she usually wears changes. It's subtle and I doubt most people would notice, because the change is mostly in the eyes, but I can see the difference. It's not blank. She's pissed, and if I'm not mistaken, she's pissed at me. I don't get much of an opportunity to examine it because she's walking away before I even reach them.

"Call me!" Drew yells over his shoulder to her, laughing as if this is some sort of joke.

"You know her?" I ask, laying my books and my level on the hood of his car. Most of the parking lot has emptied out by this point. For as slow as the traffic moves into this place in the morning, the afternoon exodus takes no time at all.

"I plan to," Drew responds, not looking at me. He's still watching the girl walk away. I ignore the innuendo. If I had to acknowledge every thinly-veiled sexual suggestion that comes from his mouth, we'd talk of nothing else, which would probably make him happy.

"Who is she?"

"Some Russian chick. Nastya something I haven't learned to pronounce. I was starting to worry that I was losing my appeal because she'd never talk to me, but apparently, she doesn't talk to anybody."

"Are you surprised? She kind of screams antisocial." I pick the level up off the car and turn it over in my hands watching the water shift from one side to the other.

"Yeah, but it's not that. She doesn't talk, period."

"At all?" I look at him skeptically.

"At all." He shakes his head, smiling with warped satisfaction.

"Why not?"

"Don't know. Maybe she doesn't speak English. But then I guess she could still say yes and no and shit." He shrugs as if it's of no consequence.

"How do you even know?"

“Because she’s in my Speech & Debate class.” He smirks at the irony of that fact. I don’t respond. I’m trying to process the information, and Drew can keep this conversation going on his own. “I’m not complaining. Gives me a chance to work on her every day.”

“Not a very good sign if you have to work on her. Maybe you are losing your appeal,” I reply dryly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says in all seriousness, looking down at his watch. His smile returns. “It’s 3:00. Better get your ass home.” And with that, he hops in his car and drives off, leaving me standing in the parking lot, thinking of pissed off Russian girls and black dresses.

CHAPTER 7

Nasty

I feel like I'm waiting here. Waiting for something that hasn't happened yet. Something that isn't yet. But that's all I feel and nothing else. I don't know if I even exist. And then someone flips a switch and the light is gone, the room is gone, the weightlessness is gone. I want to ask to wait, because I wasn't finished yet, but I don't have a chance. There is no gentle pulling. No coaxing. No choice. I'm wrenched out. Yanked, as if my head is being snapped back. I'm in the dark and everything is pain. There are too many sensations at once. Every nerve ending is on fire. Like the shock of being born. And then, there are flashes of everything. Color, voices, machines, harsh words. The pain doesn't flash. The pain is constant, steady, never-ending. It's the only thing I know. I don't want to be awake anymore.

I made it through my second Monday at school. You'd think I'd be drained just from the constant suck of it all, but apparently not, because I still can't sleep. I've been in bed for two hours now; I know it's after midnight but I can't see the clock from here so I'm not sure exactly what time it is. I think about the composition book tucked under the mattress beneath me. I reach down and shove my hand under to touch it. My three and a half pages are done, every word accounted for, but still no sleep. Maybe writing them again would help, but it won't bring me the soul-sucking exhaustion my body is begging for, so I pull my hand back and rest it on my stomach, opening and closing it to the rhythm of my breathing.

I can hear that the hard rain has stopped, so I peel off the covers and look out the window. My window faces into the backyard and it's too dark to see if it's still pissing rain, so I head to the front of the house and peer into the

beam cast by the streetlamp. There's no rain visible in the yellow glow reflecting off of the wet sidewalk below and I'm stripping out of my makeshift pajamas before I even get back to my bedroom, giddy with the thought of running out the past few days, pounding my aggression into the sidewalk and leaving it behind me as I go. It takes no time to slip on a pair of running shorts and a t-shirt and throw on my shoes. My feet love me again. I glance at the clock. 12:30. I hook a canister of pepper spray onto my hip and grip the kubotan that holds my keys in my right hand, even though it's annoying as all hell to run with. It's my security blanket. Clutched in my fingers, offering me the illusion of a security that doesn't exist.

I lock the door behind me and force myself to ease into a jog, down the driveway and into the rain-drenched streets, but it's not easy. I want to tear down the road until I can't breathe, until there is not enough oxygen left in the world to keep me from suffocating. The humidity is brutal, especially paired with the late summer temperatures, but I can't care. It'll only mean more sweat and I can handle that. Every drop is the stress leaching out of me, taking with it all of my anxiety and energy so I can collapse into sleep tonight or this morning or whenever the hell I crawl into bed. Maybe I'll stay out until it's time to go to school and then sleepwalk through the day. All the better. My feet disobey me and break into a full-throttle run only seconds after I hit the road. My legs will hate me later, but it will be worth it. I run fast and far the way I've become accustomed to running. I wish I was on one, long, straight expanse of highway so I could just keep going without having to turn or think or make decisions of any kind. Instead, I head right and follow my feet without thinking. I don't pay any attention to the houses or the cars. My body and my mind have missed this over the past couple of weeks; first through the drama of the move to Margot's house, and then with the constant nightly rain that traps me indoors. If this is what I have to do every night—wait until it stops, even in the dregs of night—then I will. I won't go this long without it again.

The first night I ever ran, I ended up throwing up all over my shoes. It was one of the best nights of my life. It didn't start out that way. It started out with me fighting with my parents. Followed by me listening to my parents fight about me. I sat in that room and sat in that room and sat in that room on the comforter that looks exactly like the one I sleep on here. I sat in that room

until I couldn't sit there anymore. I couldn't be in that house, listening to another fight that I caused. My father would ask my mother why she kept blaming herself and my mother would ask my father why it didn't bother him and my father would tell my mother that it killed him inside but that he didn't see the point in drowning in it and my mother would tell my father that as long as I was drowning in it, she would be, too. It was always the same fight on an endless loop.

It was nine o'clock at night and the first shoes I could find were a pair of sneakers and I shoved my feet into them without socks and ran down the stairs, flinging the door open and not bothering to close it. It was my very unsophisticated, very literal version of running away. I ran and ran and ran. There was no slow warm up. There was no pace or purpose. There was only away.

I don't even know how far I made it that night, probably not very, before I was gasping and my lungs ached and my stomach convulsed and I puked right where I was standing. And it was awesome. It was cathartic and constructive and destructive and perfect. Then I sat on the ground and cried—the ugly kind of crying where you keep sucking breaths in all at once and it makes that horrible sound as the air scrapes against your throat. Then I got up and went home.

I ran every night after that. I learned to control myself and to warm up and to pace myself, but I always ended up pushing too far, running too hard, running too long. My therapist told my parents it was healthy. Maybe not the vomiting so much, but the running in general. It was a *healthy outlet*. My parents love the word healthy.

My dad tried to come with me a couple of times. He tried, he did. But I wouldn't hold back for him and he couldn't keep up. I don't think pushing himself to the point of heaving was as appealing for him as it was for me. The only reason I ran was to drain every ounce of energy out of myself so that there was nothing left to use for regret or fear or remembering. It takes much more to drain me now. I run longer every day. It's gotten harder to achieve the body-draining fatigue that I love, because if I'm going to run, I want to feel like I've been wrung out and spun dry, but it still does the trick. It's the only therapy I get now.

My lungs feel okay but my stomach is teetering. I've been out of commission for a little while lately, so hopefully, I can tap myself out easily tonight. With every step, I stomp out the shit in my head until it's all but gone. It will come back in the daylight, when I'm replenished enough to think, but for now it's away and for now that's enough. My thoughts drift off with the last vestiges of my energy and adrenaline, leaving me with the all too familiar feeling of nausea I've come to know well. I slow to a jog, and then a walk, trying to lull my stomach into submission, but it's not working.

My feet stop, giving me a minute to scan the street for a gutter or well-placed hedge to throw up in, and for the first time since I bolted through the door, I take note of my surroundings. I haven't been on this street before. I'm not sure how far I've run, but it's unfamiliar. It's late. Most of the houses are dark now and I try to slow my already rapid breathing. I bolt for the nearest hedge to heave into. I miscalculate the distance and end up running straight into it. Thorns. Of course. Insult to injury. The thorns slash my legs every time I move but I'm too busy puking to extricate them just yet. When my stomach has been thoroughly emptied, I lift my legs out as carefully as possible, trying to minimize the damage, but it's already been done. I can see blood just beginning to seep through the torn skin on my calves but it's the least of my worries right now. I close my eyes, then lift them open again. I force myself to take in my surroundings and to remind myself where I am, and more importantly, where I am not.

The sickness in my stomach is replaced by a new kind of dread. The houses are the same, all the same. I can't find a street sign, but I know I ran fast and I ran far and I didn't pay attention to anything. I broke every rule that I have and I've gotten what I deserve for it. It's the middle of the night and I am alone and lost and drenched in darkness.

I instinctively pat my pocket, feeling for my phone so I can use the GPS. Empty. Of course I didn't bring it. I ran out the door so fast I forgot, because I'm careless and impatient and I didn't think of anything beyond air and sneakers.

I follow the sidewalk. I must be on the outer edge of the community against the preserve that walls it in. I know that this sidewalk probably circles the whole neighborhood, which can give me some bearings and I should stay on it. But I can't help it. I want to get the hell away from all of those trees. I

can't see past them and I can't control what comes out of them and there are too many sounds to process.

There are no street lamps where I'm standing now, but I can see the faint yellow glow of one up ahead. The houses along the other side of the street are shadowed in dark and sleep. Like all sane people at this hour. The churning in my stomach is still there, but it's being overshadowed by the fear of being lost.

My kubotan is swinging at my side until my keys are nothing but a blur. I listen to the quiet that settles around me. I can hear everything: the hum of the streetlamps from overhead, crickets chirping, unintelligible voices coming from a television somewhere, and a sound I can't place right away. It's rhythmic and coarse. Following the direction of the sound, I glance down into the darkness and see light coming from one house at the end of the road. It's brighter than what could be given off by the front lamps alone. I head towards the house, not knowing what I expect to find there. Maybe someone awake who can give me directions. *Directions you can't ask for, idiot.* In the distance the rhythmic scratching sound continues. Soft and almost musical and I follow it. The house is close and the sound is louder now, though I still can't tell what it is, until a moment later I'm there.

I stop at the end of the driveway, in front of a pale yellow house with a brightly lit open garage. I want to look in to see if anyone is inside before I get too close, but my feet won't stop. The sight of it pulls me in. As soon as I reach the threshold, I am frozen, only one thought forming in my mind. *I know this place.* I take a tentative step closer, looking around, remembering details of a place I know I have never been. *I know this place.* The thought invades my brain repeatedly, and as it does, I finally take note of the rhythmic sound, still humming in my ears. There is a figure sitting at a workbench on the far wall of the garage, his hand moving back and forth, sanding down the narrow edge of a wooden beam. My eyes are fixed on those hands as if they're hypnotizing me. I pull my gaze away to follow the dust falling to the floor, catching the light as it goes. *I know this place.* The thought comes at me again and I suck in my breath all at once and I just need a second. One more second to process what it means. *I know this place.* But before I can think, the hands have stopped, the sound has stopped and the person in the garage has turned around to face me.

And I know him, too.

CHAPTER 8

Nastya

Lit up by the fluorescent lights, Josh Bennett studies me across the garage. I haven't moved or looked away. I don't see any recognition in his eyes and I wonder if he knows who I am. I'm just now remembering that I probably look like a different person. My hair is pulled back in a ponytail and I don't have a trace of make-up on my sweat-covered, and probably very flushed, face. I'm in running clothes and sneakers. I'm not sure I would recognize myself if I didn't already know what I was supposed to look like under the crap I—just barely—cover myself in at school. I'm beginning to wish I at least had the make-up on because I'm feeling very exposed under the fluorescent lights with this boy staring at me. He's skewering me with those eyes. I know I'm being assessed somehow, but I'm not sure on what criteria.

“How did you know where I live?” He's annoyed and he doesn't bother hiding the accusation in his words.

Obviously I didn't, because it would have been the last place on earth I would have come, but I guess now he thinks I'm a stalker. My right hand tightens around the kubotan, even though I don't feel like I'm in any real danger and my left hand matches it, even though it's holding nothing. I probably look crazy or confused or both.

His eyes drop down to my legs, which are criss-crossed by the bloody tendrils that infernal shrub left in its wake, and then they return to my face and I wonder what he sees there. I wonder if he senses how defeated I feel. I did not plan for anyone to see me like this, much less Josh Bennett, who apparently I am supposed to fear or revere, though I don't know why. Is he wearing a ring? Is he waiting for me to kneel down and kiss it?

One of us is going to have to blink first, so I take a tentative step back as if I'm trying to evade a predator, hoping he won't notice that I'm moving until I'm already gone. I lift my foot to take another step.

“Do you want a ride home?” He looks away before he says it and his tone loses some of its edge. My foot comes down harder than I mean it to. If I had a list of the things Josh Bennett might say to me in this situation, asking me if I want a ride wouldn’t have made the top fifty. His voice is devoid of any emotion as usual. For the record, no I do not want a ride home, but I think I need one. And it sucks to need something from someone who so clearly detests you, but I’m not proud enough to say no.

I nod, opening and closing my mouth quickly because I really want to say something, even if I don’t know what it is I want to say. He stands and walks to the door that leads into the house, opening it enough to reach in and grab a set of keys that must have been hanging on the inside wall. He turns to close the door but looks back in and pauses a moment as if he’s listening for something. I imagine he must be checking to see if his parents are awake, but they probably aren’t. They’re probably asleep at this hour along with the rest of the civilized world. Except for me. And Josh Bennett who apparently likes to do woodworking in the dead of night in his garage. I look around to try to figure out what exactly he was working on but it all just looks like a bunch of wood and tools to me and I can’t tell. I glance at the garage one more time, memorizing it, and as much as I hate to admit it, I know I’m coming back here.

I walk out and wait in the driveway next to the truck parked in it. It’s the only car here so I guess he doesn’t have his own. It’s a beautiful truck, even I can admit that, and I’m not a big truck person. His father must take good care of it. I wish my car was that shiny, but I hate to wash it, so I’m lucky you can even tell what color the paint is at this point.

Josh stops at a small refrigerator that sits on the floor under one of the work benches and pulls a bottle of water out of it. He walks up and hands it to me, wordlessly, before unlocking my door and opening it. I take the bottle out of his hand and look at it, suddenly aware of just how much I must be sweating. I turn to climb into the truck and I’m glad I’m not in a skirt, because I’m seriously short and I have to take a pretty big step up to get into it. He closes the door behind me, then walks around and climbs in the driver’s side. He seems a lot more graceful doing it than me, like he was born climbing in and out of this truck. I’m wondering if I’m allowed to hate Josh Bennett, because I’m thinking I might start.

And then we sit. He doesn't look at me, but he doesn't start the car, either. I wonder what the hell he's waiting for and maybe wandering lost in the dark might not be the worst thing after all. Everything feels endless right now. My stupidity hits me upside the head a moment later when I realize that he's not sitting here to make me uncomfortable, he just doesn't know where to go. Looking around the car for something to write on is futile. There isn't a damn thing in here. It's the cleanest car I've ever seen. When I get in my car tomorrow morning, it's going to feel like a slum compared to this. Before I can do the eye-pleading thing with him and hope he understands, he reaches across the dashboard and pulls the GPS down and hands it to me.

The ride is ridiculously short. It takes only minutes to get back to Margot's and I feel stupid for having him drive me. I paid attention to everything on the way. I tell myself it's so I won't get lost again, but really I need to find my way back there.

I should say thank you, but he won't expect it and I get the feeling he's more comfortable with the silence anyway. When he pulls into the driveway, I reach for the door almost before he's put the truck in park, determined to put us both out of our misery. I jump down onto the ground and turn to close the door. I don't say thank you. He doesn't say good night, but he does speak.

"You look different," he says and I shut the door in his face.

CHAPTER 9

Nastya

Josh Bennett walks in and heads straight for my table in shop and I try not to look, but I really, really want to. I just don't want him to know that I'm looking. Soon I have no choice in the matter because he's standing in front of me, staring at my face. I stare back at him and I want to scream *What?!* I can almost see the word, interrobang and all, floating up from my lips in unspoken fervor, because he's the only person I know who can appear seriously put out with no expression at all on his face. Does everyone irritate him so much or is it just a special gift I have? He seems disturbed by the fact that I even exist, much less occupy the same space in his precious shop class.

"I sit here," he finally says, and again, he doesn't sound pissed, just matter-of-fact, like that's the way things are and I should know it like everyone else. Does this mean I'm supposed to get up? Move? Where? This is where Mr. Turner put me and I'm trying to decide if I want to have a stare-down with Josh Bennett or get up and move because our near silent dispute already has an audience. Before I can make my decision, Mr. Turner calls Josh over to his desk. He leaves his books on my—his?—table in an obvious show of ownership and refusal to concede and walks to the front of the room. I see Mr. Turner look in my direction and back to Josh and I assume he's telling him that he told me to sit here. I don't know if Josh is going to get his way or not, but the way things seem to go around here, that's usually what happens. I'm not going to give him a chance to be smug about it, so before he turns to come back, I move myself.

There aren't any other empty tables. The one I was sitting at was the last one. There are empty seats at the others but I don't want to sit next to anyone; it becomes too awkward for me and for the person stuck sitting with me. Plus, I like sitting in the back so I know no one is behind me.

There's a counter built around the perimeter of the room with storage cabinets underneath, so I take my books and place them on it and hope like

hell I can sit up here without flashing the world. I push myself up on the counter and turn to face the front. As I do, I see Josh walking back. He doesn't look at me but he does speak. His back is turned to the rest of the class and his voice is low so I'm pretty sure no one but me can hear it.

"I wasn't going to make you move."

I'm not sure if I should be annoyed that he assumes he had the power to make me move or if I should feel bad for misinterpreting him. I'm thinking I'll never understand Josh Bennett and then I'm wondering why I try.

"There's a party tonight at Trevor Mason's. Want to go?"

I look at Drew. We're sitting in Debate. It's almost two-thirty and I'm trying to pull the last five facts I need to finish my assignment off of the internet before the bell so I don't have to deal with it tonight or any other time this weekend. I don't know what Drew's working on, other than me, because I don't think he's accomplished a thing this entire period. He'll no doubt procure an A for whatever non-work he did. That's how things work for Drew around here.

What did he just ask me? It was pretty straightforward and shockingly innuendo-free so I'm momentarily dumbfounded. Go to a party tonight? Not what I was expecting. He's been tossing all of his sexually-charged material my way since the first day of school. I'd call it banter, but it's really not, since my contribution is nothing more than pointed looks and hand gestures and even those are few and far between. He tried to get me to resort to note writing a few days ago but I shut that down quickly enough. Note writing is for fact-based, pertinent information only, not conversations.

Go to a party with Drew? Why not? I surprise even myself, but really, why not? Okay, there are probably about a hundred reasons why not. Because let's face it, he's probably not asking me for my sparkling wit and entertaining anecdotes. But much to my chagrin, Drew is actually one of the few things in my day that I don't completely dread, because at least with him, I feel a certain sense of control. I can handle Drew. He doesn't scare me, and

right now, that may just be enough. I find that, in spite of his blatant man-whorishness and put-on cocky smolder, I like him. Not *like him, like him*. But I do like him and I wonder what that says about me. He's entertaining, and I am sorely in need of entertainment. I nod to him. *Sure, party, of course*. He looks surprised for a moment. Hell, I'm kind of surprised myself. Then the surprise is gone and the self-assured, of-course-you-said-yes smile spreads across his face.

"I'll pick you up at nine?" he asks.

I nod, digging a notebook out of my backpack and ripping a page out of it. I grab the pen he's been holding out of his hand and write down the address because addresses are acceptable note material.

"You should probably wear black," he mocks as I write the address. I've worn nothing but black in the past two weeks. I hand the paper to him, seeing that conquering gleam lingering in his eyes. I tilt my head to the side and look him up and down in all his preppy hotness until my eyes rest back on his face. Then I shrug and walk away.

CHAPTER 10

Josh

Drew pulls into my driveway just after midnight and I know immediately that no good can come of this. I put down the pencil I've been using to mark down measurements with and watch him get out of the car and walk towards the garage.

"Dude, I need a favor."

"Of course you do."

"I need you to take Nastya." *Take Nastya?* At first I wonder where he wants me to take her, until I glance down the driveway and see what he means.

"What? No way." I look past him to the dark figure slumped over in the front seat of the car. "What did you do to her? Is she even conscious?"

"Nothing. No," he says defensively, following my eye-line back to the car. So now we're both standing in my garage, his arms crossed, my hands shoved in my pockets, watching through the windshield of his car for signs of movement. "She just drank too much."

"Too much of what?"

"Flame throwers." He avoids my eyes when he says it.

"What asshole gave her flame throwers?" He looks at me without answering which is answer enough. He's an idiot. A flame thrower is grain alcohol mixed with cherry Kool-Aid. He might as well have chloroformed her. "What were you thinking? She weighs like 25 pounds."

"Yeah, OK, Dad. Thanks for the lecture, but it's not really solving the problem. Besides, how was I supposed to know she couldn't handle it? She looks like a badass."

"A 25-pound badass." It's true. She does look like a badass. I've seen her arms, and she's ripped which is kind of weird and scary all at once because it just seems all wrong on her. She's really small and fragile-looking,

and at the same time, it's like she's some exotic teenage mercenary, all rock solid, dressed in black, ready to take somebody down. None of it makes any sense. It's kind of disconcerting. She's like an optical illusion. You look at it from one angle and you see the picture and you think you've got a lock on it and then it shifts and the image changes to something entirely different and you can't even find the original picture anymore. It's a serious mindfuck.

“Josh, seriously. I can't take her home like this and if I miss curfew again my mom will rip my balls off.” He's not really making his case with that point. I'd pay good money to watch Drew finally get nailed for something. Drew's mom is the sweetest woman on earth, but there's one person who can piss her off like no one else and he's standing in front of me, begging for a stay of execution, or maybe just a stay of castration. I won't say no. He knew it when he came here. The asking is just a formality. I never say no to Drew.

I walk over to the car and open the passenger door. I try to wake her up and ask if she can walk into the house. She stirs a little and opens her eyes. I'm not even sure they focus on me and then her head drops forward onto her chest like it's too heavy for her to hold up and I know there's no way she'll be walking anywhere. She barely even moves when I drag her out of the seat and pick her up to carry her into the house.

“Shit, Drew,” I mutter.

He leans against his car and exhales. “True story.”

Nastya

When I pry my eyes open, it takes me a minute to try to figure out where I am. And I do try, really try, to figure out where I am and I have no freaking clue and that seriously scares the crap out of me. I reach up to brush my hair back out of my eyes so I can look around and attempt to determine what the hell is going on. The only three things that I know for certain took place last night are that *one*—small elves climbed up my body and tied my hair into a mass of tiny knots, *two*—I must have slept with my mouth open because

something crawled into it and died and *three*—I was sucked through a vortex into some animated world where an anvil was dropped on my head.

I lift my hand to my forehead and press, trying to relieve some of the pounding as I attempt, not without effort, to sit up. I'm on someone's couch. Someone's couch. *Someone's couch*. And as soon as I remember, I'm wishing I could forget.

“Good morning, Sunshine!” Josh Fucking Bennett. By now, I'm pretty sure that if I were to find his birth certificate that is exactly what it would say. I don't have time to figure out why I'm here or what he's playing at with the fake, overwrought cheeriness, because he doesn't even take a breath and I wonder if the real Josh Bennett has been abducted by aliens, or maybe the elves carted him off after they got done with my hair. “I'm glad you're awake. I was starting to worry that you might not be feeling well. You know, with all the projectile vomiting last night.” I wince, from either physical pain or embarrassment, I'm not sure which. He sees my discomfort but it doesn't stop him. I think he might actually be encouraged. “No, don't you worry your pretty little head over it,” he says with mock sincerity, then pauses, looking me over. “Well, today, maybe not so pretty, and last night, definitely not so pretty, but still, don't worry about it. It only took four or five towels to soak it up and I think the smell will go away after a day or two. Hopefully it won't stick that badly to your hair. I did what I could, but a ponytail probably would have been helpful.” Josh Bennett cleaned up my puke. Fabulous. He's getting even now and having far too much fun doing it. I can't decide which is worse, angry dad Josh Bennett or sarcastic, mocking Josh Bennett. I'd like to punch them both in the throat right now but I'm not sure I can lift my arm.

Why the hell am I here? The last I knew, I was with Drew, at an overcrowded party, drinking something that tasted suspiciously not like alcohol. I look down at myself, eternally grateful for the fact that I am still wearing the same clothes I was in last night, even if they have what I am now sure is throw up splattered on them. At least Josh Bennett didn't have to strip me and let me wear his boxer shorts. The thought gives me little comfort. Maybe because I'm just now realizing that, while my clothes are still on, my bra is suspiciously MIA. I try to look around to see if it's lying on the floor or something, but it really hurts to move my head.

He hasn't stopped talking, but I have no idea what he's saying, even

though his voice seems to be inside my skull. He's still on the ponytail thing. Something about them being a requirement for drunk girls. He's doing nothing to lower his voice. In fact, he might actually believe he's on a stage somewhere projecting to the back of a theater, because that's how loud his voice is. He's obviously annoyed and why shouldn't he be? It's the ass-crack of dawn on a Saturday morning and he's up with a strange girl on his couch—the same strange girl who projectile vomited in his bathroom last night while he tried to hold back her hair. I think I may just have to cut him some slack. Like a whole crapload of slack, especially when he goes into the kitchen and returns with a glass of ice water which I desperately need right now. I look at the glass in his hand as he offers it to me. It's a pathetic, short glass tumbler. Is he some sort of conservationist? I'm going to need about eighteen of those right now. I take it, gratefully bringing it up to my lips and immediately gulping it down. The liquid is at the back of my throat before it's coming right back up again. *What the hell?* Vodka. I spit it out, not even conscious of where it goes, and start retching. My stomach clenches and convulses but nothing else comes up. I glare at Josh Bennett who is staring at me now with a look of what? Disbelief? Repentance? Fear?

“Shit! I didn't think you'd actually drink it.” He grabs the glass out of my hand. What did he think I was going to do with it? Bathe? “I thought you'd be able to tell.” He looks at me with apology. “It was a joke. Obviously a shitty one,” he mutters under his breath as he runs back to the kitchen and returns with yet another towel. This boy will be doing laundry all day. I wonder how he's going to explain this to his parents. It's a miracle they aren't out here already, wanting to know what's going on. I yank the towel out of his hands and get down on the floor to clean up my own mess. Even if this one was his fault, I'd rather not owe him anything else. He stands over me while I mop up what remains of the vodka I sprayed across the floor. I realize what I must look like, down on all fours, my hair, my face, my clothes, a reflection of the cruel joke that has been this night.

I look up and glower at him, angry just for the fact that he has witnessed my utter humiliation and that, as much as he's glorying in my downfall, I owe him some debt of gratitude. Drew, on the other hand, is another story. I owe him a fate worse than death. I think I may have preferred to have him dump me on my front porch for my aunt to find rather than putting me at the

mercy of Josh Bennett. As soon as the thought crosses my mind, I know that maybe it's not so true. But it feels like it should be true. I realize I've been glaring at him through my entire thought process and I wonder what my face must have betrayed because he's smiling at me now. *Smiling*. And it's almost a real smile, though I can't be positive, because I've never really seen him smile. At school he wears the same unchanging expression, day in and day out, like nothing in the world touches him on any level. And that brings me back to my alien abduction theory, which I'm starting to consider as a real possibility, when he speaks.

"You really want to tell me to fuck off right now don't you, Sunshine?" He's not done playing with me yet. I narrow my eyes when he calls me Sunshine again, which is a tactical error; because now he knows it annoys me and I have a feeling he's enjoying annoying me. "What? Sunshine fits you. It's bright and warm and happy. Just. Like. You." And that's when I lose it. I can't help it. As shitty as I feel right now, as stupid as I look, as angry as I am at myself, at Drew, at Josh Fucking Bennett and drinks that taste deceptively like cherry Kool-Aid and nothing else. The ridiculousness of this whole situation slams into me all at once, and for the first time in forever, I laugh. Maybe it's not even real laughter. Maybe it's just the deranged cackling of a very unstable girl, but I don't care, because it feels good and I don't think I could control it now if I tried. Now the smile is gone from his face. Moved from his to mine, and he's wearing my confusion. He's looking at me like the insane girl I am. I may have actually surprised him. You win, Josh Bennett. You earned it.

When my hysterics subside, he takes the vodka-laden towel from me and goes back into the kitchen. I study the room for the first time. It's simple. There isn't much in it that's modern. Almost everything in here, except for the couch, is made out of wood, which shouldn't surprise me. None of it goes together. I don't think any two pieces of furniture in this room match in any way. Every piece is a different style, a different type of wood, a different finish. I wonder if he built any of it. The oddest thing is that there are no fewer than three coffee tables in here. The one in front of the couch I'm sitting on is really nothing to look at. It's all square edges and plain and the finish is wearing off across the surface where people probably spent years putting down glasses without using coasters. It might not seem out of place, if

not for the fact that there are two more across the room, and they are anything but plain. The two of them are from another world and I walk over to get a closer look at them. They don't even appear to be coffee tables in the traditional sense, but I don't know what else to call them. They look old. Ornate and understated at the same time. I have no idea why they would be shoved, unceremoniously, against the wall on the far side of the room. I kneel down and reach out to run my fingers along one of the curved legs of the table closest to me, but then I hear Josh coming and I head back over to the couch. I don't need him thinking I'm, thinking I'm what? Fondling his furniture? I don't know. I just don't want him thinking anything.

When Josh comes back, he's carrying one of those huge plastic hospital mugs. I have a whole collection of them at home. Mine are white with teal lettering. The one he's holding is red on white. He hands the mug to me. "Water." I look at him skeptically. "For real this time. I promise."

I manage to get all of the water down in addition to the ibuprofen he hands me with it. Then he takes the mug, without a word, and goes back into the kitchen, returning a moment later with it refilled. He makes me drink that one, too, which I'm none too happy about, because I really just want to get out of here. I look like crap; I feel like crap; and I have no idea how all of this is going to play out on Monday. But I'll deal with that thought later, when my head isn't exploding and I'm not on Josh Bennett's couch.

I stand up to leave, looking down at myself and wondering if I should even ask.

"It's on the bathroom floor." He's smiling at the carpet, not at me, when he says it. "You seemed really disgusted by it for some reason. Ripped it out from under your shirt, through your sleeve, in one fluid motion and flung it across the room. It was pretty impressive." Wonderful. Last night's dinner, the charred remains of my dignity, and apparently, now, my undergarments, too. What else did I leave on Josh Bennett's bathroom floor? I have to admit that, even in the midst of such utter degradation, I think it's funny that he can't seem to say the word bra.

He points me in the direction of the bathroom and I walk as gingerly as I can. Every step sends shockwaves rippling from my feet up into my brain. When I get there, my bra mocks me from the tile floor in the corner between

the bathtub and the toilet. At least it was a cute black lacy one, because ugly underwear is the only thing that could make this morning any worse. I kneel down to retrieve it, and in the process, wonder if I can possibly scrape up the discarded dregs of my self-respect. I may need them.

Josh doesn't need any directions this time. He says nothing at all on the way home and I can't decide if I'm grateful for that or not. He drops me off at Margot's with thirty minutes to spare before she gets home from work. It's just enough time for me to shower and change and pretend all is well before she walks in the door.

"Feel better, Sunshine." He's not looking at me, but I can still see one side of his mouth turned up when I shut the door.

I think about the fact that he let me sleep on his couch when Drew obviously dumped me there. He held back my hair, cleaned up massive amounts of puke, brought me painkillers and stood over me while he forced me to drink a half-gallon of water so I wouldn't get dehydrated. There's nothing sunny or shiny about me, but after last night, he's earned the right to mock me this morning. So yes, I think, at least for a little while, Josh Bennett can call me whatever the hell he likes.

CHAPTER 11

Josh

At 4:00 on Sunday the doorbell rings. When I open it, I find Drew's mom on my porch with a plastic container in her hands.

"It's Sunday. I made sauce. Drew said you weren't coming for dinner so I wanted to drop it by." She knows I can't make spaghetti sauce to save my life and it pisses me off, so she always brings me some.

"Thanks." I step aside and push the door open so she can come in. "You could have had Drew bring it to me. You didn't have to come all the way over here."

"Drew disappeared somewhere this afternoon. Probably to see whichever girl he's chasing now." She raises her eyebrows questioningly at me and I keep my expression blank, wondering if I know exactly which girl that is. I take the container from her and turn to put it in the refrigerator, while she sits down on a barstool at the kitchen counter, in front of the plate of cookies that appeared at my front door earlier today. "Besides, you know I like to check on you and interrogate you on your life every now and then. Even if I know you won't answer." She smiles, picking up a cookie.

"Thanks," I say for the second time in as many minutes, not sure what I'm thanking her for: coming by, checking on me, not expecting me to answer. Any of a number of things. I could probably thank Mrs. Leighton all day long, but she wouldn't expect me to.

"You could make it easy on me and just move in with us." She doesn't even try to hide the smirk on her face. She's asked me to move in with them every week since I found out my grandfather was leaving. She always gets the same response, but she never stops asking. I'm not sure how I'd feel if she did.

"Thanks," I say again and now we're up to three. I don't need to refuse anymore.

“I’m just being selfish, you know. I need you to be a good influence on Drew. Someone needs to save that boy from himself. I’m not old enough to be a grandmother.” She looks knowingly at me.

“I think you give me too much credit.”

“Josh, I love my son, but some days I think you may be the only good thing about him. You are, quite possibly, the only reason I keep him.” She shakes her head and I know she’s not being serious. Drew is a mama’s boy, through and through. He just also happens to be a huge pain in her ass most days. “You’ve been holding out on me. When did you start baking?” She turns the half-eaten cookie over in her hand, examining it.

“I didn’t,” I pause, looking at the plate. Now that part of the bottom is visible, I can see the blue paisley pattern around the edges. I wonder if it’s part of a set and if I should return it. “Someone else gave me those.”

“Someone else?” she says suspiciously. I can tell her interest is piqued. She got tired of asking Drew about the girls in his life because they come and go so fast that there’s never any point. But she’s never stopped questioning me, waiting for the day when she might actually get an answer. “Well,” she takes another bite of the cookie. “*Someone else* can bake. These are delicious.”

“I’m not being evasive,” I smile, answering the question she asked without asking. “I don’t know who it was. They were on my porch this morning.”

“Oh,” she says, pulling the cookie away from her mouth, her smile gone.

“I have a good idea who it was. I think you’re safe.” Her expression softens to slight relief. I do have a good idea who it was but I can’t know for sure. There was no note with them when the cookies showed up but I couldn’t help the feeling that they were a thank you of sorts. And really, there just isn’t anybody else it could have been. “Besides, I’ve eaten like six of them already. If someone wanted to poison me, I think we’d know by now.”

We talk for a few more minutes and she gets up to leave, asking me one more time if I’m sure I won’t come to dinner. I won’t and she already knows that. I’m still pissed at Drew for Friday night and I don’t feel like dealing with his shit yet.

“I waited for her in the parking lot this morning,” Drew says when I run into him before the warning bell Monday morning. He called me last night but I didn’t pick up and I deleted the message without listening to it. I haven’t spoken to him since he showed up on Saturday afternoon, wondering what happened with Nastya after he dumped her there. I could say he dropped her off, but we both know that’s not what happened. It would be one thing if he was actually concerned about whether or not she made it home ok or how she was feeling, but his primary concern was finding out how pissed she was at him and I didn’t do anything to try to ease his mind. I hope she’s pissed at him. She should be.

“She won’t talk to me,” he laughs as we make our way to first period. “Well, you know, she won’t make distinctive facial expressions at me. She did make one expression involving a finger but it could have just been a tic or some sort of muscle spasm.”

“Of course,” I reply.

“Are you still pissed at me, too?”

“I’m over it.”

“You should be. Come on, I dropped a really hot drunk girl, who doesn’t talk, off at your house. That’s like a gift.”

I stop walking and look at him, wondering, yet again, why we are friends. I know him well enough to know that he’s not being serious. Drew is an ass and a whore but he’s not a complete douchebag. Still, I can’t help but call him on it. He deserves it this time.

“Sorry,” I apologize with an utter lack of conviction and keep walking. “I thought you were just asking me to clean up your mess. I didn’t realize you were being a friend and giving me an unresponsive drunk girl to rape. Next time, be a little clearer for me so I don’t miss such a golden opportunity.” I can’t hide the sarcasm in my tone and I don’t try.

“You know I was kidding.” He has the grace to at least sound like he feels bad. “I left her with you because I knew you wouldn’t do anything.” Now he makes me sound like some sort of monk and I don’t think I like that

any better.

“She doesn’t know that. She probably thinks you did exactly what you said you did. Dumped her with some strange guy without thinking twice about what would happen.”

“What did happen? You were so pissed at me on Saturday you wouldn’t tell me shit.”

“Maybe because I was up half the night cleaning up vomit.” I stop walking and look at him so he realizes that I’m not joking. There is nothing at all funny about the amount of puke I faced on Friday night. I may never be the same again. “You want to know what happened? She threw up. A lot. She passed out. She woke up. I took her home. That’s it.”

“Dude, I so owe you,” he says, still cringing from the discussion of vomit.

“You have no idea.”

Nasty

When I get to shop on Monday, Margot’s blue paisley plate is sitting on the counter in the back of the room where I usually sit. Josh isn’t at his regular table but he must have put it here. I see him on the other side of the shop where all the power tools are. I don’t want to stare at him long enough to figure out what he’s doing, so I shove the plate in my backpack before he gets back to his seat. The bell rings and he slides onto his stool without a glance in my direction and things are normal again. The normalcy doesn’t last long, which shouldn’t surprise me. I don’t think anything is normal where Josh Bennett is concerned. Though, I really shouldn’t be judging him on normalcy, especially when I’m watching him from the confines of my own, very precarious, glass house.

“Hey, Bennett! Is it true you got emancipated?” *Emancipated?* I look around to see who’s asking the question. It’s some punk-ass skater kid whose name, I think, is Kevin, but I haven’t paid enough attention to know for certain. Mostly what I’ve picked up is that his hair is overlong in the front,

his pants are always baggy and he thinks he's pretty awesome. I really don't care who asked the question but I'm definitely interested in the answer.

Josh nods, but says nothing. He's looking down, working on the scale drawing we were assigned Friday. He doesn't bother to lift his head and acknowledge Kevin or anyone else whose attention is now on him.

"So that means you're, like, free to do whatever the hell you want?"

"Apparently so." He turns the ruler and traces a line along the edge of it with a pencil. "Of course, I can't murder anyone, so it has its limits," he adds dryly, still not looking up. I have to stifle my own smile, especially when Kevin soldiers on, completely oblivious to the innuendo.

"Man, that's awesome. I'd be having parties every night." Kevin doesn't seem to take the hint that Josh has nothing to say to him and keeps pushing. I'm kind of wishing Josh would give this kid the fuckupance he so richly deserves, but I think that's more my style than Josh Bennett's.

I hear someone tell Kevin, in a hushed voice, to shut up. The kids around him look anywhere from curious to uncomfortable to downright astonished by his line of questioning. I'm in the curious camp myself, but I'm trying to act disinterested. I can tell Mr. Turner's picked up on it, too, because he keeps glancing in that direction. He's not going to interfere, but he damn sure wants to know what's being said. He looks almost disgusted. I know that I'm missing some vital piece of information here and I can't ask anyone what it is. Why has he been emancipated? Are his parents abusive? Dead? In jail? Out of the country? Maybe there's a top secret spy mission involved.

My mind turns while the conversation continues. I'm still trying to figure out why Josh has been emancipated and what it has to do with the fact that everyone stays the hell out of his way. We've been sitting here for all of forty-five seconds and yet I almost feel like the air in the room has gotten heavier.

Josh

I can see their expressions without looking. Usually everyone ignores me, but the times when they don't are worse. Like now. You either get the ignorant crap spewed by morons like Kevin Leonard or you get the sucks-to-be-you stares. Especially from the girls. The girls are the worst. Drew says I should use it to my advantage; that I waste the shitty cards I've been dealt and that I should at least get something out of being such a tragic figure. But there's something about being pity-fucked that just doesn't sit well. It's hard to want a girl who looks at you like you're a lost puppy she wants to take home and feed or a dejected child who needs to curl up in her lap and be coddled. There's nothing hot about a girl feeling sorry for me. Maybe if I was desperate, but probably not even then.

The adults are even worse because they love to make their dumbass comments about how well I'm doing; how well adjusted I've become; how well I handle everything. As if they have any clue. The only thing I've learned to do well is avoid, but everyone would rather believe it's all good. That way they can crawl back under the shelter of that rock they live under. The one they think death can't see them through.

It's even the same with the teachers. I can get out of almost any assignment I want if I play the death card. It makes everyone uncomfortable, so they'll do just about anything you want to get you to go away so they can pretend it doesn't happen. They get to convince themselves that they empathize and that they've done their good deed for the day. When I'm lucky, they just ignore me because that's easier for all of us anyway. Easier than having to acknowledge death.

One death card might be more than enough to play for a missed assignment or copping a feel on some girl, but I'm racking up a full deck at this point, and I can probably get away with almost anything. People started looking the other way a long time ago. Maybe I did, too.

When I was eight I went to a spring training game with my dad. Once a month my parents would split up and each take either my sister, Amanda, or I out for the day. One month I'd go with my dad and Amanda would go with my mom. The next month we'd switch. It was March and it was my turn to go with my mom, but since that's when the game was, I begged to go with my dad instead. I told my mom she could have me April and May to make up for it. Because I was such a fucking prize. My mom said it sounded like a

good deal to her and made me shake on it.

My dad and I got home at six o'clock. I had fallen asleep in the car on the way home. He woke me up when we pulled in but he ended up carrying me into the house anyway because my ass was not crawling out of that car. We ate too much, laughed too much, yelled too much. My stomach hurt. My face was sunburnt. I lost my voice and I couldn't keep my eyes open. It was the last happy day of my life.

When I woke up, I didn't have a mom or a sister anymore, but apparently it would all work out, because we'd end up having more money than we would ever need. The trucking company's lawyers said it was a generous settlement. My dad's lawyers said it was fair. Fair compensation for my mother's life. Fair compensation for my dead sister. They didn't consider the fact that I really lost my father, too, that day. That something in him broke, shattered, melted, combusted, disintegrated like the car my mother was driving when an 18-wheeler delivering soda drove right over it. But I'm sure if they had considered that, too, they would have determined that it was also more than fair. Generous, even. I don't have a sister to bitch about or a mother to talk to or a father build things with. But I have millions of nearly untouched dollars in bank accounts and brokerage funds and life is so very fucking fair.

"It's completely awesome," I reply, hoping my agreement will get Kevin to turn back around and impress someone else with his ignorance and talk of legendary partying. "Nobody gives a shit what I do." It's true in more ways than one. I look up and focus my eyes on his, hoping he understands.

I go back to finishing the scale drawing I've been working on, glad that everyone's attention has shifted back to more important things, like math tests and hot girls. Mr. Turner is making his way around the room, looking over everyone's shoulders to check their progress. He passes my table and glances behind me.

"Nastya, you can't draw sitting up there. Why don't you move over and sit at the empty seat next to Kevin?" He sounds almost apologetic for asking her to move. I'm surprised he's even expecting her to do the assignment. So far he's been acting like she's not even in the class, which we both know she shouldn't be. But I guess he got stuck with her, because she's still here. I

think she makes people as uncomfortable as I do. Mr. Turner's never been awkward with me, but he sure as hell is around her. Maybe it's the clothes, or lack thereof, because he always seems kind of scared to look at her. I had forgotten she'd been behind me this whole time, and that she probably heard the entire exchange earlier. She starts picking up her things and Mr. Turner shifts his attention back to me.

"Looks good," he says, checking out the sketch in front of me. "What are you going to use?"

"European ash, probably. Natural finish," I reply. He nods, but stands there a second longer.

"Everything ok?" he asks and I know he's referring to the Kevin situation, which is stupid, because I don't let that crap bother me anymore.

"Everything's good," I tell him, turning the ruler on my paper as he walks back up to his desk. Behind me, I hear Nastya hop down off of the counter, the click of her heels hitting the floor. She passes behind me, moving around my table to the one where Kevin Leonard is laughing his self-congratulatory ass off. Everyone's working on their own now, and the noise level has kicked up considerably, so I'm not sure if I'm imagining things, or maybe I'm just crazy, when I hear the words.

You lie. They aren't even a whisper. They drift into my consciousness so soft they almost have no form, as if they're made of air and longing, but I swear I hear them anyway. When I look up, the only person who could have said them is settling down on a stool next to Kevin Leonard and I kick myself for being ridiculous, because I know they can't be real, and that the longing those words were born from is mine.

I make it to art just under the wire, slipping in and sitting at an empty table in the back, behind Clay Whitaker. I'm not much for art but there were no course numbers left to sign me up for an extra shop class. I'd taken them all, so I needed another elective to fill my schedule. Preferably one without homework or thought involved. The path of least resistance is well worn by

my boots. Mrs. Carson lets me get by with turning in sketches of furniture that I love and whatever I'm designing to build at some point. Sometimes I draw stuff I see in antique stores. Things I wish I had the talent to make. Maybe one day. I'm not that great when it comes to the drawing. I'm ok. Not terrible, not amazing. I glance at the table in front of me. Clay Whitaker is amazing. He can do with a sketchbook and charcoal what I wish I could do with lumber and tools. I pull out my backpack and rummage through it for the picture I printed off the internet last night. I barely get started when Clay turns around.

"What are you drawing?" He inclines his head to get a better view of the picture in front of me.

It's a late 19th century George II-style marble-topped console table. Our assignment was to bring in a photograph to recreate so that's what I picked.

"Table," I say.

"One day you should try drawing something with two legs instead of four."

Drawing people doesn't interest me, plus, I suck at it. "What are you drawing?" I ask.

"Who, not what," he corrects. Clay rarely draws anything other than people. He's obsessed with human faces. If I'm forever drawing furniture, he's forever drawing people. He's damn good at it, too. It's almost creepy how realistic his drawings look. There is some arcane quality about his sketches; some way he makes you see past the face itself and into it. I've seen him make even the plainest, most uninspiring face interesting in ways I don't have words for. I'm jealous of his talent. If I didn't have something of my own to love like that, I'd be insanely jealous. As it is, I can appreciate his ability without hating him for it, but I know there are a few people in this class who can't. Sometimes I think Mrs. Carson, herself, is one of them. It must be kind of depressing to have to teach someone who surpasses your abilities on every level.

My attention shifts back to Clay as he drags a 4x6 photograph off his table and passes it back to me with a shit-eating grin on his face like he knows something I don't. I take the picture out of his hands and look down at it. I'm not sure who I expected it to be, but it certainly wasn't the girl whose

face I'm looking at now. Even so, I can't say I'm surprised. If there's an interesting face in this school, it's Nastya Kashnikov's, maybe just because she never opens her mouth to take away from the mystery. I stare at the picture a second longer than I should. She's looking in the general direction of the lens, but not directly facing it. The camera must have been zoomed in on her, because it's not that well focused, and it's obvious that she didn't know the picture was being taken.

"Why her?" I ask, reluctantly handing it back.

"Her face is insane, even with all that shit she covers it up with. If I can do that justice, I'll never need to draw another girl again." He's staring at the photograph like he's picturing how she looks without the make-up. I want to tell him he's right. What she looks like in that picture is nothing compared to what she looks like without a trace of make-up on and her hair pulled off her face. That's what I'd like a picture of, instead of having to rely on my memory of her, lost and dripping sweat in my garage at one in the morning.

"I wouldn't think she was your type." I yank my attention away from thoughts I shouldn't be having and put the focus back on him so maybe he won't notice, but Clay always notices. Clay's as much of an outcast here as anybody and I know he's a watcher, too. I've seen enough of his drawings to know how many people he studies when they don't know he's looking. And when Clay looks, he sees, and that's the most disconcerting thing of all.

"My dick doesn't have to want her. Just my pencil." He smiles at me again, like he's got some secret of mine. He probably does. He's always watching me like he never got the message to leave me the hell alone. For some reason, I don't mind. He stays in the fringes, and other than the shit he still occasionally takes for coming out, he flies under the radar. I go back to my own crappy drawing and then kick myself when my mouth opens again.

"How did you get the picture?"

"Michelle." The name is an answer in itself. Yearbook Michelle. Clay's the only one who doesn't throw the word yearbook in front of her name when he says it. She sits with him every day at lunch, camera all but surgically attached to her hands. "I got her to take it in the courtyard one day when Nastya wasn't looking." He shrugs, looking a little guilty, though not at all apologetic. He uses her name like he knows her and I wonder how well.

“She’d kick your ass if she knew you took it.” It’s a dumbass thing to say. I don’t know her well enough to know what she’d do and I’m talking about her like I do. She’s ripped enough to kick his ass, and mine, too. Really, she should have kicked my ass for handing her a glass of vodka when she was hung over, but she laughed in my face instead, so what the hell do I know?

“There are a lot of people who want to kick my ass,” he responds nonchalantly, as if it’s just a fact of life. It’s true that a lot of the assholes in this school want to kick the crap out of him, but wanting and doing are two different things. They still talk shit about him, but nobody’s laid a hand on Clay since eighth grade and he and I both know why.

When my mom died, I went through the angry phase. It’s okay, of course, because anger is acceptable when you’re grieving, especially when you’re an eight year-old boy. People will make a lot of excuses for you. I dealt with my acceptable anger by doing unacceptable things like beating the crap out of other kids who pissed me off. Pissing me off didn’t take much. I was pretty liberal about what would be enough set me off. Turned out, even the unacceptable things I did with my fists were considered acceptable and brushed under the carpet.

I punched Mike Scanlon in the face, twice, because he said my mom was in the ground getting eaten by maggots. I don’t think there was even enough of her body left after the crash to feed a maggot, but I didn’t argue with him. I just nailed him in the face. Gave him a black eye and a split lip. He told his dad. His dad came to my house and I hid around the corner, listening and wondering how much trouble I was going to get in. But he wasn’t even mad. He told my dad it was okay. He said he understood. He didn’t understand crap, but I didn’t get in trouble. And that’s the way it always went.

The only time I really had to answer for it at all was the one time it happened at school. I punched Paul Keller on the soccer field during P.E. and I thought I was in for it. The principal called me in, which had never happened in my life. Lucky for me, he also understood and I got off with a warning and a few trips to the school psychologist. All the kids I beat up learned that no one was going to touch me for anything I did. I could hit them in broad daylight with ten witnesses and even their own dads would tell them

to give me a break.

My angry phase had ended by the time I got to eighth grade, just in time for my dad to have a heart attack. By that time, almost everybody left me alone. No one would give me an excuse to be angry at them. Then one day I was walking home from school and ran into three shits beating the crap out of Clay Whitaker. I didn't even know him at the time but they were kicking him good and I needed an excuse to kick someone back. I had a lot of healthy, acceptable anger built up and they were good therapy. There were three of them and I wasn't the biggest kid around. They should have been able to grind me into the sidewalk without breaking a sweat. But they had only garden-variety cruelty to fuel them. I had pure unadulterated rage.

Clay was sitting on the ground when the other kids finally ran off. I was hurt and out of breath so I sat down, also, because I didn't know where to go and I didn't care if anyone else came looking for me. No one did. I probably would have hit them, too. Clay didn't say thank you, or anything else to me for that matter, which was good, because I didn't deserve any thanks. I didn't do it for him. There weren't any noble intentions.

I didn't care if I got in trouble. I didn't care about Clay Whitaker, sitting a couple feet away, bloody and crying. I just didn't care. That was the last time I hit anyone. After that day, I decided to wait until someone gave me a good reason. But it didn't matter, because everyone had already learned that I'd get away with it if I did. I wasn't even sure what a good reason would be, but I figured I'd know when the time came. And maybe it never would.

I didn't say a word to Clay before I finally got up and walked home and we never spoke about what happened. I was used to people not bothering me, but after that day, nobody bothered Clay Whitaker, either.

"I'm starting to understand the feeling," I mutter, and he knows I'm not serious but he throws his hands up and takes the hint.

"Fine. I'll leave you to your very compelling table. I'm going to draw a girl," he says smugly and turns around to open his sketchbook.

CHAPTER 12

Nasty

I used to spend excessive amounts of time thinking about what I'd be doing over the next twenty or so years. It usually had something to do with playing the piano in concert halls all over the world. Which would mean lots of world travel that would include stays at fabulously glamorous hotels with fabulously fluffy towels and fluffier bathrobes. There would also be the unbelievably hot, musically gifted, swoon-worthy princes who would tour with me and inevitably fall obsessively in love with me. Because that happens. I would be revered for the talent that came from my father's side of the family and the beauty that came from my mother's. I'd wear elegant gowns in colors that haven't even been imagined yet and everyone would know my name.

Now I spend my time thinking about what I'll be doing over the next twenty or so hours and hoping it involves something resembling sleep.

I've been able to run every night for a week now. The weather has cooperated. My legs are coming back. I push myself harder than I should but I haven't thrown up again since the second night. My body is remembering. The best part is that I can exhaust myself, drain everything the day dredges up, so I can sleep. I still can't do without the notebooks, but the running helps. It gives me something, or maybe more accurately, it takes something away. I don't care. I know I depend on it too much but it's the one of the only things I can depend on. Exercise, notebooks, hate. The things that do not let me down.

I know my way around the streets now. I can pay attention without paying attention. I've memorized the ambient sound. I know what belongs

and what doesn't. I know where the sidewalks are uneven, where the pavement has been pushed up by the roots of an angry tree. My mind has learned what to expect from the night I run in. I leave around the same time every evening but I don't run the same route twice. I can get myself home a dozen different ways from any direction if I need to. I am not comfortable. I'll never be comfortable leaving the house again, but I feel prepared, and that's better than I was the last time and the most I can expect to be.

For the past six nights, I have purposely avoided the pale yellow stucco house on Corinthian Way. The one with the perpetually open garage. I run past the street every night, but I can't ignore the pull I feel to at least glance down the road from the turn off. I can tell by the pattern of the lights whether or not the garage door is up and it hasn't disappointed yet. It hasn't been closed once, no matter what time it is. I always wonder what he might say if I were to show up there again. I know it won't be much but I wonder what the words would be anyway. Would he say anything? Would he ignore me and keep working as if I wasn't there? Would he tell me to leave? Ask me to stay? No, I know he wouldn't do that. Josh Bennett doesn't ask anybody to stay. I could come up with a hundred possibilities, but I really can't figure out which of them would be the closest to possible. Then, for a just a moment, I lose focus. I stop thinking about what he would say to me and start pondering what I would say to him. That's the moment I push my feet hard and fast in the opposite direction. And I run far away from Corinthian Way and my absurd, self-destructive thoughts.

I get back to Margot's house at 9:25 and head straight for the shower. I talk more to myself in that shower than I have in months. Within the safety of an empty house, under the muting of the running water, I remind myself of all the complications that will come from opening my mouth. I try to get all of the words out of my system. I tell Ethan Hall that he's a douche while I visualize administering a perfectly executed palm heel strike to his face. Or a fork to his eye, which is equally appealing. I tell Ms. Jennings that, contrary to popular belief, Bach was not more prolific than Telemann; he's just better remembered. I tell Drew which of his pick-up lines works the best and who I think he should really use them on instead of wasting them on me. I tell my Dad that he can still call me Milly because, even though it's a sucky nickname, it makes him happy and that makes me happy in a way I don't

know how to be anymore. I tell my therapists thank you, but that nothing they do or say or try to make me say will help. I talk until the water runs cold and my voice feels hoarse from overuse. I hope it's enough to help me keep my mouth shut. I haven't said a word to another living person in 452 days. I write my three and a half pages, tuck away my composition book and crawl into bed, knowing how close I came to not making it to 453.

I've been doing a decent job avoiding Josh at school. Other than fifth hour, the only time I have to see him is in shop, which is always a humbling experience since everyone in that class knows their way around lumber and power tools and I'm lucky I can identify a hammer, maybe not even that. The other day this kid named Errol asked me to hand him one, and when I did, he looked at me like I was an idiot. Apparently there are like four hundred kinds of hammers and I didn't give him the right one. Now nobody even asks me to get them stuff.

I could have tried to drop the class, but I decided to choose my battles with the guidance department and shop was the lesser of the evils when compared to Speech and Debate and Intro to Music. Between the two of those, I figured I could survive Speech since Mr. Trent had told me I could earn my grade doing research and finding interpretation material. Plus, I had crash hot sexy Drew to amuse me and I'll take all the amusement I can get. And if I'm being completely honest with myself, which I usually endeavor to avoid, I knew from day one that I needed the hell out of Intro to Music. That class was a fault line running just beneath the surface of my unstable mind. I'd rather avoid it. I'm good at avoiding.

And besides, being the teacher aide in Ms. McAllister's fifth hour has been more entertaining than I could have hoped for. It's like the school equivalent of watching *Big Brother*; I get to eavesdrop on the drama and it's not mentally taxing in the least. Drew is in there, along with Josh, dirtbag Ethan, fuckwad Kevin Leonard and this badass girl named Tierney Lowell who Drew argues with non-stop. I don't think she's my biggest fan, either. She hasn't told me outright, but she glares at me like I spend my free time

murdering puppies, so it's an educated guess.

Shop really isn't so bad, either, even if it does make me feel inept and useless most of the time. No one bothers me, and Mr. Turner doesn't expect me to do much of anything. Josh is apparently some sort of god there. He walks around like he built the place. They should give him a dedicated phone line in the workshop, because every time the phone rings, the same thing happens: Turner answers, Turner summons Josh, Josh leaves. He gets sent out a lot. Shelves need fixing? Call Josh Bennett. Drawers stuck? Get Josh. Need an exquisitely-crafted, custom-built dining room set? Josh Bennett is your man.

Just don't ask him to talk. He hasn't said anything to me since the day he told me he wasn't going to make me relinquish my seat at his table, benevolent despot that he is. I, obviously, have not said anything to him.

CHAPTER 13

Josh

Drew walks in at about ten after eleven on Sunday morning. I forgot to lock the door when I went out to get the newspaper this morning so he walks right in. I have to cancel the stupid thing. I don't read it. It's another remnant from my grandfather living here. I tried to convince him to read it online but he wouldn't have it. He said he liked the feel of it in his hands and the smell of the paper. I hate the way newspaper feels and I like the way it smells even less. I make a note to call today and have them stop delivery. I don't want to have to see another one in my driveway.

"What's up?" I ask while he makes himself at home.

"Sarah. House. Girls. Too many," he sighs, collapsing prone onto the couch and staring up at the ceiling.

"I didn't think there was such a thing as too many girls in your world."

"When it comes to Sarah's friends, I make exceptions."

"You never make exceptions."

"OK. True story. But I should."

I don't blame him. Sarah's friends are painful. They're nice to look at, but they all know it, which kind of diminishes the appeal. They're all the things about the girls at school that I can't stand and Sarah's turning just like them. I guess I'm lucky I intimidate them, because after they try their flirting thing once, they usually realize they're not going to get a reaction and they don't come back for more.

"You've already hit at least three of them. Finally learn your lesson?"

"Think they finally learned theirs. Plus, Sarah put her foot down and said no more with the friends. Off limits."

"Does she really think you're going to listen?"

"She put her foot down to them. *I'm* off limits."

“How deprived they must feel.”

“Don’t mock. It’s true. I’m like a rite of passage.”

“Why are you here?”

“Told you. Can’t be in the house. I feel my testosterone levels dropping by the second in there.”

“Yeah, but why are you *here*?” My house is usually not the first resort for escape when Drew needs to get away from his. It used to be a few years ago, but not anymore. I think it might have something to do with my possession of a Y chromosome.

“Nowhere else to go.”

“You could pick up some grain alcohol. Go make a peace offering.”

“I’m not going over there alone. They might never find my body.”

“Giving up so soon?” There are a hundred other girls he could go after; this one I just don’t get.

“No. Just have to switch tactics. Ideas?”

I don’t have any ideas and if I did I wouldn’t help him out. I do have questions, though, and I seem to come up with more every day. “Why do you think she doesn’t talk?”

“Nobody knows. I hit her with some of my favorite material, and judging by the look I got, she has no problem grasping the English language. I’m voting no vocal cords.”

I know for a fact that’s not true. She laughed when she was here—full-on laughed. I looked it up. You need vocal cords to produce sound like that, so I know that’s not it. Maybe it’s still a physical thing. I don’t know shit about anything like that, but something tells me it’s not physical and that makes me wonder even more. What reason does someone have to not talk? Did she ever talk? Maybe she’s never uttered a single word. I don’t know. I do know that she pays attention; she’s watching everything all the time, even when she’s not even looking. I don’t think she misses a damn thing. It might creep me out if I didn’t kind of get it. I wonder if she sees things that I don’t, but it’s not like she’d tell me and I would never ask anyway.

“She doesn’t seem like your type,” I say. With rare exception, Drew tends to go the vapid, cute and popular route. He’s all about the path of least

resistance when it comes to girls, and fortunately for him, that path seems to lead to almost any girl in school. I don't think he's ever been turned down, even though they all know the reputation and he's never done anything to sugar-coat it. He's never pulled out the love card and pretended to have any sort of feelings for a girl to get her to sleep with him. He doesn't have to. They do it anyway without any emotional persuasion from him. They provide that all on their own.

Most girls think they'll be the one he ends up staying with but it never happens. You'd think at least one of them would publicly call him out for it. Try to make him take responsibility and own up, but none of them do, because at the end of the day, they know that Drew did exactly what Drew does and most of them realize they probably shouldn't have bought into the reform-the-asshole fantasy.

I'd like to blame him, but it's hard when he doesn't deny or make excuses or apologies. He is what he is. Take it or leave it. I couldn't do what he does, not that there isn't a certain appeal. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't something I've thought about, but it's way too much responsibility for me. Too many feelings coming off of those girls and I'm not good at deflecting them. They seem to roll right off Drew. The tears and the name calling and the bitterness don't even faze him. I have enough responsibility and I don't want anyone else's feelings to worry about. I banished my own a long time ago and I'll be damned if I have to deal with someone else's.

"She's female. She's hot. Requirements met," he says bluntly.

"She seems to hate you." She seems to hate everyone but I don't bother to say that. I'm really trying to figure out why he's wasting his time with this girl. It's out of character. He should have given up on this a while ago.

"So, it's a challenge."

"Exactly. Doesn't exerting effort go against your personal philosophy?"

"It does, but maybe I'm entering a personal growth phase. Trying to improve myself."

I stifle a laugh or a gagging sound. I'm not sure which.

"Your lack of faith is insulting. Besides, not all of us have a sure thing in our back pockets with no strings and no effort required." He looks deliberately at me. I can't dispute it. There's no point in acting all high and

mighty when I don't ever have to worry about getting a girl to have sex with me.

I've got Leigh, even though she's not around as much as she used to be now that she's in college, but that just makes it easier. She's only a couple of hours away and she comes by whenever she's home for weekends and holidays. Then she leaves again. She doesn't tell me she loves me. She doesn't ask if I love her. I don't and I never will. We have an easy non-emotional arrangement; we use each other and go home. It's about as perfect as a situation gets. Even if I didn't have Leigh, I don't think I'd be desperate enough to sink to Drew's level. I like getting laid well enough, but knowing me, I'd still feel like a prick and end up dating the girl for months out of guilt.

"You don't get to judge me. In fact, in light of my newfound self-improvement goals, I'm going to conquer my fear of being flayed alive and go over to her house right now." He jumps up off the couch and heads for the door.

"Good luck with that," I say, not meaning it in the least.

I spend the rest of the afternoon involved in varying degrees of avoidance. I finally did pick up the phone and cancel the newspaper, which I wasn't sure I'd actually do. Then I figured as long as I was dealing with things I'd call the hospice and have them come take away the hospital bed they delivered for my grandfather two months ago. He's been gone for two weeks, but it feels like forever. If there weren't so many phone calls to make, I might wonder if he was ever here at all.

When I hang up with hospice, I look at the phone and think about calling my grandfather. I thought about calling yesterday and the day before and the day before that. But I haven't actually called. I spoke to him last week and it sucked. He's a hundred times worse since he left here. His mind isn't his anymore. It belongs to oxycodone and morphine and every other pain killer they can pump into him to make it easier. Talking to him isn't even talking to him anymore. He's a body on the other end of the phone, but the mind is all

but gone. I can almost hear his brain struggling to process the words as I speak to him. He can't make sense of it and I know it frustrates him, and if there is any part of my heart left to break, it breaks with his confusion. Still, I get selfish sometimes and call him anyway. For me. And I talk. I tell him things I wouldn't tell another living person, because I know that when I hang up, it will be like I never told anyone at all.

Even the last real conversation we had, on the Saturday night before my great uncle and his wife came to pick him up, was tainted by the drugs. He sat me down to give me the advice he thought I still needed. He told me to sit on the couch and he sat in the recliner across from me the way he had for years when he was imparting whatever piece of wisdom he felt I needed at that point in my life. I never really listened because I didn't think I needed his wisdom. That night I sat. And I listened. I'd listen to anything he wanted to say. I was greedy for it, desperate for whatever words he had left to give me, even if they were delivered through a drug-addled haze.

He told me a lot of things that night and I remember them all. There was talk of women and unforgiveable things, porch swings and red brick houses and memories that didn't exist yet.

I have to be at Drew's for dinner at 6:00 which means I need to get in the shower now and find some better clothes to put on. Drew's mom likes it when you dress for Sunday dinner. It's not any fancy thing, but according to Mrs. Leighton, dressing nicely makes it special, so that's what we do. I tried to get out of going, but she wouldn't let me. I haven't gone to Sunday dinner in three weeks. I don't hate it. It's actually fun most of the time. I get to eat real food that I don't have to cook and Drew doesn't act like such a douche around his family. It's just that, when I go there, I feel like I'm in an episode of Sesame Street, stuck in the upper quadrant of the TV screen while they sing that one of these things just doesn't belong here. The normalcy of it reminds me, in detail, of how fucked my life actually is. I could stand here all day thinking of all of the reasons not to go, but I know I'm not getting out of it, so I suck it up, pull some decent clothes out of the closet and jump in the

shower.

CHAPTER 14

Nastya

There are twenty-seven bones in your hand and wrist. Twenty-two of mine were broken. Relatively speaking, my hand is kind of a miracle. It's full of plates and screws, and even after several surgeries, it still doesn't look quite right. But it works better than they thought it would. And it's not like it can't do anything; it just can't do the one thing I want it to. The thing that made me, me.

I never had much of a social life, even before. After school, I spent my hours in the music lab or in private instruction and my Saturdays were spent playing the piano at weddings. There were times during wedding season that I'd hit three in a day. I'd run out of one church, jump in the car my mom would be waiting in out front, and rush to the next. It got crazy sometimes and I rarely had a free weekend, but the money was awesome, the time commitment minimal, and it was easy. Most wedding coordinators and brides aren't very original. I had about five pieces of music that were rotated through; the standards that you tend to hear at every wedding. I took it for granted that I could sleepwalk through those things. I had three dresses that got rotated just like the music; all conservative and girly with varying degrees of formality depending on the wedding itself. I wonder what they would have done if I walked in dressed like I do today.

When I wasn't playing weddings, I played at upscale malls and restaurants. I was a pretty little novelty in the beginning. I was everybody's pet. I don't know if anyone really knew my name; they mostly just called me the Brighton Piano Girl, which was fine, because that's who I was. Once I got older, everybody was used to seeing me here or there, but back when I

started, around eight years old, people usually did a double take. I'd wear my frilly little dresses and my hair would always be tied back out of my face with a matching ribbon. I'd smile and play my Bach or Mozart or whatever overused pieces of music they asked me to play. Everyone knew me and people would always clap when I got done and say hi to me whenever they saw me. I loved every second of it.

By the time I was forced to stop, I had quite a bit of money put away. I was saving it to pay for the summer music conservatory in New York that I had been drooling over for three years and was finally old enough, at fifteen, to apply to. My parents said if I wanted to go I had to work for the money, but that was a joke, because work meant play and playing was never work. Between that and school and private instruction and recitals, it hadn't left much time for a social life, but it was a small sacrifice. Plus, if I'm being honest, it probably wasn't any sacrifice. I didn't go to parties and I was too young to drive. I liked Nick Kerrigan but mostly we just looked at each other and looked away a lot.

I didn't have a bunch of girlfriends to go hang out at the mall with and my mom bought most of my clothes anyway. Even at fifteen, I was younger than fifteen. My style was Sunday school-chic. The couple of friends I had were like me. We spent all of our free hours practicing because that's who we were. Piano girls. Violin girls. Flute girls. That was normalcy. My grades weren't awesome and I was the polar opposite of popular, but it was ok. It was better than being normal. I never gave two shits about normal. I wanted extraordinary.

Normal people had friends. I had music. I wasn't missing anything.

These days I'm missing everything. I'm haunted by music; music I can hear, but never play again. Melodies that taunt me note by note, mocking me with the simple fact that they exist.

I still have all of the money that I saved for the conservatory. I had more than enough, but I never did get to go. I spent that summer in and out of hospitals, recovering, in physical therapy, learning to pick up quarters off of a table, and with therapists talking about why I was mad.

At this point I've regained enough control in my hand that I could probably bang something out on the piano if I tried, but it would never be

what it used to be, what it should be. Music should flow so that you can't tell where one note ends and the next begins; music should have grace and there is no grace left in my hand. There are metal screws and damaged nerves and shattered bones, but there isn't any grace.

Today is Sunday and I have nowhere to be. I never had weddings to do on Sundays but I usually spent the mornings filling in at the Lutheran church if they needed me. I wasn't religious; it was just a favor to one of my mom's friends, so I did it. Afternoons were usually spent at the grand piano upstairs in the mall outside Nordstrom's. Then I'd actually practice the real stuff in the evenings and once in a while I did my homework.

Now homework is about the only thing I have to do, so miraculously, it's been getting done. But I'm still kind of crap at it.

Margot spends the afternoons next to the pool until she has to get ready for work. I can't sunbathe. It doesn't work so well with the translucent skin, plus, I suck with the sitting still. I will douse myself with sunscreen on occasion, braid my hair and swim laps until my limbs won't move. I can't run in the afternoons so it's a good alternative.

I'm only on lap twenty-five when I lift my head out of the water to see Margot standing at the edge of the pool next to the perpetually-smirking Drew Leighton. I'm momentarily dumbfounded, wondering how he knew where I lived, when I remember that he picked me up for that ill-fated party last week. I am so not about to pull myself up and out of this pool dripping wet and nearly naked in front of him. I might go to school half-naked, but half-naked and nearly naked are two entirely different things, and I'm not going to climb out of the pool and define the difference for him in a very small bikini. It's bad enough that I have no make-up on, but there isn't anything I can do about that now so I've got to let it go. I grab the sunglasses I left at the edge of the pool and compensate by staying as far away from him as possible.

"I'm Nastya's aunt," Margot introduces herself to Drew, "and I assume you two know each other." She turns and smiles knowingly in my direction. Since the first day of school she's been pushing me to make friends and have some sort of social life so this must be thrilling her to no end. Drew is putting on the boyish charm in a way that I'm sure has won over many a suspicious

mother. He'll probably need to work a little harder on Margot. She's younger and cute and used to being flirted with. She isn't oblivious to what he's playing. Still, that suspicion is being tempered by her desire for me to get some sort of life. She walks away, leaving me to him, and goes back to her chair and a copy of *Cosmopolitan*. She's not fooling me, though. I know she's straining to hear every word.

If I wasn't trapped in the pool by my state of undress, I could fully enjoy the situation a bit more. Drew can't use his arsenal of sexual innuendos on me now, while he's being chaperoned. He kicks off his shoes and sits down at the edge of the pool, dangling his feet in the water.

"I feel I've done my penance. You should forgive me now."

I just stare at him. I don't even bother changing my expression. He's going to have to exert a little effort to get me to waste facial expressions on him.

"You haven't even looked at me in a week. It's killing my reputation."

I have a feeling a nuclear bomb couldn't kill his reputation at this point, much less a week without my attention, but I appreciate him giving me the credit.

"Let me make it up to you. Come to dinner at my house. Tonight."

This makes me suspicious and I'm pretty sure it shows. Innocence does not become Drew. It doesn't gel with the pure unadulterated sex that drips from his pores. I meet his eyes and wait for the catch.

"You won't even have to be alone with me. My whole family will be there."

Perhaps he thinks this is a selling point. It isn't. I don't mind parents. I actually used to do quite well with parents. Now, probably not so much, but it's not the parents that concern me. It's the sister I'm not going anywhere near. I'm already on her radar. I was even before the unwanted courtyard heroics of a certain Josh Bennett, and I'm not rushing to put myself in the eye of that storm again by showing up to a family dinner on her brother's arm. No way. Not happening. Not ever.

"I'm sure she'd love to go," Margot chimes in over her magazine. So much for pretending she's not eavesdropping. My defiant convictions lasted

all of three seconds. “I have to work. There’s no point in you sitting here, eating dinner alone.” *Thanks, Margot.* I flash her the smile I save for my mortal enemies. She looks at me, face full of innocence, eyes full of mischief. She knows I’m cornered. Damn self-inflicted mutism. Is that even a word? Irrelevant. I shake my head but I can’t offer an excuse and I don’t have one anyway, though I’m sure I could easily come up with something believable: homework, emptying bedpans at the local nursing home, cholera. Alas, they all stay trapped in my throat as I look on helplessly while my evening’s fate is decided by my meddling aunt and a cocksure teenage boy. Margot knows I have nothing to do and Drew isn’t about to give me a chance to get out of it anyway. He’s on his feet in an instant, bolting before the plans can be rescinded.

“Dinner’s at six. I’ll pick you up at 5:45. Dress nice. My mom likes to pretend we’re civilized once a week.” He smiles conspiratorially in Margot’s direction. He knows he has her to thank for this. It’s no mystery that, given a choice, I never would have agreed. I’m angrier at myself. I dug my own grave on this one. You give up talking and you give up free will. I wonder what Margot would think if she knew the truth of Drew Leighton, the sex volcano she just sacrificed me to.

“Don’t get up. I’ll just walk around the house. Nice meeting you.” He turns back to me. “See you later.” It sounds like a threat.

If only Margot hadn’t heard the doorbell, I could be blissfully, comfortably alone this evening, just like I should be. I wouldn’t be in the predicament I’m in now, at five o’clock, staring at my closet and wondering what one wears to Sunday dinner at the home of one’s non-boyfriend. I spent the afternoon alternately putting off the decision and coming up with self-inflicted injuries that might get me out of it.

Once my fate was decided, I killed most of the day in the kitchen, baking and frosting a three-layer chocolate cake. My mom would have several choice words for me if I were to show up to dinner as a guest empty-handed and desserts are about the only thing in my repertoire. I’ve avoided

the inevitable as long as possible, but unless I'm planning to wear the towel I've got wrapped around myself, I need to pick something soon. I'm running out of time.

True to his word, Drew knocks on the door at exactly five forty-five. I'm kind of surprised that he didn't just beep the horn and expect me to come running. Okay, I'm really not. As much as it pains me to say so, he actually possesses surprisingly good manners. The better to get into girls' pants, I suppose. I won't give him too much credit.

I pick up the cake and hold it in front of my body as if it can actually shield me, preventing Drew from seeing what I'm wearing. It's a simple sleeveless shift dress with a very subtle scoop neck and a slight A-line skirt that hits just barely above my knee. It's the most conservative thing in my closet. My mother bought it for me before I left, along with a bunch of other dresses I never wear. I kept it because it was black, but that's about the only reason. I feel like I'm going on a job interview. I don't think I'll look even remotely right at a Sunday dinner but I guess it's better than the stuff I wear to school.

He opens my car door and I slide in with the cake on my lap.

"You didn't have to do that," Drew inclines his head towards the cake. I shrug. I didn't mind. I like excuses to bake and I don't get them very often these days, which means that I still bake, but I end up eating most of it myself. Sugar has a very special, oversized place on my food pyramid. "You'll get points with my mom, though. She's pregnant. Again," he adds pointedly, "and she loves chocolate."

We pull into Drew's driveway about ten minutes later. He lives in a development a few miles down the road from Margot's. He parks the car and kills the engine but he doesn't move to get out. He looks uncomfortable, which makes me uncomfortable. I'm really hoping he doesn't hit on me in the car in front of his parents' house, because I'll have to get pissed and the cake will probably not survive. He turns to me and takes a breath. He's not smiling, and when he speaks, the tone of voice is completely different from what I'm used to with him. The cocky self-assuredness is gone and that makes me nervous. I'm accustomed to his brash over-confidence. I'm prepared for it and it puts us on even footing, like neither of us is real.

“I really am sorry.” The sincerity in his words catches me off-guard. I would have been ready for a full-on assault of charm and creative come-ons but I’m completely unprepared for the utterly guileless apology I’m getting. Maybe this is his new angle. He turns his eyes to the windshield, and I’m glad, because I’m more at ease with him not looking right at me. “You were ok with Bennett, you know. Josh is the best person I know. I wouldn’t have left you anywhere else. I know it was shitty and I probably should have taken you home and taken care of you myself since it was kind of my fault in the first place. If there are two choices, I’m usually going to pick the wrong one, but I really didn’t do it to be an asshole. Just comes naturally.” He stops talking and is quiet for a minute before looking back at me again.

“We good?”

I tilt my head and study him. Are we? Yes, I think we are. As much as I’d like to question his motives, I also kind of want to believe he’s not a completely awful person. Then at least I’ll have an excuse for why I can’t seem to dislike him.

“Good enough?” he tries.

I nod. *Yes, good enough.*

“Good enough,” he repeats, without question this time, and the tell-tale flirt comes back into his voice. His posture loosens and he seems to relax. He’s back in familiar territory. “Let’s go inside before I give in to the fantasy I’m having of covering you in that cake and licking the frosting off.”

I glare at him. I’m kind of glad to have this Drew back. I roll my eyes and shake my head. He shrugs, resigned.

“Sorry. Nature’s a bitch. Can only fight it for so long.” He comes around to open the car door and offers to take the cake for me but I shake my head. I need to hold it. I cling to the cake like a lifeline as I walk up to the house, hoping my left hand doesn’t choose now to stutter and make me drop it. A three-layer cake with scratch fudge frosting, adorned with piles of shaved curls of dark chocolate, was probably overkill but I’m hoping it does its job and that they’ll notice the cake instead of me.

We walk into a high-ceilinged foyer that opens up into an exquisitely furnished living room. It’s pristine. I feel like I should take my shoes off so my heels don’t tear into the Berber carpet but that would probably be weird.

Plus, as much as the shoes hurt my feet, they give me comfort. I used to perform in front of audiences, now I hide behind cake and high heels. Drew leads me back through a formal dining room. The table must seat at least ten people. It's already set with china and fabric napkins that are folded to look like swans. Drew must notice me gaping at it.

"Told you my mom likes to pretend we're civilized once a week." Civilized is one thing. This is something different entirely. "It's usually not this bad. I think she went a little overboard because I told her I was bringing you. Usually it's just us and Josh. And he doesn't count as company." What the crap? I'm not sure which part of that little explanation I'm supposed to panic about first; either the part where his mother appears to have prepared for the coming of the queen because of me or the part where Josh Bennett is expected. Both are equally appalling but I think I'm giving the edge to Josh. As much as I fear the scrutiny of Drew's mother, it's a little worse to imagine eating a meal across the table from the boy who mopped up my vomit and watched me strip my bra off and throw it across the room. I spent most of the afternoon freaking out about what to wear and dreading having to face Drew's sister. The thought that Josh Bennett might be here never even entered my mind. I don't have any more time to get used to the idea because the doorbell rings, then opens before anybody could possibly have gotten there. Josh isn't company here. Of course he doesn't wait to be let in.

Before I know what's happening, Drew's mother is coming towards me, taking the cake out of my hands. I want to hold onto it, keep it in front of me just a little longer but it's not an option so I relinquish it to her. My hands feel very empty.

"You must be Nastya!" Her smile comes from every part of her face. There isn't a question where Drew and Sarah came by their looks. Their mother is beautiful. I can't help glancing down toward her stomach. She must not be very pregnant because I can't even tell. I wonder how old she is. She has to be at least forty, I imagine. It's weird to me why anyone would want another baby at that age but I guess if you can, why not? She's shifting things in the refrigerator now to make room for the cake. I didn't ask her to but I'm glad. The heat and humidity already started doing a number on the frosting on the way over here.

"Honey, it is so sweet of you to bring dessert. It's beautiful," she says,

shutting the refrigerator door and turning towards me. She closes the gap between us a moment later and before I can comprehend what she's doing, she hugs me. I don't do hugging. I don't like people touching me even when there's no threat involved. It's too intimate and it bothers me. She doesn't seem to notice how stiff my arms are at my sides and she lets me go a second later when Drew starts talking.

"How come you call her honey and never use terms of endearment on me?" he fake whines.

"I do," Mrs. Leighton says, patting him on the cheek as she walks by. "Just last week I called you the bane of my existence."

"That's right," he says. "That was a good day."

It's hard not to want to smile watching them. It hasn't been so long that I don't remember what it was like when my family was happy, too.

It's only seconds before Josh Bennett finds us. Judging by the look on his face, he didn't know I was going to be here any more than I was expecting him. I think he literally took a step back when he saw me.

Drew's mom steps between us before excessive awkwardness sets in. She hugs him and he actually hugs her back. It looks wrong to me. I'm used to seeing Josh separated by a six-foot radius from all human contact, so to see him here, looking warm and alive and touchable with Drew's mom, takes me a minute to process. I hope my mouth isn't hanging open. I'm going to have ten-miles worth of thoughts to sort through when I run tonight. Not only do I have unexpectedly sincere Drew to process, but now I've got not-so-untouchable Josh Bennett as well.

Sarah's in the kitchen a moment later. She obviously knew I was coming because there's no surprise on her face. Only disdain.

"I guess you all already know each other," Mrs. Leighton says, saving us from friendly pretense. "Dinner will be ready in ten minutes. Sarah, you pour drinks. Drew, take Josh and check on your Dad at the grill. Make sure he doesn't overcook the steaks again. Nastya, you can help me bring in the food from the kitchen." I nod, thankful that she's given me something to do so I don't have to stand around feeling not only out of place, but useless, as well. I follow her to the stove and she hands me a couple of trivets to put out on the table. There's something at once comforting and unsettling about being asked

to help. Like I'm not being treated like an outsider. This morning, my plans consisted of eating FunDip while watching misguided fame whores choke down buffalo testicles on old reruns of Fear Factor. Now I'm standing in black stiletto heels in the middle of a Norman Rockwell painting. More thoughts to process for later. I should start writing a list so I won't forget anything.

Dinner is actually the most enjoyable thing I've done in months. For all the pomp and circumstance of the table, Drew's parents are completely down to earth. His father is self-deprecating and funny. His mother is sharp as a tack and doesn't take crap from any of them. Drew turned up the well-bred charm and turned down the suggestiveness as soon as we'd walked into the house. He sits next to me and Josh is on the other side of him so I really can't even see Josh at all throughout the meal. I make a note to count that particular blessing tonight. Sarah is seated across from me so I can't avoid seeing her. She says nothing to me and remarkably little to everyone else, but with all the talking going on at the table, it seems to have gone unnoticed. I do catch her looking at me a lot and I can't figure out if she's angry or uncomfortable. Maybe she's afraid it will come out how she's treated me at school and she doesn't want her parents to find out that she's such a stereotypical bitch. They must have some clue. I've seen the way she acts with Drew and she can't hide that all the time. Maybe sibling rivalry is acceptable here but treating other people like crap isn't.

Once dinner is finished and we've all helped clear the dishes, Mrs. Leighton brings the cake over to the table along with an apple pie. Sarah follows behind her with a stack of plates and forks and a container of vanilla ice cream.

"This is delicious, Nastya. Where did you order it from? I need dessert for a dinner party in a couple of weeks and I'd love to bring one of these."

I shake my head and point to myself.

"You?" She doesn't sound shocked so much as intrigued. I nod. "From scratch?" I nod again. I only bake from scratch. I don't have anything against mixes, they just seem like cheating and I don't feel like I can take credit for them. It's just a cake. It's not music, but it's something.

"I can't bake at all," she says. I'm sure she could. It's not that hard; you

just need to know the ratios and once you get those down you can play with it. It mostly comes down to math and science, which is funny, because I suck at math and science. “Josh knows someone who can bake. Don’t you?” She looks over at him and I get the feeling the question isn’t entirely innocent. I look down and push the cake around my plate into a pool of melting ice cream.

“Just someone from school.” He sounds as uncomfortable as I feel. I mentally will everyone to drop it and I think Josh may be doing the exact same thing. I really don’t want him to explain the circumstances surrounding how those cookies ended up on his porch. He obviously didn’t have any trouble figuring out they were from me, which means he knew exactly why they were there.

“Who?” Drew asks around a mouthful of chocolate cake. Interesting, though not entirely surprising. He didn’t tell Drew. I wonder how his mom knows. Josh is waiting just a little too long to answer and I see Mrs. Leighton’s gaze flick from him to me. She seems satisfied. She got her answer.

“Drew, talk with your mouth full again and you’ll be serving at my next book club meeting.” She points her fork in his direction and his mouth clamps shut. Obviously this is a threat of monumental proportions. He holds his hands up in surrender to his mother.

Once we finish cleaning up the dessert dishes, Mrs. Leighton makes coffee and we all sit on the oversized white couches in the living room. I decline the coffee. I don’t drink it, because no matter how much sugar I put into it, it still tastes like ass-water to me. Maybe it’s just because my taste buds are so desensitized to sweet that anything not comprised of at least ninety percent sugar tastes wrong. Even if I was addicted to caffeine, in a dystopian future where coffee was an illegal controlled substance and I hadn’t gotten my hands on any in three days, I still would have refused it. I never would have overcome my horror if my hand decided to lose its grip while holding a full cup of coffee on one of those white brocade sofas. Sarah doesn’t drink any, either, so I guess it doesn’t seem strange. Josh drinks three cups of it, not that I’m counting.

I listen to everyone talk until the conversation dwindles and the coffee

pot is empty. The phone rings, giving Sarah an escape she must have been desperate for, judging by how fast she jumps off the couch at the sound. Drew walks over to his mother and takes her empty cup. Josh takes Mr. Leighton's and follows Drew back to the kitchen. I don't have a coffee cup to use as an excuse to bolt, so I sit in awkward silence, hoping they don't stay in the kitchen too long. I study the coffee table, not really wanting to make eye contact with either of Drew's parents. It looks familiar to me. I tilt my head to study the legs and I realize that it's almost identical in style to the one I had seen in Josh's living room on the morning we shall not mention. The similarities in the design are clear, but this table is obviously newer. The surface of the wood and the finish are flawless. I don't even realize that I'm leaning over and running my fingers along the curved wood of the table leg when Drew's father speaks.

"Beautiful, isn't it? Josh made it." He's staring, with pride, at the table, and thankfully, not at my face. My hand stops moving but I don't look away from the table. I pull my arm in and settle back onto the sofa in time to see Josh standing in the doorway from the kitchen, watching us. Mr. Leighton looks up. "What was it, Josh? A Christmas gift?"

"Mrs. Leighton's birthday." Josh's hands are shoved in his pockets and he's looking past us at the table. He doesn't step any further into the room until Drew comes in behind him, forcing him to move.

"Your big ass truck is blocking me in," he says, slapping Josh on the back. "Sorry, Mom." He turns, looking halfway contrite about his language. I've heard a lot worse than that out of his mouth. I wonder if he thinks his mother is even remotely fooled, because I'm betting she knows his act pretty well.

"Book club," she taunts, holding up her hand as if balancing a tray.

"Noted," he responds, shifting his attention back to Josh. "Can you please move your truck so I can take Nastya home?" he begs with sarcasm.

"Didn't you say she lives in Josh's neighborhood?" Mrs. Leighton asks. I think I actually hear her loading the bullets into that question.

Oh no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Please no.

"Josh, can you drop her off? It's silly for you both to go in the same direction when Josh is going there anyway." She seems to look at all of us at

once. How does she do that? We aren't even standing next to one other. It's more than unnerving.

Between Josh and I, I don't know which one of us looks the most horrified. We're both on equal ground with this one. Josh nods in resignation and I try to look like I think this is a good plan. A good, logical, practical, not-at-all-awkward plan.

Drew and his parents walk us out to the driveway. Sarah never re-emerged after the phone call, which is fine with me. Josh unlocks the car with his remote and Drew opens the door for me while I try to figure out how high I have to hike my skirt up to step into the truck without tearing it. I really don't want to end the evening by flashing my pink heart polka dot underwear at Drew's dad. Once I manage to get in, Drew's mom comes over to the passenger side. Thankfully I'm already up and seated so I don't have to worry about being hugged again, but what comes next is almost worse.

"Thank you for coming. It was so nice to meet you. We'll see you next Sunday at six?" It's a question without much question involved. She tilts her head sideways to look past me at Josh. "You can pick her up on your way, right?" She did it again. She's good. I try to shake my head. I could write a note for this. This would be note-worthy. I look around frantically for a piece of paper but the truck is as barren as it was the first time I rode in it. Nothing. At this point I'm hoping Josh might save me, save us both. Maybe he has plans and will have to decline and I can nod in unison. No such luck.

"No problem. Thanks for dinner, Mrs. Leighton, Mr. Leighton," he nods at Drew's father.

"One day we'll get you to call us Jack and Lexie," he laughs, shaking his head as if he knows this will never happen. "Maybe when you're thirty."

"Good night, Mr. Leighton," Josh responds.

Drew waves from the front porch, already on his cell phone, as Josh backs the truck down the long driveway. Ten minutes in a car with Josh Bennett feels much longer than ten minutes in a car with Drew. Drew fills all the silence without ever realizing that he's doing it. Josh melts into the silence like he's part of it. He doesn't say a word on the way home until he pulls into Margot's driveway for the third time now.

"You can get out of it if you want, you know. But you should go. She

likes you.”

I nod and open the door to the truck. I can't step down and reach the ground, and trying to jump in these shoes, no matter how short the distance, is not going to end with my ankles intact. I bend over and slide my left shoe off, followed by my right, and hop out onto the driveway, turning to shut the door.

“You're going to need better shoes if you want to get near the tools. Mr. Turner will never let you in the construction area in those things.” He shakes his head as if he can't believe he's telling me this. I think it might physically hurt him to talk to me. I don't know what the right response to that is. I don't think Mr. Turner is planning to let me near the tools no matter what shoes I'm wearing. I nod again and close the door.

It's almost ten at this point. Normally I would be throwing on sneakers and running clothes right about now. I'm torn in half between needing to run and knowing it can't serve its whole purpose tonight. For the first time in two weeks, I'm not really sure I want to run. I think better when I'm moving and I have plenty to think about tonight, but that's the problem. I don't have a treadmill to run on here so I have to go out, but when I'm running outside, I have to fragment my mind. I have to keep part of it constantly, acutely aware of every sound, every echo, every movement going on around me. It makes it hard to figure out the things I need to figure out. It's the same way I have to split my focus every time I'm around other people so I don't accidentally respond to something or someone. It's natural to want to talk and I have to remain constantly on alert so that I don't slip. I thought it would get easier. It should have been harder when I first stopped. But it's the opposite. When I first stopped I had absolutely nothing I wanted to say. I wasn't tempted at all. Now, more and more, I find things I'm desperate to say. They constantly bombard my mind and I have to choke them back. It's exhausting.

I decide against braving the assault on my senses and I stay in. This whole night has been draining enough.

CHAPTER 15

Josh

“Party at Kara’s Friday night. You in?”

I look at Drew as if this is a rhetorical question. It should be.

“At some point I’ll get you to come with me.” No you won’t. “Fine. I have a backup plan. And there she is.” I look up to see Nastya coming down the hall towards us. She’s still wearing those shoes. We’ll be starting to work soon and it’s true what I told her. Mr. Turner won’t let her near the workshop unless she’s got on decent shoes that will protect her feet. She obviously doesn’t care.

“Shouldn’t I have been the backup plan?”

“You probably shouldn’t be any plan, but I’ll break you eventually.”

“You get her wasted again, she can throw up on your couch.”

“Are you never going to get over that?”

“No.” It’s true. I think the things I saw that night will haunt me forever.

“Hey, Nastypants!” Drew picks up his pace and breaks away from me to reach Nastya just before she gets to the shop door. I half-expect the look she impales him with to kill him on contact. “What?” I hear him cajole her as I get closer. “It’s a term of endearment.” If this is his new tactic, I’m afraid for him. Before I can worry myself too much for his safety, her face subtly changes. I think she’s fighting it, but she loses, because she actually half smiles at him. Maybe it’s not even a smile. Her lips just barely turn up at the corners but on her face it stands out because of the rarity of it. I’d be disappointed that his crap is actually working on her but I don’t think it is. I think she’s amused. The smile is gone in seconds, and she walks into the room, leaving Drew in the hall just as I catch up. He didn’t even ask her about the party.

“That worked out well for you.”

“She didn’t hurt me,” he smiles, seemingly satisfied with the outcome.

“She should.” Tierney Lowell is closing her locker across the hall and turning towards us. Really she’s turning towards Drew. I don’t know that she sees me at all. Her jeans are so tight that I wonder if they’re cutting off her circulation and she’s wearing a black bra under a white t-shirt that rides up above the waist to show just enough of her skin to tease. She’s got the body to pull it off and she isn’t shy about it. The two of them hooked up some time last year and the aftermath wasn’t particularly pretty. Tierney didn’t take too well to being discarded. That didn’t surprise me. What surprised me was the fact that it had happened in the first place. She’s hard-core and he’s Drew. It never added up to me. Drew never even told me that it had happened until after it got out, and by that time it was done. Drew was moving on to another girl; Tierney was pissed and people were talking about how clueless she was for being surprised. I don’t think she ever seemed surprised, just disappointed.

Drew doesn’t respond to her and she walks away without another word.

“That one was a mistake from the beginning,” he says. Most of them are mistakes if you ask me. The constant drama doesn’t seem worth the trouble. I head in to shop and Drew takes off toward the office where he gets to spend the next period running passes around the school, flirting in the halls and generally avoiding any responsibility whatsoever.

Nastya is sitting next to Kevin Leonard at the table Mr. Turner moved her to a week ago. I’m glad she stayed there because it made me nervous having her behind me all the time. I like being able to watch everyone else without them watching me. Most people know better than to look at me anyway, but Nastya hasn’t been most people since the day she got here.

When the bell rings, Mr. Turner does a visual roll check. Then he tells one person from each table to go up to the front and pick up a materials box. I’m the only one at my table so I head up. All of the other tables have two people, except for Nastya’s where there are three: Nastya, Kevin and Chris Jenkins. She doesn’t move to get up and Chris goes to get the box. Inside are several pieces of wood, a hammer, different size nails, sandpaper and a few other items which seem to vary in each box. Kevin grabs the box out of Chris’ hands and turns it over on the table. The box of nails opens when it hits the surface and they go rolling in every direction. This gets everyone’s attention but no one moves to pick them up.

“Clean it up, Leonard,” Mr. Turner calls over to him, not seeming the least bit surprised with his idiocy. I know why Mr. Turner signed him in to this class. As much as I’d like to ignore the fact, Kevin’s pretty good when it comes to building. He doesn’t have much of a sense of artistry or style but he has an innate understanding of construction and balance. Too bad he’s such an asshole.

Nastya is kneeling down on the floor, picking up nails and loading them up in her left hand. Chris is gathering up the ones on the table and sweeping them back into the container. Kevin is laughing. Nastya has most of the nails off the floor and her hand is close to full. I think she’s about to stand back up and then the nails are all over the floor again. I’m not even sure what happened. It’s like she just let go of them. She doesn’t even seem surprised. She just starts picking them up again. I think I’m the only one who noticed. Nobody helps her. Not even me.

Mr. Turner goes on to explain the assignment. We’ll have today, plus the next three periods, to design, plan, and construct something that’s either useful or aesthetically pleasing with whatever materials we find in the box we picked up. We are allowed to add up to two additional items of our choosing but nothing else. I’ve already studied what’s in mine and I know what I’m going to build. I spend the rest of the period measuring, sketching and planning while everyone else sits around arguing about whose idea is better and what they should make. Tomorrow I’ll start construction. The rest of them will probably still be fighting.

I’ve spent the past hour going through every drawer of every tool cabinet in my garage and I still can’t figure out where I put my stud finder. I slam the bottom drawer on the last cabinet shut and look at the clock on the wall. Ten-thirty. Too late to go buy another one, not that I really need it tonight, but I have nothing else on my plate right now and it’s something to do.

I stand back up and turn around, looking for something to occupy my time and she’s standing at the top of my driveway, just outside the threshold

of my garage. I'm glad I don't gasp or anything equally pathetic, because if I did, I'd probably have to cut off my balls and hand them to her. I wouldn't deserve them anymore.

She looks almost exactly the same as the first time she showed up here, except she's not lost or scared. She came here on purpose. We look at each other for a minute and I realize that I'm waiting for her to say something, which obviously isn't going to happen. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to her, so in a bold and unprecedented move, I do nothing. I turn around and continue looking for the stud finder I know isn't here. I pretend not to care what she's doing but I'm hyperaware of every breath she takes. I can tell the second she decides to stop standing there. Only she doesn't turn and leave like I expect her to; she steps into the garage.

I can't pretend I'm not noticing her now. I watch to see what she's going to do. She's looking around again, like she did the night she showed up all sweaty and lost and amazing. She's not looking at me at the moment; she's much more interested in the surroundings. It's just a garage with a lot of wood and tools. I don't know what's so mesmerizing about it but I'm not arguing, because while she's preoccupied with studying the room, I can study her. The make-up is gone again tonight and her hair is up so I can see her face. Even when she went to dinner at Drew's house, she still had all of the make-up on: black eyeliner, dark red lips, the works. It's horrible and it makes no sense when you see what's underneath it.

She's not as drenched or out of breath as before but she still must have been running. I wonder if she runs every night. Her legs are all muscle, just like her arms. It still doesn't look right with her face. Her face reminds me of the porcelain dolls that are still lining the shelves in my sister's room. Childlike. Smooth and hard and flawless and fragile.

She walks around, running her hands along the counters, stopping at the vise attached to the end of one of the workbenches. She turns it a few times, watching it close, before sliding her hand in between the plates and continuing to tighten it. I can't even move because I'm wondering what's going on, but the more it turns, the tighter the hold gets on her hand and I don't know how much longer I can ignore it before I have to jump up and ask her if she's batshit crazy. I get the feeling I'm actually standing in my garage, watching this girl decide whether or not to crush her hand. She stops just shy

of that point and loosens the vise just enough to where it releases her hand and then she continues her surveying of the room.

My eyes shift away before she sees me looking and I start rifling through the same drawers I've already searched twice tonight before I start working my way around the counters. The workbench my father and I built together years ago lines the perimeter of the garage. According to Mark Bennett, you could never have enough work surfaces. The more the better. So we built in as much as the garage could handle. I think maybe it was just something to do.

I hear her move while my back is to her, and when I turn around, she's sitting on the workbench on the other side of the garage. She's just planted herself there and made herself comfortable. Okay. It's kind of freaking me out to have her sitting in my garage, watching me. Because that's what she's doing now. She's watching me and she's not even bothering to try and conceal the fact that she's doing it. I kind of want to scream at her to get the hell out, but I also kind of want her to stay. Which makes me the dumbass I am.

I eventually sit down and work on checking cut lines on some beams I need for a job I have and then planing them. It's quiet work so I can do it at night, plus I have to stay busy or I'm going to end up in a staring contest with this girl in a lame attempt to read her mind or something. At midnight she jumps off of the counter and heads back down the driveway without a word or any sort of acknowledgement, just the way she came.

I don't pay much attention in my first three classes and no one notices. At lunch I watch for her, wondering if she'll look at me. I never do see her cross the courtyard, but when I get up to head in to the shop wing just before the bell, she's leaning against the wall with Clay Whitaker. I walk in the other direction.

I pick up the material box from Monday's class, bring it to my table and pull out my plans. She walks in and heads to the back counter behind my

table to retrieve the box she's working out of with Kevin and Chris, neither of whom has shown up yet.

"Good morning, Sunshine." I don't even bother to think before the words leave my mouth, but at least I don't say it loud enough for anyone but her to hear. I probably shouldn't have done it, shouldn't have reacted to last night at all, but I couldn't help it. I feel like she was messing with me last night and I want to mess with her back. I don't like her thinking she can just show up at my house to play a game of mystery mindfuck whenever she pleases.

She's behind me but I can almost feel her stiffen at the words. Good. Maybe if she doesn't want to be reminded of the night she coughed up her intestines in my bathroom, she'll think twice about coming back to my house again like she belongs there. I wonder what it will take for her to pick up on the fact that she lives in the same world as everybody else, and in that world, people leave me the fuck alone.

She recovers quickly enough and goes back to her table without looking back at me. Kevin and Chris show up a minute later and the bell rings. Mr. Turner sets us all to work and the room gets loud almost immediately. It's amazing the amount of noise fourteen students can produce when coupled with the sound of sawing and hammering.

Halfway through the class, Nastya hasn't moved from her seat, but she can't feign disinterest. She's been watching everything Chris and Kevin are doing. At one point, she reaches out and slides the scale drawing Chris had done over in front of her, studying it for a few minutes before pushing it back towards them. They don't say anything to her, but I do notice Kevin look down her shirt when she leans over and I want to punch him in the face.

Kevin gets out of his seat a few minutes later and goes over to Mr. Turner's desk. Mr. Turner scribbles something on a pass and hands it to him and Kevin walks out of the room, leaving Chris with Nastya. It's obvious Chris needs another set of hands, and he keeps glancing up at her as if he's not sure he can ask her to help. Finally, frustration gets the better of him and I hear him ask her to hold the pieces he's working on in place so he can nail them together. He shows her where to put her hands and she nods, placing them on either side, the way he demonstrates to her. Once he gets them in

position, they move on to the next set. It looks like he has four identical pieces he's putting together the same way. I scan over what they've done so far. I can't see what's on the drawing and I'm trying to figure out what they're making. It looks cool.

At that moment, Kevin walks back in, crumpling up the hall pass and tossing it into the trash can in the corner.

"Better not have been slacking while I was gone," he says, not even bothering to look at Chris before he slaps him on the back. I wish I could say that what happens next takes place in slow motion, like when something catastrophic happens in a movie, where it all slows down so you can see exactly what happened and how. Nothing slows down, but I see it anyway. Kevin's hand hits Chris' back; Chris was already mid-movement with the hammer and the momentum he's already got going, coupled with the slap on his back, sends the hammer down even harder, just not where it's supposed to go. The hammer hits the ring finger on Nastya's left hand which had been splayed flat against the table with her thumb bracketing the wood in place.

I'm focused on her face. I catch her eyes widen almost imperceptibly with the initial shock of pain before they narrow again. Water slips into her eyes and they turn glassy with tears that don't escape. How the hell is she not crying? I saw how hard that hammer hit her. I heard how hard that hammer hit her. I think even I might have cried. I would have felt stupid after, but it probably would have happened anyway. It had to hurt that much. She doesn't even move. Neither do Chris or Kevin. They're just staring at her, her hand still on the table. *Get the girl some fucking ice.* Chris looks horrified. Kevin looks like he has no idea what just happened. She moves now to look down at her hand but she keeps it in place, staring at it. I'm really hoping someone gets up and gets her some ice soon or I'm going to have to go do it. I should have done it already, but for some reason, I'm frozen here, too. I can't stop watching her. Why won't she cry? Chris finally seems to break out of his trance and runs to the freezer that's kept in the shop area solely for the purpose of having ice on hand. Mr. Turner is already over at the table checking her fingers. I watch her just barely flinch as he checks for movement, but otherwise her face is like stone. Or maybe porcelain.

Chris comes back with an ice pack and offers it to her. She looks surprised and almost like she's about to refuse it. It reminds me of the wise

again and I wonder if she's insane. Then I watch her mind change and she accepts it without any acknowledgment of thanks. I'm glad she doesn't thank him. He looks guilty as hell. Looking at his face, you'd think he's in more pain than she is, but he still hasn't apologized. Kevin is the one who should be begging for forgiveness but I won't hold my breath for that one. Mr. Turner comes back from his desk with a clinic pass and sends Valerie Estes, the only other girl here, with Nastya, to hold her books.

It couldn't have been more than a matter of seconds that passed between the hammer coming down on her fingers and when Chris brought her the ice, but it felt longer. Maybe time does slow down. It's not until she's left the room and everything has calmed back down that I replay the whole scene in my head. It's then that I realize that even when the hammer came down, even when the full force of the blow landed on her fingers and the pain had to be excruciating, she never made a sound.

You've got to be shitting me.

That's my initial thought as I watch her walk back into my garage for the second night in a row. My eyes go to her hand immediately and I see that two of her fingers are splinted together. She doesn't hesitate tonight. I initially think she's going to perch herself back up on the counter where she sat last night. For a minute it looks like she thinks so, too. Then she sinks down, cross-legged, onto the floor and leans her back against the cabinets behind her. She doesn't seem to mind the layer of sawdust carpeting the ground, but I still wonder why she'd choose to sit there. It's not like the counter is particularly clean but it's not as bad as the floor out here. Then I realize that she probably couldn't push herself up onto the counter with one hand.

I go back to what I was doing before and we remain like this, in silence, for at least half an hour. Me working, her watching.

"Didn't it hurt?" I finally ask, because I want to know, even though she won't respond. She turns her hand over in front of her as if she's trying to

decide if it hurt or not. She shrugs. Good answer. What did I expect? I wait a few more minutes, trying to concentrate on recalibrating my table saw and then I ask the real question.

“What do you want?” It comes out nastier than I mean it to but it’s probably for the best. Nothing. It’s driving me insane, wondering what it is that possesses her to keep coming here. It’s not like I’m particularly friendly. Maybe tonight she’ll get the hint and she won’t come back. I try to convince myself that I’m relieved by that possibility, but I’m not convinced. I shove the thought aside and try to focus on the saw.

The silence persists. I don’t know how long she plans to stay, hovering, watching. It’s like having a ghost in my garage. I feel like I’m being haunted. With all of the dead people I’ve got in my corner, you’d think one of them would be the one hanging around. In fact, I used to hope for that. Being haunted seemed like a gift. I prayed for it. My mother, my sister, my father, my grandmother. After every one of them died I would hope that they’d come back, even once, and let me see them again. Give me a sign. Let me know that there was something else and it was good and they were good, but none of them ever came back for me. My grandfather assured me before he left, that there was an afterlife, one he’d seen, if only briefly, a long time ago. I listened but I didn’t believe him. It was a story born of disease and painkillers not memories and truth. He’ll be dead any day now and I won’t be waiting for a sign. I’ll just be relieved that I have no one left to lose.

At ten-thirty the ghost girl gets up and brushes the sawdust off of her pants with her good hand and then she’s gone again.

CHAPTER 16

Nastya

Josh shows up at five forty-five on Sunday, right on schedule. I run to the refrigerator as he pulls into the driveway. I made tiramisu for dessert since everybody seems to like coffee, except for Sarah, and I couldn't care less about her. My fingers are still splinted so I've got to get the dish out with one hand and it's proving difficult. Margot put it in the fridge for me this morning but she left for work early so I'm on my own. It's awkward, but I manage to stretch my hand over the edge and get a good enough grip on it. The doorbell rings just as I get there, but now I have the dish in one hand and I can't grab the doorknob with my left so I'm just standing there for a minute, holding tiramisu and looking at the door. Finally I have to put the dish on the floor so I can use my right hand to turn the knob.

Josh is standing on the porch, hands in his pockets, looking as if he's picking me up for a date. His hair, as usual, hangs over his forehead, just a little longer than it needs to be. Like a kid who doesn't have a mother nagging him to get it cut. I hate to admit how well he cleans up, dressed in a burgundy polo shirt and khaki dress pants, not that I mind the worn out jeans he's usually in. I'm still surprised to see that he's not wearing work boots. I was beginning to think they were physically attached to him.

We're going to have to hurry to beat the rain. I can see the storm forming in the sky behind him. I've been inside all day so I hadn't noticed. Usually I like to sit at the kitchen table and watch the clouds roll in and the sky turn because it happens so quickly here that you can see it change in a matter of minutes.

Today I was too busy making tiramisu, kicking myself for not going to the mall to buy a new dress, and ultimately trying to think of a brilliant plan to get out of this dinner. Dysentery was topping my excuse list today. It would have been far easier if Drew's parents had looked down their noses at me and the whole affair last week had been uncomfortable and forced, but

they didn't and it wasn't. I won't ever fit in there the way they're pretending I do. I'm not even sure why she invited me back. The only thing I contributed to the evening was cake. Though, according to Drew, one could never underestimate the power of cake to his mother. I imagine they're accepting me for Drew's sake. And if that's the case, they probably don't expect me to be around for long. I wonder how many girls have passed through the Leighton Sunday Dinner, one time, never to be seen again.

I ended up not bothering with the pretense of a nice conservative innocent dress. I figured the sooner we got to the truth of it, the sooner we could cut our losses and walk. I'm wearing a low cut black halter top and a black miniskirt—emphasis on the mini—paired with knee-high, spike-heeled leather boots. If I looked out of place last Sunday, it will be nothing compared to this. After tonight, things can go back to normal. Drew can find himself a nice girl who will have uncommitted sex with him and I can go back to a comfortable, expectation-free existence.

Josh studies me for a minute, taking in my appearance as if he's looking for an answer to an unspoken question. His greeting consists of one word, "Sunshine." Mine consists of no words.

I kneel down to retrieve the tiramisu from the foyer floor but I can't get my fingers under it for leverage. I find myself silently cursing hammers and clueless boys. I'm about to try to use the palm of my left hand to push it into my right when Josh steps inside and kneels down, far too close to me, and picks it up without another word. He doesn't smell like sawdust and there's nothing right about that. No matter how good he looks right now, Josh Bennett without work boots and the smell of sawdust is all sorts of wrong.

We pull into the driveway at the Leighton house and have just enough time to jump out and run as the sky opens up. I wrap my arm around the dish and reinforce it against my chest. Somehow both the tiramisu and my ankles survive the jump intact. When I hit the ground, Josh is next to me and he takes the dish out of my hands and runs to the shelter of the porch overhang. We manage to make it without getting completely drenched. Before he opens the door, he hands me back the tiramisu and then reaches up and frames my face with his hands, running his thumbs across the skin below both of my eyes. I think my mouth might be hanging open because I have no idea what the hell he's doing.

“Black shit,” he says, by way of explanation, and I realize that my eye make-up must be running. Then he opens the door for me without another word.

When we get inside, everything happens almost precisely as it did the week before. The table isn't set quite as fancy which I'm glad for because it means I'm not such a novelty this week. But then I have to face that, if I'm not a novelty, it means I have a place here and I don't want that at all.

We walk into the kitchen, past the dining room where I notice there's an extra place setting at the table and I wonder who else is coming. Drew is fighting with the stereo because apparently it's his turn to pick the dinner music tonight and I can't imagine what that's going to be.

Mrs. Leighton proceeds to rearrange the refrigerator to make room for the dish while telling me that I didn't have to go to the trouble. I have a monstrous case of *déjà vu* and I know that in a minute I'm getting hugged whether I like it or not.

Sitting on two bar stools at the granite breakfast bar off of the kitchen are Sarah and a girl I recognize from school. I'm pretty sure she's the one who accused me of being sired by Dracula. They're laughing and attempting to knot their hair together. It's the height of immature teenage girlishness. I want to mock them for it but I'm appalled by the fact that it makes me sad.

For a moment I feel like a survivor in some post-apocalyptic world, looking through a window, imagining a part of my life that's gone now. I wonder what it would be like to have even one girlfriend. I used to have a couple, but they weren't like this either. They were single-mindedly music-obsessed like I was. It was our link. Other girls compared nail polish colors and crushes; we compared audition pieces. Our friendships with each other never came first because music was always more important. Take the music out of the equation and I don't know if I had anything in common with them at all. Even if I did, I still would have cut them off afterward. It hurt too much to be around them.

My friend Lily called me for months, but the only things she ever had to talk about were auditions and recitals and practice. I tried to be happy for her, but I wasn't. I was jealous and pissed. It was like watching my best friend blissfully dating my ex-boyfriend who I was still madly in love with;

watching her have everything I loved but couldn't have anymore. In other words, painful, depressing and unhealthy. And I'm nothing if not healthy.

Even if I was talking, because let's face it, the silent thing is definitely a barrier in terms of making friends, I probably still wouldn't have any. I lost almost the entirety of my sixteenth year. While other girls my age were thinking about homecoming dances, driving lessons and losing their virginity, I was thinking about physical therapy, police line-ups and psychiatric counseling. I left the house to go to doctor's offices, not football games. I interviewed with police detectives, not the manager at Old Navy.

Eventually, my body healed as much as it was going to. My mind started getting put back together, too. I think it's just that the pieces got put back a little out of order. It seems like the more my body healed, the more fractured my mind became, and there aren't enough wires and screws to fix the breaks in it.

So I didn't do the normal stuff I was supposed to be doing at fifteen and sixteen. At the age when most kids are trying to figure out *who* they are I was busying trying to figure out *why* I was. I didn't belong in this world anymore. It's not that I wanted to be dead, I just felt like I should be. Which is why it's hard when everyone expects you to be grateful simply because you're not.

It left me lots of time to think, lots of time to get angry and feel sorry for myself. To ask *Why me?* To ask *Why?* period. I have a black-belt in self-pity. I was an expert in the field. Still am. It's a skill you never forget. Needless to say, all the thinking and all the questions didn't accomplish much. That's when I started focusing on the anger. I stopped worrying about being polite, about hurting people's feelings and saying what I was supposed to say, healing the way I was supposed to heal so that everyone could believe I was okay again and move on with their lives. My parents needed to believe I was okay, so for a long time I tried to convince them that I was. I tried to convince myself, too, but I was a much tougher sell because I knew the truth. I was so very not okay. I realized that I was going to feel shitty either way. I was probably going to feel shitty for the rest of my life, a life I should not even still be living. A life that should have let me go. So I got angry. Then I got very angry. Then I got angrier still. But you can only go so long being angry before you learn to hate. I stopped feeling so sorry for myself and started hating instead. Whining was pathetic, but hate got things done. Hate

strengthened my body and shaped my resolve and what I resolved to do was to get revenge. Hate seemed pretty damn healthy to me.

Nonetheless, I've learned that although hatred is good for some things, it won't make you a lot of friends. I turn away from Sarah and the girl who has since been introduced as Piper. *Piper*. I roll it around in my head. It's a pointless name, a meaningless name (unless you count pipe player as a meaning and that thought makes me laugh, because well, you know, *pipe player*), a name for someone like her. As I walk toward the dining room, I'm not at all confused about why I have no friends.

Despite the presence of Sarah and Piper, dinner is fun again. We, okay, *they* talk about college applications, building the homecoming float, drama auditions and how drastically the tax laws are changing. That last one is courtesy of Mr. Leighton who is a CPA. I kind of tune out at that point because the intricacies of tax law are a little outside of my sphere of comprehension, but then the conversation starts turning toward debate.

"We've got a tournament two Saturdays from now," Drew tells his parents.

"What are you arguing?" his Dad asks, refilling his wine glass. Mrs. Leighton stares at it like she'd like to rip it out of his hand but I guess she's not allowed. Pregnancy puts a crimp in the whole wine-drinking thing. I can't blame her, though. I'd kind of like to rip it out of his hand, too.

"I'm not sure exactly. Something centering on the importance of the conservation of fabric." He looks in my direction, focusing on my clothes, or lack thereof, while he bullshits them. "Mr. Trent assigned Nastya to help me with the research so I wanted to pick something she was passionate about."

At that point Sarah chokes on whatever she has in her mouth. Mr. Leighton continues swirling his wine around in his glass as if he's actually giving credence to what Drew said and considering the relevant arguments on the topic. Piper doesn't even seem to have gotten the joke. I watch Josh's jaw twitch out of the corner of my eye, the only sign at all that he's sitting at the same table with the rest of us, listening to this conversation. I'm still watching him struggle to remain stoic and unaffected when I hear the sound of Mrs. Leighton's shoe connecting with Drew's shin.

CHAPTER 17

Josh

My father started teaching me how to build after my mother and sister died when I was eight. I don't know if he necessarily wanted to, or if he had no choice because I just kept following him. He holed up in the garage all the time and if I wanted to see him I had to come out here. He never really talked, but I took what I could get. In the beginning, I mostly watched him. I picked up on a lot just by paying attention, but once I got the tools in my hands, I realized how little I knew. The first thing I built was a lopsided birdfeeder. I ended up making four of them before I got it right. I've been at this for almost ten years and some days I still feel like I don't know shit.

I wonder how much Nastya picks up on. She watches everything that goes on in shop, though she hasn't touched so much as a nail since the hammer incident. She's been watching me here at night for the past two weeks. I haven't been successful in getting her to leave so I've given up. Last night I tried being outright rude. I figured if telling her to get the fuck out didn't do the trick, nothing would, so that's what I told her. She didn't get the fuck out, at least not until she felt like it an hour later.

She's sitting in her normal spot on the counter again, watching me right now, so I guess that's my answer. Her legs are ceaselessly swinging back and forth, taunting me as if to say, *Ha, ha, we're here and you can't make us leave—so suck it*. I think they're using a mocking, sing-song, playground voice when they do it. I want to tell them to shut up. I'm pulling the battery off of my drill and putting it on the charger and trying to figure—

“Why do you have so many saws?”

You would think I would spin around at this moment in some sort of shocked frenzy, but it's almost like I've been expecting her to talk to me since the day we met and I've just been wondering what she was going to say. I can tell you that I've run through more than a couple scenarios in my mind and in not one of them did she ask me about the number of saws I own.

I do turn around because I need to see her right now but it's a lot slower and more controlled than even I planned.

"They're all designed for a different purpose, for different jobs, for different kinds of wood. It's complicated. It would take me hours to go through them all." OK, it's not really complicated. It would just take a very lengthy, tedious, boring explanation and right now I don't want to think about saws. I can't believe this is what we're talking about. The word surreal does not suffice.

"I don't think I want anything, but I'll leave if you want me to." It takes me a minute to switch gears and realize that she's answering the question that I asked her over a week ago. Is she calling my bluff? I look around the floor for the gauntlet she's thrown down because she's obviously waiting to see if I'll pick it up. I have to decide if I really do want her gone, because if I tell her to leave this time, I have no doubt that she'll take my word for it.

I should say yes. Hell, yes. I've been trying to get rid of you since you showed up, but that's a lie and we both know it. I'm not ready to give her an answer yet, so I answer her with another question. She's talking; I want to keep it that way. Part of me knows that there's a very real possibility that when she walks out of here tonight, she may not come back no matter what I tell her and I may never hear her speak again. It hits me, once more, just how much she reminds me of a ghost and how at any moment she might just fade away.

"Who else knows you talk?" I ask, and not just to keep her talking, but because I really do want to know. Does Drew know and he hasn't told me? Does she talk to her family? Drew said she lived with an aunt—actually he said a hot aunt—but that's all I really know.

"No one."

"Did you ever talk? Before now?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell me why you've taken this vow of silence?"

"No," she says, looking right into my eyes. Neither of us will break eye-contact. "And you're never going to ask. Ever."

"OK. I'm never going to ask. Check," I say matter-of-factly. "And why

have I agreed to this?”

“You haven’t.”

“And why should I?”

“I don’t know that you should.”

“So I haven’t agreed to keep your secret and you can’t give me any reason why I should. You’re not really making a strong case for yourself. What makes you think I won’t tell anyone?”

“I don’t think you want to.” And this is where she wins even if she doesn’t know it yet. She’s right. I don’t want to tell anyone. I want her secret all to myself but she has no way of knowing that.

“That’s a big gamble on your part.”

“Is it?” She cocks her head to the side and studies me.

“You have no reason to trust me.”

“No, but I trust you anyway,” she says, walking out toward the driveway.

“And I’m supposed to trust you?” I say to her back. This girl really is crazy if she thinks she’s walking in here, out of nowhere, and expecting me to do that.

She stops, turning to level her eyes at me before she goes.

“You don’t have to trust me. I don’t have any of your secrets.”

She leaves before I can respond. She never even sat down, but in the few minutes that she was here, everything shifted. Maybe she’s giving me time to decide if I want this, whatever this is. Her secret? Her friendship? Her story? Maybe I don’t want it. I do know that I *shouldn’t* want it and that may make my decision right there.

I know something about her that no one else does. I haven’t had a secret in years. Everybody knows my story. Mother and sister killed in a car accident. *Tragic*. Father has a heart attack. *Dies*. Grandmother fights ovarian

cancer. *Loses*. A year later grandfather picks up the cancer baton. I don't know if I'm supposed to die now, too, or if I'm just supposed to be the last one left.

I can't help thinking that there must be something better to be known for.

I won't tell anyone about her. I know that much. I still have a hundred questions formulating in my mind but only one that keeps coming back again and again. *Why me?* It's the obvious question, the question that still plagues me even hours after she's left. It's the one question I don't ask, because no matter what the answer is, I don't want it. I just don't care.

It's been days since she spoke to me. I expected her to show up the next night but she didn't. Or the night after. Or the night after that. I've seen her at school every day but she hasn't so much as looked in my direction once. I'm beginning to think I imagined the entire encounter. Maybe I'm the batshit one in this scenario. I've spent the last several days trying to make myself believe that I was glad she had stopped coming and that I couldn't care less. After all, it was what I wanted. I made several arguments to myself. I wasn't very convincing.

I hadn't even had the excuse of seeing her at Drew's on Sunday. Leigh was here for the weekend and I was with her. It should have made things easier but I think it might have made them worse.

"You don't have an accent."

When she finally shows up, exactly one week after she spoke to me, this is the first thing I say.

"No."

"I thought you would. The name." I can't stand the name. It doesn't fit. But then maybe nothing about her does. She considers this and for a minute I think she might say something, but she doesn't. She just keeps walking around my garage and touching tools and running her hands across half-built pieces of furniture and it's starting to piss me off.

“Are you Russian?” I ask, hoping to distract her.

“You got to ask the questions last time. Tonight’s my turn.” She didn’t answer the question but at least it seems to have temporarily shifted her focus away from all my stuff.

“I don’t remember agreeing to that.”

“I don’t remember giving you the choice.” And she’s back to wandering around my garage again. Studying. I feel like grabbing my crotch and checking to see if my balls are still there because I think they may be in her pocket and I need to get them back. This was fun or different or intriguing for a little while but not anymore. It’s one thing to have her sitting and watching, but if she wants to start with the interrogation and the inevitable teenage girl psychoanalysis, I’m out.

“You know who likes to talk? Drew. Why don’t you head over there and make his day?” I need to walk away. I pretend I have to get something out of the tool chest across the room. She’s settles back on the workbench and the legs start swinging immediately.

“I think there are other things he’d rather I did with my mouth.” There’s nothing coy or suggestive in her tone. She says it like she’s talking about helping him study for trig.

“Did you really just say that?”

“Believe so,” she says blandly.

“Well, if you do that you might make his week.”

“I could make his year if I wanted to.” Confident girl. Makes me wonder if she can back that up and I shouldn’t be thinking about that at all. The legs are still swinging and it’s driving me crazy.

“Do you want to?” Not what I planned to ask. I wonder how much it would hurt to cut out my tongue.

“I’m asking the questions.”

“Not to me you’re not.” *There.*

“Do you live here alone?” That lasted a while.

“Yes.”

“Why were you emancipated?”

“Necessity.”

“Is it hard?”

“*What?*”

“Is it hard to get emancipated?” I knew that’s what she was asking. Really, I did.

“No. It’s embarrassingly easy.”

She doesn’t speak right away which, ironically, is now unusual. I look at her and she’s studying me.

“What?”

“I’m trying to figure out if you’re being sarcastic.”

“No, it really is embarrassingly easy. It basically comes down to two things. Age and money. And, really, it’s the money that’s the most important. I think the state would cut you loose at twelve as long as they knew it wouldn’t cost them a dime to support you.”

“So, what did you have to do?” If these are the questions she’s going to ask, then I can deal with it. As long as she’s far away from anything personal, I’ll tell her what she wants to know. She lives with her aunt. Maybe she wants to be emancipated, though she’s got to be almost eighteen so there doesn’t seem to be much of a point to it now. My grandfather and I took care of it a year ago as soon as he found out he was sick.

“You fill out some paperwork, provide documentation that you’re at least sixteen and you have the financial means to support yourself. Then your guardian signs it, quick hearing and you’re on your own.”

She nods as if the explanation is acceptable to her. She doesn’t ask about the money. Maybe she has some social graces.

“Who was your legal guardian?” Interesting question, but I’m not opening that door. She could ask anyone else. Everyone knows the story, but I don’t think I’m in danger there just yet. She’ll find out sooner rather than later. I’m not deluded enough to think it won’t come out somehow, but it’s nice to have one person exist who doesn’t know all of my tragic bullshit. At least for a little while.

“Why do you care?”

“I just wondered if that’s who was visiting you on Sunday. Drew said you had company, that’s why you weren’t at dinner.” I did have company and it most definitely wasn’t my grandfather but I’m not getting anywhere near the Leigh situation with this girl. Not now or ever.

“A friend was in town.” I’m expecting another onslaught of questions but no more come. I have quite a few for her but she seems to be done talking right now and I’m afraid if I invite any more conversation tonight, I’ll probably be the one regretting it.

After about ten minutes of leg swinging and silence, she starts asking questions again. They aren’t what I expect, but nothing with this girl is. And these questions, I don’t mind. She asks about tools and wood and furniture building. I don’t know how many questions she asks but I know that my voice is hoarse by the end of the evening.

When she jumps down from the counter—her universal sign for *I’m leaving now*—I say the one thing that I’ve been thinking all night.

“You’re not what I expected you to be like.” I catch her eye and she actually looks a little surprised and a lot curious which I think she tries to hide.

“How did you expect me to be?”

“Quiet.”

CHAPTER 18

Nastya

My mother's voice. It's the first thing I remember after I opened my eyes.

My beautiful girl. You came back to us.

But she was wrong.

If Edna St. Vincent Millay was right and childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies, then my childhood ended when I was fifteen. Which I guess is more than Josh got, because according to what I've picked up on from Drew, his ended at eight. I don't know more than that, because I don't ask Josh questions I'm not prepared to answer myself.

I have to go home this weekend. My mom expected me to visit a month ago. I'm surprised she hasn't shown up here. It isn't like Charlotte Ward to wait for anything she wants.

I don't really have much I need to pack. I left most of my old clothes there. I won't see anyone except my family, so I'm leaving my Hollywood Boulevard attire at Margot's, which means my feet will be happy for a couple days at least. I have to miss school on Friday so I can get to Brighton early enough to make the appointment my mom made with my therapist. I thought about telling Josh I was going, but I didn't end up mentioning it for a lot of reasons, mostly because I'm not responsible to him. I could probably make it back by six o'clock on Sunday to get to dinner, but it might be for the best if I skip it this week.

When I walk through the front door of the very out of place Victorian-style house I grew up in, I feel home. The feeling only lasts a moment. It's not real. It's just a knee-jerk reaction; an echo of a feeling that used to exist.

Just once, I'd like to go home and have home be what it used to be. Then again, maybe I'm just imagining some sort of halcyon days that exist more in my memory than they ever did in real life.

My mother is at the dining room table we have never used except for holidays. She has proofs spread all over the surface. My mother is a photographer, which is kind of funny, because she's drop-dead gorgeous, but she's never actually in any pictures because she's always the one taking them. She works freelance but she's never without an assignment because she's really good, which means she can make her own rules, take the jobs she wants, come and go as she pleases. My bedroom upstairs used to be covered with her photographs. All of my favorite ones. I'd sit at the table and look at her proofs with her and pick the ones that jumped out at me. There was always one photo that resonated above the others and I'd point it out and she'd make me a copy. It was our ritual. I don't even remember the last picture I picked. I didn't know it was going to be the last one. I could walk over to her, sit down at the table and point one out right now, but I don't. My walls are covered with new wallpaper now.

As soon as she sees me, she's out of her chair. I don't think it takes her more than three steps to reach me and wrap her arms around me. I hug her back because she needs it, even if I don't. It's different from hugging Mrs. Leighton but not in the way that you would think. Hugging my mother is far more awkward. She pulls back and I see the expression in her eyes; the one I have gotten so used to; the one I have seen a thousand times in the last three years. The look of person staring out a window, waiting for someone they know is never coming home.

I'm not the only one who isn't the same person anymore. None of us are. I wish I could have made that different for them, given them everything they believed they had gotten back that day when they found me alive and not dead. Who knows what we would be like now, if my mother had been allowed to watch me fade away from her? She would have lost the little girl anyway; just later and gradually. Not the way it happened—in one big ass fell swoop. Even if everything hadn't happened the way it did, that child part of me would still have disappeared. Imperceptibly over time. I just got too old, too fast. All at once.

And she wasn't ready to say goodbye.

I'm saved by the appearance of my brother, Asher, who comes bounding down the stairs. He's a year younger than me and what seems like two feet taller. He grabs me in a bear hug and lifts me off the ground. He's gotten the memo that I don't like being touched about fifty times but he hasn't bothered to read it yet or he just doesn't care. He refuses to adhere to any rules or suggested boundaries where I'm involved. It upsets my parents and pisses the crap out of me in a way that only a brother can. Asher calls bullshit on me and I let him. He's the only one. He's not afraid of losing me or pushing me away, because he knows that right now is about as far away as I can get, and he figures he has nothing to lose.

I have an hour before I have to be at therapy. Asher says he'll drive me. I shrug. I can drive myself, but my appointment is at three-thirty which is the witching hour as far as I'm concerned, so I'll take the company, and besides, I miss him. Asher might be my younger brother, but I don't think he realizes it. He would beat the world down for me if it would make things better, and I think he feels like a failure because it won't.

On the drive, he regales me with stories from school. He's a junior and a popular one. Playing baseball as opposed to the piano will do that for you. He's dating a girl named Addison. I'd like to tell him that her name has the misfortune of meaning *Adam's son*. He wouldn't care anyway, because according to him, she's *smokin' hot*, though I have a feeling that's not the whole story. He can say what he wants, to save face, but I know Asher well enough to know that smokin' hot will only get a girl so far and then she'll have to have some substance. He doesn't have to worry. I won't call him out for failure to be a douche. There are enough douches in the world. I'm glad my brother isn't one of them. He's got two AP classes this year, which is two more than I have, and he's taking the SATs in a few weeks, so he's been cramming like hell and I'm invited to help him this weekend if I want to. I don't know what helping would entail, but I have a feeling it would be hindered by my silence, so he's on his own. During the fifteen minute ride, I get caught up on the last seven weeks in the uncomplicated world of Asher Ward. No wonder his name means blessed.

I sit through my therapy appointment, even though I don't say anything, because everyone cuts me more slack when I go. I'm not sure what good inconsistent therapy sessions even do, but showing up apparently

demonstrates that I'm making an effort. I'm not. The only effort I'm making is to do just enough to be left alone.

I am an expert in all manners of therapy. The only thing I'm not an expert in is getting them to work. My parents had me in therapy before I even left the hospital, which is the recommended course of action when the devil finds your fifteen year-old and the afterlife spits her back out.

I stayed in therapy long enough to know that nothing that happened to me was my fault. I didn't do anything to invite it or deserve it. But that just makes it worse. Maybe I don't blame myself for what happened, but when they tell you that something was completely and utterly random, they're also telling you something else. That nothing you do matters. It doesn't matter if you do everything right, if you dress the right way and act the right way and follow all the rules, because evil will find you anyway. Evil's resourceful that way.

The day evil found me, I was wearing a pink silk blouse with pearl buttons and a white eyelet skirt that came all the way down to my knees and walking to school to record a Haydn sonata for my conservatory audition. The sad thing is that I didn't even need it. I'd already recorded it once, along with a Chopin etude and a Bach prelude and fugue, but I wasn't happy with the sonata and I wanted to record it again. Maybe if I could have lived with that slight imperfection, I wouldn't be living with such a huge one now.

Either way, I still wasn't doing anything wrong. I was out in the sunlight in the middle of the day, not lurking in the dark. I wasn't skipping school or sneaking out. I was going exactly where I was supposed to be going, exactly when I was supposed to be going there. He wasn't after me. He didn't even know who I was.

They tell you it was random to make you feel blameless. But all I hear them telling me is that I have no control; and if I have no control, then I'm powerless. I would have preferred being blamed.

I've done the support group thing, too, but I hated it even before I stopped talking. I never understood how hearing everyone else's shit stories was supposed to make me feel better about mine. Everyone sits around and laments the crap hands they've been dealt. Maybe I'm just not a sadist. It doesn't comfort me to see other people as annihilated as I am. There isn't any

safety in these numbers. Just more misery and I have enough of my own.

Plus, support groups get a little antagonistic when you don't talk. It's like you're pilfering everyone else's pain, taking, but not offering anything in return. They regard me like I'm some sort of thief. One time, a blonde girl named Esta—which I couldn't find a meaning for unless you count the fact that it's the Spanish word for *this*—told me I needed to “put up or shut up” and I wasn't sure how to react to that, but it kind of would have been worth talking just to ask her what the hell she was smoking. Then I found out that she had been stabbed by her mom and making fun of her wasn't quite so funny anymore.

I got to hear about rapes and gunshot wounds and hate crimes, people who knew their attackers, people who didn't, people whose assailants were punished and those who weren't. There isn't any comfort in it. If eavesdropping on someone else's nightmares is supposed to make me feel better, I'd rather stay feeling like shit. I don't think telling them about my horror story would do me any good. And besides, I'm not even supposed to have a story to tell.

So that's what it was like every week. I'd sit in a circle and a bunch of people who'd been through as much shit as I had would look at me like I snuck into the club without paying the cover. And I'd feel like screaming and telling them that I had paid it the same as everyone else in the room, I just didn't feel like waving around my receipt.

Today my therapist doesn't talk to me about blame. She talks to me about talking. I wish I could say that I listen, but I spend most of the time thinking about how to tweak my angel food cake recipe and proper kickboxing techniques.

On the way home, I get what I knew was coming.

“Mom still thinks you might come back.” Asher won't look at me when he says it. I don't even know if he's talking about back home or just back. “You're not going to.” He doesn't even bother to make it sound like a question. Then it gets even better.

“They want you to talk to Detective Martin again.” Of course Ash would be the designated bomb dropper. I know he hates being put in this position, but somehow Asher has become the path of least resistance to me. “She'll

come to the house if you want, so you don't have to go to the station, but they want to show you some pictures. They know you don't remember anything, but they want you to look anyway, in case something jogs your memory."

I stare out the window so I don't have to look at his face when I lie to him with my silence. I don't need my memory jogged. My memory jogs me. I remember everything.

Every detail.

Every night.

For the past 473 days.

On Saturday, I meet with Detective Martin. I look at the pictures. Check out the drawings. Shake my head. He isn't there. He never is. They have no idea what they're looking for. She gives us another business card. I'm not sure how many we have now.

I should tell. I know I should. But he's mine. I don't want him getting the chance to walk away. I want him to pay and I want to be the one who decides how.

On Sunday morning, my dad makes pancakes for breakfast like we always used to. I come downstairs to the smell of bacon frying and I know that in two days you'll still be able to smell the lingering aroma of bacon grease in the house. I won't still be here in two days to smell it, but it will be here even if I'm not.

Asher comes down wearing swim trunks and no shirt and is promptly sent back upstairs by my mother to get one. He groans at the request but goes anyway. He's on his way to the beach with the famous Addison Hartley who is picking him up in less than an hour. I'm actually excited to meet the girl who has my brother trying to act like he's not acting like a lovesick fool. I'm happy for him, because going to the beach with someone you're stupidly in love with is such an awesomely normal thing to do. He invites me to go with them, but I shake my head no for all the good it does me.

“Come with us. It’ll be fun,” he tries to convince me. I’m quite sure it would be fun, if it was only Asher and his girlfriend going. Even though I’m freakishly pale, I still might have considered it if not for all of the other kids who I knew would be there. I may be gone, but around Brighton, I am never forgotten. I shake my head again.

“Go with him. All of your old friends will be there,” my mother says hopefully. It’s hard to see hope in your mother’s face when you know you’re going to kill it. I don’t know what she’s more misguided about, thinking this is a selling point or thinking that I actually have old friends. The only old friends I had are probably spending their Sunday with a musical instrument, not running around half naked on the beach.

“There’s nothing stopping you from going, Mil—” my dad says, catching himself before finishing. *Right Dad*, nothing but the fact that I have to wear a shirt the whole time to hide the scars and field a thousand questions I wouldn’t want to answer even if I did talk. Getting impaled with a railroad spike would be less painful.

If I had to decide who, out of all of us, this whole shit situation was the hardest on, I’d say it was my father. My father is a quiet badass. Gentle, protective, and if need be, murderous to protect his children. Like all fathers should be. The problem is he didn’t protect me. Because he couldn’t. No one could. But I don’t think he sees it that way.

“You have to rejoin the world sometime,” he starts. I feel the no excuses lecture. Asher and I have never been allowed to make excuses about anything, even now. I have a feeling he’s talking about more than going to the beach. “You didn’t get a choice in what happened to you. Neither did we. But *you* have a choice in what happens now. We don’t. You’re the one in control and all we can do is sit on the sidelines and watch, even if you keep making the wrong calls over and over again.” We’re obviously veering into sports metaphor territory. “We’re not going to force you to do anything you aren’t ready to do. You’ve had enough forced on you. But you have to make a decision about how long you’re going to let this define your life.”

Now I think my parents realize that they’ve parented themselves into a corner with their insistence that Asher and I make our own choices growing up and that we stand behind them and live with the consequences. Because

they can't take it back. Now, they're stuck letting me make all of my own decisions, wrong or not, and watching me live with them because that's what they taught me to do.

It was fine when being the Brighton Piano Girl defined my life. When I was making the *right* choices. When all of my choices were influenced by what my parents wanted me to choose. I let their current steer me, let it smooth and shape me like a stone pushed along the sand until I was perfect. And as soon as I was, I was ripped out of the water and thrown and smashed into a thousand pieces that I can't put back together. I don't know where they go. And there are so many missing that the ones that are left don't fit together anymore.

I think I'll stay in pieces. I can shift them, rearrange, depending on the day, depending on what I need to be. I can change on a whim and be so many different girls and none of them has to be me.

We sit down at the table and eat pancakes made from a box mix. Even Asher doesn't say anything else. After breakfast I go to my room and look for more names to add to the walls. I see Addison arrive from my window, but I don't go downstairs. I never do get to meet her, but Asher's right, she does look smokin' hot.

I get in my car just after five on Sunday afternoon. Everyone walks me out. My mom reminds me to text her when I get back to Margot's so she knows I arrived safely. My dad hugs me and closes the door of my now very clean car which he made Asher help him wash yesterday. I lock the doors as soon as I'm in, turn off the radio and leave.

Going home is like culture shock. Different house, different face, different clothes, different name. Same comforter. Sometimes I think I wouldn't mind wrapping Asher up in a box and taking him back to Margot's with me. But then he'd see the way I am there. That I've probably gotten worse instead of better and I'd have to face the very disappointment and lost hopes I ran away from in the first place. Plus, once he did the requisite

double-take and recognized me, he'd probably beat the crap out of any guy who looked at me in all my Snow White meets Frederick's of Hollywood glory.

By the time I get back to Margot's, it will be after seven o'clock. I planned it that way on purpose so I wouldn't have to decide whether or not to go to Drew's. I'm starting to feel guilty about the fact that neither Josh nor I have made any move to tell him about the amount of time we spend together. It's not that I really mind Drew knowing; I think he's finally accepted the fact that there is not enough alcohol in the world to get me to have sex with him, so that's not the issue. The problem is that he would inevitably start to wonder how Josh and I spend so much time together with no talking involved, and even if his suspicions are unconfirmed, they're still suspicions I'd rather avoid. Plus, if I'm being honest, the hours I spend in that garage with Josh, apart from school and Margot and everything else, are mine. I just don't want to share it yet. Apparently Josh hasn't said anything, either.

CHAPTER 19

Josh

“Nastya can’t make it to dinner. She asked me to drop this off on my way to work.” The blonde woman at the door hands me a really tall, elaborately iced cake. I can see the blue paisley pattern around the edge. The last time I saw that plate, it was on my front porch covered with cookies.

“She asked you?” I say skeptically. Does she talk to other people and she’s lying to me? I don’t know why, but that bothers me. A lot.

“She wrote down this address under the words *Drop off, Sunday* and *5:45*. At the bottom she tacked on the word *please*. It’s the most communication I’ve gotten from her in years.” She sounds aggravated at having to explain herself to me.

“OK. Thanks.” I take it out of her hands and she looks at me like she’s waiting for something.

“Who are you?” she asks.

“Josh Bennett.” *Who are you?*

“Can I come in?”

I’m kind of dumbfounded by the request but I don’t want to be rude. I look at her again. She’s really thin and tan and blonde and doesn’t remotely resemble any serial killers in my mind. She doesn’t resemble Nastya, either, but I’ve got to assume she’s the aunt Drew talked about, so I push the door back and let her step inside. I really don’t know what she wants from me, unless Nastya’s messing with me in more ways than I imagine and this woman knows things I don’t.

“Margot Travers. Nastya lives with me.” She holds out her hand. I hold up the cake in response.

“Listen, I’m not going to beat around the bush because I have to be at work soon, and frankly, it’s just not my thing.” *Okay*. “Even if I didn’t have to drop the cake off, I would have been over here this weekend anyway to

find out what's going on." I can't decide if I'm more nervous or curious now, but I'm definitely listening. "There's a tracker on Nastya's phone." She pauses for a second. I guess she's giving me a minute to react. I don't. "I check it periodically, and a few weeks ago this address came up, so I started checking it more often and do you know what I found?" Of course I do, and you know that I do. You just want to ask for dramatic effect and then you're going to tell me anyway. "This address came up again and again and again—at nine o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock. Sometimes midnight." Sounds about right. I don't confirm or deny. I'll let her keep talking until she asks me something outright.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" she asks expectantly.

"Is there something you want to know?" I feel like I'm having a seventh-grade stare down with this woman.

"What's going on?"

"Why aren't you asking her?"

She looks at me as if to say *yeah, right*. "She doesn't talk to me."

Every time she pauses, her eyes scan the room like she's looking for my porn collection or the entrance to my hidden meth lab. I'm getting a little insulted at the fact that this woman nearly pushes Nastya out the door with Drew, of all people, but she's here giving me the third-degree. Maybe because Drew shows up, knocks on the door and asks her to be a guest at a well-chaperoned dinner on a Sunday evening, while I let her covertly hole up in my garage, late at night, with no adult supervision anywhere.

"Then why should I?" I respond, because now I'm just being a child. But then I realize what she's really asking, what she really wants to know. And it's not my first suspicion. Because this woman isn't trying to figure out if her niece is sneaking over here and having sex with me. She wants to know if she's *talking* to me. I take a breath; because now I want this over, and if I give her some sort of answer, maybe it'll be enough to get her off my case. Plus, I'm getting the feeling she's going to start issuing rules or threats and I don't really handle either of those well. I may not know if I want Nastya hanging around all the time or not, but I don't like the idea of someone else making that decision for me. I can give her an answer, but I'm doing it for my benefit, not hers. "She's in my shop class. She's really behind everyone

else so she comes over here at night when she goes running and watches me work.”

She looks at me long enough to make me wonder how she’s going to respond.

“That’s it?” She sounds disappointed. Her eyes narrow again. “Your parents don’t mind that she’s here all the time?”

“Doesn’t bother them at all.” It’s not really a lie. Not really.

“Where’s Nastya?” I’m greeted by Drew’s dad almost as soon as I walk in the door for dinner. The comment brings his mom around the corner a second later. The music’s already playing and I can tell it’s Sarah’s. I’d rather listen to a circular saw but we’re not allowed to insult anyone’s music when it’s their week.

“Nastya’s not coming?” Mrs. Leighton asks, taking the cake out of my hands and sounding genuinely disappointed. “Then where did this come from?”

“Her aunt dropped it off this afternoon and said she wanted you to have it.”

“She is the sweetest thing!” she exclaims, carrying it into the kitchen. I don’t know if there’s another person on Earth who would refer to Nastya as the sweetest thing, and I wonder if she sees something the rest of us don’t.

Dinner at Drew’s ends up being just the five of us, like so many dinners I’ve eaten at this table before. We don’t talk about Nastya at all until dessert comes and the cake gets brought out.

“She’s a freak,” Sarah says, glad to finally have the chance to talk behind her back. She looks at me when she says it and I look away because she’s pissing me off.

“Sarah, not everyone has such an easy life. Some people have problems and you need to learn to empathize, not judge.” Mrs. Leighton is skewering her with the look that has kept all three of us in line for years, four of us if

you count Mr. Leighton.

“Is that why you invite her?” Shit. I wonder if my voice sounds as pissed off as I think it does.

“No, we really like her.” She sounds surprised by the question. Her response is sincere, but it’s the sincerity that pisses me off. Before I get a chance to respond, Sarah opens her bitchy mouth and saves me from myself, if only for a moment.

“Speak for yourself.”

“Shut up, Sarah,” Drew counters with the phrase that must leave his mouth a hundred times a day.

“Drew!” Mrs. Leighton lays her fork down next to her plate and it’s obvious that it pains her not to slam it onto the table.

“What? She can be a bitch but I can’t tell her to shut up?” Drew stands up and pushes his chair back from the table.

“Sit down, Drew.” The forced calm in his mother’s voice is a warning and he sits. He’s readying for his comeuppance, but I’m not done yet.

“How can you like her? You don’t even know her.” I should drop it. I know I should, but I don’t get it. It’s like she’s a novelty or a pet. *Look at the troubled, misguided mute girl we’ve taken in. Aren’t we amazingly generous and understanding?* I hate it and I don’t want it coming from Drew’s mom.

“I don’t know how well you can really know a girl who can’t talk,” she says sympathetically.

Doesn’t talk, I silently correct. *Can, just won’t*. I know that one thing.

Mrs. Leighton’s attention is on me now. She’s trying to explain it for me as well as for herself. She wants to convince me, but she doesn’t need to. I already know. The answer is *you can’t*. You can’t know her at all; at least not Nastya, because she won’t give you anything, and what she gives you isn’t real. She may talk to me, but I don’t know her either.

“So how can you say you like her?” I’m not as angry now, but I want to know.

“She’s obviously a nice girl. She has manners. She never comes to dinner empty-handed.” I don’t know how manners and nice are equal, but I keep my mouth shut because being mad at Sarah is one thing, but being mad

at Drew's mom is something else. I don't think she's ever done anything to piss me off before. The feeling sucks. I don't even know where it comes from. "Clearly, there's something going on in her life and we can't judge—"

"So what is it? You invite her because you feel sorry for her or because you're using her to teach Sarah how to be a better person?" I had to cut her off. It was getting way too close to the point where the psychoanalysis was going to start and I didn't want to let it happen. I didn't want to hear it. It would feel too much like I was being psychoanalyzed, letting them tear me open and pick apart every action and choice and motivation, so they can feel superior and sane. I didn't want them to do it to her while she wasn't even here. Of course, I feel like I've just ripped myself open for them, spared them the trouble and dumped out my feelings so they can lay them across the dining room table and poke around in them with a stick.

"Josh." She says a lot with that word. Like I'm being called out and judged and questioned and pitied. Everyone's looking at me. I can't blame them. I invited it by being the stupid bastard who couldn't keep my mouth shut. It's not even an outburst. I never even raised my voice. I don't even think my tone changed at all, but they still aren't used to it. It's the Josh Bennett equivalent of tattooing her name across my chest. Regrettable, moronic, and really fucking embarrassing.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Leighton continues, and now I can tell she thinks I'm deluding myself. But I'm not the one taking in strays. I'm not trying to save anyone.

"She's not a side show," I cut her off again because I don't want Mrs. Leighton's apologies. She doesn't owe them to me. I should quit while I'm ahead, but that would be smart, and I'm not being smart tonight.

"She dresses like one." Obviously Sarah isn't being smart either.

"I like the way she dresses." I don't know if Drew is trying to get everyone back on track by reminding us all what an idiot he is, or if he really is just an idiot.

"Less work for you," she retorts.

"What is your problem Sarah?" I demand.

"What's yours? My parents aren't allowed to be nice to her and I'm not allowed to not be nice. You're the one with the issue." Sarah has no problem

raising her voice. The worst part about it is that she's right. I am the one with the issue and I don't even know what the issue is.

I don't know how this whole dinner devolved into the mess we're in now, but I have a feeling I'm to blame for it. I could have kept my mouth shut, listened to them play a nice game of *Solve Sunshine* and let it go. But I didn't.

Mrs. Leighton manages to corner me at my truck before I can leave, and I wish she'd just leave me alone like everyone else. Apparently I've been claimed by this woman whether I like it or not.

"Which one of you is dating that girl?"

"I don't think either of us is." Maybe Drew is, but I don't think so. At least dating wouldn't be the word for it, but I don't want to think about that so much. "Drew, I guess."

"I doubt that." She looks knowingly at me.

"Then why ask?"

"Josh." I wish she would stop saying my name like that. Soft and tentative, like she's licking broken glass. "Look at the way she dresses, the way she covers her face with that make-up and the fact that she doesn't speak. She might be silent, but she is screaming for help."

I feel like I'm watching an episode of *General Hospital*.

"So why doesn't someone give it to her?"

"Maybe nobody knows how. Sometimes it's easier to pretend nothing is wrong than to face the fact that everything is wrong, but you're powerless to do anything about it." I wonder if she's talking about me and she thinks she's being subtle.

"Why are you telling me this? Shouldn't you be talking to Drew?"

"Drew doesn't care."

Her accusation is clear and I answer it.

“Neither do I.”

CHAPTER 20

Nastya

I hate my left hand. I hate to look at it. I hate it when it stutters and trembles and reminds me that my identity is gone. But I look at it anyway, because it also reminds me that I'm going to find the boy who took everything from me. I'm going to kill the boy who killed me, and when I kill him, I'm going to do it with my left hand.

Clay Whitaker is chasing me on my way to first period on Thursday, hair as disheveled as his clothes, looking every bit a refugee from the *Island of Misfit Boys*. His sketchbook is closed up and tucked under his arm the way it always is, like it's attached to him or something. I would still love to see what's in it. I wonder how many of those he goes through and how fast he fills them up. It can't be the same book all the time. Maybe he goes through as many sketchbooks as I do black and white composition books. His closet probably has a stack of them from floor to ceiling, and I bet if you flipped through them you wouldn't find the exact same picture on every page. Not like in my notebooks. His are probably like a photo album of memories, where he can look back and know exactly what place he was at in his mind when he drew the picture. Mine aren't like that. I can't flip the pages and read what I wrote and tell you what was happening in my life, in my mind, at that time. I can only tell you what happened on one particular day, and it's the one I'm not supposed to remember.

"Hey, Nastya!" He's panting when he reaches me, smiling through heavy breaths. I stop and step off to the side so we aren't standing in the middle of the hallway. I'm curious because Clay will say hello to me if I run into him, but he never seeks me out.

“I wanted to ask a favor, and I figured since you kind of owe me, you’d say yes.”

Really? I’m not worried about whatever favor he wants but I am trying to figure out what I owe him for. I narrow my eyes at him and his smile is still there.

“How many times have you gotten into the English wing at lunchtime because a certain book has been propping the door open? A book which, by the way, is dented to hell and I’m probably going to have to pay for, so you kind of owe me double.”

I’ll concede that. *Come on. Bring it.* I motion with my hand.

“I want to draw you.” Not what I was expecting but I hadn’t really stopped to think about what I was expecting. It’s not really an unusual request, considering that it’s coming from Clay Whitaker, but I don’t know why he wants me. I hope he doesn’t think I’d pose naked for him because that’s not happening. I tap on his sketchbook and motion for him to open it. I’ve been dying to see what he does and he couldn’t have handed me a more perfect excuse. If it’s possible, his smile gets even wider, but now it’s genuine, too. He’s not trying to sell me something anymore, even though that’s exactly what his drawings are going to do.

We’ve been facing each other but he moves over to stand next to me, leaning his back against the wall so he’s shoulder to shoulder with me. He drops his backpack to the ground and opens the sketchbook. The first drawing is of a woman, older, with a lined face and thin lips. Her eyes are sunken and it’s horribly depressing. I look over to him and he’s waiting for my reaction. I don’t know what reaction to give him so I motion for him to turn the page. The next picture is of a man’s face. He looks like an older version of Clay, and it must be his father, unless it’s some sort of future self-portrait. Just like the first drawing, it’s jarringly real. I swear I can look at the eyes and tell what they were thinking. It isn’t just inspired; it’s almost frightening. The next one is a woman with eyes I can tell are bloodshot even though the drawing is black and white and my reaction is almost visceral. I can feel it. I want to touch her and find out what’s wrong. But it’s nothing compared to the feeling I get when I see the page he flips to next.

I’m staring at myself. The picture is me but not me. It’s me he’s never

seen. My face looks younger and my eyes are clear. There isn't a trace of make up on me and my hair is smoothed back in a ponytail that is pulled over my right shoulder. This one I do touch. I can't help it. My hand just goes there. I pull it away as soon as my fingers meet the paper. I wish he hadn't shown this to me here. I can't look at any more. I close the book and shove it back at him.

Now I'm not so certain that the second picture wasn't actually a future self-portrait after all. I'm sure he could easily look at a face and age, not only the skin, but the person behind it. It's what he did to me in reverse. He regressed me. Took the age and the days and the years and everything that happened in them away and drew me the way I used to be.

When I turn to face him, I don't know what's in my expression. It could be any of a thousand emotions I don't want to try to sort out right now in the hallway before first period. The bell is going to ring soon and the corridor is filling up around us.

Clay is staring at me. He's waiting and he's not smiling anymore. He must have been watching the entire time I was looking at the book, gauging my reactions while he showed me his soul. No matter how proud he may be, I know that showing me his work still has to be like ripping off his clothes, spinning around in front of me naked and waiting for judgment. I used to feel the same way when I played anything I had composed.

“So?”

I pull a spiral notebook out of my backpack. The first of two pre-school warning bells just blasted through the hall and I have to get to class. *Time and place?* I write and hand it to him just as Yearbook Michelle comes running up and grabs his arm, pulling him away.

“Come on! We're gonna be late!” I don't think she even noticed that he was talking to me.

“Find me at lunch!” he yells over his shoulder as I walk off in the opposite direction, haunted by my own face.

“To the right. Just a little. Back more. Forget it. The light in here sucks. Let’s go back downstairs. The kitchen is the only room in this house with enough decent natural light.” Clay picks up his sketchpad, charcoal pencils and some other art crap, and I follow him back down the stairs of the townhouse I’ve spent the past three days in. He’s obsessed. I can’t blame him. I recognize it. I know the overwhelming need to create something. I watch him draw and hate him a little bit for it. I don’t feel bad about it. I feel justified. I miss it. I want it back so badly that I would break my hand apart all over again just to give myself something else to feel. Sometimes the wanting almost kills me again.

It’s a little bit devastating being surrounded by people who can do what you can’t anymore. People who create. People whose souls don’t live in their bodies anymore because they’ve leached so much of themselves into their work. Josh. Clay. My mother. I want to steal from them to let myself live.

“Back downstairs?” Maddie Whitaker has been here every day that I’ve come. She works doing data entry from home, so Clay says she’s always around. He sees his dad on the weekends on the other side of town which is why he’s been having me sit for him during the week.

“Crap light,” he says, and it’s enough of an answer for her.

I sit for the next hour, watching Clay, charcoal in hand, with his eyebrows pulled together the way they get when he’s concentrating. He hasn’t let me see anything he’s done yet. I don’t even know how many he’s drawn. I thought I was agreeing to one picture, maybe two, but we seem to have gone beyond that. By like eighty.

He finally takes pity on me and lets me up to use the bathroom.

“How many more?” I write down on a pad of sticky notes I find on the kitchen counter, because I’m stalling before I have to sit again.

“I don’t know. I’ll know when I’ve got them all, but I won’t know how many that is until I’m done.”

“Cryptic, much?” I scribble back. Because if I’m going to be spending this much time with him, I have to at least be able to communicate a little. Plus, Clay won’t sell me out.

“Not trying to be. Some people I can capture in one picture. For most, it’s two or three. For you, it’s more.”

Now he's got me. I'm in. *Why does it take so many pictures to capture one face?*

"I'm not trying to capture one face. I'm trying to capture all the faces." He stops to see if I'm getting this. "Most people have more than one. You have more than most."

He tears apart faces and puts them back together whole, like I would a piece of music. I could play it a hundred ways, imbue it with a different emotion every time and try to find the truth of it. He does that with faces, except he's not putting the truth in, he's drawing it out. He's looking for the truth of me. I wonder if he'll find it, and if he does, maybe he can show me where it is again.

CHAPTER 21

Josh

My router is acting up for the second night in a row. I thought I had it back in working order last night, but now it's pissing me off again. I wanted to finish this chair by the end of the week because I have three more projects waiting that all should have taken priority over this. But I wanted to build the chair and I couldn't get it out of my head. So now I'm behind and I'll be living out here for the next couple of weeks, trying to get back to even. I don't mind. There are worse places to be.

The quiet out here is strange. It shouldn't be. I'm used to the quiet, but it only took me two days without her, to feel it. It's unsettling. Years of working out here by myself undone by less than two months of her company. And now she hasn't been here for days. Maybe it's a good thing, because I obviously need a reality check. I try to work with the garage door down as much as possible, just so I know that I can. I'm not going to let myself get used to anyone again. She can come here. She can sit in my garage, hand me tools, ask me questions. She can use me to get the talking out of her system. I can handle the company as long as I don't come to expect it too much. And I won't. I don't know when she's coming back but I wonder how long I can keep the garage closed before I start to suffocate.

Nastya

I've been clocking more miles this week than I have for the past several. A lot of my running time has been being spent in a certain garage and I'm trying to rein it in. But I miss him. It's not like going without seeing a friend for a few days. He's the be all and end all of my friends right now. I have Drew, and I seem to have acquired Clay somewhere along the way, but Josh

is my escape. He's my hiding place.

It's been days since I've been to Josh's house. I've spent the whole week sitting in a chair at Clay's, feeling antsy and ridiculous and just wanting to get up and move. I hate the sitting still. When you spend months in a bed, letting your body heal and then sitting in a chair, trying to make your hand work, you get sick of it fast and you want to run away. So every day when I get done at Clay's, I have to run. It's the only thing that keeps the frayed edges of my sanity intact. And since Margot caved a few weeks back and let me get a portable punching bag, I have something to hit now and I spend a good amount of time doing that, too.

By Friday night, I can't help it. I don't even know if he'll be home, but my feet take me there anyway. I wonder if he missed me, too. I slow myself down before I reach the driveway. He's in the back, adjusting one of his saws and he's turned away from me. I look around for someplace to climb up on the counter, but there isn't one. Every inch of space on the workbench is occupied. Piles of wood scraps, random tools and boxes covering the whole thing. It's never this overrun in here. Josh is meticulous, which means this is on purpose and I wonder if it's a message. Maybe he realized how much he enjoyed not having me all over his space. He got reacquainted with his solitude and found that he'd missed it.

I'm not ready to walk out yet. If I'm going to be rejected, I'd like it to come complete with humiliation. I'm hoping he'll come out from behind that stupid saw and say something to me, but he doesn't look like he's rushing to do so. Out of the corner of my eye, in front of the side door where the workbench ends, is the chair I'd seen him working on last week. I recognize the legs on it, the design he had painstakingly routed on all four of them. He must have finished it this week and I wonder if he made it on order or if he did it for himself. It's exquisite, and every time I see something he's made, I hate him a little more for it. My jealousy is a living thing. Shifting, changing, growing. Like my rage and my mother's regret.

I run my hands along the arc of the backrest and kneel down to examine the legs. The armrests are wide and curved to match the lines of the back. I wonder if he's started another one yet, because it should be part of a matching set. My fingers are still tracing their way down the other side, and before I've thought better of it, I slide into the seat, and that's when the

perfection of it strikes me. Because this chair should not be comfortable, but I may never want to leave it. My arms are resting on the sides and I lean back and look up to find Josh watching me. It's unnerving the way he's staring, no matter how much I may have gotten used to him and I kind of wish he wasn't so damn good-looking because it makes it hard to look away.

The expression on his face is almost anxious but there's something like mischief in it as well. It's the same look Clay had when he showed me the picture he'd drawn of me. He's waiting for a reaction, for approval. I look down at the chair I'm sitting in and back up at him, but he's not looking at me anymore. He's gone back to adjusting the saw as if everything has returned to the way it should be and that's when it hits me. That he had done all of this on purpose. He made sure there was no place for me to sit on the counter so I'd be forced to notice it. Because the chair was meant for me.

The realization is enough to propel my ass straight up and out of that chair. He looks up, jarred by the sudden movement and for a moment we just stare at one other. I must look like a crazed animal, ready to bolt like the first night I walked in here. I can say what I'm thinking but I don't need to. He already knows.

"It's only a chair." He's talking me down off a ledge.

"I can't take it." I try to make it sound like he's the unreasonable one for giving it to me.

"Why not?"

"You should sell it."

"I don't need to."

"I won't take it. Give it to someone else."

"You need someplace to sit. I'm tired of you moving everything around and getting in my way whenever I'm working. Now you have a place to sit. So sit." He motions me down into the chair with a tilt of his head and I sit and it feels more perfect than it did a few moments ago. He leans over me and places his hands on top of mine on the armrests and looks straight into my eyes, which flays me a little bit.

"It's a chair. Stop overanalyzing it. I'm not selling it and I'm not giving it to someone else. I made it for you. It's yours." He pulls away and stands up

straight. When his hands are gone from mine, I realize that it's the first time he's ever really touched me, and I wish he'd put them back. "Besides, it already has your name on it."

"Where?"

"Look underneath. I was going to put it on the back where you could actually see it but it didn't work."

I slide down out of the chair and get as low as I can to the ground so I can twist my head around and see what he's talking about. And I do and it's unmistakable. There, on the underside of the seat, is an engraving of the sun.

I know at that moment what he's given me and it's not a chair. It's an invitation, a welcome, the knowledge that I am accepted here. He hasn't given me a place to sit. He's given me a place to belong.

CHAPTER 22

Nastya

It amazes me how people are so afraid of what can happen in the dark, but they don't give a second thought about their safety during the day; as if the sun offers some sort of ultimate protection from all the evil in the world. It doesn't. All it does is whisper to you, lulling you with its warmth before it shoves you face down into the dirt. Daylight won't protect you from anything. Bad things happen all the time; they don't wait until after dinner.

I've never been to Josh's house during the day. It looks different in the afternoon. I wouldn't be here now if my car battery hadn't been unjumpably dead when I left school today. I live close enough to the campus to walk, but I don't walk anywhere in the afternoon. Mornings I can deal with, but there's a period of hours in the afternoon when I hate being outside. Even nighttime doesn't bother me so much. The dark doesn't breed fear in me the way the daytime does. The afternoon sun has a way of following me, burning memories onto my back. Josh always offers me rides home from his house. He thinks it should make me nervous, running alone at night, and it does. I'm not stupid enough to think I'm ever safe outside, anywhere, at any time of day. It's just that I'm more nervous during the daytime.

So now I'm here, on Josh Bennett's couch at 3:15 in the afternoon, watching *General Hospital*. Josh spent the last commercial break patiently filling me in on as much of the past decade's worth of storylines as he could in three and a half minutes while I ate as many Twizzlers as I could. When the commercials were over, he stopped abruptly and told me he'd tell me the rest during the next break. I don't think I've spent much time actually watching the television. Mostly I've been looking at Josh and trying to figure

out who the hell he is. I've developed a theory that, perhaps, Josh is really twins and there are two of him, because I'm convinced, from day to day, that he's not the same person. It's like that Christian Bale movie where the twin brothers share the same life and you never know which one you're with. That's how I feel with him.

I crumple up the empty cellophane wrapper and walk into the kitchen. "Where's your trash?" With as much time as I spend at this house, I never actually come inside. We pretty much live in the garage.

"Under the sink," he says, not looking away from the TV. "Do you ever eat anything other than sugar?"

I mentally tally what I've eaten today: two protein bars, two bags of peanut M&Ms (but they were the small bags so it's really like eating only one), plus the recently consumed Twizzlers. "Sometimes," I answer. Really, I wouldn't even bother with the protein bars if I didn't need them after working out. When I lived with my parents, we actually sat down and ate meals, real ones, like the way we eat at Drew's on Sundays. Margot doesn't cook, plus we always have to eat early so she can get to work and I'm usually not in the mood. Maybe when I'm eighty I'll like eating dinner at four o'clock in the afternoon, but now, not so much.

I sit back down on the couch next to him and we watch the rest of the show. By four o'clock I know more than I ever cared to know about Quartermaines and Spencers. I shouldn't mock. While I was stuck recovering all those months, I watched my share of bad soap operas. And bad game shows. And bad talk shows. I was an expert in all things daytime television. I just didn't watch General Hospital. After today, I know enough that I can pretend like I did.

When it's over, we climb into Josh's truck so he can take me to buy a car battery. We have to stop back at the school parking lot on the way, because I know the make and model of my car but that's the extent of my knowledge. Apparently that's not enough information to tell me what kind of battery I need, so we have to detour back to campus. Josh looks at my car, writes something down and then takes my keys and pops the hood. I'm still holding onto my backpack with all my books, so I jump out to throw it in my car so I won't have to keep carrying it. As soon as I do, I wish I wasn't so

lazy, because that's when I see Tierney Lowell walking towards us in the parking lot. She's not the only one. There are quite a few students exiting the building and I realize that it's just after four and most of the practices and club meetings are finishing up. She's the one I notice though, because for some reason she seems to hate me. OK, most of the girls don't like me and I'm an easy target because of the clothes. I get that. But she shoots daggers at me like she just caught me feeding chocolate to her dog. Normally, that's cool, because it's all easily ignorable and I can avoid her without much effort. However, right now, I'm jumping out of Josh Bennett's truck and he's standing next to my car and in a minute we'll be leaving together and that's an act of exhibitionism I wasn't planning to put on just yet.

We get back in the truck immediately, with the shared, unspoken need to get out of there as quickly as possible. Once we've driven away, I look out the window, scanning the cars around us. Josh's windows are tinted, but I still won't take any chances. When I feel safe enough that we're not being watched, I ask the question I've been holding onto since we left his house.

"You watch General Hospital?" I don't really need confirmation. I know for a fact that he watches it. He doesn't look at me but I see his lips turn up in the half-smile he gets when he's embarrassed about something, which is really just a real smile he's trying to drown.

"Yes," he says. OK, he did answer my question, but what I really wanted to know was why or how or something that will explain it to me because *come on*. But if there's anything more surprising to me than the newfound knowledge that he's a closet soap opera addict, it's the fact that he actually keeps talking and offers me an explanation; one I didn't have to ask for. "My mom used to watch it. Religiously. Never missed an episode. My dad and I made fun of her all the time. When she died, I kept thinking that maybe she'd come back, and when she did, I wanted to be able to tell her everything that had happened so she wouldn't have missed anything. So I watched it. Every day. After a while I realized she wasn't coming back but I was pot vested by that point. I just never stopped." He shrugs like he's accepted this fact; only I'm not sure if it's the fact that his mother isn't coming back or that he watches General Hospital that he's accepting. Maybe he's not sure either.

"How old were you?"

“I was eight which I guess is old enough to get it. I just didn’t really want to... I don’t know... My dad tried to make it make sense for me, but there really isn’t a way to explain how a person you’ve seen every day of your life just *isn’t* anymore. Someone just hit delete and she’s gone. I had a hard time grasping that I could come home one night and find that the person who was laughing and hugging me that morning just stopped existing. I didn’t believe it was possible. I didn’t want to believe it was possible... so, yeah, General Hospital.”

I didn’t look away from him once while he was telling that story. It’s the first real thing he’s ever told me. It makes me feel ashamed because I’ve never told him anything real. Not even my name.

He turns and looks at me for a second with what is almost a look of apology on his face. Resignation, maybe? Then he shifts his attention back to the road and we pull into the mall parking lot a minute later. I have one of Josh Bennett’s secrets now. He gave it to me. I wish I could give it back.

CHAPTER 23

Josh

Whenever someone knocks on my door, there's a part of me that still kind of expects them to be carrying some sort of food. In the days and weeks after my mom and my sister died, I got a crash course in grieving. I learned the way it works; some of it was about how I was expected to react, but most of it was about how other people were expected to react. I don't think there's a written set of rules, but there might as well be, because everyone seems to do the same things. A lot of it has to do with food. My grandmother explained the psychology of this to me at one point but I didn't really listen because I didn't really care. People must know that just because you need to eat doesn't mean you want them coming by your house non-stop, using casserole dishes and coffee cakes as an excuse to eavesdrop on your grief.

I was indoctrinated into all of the pointless condolence rituals at age eight and I came to realize that they never really change. I could always count on an onslaught of food and sympathy that I had no use for.

Sometimes people will try to tell you some funny thing they remember, which usually isn't funny at all, just sad. Then you stare at each other uncomfortably until they finally get up to leave, and you thank them for coming, even though they just made you feel worse.

Then you get the people who just want an excuse to come by to see how ripped up your face looks from crying, see if you've cracked yet so they can talk about it with the neighbors. *Did you see poor Mark Bennett and the boy? What a tragedy. It's just so sad.* Or something equally lame. But they brought you some food, so they're entitled.

Ten minutes later the doorbell rings again and we start all over. It goes on like this for days. Too many apologies and a crapload of food. Mostly lasagna.

Maybe some people find comfort in obligatory words and reheatable food; my dad and I just weren't those people. We thanked everybody

anyway. Took their foil pans and condolences. Then we threw it all away and ordered pizza. I wonder if there is a person on Earth who is consoled by a casserole.

Then I think about Leigh, and I know that, sometimes, someone shows up at your door offering something better than words and food. Sometimes, somebody brings you something you really need, and it's not a fucking coffee cake.

The first time I met Leigh, she was standing on my front porch, holding the tell-tale foil-covered dish. My grandmother had died two days earlier and at that point I had about six of them on my counter and a couple more in the refrigerator. I was fifteen, and I think I visibly exhaled with disgust at the sight of it. But not at the sight of her. She was wearing a really short green sundress and she was seriously hot. Those are the only real details I recall. I recognized her from school, but she was two grades ahead of me and we never spoke. I didn't even know her name until that day.

I took the dish from her, which was actually from her mom who knew my grandmother. I invited her in because I had learned that that's what you were supposed to do. My grandfather wasn't home so I did the grieving host thing. We went through the required conversation, making sure to hit all the main points and platitudes. After a few minutes of standing in the kitchen, vying for the title of most uncomfortable, she asked if anyone was home and if I wanted to go into my bedroom. I think it was her way of saying she was sorry and my way of saying thanks for the casserole.

That was the first time Leigh came over. But it wasn't the last. We never dated. Never hung out. She'd come over and sneak into my room at night or we'd end up in her car somewhere, but that was the extent of our involvement and it's been the extent for close to three years now. Even now that she's at college, we manage to keep up a regular schedule. Sometimes we talk but never about anything real.

Maybe it was wrong. Maybe it is wrong. Wrong or not, I don't feel bad about it. I was up to four deaths by the time she showed up, with only one more to go. I needed one normal thing and Leigh gave me that and it didn't cost me any emotions or feelings or commitment. I didn't have to love her. I like her, though I'm not sure if that would have been a deal-breaker, either. I

don't even think it mattered to her if I cared. We still employ a policy of equal-opportunity using, no questions asked. She's sweet and laidback and good-looking as hell. But if she walked away tomorrow, I wouldn't miss her. People disappear all the time. I might not even notice.

It's not a coffee cake Nastya's carrying when she walks into my garage just after eight o'clock. Though if it was, I'm sure it would have been homemade, covered with cinnamon and unbelievably awesome. She is carrying two plastic grocery bags. She walks past me without a word and reaches up with one hand to awkwardly open the door to the inside of the house without letting go of the bag.

"Sunshine?" She doesn't respond, so I follow her in and find her opening the freezer and shoving no fewer than four half-gallon containers of ice cream into it. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" she snaps.

"You get knocked up?"

She whirls around on me. "*What?*" Guess not. I hold my hands up, palms out in surrender. She's obviously not in the mood.

"Sorry, just," I motion toward the open freezer, her hand still inside on one of the containers, "a lot of ice cream."

"Right, because I'd have to be pregnant to want ice cream. Next thing you'll be saying that I must have my period because that's the only reason girls have for getting pissed, but of course since you're a guy, you won't actually say *period*, but something prickish like on the rag." She slams the freezer door shut. Now might be the moment to swear profusely that I had no intention of bringing up her period in any manner, much less one containing the word *rag*, but I feel safer keeping my mouth shut right about now and letting her play this out.

With any other girl I could probably pull out the classic guy fail-safe of walking over and wrapping my arms around her and letting her put her head on my shoulder. It's cheap, but it works. Drew swears by it. But I'm afraid

that in this particular instance it would result in one of two things: a string of innovative new expletives or her knee in my balls. My money's on the knee.

"I like ice cream. You never have any. Bad things happen when I go too long without ice cream," she says, sounding slightly calmer.

"Are you sure you got enough?"

"Fuck off."

"Maybe you should open one of those now," I suggest.

So that's what we do. Except that we don't open one, we open all four of them and eat straight out of the containers at the crap coffee table in front of my couch. I keep this one in front of the couch because it's shit and I don't care what happens to it. I don't have to worry about coasters or Drew putting his shoes on it. I figure I'll keep it here until he leaves for college, or some girl finally kills him.

Nastya doesn't eat from the middle of the container like a normal person. A normal person who doesn't eat ice cream out of a bowl, that is. She waits until it starts melting and scrapes away the melted part from around the edge of the container. According to her, half-melted ice cream tastes better than fully-frozen ice cream. I can't tell if she's right because she makes me eat the more frozen stuff from the center and threatens me if I try to eat from the edges. We put a pretty big dent in every one of those containers and she's definitely more Sunshine and less Nasty afterward. I make a mental note for the next time she gets pissy that, in lieu of mood stabilizers, ice cream will do the trick.

We're both on a sugar high after all the ice cream and we end up back in the garage because I have a list of projects to finish. I figure she's going to go running because that's usually her M.O. when she's carb-loaded, but she doesn't leave.

"Give me something to do," she says, with just the barest hint of wariness.

“What do you want to do?” I ask, assessing her.

“Nothing with power tools or anything like that. Something I can do with my right hand.”

“You want to sand?” I offer. “It sucks, but—”

“I’ll sand. Just show me what to do.”

I grab a sheet of sandpaper and demonstrate how to attach it to the sanding block.

“We have to sand with the grain on this.” I pick up her hands to show her how much pressure to use and they’re so soft that I hate to put sandpaper anywhere near them.

“How do I know when it’s done,” she asks, starting to work.

“My dad’s rule was always that when you think you’re done, you’re probably halfway there.”

She tilts her head and looks at me like I’m useless. “So, how do I know when it’s done?”

I smile. “Just show it to me when you think it’s ready. You’ll start to know after you’ve done it a few times.”

She keeps her eyes on me for just a second longer than she needs to before turning back to the wood. I know the questions are there. I saw them in her eyes as soon as I mentioned my father. How? When? What happened? But she doesn’t ask. She just keeps sanding and I won’t stop her. I despise sanding.

It’s after midnight by the time we call it quits. I don’t know how her hands even held up this long. She sanded the hell out of everything I gave her. I never did ask her what was wrong earlier.

CHAPTER 24

Nastya

When I get to his house at 7:40, Josh is in his driveway, leaning against the side of his truck. As soon as he sees me, he unlocks the doors and comes around to open mine.

“About time, Sunshine,” he says. “I was about to give up on you.”

“I didn’t know you had a field trip planned,” I reply once I’ve settled into the truck and shut the door.

“I have to get to Home Depot before they close.”

“You didn’t have to wait for me.” He really didn’t. It’s not like I was going to be sad to miss the weekly hardware store stock-up.

“No. But I knew you’d be showing up sooner or later and my garage would be closed and you’d feel abandoned and then I’d feel guilty and I hate feeling guilty. So it was just easier to wait.” One side of his mouth turns up.

“Your life is so hard,” I say dryly.

“You are the only person who would even think to say something like that to me.” He sounds weirdly pleased.

“Force field hasn’t kept me out yet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I give him a pointed look because I’m sure he can figure it out. He keeps staring at me, so finally I shrug and then throw in a sigh so he knows that I’m exasperated at having to explain this to him.

“At school, no one comes near you. When I first saw you on the bench in the courtyard, I wondered if you were surrounded by some sort of force field. I kind of wanted to get one for myself. You can hide in plain sight. It’s pretty awesome.”

“Force field,” he repeats, somewhat amused. “Might as well be. People used to call it the dead zone,” he adds, but he doesn’t elaborate. “Maybe you

have special powers.” I assume he’s commenting on my ability to breach his force field, but I don’t respond.

I don’t have any special powers. I’m certain of that, because I’ve spent a lot of time lamenting my lack of them. I do have an uncanny capacity for bitterness and misdirected rage but I don’t think that counts. I feel a little misled. I spent crapload of time over the past couple years reading books and watching movies, and in all of them, when you die and they bring you back to life, supernatural abilities are just part of the deal. *Sorry you didn’t win the grand prize of eternal peace, but you’re not walking away empty handed!* You may come back broken and wrong, but at least you get some cosmic consolation prize, like the ability to read minds or speak to the dead or smell lies. Something cool like that. I can’t even manipulate the elements.

Of course if I were to take the books at their word, I’d also have to believe that all teenage boys go around calling girls *baby*, because apparently that’s the express train to romance. He was an asshole a minute ago but then he drops the baby on you and it’s all over. Uncontrollable swooning and relinquishment of all self-respect activated. *Ooooh, he called me baby. My panties are wet and I luuuuuuuuv him.* Do real boys actually call girls baby? I don’t have enough experience to know. I do know that if a guy ever called me baby, I’d probably laugh in his face. Or choke him.

I follow Josh down another aisle. He’s almost as comfortable here as he is in his garage. It’s like he’s being pulled around by an invisible string that leads him to everything he’s looking for. He’s on autopilot, not even thinking. He must spend half his life in this store.

“I’ll get the wood next time,” he says. “I don’t feel like dealing with it tonight. Plus, I think we’re going to have to hit the lumber yard for what I need anyway.” The *we’re* part of that sentence sticks in my head.

“What are you making?” I ask, glancing down the aisle to make sure it’s empty before speaking.

“I have a job for one of the teachers at school. Then I have two Adirondack chairs to make.”

“You sell everything you build?”

“Some of it I give away. Some of it I sell. It’s how I pay for the wood and the tools.”

“Is that why you haven’t applied to college?”

“Huh?” he says, putting two more cans of finish in the cart.

“I heard Mrs. Leighton talking to you. You haven’t applied yet. You don’t want to go?”

“I never really got into the whole school thing.”

“Did your parents want you to go?”

“I don’t know. We never really got that far.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Probably the same thing I’m doing now. Just more of it.”

I get that. I used to think the exact same way, but he can actually do it.

“You can afford that?” I ask. We’re in front of a display of little drawers full of every size screw you can imagine and he’s pulling them out without even looking.

“I can afford just about anything I’m willing to pay for.” I’m not sure exactly what he means by that, but the way he says it is bitter, and if there’s something that makes him sound that way, I don’t want to get into it.

We get up to the self-checkout and I start taking things out of the cart and handing them to him one at a time as he runs them over the scanner. It strikes me how utterly domestic this all seems. He could have come without me because I really haven’t served any purpose here at all. I could have used the time to run which is probably what I should have been doing. It’s what I would have done if I had shown up at his house and he wasn’t there. I would have run myself into exhaustion. He’s right about one thing and I wonder if he knew just how right he was and if that’s why he waited. If I had gotten to his house and seen that closed garage, I would have felt abandoned and I may never have gone back.

When we get back to his house just after nine o’clock, I help him carry the bags into the garage and watch him put everything away. He is all grace and fluid in this place; there isn’t one wasted movement. Everything he does

has purpose. I don't feel uncomfortable about watching. He watches me, too. We have an unspoken agreement. I let him watch me. He lets me watch him. We never call each other on it. It's a gift we give one another. No strings, no expectations, no reading between the lines. We're like mysteries to one another. Maybe if I can solve him and he can solve me, we can explain each other. Maybe that's what I need. Someone to explain me.

When everything has been put away, he closes the garage door and goes into the house, waiting for me to follow before he shuts the door.

"Did you eat?" he asks.

"Yeah, before I came over. You?"

"Yeah. I would have heated you up something if you were hungry. So, you actually cooked tonight?" He regards me skeptically.

I snort. Because snorting is attractive. "No."

"What'd you eat for dinner?"

"Peanut butter cookies."

"I don't need to ask if you're serious, do I? I don't know how you exercise so much with the way you eat."

"Peanut butter has protein in it," I say, full of false indignation. "Besides, I was messing with the recipe. I had to eat a bunch of them to see when I got it right."

"Did you?" he asks, pulling a bottle of water out of the refrigerator and drinking half of it before handing it to me.

"I don't know. I'll bring you some and you can tell me."

"I'll eat your cookies, but you let me feed you real food first."

"You're going to cook for me?" I almost choke on the water before passing the bottle back.

"I cook anyway. What's the difference if you're here?"

"Don't put yourself out."

"I won't." He smiles as I walk around the counter and pick up the mp3 player that's sitting next to the phone.

"What are you listening to?" I ask, turning it on.

"Nothing. I took it out for you. It just sits here. I thought you might want

to use it when you run.”

Oh. I flip it off without looking and put it back down. “That’s okay. I don’t need one, but thanks.”

“How come? You’re the only person I’ve ever seen running without music. Doesn’t it get boring?” he asks. It’s a valid question, but it doesn’t get boring. It’s never quiet enough to get boring and I certainly don’t plan to stick shit in my ears like a written invitation for someone to jump me. I shrug, pushing it back further on the counter and turning away.

“Not really. I heard you and my aunt had a nice chat,” I say sarcastically, moving to the sofa. I kick my shoes off and tuck my feet underneath me.

“I was wondering if she’d mention that.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He shrugs. Between the two of us we do a lot of shrugging. Maybe that’s why I finally started talking to him. My shoulders just got tired.

“What did she say?” he asks, sinking down next to me.

“She said she wasn’t stupid and that I shouldn’t treat her like she is.”

“So are you not supposed to be here right now?”

“No. She’s okay. She just expects me to let her know where I am from now on. As long as I text her it’s fine.” It’s true. Margot did sit me down and lecture me. She made sure I felt the full measure of my lack of consideration for her and that I understood that if anything happened to me, she would be the one dealing with the wrath of my mother; a five-foot three woman who could strike fear in a berserker. But God bless Margot, because she wasn’t going to force me into a corner with rules and ultimatums, either, which was good, because I would have ignored them. Not because I wanted to rebel against her or because I didn’t want anyone telling me what to do, but because I wasn’t going to give up sitting in that garage.

“Look Em,” she said, “I’m not naïve. I was young, too. I’m thirty-two years old and I still have a list of stories I will never tell my mother, and if Charlotte was my mother, that list would be even longer, so believe me, I understand. But you also need to understand that you are my responsibility and beyond that I love you.” I think I cringed at that part but she ignored me

and kept going. “You’ll be eighteen years old soon and I know exactly how futile it will be to forbid you to do anything, but I need you to respect me enough to let me know where you are and who you’re with and what you’re doing. If you do, we’ll be fine. If you don’t, I will not hesitate to throw you under the bus with your mother.”

She made sure to tack on that she knew I was a smart girl and that smart girls often do the stupidest things and then she hugged me and told me I could tell her anything and she wouldn’t judge me. I think it was her version of a sex talk.

I hugged her back because it was my only way to say thank you to her for letting me keep him without a fight. She wasn’t going to make it difficult for me to see him and I desperately needed something in my life that wasn’t difficult.

CHAPTER 25

Josh

“How’d you learn to cook?” The legs are swinging from my kitchen counter, not my workbench, tonight. She eats here all the time now. Sometimes she helps. Sometimes she watches. She always talks.

I reach up and open the cabinet over the refrigerator where my mother stored all of her cookbooks. She looks up at the overfilled shelf. I really only use a few of the ones in the front, but the cabinet goes pretty far back and the books are in there three rows deep.

“You learned to cook by reading cookbooks?” She raises her eyebrows.

“Isn’t that how most people do it?”

“Not most seventeen year-old boys.”

“I don’t think many seventeen year-old boys learn to cook at all.”

No response to this one. I didn’t say it to make her feel bad, but I think she does, because that quiet sets in. The quiet everyone thinks they should fill but they can’t because they’re busy trying to figure out what to say. So while they sit and think about it, the silence stretches out until there aren’t any words left that wouldn’t make everything more uncomfortable. All the ok things to say dissolved in the silence while they were busy thinking.

“If it sucks, can we order pizza?” she asks. Silence can’t win against her. It doesn’t intimidate her at all. When you spend over a year not talking to another living person, I guess you learn to manipulate the voids.

“It won’t suck,” I respond.

“Confident, aren’t we?” she mocks.

“I’ve been cooking a while.”

“How long?”

“Three years, give or take.” It was right around the time when my grandmother got too sick to do it anymore. About the same time I had to

learn to use the washing machine and empty the vacuum cleaner.

“Since you were fourteen? Why?”

“I got tired of eating dry cereal out of the box for dinner every night, so one day I pulled out the books and started reading.”

“I can’t cook for shit.”

“You can bake.” Damn can she bake. She brought those peanut butter cookies over last week covered in sugar with a criss-cross pattern across the top. As soon as I looked at them, I remembered that my mother used to make them, too, but I had completely forgotten. And it made me wonder how many other things about her I had forgotten.

“Not the same thing.”

“You could learn to cook if you wanted to. I’ll even loan you a cookbook if you want,” I say half-sarcastically. She doesn’t seem too enthusiastic about that. “It’s not that hard.”

“Maybe not for you. We can’t all be awesome at everything like Josh Bennett.” She makes me sound like a renowned jackass.

“You know how many meals awesome Josh Bennett effed up in the beginning?” Now I’m making myself sound like a renowned jackass.

“Enlighten me.”

“Let’s just say I didn’t quit eating cereal for the first few months. And even then, my grandfather and I ate a lot of dry, overcooked food.”

“You could have eaten at Drew’s house every night.”

“Yeah, if I wanted to put up with Drew every night.” I’m not that much of a glutton for punishment, but she’s right; I was always invited.

“He *is* your best friend. Not that I have any clue how that happened.”

“We were in Little League together. When everybody started dying and everybody else started ignoring me, he didn’t. He just kept coming back and coming back, even when I tried to get rid of him. Eventually I realized he wasn’t going anywhere.”

“Sounds like Drew.”

Sounds like you, too, Sunshine.

“Little league?” she asks, smirking.

“Didn’t last,” I say. “Once I realized that I was more interested in figuring out how to make a bat than how to swing one, I quit.”

She’s watching me chop vegetables, but I know she won’t offer to help with anything involving hands and sharp knives.

“I messed up everything I baked in the beginning, too,” she tells me, switching back to our last conversation. I find that hard to believe. I imagine she came out of the birth canal holding a cupcake and a spatula.

“When did you start?”

“When I was fifteen.” She looks down at her left hand, turning it over and staring. I assume she’s done talking, because I’m used to being answered with a bare minimum of information from her. Intentionally vague is about as good as it usually gets, but she surprises me and keeps going. “My hand got messed up and I had to do a lot of physical therapy. They suggested that I knead bread dough to build strength back. At some point, I figured that if I was going to spend so much time kneading the dough, I might as well bake the bread.” She coughs out a laugh.

“Easier said than done, I take it.”

“Understatement.” She smiles unguardedly, and it’s at war with everything I’m used to from her. “The first time, I don’t think it rose at all. It was just this flat, hard, disk-shaped thing. My dad ate it anyway and said it wasn’t that bad. You should have seen his face trying to chew it. I don’t know how he did it.” She hasn’t stopped smiling while she tells me this. I’m watching the memory play across her face and I realize that I’ve completely stopped chopping the vegetables and I’m just staring at her. I force myself to start chopping again before she notices. “I tried again and again and again. It was always one issue or another. I just couldn’t get it right. It pissed the crap out of me.”

“Did you finally give up?” I ask, and she looks at me as if the thought is outrageous.

“There was no way I was being brought down by a stupid loaf of bread. I went through so much flour. My mom had to start buying yeast in bulk. Once, I got so pissed, I threw the dough at the ceiling. I thought my mom was going to ban me from the kitchen when she found me on a step ladder, trying to clean it off with a bench scraper. But I finally did it. It took months, but I

eventually ended up with a decent loaf of bread.” She shrugs, looking back down at her palm and folding her fingers over. “Hand got stronger, too.”

“Do you still bake it? Bread?”

“Hell no.” She snorts as if this is the most absurd question I could ever ask. “It’s a pain in the ass. Takes too much time and it’s a bitch to get it to work with the humidity here. I just had to know that if I wanted to, I could. I like the stuff that’s full of sugar better anyway.”

She tilts her chin toward the cutting board in front of me. “I think you chopped those into submission.”

I glance down at the red peppers I’ve annihilated while listening to her talk.

“Not my fault that you’re distractingly pretty.” I have to take a minute to confirm to the pissed off part of my brain that still works that, yes, in fact, I did just say that. And I don’t know if distractingly is even a word. If it is, it’s a stupid one. Like me. Ignoring it and pretending it never happened seems like the best possible plan at the moment and I’m hoping she’ll go with it, but she does the next best thing.

“Drew says I’m sexy as fuck,” she shrugs blandly and lets me off the hook.

“That, too,” I smile, not meeting her eyes as I scrape together what’s left of the red peppers. I pour oil into the bottom of a sauté pan and line up the vegetables on the counter. “Turn the front burner on to 8.” I point at the stove and she reaches over to do it just as the front door opens, which shuts us both up.

“Hey, what’s go—” Drew stops mid-sentence when he sees Nastya. I don’t know if the shock registering on his face is from the fact that she’s here, sitting on the counter like she owns the place, or the fact that she’s almost unrecognizable to him. She’s wearing white denim shorts and a pink t-shirt and the make-up is long gone from her face, which you can actually see because her hair is pulled back and braided. She looks younger, like she always does like this, and running along her hairline, you can see the jagged scar that she’s constantly trying to cover up. I’m used to this Nastya, but I know Drew’s never seen her looking even remotely like a real girl, and I’ve never once mentioned it to him.

I don't know if not telling him was a betrayal. If it was, I should feel guilty and there's a part of me that does. But I feel justified, too. Even if it is selfish. He can be pissed if he wants. It would still be worth it.

Nastya slides down from the counter and I think she's going to leave me to deal with explanations, but she doesn't. She steps across the kitchen, opens the upper cabinet where I keep the dishes, and pulls out another dinner plate. Then she grabs an extra set of silverware from the drawer and places them on the table. Drew walks to the table, pulls out a chair and lowers himself into it. He hasn't taken his eyes off her yet. Like he's trying to work out the truth of her. It's the optical illusion again. My eyes have adjusted to it, but he's still trying to find the focus.

"So, want to introduce me to your girlfriend?" he asks, looking directly at me now. There's more curiosity than malice in the question. He might also be just a little bit impressed.

"Not my girlfriend." I hand Nastya the trivets to put on the table with one hand and keep stirring with the other. I don't look at her face on purpose.

"Well, in that case," he reaches out and pulls Nastya onto his lap as she places the trivets on the table, "what's for dinner?"

CHAPTER 26

Josh

“How do you know there’s not a God?” Tierney Lowell spits out at Drew, twenty minutes in to a debate that’s been raging since the fifth period bell rang. It started with a discussion about a short story we’d read last week and somehow devolved into a full-scale back and forth on the existence of God.

“How do you know there *is* one?” Drew retorts. He isn’t even trying. This is laziness, or just apathy. I’ve seen him practicing for debate, and this is nothing for him. He’s just baiting Tierney for fun.

“I never said I *knew*. Faith isn’t about knowledge. That’s why it’s called faith, jackass. Thus, the expression, leap of faith.”

“Ms. Lowell?”

“Moron, mule, idiot, fool, Drew.” Tierney tosses out. It’s Ms. McAllister’s rule. You use an unacceptable word, you have to come up with five to replace it. She lets the Drew part slide.

“When did you turn all religious?” Drew doesn’t miss a beat. Everyone is paying attention, heads whipping back and forth like the audience at a tennis match. Immoral people debating the existence of God is always a crowd pleaser. Especially with palpable sexual tension thrown in. The only other sound in the room is the periodic slam of the stapler Sunshine is using in the corner. She’s been collating papers since class started. Her back is turned but I can almost see her listening.

“I hate religion. I believe in God.”

“Believing in God is for weak people.” Drew almost sounds bored, but it’s obvious he’s enjoying this.

“Then it’s a mystery why you don’t.” She leans back in her chair but Drew doesn’t take the bait.

“People believe in God because they don’t believe in themselves. They

need something else to depend on or to blame instead of taking responsibility for their own shit—crap, excrement, waste, mistakes, faults.”

“That’s rich coming from a person who takes responsibility for nothing.”

“I’ve never denied my actions.”

“Which makes you such a moral paragon.”

“Morals?” Drew chokes out the word which probably burns on his tongue. “Isn’t that the pot smoker calling the kettle black?” Kevin Leonard and the other stoners in the room think this is the greatest thing they’ve ever heard. “Don’t lecture me T. I take responsibility for everything I do.”

“Not everything.”

“If you’re going to make accusations, back it up, give me some support, otherwise your arguments mean nothing.”

“We’re not in debate, Drew.” She doesn’t look cowed by him. She looks betrayed.

“We might as well be. Same rules. You want to say something, support it. Otherwise, don’t throw it out there because you just make your argument weak. Kind of like people who believe in God.”

Ms. McAllister changes the subject and effectively ends the discussion. It’s surprising that she let it go on as long as she did. The conversation might be over but the glaring between Drew and Tierney continues until the end of class, and I wonder if they might start ripping each other’s clothes off right here.

Nastya

“Go sit. I’ve got it.” Josh nudges me away from the sink after we’ve cleared the dishes from dinner. I eat here more often than not now. It’s the only time I ever consume an actual meal. He makes me real food and I keep him in desserts.

“You cooked. I can wash the dishes.”

“No. You can’t.” He pulls the sponge out of my hands and turns off the tap while I go clear off the rest of the table and dump the dishes in the sink. We’ve fallen into an oddly domestic pattern and it’s kind of pathetic when you stop to think about why.

“I can’t wash the dishes?” I ask, disbelieving.

“No.” He shakes his head.

“Why not?”

“Because you suck at it.”

“I suck at it?” Who sucks at washing dishes? It’s not brain surgery. It’s cleaning the food off of a pan.

“Yes. How can you not know this? I have to rewash the dishes every night after you leave.”

“You do not.” *Does he?*

He looks at me and I know it’s true.

“You’re anal-retentive.”

“Yes, I like to eat off clean dishes. I have issues,” he deadpans.

I think of how low I’ve sunk. I don’t even have the ability to clean a dish properly. He cooks, he cleans up the dishes, he builds freaking furniture. I feel useless around here. The dryer buzzes and I figure I can do something.

“Fine. I’ll go fold the clothes.” I turn to head into the laundry room.

“No, you won’t. Just sit.”

“I can’t fold clothes, either?”

“You are *not* folding my underwear.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. It’s weird.” He reaches across me and pulls open a drawer full of dishtowels with a dripping wet hand. “Here. Dry.” He snaps the towel at my chest, splattering me with water in the process.

I grab it out of his hands. “Maybe I’ll just go get a pair of your boxer shorts and dry the dishes with those.” Childishness is not below me.

“How do you know I wear boxer shorts?”

“Just hoping.” The alternative is so unappealing.

He shrugs, handing me a plate. “Go ahead. You’re the one who has to eat off of them.”

“No one likes you,” I reply, because muttering under my breath, like a surly teenager, is cool.

I end up using the towel and Josh is right. He does wash the dishes better than I do. Mostly because I’m lazy when it comes to any kind of cleaning but he doesn’t need to know that.

“What was with Drew and Tierney today in English?” I ask.

“What? The God thing? Drew and Tierney always argue. Drew would argue the merits of celibacy if Tierney was against it.”

“Maybe. It just seemed personal.”

“Drew likes to piss her off. He was just messing with her today. He could have argued her into the ground if he wanted.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t. He’ll destroy anyone in debate.” It’s impressive. If he feels like it, he’ll verbally assault someone to the point where they can barely stand when it’s over. He won every round at the tournament we attended a few weeks ago and he didn’t even pull out the full arsenal of charm.

“He didn’t have to. She has no chance up against him. It wasn’t even worth his effort.” It’s true. That’s just Drew. He just does it for fun until he gets bored. He’s like a cat batting a lizard around until it’s too maimed to play with anymore.

“Why does McAllister let it go? It wasn’t even what you were supposed to be discussing.”

“That’s how she gets to know everyone. She can figure you out a lot easier if she just lets you go and listens. Finds out how you think. Learns your strengths and weaknesses.” It’s like recon. I’m impressed. But it’s not the most efficient when you only have two people arguing.

“No one else even got involved,” I say.

“No one else is stupid enough to want to debate the existence of God. It’s an unwinnable argument.” He finishes putting the last of the clean dishes back into the cabinets.

“On which side?”

“Either.”

“Do you believe in God?”

“Yes,” he answers definitively. My expression must betray me because he asks, “What?”

“I’m just surprised. I didn’t think you would.”

“Because I’m cursed and everyone around me dies?” he asks unemotionally.

I don’t want to give him affirmation, but it is what I was thinking.

“I believe in God, Sunshine. I’ve always believed that God exists,” he says.

And what he says next isn’t self-pity or angst or melodrama. It’s truth.

“I just know that he hates me.”

Maybe what he says should floor me, but it doesn’t even make me blink. Maybe I should jump in immediately and tell him that he shouldn’t think that way. That, of course, God doesn’t hate him. That it’s a ridiculous thing to believe. Except, it’s not. Nothing about it is ridiculous. When you watch every person you love systematically removed from your life until at seventeen years old there is no one left, how can you think anything else? It makes such perfect sense that the only thing that surprises me is that I didn’t think of it myself.

CHAPTER 27

Josh

“You look ridiculous.”

Sunshine is already in my garage at eight o'clock, dressed to go to a party with Drew. She hates the parties, but he gets her to go every time.

Our routine has become, well, routine. We do homework, make dinner and then hang out in the garage. Sometimes she leaves for a while to run before she ends up back here sanding down wood or looking over my shoulder and asking a hundred questions about every single thing I'm doing. She'll sand down anything and everything but she won't go near any of the power tools because she doesn't trust her hand.

“What? You don't think it works? I may not change them back.” She looks down at the old worn out work boots she's borrowed from me. They are enormous on her feet and she has them pulled and laced as tightly as possible to hold them on. She walked in earlier in the most torturous black dress imaginable and open-toed shoes. I have too many tools going today, so she only got to stay if she changed the shoes. Part of me hoped she'd choose the leaving option so I wouldn't have to keep looking at her in that dress and struggling to keep my dick in check, but she didn't put me out of my misery. Weeks ago, when I finally accepted the fact that she wasn't going away, I promised myself I wouldn't go anywhere near her. I'm not that self-destructive. But on days when she walks in wearing tight black dresses and my work boots, I wonder how long I can keep that promise.

“You sure you won't come?” she asks. She always asks when she's going out with Drew. But I won't subject myself to that, even to be close to her. Drew pulls into the driveway and saves me from having to answer.

“Nice boots. I like it. Maybe I'll let you keep those on.”

She flips him off but it means nothing.

“You should come,” he says to me. “I can hook you up.”

“Hook yourself up. I’m good.”

“Yeah, we know.” He looks at Nastya. “I’m good, too. I have my own personal Sunshine to keep me warm.”

Something in me snaps with that. He goes out with her, he touches her, he says shit no one should be allowed to get away with to her. But he cannot call her Sunshine. I’m nailing a board down over my anger so I don’t blow up. They’ll be out of here in a minute and it’ll be over. I wish they’d get out of here now.

“Call me Sunshine again, and I will murder you, cocksucker.”

I don’t know whose head spins faster, mine or Drew’s, but I’m the speechless one in this garage right now. Once I register the words, my shock has to compete with my amusement and I fight the smile because, obviously, she doesn’t like him calling her Sunshine any more than I do.

I’m not sure when she made the decision to speak to him, but I know it wasn’t at this moment. I may not have figured out much about her but I have picked up on the fact that everything she does is a choice. She considers the repercussions for every action she takes. The girl does not understand the word spontaneous. She plans every breath.

“You talked? You talked! She talked!” He looks at me for my reaction but there isn’t one. I’m surprised, but I’m not shocked. I’m still trying to stifle a smile.

If it’s at all possible, I think his eyes get wider.

“You fucker! You knew!” He’s going back and forth between Sunshine and I, unable to decide who to look at. Neither of us is looking at him.

He’s regaining his composure and I remember myself enough to walk over and close the garage. My house is all the way down at the end of the street, so nobody can really see in, but Drew is being obnoxiously loud right now and we don’t need an audience.

“Well, well, well.” Now he’s pleased with himself but there’s no reason for it. Drew can find a way to make anything his own personal triumph. Obviously his charms are so irresistible that he can make a not-quite-mute girl talk. Or maybe he just thinks he’s figured something out.

“How long?” he asks, and I’m not sure what he means until he motions

between Nastya and I. “You two? How long?”

“Us two nothing. We talk that’s it.” I look across to where she’s leaning against the work bench. She keeps glancing over at me. I can’t tell if she wants me to know something or if there’s something she wants from me. I feel a mixture of relief and resentment. I’m glad to be done keeping this from Drew but I can’t help feeling that I’ve lost something irretrievable and that she’s the one who gave it away without asking.

“That’s it? She hasn’t talked to anyone since she’s been here. Not one word. Except apparently to you. And that’s it?”

“Didn’t mean to let you down.” I think I’m the one who’s disappointed. I know that she’s just a little bit less mine than she was a few minutes ago.

“She doesn’t even have an accent.” He turns his attention back to Nastya.

“Disappointed?” Her voice comes out like arsenic-laced honey. It sounds nothing like the one she uses with me.

“Extremely. I thought it would be hot. I’ve never had someone scream my name with an accent before. I was looking forward to it.”

“You’re vile.” There’s more amusement than malice there.

“You’ve been waiting a while to say that to me, haven’t you? Feel good?”

“Not as good as I thought it would.” She scrunches up her nose as she thinks about it and she looks unbearably cute. She’s obviously done because she walks to the back of the garage to hit the button and open the door back up.

“Hey,” Drew calls before she can press it, as if he’s just remembered something monumental. “Did you just call me a cocksucker?” he asks.

Her eyes light up for him and one side of her mouth quirks into the faintest hint of a smile. “True story.”

The mischief in his eyes matches hers and his smile is a mixture of pride and disbelief and I get why she chose to speak to him.

“Welcome to the party, Sunshine.”

CHAPTER 28

Nastya

The party at Jen Meadows' house is lame and we know when we get there that we probably won't stay. It's a relief, because even though it's inside, the noise at these things always gets to me. It's too hard to filter out the sounds and where they're coming from. I've gotten to the point where I can relax some indoors with people around, but given a choice, I'd prefer the quiet.

Drew keeps me attached to his side more diligently than usual. Normally, he drapes his arm over my shoulders as we walk in, in a clichéd display of ownership, and then once that's established, I'm released. He never lets me get far and I'm never more than a couple feet from him, but tonight he doesn't want to let me go at all.

He keeps looking at me sideways and smiling like we're coconspirators in something. I should regret what I did, but I don't. Even though he did spend the whole ride over here trying to get me to tell him why I don't talk, until I finally explained to him, in vivid detail, the fate that would befall him if he asked again. He didn't. I think it had something to do with the love he has for his boy parts.

His arm snakes around my waist and he backs me against a wall just in time for me to look over his shoulder and see Tierney Lowell walk in the door. Chris Jenkins has a cup in her hand and is talking in her ear before she makes it through the living room.

Drew slides his hand down my arm and laces his fingers through mine, pulling me towards the stairs in direct view of the rest of the room. I have two choices; I can stop him in front of everyone, which would consist of me standing still and refusing to budge while he tries to lead me up the stairs, or I can go with him. Option A is the one that will draw more attention. Drew and I disappearing upstairs to a bedroom at a party isn't going to raise any eyebrows. Apparently we've been screwing for weeks. It doesn't bother me.

Drew has had every opportunity to try to take advantage of me and he never has. Other than the arm around my shoulders and occasionally holding my hand, he doesn't touch me at all. No surreptitious feel-copping whatsoever. Drew keeps me around for some reason, but whatever it is, I'm fairly certain it isn't sex.

"Why do you want everyone to think we're together?" I whisper when he pulls me through the door of an empty bedroom and shuts it behind me. He reaches down and turns the lock. The only light is coming in under the door and from a streetlamp outside the window. It's a guestroom with a bed that's obviously already been occupied once tonight. The music is still so loud that I don't have to worry about anyone hearing us but I keep my voice down anyway and Drew follows suit.

"Because we should be." He leans back against the door and closes his eyes. He's delivering a line but he doesn't mean a word of it.

"You don't do together. You do one-offs."

"I could make an exception." He looks me up and down but his heart isn't in it and I don't know why he's bothering.

"You could, but if you did, it wouldn't be for me."

"What would you do if I kissed you right now?"

"I'd probably let you, just to see what all the fuss is about. Then I'd rip your lips off and feed them to you, which would be kind of hard because, you know, you'd have no lips."

He nods, not looking at me. "You're scary."

"So you're not going to kiss me?"

"No. But not because of the lip ripping thing, though that is compelling."

"You must have a good reason to tank your reputation over it."

"I don't have to tank anything. What do you think we're doing right now? Talking? You don't even speak, so that limits the options. Everyone downstairs knows I'm screwing you right now." He pulls out his shirt and rumples his clothing.

"Am I enjoying it?"

“I’m the best you’ve ever had,” he says hypnotically, like he’s using Jedi mind tricks on me.

“Undoubtedly. So why not just do what we’re doing anyway?”

“I could call your bluff, you know.” He opens one eye to look at me.

“But you won’t.” I might be a little disappointed if I wasn’t so relieved. “You should at least tell me why. I showed you mine.”

“If I showed you mine, you’d probably rip that off, too.” He won’t give me anything, even though there’s obviously something there to give.

“So what was the point of the past couple months if you never had any intention of following through?”

“People think I’m hooking up with you, they won’t expect me to be screwing everything else on two legs.”

“But isn’t that what you do?” I never really bought the whole of his image, at least not to assume that it was all of him. But he was the one selling it. I was led to believe that if you look up moral turpitude – or maybe just man-whore—the definition is Drew Leighton. This is shattering that image.

“I liked you so much better when you didn’t talk.”

“Yeah, I know. Can’t unring a bell. Don’t know what you got ‘til it’s gone. Hindsight’s a bitch. Answer the question.”

He rolls his eyes and exhales, making sure I experience the full weight of his annoyance.

“It’s what I’m supposed to do. If I stop, everyone will want to know why. Then they’ll start speculating. Subterfuge is much easier.”

“Why me?”

“I figured you’d never tell anyone the truth.” He shrugs, and if Drew Leighton could do sheepish, I’d say he was trying, but it’s a little out of his depth. “Sorry. It didn’t start out that way. If it makes you feel better, I really did plan to pull the same shit with you as always. If you would have gone for it, we’d have hooked up the first possible opportunity and we would not be here right now. But you just seemed to take it all as a joke and it was a relief. I was relieved to not have to follow through on it and the more I chased you, the less you took me seriously. So the real question is why did *you* put up with it?”

“Same reason as you. People smell your piss all over me, they assume I’m off the table. Other than Ethan the Arrogant, I get left alone. Win-win.” I don’t really care what people say about me. I’m fine with lies and rumors. It’s the truth I don’t want being told.

“Where does Josh fit into this?” he asks, finally meeting my eyes.

“We’re not talking about Josh.”

“Aren’t we?” he probes.

“Josh is screwing someone else.” Add that to the fact that he doesn’t want to have to give a crap about anyone ever again and he’s kind of an impossible dream.

“So? Josh Bennett has a fuck buddy.” He shrugs like he’s just told me that Josh wears pants. It’s the same tone he used when he dropped it on me the first time and it sucks just the same to hear it. “How do you think he’s managed to keep his hands off of you this whole time? Doesn’t mean anything.” The look I give him says otherwise. “Don’t get all judgmental. He’s a good guy, not a saint.”

“What is she to him?” I try not to sound jealous or like I’m fishing for information, but I am on both counts.

“She,” he says, looking at my chest, because he is still Drew, before pulling his gaze up to my eyes, “is a poor man’s Sunshine.”

I have a seriously hard time believing that, because Josh never comes anywhere near me.

“He doesn’t even look at me sideways much less try to touch me.”

“You’re right. He doesn’t look at you sideways. He looks right at you and doesn’t even try to hide it. The only thing I’ve ever seen him drool over as much has four legs and is made of mahogany but I don’t think he’s planning to ask it out any time soon.”

“Don’t let him do that, Drew. Not with me. He’ll listen to you.”

“No. He won’t,” he pauses to look up at me from the floor. “I think that beam’s been cut, Nastya.”

“Beam’s been cut?”

“Yeah, like that time has passed, that ship has sailed, that cherry’s been

popped. I was just trying to put it in building terms but my frame of reference is limited. Didn't work, huh?"

"Not really."

"Don't worry. Josh likes to keep his life free of unnecessary complications. I think you're safe for a while." He reaches up and tousles his hair purposefully.

"How long do we have to stay in here?" I'm done with the Josh conversation. Some things are better left alone and this is the definition of one of those things. I look at the tangled sheets on the bed and decide against it. I slide down the wall onto the floor next to Drew and cross my ankles. He pulls my head onto his shoulder, letting me lean against him.

"At least another twenty minutes. I have a reputation to uphold."

CHAPTER 29

Josh

“Shit!” The saw blade slices through my hand and in seconds I’ve got blood soaking my pants where I’m pressing down on it with the palm of my other hand. I’m not good with blood. In fact, I am absolutely horrible when it comes to blood, so this situation pretty much sucks for me.

I sink down to the ground and lean against the cabinets. I need to stop the bleeding, but sitting is taking priority because I think I might pass out.

“What the hell, Josh?” Nastya is picking up my hand and I want to tell her to stop because there’s so much blood, but I just end up cursing again.

“Here.” She’s got pressure on the cut now and I’m trying to reach up with my right arm to grab the towel that’s on the counter. She shoves it away.

“That’s covered with grease and sawdust. Crap!” she says as my blood starts running down her arm while her hand stays clamped over the gash. “Hold this!” She grabs my right hand back and presses it over the blood-gushing split across my left palm.

I make the mistake of looking before she presses my hand down over it again, and I get seriously lightheaded. Blood is my kryptonite. Massive amounts of puke I can handle, but I can’t do blood. Especially my own.

“A lot of blood,” I breathe out.

“No, it’s not,” she says, pressing her hand down on top of mine.

“Yes, it is,” I manage, because I’m right on this one. If I’m sitting on the floor like a pussy because of some blood, then I’m going to insist that it’s an awful lot of blood.

“No,” she says emphatically, and there’s no room left for discussion when she looks right in my eyes, forcing me to focus on her. “It’s really not.”

She keeps glancing around for something to stop the bleeding.

“Can you get up?” she asks.

Fuck. I'm gonna pass out in front of her if she makes me stand right now. Before I can fully absorb the humiliation of that thought, she diverts my attention. By taking off her shirt. She has it off in one motion and is wrapping it around my hand before I can ask her what the hell she's doing. It's almost more impressive than the bra maneuver.

"Shouldn't I be the one taking off my shirt?" I ask to lighten the moment. At least for me. She doesn't seem at all affected.

"If I thought you could get it off before you lost another pint of blood, believe me, I would have gone that route." She pulls the shirt tight around my hand and holds it down. "Besides, I have to focus, and looking at you shirtless might cause me to hyperventilate. Then we'd both be passed out." Sarcastic smartass.

"I haven't passed out." *Yet.*

"Yet," she smiles, lifting my hand and checking out her work. "Now at least you won't bleed all over the carpet. Inside," she commands, but I'm too busy staring at her chest in a pink lace bra. I'm not sure if I'm more shocked by the fact that I'm staring at her tits or by the fact that it's pink, not black, but at least it's got my mind off of the blood. And then, before I can even move to stand, my traitorous dick jerks. I'm bleeding out in the middle of my garage. Ten seconds ago, my worst fear was that I would pass out in front of her. That's not my worst fear anymore. It does it again and I'm in the midst of an undeniable hard-on. Now I *try* to think about the blood, but she's right in front of me, offering to help me up and it's far too late for that. She glances down. *Of course* she glances down.

"You're kidding me, right?" She looks back to my face, and if I had any blood to spare, it would probably turn red. Fortunately, between my dick and my hand, all of my blood is spoken for right now. "Seriously? Right now? At this moment? *Seriously?*" She shakes her head and laughs and it's almost worth all of the embarrassment. "It must so suck to be a guy."

"Your fault. You're the one who took off your shirt."

"If you get your ass into the house, I can put on another one." She's gently pulling on my upper arm.

I push myself up as slowly as possible. Thankfully the shirt is knotted tight enough around my hand that the bleeding is under control and I'm able

to make it inside without sacrificing what's left of my Y chromosome.

A few minutes later, she comes out of my bedroom wearing one of my t-shirts, and it might almost be worse than seeing her in no shirt at all. She sets the first aid kit on the table in front of us.

"Is this the only thing you have? I think I'm going to need more."

"Guest bathroom. Under the sink."

Now we have a huge bottle of peroxide and extra gauze and she looks at me nervously before unwrapping the shirt.

"Don't watch. Okay?"

"I thought it wasn't that bad."

"It's not. But I think a paper cut might do you in, so just close your eyes or look over there or something."

I pick *or something*. I reach out with my good hand and lift up the hem of the t-shirt she's wearing and trace my thumb up one of the scars on her abdomen that I was too busy staring at her chest earlier to really study. Her breath hitches almost imperceptibly at the contact, before she swats my hand away and I drop the shirt.

"You haven't lost so much blood that I'm above hitting you. And if I hit you, it will hurt."

I don't doubt that for a second. "What's it from? The scar?"

"Surgery."

"No shit, Sunshine. What about the one by your hair?" I've wanted to ask about this one for ages. The other one, I just discovered tonight, along with a pink lace bra and a set of abs that is just insane.

"Catfight."

"That I can believe."

"Good. Quit talking. I'm afraid you're going to pass out as it is."

"Then you talk to me." I lean my head back and close my eyes while she starts on my hand.

"About what?"

"I don't know. Anything other than blood. Tell me a story."

“What kind of story would you like?” she cajoles me like a five-year old which is exactly what I’m acting like right now. I blame blood loss.

“The real one.”

“You said you didn’t want to hear about blood.”

I don’t know what that means, but I know it means something. It’s just another piece of the puzzle she is. But the more she gives me, the more abstract she gets. It’s like pieces to three different puzzles. You try to put them together but they never fit, and when you force them, the picture comes out all wrong.

She’s got my hand unwrapped at this point, and I watch her face while she’s cleaning it. She doesn’t look bothered at all. Once some of the blood is gone, I can’t help checking it out. The gash runs from the base of my thumb diagonally across my palm towards my wrist. It hurts like a bitch. She covers it with some antibiotic crap and wraps it with gauze because there aren’t any bandages big enough to cover it.

She disappears into the kitchen and I hear her open the fridge and dig through the cabinets. When she comes back, she hands me a can of soda and a chocolate bar. In addition to the ice cream, she has taken to stashing candy here, too. I wonder how long it’ll be before she has a shelf in the medicine cabinet and a drawer in my dresser. And once that happens, I wonder how long it’ll be before she’s gone.

“Am I dying?” I ask.

“I think you’ll live. Why?” She’s amused.

“Because giving up your sugar is like giving up your life’s blood. I figure I must be dying.”

“Consider it a transfusion. You’re as pale as me right now. It’s scary.”

“I didn’t think anything scared you.”

“Not the sight of blood. Unlike some people.” She smirks at me.

“I owe you a shirt. You didn’t have to do that.”

“You were bleeding like a son of a bitch. I didn’t have time to fight with yours. Besides, you know how many people have seen me without my clothes? Doesn’t bother me.”

I'm not touching that last part. I like thinking about her without her clothes, but I don't like thinking about anybody else seeing it. "I thought you said it wasn't that much blood."

She tightens the gauze and puts my hand back on the table. "Relatively speaking, it wasn't."

"Relative to what? Being shanked?"

"You should probably still get stitches." The look I give her tells her that is not happening. "It'll heal faster. Plus, you need to get it looked at to see if you sliced a tendon or something."

I wince at the *sliced a tendon* comment and I catch her smirk at me again. She's getting to do a lot of smirking at my expense tonight.

"The longer it takes to heal, the longer you won't be able to play with your tools," she sing-songs. I'm not oblivious to the double entendre and I could probably make some lame comeback about still having my right hand, but she knows she's hitting home right now and I'm listening. "Compromise," she says, grabbing her phone and shooting off a text. "Margot's off tonight. If she's home, you let her look." The phone beeps a few seconds later and she holds it up. *Come on over.*

An hour later, we're back at my house. My hand is treated and wrapped and I've been sworn off tools for at least a week, depending on how it heals.

"Your left hand sucks now, too." She picks up my bandaged hand and turns it over in hers. "You're going to go crazy aren't you?"

"High probability." The thought of a week or more of not being able to work is more depressing than I want to admit.

"You won't even be able to wash the dishes." She's loving this.

"We'll use paper plates," I respond dryly.

"I sit with you for your therapy," she says, and it takes me a minute to realize what she's talking about. The garage, the tools, the wood, the work. My therapy. The thing that keeps me sane. "Want to come along for mine?"

Her therapy turns out to be nightly running. Not jogging. Not a leisurely stroll. Hard ass running. She's been kicking my ass for three days in a row like a tiny, porcelain drill instructor. It's miserable and exhausting. I've thrown up every time. I wish I could say I hate it.

I haven't been able to keep up with her, at least not for any real distance. My legs are longer and I can take her in a sprint, but I have no stamina. She can go hard for miles, but the way she does it, nothing about it is for exercise. She runs like something is chasing her.

"It gets easier," she says, standing several feet away while I purge in the bushes at some unfortunate stranger's house.

"Only if I keep doing it," I respond, thinking I should start running with a bottle of mouthwash. Or at least gum.

"You're not going to?" Not surprised or curious. Disappointed.

I don't do well with disappointment. Especially not hers. If she wants me to run with her, I will. Maybe she'll eventually get tired of waiting for me to keep up and she'll send me home where I can hide in my garage. Running away is her thing. Hiding is mine.

When we get back to my house, I jump in the shower immediately and offer to drive her home when I get out. I have to yank myself out of the water because I could probably stay in there all night. Every part of my body aches.

When I get out to the family room, there's a note on the coffee table.

Had to run – no pun intended. Couldn't trust myself knowing you were wet and naked in the next room. Didn't want to tempt fate. See you tomorrow.

P.S. I folded your laundry. Don't worry. I didn't touch your panties.

On the bottom, it's signed with a little drawing of the sun with a smiley face in it which has to be the most out of character thing I've ever seen from

her.

I head over to the utility room and there's a perfectly folded pile of my clean laundry on top of the washer. When I open the dryer door, there's nothing left in it but my abandoned boxer shorts.

CHAPTER 30

Nastya

“Ice cream.”

I know those words. I like those words. I look up from the Physics textbook that has been my close companion for the past three hours. I will never pass this test. I should never have even signed up for the class. I was reaching from the beginning. Josh is standing next to me and leans over, shutting the book. I have a feeling this may have something to do with the frustrated barrage of profanity that left my mouth moments ago.

Academics have never been my forte. I’m not very smart, a fact which I have no trouble proving to myself several times a day. Asher is the smart one. He checked off that box on the family rubric. Asher has baseball and school. I had the piano. Now I don’t have anything.

“You need it. We’re getting it. Now.” Angry dad voice again.

“Now?”

“Now. Remember when you said that bad things happen when you don’t get enough ice cream? Bad things are happening. You’re all stressed out and cranky like a teenage boy who’s not getting laid.”

“Nice analogy.” *Do they get cranky?*

“Sorry, it’s true. And nobody likes a cranky Sunshine. It goes against the laws of nature.” He pulls my chair away from the table with me in it.

“You make me sound like a petulant four year-old.” *Petulant – sulky, crabby, peevish, moody, sullen.* Picked that one up from Asher while he was studying for the SATs.

“You’re acting like one. With a more colorful vocabulary. Get your ass in the truck. We’re going.” He grabs his keys and stands in the entryway, holding the door open and waiting.

We pull up to a strip mall a couple miles away at eight o’clock and I follow him into an ice cream parlor that’s tucked away in the back corner of

the plaza. If you didn't know it was there, you'd probably never find it. It's a Tuesday and it's mostly empty except for a family at a corner table with a little boy whose clothes seem to have seen more chocolate ice cream than his mouth. I haven't been in here before. I prefer to eat my ice cream out of the container at the kitchen counter where no one can watch me. Ice cream makes me happy. I like to concentrate on the joy.

This place is a little pastel paradise. It's small and screams CUTE! at the top of its lungs from every direction. Six glass-top tables are scattered around the front of the shop. It must be a nightmare to keep them clean in a place full of melting sugar. The chairs have silver metal frames that match the table bases and padded vinyl seat cushions in pastel pink, yellow, blue and lavender. I look down at myself in black on black. I look like teenage Elvira walking into a Bonne Bell commercial.

There's a girl I don't recognize wiping down the tables in the front and a girl behind the counter that I do. She's a senior named Kara Matthews from my ex-music class. She stares at us when we walk in. Then she must realize that she's doing it, because she looks away, but it's pretty obvious what she's thinking. *Nastya Kashnikov and Josh Bennett walk into an ice cream parlor together on a Tuesday night.* It's like the beginning of a bad joke. Or the apocalypse.

"What do you want?" Josh asks, knowing I can't answer him here. I raise my eyebrows at him impatiently. He holds his hands out in surrender at the look I give him. "I didn't want to be accused of being a chauvinist, but if you don't tell me what you want, I'm just going to have to guess." There's mischief there and I don't trust him. I shrug. I'm an excellent shrugger. It's rivaled only by my ability to nod.

There's nothing I can do. I sit down, facing the front windows, so I don't have to look at Kara Matthews or let her look at me. I'm thankful that I'm still in my school clothes. Josh walks back to the counter and I can hear his voice but I can't figure out what he's saying. I do hear Kara Matthews.

"Seriously?" she laughs. I wonder what he's said, but he spoke too low for me to hear. The thought of Josh Bennett flirting with Kara Matthews is outside the realm of possibility for my imagination. I trace my fingers around the beveled edge of the glass table and try to predict what kind of concoction

he's going to walk back with just to taunt me. Probably lime sorbet and peanut butter cup ice cream or some equally vile combination. The wait lasts forever. It shouldn't take this long to order ice cream and I almost cave and turn around when I hear him walking back to the table with the uneven footfalls I have memorized by now.

"Dinner," Josh says, coming around from behind with what can only be described as a trough of ice cream. He sets it down in front of me. He must have gotten every kind of ice cream they have. It reminds me of something my dad would do. Something so utterly ridiculous that I would have no choice but to be cheered up from whatever tragedy had befallen my young life. Back before I knew what real tragedy was. When the hard things were the fact that Megan Summers had better clothes or that I had messed up during a performance. Charles Ward was the master of cheer ups when I was little. Better than a barrel full of puppies. Maybe even better than melty ice cream.

"I didn't know what kind you wanted so I got them all." He's not lying. I look at the trough and I'm fairly certain the only ice cream flavors not in there are the ones they haven't invented yet. He sits down across from me and leans his elbows on the table, unsuccessfully trying to stifle the shit-eating grin on his face.

I don't have a pen and talking here is out, so I grab my phone from my purse and text the boy sitting across the table from me. His phone beeps a second later and he pulls it out to read the two-word message I sent him.

Where's yours?

And then he does something that shocks even me. Josh Bennett, king of the brooding stoics, laughs. Josh Bennett laughs and it's one of the most natural, uninhibited, beautiful sounds I've ever heard. I know Kara Matthews is watching us and people will talk tomorrow. But right now I can't even care. Josh Bennett laughs, and for one minute, everything is right in the world.

“We’re going on vacation over Thanksgiving,” my mother tells me on the phone when I get home from Josh’s.

It’s ten o’clock and there were three messages from her, along with a text that simply read *Please call*. Ten o’clock is never too late for my mother. Not anymore. She pores over pictures until all hours. Before the attack, I never remember her working through the nights like she does now. But after, it was all she seemed to do. My mother went through the most prolific period in her life while I was recovering. She’d say she stayed up because she wanted to be awake if I woke up and needed anything, but I don’t think she could sleep. It was easier to crawl into a computer full of her photographs than a bed full of her nightmares. I’d sit up with her sometimes, because I couldn’t sleep, either. I’d watch her, amazed at just how much a person could accomplish fueled by tea and regret.

“We’re staying in a beautiful house. We’d like you to come.” She waits for a reaction. She always waits. There’s a hope my mother never loses that, one day, I’ll fill that pause. She probably wouldn’t even care what the words were at this point, just that they were there.

“We thought it would be fun to go skiing.” *Skiing? Seriously, Mom? With the hand?* I don’t want to go on vacation. I certainly don’t want to go skiing. I’d rather be hit in the face with a dodgeball. Repeatedly.

“I already talked to Dr. Andrews. We can make an appointment to have your hand looked at again before we go. She thinks it should hold up fine as long as it isn’t for too long of a period. If it starts to bother you, we can go in and sit by the fire and drink coffee.” I hate coffee. I can’t ski. I’m from Florida. I have no sense of balance or coordination and a hand that likes to randomly lose its grip at inopportune times. Not to even mention the fact that it’s so full of plates and screws that it will set off every metal detector in the airport.

My brother is the athlete. He must be in heaven. I don’t want them not to go because of me, but I don’t think that’s an issue. They’ll go whether I do or not. And I’m not going. I’ll be miserable and then everyone will be miserable and it’ll be my fault. Again. I’m tired of being responsible for other people’s misery. I can’t even put up with my own. My mom keeps talking. She’s not afraid of being interrupted, but she wants to get all of her selling points made.

Like the faster she gets them out, the more convincing they'll be.

"The house is big. It belongs to Mitch Miller, your father's boss, and he's not using it this year so he offered it to us. Addison is coming, too." Addison is coming? It fits. Morals were never the big issue with my mother, just excellence. Asher and I could probably screw half the country under her roof as long we didn't lose focus. I wonder if it would still apply to me now that I'm not good at anything anymore. Knowing Asher, he probably isn't even sleeping with the girl yet, but it's an easy thing to judge my mother on so I use it.

I tap the phone three times which means I'm hanging up.

"Please at least think about it. Margot's going to come, too, and I don't want you to be alone on Thanksgiving." I hang up before she can tell me that she loves me. Not because I don't want to hear that she says it, but because I don't want her to hear that I don't.

My life outside of school has become virtually unrecognizable, but almost nothing between the hours of 7:15 and 2:45 has changed. Josh and I barely acknowledge one another, Drew flings sex-bombs at me at every turn and I try to sidestep dress code violations. The rest of my time, I spend avoiding whatever it is that needs avoiding that day. Nasty looks from Tierney Lowell. Being propositioned by Ethan Hall. Everyone at lunch.

I'm passing through the courtyard on my way to my favorite empty bathroom where I can get twenty-five minutes of uninterrupted angst before heading to shop. I look at Josh before I start across. He's already there. His third period is right off of it so he usually gets here first. I only let myself look at him now because he's far enough away that no one will notice. When I get closer, I always make sure to avert my eyes because I'm afraid if I glance at him for even a second, the whole world will know everything that goes on in my head. I'm just walking by, and out of the corner of my eye, I can see that he's looking down at his hands in the exact same position he was in the first time I saw him and I start wondering if he sits like that because he

knows how amazing it makes his arms look.

“Sunshine.”

It’s so quiet that I almost don’t hear it, and thankfully, no one else can, but I know it’s real. He doesn’t look up until I stop and stare at him, wondering what the hell he’s thinking. Then he’s staring back at me like he couldn’t care less who sees.

“Sit.”

I walk over to him so at least I’m no longer standing in the middle of the courtyard. My back is to everyone else when I face him and narrow my eyes. *What are you doing?*

“Kara Matthews must have been on the phone half the night,” he says flatly. I already know this. At this point I’ve learned that Josh and I have been secretly screwing for weeks, but that now, he and Drew are just passing me back and forth. I guess he’s heard it, too, but I don’t have to answer to it. I just play dumb and walk away. I doubt Josh has to answer to it, either. I’m surprised anyone even got close enough for him to hear what they were saying. Most of them are usually too terrified that they’ll drop dead from being too near him, or worse, that they’ll have to acknowledge that he exists. I don’t know what this has to do with him calling me over in the middle of the courtyard. Giving them more ammunition is not usually his M.O.

“Sit,” he repeats, and it’s gentle. Not a command. Not a request. Just the only thing left to do. “There’s no reason to keep hiding in the bathroom. Hide here. There’s a force field, you know.” He lowers his voice when he says it, like he’s telling me a secret and then just barely hints at a smile that no one but me would catch before he puts it away and sobers, adding quietly, “No one will bother you.”

So I sit. He’s on the backrest and I’m on the seat. We don’t touch. We don’t speak. We aren’t even at eye level with one another. And today, for the first time since I came to this school, the courtyard isn’t nearly so horrible after all.

CHAPTER 31

Josh

My grandfather died this morning. Nothing changed.

I thought, when he died, I would crack and cry and get drunk and throw shit because it was over, because he was the last one. But I didn't. I didn't break down. I didn't punch holes in the wall. I didn't start fights with every asshole in school. I just kept going like nothing even happened. Because it was all so incredibly normal.

“Where are we going?” Sunshine asks when she climbs into my truck. I don't feel like being here. The garage doesn't offer me anything today. That workshop is the only thing in the world that I count on, and I don't want to think that it's powerless for me right now. I'd rather just leave it for a little while so I don't have to be afraid that I've lost that, too. I don't really know where we're going. I just want to go.

We drive for a long time. I haven't said anything since we got in the truck. I never even answered her question. Sunshine is good with silence. She leans her head against the window and looks outside and she just lets me drive.

We end up stretched out in the bed of the truck, staring up at the sky in the parking lot of a closed down car dealership.

I haven't started counting yet. I wonder if it's just me or if it's like that for everybody; that every time someone dies you start counting how much time has passed since they've been gone. First you count it in minutes, then in hours. You count in days, then weeks, then months. Then one day you realize that you aren't counting anymore, and you don't even know when you stopped. That's the moment they're gone.

“My grandfather’s dead,” I say.

“If we had a telescope, I could show you the Sea of Tranquility.” She points up at the sky. “See? Up there on the moon. You can’t really tell from here.”

“Is that why you have a picture of the moon in your bedroom?” At this point I’m an expert at going along with her tangents.

“You noticed that?”

“It was the only thing on the wall. I thought you were into astronomy.”

“I’m not. I keep it there to remind me that it’s bullshit. I thought it sounded like this beautiful, peaceful place. Like where you’d want to go when you die. Quiet and water everywhere. A place that would swallow you up and accept you no matter what. I had this whole image of it.”

“Doesn’t sound like a bad place to end up.”

“It wouldn’t be, if it were real. But it’s not. It’s not a sea at all. It’s just a big, dark shadow on the moon. The whole name is a lie. Doesn’t mean anything.”

Her left hand is resting on her stomach, opening and closing. She does that all the time but I don’t think she realizes it.

“So your warped fascination with names extends beyond people?”

“They’re all lies, really. Your name could mean to excel and you could be useless and crap at everything. You can put a name on anything, call it whatever you want, doesn’t make it real. Doesn’t make it true.” She sounds bitter. Or just disillusioned.

“So if they’re all such meaningless crap, why are you so obsessed?” I can’t count how many mutilated newspapers she’s left on my kitchen table once she’s cut her way through the birth announcements. At first, I thought she was one of those girls who takes pre-naming her future children to the extreme, but apparently it’s just some weird hobby.

“Because it’s good when you find one that does mean something. Makes all the empty ones worthwhile.” The faintest smile crosses her face and I wonder what she’s thinking about, but she doesn’t give me the chance to ask.

“Where do you think he is?” she asks, still staring at the sky.

“Someplace good, I guess. I don’t know.” I wait and she does too. “I asked him once if he was afraid. Of dying. Then I realized it was kind of a shit thing to ask someone who’s dying, because if they weren’t thinking about it before, they definitely would be after.”

“He was upset?”

“No. He laughed. Said he wasn’t afraid at all. But he was on a lot of drugs by then, so he wasn’t all there. He told me he already knew where he was going because he’d been there before.” I stop because I think that’s all of my grandfather’s craziness that I want to share. He wasn’t always like that. Just at the end, with the drugs and the pain. But then she’s looking at me with the curiosity of a hundred questions in her eyes and I feel like I have to answer her. “When he was like twenty, he was working construction and he fell and his heart stopped, so I guess he was technically dead for like a minute or something. He told the story a thousand times.”

“Then why would you think it was the drugs talking if you’d heard it before?”

“Because he always said he didn’t remember. Everyone asked him if there was a light and all that bullshit, but he always said he couldn’t remember any of it once he woke up. Then the night before he left, he sat me down and said he had two things he wanted to give me—one final piece of advice and his last secret. And that’s when he told me that he always remembered it, where he went when he died. He said he remembered exactly what it was like.”

“What did he say?”

“He said there wasn’t really any form or sense to it. That it was like feeling without knowing. Like a fever dream. Like the dream of second chances. He said the only part of it that had definition was a porch swing in front of a red brick house, but he didn’t know what it meant at the time so he didn’t say anything about it to anyone. Then he showed me this old picture of him sitting with my grandmother on a porch swing in front of the red brick house she lived in when they met.”

“That’s sweet,” she says, but there’s almost something like disappointment there and I wish I was allowed to reach over and touch her face or her hand or anything.

“Yeah, it’s sweet,” I say, not meaning it. “Except he didn’t actually meet her until three years after he had that accident; that’s why he didn’t get it at the time. But once he saw that swing and that house, then he knew. He knew he wasn’t supposed to die. He was supposed to come back so he could meet her because his heaven was where she was, even if he didn’t know it at the time. And that’s why he wasn’t scared.” I turn to see her watching the moon, the ghost of a smile playing on her lips where the disappointment was a minute ago. I look up at the sky to see what she sees and she moves closer and rests her head on my chest. I don’t care if it’s only because she’s cold or the metal truck bed is hard as hell. I don’t question it; I just close my arm around her and pull her into me like I’ve been doing it for years. “Like I said. Lots of pain killers.”

“Was it good advice?” she asks on the drive home. Her head is resting against the window and she’s watching the road go by.

“What?”

“You said your grandfather gave you one last piece of advice. Was it good advice?” She’s sitting up now and facing me.

“No,” I laugh, when I think about it. “I’m fairly certain it was the worst piece of advice ever. But I’m going to blame that on the drugs, too.”

“Now you have to tell me. I have to know what qualifies as the worst advice ever.” She twists her body towards me and tucks one of her legs under the other.

“He said,” and I’m almost embarrassed telling her this, “that every woman has one unforgiveable thing, one thing that she’ll never be able to get past and for every woman it’s different. Maybe it’s being lied to, maybe it’s being cheated on, whatever. He said the trick in relationships was to figure out what that unforgiveable thing was, and to not do it.”

“That was advice?”

“I warned you. He also told me there was a raccoon in the kitchen that night. So...”

“Do you believe it?”

“About the raccoon or the advice?”

She looks at me and tilts her head impatiently and I glance at her before turning back to the road.

“You tell me. You’re a girl. You’re not one of those girls who wants to be called a woman, right? Even though you’re almost eighteen? That just seems weird.”

“Please don’t,” she says dryly.

“So what’s yours?” I ask.

“My advice?”

“No, your unforgiveable thing. Apparently you must have one.”

“Never thought about it.” She turns back to the window. “I’m guessing murder is out.”

“Murder is out. You’d be dead, so the forgiveness would be a moot point.”

“Not necessarily, but we’ll say so for the sake of argument. I guess I’d go with loving me too much.”

“Loving you too much would be unforgiveable? I’m going to pull a McAllister on you and require supporting details.”

“Too many obligations. People like to say love is unconditional, but it’s not, and even if it was unconditional, it’s still never free. There’s always an expectation attached. They always want something in return. Like they want you to be happy or whatever and that makes you automatically responsible for their happiness because they won’t be happy unless you are. You’re supposed to be who they think you’re supposed to be and feel how they think you’re supposed to feel because they love you and when you can’t give them what they want, they feel shitty, so you feel shitty, and everybody feels shitty. I just don’t want that responsibility.”

“So you’d rather no one loved you?” I ask. I wish I wasn’t driving so I could look at her for more than a second.

“I don’t know. I’m just talking. It’s an unanswerable question.” She pulls her foot out from under her and puts her head back down against the

glass.

“Worst advice ever,” I say.

I’m used to being alone, but tonight I feel more alone. Like I’m not just alone in my house, I’m alone in the world. And maybe that’s its own blessing, because now, I never have to do this again.

Tonight when I climb into bed, I don’t even bother to count.

CHAPTER 32

Nastya

I didn't stop talking immediately. I talked right up until the day I remembered everything that happened, over a year later. That was the day I went silent. It wasn't a ploy or a tactic. It wasn't psychosomatic. It was a choice. And I made it.

I just knew that suddenly I had answers. I had all the answers to all the questions, but I didn't want to say them. I didn't want to release them out into the world and make them real; I didn't want to admit that such things happened and that they happened to me. So I chose the silence and everything that came along with it because I wasn't a good enough liar to speak.

I always planned to tell the truth. I just wanted to give myself a little time. A chance to find the right thing to say and the courage to say it. I didn't take a vow of silence. I wasn't suddenly struck mute. I just didn't have the words. I still don't. I never found them.

I don't feel any different when I wake up on my eighteenth birthday. I don't feel older or mature or free. I feel inadequate, if anything, because I know what I was supposed to be at eighteen and it's not what I am. My dad's brother, my Uncle Jim, got really down with himself when I was fourteen and he came to stay with us for a while to "re-evaluate." My mom said that it just happens sometimes when you get older. You get halfway through with your life and you realize you haven't done the things you wanted to do or become what you'd thought you'd become and it's disheartening. I wonder if it's a special kind of disheartening when you get to that place at eighteen.

Margot's car isn't in the garage when I get home from school. Normally

she's sleeping at this hour, either in bed or in a chair by the pool. I know she made sure she had the night off because Margot loves birthdays and she's been more excited than me about this one.

I kick off my shoes and toss my backpack on my bed and barely make it to the kitchen when the doorbell rings. Standing on the other side of the door are Margot, my mother, my father, Asher and Addison. My mother is holding a cake and her smile just barely falters before she catches it. I'm in the doorway in my school clothes and make-up. My mother has never seen me like this. She's seen glimpses of it, but not the full effect all at once, and I think it devastates her a little. Margot looks like Margot, my brother looks resigned, my father barely looks and Addison doesn't know what to look like. I think she wonders what she's doing here as much as I do.

They've done the *Surprise! Happy Birthday!* thing in the doorway, so I step out of the way and they come in—cake, presents and all. My parents suggest going to a restaurant, but I don't want to go out. It's three-thirty and there's too much of a chance of running into people from school, so Margot calls for pizza and puts the cake in the refrigerator while everyone crashes in the family room to wait for the food.

"We could probably still get you a ticket if you want to come with us for Thanksgiving," my mom throws out. It took exactly forty-three seconds from the time she got into the house to bringing it up.

"The house is sick. You should see it, Em. Three fireplaces. A balcony. *Hot tub.*" Addison's face turns pink and my brother looks at her apologetically. Bringing up the hot tub in front of the parents is really an amateur move.

"You could bring someone, too, if you want." That comes out of left field. I wish she would stop trying. My mother's hope is a weapon. I see Margot watching me from the kitchen. I wonder what, if anything, she's told them about my extracurricular activities. "Margot says you eat dinner with a boy's family every Sunday. What's his name?" She turns to Margot.

"Drew Leighton." Margot's still looking at me. No mention of Josh Bennett and I wonder why she's kept that to herself but told them about Drew.

"Drew," my mother repeats. "That's right. Why don't you call him now?"

He can celebrate with us. We'd love to meet him. You know him from school?"

I nod.

"They're in debate together," Margot answers for me.

"Addison's on debate," Asher interjects, and maybe we can turn the conversation on her, because Drew Leighton is too close to Josh Bennett and my family isn't getting anywhere near Josh Bennett.

"Debate Drew Leighton?" It's the first time I've heard Addison's voice. It's all soft and feminine like her. She's sitting next to Asher, holding his hand, and it kind of pisses me off. "I know him! He's—" she cuts herself off before she continues and I smile at her. I can't help it. We both know what she was about to say. "He's a really good debater. Everyone knows him."

"Really?" Asher looks at her dubiously and then over at me and I know he plans to find out the truth of it later.

I nod and she stifles her own smile and continues in a more appropriate direction.

"He came in third in state last year and everyone knows he's the biggest threat in extemp and LD. No one wants to go up against him this year." She sounds almost reverential. It's understandable when you've seen Drew debate, and she obviously has, or at least she's aware enough of it. I'm almost proud to hear someone talk about Drew for what he should be talked about, but it's a rare thing. I find myself smiling at her for real, and maybe I'm not so pissed about Addison holding my brother's hand after all.

We eat pizza and everyone relaxes and I find myself missing my family and wondering if maybe I didn't exaggerate everything. Maybe it wasn't so forced and awkward. Then again, maybe it's just not awkward because I'm watching from the outside right now. It may be my birthday that brought them here, but they're in their own element and I'm just looking in. Even Addison has a place, in this picture, with my family. I'm the outsider.

Asher goes on about school and baseball and homecoming. Margot talks about nurse shortages at work and how the schedule is starting to kill her a little bit. My dad doesn't say much. He just glances at me every once in a while and I try to work out what he's seeing when I look at his eyes, but they tell me nothing and I wonder if they're just a reflection of my own. Ever

since the day I told him to stop calling me Milly, and then stopped telling him anything else at all, there's been very little between us. My mother still tries, but my father has lost all hope. Maybe he's the smart one. Though it doesn't make me feel any better. My father has shut down and it's worse than any anger or disappointment he could level at me. The man who was the source of all my smiles now can't even conjure one himself. I'm a coward and a fraud and I murdered his spirit. There's something about knowing that I broke my father's heart that makes me hate myself a little more than I already do.

We get done with dinner but we all ate so much pizza that no one can even think about cake yet. Except maybe me. I can always think about cake.

My mother and Margot move a pile of presents from the counter to the table in front of me. There are way too many of them, but I wish there weren't any, because I don't want to feel grateful and there's nothing they can give me that I need anyway.

I open them all and feel like I'm under a microscope where my every facial expression is being studied and it makes me want to scream, but I can't. So I just swallow it like dirt and blood.

The last present is the smallest box, and I should know to be scared by the anxious expression on my mother's face. Or maybe my father's face tells the real story, because he looks like he thinks this is a really bad idea and he's probably said as much to my mother a hundred times. I rip open the paper and I'm holding a brand-new, jacked-up iPhone.

My mother starts extolling the virtues of the phone as if I don't know everything it can do, for example, reveal my exact whereabouts at any given moment. I don't need to listen to the sales spiel, but I'm right back in the room when I hear the kicker.

"You can keep the phone and we'll pay the bills. The only condition is that you call and *talk* to us on it at least once a week."

I smile. I can't help it. Up until two and a half minutes ago, I was genuinely enjoying this day. I had actually chastised myself for being upset that they had come and let myself think that maybe this would be a turning point. But it's not a turning point. It's an ambush.

My family has taken my birthday and turned it into an intervention.

They all trade off explaining to me how my behavior is hurting them. I find out, in great detail, how my failure to speak affects each and every member of my family. I listen to all of it. They haven't tied me to the chair so I can't escape or enlisted the help of an objective third party to impart the proper amount of guilt while keeping us all focused on the problem at hand. *Me*. There's no reason I have to stay here and listen to this, but I do, until every one of them has spoken.

Except Addison. She just looks uncomfortable. I think they pulled a bait and switch on her, too, with the whole birthday party idea. She looks like she wants to bolt as much as I do, and I feel kind of sorry for her. I wonder if we could make a run for it together.

When they've all finished. I smile. I love them and they love me and we all know this. I hug my brother. I nod to Addison and Margot. I kiss my mother and father on the cheek. I leave my awesome iPhone on the table and I walk out the door.

My mother's camera is still sitting on the counter, untouched. She didn't take one picture.

I walk into Josh's garage and climb up onto the workbench, crossing my ankles. Josh wanted to put another coat of finish on my chair, so it's out of commission right now. I thought it looked fine, but he kept pointing out why it didn't until I gave up and let him do it.

"My mother turned my birthday party into an intervention," I say. As soon as it's out of my mouth, I cringe, realizing that it's probably pretty crappy to complain about your parents to someone who doesn't have any. It's like bitching that your shoes are too tight to someone who's walking across broken glass barefoot.

That's the irony of Josh and I, and it shames me every time I think about it. He has no family. No one to love him. I'm surrounded by love and I don't want any of it. I piss all over what he would thank God for, and if I needed more proof that I have no soul, then there it is.

“When was your birthday?” He looks up at me.

“Today.”

“Happy birthday.” He smiles, but it’s sad.

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t tell me,” he says, walking over to put his drill on the charger before turning back around.

“People who go around advertising their birthday are douchebags. It’s a fact. You can look it up on Wikipedia.”

“So, intervention?” He tilts his head.

“Yep.”

“I wasn’t aware of your drug problem. Should I hide the silver?”

“I think it’s safe.”

“Heavy drinking?”

“No. But you might beg to differ.”

“True. I’ve seen the ugly side of your drinking and I hope never to go there again.” He comes around and climbs up on the workbench next to me. Close enough that his leg touches mine, and it’s grounding. “So what are we intervening?”

“Silence.” He looks at me skeptically when I answer. “They want me to talk.”

“If you spent every night in their garage they might rethink that.”

“Jackass.”

“There’s my Sunshine,” he says, kicking my foot.

“They gave me an iPhone with the condition that I call and speak to them on it once a week.” I brush the sawdust into a pile next to my leg and poke a hole in it so it looks like a volcano.

“Not what you wanted, huh?”

“I was hoping for implants.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Always helpful with the job search after college.”

We sit for a minute without talking. My legs start swinging out of

instinct and he reaches over and stills them with his hand, but he doesn't say anything and then finally—

“Was the cake at least good?” He knows where my heart lies.

“Didn't even get to it.”

“That's the real tragedy. Forget the intervention.”

“I'm not hungry anyway.”

“I'm not talking about the cake,” he says, taking my hand and pulling me down from the counter before I can protest. “I'm talking about the wish.”

He makes me wait while he goes back into the house, and a few minutes later we are driving away in his truck with a red plastic beach pail full of pennies on the seat between us.

It's not even dark yet when he pulls into the parking garage of an outdoor shopping center. The bucket of pennies is so full that he has to struggle to get it out of the truck without spilling it. He picks up the handle with one hand and slides the other underneath for support so it won't snap off and then kicks the door shut with his foot. The sun is just starting to set and the plaza lights have kicked on. It's one of those high class places with stores no real person ever shops at and restaurants with overpriced food you'd never want to eat anyway. But the fountain is amazing. Right in the middle of all of the pretense, it's an even more pretentious spectacle. Every few minutes, the spray pattern shifts and the lights change color from below. There's a walkway that forms a bridge across it and the fountain spray arcs overhead, splitting in two on either side so you can pass underneath it without getting wet. It feels like magic and I'm a little girl. I wish I had my mother's camera.

I follow Josh halfway through the walkway where he stops and curses under his breath at the pennies when he sets them down at his feet. The fountain obscures us and I don't think anyone from school would be out here anyway, but I still worry about being seen, or more problematically, heard in public. It's one of the reasons I never go anywhere, but it's not the only one.

“Have at it,” he says.

“What?”

“Wishes. You only get one with a cake and even that you only get if you blow out all the candles, which is kind of shitty because it's your birthday

and there shouldn't be a contingency on a wish. Pennies are a sure thing and you can have as many as you want."

I stare down at the pail. "I don't think I can think of that many things to wish for." There's only one thing I really want.

"Sure you can. It's easy. Watch." He leans over and grabs a handful of pennies in his left hand and picks one up with his right. He thinks for a second and then tosses it into the fountain. "See? You don't even need good aim." He turns to me expectantly.

"Here." I can smell the sawdust on him as he takes my left hand and pours a fistful of pennies into it. My hand stutters and he steadies it with his, for a moment, before letting go. "Your turn."

I look at the pennies and up to the fountain and wonder if there is such a thing as magic or miracles. Josh is watching me as I make the same wish I always do. It's the one that won't come true, but I wish it anyway, so maybe I haven't totally given up after all. I toss the penny into the air and watch it fall into the water while the lights below switch from pink to purple.

"What'd you wish?"

"I can't tell you that!" I say indignantly.

"Why not?"

"Because it won't come true." Do I really need to say this? I'm pretty sure it's a given in wish situations.

"Bullshit."

"It's the rule," I insist.

"It's only the rule with birthday cakes and shooting stars, not pennies in fountains."

"Who says?" I ask, sounding like a first grader.

"My mom."

That shuts me up quick. I look at the pennies and the fountain and anywhere but at him because I don't want to scare him away, and I'm hoping he'll say something else. Then he does, and I wish he hadn't.

"Then again, I doubt many of her wishes actually came true, so maybe she didn't know what she was talking about after all."

For just one moment, I see an eight year-old boy glued to a television set, waiting for his mother to come home.

“Maybe she just made the wrong one,” I say quietly.

“Maybe.”

“You talk about your mom more than your dad.”

“My dad was around longer. I remember him. I remember what he was like. I’ve forgotten almost everything about my mom so I try to make myself think about her more. Otherwise, I’m afraid one day I’ll wake up and I won’t remember her at all.” He tosses a penny into the fountain and I watch it sink. “If you asked me now about my sister, the only word I’d be able to come up with is annoying. I remember that she bugged the hell out of me and that’s about it. If I didn’t have pictures, I don’t even think I could tell you what she looked like.” He looks at me. “Your turn.”

I’m not sure if he’s referring to the wishing or the confessions, but I go with the pennies. I don’t even wish. I just throw one.

“I’m sorry.” The two easiest and emptiest words to say and I say them.

“Because I don’t remember my mom or because you asked?”

“Both. But mostly the asking.”

“No one ever asks. Like they think they’re doing me a favor. That if they don’t bring it up, I won’t have to think about it. I never stop thinking about it. Just because I don’t talk about it, doesn’t mean I forget. I don’t talk about it because no one ever asks.” He stops and looks at me again and I wonder if I’m supposed to say something, but I don’t want to, because if I say something, I’m afraid I might say everything. He turns back to the fountain so his eyes aren’t on me anymore, but I think he’s still watching. “I’d ask you, you know. If I was allowed. I’d ask you a thousand times until you’d tell me. But you won’t let me ask.”

We manage to find the laughter in the evening again, and we wish ourselves through most of the bucket of pennies. At one point, a mother with

two little girls passes through and Josh gives them each a handful of pennies and begs them to help us because we're running out of things to wish for. They take the affair very seriously as if each wish is so precious that they can't afford to waste it. They squeeze their eyes shut and concentrate, making sure they do it just right. And I wish for every one of their wishes to come true.

Towards the end, we start making mega-wishes and fortifying them with handfuls of pennies. One of those wishes results in the clasp of my bracelet coming undone, causing it to fly off into the fountain along with my wish-imbued pennies. Josh rolls up the bottoms of his jeans and pulls off his boots. I just have to take off my shoes because I'm still in the skirt I wore to school and it's plenty short. We scan around, hoping there aren't any security guards in the area before we step in. Thankfully the water is shallow, because it's freakishly cold and my legs are ice the second I get in.

"Where did it go?" he asks. I point off in the direction I threw the pennies. I don't think it could have gotten very far. We head off in that direction but it's impossible to see anything because the entire fountain floor is carpeted with coins. Half of them probably came from us. It's a tapestry of silver and copper and colored light. Every time I see something I think might be my bracelet, I have to reach down and submerge my arm into the water, which is what I'm doing when Josh decides to push my leg with his foot just enough to knock me off balance and send me face first into the ice cold water. The splash is followed by laughter from him and a death glare from me. I plan to grab him and pull him in after me, but I don't have to, because he tries to step away from my grasp too quickly and falls in all on his own.

"Karma's a bitch, Bennett."

His pants and half of his shirt are soaked, but he managed to keep his head out of the water unlike the drowned rat that is me. When he looks at me, he starts laughing all over again and I finally dissolve in it, too. "Don't do the last name bullshit. I hate it," he says.

"Not really caring what you hate right now," I say, trying to force some venom into my voice, but it's hard when I'm fighting what I am quite certain are the early stages of hypothermia. I feel like one of those insane polar bear people who jump in the freezing cold ocean every year and I mentally put

that on my list of things I will never do.

“Screw the bracelet. It’s not worth it,” I say, climbing out of the water with Josh right behind me. He doesn’t argue.

We split up the rest of the pennies between the two little girls whose mother gives us a dirty look because I think she’s had enough wishing for the night. Or maybe because we’re soaking wet and just climbed out of the fountain. I pick up the empty pail and swing it back and forth between us while we walk to the parking garage, leaving the fountain, my bracelet, eighteen dollars in pennies and two giggling girls behind us. Josh reaches over to take the pail from me. He stops my hand and opens my fingers, retrieving the handle with his left hand and holding mine open with his right. His hand is no warmer than my own, but it feels good anyway, and I wait for him to let go, but he doesn’t.

When we reach his truck in the parking garage, he tosses the bucket into the back and then reaches up and cradles my face in his hands the way he did that day on the Leightons’ front porch.

“Black shit,” he says, letting one side of his mouth turn up as he wipes the streaks away with his thumbs. Then, he moves away and opens my door. “Happy birthday, Sunshine.”

“I wished that my hand would work again,” I tell him when he climbs in after me. It was my first wish and the only one that mattered.

“I wished my mother was here tonight, which is stupid, because it’s an impossible wish.” He shrugs and turns to me, drowning the smile that cracks me every time.

“It’s not stupid to want to see her again.”

“It wasn’t so much that I wanted to see her again,” he says, looking at me with the depth of more than seventeen years in his eyes. “I wanted her to see you.”

CHAPTER 33

Josh

“There are clean towels in the guest bathroom. I’m going to shower in the master.”

“I hope you have a big hot water heater, because I may never come out,” Sunshine yells from the hall. She’s still shivering because she has almost no body fat on her and I kind of feel like shit for the whole fountain thing.

“I’m going to put water on for tea. You want some?” I call from the kitchen where I’m filling the tea kettle.

“You drink hot tea?”

“So?”

“So, you’re not old. Or British. I can count on one finger the number of teenage boys who drink hot tea.”

“I used to make it for my grandfather. I got used to it. Shut up.” I finish filling the kettle and put it on top of the stove before I head into the bathroom. “You want it or not?”

“Not. Tea sucks. I’ll be out in an hour. Maybe two.” The bathroom door slams.

I’m out of the shower ten minutes later and the water is still running in the guest bathroom so I guess she wasn’t lying. I throw my wet clothes in the empty washer then head into the kitchen to turn the stove burner on. Maybe tea does suck, but I heat the water anyway. She won’t turn down hot chocolate.

The doorbell rings and I figure it has to be Drew, because other than the girl using all the hot water in my bathroom, he’s the only person who would come over here. He’s got a key so I don’t know why he doesn’t just come in.

“What?” I open the door, ready to hear about whatever minor irritation has sent him fleeing from his house this time, but it isn’t Drew. It’s a kid I’ve never seen before and he’s staring at me so intensely that I feel like he’s

checking me out. Not like he wants me, but like he wants to know who the hell I am, except that he's the one knocking on my door.

"Can I help you?" I finally ask because the kid isn't talking.

"Is my sister here?" *Sister?* "Margot said she'd probably be here. Nastya." He spits out her name like it tastes bad in his mouth.

"She's your sister?" There's not much of a resemblance unless you really, really look. He actually looks a lot like Margot.

"Yeah. She left. Is she here?"

I push back the door and let him in. The water in the shower is still running and there's no ignoring it. *Damn it, Sunshine.* He's not looking relieved and I can guess why as I stand in front of him in a t-shirt and sweatpants, still wet from the shower, while we listen to the water continue running two doors down.

"She's in the shower," I say, because it's not like I can hide the fact. I need to warn her before she comes out. "I'll go let her know you're here."

"Why is my sister showering in your house?" he demands before I can get away. He's pissed. I'm getting the full over-protective brother treatment and I kind of respect him for it, but I don't like the way he's talking to me, in my own house, like I'm some sort of scumbag. It's the same thing Margot did when she came over. I don't think I'm particularly threatening and it's not as if Nastya comes across like some delicate flower.

"Your sister is eighteen years old. She can do more than shower here if she wants."

"My sister is emotionally stunted at fifteen." He levels his eyes at me. This is not really a conversation I anticipated having tonight. I don't even know how to respond to that.

"So you're saying she's immature?" It's the only thing I can come up with. And I can't decide which side I'm on anyway. Some days she seems older than anyone I've ever met and others she's like a little girl.

"I'm saying she's messed up." He exhales and he looks tired, like he's said this a thousand times before and he doesn't want to be here, saying it now.

"I don't agree." I do agree. I just don't know why or how or anything

that might matter.

“I know my sister.”

“I know your sister.” I know what she tells me. The fragments of a life she gives me glimpses of on the days she’s feeling particularly generous, or maybe just reckless.

“Did you even know today was her birthday?” he asks. I don’t answer. “I didn’t think so. From the look on your face earlier, you didn’t know she had a brother, either. You ever wonder what else you don’t know?” *Always.* “She’s got issues and she doesn’t need another one. Leave it alone.”

I don’t appreciate being referred to as an issue.

“If there’s something you want me to know, why don’t you tell me? Otherwise you can take the condescending attitude and get out of my house.”

He doesn’t answer. He won’t betray her, and as much as I want to know what the hell is going on, I can respect that. Still, I’m not letting him make me the villain here. I want to like this kid, but he’s starting to piss me off.

“You like taking advantage of messed up girls? Is that your thing?” he asks.

“What’s yours? Pointless accusations and intimidation?”

The water stops running and I’m ready to bolt down the hall to intercept her before she comes out, but the door opens before I can get there. I didn’t even have a chance to leave her a dry change of clothes. She comes out of the hallway, dripping wet with a towel wrapped around her and all the blood drains down from my brain and my stupid dick twitches because that’s what it does when beautiful, wet, towel-clad girls come out of my shower. I wish I could enjoy the view because, *seriously*. But this isn’t the time, and fortunately, my dick gets the message that her extremely pissed-off looking brother is standing next to me and stays down.

She opens her mouth but sees him before any words make it out. I don’t know whose eyes are wider. Something unspoken goes on between the two of them. I can’t tell if she looks frightened or ashamed, but it looks like she’s gotten younger just seeing him. The tea kettle whistles and we’re so on edge that I think we all might piss our pants right here. Except for Nastya, because right now, she’s not wearing any. I look between the two of them and settle

on her.

“Got company, Sunshine. Anyone want tea?”

Her brother eventually leaves once he accepts that she isn't going back with him. I wonder how much hell she's going to catch for that. Answering to people isn't something I ever have to worry about, so it never crosses my mind, but she has a family and I don't know how she gets away with just not going home, even if she is eighteen. She made a comment once that her parents are afraid to discipline her but she didn't elaborate. I wonder if they're scared of her, too. She spends most of her time here already, but how much of that information gets back to her parents is beyond me. If her family didn't think we were screwing before, they do now.

“You're not sleeping on the couch.” I tell her when she pulls the pillow and blanket she's used before out of the linen closet.

“All right. Sorry.” She puts them down and starts looking around for her keys.

“You don't have to leave.”

“But you said—”

“I just meant that the couch is seriously uncomfortable. You can take my bed. I'll sleep on the couch.”

“I am not taking your bed. I don't mind the couch. I've slept on it before.”

“So you know it sucks.”

“It's better than always going back to Margot's and being alone. I don't want you giving up your bed.” She sits down on the couch and clutches the pillow in her lap.

“So sleep with me.”

“What?” Her eyes go wide and I laugh.

“Not that kind of sleep with me. Just sleep. It's a king-size bed, you won't even know I'm there.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” She looks around like she’s trying to figure something out. “How is it possible that you only have one bed in this house, anyway?”

“There’s a twin bed in Amanda’s room but you can’t find it anymore because I started storing everything in there and it’s underneath a bunch of crap. I got rid of the one in my old room when they needed to bring in the hospital bed for my grandfather. So now I just have the one in the master.” She doesn’t look at me like she feels bad, just like she understands.

“It can’t really be that bad,” she says, walking down to Amanda’s room. The door is always closed and she’s never gone in before, but she does now.

She steps inside to the almost non-existent pathway of visible carpet, and scans the room. There are boxes and piles of old clothing folded on the bed. A couple of random pieces of furniture I built, but wasn’t happy with, are shoved here and there; things I would keep in the garage, but don’t, because I need the space out there more than I need it here.

“Okay, it is that bad,” she laughs, before her eyes narrow with curiosity and I turn to see what she’s looking at. “You have a piano,” she says softly, stepping over to it. “Why is it in here?”

“Amanda was taking lessons. I never did. I rolled it in here a couple years ago when I needed the space in the living room for one of the tables.”

She runs her fingers along the top of the keys so lightly that I’m not sure she even touches them at all. There’s a reverence in the way she does it.

“Do you play?” I ask, because she’s never mentioned it.

“No,” she says. It takes her a second to look up at me because she’s still staring at the keys. “Not even a little.”

When I crawl into bed with her later, it doesn’t matter how huge the mattress is. I’m not completely brain dead. I know that this is a monumentally bad idea with repercussions written all over it. But she’s right. It’s just nice not being alone. And the couch is hellishly uncomfortable.

“Is it just me, or is this really strange?” she finally asks after about twenty minutes of awkward silence, because neither of us is sleeping.

“It’s not just you,” I agree.

“Do you want me to go?” she asks.

“No.” I don’t even need to do anything with her. Not that I don’t want to, because I want to touch her more than I probably should. But it really isn’t that. I just like her here.

She reaches over and finds my arm, just below my shoulder, and follows it until she reaches my hand. It reminds me of the way she touched the piano keys earlier and I can feel the trail her fingers leave all the way down my arm. There’s a comfort that wasn’t here a moment ago. Then, without a word, she curls up next to me and that’s how we fall asleep. Her hand in mine. Together.

On Wednesday in art class, Clay Whitaker shows me the portfolio he’s been working on and I want to hit him. He’s always updating, adding, deleting, based on whatever competition he’s entering it in or the college he’s applying to, and then he’ll show it to me, even though I never ask to see it and I don’t know shit about art. I don’t want to hit him for the portfolio itself, but for showing it to me here, in the middle of class, where it’s nearly impossible to keep my face blank. I think it’s a test. I look at Clay watching me, and I know it’s a test.

Every last drawing is of Sunshine. He has her face from every angle. Every emotion I can imagine anyone ever feeling is in her eyes in these pictures. I forgive him for every minute he stole her from my garage.

“Draw one for me.” The words are out of my mouth before I can bitchslap them into submission.

“You want me to draw you?” He’s annoyed or disappointed. I haven’t given him the reaction he was expecting.

“No. I want you to draw her. For me.”

Clay looks a little more pleased with that.

“How?” he asks.

“What do you mean, how?” I sound pissed and I mean to, but it’s me I’m pissed at. I just spilled my guts all over the floor in art class and now he’s going to kick them around a little bit for fun.

“How do you see her? If you want me to draw her for you, it should be how you see her. Not how I see her.”

“You’ve drawn a hundred pictures of her. Just draw another one or give me one of those.” I motion toward the portfolio.

“When you look at her what do you feel?”

“Are you fucking serious? Forget it.” He can kiss my ass if he wants to start talking feelings with me.

“You obviously want it for a reason.”

“I want a picture to jack off to. What do you care?” I keep drawing so I don’t have to look at him, but I’m mutilating the sketch I’m working on. I’ll have to start over, but I don’t care.

“Joy, fear, frustration, longing, friendship, anger, need, despair, love, lust?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“All of it,” I reply, because I’m all in now whether I like it or not.

“I can have it to you in a couple of days.”

True to his word, Clay walks into class two days later and hands me an oversized cardboard folder and tells me not to open it until I get home. There’s a part of me that almost hoped he had forgotten or that it was a bad dream and I had never really asked. Then he shows me another drawing he’s added to his portfolio and now I know where Sunshine has been for the past two days.

“You’re obsessed,” I tell him, handing it back.

“Am I the only one?”

“Yes.” He’s looking at me skeptically and I know this was a huge mistake, but it’s one I can’t take back now. “I just wanted a picture. I wouldn’t have asked if I knew you were going to be such a dick about it.”

“Don’t worry,” he says, and for a moment, smug Clay is gone. “I’m not going to tell her.”

I accept this and we don’t speak for a minute during which time my brain leaves my body and deserts me.

“What are you doing tonight?” I ask him.

“You asking me out?”

“Dinner at Drew’s at six.” I’ve officially gone batshit crazy. Drew’s parents are out of town this weekend, but his mom made a ton of food and insisted that we still do Sunday dinner. Then they decided to come home early, so Drew moved it to tonight.

“You’re out of your mind.” Clay agrees. “First the picture and now this? I will not be a victim in whatever self-destruction you have planned.”

“You can stalk the object of your obsession some more.” I tilt my head toward his sketchbook. “Bring Yearbook Michelle if you want.”

“You do realize Drew will shit if Michelle and I show up at his house.”

“Yep.”

“Six o’clock?”

“Six o’clock”

CHAPTER 34

Nastya

I'll take control any way I can get it now. I may not be able to prevent some random psychotic from finding me in some random location at some random time, but I can control what I do to him when he gets there.

I've taken enough self-defense classes over the past two years to know that there were several things I could have done that day. I'm no martial arts expert. Not even close. All I really know are a couple of difficult, but seriously awesome takedown maneuvers, along with some key dirty street-fighting moves; but even those may have been enough. I could have gouged his eyes or crushed his windpipe or boxed his ears or kneed him in the groin or employed the always classic gold standard—scream and run like hell. I didn't do any of those things. Know what I did? I smiled and said hi. Because I was polite. And stupid.

Drew's driveway is empty when Josh and I pull up. Josh picks up the cupcake carrier—a gift to me from Margot for no particular reason—and carries it in to the house while I follow. I try not to smile, because I'm used to seeing him carrying lumber, so a pink plastic cupcake carrier is something different entirely. Drew and Sarah are in the kitchen where Mrs. Leighton would usually be. I can smell dinner immediately. Italian.

“Josh,” Sarah bites out as soon as we walk in. “Aren't you supposed to reheat food no higher than three hundred-fifty degrees?”

“It'll heat faster at four-fifty,” Drew argues.

“It'll dry out,” Sarah lilts in a sing-song voice. It seems like this argument has been going on for a while. She glances over at me and I get the disgusted look she seems to save just for me.

“Depends on what it is, but yeah, it’ll probably dry out,” Josh says, moving around them to put the cupcakes on the counter. The kitchen is stifling from the heat coming off of both compartments in the double oven and I wonder if the meticulously-piped Swiss buttercream on those cupcakes can survive. My hand didn’t freak out at all while I was doing it, so they look perfect.

“See!” Sarah says in Drew’s face, triumphantly walking over to the oven to lower the temperature. I guess Josh’s word holds when it comes to reheating food as well.

“Suck it,” Drew says.

“Your girlfriend’s here. Ask her.” Sarah smiles overly sweetly at me before disappearing down the hall towards her bedroom.

“I hate her,” Drew says, but he lets the girlfriend comment go.

I look around the kitchen at the number of bowls and dishes littering the countertop. Mrs. Leighton must have known it would end up being more than the four of us because she made enough food for an army.

Within the next fifteen minutes, the doorbell rings four more times. Piper walks in first, dressed in an outfit she must have coordinated with Sarah. She says hi to Drew and Josh before she heads to Sarah’s room without acknowledging me. Her arrival is followed by Damien Brooks and Chris Jenkins. Chris I know from hammer-wielding shop fame. He looks at me awkwardly and says hi. Ever since the hammer incident, he’s tried to ignore me even more. I wasn’t sure that was even possible, but he’s been doing an admirable job. Damien I’ve seen around but never met. He looks at my chest but doesn’t say anything. Chris has a case of beer in each hand. Damien has a twelve pack in his left and a bottle of tequila in his right. Clearly Drew gave them a very different description of Sunday dinner, and now I get why he moved it up to Friday. Of course, I may also have been a little more creative with the invitation I issued to Tierney Lowell in the bathroom a few days ago. When the doorbell rings for the third time, I’m the only one who’s expecting her.

I was in the girls' restroom at the far end of the foreign language hallway on Wednesday. Tierney must have seen me and followed me in, because she obviously wasn't using the facilities. When I got done washing my hands, she handed me a paper towel with a gesture so full of menace that I had to respect her, because anyone who can make handing you a paper towel look like a threat, is impressive. Of course, she still hadn't stopped glaring at me, and I didn't want to seem rude, so I glared back. It was so completely absurd that I wanted to laugh. It took a serious amount of throat clenching to keep from erupting, but I had invested myself in that particular stare-fest and I don't like to lose. She obviously had something to say, so I wished she would just get on with it, because she wasn't going to intimidate me no matter how many rumors I had heard about her: drug dealing, illegal abortions, knife wielding. I even heard she brings glass to the beach.

I didn't believe any of it and I was kind of hoping she would stop looking at me like I poisoned her grandmother. I really kind of like Tierney and I wish she'd like me too, because to be honest, it would be nice to have a female friend to not talk to sometimes.

"You must know a lot of tricks for him to keep you around this long." Mystery solved. *Drew*. I'd say, *of course*, like I should have gotten it all along, except I couldn't have known, because, even now, I'm just not seeing it. If she and Drew had, in fact, hooked up like Josh said—and with Drew anything is possible—she doesn't seem like the type who would be much for sticking around, either. I don't see Tierney Lowell being the kind of person who's going to let anyone, much less Drew Leighton, take advantage of her. I so wished I was more in the loop on things because I wanted the rest of that story. Badly.

Crap. I was going to have to write a note. It was rule breaking, but I chalked it up to absolute necessity; life-threateningly unavoidable, because otherwise my curiosity would kill me. I grabbed the notebook she was holding and pulled a pen out of my purse. I decided to jump off a cliff with this one and go for broke because there was only one reason this girl was cornering me in the bathroom, and it was pure, undiluted jealousy. *Do you still love him?* I wrote on the paper and shoved it at her, feeling seriously melodramatic.

She gaped at me, her eyes narrowing and her voice laced with forced

venom, “I *never* loved him.”

She didn’t laugh like it was the most absurd suggestion on Earth, so I grabbed the paper back and scribbled down the invitation. *Bunch of us hanging out at Drew’s Sunday at 6.* That was a logistical note, so it was totally acceptable.

She read it and looked back at me with unveiled skepticism, clearly familiar with the Leighton family tradition. “They do Sunday dinner.”

I shook my head and pointed back down at the note again, hoping that would convince her. I knew she wasn’t totally buying the fact that I wasn’t trying to lure her into some plot involving pig’s blood and public humiliation, but I could tell she was interested, too. I walked out wondering which part of her would win out.

Unlike everyone else so far, Tierney is the only one who waits to be let in. I wasn’t sure she’d show; I shoved another note in her locker yesterday after Drew changed the plans, but I didn’t know if she’d even seen it. When Josh opens the door, she looks almost nervous, standing on the porch, wearing a short denim skirt and two purple spaghetti strap camisoles layered one on top of the other. She really is a pretty girl; she just always looks mad, but maybe that’s just when she’s looking at me.

“Tierney?” Josh asks, because it’s not like he doesn’t know who she is, but he’s certainly wondering why she’s here. I watch to see how he reacts but it’s Josh, and as usual, he gives nothing away. He could have opened the door to two hyenas having sex and he wouldn’t have changed his expression.

I would have pressed him for more details about Drew and Tierney the other day, but he gets weird when I ask questions about Drew, so I figured I’d have to be patient and wait until tonight.

“I was invited,” she says, not wanting to look pathetic, like she just showed up at Drew’s house hoping to see him because his parents were out of town and I feel kind of shitty for putting her in this position. Josh doesn’t say anything else. He just opens the door further and lets her walk in. She

catches me watching from the dining room but does nothing more than check out my outfit before heading back to the kitchen. Tierney knows exactly where she's going in this house.

I try to nonchalantly catch up with her before she gets to the kitchen. I want to see Drew's reaction. As soon as she walks through the doorless entryway, I hear Damien Brooks yell, "T-Lo in the house!" removing all doubt as to his immense douchery. "What's up, sexy? Didn't know you'd be here."

"Neither did I." She shifts her attention as Drew returns from putting the rest of the beer in the garage refrigerator.

"Tierney," Drew says, tamping down his initial surprise.

"Drew."

"Were we expecting you?"

"Your," she pauses and motions toward me, "she invited me."

I knew that was coming. Drew walks over and puts his arm around my waist and pulls me up against him. I'm used to his possessive displays by now so I just go with it. Josh's eyes shift to Drew's hand around my waist before he walks away.

"Funny, she didn't mention it," Drew says, but it doesn't sound like he thinks it's funny. His fingers tighten just slightly against the bare skin on my stomach where my shirt's ridden up. I push him away and flip him off, trying to play it off like this is just something we do, which I guess it kind of is, but he still needs to watch it and I make sure my expression tells him so.

"Later, Nastypants. I promise." He's talking to me but he's still looking at Tierney. "Right now I have a dinner to host!" He claps his hands dramatically to get everyone's attention which he already has anyway. "You know the rules. Everybody helps!" Within moments, this mish-mashed group of us, from preppy and prissy to slutty and scandalous, is doing just that. We are all pulling out dishes, pouring drinks, and making trips back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room. Damien Brooks is standing at the counter slicing loaves of garlic bread and Tierney Lowell is hovering over the dining room table making flawless napkin fans. It's surreal. Mrs. Leighton would be proud.

By the time Clay and Yearbook Michelle show up, no one is shockable anymore.

“Something you want to tell me?” Josh whispers so only I can hear as we walk side by side into the dining room, carrying plates and silverware. Is he angry? I can’t tell. I know I was out of line with the Tierney thing, but if anything, Drew is the one who should be upset about that. I don’t answer, grateful for the fact that we’re surrounded by other people so I don’t have to respond. Who knows how this whole evening is going to turn out anyway? It’s like *The Breakfast Club* in a powder keg in here and I’m wondering who’s going to light the match.

Turns out, dinner is amazing, at least the eating part. The food is so good and there’s so damn much of it that most of us spend the entire time with our mouths full, which leaves little opportunity for conversation and that can only be a good thing. My first impression was that Mrs. Leighton had gone a little overboard with the amount of food she left, but watching how much teenage boys can put away is starting to make me wonder if there’s enough. I’ve seen Josh and Drew eat and I thought that was something, but they’ve got nothing on Damien and Chris who are inhaling everything on the table. I almost feel like pushing my plate of half-eaten food over to them lest they walk away hungry. I’m wondering if I can sneak into the kitchen unnoticed and hide half of the cupcakes now, because I’m going to need the sugar to get through the rest of this night.

Josh

Everyone ends up on the couches in the family room once dinner has been cleaned up. The beer already has a good dent in it and the bottle of tequila that piece of shit Damien Brooks brought is looming over the coffee table like a bad omen.

Sarah drank two beers during dinner and she’s already acting ridiculous. Two more and she’ll be face first on the carpet. The good thing about Sarah drinking is that, when she does, she stops being such a bitch for a few

minutes and I remember why I actually liked her once and why I hate how she's become.

I look around for Sunshine and see her coming out from the kitchen, passing Damien who grabs her arm for some reason to stop her. I don't even know what happens, except that about one point five seconds later, Damien is face first on the ground with her knee pressed into his back. Then, just as quickly, she's off him.

"What the fuck was that?" he whines, pushing himself up from the ground and acting like nothing hurts, but it's obvious that something does. I'd think it was funny if I hadn't seen her face. But I did, and I know there's nothing funny about it. She's backed against the wall, and I can't tell if she's terrified or enraged. I try to catch her eye to see if she's ok, but I think she's purposely not looking at me. I'm wondering if there's a way for me to get her out of here for a few minutes, but I don't even get a chance to come up with anything.

"You have got to teach me how to do that!" Sarah's eyes go wide and she looks at Nastya for the first time with something other than disgust. It's pure awe. I'm kind of in awe myself. Damien is bigger than all of us and everyone is bigger than Sunshine.

Tierney looks sideways at Drew. "I'd like to get in on that, too."

The next hour becomes an impromptu self-defense demonstration. All the furniture is pushed against the walls and we've padded the floor down as well as possible.

I get to play the role of predator and get the crap kicked out of me while Sunshine points out every vulnerable spot on my body, from eyeballs to lower ribs to groin—which I like the idea of having her hands on, but I won't even let her pretend to hurt—to feet. There's no doubt that I got the shit end of the stick here. Thankfully, she doesn't really want to hurt me, but she does seem extremely serious about making sure they get what she's showing them to do. There's no question that she doesn't think it's a joke.

"I'm afraid I might break you," I say when she makes me come at her again. Really I'm afraid she's going to break me. She's freakishly strong.

She snatches a piece of paper from the counter, scribbles on it and shoves it at me. Her eyes are narrowed in challenge and I try not to smile.

You'll have to try harder than that to break me. Quit being a pussy!!!!

She's daring me because she thinks I'm not really trying to hurt her. She's right; I'm not. Every time, I plan to go at her full force, but I can't and I pull back some. She has to be mad if she's actually writing it down, so I try harder. Finally, I go at her like I really want to take her down. The only person who ends up down is me. She must have practiced this move a thousand times; I have no idea how she even did it. The sad part is, I think that time *she* pulled back for *me*.

Then, before everyone scatters, she picks up the paper and starts writing again. I think she's writing something to me, because it's odd for her to be writing at all. But when she's done, she hands it to Sarah and the other girls, then immediately turns away to start picking up the pillows off the floor.

We try to put the room back together, but it's a half-assed job. Once the couches are back in place, we figure it's good enough. Sarah lays Sunshine's note down on an end table when she goes back to the kitchen for another beer, and I finally get a look at it. She's written the name of the martial arts studio she goes to and a phone number and then underneath that, only a few words, written in all caps –

RUN FIRST AND RUN FAST.

Drew sits down on one end of the couch and pulls Nastya into the seat next to him. I settle on the other side of her. My leg presses up against hers when I sit, but she doesn't pull away and I don't either. I've spent the last hour with her hands all over me; you would think that would be enough. But it's not even close to enough. It never is. Not like it matters, she'll probably be in Drew's lap by the end of the night anyway.

"I know," Sarah slurs, putting another empty beer bottle on the counter and throwing herself onto the loveseat. "Let's play truth or dare."

"Lame," Damien yells from the kitchen where he's opening every cabinet looking for shot glasses.

“That game sucks ass,” Chris seconds.

“I’d play truth or dare,” Drew says, running his fingers down Sunshine’s arm and making me want to punch him.

“You would?” Sarah’s already too far down the road to plastered to be skeptical.

“Yeah, if I were thirteen and a loser.”

Before Sarah can tell Drew to shut up, Tierney leans over the counter from the kitchen. “Afraid of a game, Drew?”

“Fear is coursing through my veins, T. Remind me again why you’re here.” He picks up Nastya’s hand and kisses the back of it and then puts it down on his leg. I’m hyperaware of every time he puts his hands on her and it’s making me feel like some sort of obsessed stalker.

“To play truth or dare,” she contends matter-of-factly, coming around the counter and grabbing the shot glasses from Damien’s hands. She puts them on the table and fills them with tequila. “Everyone plays. You cop out, you do a shot. Simple.” She tops the last glass off and rights the bottle without losing a drop.

I’d half expect Clay and Yearbook Michelle to be a little shell-shocked, but they look more amused than anything. I imagine if you’re just a spectator here, this whole evening would be pretty damn entertaining.

“OK, Drew. Truth or dare?” We’re four rounds in and this one comes from Chris. Things started getting ugly after the first round and the tension in this room is starting to wear on me. I’m ready to go home.

Sunshine is three shots down and way past half-lit. She picked truth every time and wouldn’t even write the answers to anything. They asked her how many guys she’d had sex with, how old she was when she lost her virginity, and the strangest place she’s ever had sex. She took the shot every time. By the last round, when Piper switched off the sex topic and got bold enough to ask why she doesn’t talk, I stood up and took the shot for her.

“Truth,” Drew answers.

“How long did it take to get her to—” Chris looks in Nastya’s direction and cuts himself off.

“To what? Why ask the question if you can’t even say it,” Piper laughs mockingly.

“I think he’s scared,” Sarah giggles. “He knows she can kick his ass.”

“That’s such a waste of a question anyway. Everyone knows she screwed him. Who cares when?” Damien says.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tierney counters. “Question was asked. Answer it or shoot.”

Drew looks at Nastya, and if I wasn’t paying attention I might miss the exchange that goes on between the two of them, but I know that there was something unspoken happening that no one else picked up on. The whole thing bothers me and that bothers me even more.

“Trevor Mason’s party. Second week of school.”

“That was a couple months ago. Isn’t that like a record Drew?” Tierney asks, but she can’t seem to force the malice she’s going for into her tone.

Everyone is still talking, but I’m not listening anymore. Trevor Mason’s party is the one Drew got Sunshine so shit-faced at that she spent most of the night on my bathroom floor, and I got so scared that she had alcohol poisoning that I almost took her to the hospital. He fucked her and I cleaned up her puke.

There’s a part of me that wanted to believe that he had never touched her; at least not *really* touched her. But I didn’t ask, because only a part of me believed that. The other part of me knew that there was still a possibility that it had happened, and if it had, I didn’t want the confirmation.

“Drew,” I say, not giving a shit how pissed I sound. “Truth.”

“Drew just went and you have to give him a choice anyway,” Piper whines, but no one else gets on the rule-enforcing train because they all want to know what the hell this is about. Except for Drew and Nastya, who look like they want to tell me to shut the hell up. It would be good advice. Too bad I don’t listen.

“Truth, Drew.” I haven’t taken my eyes off of him and I can feel the

tension rolling off of Nastya. She pulls her hand away from Drew and subtly presses her leg against mine, but I don't want any part of it.

"Fine," Drew says.

"Did you fuck her before or after the party?" He knows exactly why I'm asking.

"Pour the shot, T," he says, not looking away. Maybe I'm an idiot for thinking he wouldn't screw her when she was that drunk.

"Hey!" The voice breaks me out of the stand-off I've got going on with Drew, and I freeze, watching Leigh walk in. None of us even heard the front door open. I start racking my brain. Was I supposed to meet her? Did I even know she was coming? All of a sudden this room is a hundred times smaller and I feel very trapped. There's something about having Leigh and Sunshine in a room together that makes me imagine two planets colliding. World-ending destruction. I reached my drama threshold hours ago. This is the reason I avoid this kind of crap.

Leigh smiles, completely clueless about what she's walking into. It was bad before she got here, and this is just worse. I stand, out of instinct, as she approaches me. I can see Drew pull Nastya into his lap and whisper something in her ear. Her eyes just barely shift, and I haven't forgotten that I want an answer from him before I leave here.

"What's going on?" I ask, trying not to sound as annoyed as I am, because Leigh hasn't done anything wrong, but I really, really don't want her here.

"I came down last minute," she explains. "I stopped by your house but you weren't there. Home Depot is closed," she smiles knowingly at me, "so I figured you had to be here."

"You don't have to cover for the fact that you wanted to see me, Leigh, but subtlety is always appreciated." If Drew thinks he's lightening the mood, he's an idiot.

"You haven't changed at all, have you?" She smiles at Drew.

"You have. I think your tits got bigger." He lifts his chin towards her and then switches gears before she can respond. "Too bad you missed an awesome game of truth or dare. We just finished." Maybe he's not such an

idiot. His survival skills are kicking in. Leigh walking in gave him an out and he's taking it.

"I haven't played truth or dare since I was in middle school," Leigh laughs, sitting on the couch with Drew and Nastya and pulling me down with her so that there's not an inch of space between us. Nastya's eyes keep darting to Leigh but she won't look at me.

"Wish we could say the same," Damien groans.

"You didn't seem to mind when you were daring Piper to jerk you off in the closet," Sarah spits back.

"What-the-fuck-ever." Tierney lets out an exaggerated breath. "There's way too much drama in this room. Enough with the tequila; it's just making you people worse." She tosses a bag of weed onto the coffee table and turns to Drew. "I need a two-liter soda bottle, something to cut through plastic, a screen and a pitcher of water."

Dali has nothing on the scene that unfolds next in the Leighton living room. People who were trying to sabotage one another thirty minutes ago are now collaborating on a bong-making scavenger hunt. They keep bringing things to Tierney for approval like she's their ant queen or something. She checks out the pile of stuff in front of her. "There isn't a screen."

"I didn't know where to get one," Sarah says.

Tierney leaves the room and disappears down the hall. When she comes back a few minutes later, she's holding a small, round screen in her hand.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Bathroom faucet," she answers, kneeling down in front of the coffee table and setting to work on building a gravity bong.

Halfway through, Piper eyes Tierney's progress suspiciously. "I'm not putting my mouth on that thing."

"You'll put your hands on Damien's dick, but you won't put your mouth on this?" Tierney looks almost disgusted by the waste and we get treated to another exasperated exhalation. "Your loss. You get a bigger hit, but whatever." She looks around and her eyes settle on Damien. "Here." She throws some rolling papers at him and tells him to roll Piper a joint, but he doesn't get far before she pushes him away because he's destroying it.

“If you can’t roll a joint, don’t try,” Tierney snaps.

“It’s not like it’s that hard,” he says defensively, but he doesn’t fight her when she reposes the papers.

“It’s an art, jackass. Get out of my way.” Tierney proceeds to roll the tightest joint I’ve ever seen. She’s right about it being an art and she’s more than talented. I suck at rolling joints, not that it’s something I do all the time, but it might be nice to have the skill.

“Everybody’s gotta be able to do something with their hands,” Drew says, idly running his fingers through Sunshine’s hair while Tierney glowers at him before resuming bong construction.

It’s hard to watch her and not be impressed. She’s completely focused, as if this is a high-tech operation she’s in charge of, and she has total respect for it. Clay hasn’t left her side and is making her explain every part of the process. He kind of reminds me of Sunshine in my garage. Tierney talks him through every step, instructing him not only what she’s doing but the science of it as well. It’s like watching the illegal substance version of physics class.

I try to focus on watching their progress so I don’t obsess over the fact that Leigh is running her fingers up and down my thigh, and Sunshine is sitting right next to her with a front row seat.

When Tierney gets done, she hands the bong to Clay and looks almost proud of him. “You go first. You worked for it.” Then she turns to the rest of the room and tells us we better lighten up because she’s sick of all the angst and she’s not wasting good weed on assholes.

Leigh leans over and whispers something in my ear about finding a bedroom and then we’re up and walking down the hall before I know what’s going on. I make the mistake of turning back around to fortify myself with the picture of Drew all over Sunshine on the couch, but when I do, she’s watching me. Unflinching. Making sure I have to answer for what I’m about to do. Drew looks from her to me and tightens his arm around her waist so that she looks away just before I’m out of her line of vision.

CHAPTER 35

Josh

I walk Leigh out and return to the family room, wishing I was drunk or high like everyone else here. Sarah and Piper are gone, which means they're probably passed out in her room. Through the sliding glass door, I can see Michelle lying on the grass, staring at the sky. Or sleeping. I can't tell from here. The gravity bong is abandoned on the coffee table and Damien and Chris are still half-baked, trying to kill each other on the Playstation. Across the room, Tierney is giving Clay a lesson on joint rolling, and I hear him say something about wanting to draw her, which she laughs hysterically at. Drew is on the couch, staring at her. He looks up when he hears me and I can see the disgust take over his face. I don't need his. I have enough of my own.

"Where is she?" I ask.

"Do you care?" He's making sure I know I'm an asshole.

"What?" I'm tired and I want to go home and my tolerance for Drew's bullshit was running dangerously low hours ago.

"It's a simple question," he continues. My fist is tightening with every word and I force myself to loosen my hand. "Do you *care* where she is? Did you *care* when you were in my guest room screwing another girl?" I can't believe he has the balls to say any of this to me. It's not like Sunshine and I are together and he obviously knows that better than anyone.

Tierney is completely blitzed and struggling for clarity while she watches this play out.

"Not here, Drew."

"Fine. Outside then." He gets up and he's surprisingly sober and I realize I haven't seen him touch anything since dinner hours ago. He never did take the shot he made Tierney pour when he refused to tell me whether Sunshine was drunk or not when they had sex.

"Answer my question." I lean up against the side of my truck and shove

my hands in my pockets because I need something to do with them.

“I took her home,” he says. “Now answer mine.” He’s not fucking around. He’s pissed.

“That’s not the question I meant.”

“I know. Answer mine first.”

“Yes, I *care* where she is,” I mock his tone.

“Is that what you were doing in the bedroom with Leigh? *Caring?*” The sarcastic condescension is getting on my nerves. I don’t *care* if I deserve it or not.

“I was ending it,” I tell him, even though I don’t owe him an explanation. And the whole time I was wondering what the hell I was doing. I sat on the bed and looked at her green eyes and blonde hair and the perfect body that was mine whenever I wanted it, no strings attached. It was simple, convenient, uncomplicated. And I didn’t want it anymore. OK, I wanted it, but wanting it had never involved a choice before today.

I leaned over and kissed her, hoping it would make every other thought go away. I closed my eyes, and for the first time since I had been with Leigh, it wasn’t her face I was picturing. I didn’t see blonde hair and green eyes and simple and uncomplicated. I saw dark hair, dark eyes, dark, complicated, frustrating, messed up everything. And the moment I broke away and opened my eyes to look at the girl pulling my shirt up over my head, I knew what I would lose if I did this. There was never a price before, but now there was and it wasn’t worth it.

She wasn’t even upset. No drama. No questions or tears. Just the same as I would have been if it had been the other way around. Ending things with Leigh was just like everything else had always been with Leigh – easy.

Even when I walked her out, I kept thinking how simple it would be to change my mind and take it back. And then screw her in the backseat of her car so that it would make it impossible for me to ever take anything back again.

“That changes things.”

I don’t really know what it changes for Drew. I know that I just gave up getting laid because I felt guilty about a girl I don’t even have.

“Why didn’t you tell me you slept with her?” I ask and I still want to know if he waited until she was wasted, because if he did, I’ll seriously hurt him.

“Because I didn’t.” Not the answer I was expecting.

“You said you did.”

“I guess I didn’t take the truth part of truth or dare literally.” He shrugs.

“She didn’t disagree.” I think back to the look exchanged between the two of them. He was asking her for permission but I don’t get why she gave it to him.

“We have an agreement.”

“Break it,” I tell him, even though I have no right.

“Why?”

“Because you’re all over her all the time. You make her look like a whore.”

“First, I hardly think I’m the only thing making her look like a whore. Second, if she asks me to stop, I’ll stop. Otherwise, why should I?”

“Because I’m asking you to stop.”

“She and I have a mutually beneficial relationship. Kind of like you and Leigh but we don’t have sex. It works. Why would I give that up?” He’s not hiding the subtext.

“Because it doesn’t mean anything to you.”

“Why does it mean anything to you?”

“Because she’s mine and I don’t want you touching her.” I’m a five year-old fighting over a toy. I feel like an idiot as soon as I say it, but it’s said and it’s true. And I don’t want it to be.

“I know,” he says arrogantly.

“You *know*?”

“I’m not stupid Josh. The two of you have been eye-fucking each other since the beginning of school. I wasn’t going to do anything with her and she was never going to do anything with me.”

“Then why all the bullshit tonight?”

“Just wanted to hear you say it.” He smiles and heads back toward the house. I’m too relieved to be pissed at him.

“What’s with you and Tierney?” I ask when he gets to the porch.

“Trying not to screw each other. Trying not to kill each other. Same thing that’s always with me and Tierney.”

I’m at Sunshine’s house at nine o’clock the next morning. We’re supposed to have plans, but after last night I’m not sure if we still do. I wait in the driveway because Margot probably just went to bed and I don’t want to knock and wake her up.

When the door opens, Nastya comes out wearing a pink, flowered sundress and flat white sandals and I wonder who she is today. She gets in the truck and shuts the door.

“Shut up. It was a birthday present,” she says before I can even comment.

“Doesn’t mean you had to wear it.” *But I’m glad you did.*

“I figured I should get something out of the intervention since I didn’t take the phone. Besides, I spend so much time doing your laundry that I haven’t gotten to any of mine.” She buckles her seat belt and we’re off without a word about last night.

We hit three antique stores by noon and I still haven’t found anything remotely like the console table I’m looking for. If she’s true to form, Sunshine will start complaining around store number five. That’s where her antiques patience tends to run out. Store number four is a high end one, two towns west of us, and I have to promise her ice cream after this one to get her to leave the truck.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just find what you’re looking for on the internet?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I ask. She’s right. It would be much easier, but I like the looking.

“Where’s the fun in this?” She pulls open the door and exaggeratedly drags her feet inside.

“You know you like it.”

“I do?”

“You do.”

“And you know this, how?”

“Because I know you, and no one makes you do anything you don’t want to do. If you didn’t want to come, you wouldn’t come. And if you didn’t come, you wouldn’t be here. So it follows that if you didn’t want to come, you would not be here right now. But you are here, so by the transitive property of Sunshine, you want to be here.”

“I hate you.”

“I know that, too.” I say nonchalantly and one side of her mouth turns up in response.

“It was worth coming just to hear that many words leave your mouth at one time. That may never happen again.”

“Probably not.”

“So remind me again why you can’t join modern society and use the internet.”

I shrug because it’ll probably sound stupid. “I like finding things no one else is looking for. Things that got lost or forgotten, shoved in a corner. Stuff I never knew existed. I don’t even need to buy it. I just like to find it and know that it’s there. That’s the part I like.”

“Is any of this stuff even worth what they’re charging for it?” She looks at the price tag on an ornate mahogany sideboard.

“Depends on how badly you want it. It’s worth whatever you’re willing to pay for it.”

“Can you even afford any of it?”

“Yes.”

“You sell that much furniture?” She looks impressed.

“No.” I do okay with selling the furniture but not even close to this well. I don’t have enough time.

“Oh.” She doesn’t ask anything else, but I tell her anyway, even though it’s the thing I hate mentioning the most.

“I have a lot of money.”

“How much is a lot?”

“Millions.” I watch her face. *Millions*. It sounds absurd. I’ve never told anyone before. The only people who know are the ones who have always known. It feels weird to even say it out loud. I don’t talk about the money. I try not to even think about the money. I have a lawyer, two accountants and a financial adviser who worry about it for me. If they handed it all over to me tomorrow, I wouldn’t know what to do with it. I’d probably end up hiding it under the bed.

“No wonder you didn’t have a problem getting emancipated,” she says dryly.

“No wonder.”

Her eyes narrow. “You’re not lying.” She studies my face and I shake my head.

“You don’t spend any of it.” It’s not a question.

“My dad never wanted to touch it so I try not to as much as possible. I use what I have to for paying the bills because I can’t make enough to live on while I’m in school.” I can’t say I hate that it’s there, because I do need it. But I hate what it means, and I’ll never let myself be happy about it.

“Did you buy anything with it?”

“I bought my truck last year when my dad’s old one finally kicked it. And I bought an antique table.”

“Which one?”

“The dark one on the far wall of the living room near the sliding glass door.”

“The dark one? That’s it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Usually you get all flowery and descriptive and talking about the curves of the wood and the symmetry of the lines and the marriage of form and function.” She puts on a pretentious tone and waves her hand around in

the air.

“I talk like that?”

“When you talk about wood and furniture you do.”

“I sound like a pompous ass.”

“If the shoe fits.”

She moves on to the back of the store where they keep the shelves with all of the ceramics and vases and lamps. “I have to be home by five,” she says, turning over the three-thousand dollar price tag on a hideous lamp with a base that looks like a harlequin. “I need this,” she adds sarcastically.

“Why five?”

“I have to meet Drew to do debate research. There’s another tournament coming up. State possession of nuclear weapons. Exciting stuff.”

I haven’t thought about Drew since this morning and I don’t really want to bring him into this now; but knowing him, he’s probably going to say something to her tonight and I have to do pre-emptive damage control.

“About last night,” I start, and I realize how cliché that sounds. Now I know why. She doesn’t stop her intense examination of an ugly ass vase but I know she’s listening. She’s always listening. “I told Drew to keep his hands off of you.”

“Why would you do that?” This must interest her more than the vase because she turns around.

“Because everyone talks shit about you because of it.” And I’m jealous, which is the real reason, because neither of us really cares about the crap people say. “But it’s not my business so I’m sorry.”

“And he agreed?” She looks a combination of shocked and amused.

“Not without persuasion.”

“What kind of methods do you have that would work on Drew?” she laughs.

“I lied,” I say, even though I’m lying now. “I told him you were mine.”

No response, so I keep talking. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to act like you were an action figure or something.”

I wait for some sort of reaction, but there is none. She turns the price tag

around on a jewelry box so it's facing the right way and puts it back.

"As long as it's Lara Croft, we're good."

"Of course," I smile, but it's weak. "Anatomically correct, too."

"Come on," she says, heading back up to the front of the store. "If you're not going to buy me the three-thousand dollar clown lamp, we need to get going. You promised me ice cream."

After the ice cream, I drag her to one more hole in the wall antique store in the old part of town and then we head back. The iridescent painted cat she insisted I buy her is between us on the seat and I can't wait to get home because it's scaring the crap out of me. I think she saw the fear in my eyes when she picked it up at the store, and after that, there was no way she was walking out without it. I told her I'd rather buy her a bracelet to replace the one she lost on her birthday, because I really did feel shitty about that, but she said no. She said it would be inappropriate, whatever that means. I guess nightmarish ceramic cats are acceptable because that's what she's got. Every time she looks at it she smiles and it's worth ten times what I paid for it.

"Thanks for coming," I say, just to have something to say while she's digging her keys out of her purse.

"Thanks for the cat." She smiles again, picking it up and holding it up to her face. "I named him Voldemort." She puts it in her lap like it's a real cat and for a minute I'm afraid it might actually bite her.

"My pleasure," I say, and I mean it, even if it sounds dumb.

She cradles the cat under her arm and reaches for the door handle, stopping to look at me before she jumps out.

"Just so you know," she says, her smile fading as her eyes lock onto mine. "You didn't lie."

CHAPTER 36

Nastya

Josh's garage is open when I drive by on my way home from Drew's. He's on a stool hand sanding a piece of wood. He must be desperate to get whatever it is done, because he usually leaves the sanding for me.

"Done?" he asks when I take the sandpaper out of his hand to check the grit before handing it back. I pull another sheet of it out of the cabinet and sit down next to him.

"For tonight." I hold a piece of wood up to him. "With or against?"

"With the grain on all of these." He motions to the wood pieces between us on the work bench.

"What's it going to be?" I tilt my head toward the pile of cut wood while I attach the paper to a sanding block.

"Bookshelf. For Sarah's birthday."

I nod and start working on one of the shelf pieces.

"You changed," he says, after a few minutes of listening to nothing but the lullaby of sandpaper on wood.

I look down at the jeans and black t-shirt I put on after he dropped me off and shrug.

"Probably a good idea. Drew would never have been able to concentrate with you in that dress."

"Can you blame him? I am distractingly pretty." I deadpan, just to get him off of the subject of Drew and me. It never ends well. Besides, the dress was for Josh, not Drew.

"You're not going to forget about that are you?"

"Why would I want to?" I have a list of things I'd like to forget, but that isn't on it. I've replayed it in my head a thousand times. Maybe because he didn't say beautiful, or stunning, or gorgeous or any crap like that. He said

pretty, and pretty I might actually be able to believe.

“Because it’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever said and I’d like you to,” he half-snaps and it slingshots my mind back to the picture of him disappearing down the hall last night with one of the most beautiful girls I’ve ever seen. Blonde, tan, all lit up and everything I’m not.

“Consider it forgotten.” I finish sanding one side of the shelf I had been working on and place it back on the counter. I step off the stool and brush the dust off my pants and I can feel him watching. “It’s late. I should go.” I didn’t stay here after last night and I’m sure as hell not staying here tonight.

“See you tomorrow?” he says as I walk toward my car.

I wave over my shoulder, but I don’t look back.

Josh

I’m in her driveway before she can get her key in the door. I left my house as soon as she was off my street, because fuck if I can do this anymore.

“Can I come in?”

She opens the door and steps inside and I follow her.

“Don’t say things if you don’t mean them. I’m not that pathetic that I need empty compliments.” She locks the door behind me and throws her purse onto the front table along with a can of pepper spray and that baton key holder thing she always carries around.

“I did mean it. It was just stupid.”

“Wow. Even better. You’re on a roll. Keep going.”

“You’re not going to make this easy are you?”

“That was the nicest thing anyone’s said to me since I’ve been here and you took it away. So, no.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“But you did.”

I know I did. I can tell. She can’t cover the hurt in her expression, even

though I know she's trying.

"You know I meant it. I am human. And male. And not remotely blind. Do you want me to say it again? You are distractingly, even-if-that-is-not-a-real-word, pretty. You are so pretty that I bullied Clay Whitaker into drawing me a picture of you so I could look at you when you aren't around. You are so pretty that one of these days I'm going to lose a finger in my garage because I can't concentrate with you so close to me. You are so pretty that I wish you weren't so I wouldn't want to hit every guy at school who looks at you, especially my best friend." I stop to catch my breath. "More? I can keep going." I *can* keep going, but even as I say all of this, I know it's not quite true. She's not just distractingly pretty. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen and I want to touch her so badly right now that it's almost impossible to keep my hands from reaching out and doing it.

"How?" Her eyes are searching mine like she doesn't quite believe me and they're so wide that I think I could walk right into them if she'd let me. "I've changed my clothes at your house a hundred times. You never try to look. I sleep in your bed. You never come near me."

"I didn't know I was allowed."

"You were waiting for permission?" She looks at me like I'm insane and I wonder if I am.

"I said I was male. I didn't say I was an asshole." The silence that used to be so comfortable is torture right now so I fill it. "I'm not Drew."

She picks up the baton thing and starts swinging it around and I realize that it's a weapon. Her keys are attached to one end of it and they're spinning so fast that they're nothing but a blur. I want to reach out and still it, but I think if it hit me it would seriously hurt. "Drew's not really an asshole; he just plays one on TV," she says, shaking her head and wincing. "Sorry. That wasn't even remotely funny."

"Not even a little," I smile. "But you're right. He's really not an asshole." I don't know why it makes me happy that she sees that about him, but it does.

"Why are we talking about Drew?" *Good question, Sunshine.* Because it's easy. Because if we stop, we're going to have to deal with what we're doing here and neither of us knows how. We suck at this.

“Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?” I spit the words out before I can talk myself out of them.

“It’s Sunday. We always have dinner together.”

“No. Just us.”

“You don’t want to go to Drew’s?” She looks confused.

“No.” I definitely do not want to go to Drew’s.

“Why not? Are you still pissed about the sex thing? He said he told you it wasn’t true.”

“I’m trying to ask you out and you’re making it really impossible.”

She stops spinning the baton. “Why would you ask me out?”

“Isn’t that what people do? Go on dates?” People still do that, right? Leigh never expected movies and dinner first, so I really don’t have a clue.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been on a date.” And it’s swinging again.

“Never?”

“Sorry, no. Never really had a chance. My life hasn’t exactly been what you’d classify as normal. How many dates have you been on?” Her defensiveness is kicking in.

“None.” My life hasn’t been quite normal, either. “Guess we’re both freaks.”

“I think we established that a while ago.”

“So let’s pretend. One night. We’ll go out and pretend we’re normal.” We never even left the foyer, so I’m still right next to the door, but I’m not ready to open it yet. She looks scared. Like she thinks this is a very bad idea and any second now she’s going to say so. I put my hands on either side of her face so she has to look at me. “One night,” I repeat, not giving her a chance to formulate an excuse. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow.” I press my lips to her forehead, even though that’s not where I want them at all.

“Are you still with her?” she whispers, and I can’t believe I didn’t think to tell her. Actually, I can, because I’ve never discussed Leigh with her. Not once. I wonder if it’s been in her head this whole conversation.

“No,” I say.

“Not even just for—” she stops and looks uncomfortable and I kind of

want to laugh because some of the conversations she has with Drew would make a porn star blush, but she can't spit this out. Looking at her now, I'm forced to admit to the vulnerability that she's always been hiding behind every sexual innuendo and under every tight black dress.

"Not for anything. I promise." I trace my thumb under her bottom lip and back away before I let myself kiss her, because I've been waiting to kiss her for months and I don't want to do it standing in the foyer while she has a weapon in her hand and we just got done talking about Leigh.

She nods and looks embarrassed for asking, but she shouldn't be. I would have needed to know if it was the other way around.

"So, tomorrow. You and me. Normal. All right?"

"All right." She smiles, but it's not even a real smile, just the vague idea of one.

I turn toward the door, but she stops me.

"What am I supposed to wear?"

I shrug because I don't even know where we're going yet.

"Wear something normal."

I pull up to my house just in time to see Clay Whitaker walking back to his car in my driveway. He looks nervous when he sees me.

"What's up?" I ask. I didn't even know he knew where I lived.

"You never told me what you thought of the picture." Nice try, Clay, but that's not why you're here.

"Picture was perfect, Clay. You know it was. What do you want? Because you don't do subtle well."

"Why'd you have me draw it?"

I feel like every single person I know wants a confession from me tonight.

"I'm going to walk in that house right now and give you your damn

picture back so I never have to hear a fucking word about it again.” I start toward the front porch and the motion sensors kick the lights on.

“You didn’t see her face.” He’s not talking about the picture anymore. He’s talking about at Drew’s when I walked away with Leigh and he’s wrong. I did see her face and it was awful and it would be nice if everyone would let me forget it.

“What is it about that girl that makes everyone think they have some sort of ownership or obligation to protect her?” Me, included. “In case you haven’t noticed she should probably be the one protecting all of us.”

“Drew and I maybe. Not sure about you.” He’s kicking an invisible rock back and forth with his foot and I start looking around for one of my own.

“Fine, Clay. Tell me what to do.”

“You’re asking me?” He’s shocked. So am I. “You do realize that gay teenage boys and straight teenage girls are not interchangeable, right? Same strategies don’t really work.”

“I get it. I’ve never done this before.” I’m trying to figure out how I got to the point where I’m standing in my driveway, asking Clay Whitaker for advice. How is it that with everything that’s happened in my life, this girl is going to be the thing that undoes me?

“You’ve never done this before?” he asks with more than a little disbelief.

I look at him like the insulting idiot that he is, especially in light of what he thinks I was doing last night with Leigh. “I’ve done *that* before. I just haven’t done *this* before.” I motion back and forth between myself and the direction of Nastya’s house even though he probably has no idea what I’m doing.

“You’ve never just gone out with a girl?” He laughs but I’m not seeing the humor and I make sure my expression tells him so. “OK, not funny. Seriously, why don’t you just ask Drew for advice?” He considers that for a moment. “Scratch that. Never mind.” He walks over and leans up against the door of his car. “Okay, then. What does she like?”

“Running and ice cream. And hitting things. And names.”

“Names?”

“Don’t ask.”

“Well, the whole sweat and adrenaline rush from the running might be nice for foreplay but I don’t think it’s going to play well on a first date. You’d be better off going with ice cream. Very chaste. Like her.” He smirks.

“I thought you were going to be serious.”

“I was being serious.” He stops and I can tell he’s trying to decide something. “How do you know so much about her anyway? She doesn’t even talk.” It’s almost like what I said to Mrs. Leighton, but Clay’s intentions are different.

“Already did the ice cream thing.” I ignore his question.

“Then it looks like you’re down to hitting things.”

CHAPTER 37

Nastya

Is it sad to be going on a first date at eighteen years old? I thought about texting Josh to cancel at least six times today. At one point I finally did text him that I couldn't go because I had nothing to wear. He texted me right back

—

Nothing sounds good c u at 4

So now I'm stuck. The only thing that makes me feel better is that Josh seems to be as socially inept as me. Except that he talks. So I guess he gets the edge. But still. I really need him. I don't want to mess this up. It's bad enough that my brain is a cesspool; I can't imagine the hellhole my heart would be if he wasn't in it.

Since wearing nothing isn't really a viable option, I'm back to square one. I have absolutely no idea what to wear. My fashion sense isn't lacking. It's nonexistent. I went from recital clothes to recovery clothes to repulsive clothes. I've never done normal. I don't even know what that is. This is where the female friend thing would come in. I would have sucked it up and written a note asking Margot to help me, but the whole idea was kind of last minute and she had plans this afternoon so she's not even home. Which means my closet and I are on our own.

My closet is of no use to me. It may actually be laughing at me. It's true. I hear it. Other than the sundress I wore yesterday, I'm out of options in the normal department. I look at my clothes. Black, black, some more black. I don't want to wear any of it. I don't want to look like Nastya Kashnikov tonight. I don't want to be a Russian whore. I don't want to look like Emilia, either. Maybe for tonight I could just be someone else. Some third girl I haven't met yet.

I realize with a craptastic amount of horror that I am going to have to go to the mall. I throw on one of the eight variations of tight black t-shirts I own and a pair of jeans and head out.

Only I don't end up at the mall. I end up at Drew's. The God that I have recently come to think might hate me is smiling on me today because Sarah isn't home. But then neither is Drew. Mrs. Leighton opens the door. I look at her stomach which seems to have grown exponentially since the last time I saw her.

"Hey sweetie," she says and she's the only person on Earth I don't have the urge to smack for calling me sweetie. She lets me in after explaining that Drew and Sarah went out on a friend's boat with Mr. Leighton. She pours lemonade and we sit at the breakfast bar and stare at each other.

"Oh!" she says after a few minutes, and I'd gotten so accustomed to the quiet that I almost fall off the stool. She grabs for my hand and I yank it back out of instinct before I can think about it. I feel like a fool but she ignores it. "I just wanted you to feel the baby kick," she says reaching for my hand and letting me meet her halfway. She places it on her stomach and it's the weirdest feeling in the world. I almost expect an alien to burst through her abdomen at any moment.

"Feel it?" she looks at me expectantly. I pull my hand back. I can't help but see the hurt on her face but I'm too afraid I might start crying and I can't keep my hand there anymore. "Sorry," she says. "I just get a little excited. You'd think the third time around it wouldn't be a big deal, but it never gets old. It's my favorite part." It would probably be mine, too, but I won't ever get to find out. Maybe I never would have wanted one anyway, but the deciding would have been nice. The piece of shit who took my hand took that, too.

All I wanted was to figure out what to wear on a date I probably shouldn't even be going on and I don't know how I ended up with my hand on Mrs. Leighton's stomach, feeling her baby kick and fighting back tears.

Mrs. Leighton doesn't do well with the silence. She's a space filler. "It's a girl," she says. "We just found out."

There's a pad of paper and a pen next to the phone on the counter. I pick it up and write.

Name?

"Catherine," she says. "After Jack's mother."

I smile because I know that one. *Pure, unsullied* I scrawl and hand it to

her.

She returns the smile. “Drew said you had a thing with names. What does mine mean? Lexie, well, Alexa, really. Do you know?”

Defender I scribble and underneath *You*. Then, before she asks, I give her Drew’s – *masculine, manly* and Sarah’s – *princess*. She rolls her eyes and laughs. “Self-fulfilling prophecies, you think?” The quiet returns and then she asks, “What about Josh?” I think there’s more to that question than she’s letting on but she’s testing the waters.

Salvation, I write. She looks at the word and nods. And for a minute she looks as sad as I feel.

“That fits, I think.”

I’m not sure what she means so I put down the pen. I’ve written too much for one day already.

“Did you need something?” she asks. “You came over?”

I think about asking her for help with the dress situation. She could help me. She would help me. But I can’t ask for it. I shake my head and climb off the stool. I still have time to make it to the mall and pull something together.

She walks me to the door but doesn’t open it. When she turns, her eyes are soft like her.

“You know, people always think it’s the girls who are desperate to change the boys, to make them a better person, to be the thing they need.” She’s looking at me like I must understand what she’s talking about, but maybe I’m just dense because I have no freaking clue.

“Josh may seem like a very old man sometimes. But at the end of the day, he’s still a teenage boy and he wants what all teenage boys want.” She stops when I narrow my eyes at her and then laughs. “Not that. Get your mind out of the gutter. No. To be the hero. To save the girl. To save you.” She pauses to heighten the effect of the fact that she’s casting me as the damsel in distress in this particular scenario. “But for Josh, he doesn’t just want that, he needs it. He needs to be able to fix things and make it all better; to believe that you’re okay so that he can believe that he’s okay. And if he can’t,” she raises her eyebrows and leaves the thought hanging in the air like a guilt trip and I really don’t know the point of this speech. Anyone who

wants to save me is going to need a time machine because that dream is dead. No one was there to save me last time and if I end up needing to be saved from anything else, I'll do it myself, thank you very much.

I turn to leave and she opens up the door. I'm thinking I'm going to give her a pass due to pregnancy hormones and then—

“I think you and I both know it's Josh who needs saving. Have a good time tonight.”

You've got to be freaking kidding me.

Josh knocks on the door at exactly four o'clock. I still don't know why we're leaving so early. We can't be having dinner at this hour because Josh hates eating early as much as I do. He's dressed in a dark blue polo shirt and belted khaki pants. He looks exactly like he does when he goes to dinner on Sundays. It pisses me off how easy it must be for guys to get dressed. He seems to have no trouble pulling off normal and looking entirely too beautiful doing it.

I try not to look as uneasy as I feel while he stands in the entryway, taking me in. I ended up in a pale blue sleeveless dress with a dark-blue Greek-inspired design running in a band around the very bottom. It's definitely not on the cutting-edge of awesome, but it's simple. I thought it looked good and it felt like what I thought normal should feel like. I twisted all of my hair back in a loose knot at the nape of my neck. I know the scar at my hairline is probably all sorts of obvious but he's seen it so many times already, I just don't care.

“You look different,” he says, repeating the same words he used the first night I ended up at his house, and I smile because it's exactly how I'd like to look tonight. “And distractingly pretty,” he adds softly, his lips turning up just slightly.

“Are you going to tell me where we're going now?” I ask. It's been driving me crazy all day. I hate not knowing things. I'm a planner and a control freak, which is hard for a person who usually has very little control

over anything.

“No,” he says simply, taking my hand and helping me into the truck.

And then we drive. And we drive. And we drive.

“Seriously, Josh. What the hell?” No wonder he picked me up so early. We’re on a freaking road trip.

“You’ve said that four times since we left.”

“Yeah. Because *seriously*, Josh. *What the hell?* Where are we going?”

“Close your eyes. Relax. I’ll let you know when we’re there.”

“Sunshine? We’re here.” I open my eyes and look at the clock on the dashboard. 6:10. *Seriously, Josh. What the hell?*

“Where are we?” I ask, trying to figure out what the point of this two hour drive was.

“Dinner.”

We’re in a parking lot. I look out the window and see the sign for an Italian restaurant I know far too well and I know that this is not happening. Through the glass on the side of the building I can see a man in a suit playing the piano but it’s not him I’m seeing anymore.

“What are you staring at?” Josh asks.

Me, in an alternate universe, I think.

“We’re in *Brighton?*” I ask, trying to control the near hysteria in my voice.

“Yes.” He’s wary now. I think I’m scaring him a little, which is fine, because he’s scaring me.

“*Why* are we in Brighton?” I force some calm into my demeanor because freaking out isn’t going to get me anywhere right now, and when I say anywhere, I mean the hell out of Brighton.

“Because we have reservations.” His voice is tentative. He’s eyeing me like at any moment I might completely lose my mind.

I don't say anything. I can't say anything.

"You like Italian food and I looked at the ratings for like fifty places in a two-hour radius and this was the best one, plus I was able to get us in. What's wrong?" He's confused and I can't blame him for it.

"Josh, there are like five hundred Italian restaurants at home. You could have taken me to any of them. Why did we drive two hours to have dinner?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

I wanted to talk to you. He says it like it's the most obvious answer in the world. He drove us two hours away for dinner, to a place where no one would know us, so that we could have a conversation. I want to laugh and cry and hug the living crap out of him. I kiss him instead. As soon as my lips are on his, his hand is at the back of my neck and he's pulling me against his chest like he's been waiting for this forever and he's not going to let me get away. But I don't want to get away; and if the steering wheel wasn't there, I would climb into his lap just to be closer to him.

Then he shifts just slightly and I'm not kissing him anymore. He's kissing me. And when he does, part of me is lost. But it's the part that's twisted and mangled and wrong, and for just that moment, with his hands in my hair and his lips on my mouth, I can pretend that it never existed.

"I thought you were pissed," he says when I pull away. "Not that I'm complaining."

"I am, but not at you." My hands are still wrapped around his upper arms and I really don't want to let go.

"At what, then?" he asks, brushing the hair that came loose out of my eyes.

"Everything else."

He did all of this so that we would be able to go out and actually talk to one another and he brought me to the one place where we can't do that. He's just staring at me now like he doesn't know what that means and he's not sure where we go from here. I'd like to just go home and sit in his garage where everything is comfortable and I can sand down wood and watch piles of sawdust grow around my feet and feel like I'm okay for however long I stay there.

There's something in the way he's looking at me that freaks me out, but I can't look away. He leans in again and I don't move at all until I feel his lips on mine. There's a reverence in the way he kisses me that frightens me, because it's the most wonderful thing I've ever felt.

"Sorry," he says. "I've been wanting to do that for a really long time, I just wanted to do it again."

"How long?"

"Since the first night you walked into my garage."

"I'm glad you didn't," I confess.

"Why?"

"I had just thrown up. I think it would have ruined the moment."

"As opposed to this moment which is now full of romance." He smiles and I let go of his arms and sit back, trying to figure out what to say.

"Do you want to go in?" he asks finally.

I shake my head. "We can't stay here."

"Why not?" he asks, and I feel terrible for taking this away from him. Just another thing that I can add to the list of disappointments I've leveled at people I care about. I don't want Josh Bennett's disappointment, too. I don't think I can handle it. But I don't have a choice right now. There's no amount of disappointment that can get me in that restaurant. I look at Josh and wish I could just kiss him again instead of having to answer, but I know I'm not getting out of this one.

"Because it's where I'm from."

Our attempt at normalcy ends up being bad pizza at a hole-in-the-wall we found somewhere on the road between Brighton and home, and there's nothing about it that's normal. It's not even extraordinary. It's perfect and I want it to stay perfect, but nothing ever does. People like Josh Bennett and I don't get perfect. Most of the time, we don't even get remotely tolerable. And that's why it scares me. Because, even if there was such a thing to begin with,

perfect never lasts.

We pull in to Margot's driveway just before eleven and I look at Josh because I don't know why he brought me here instead of back to his house.

"I had a good time tonight," he says.

"Shouldn't I be saying that to you?"

"I don't know. Is there a rule?" he asks.

"I don't know," I concede. "I had a good time, too. It was fun. All things considered." I still feel bad for ruining his plans.

"No things considered," he says gently, lifting his hand to my cheek before leaning over to kiss me. Just once. And it isn't perfect. It's soft and warm and true and real. "It was fun. Nothing else matters."

Nothing else matters. If I had a penny right now, I'd wish that were true; I want to believe it more than I've ever wanted to believe anything.

"Then why are you bringing me back here?" I ask.

He shrugs sheepishly. "I thought it would be kind of presumptuous to expect you to sleep with me on the first date."

I yawn before he even finishes speaking. "If all you're expecting is sleep, then I'm a sure thing."

"Well," he smiles, "far be it from me to turn down a sure thing."

And with that, he backs his truck out of the driveway, and we go home.

CHAPTER 38

Nastya

My first therapist's name was Maggie Reynolds. She talked to me like a kindergarten teacher would. Soft and patient and unthreatening. Coddling. It made me want to smack her in the face and I really wasn't a smack someone in the face kind of person at that time. Not like I am now, when pretty much everybody makes me want to smack them in the face.

Every time I asked her why I couldn't remember what happened, she told me it was natural. Because, isn't everything? She said it was my brain's way of protecting me from something I wasn't ready to face yet. That my mind would never give me more stress than I could handle, and that when I was strong enough, I would remember. We just had to be patient. But it's hard to be patient when no one else is.

Everyone might have agreed that it was natural to forget, but it didn't mean they would stop asking. The question was always the same, from the police, from my family, from my therapists. *Do you remember anything?* The answer was always the same, too. No. I don't remember anything. Not one single thing about what happened that day.

Then one day I guess my mind decided I was ready, because that was the day I remembered everything and then I stopped answering the questions altogether. I think maybe my brain made a mistake about how strong I was, but it didn't let me send the memories back.

I never even had one nightmare until after my memory returned. Once the vision of what had happened was back in my head, it wouldn't be ignored. It came at me with a vengeance, night after night, like it was making up for lost time. I would wake up sweating and shaking in a state of remembered terror, and I couldn't tell anyone why.

So I wrote. I spit every detail out of my head and onto paper so that the memory wouldn't have any hold over me. I felt like a criminal. Like I was perpetrating some crime by not telling, and every night I was waiting for the

nightmares to call me on it, to turn me in. So I took away their leverage. I confessed myself. Every night into the notebooks. The words were the sacrifice I offered up daily in exchange for dreamless sleep. They have never failed me.

It's the second night this week that Josh and I are headed to the Leightons' for dinner. We spent Thanksgiving here, also. I think we both would have been happy to have stayed at his house and ordered pizza and worked in the garage like the antisocialites that we are, but you don't say no to Mrs. Leighton. It wasn't a request. It was a requirement. And it was nothing like Sunday dinner. It was grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles and strays like Josh and I. We hid in Drew's room for the most part, because Josh hates hugging ambushes as much as I do, and these people were huggers. *All of them.*

When we got to the table, with the china and the centerpiece and the napkin swans, I took a picture with my phone and sent it to my mom so she would know I wasn't alone. I don't know if it made her feel better. Seeing a table covered with food and surrounded by somebody else's family might not have been the type of comfort I was trying to send.

We didn't have school at all this week, so aside from Thanksgiving, we've had the past nine days to do nothing but build. The weather's been beautiful and the humidity is low, so I've been in the driveway finishing. We've finally found something I'm better at than Josh, and he doesn't care, because the only thing he likes less than sanding, is finishing.

Other than Drew's house, we haven't gone anywhere except the grocery store and the hardware store. We work on furniture most of the day, come in at three o'clock for Josh's GH fix, cook dinner, build some more, go running and sleep. It's been a perfect week. I hate that it's already Sunday.

“Dad’s turn for music tonight.” Mrs. Leighton has a tray full of twice-baked potatoes balancing on one hand and a water pitcher in the other.

“Isn’t it Drew’s turn?” Sarah asks, putting the last of the silverware on the table.

“Nice try. Drew’s got next week. It’s mine.” Mr. Leighton laughs maniacally to taunt her and I smile because it reminds me of something my dad would do. He opens a cabinet full of CDs and scans through them before pulling one out and turning on the stereo.

It takes me three notes to recognize the Haydn sonata he’s put on. It’s the one I know by heart. The one I practiced a thousand times to play for my audition that day at school. The one that became the theme song for my murder, instead. That’s what we’re listening to over Sunday dinner. The soundtrack to my death.

I haven’t heard it since that day, since the last time I played it before I left my house that afternoon, since I heard myself humming it while I walked to school. I don’t hear it now. I also don’t do anything hopelessly dramatic like drop dishes or freak out and run from the room. I stop breathing instead.

I’m walking and humming and practicing every note in my head. I’m not nervous because it’s just a recording and if I mess up I can re-do it as many times as I want until I’m happy. Nick Kerrigan is recording it for me in the music lab and he likes me and he’ll stay as long as I need. He told me. I like him too so that works for me. I’m checking out my hands because I want them to look good and I don’t want my nails chipped and then there’s a boy in front of me. He smiles but he looks wrong. Wrong in his eyes. But I smile and say hi and walk past him. And then his hand is on my arm so tight that it hurts and I turn but I can’t say anything because he hits me in the face and then I’m face down on the ground and he’s dragging me somewhere. Then I’m not on the ground anymore because he yanks me up by my hair. He says it’s my fault. He calls me a Russian whore and tells me to stand up but I don’t know why because he just knocks me down again. There’s blood and dirt in my mouth and I don’t remember how to scream anymore. I don’t even remember how to breathe. I wonder if I’m Russian but I don’t think so and I don’t know why this boy hates me. He’s pulled my hair so hard so many times that it’s ripped part of my scalp off and the blood runs into one of my eyes

and I can't see out of it anymore. He must be tired of picking me up because he just leaves me on the ground and starts kicking me instead. I don't know how many times in my stomach and my chest. A couple of times between my legs. I think I hear my ribs cracking. I don't know how long he kicks me. Maybe forever. I don't feel any of it anymore. Nothing even hurts. I can still see out of my left eye. On the ground, I can't tell how far away, is one of my pearl buttons. The sun is hitting it and it looks like it's changing colors and it's so beautiful and I want to hold it. If I can reach it everything will be ok. I think he's still kicking and my hand reaches out for it but I can't get there. Everything stops except his breathing. I see his boots next to my hand. Then I can't see anything anymore because everything is black and I can't feel my body. The last thing I hear is the sound of the bones in my hand being crushed and then there isn't anything anymore.

“Nastya?”

“Nastya?”

I don't know that name.

When I open my eyes, I can see again. I'm on Drew Leighton's white brocade sofa and there's no blood anywhere and nothing hurts except my soul. I can see the coffee table Josh Bennett made. I can see Josh Bennett, sitting on the floor next to the couch, holding my hand and staring at me. I can see all of the questions he isn't asking. Everyone here looks scared, even Sarah, and I wonder if I look scared, too. Because I have no idea what just happened.

Mrs. Leighton makes me drink water, even though I try to refuse, because I'm freaked out, not dehydrated. Apparently I stopped breathing long enough that I passed out and she wants to call my aunt. I shake my head and look at Josh, imploring him with every *please* I can force into my eyes. He says he'll take me home and I hope he's talking about his home because that's where I want to be, even if I don't like the look on his face. The look people give you when they're afraid that one wrong word will cause you to break. But if I didn't break before, I'm sure as hell not doing it on the white brocade sofa at Drew Leighton's house.

I have remembered what happened to me every day for nearly two years. I've seen it in nightmares. I've written it in notebooks every night for

hundreds of days. But I have never relived it until now. I know that I'm safe here. But I know what dirt and blood taste like, too.

I'm sleeping at Josh's again, because somewhere along the line, that became the norm. The more time I spend here, the more I hate being at Margot's by myself. I make sure she always knows where I am, and even if she doesn't like it, I think she understands, or maybe I just need to believe that she does. I feel more at home at Josh's than anywhere else in the world, and right now, I need a home.

I have to hide in the bathroom to write my three and a half pages, even though tonight I feel like I already did. I write them anyway and then slip the composition book into my backpack, behind my trig book, like it's homework.

"Don't," I say, when I climb into bed in the dark, because even in pitch black silence, I can see and hear and feel the question all around me.

"You have to tell me sometime," he says softly as if someone in the house might hear us.

"But I don't have to tell you tonight," I whisper back.

He takes my left hand like he knows it holds all my secrets and he thinks maybe he can learn them just by holding it.

"You were awake, but it was like you weren't even there." He pulls me against him and kisses the scar on my forehead, keeping his arm wrapped tightly around me, pulling my head onto his chest and pressing my body to his. "It scared the hell out of me and you won't tell me why it happened."

I have to tell him something, so I tell him what I know is true.

"Sometimes I just forget how to breathe."

CHAPTER 39

Josh

“Damn, your girlfriend can bake.” Drew shoves yet another cookie in his mouth. He’s eating them as fast as Sunshine can pull them out of the oven.

“Not my girlfriend,” I say, because, according to her, she’s not, and that’s fine because I hate the term anyway. Saying *girlfriend*, somehow puts us in an official relationship, and if she is an official part of my life, she will probably officially be gone very soon. So if she doesn’t want to be called my girlfriend, I’m fine with that.

“Fine,” Drew counters, “your wife.” He walks up to her and pulls a cookie off the tray, burning his fingers in the process. “No wonder you always smell like brown sugar and,” he stops, picking up a bottle off of the counter and reading the label, “pure vanilla extract.”

He’s right. She does smell like brown sugar and vanilla, but I thought I was the only one who noticed.

He flips the cap open on the bottle and inhales it. “Seriously, they should sell this as perfume.” Sunshine is just staring at him with a slightly disgusted look on her face.

“You *smell* me?”

“You don’t have to make it sound so creepy. It’s not like I sneak into your room and watch you sleep.” He walks over and slaps me on the back. “Josh does that.”

Sunshine throws an oven mitt at him and he pretends to be wounded. “Watch it woman. Since you’re not taken, I can throw you down on the floor and make love to you right now.”

She gags loudly and Drew looks mock offended. “The idea of having sex with me is that distasteful?”

“No, the idea of having sex with you is, as always, the pinnacle of

dreams. It's the make love part that's repulsive. I hate that expression. I could be sixty years old, and I'd still rather say fuck, than make love. Ichth," she shudders.

"Good," he says, confidence restored. "Then since you're not taken, I can throw you down on the floor and fuck you right now."

"Do me a favor," I say. "Either screw each other and get it over with or quit acting like you're going to." I turn the TV off because I can't hear it anyway and toss the remote on the couch. I sound like a jealous bastard. I am a jealous bastard. Just because I know there's nothing going on between them, doesn't mean it doesn't piss me off.

"Are those our only two options?" Drew asks. "Because I know which one I'm going with."

Sunshine shoves another cookie in Drew's mouth and tells him to quit while he's ahead.

"You know I've gained like ten pounds since I met you. How do you eat all this shit and not get fat?" he asks, wiping crumbs off of his hands.

"I run," she says. "A lot."

Drew looks repulsed. "Well I'm not doing *that*."

"Don't worry," she smiles. "You have enough testosterone to keep your metabolism going for a while."

"True story," he says cockily.

"Speaking of true stories and testosterone, is anyone ever going to tell me what the deal is with Tierney Lowell?" Sunshine asks.

Drew stiffens. "No."

She arches one eyebrow at him and he groans exaggeratedly like a kid who just had his video games taken away.

"Fine. But only because I'm fragile and you scare me."

Drew moves over on the couch so she can sit next to him, but she sits down in my lap instead, and I really have no problem with the fact that she's not my girlfriend.

"It's an age old story," he says flatly. "Boy meets girl. Boy asks girl to touch him inappropriately. Girl dazzles boy with her impressive knowledge

and proper use of profanity. Boy and girl end up in detention together. Love blossoms. In secret. For four months.”

Sunshine looks at me for confirmation. “True story,” I deadpan. I always knew they had hooked up, but I thought it was a one-time deal. I actually just found out the rest of the story. He didn’t tell me until I laid into him the week after the infamous truth or dare dinner. But I remember there was something up with Drew during that time period and now it just makes sense.

“And?” she asks.

“And nothing. That’s all you’re getting.” He turns the TV back on.

“You suck,” she mutters.

“So do you, no doubt.”

Somehow I didn’t find that nearly as funny as the two of them.

CHAPTER 40

Nastya

Drew and I have spent the past three hours at his dining room table with dueling laptops, pulling up research and precedents for the most boring argument ever on term limits. I guess it's better than gas taxes which we could have gotten stuck with. The county tournament is in two weeks. I don't have to compete, but I have to attend, and my grade comes from doing prep work.

So far I've gotten away with being designated as Drew's researcher. No one else really has researchers, but I'm there, and I can't compete for myself so he gets to use me. If he wasn't so good it never would have flown, but he performs. When Drew does well, the team does well, and when the team does well, Mr. Trent looks good, so he'll give Drew just about anything he asks for. Which works for me, because it keeps me out of the claws of Ethan Hall, who still thinks asking me for blow jobs in the guidance office, while pretending to harmlessly flirt, is romantic.

I hand Drew the printouts and my notes and we split up the rest of the work so we can finish it tonight. I haven't quit badgering him about Tierney yet.

"Why can't you guys at least be friends? Wouldn't that be better than nothing?" I'm not an expert on relationships. Not any of them. Not familial, not romantic, not friendly. Relationships require communication, which is not really my thing, so it's a weak subject for me. I just don't get why he has to act like he hates her when he so obviously doesn't.

"No, it would *not* be better than nothing. It would absolutely be *worse* than nothing."

"That's such a cop-out. Guys always say that because it's easy."

"And girls always want to change the rules in the middle of the game. You can't change the rules and think everyone else is just going to keep playing. I know what her hair smells like, but I can't get close enough to her

to press my face into it. I know how soft her skin is on every part of her body, but I can't touch it. I know what she tastes like, but I can't kiss her. I'm not allowed anymore; so why should I torture myself with being around her, just so I can say we're still friends?"

"Still doesn't make any sense."

"It's the only thing that makes sense, and if you'd stop to think about it for one minute, you'd realize it. If you and Josh were suddenly not together, do you think you could still hang out with him all the time? Be in his house, but not touch him? Act happy for him when he's going out with some other girl and she's going to know all of the things about him that you know, but that all of a sudden you're not supposed to know anymore? You couldn't do it, either."

"Josh isn't in love with me and I'm not in love with him."

"Sell it to someone who's buying, Sunshine. Have you seen the way he looks at you?" I've seen the way he looks at me but I don't know what it means. "Like you're a seventeenth-century, hand-carved table in mint condition."

"So he looks at me like I'm furniture."

"Exactly. See? You know what I'm talking about."

"Nobody likes a smartass."

"Fallacy. Everybody likes a smart ass. Especially you." He fixes his eyes on mine, and it's obvious he won't be done proving his theories until I concede. "Friends is bullshit and you'll know it, too, when it happens to you. When the two of you break up, you'll know exactly what I mean."

"We-can't-break-up-if-we-aren't-together." I enunciate every word in my most exasperated voice, but it doesn't deter him.

"Semantics. It's going to happen and everyone," he gestures around the room to the audience that isn't there, "knows it but you. One day, you're going to get drunk and screw the shit out of each other and then you're going to realize how incredibly, stupidly in love you are, or maybe vice-versa, knowing you two. Could happen. But anyway, you'll be *together*. And then one day, you *won't*. And when that day comes, I can promise you, you won't be friends. You'll hate each other before you'll ever just be friends."

“I don’t want him to love me.” Why I say this out loud is beyond me, but it’s true. I don’t want the obligations and the expectations. I don’t want to be the source of disappointment in another person’s life.

“He doesn’t want to love you either so I guess you’re on the same page.”

Talking about Josh is starting to feel like a very bad idea. “We’re supposed to be talking about Tierney.”

“We’re supposed to be talking about government term limits.”

“Alright, I’ll accept your impossible friendship theory if you tell me what happened. Maybe if I know how it ended, I’ll agree with you.” I actually am starting to agree with him, but I’m not telling him yet. I want the story.

“I was an asshole.”

“That’s a given. Quit stalling.”

“We got together. *Together, together,*” he clarifies. “Not just my version of together. Tierney didn’t want anyone to know because she refused to have people thinking she was another name on a very long and undistinguished list. She said she was better than that. And she was better than that. She never would have hooked up with me if it was nothing. But dickhead Trevor Mason kept giving me shit, so I told him. Except I didn’t tell him we were together. I just told him we were screwing. She got pissed. Broke up with me. Everybody acted like she was a loser for thinking I gave a crap about her.”

“Did you give a crap about her?”

He nails me with a look that says that I know the answer and he’s not saying it. I think the word love might sear his tongue.

“You guys don’t even have anything in common. What’s the attraction? And please refrain from listing body parts or anything involving the word oral.”

“She’s Tierney. She gives me shit, but she won’t take mine. She makes me laugh, but she laughs more. She argues with me about everything, even when she knows she’ll never win. Plus, she’s hot as hell and she can’t stand me. Is there anything else that could possibly make her more attractive?”

“It sounds like you’re giving a speech. Bottom line it, Drew.”

“Damn, you’re annoying,” he groans, but that’s what he always does

when he's going to answer anyway. "Listen, I know what I look like and I know how smart I am. Shut up. Don't look at me like that. I know it and you know it. But I know I'm a pretty shit human being, too," he says, sounding momentarily sincere. "Tierney made me feel like I wasn't completely worthless as a person."

"But you treat her like she's worthless. You hurt her feelings all the time. I know she's all hard-core and everything, but you do know she has feelings, right?"

"Of course I know she has feelings. Do you know how smart that girl is? No. Nobody does, because she doesn't want you to know. She doesn't want you to know she's funny and sweet either – yes, I used the word sweet and if you ever mention it again there will be consequences." He shoots me the look-into-my-eyes-and-feel-my-wrath glare before continuing. "You know who knows those things? I do. So, yes, Nastya, I know she has feelings and I know how to hurt every one of them."

"So that's what you do? You feel guilty for hurting her so you make up for it by hurting her more? You're the definition of a jackhole. Why wouldn't you have just apologized to her right after it happened? Told people the truth?" I close the laptop and push it aside.

"Because she was so pissed. She broke up with me and said I was everything she ever knew I was and that people were right, that she was pathetic for believing anything else."

"And that was it?"

Apparently that wasn't even close to it. He proceeds to tell me that the night Tierney laid all of that on him, he went to a party and had sex with Kara Matthews.

"Why the hell would you do that?" Nothing Drew does should surprise me at this point; but this does.

"Because I was depressed and pissed and I lost her because I was a prick so I figured I might as well act like one."

"You know, for someone who thinks he's such an awesome debater, your logic is seriously flawed. You hadn't lost her. You didn't lose her until you screwed Kara Matthews. It was a test."

“First of all, I am an awesome debater. Second of all, it was not a test. She broke up with me for real. She hated me.”

“That’s *why* it was a test.” How is it that an inexperienced, social loser like me can grasp this and Drew Leighton cannot? “She handed you a golden opportunity to prove her wrong. Instead, you stuck your dick in Kara Matthews and proved that Tierney meant absolutely nothing and that every bad thing she ever thought about you was true.”

I can’t pretend not to know why I adore Drew Leighton. He’s as fucked up and emotionally stunted as I am, just in a different way. But, right now, I kind of hate him for being so astronomically clueless. I walk over and wrap my arms around him and put my head on his shoulder, because I know what self-loathing looks like and if I want there to be hope for me, I need there to be hope for him.

“You really are an asshole,” I say.

He sighs and rests his chin on the top of my head. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

I end up staying long enough that Mr. and Mrs. Leighton and Sarah get home and I’m roped into having dinner with them, which isn’t such a dreadful thought now that Sarah is not my mortal enemy anymore.

Sometime after the dinner party from hell, Sarah decided she didn’t completely despise me. That whole night may have been the definition of a bad idea, but if one good thing came out of it, it’s that somehow the tension between she and I has dissipated. It’s not like we’re swapping sex stories and bra shopping together, but still. If I knew that teaching her how to knock a guy on the ground would endear her to me, I would have done it months ago. Nevertheless, things have gotten easier, maybe almost nice.

“You’d look a lot better without all that make-up,” she tells me, and I think it’s her idea of a compliment. I don’t know if I’d look better, or just different, but I’m not ready to give it up. “If you looked normal you could have more friends. You know, even with the not talking. People are kind of

scared of you.”

Good. That’s the plan. The conversation is pretty one-sided, but it’s better than being scowled at, insulted and generally treated like a pariah, which is what I’m used to from Sarah.

“Not everybody can be as socially blessed as you, Sarah,” Drew chimes in. “It’s a gift being related to me.”

“No, it’s a curse,” she says and it’s genuine.

“Right. As if you’d have half as many friends or go on half as many dates if I weren’t your brother.” I think Drew is joking but it sets her off, and when I hear what she says, I don’t blame her. I feel sorry for her instead.

“You’re absolutely right! That’s the fucking problem, Drew! Girls all want to be friends with me because they think it’s a free pass *to you*. Guys want to go out with me because they figure I’m a cheap slut *like you*. You want to take credit for my social life? Go ahead. You *are* responsible for it.” She pauses because she’s so worked up and I can tell Drew is wishing he never said anything because he didn’t see this coming at all. I don’t even want to be in the room anymore. I wonder if anybody here has an invisibility cloak I could borrow, because that would be awesome.

“I *hate* being your sister!” Sarah hisses. “I would do *anything* to not be related to you!”

Drew doesn’t say anything else. No cocky comebacks. No derision. He just walks out and leaves me with Sarah, who starts to cry. I’m seriously hoping they have some ice cream here, because without words, it’s pretty much the only thing I’ve got to work with.

“I hate him,” she says through tears, and I know that she doesn’t, but I can’t tell her that.

Later that night, we push all the furniture to the side of the room again and offer to give Mr. and Mrs. Leighton a demonstration of Sarah’s up and coming self-defense skills. I drag Drew back into the room and offer him up

as an assailant and then refresh Sarah's memory on how to cause him bodily harm. And Drew lets her do it as many times as she needs to, even when she doesn't pull back enough and it's really starting to hurt. Then the last time he comes at her from behind, he whispers *I'm sorry* before wrapping his arms around her. There's a part of me that's hoping she'll press her arms up and out before dropping straight down out of his grasp, driving her elbow back into him and then running like I taught her, but I'm glad she doesn't when he apologizes again and she turns in his arms and hugs him back.

Just as he loosens up, she stomps on his instep for real, then mock knees him in the groin and Mrs. Leighton applauds.

CHAPTER 41

Nastya

“You’re destroying your hands,” Josh tells me, picking them up and turning them over to look at my palms. I pull them back, but I can’t help smiling because it’s a compliment. It’s even better than being called distractingly pretty.

“I like it,” I tell him, examining them myself. “Means they’re doing something.” I may not be able to use them the way I’d like—unless one-handed piano playing becomes all the rage, I’m SOL—but at least I can do something. Josh hates sanding. It’s his least favorite thing to do, because according to him, it’s boring. He keeps trying to get me to use a belt sander when it’s feasible but there’s just no satisfaction in that. I like sanding because it’s mindless and repetitive and it lets me think. I can smooth out all the rough edges. And at the end of the night, I can look at what I’ve done and see a pile of sawdust and feel like I’ve accomplished something. When I look at my hands, I don’t see scrapes and scratches; I don’t see injuries; I see healing.

I think I’m still smiling at my hands like an idiot, and when I look back up he’s watching me with something like respect and that look is definitely better than being called distractingly pretty.

“They used to be soft, but the sandpaper is killing them,” he says. “They’re turning into my hands.” I wonder if he thinks that’s an insult. His hands are miracles. I can watch them for hours, transforming wood into something it never dreamed of being.

“So I won’t touch you then and you won’t notice.”

“No need to be rash,” he jokes, picking them up again and running his thumb along one of the scars on my left hand. The plastic surgeons worked miracles, but they still couldn’t get it perfect. You can still see all the wrong about it when you look. “I just like your hands,” he continues, not taking his eyes off them. “Sometimes I think they’re the only real thing about you.”

He says things like that a lot. Like he's reminding me that just because he doesn't ask the questions, it doesn't mean he forgets they exist.

"You want to test that theory?" I ask, smiling at him. He keeps his grip on my hands and pulls me back toward the wall.

"Not with the garage door open."

I spend half of Saturday morning sitting cross-legged on a flatbed at Home Depot with Josh pushing me up and down the lumber aisles, telling me about how every kind of wood varies. I learn which to use for furniture, which are better for floors, which are the best for finishing and so on. Finally he kicks me off the flatbed and I have to walk because he needs it to actually put wood on. I might complain about having to get up if it didn't mean that I get to spend the next twenty minutes watching him load up lumber, and complaining about that would be wrong on so many levels. It's worth the standing any day.

When we get home, we plan to spend the afternoon finishing, but it starts to pour and we can't work with the garage closed and the finish will get cloudy anyway from the humidity. At this point, I could tell you this myself without any prompting. Between Josh and shop class, I'm getting quite an education.

We spend the afternoon in the kitchen and I figure if he can teach me about lumber, I can teach him how to bake a decent cookie. I scold him for packing the flour into a measuring cup, and he keeps doing it just to annoy me until I take it away and do it myself.

"Why do I have to learn how to make them when I have you here to do it for me?"

"You know," I say, pushing a bag of brown sugar and another measuring cup at him since he wants to pack things so badly, "one day I may not be here, and then you'll be cookieless and sad." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. I mentally kick the thought in the groin, and when it doubles over, I knee it in the face so it will never rear its ugly head

again. Unfortunately, it's too late for that.

"It's okay," he says gently, with just a whisper of a smile. "I'm not that sensitive about it. Everyone just assumes I am. Don't be everyone, okay?"

"Why aren't you angry about it?"

"What's the point?"

"So you're just okay with it?"

"I said I wasn't angry. I didn't say I was okay with it. I understand all the crap people say. It's natural. It's inevitable. It's a part of life. Still doesn't make it okay that someone can just disappear like they never existed. But being pissed all the time doesn't make it okay, either. I know. I used to be pissed all the time. It gets old."

"If I were you I'd be the angriest person in the world."

"I think you already are."

There isn't any point in arguing with that, so I step over to show him how hard to pack down the brown sugar, but I still feel shitty.

"After we're done with this, maybe you can help me move the coffee table over from the wall. I think I'm going to get rid of the piece of crap in front of the couch," he says, changing the subject and letting me off the hook.

"You're going to move the love of your life into the middle of the room where Drew can violate it with his shoes any time he likes?" This is genuinely surprising because I know how Josh feels about that table.

"Since when did it become the love of my life?" He sounds bemused.

"You talk about it like it's a girl."

"What can I say?" He shrugs. "That table makes me want to be a better man. Jealous?"

"You know it'll kill Drew not to be able to put his feet on it. Unless you've decided to allow that."

He looks mildly horrified. I think he's imagining it happening.

"Maybe it's fine where it is."

"Just so you know," I inform him, "one day, I'm going to get tired of sharing your affection with that coffee table and I'm going to make you choose."

“Just so you know,” he mimics me, “I would chop that table up and use it for firewood before I would ever choose anything over you.” It’s a ridiculous thing to say, but he nails me with those eyes, making sure I know he’s serious and I wish he wouldn’t do that.

“That would be a waste.” I take the bag of brown sugar he’s still holding and put it back so I can have an excuse to turn away, because I’m not in the mood for serious, and for some reason, this conversation keeps veering back toward places I don’t want to go. “You don’t even have a fireplace.”

“You make it impossible to say anything nice to you.”

“Not impossible. Just difficult,” I say lightly, hoping he’ll change his tone, too. I figure maybe I can distract him and I lift myself up on my tiptoes to kiss him. I can tell he knows what I’m doing and he hesitates just a second before lifting his hand to the back of my neck and leaning into me; his mouth moving against mine, soft and searching, coaxing out my secrets. I pull away and walk over to turn on the mixer, hoping the noise of it will effectively kill any conversation.

“Tell me where you got the scar.” It comes out of nowhere and from everywhere.

“No,” I whisper. He can’t hear it over the mixer, but he knows I said it. The worst thing is that there’s a part of me that’s starting to want to tell him, and that scares the living crap out of me. Josh makes me feel safe and safe is something I never thought I’d feel again.

He pulls me back against him and holds me there. I can feel the warmth of his fingers imprinting the skin at my waist. His mouth is next to my ear, and for just one second I expect him to call me a Russian whore.

“Please.”

“I don’t even know which one you’re asking about,” I say and I’m thankful not to have to see his face. There’s something in the way he says please that won’t let me laugh this off or lie to him. There’s a desperation in it that I don’t want to acknowledge.

“Any. Just one. Just something. Tell me something true.” His arms are solid, wrapping around me, pressing my back against his chest, and it feels more like truth than anything has in such a long time. But I still have nothing to give him.

“I don’t even know what that is anymore.”

“Do you live here anymore?” Margot asks me one afternoon when I get back from school. I wish I could say it’s not a valid question, but I’m at Josh’s more often than not. I come home in the mornings before she gets back from work just so I can shower and change for school. Sometimes not even that. Little by little, my clothes seem to be making it to his house, also.

I can shrug or shake my head or play dumb and act like I don’t know what she’s saying, but I owe her more than that. There’s a part of me that almost opens my mouth, but I just can’t make myself do it. If I say something, I’ll have to say everything and that isn’t happening today. I pull some notebook paper out of one of my school folders and write.

If I say no will you make me come back?

“Sit, Em.” She pulls out a chair at the kitchen table and I do the same, keeping the pencil and paper in my hand.

“I know you’re an adult now,” she puts the word adult in air quotes and I want to shake my head at her and beg her not to make me lose respect. “But you’re not all grown up,” she continues. She’s not telling me anything I don’t know.

Point? I write and turn the paper towards her. I’m not trying to give her attitude, actually. I just want to know if I’m going to be fighting to keep the one thing that’s been keeping me sane. And, really, it’s not even as much Josh as it is that garage.

“Does it help? Being there?”

My instinct is to say that nothing helps, because that’s always my instinct, but it’s not true this time. Everything about being there helps. It’s a place to be and something to do and a person who doesn’t compare me to Emilia. I don’t just nod. I write *yes* on the paper.

“I won’t pretend to like it. But you’re alone here all the time and I don’t like that, either.” She hesitates and I don’t know if I should write something

or just see if she says anything else. And she does. “Are you sleeping with him?”

Well, yes, I am, in fact, sleeping with him, but I’d put money on the fact that that’s not what she’s asking. I shake my head, *no*, because it’s true, even though I’m not sure for how long.

“Really?” she asks and I don’t know if she’s disappointed or relieved or just skeptical.

Really

“I still want to know where you are.”

I nod. I don’t blame her for that and it doesn’t matter anyway, because I know she can track my phone. It’s just courtesy and courtesy I can do.

“He’s really cute,” she smiles, her face full of mischief.

And I nod to that, too.

CHAPTER 42

Josh

“How many miles did you run?” I ask when she walks back into the garage just after ten and strips the can of pepper spray from her waist and the heart monitor off her wrist.

“Didn’t track it. Just ran,” she pants while the sweat drips down her face. She grabs a bottle of water and comes up next to me, looking over my shoulder. “How far did you get?”

“Almost done. I was about to quit. It’ll be ready to finish tomorrow, if it’s not raining.”

“I can help when I get done at Clay’s.” She’s been at Clay’s at least twice a week for a month. He’s doing some sort of freaky layered montage thing. I don’t get it. I like the ones where I can just see her face.

“Tell him he’s monopolizing you and I’m starting to get jealous.”

“I’ll let him know,” she smiles. “He’s got that competition next month and I can’t sit this weekend so I said I’d do it after school.” Between researching with Drew, sitting for Clay, running, school and building with me she never stops for a second. She just signed up for some Krav Maga class, too, whatever that is. She’s not good with down time.

“Is that the one you’re going to with him?”

She nods, tilting back the rest of the bottle of water. “It’s at some art gallery in Ridgmont. They use it every year for the state competition and they display all the finalists’ work.”

“Still going home this weekend?” I wish she wasn’t because I’m used to her now. I realized how much it sucks to cook alone and eat alone and watch TV alone and generally be alone.

“I said I would.”

She never sounds happy about going home and I have absolutely no clue why, except that it has something to do with all the scars she has and the

stories she won't tell me. Whenever she comes back from there, it's like she's out of focus for a few days, like a hologram that keeps blurring in and out. She's always been like that, like music and lyrics to two different songs. It's just worse after she's been back to Brighton.

"You don't talk to anyone in your family?"

"You know I don't." She's getting the where-are-you-going-with-this tone in her voice that I'm so familiar with now.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't tell them what they want to hear. If I talk to them, I'll have to lie and I don't want to." It's more information than she's ever given me before and it's still not enough. It doesn't tell me crap.

"You stopped talking just so you wouldn't have to lie?"

"I didn't plan to. I just wanted a day and then I just wanted one more day and then one more after that and that turned into a week, which turned into a month and you get the idea."

"They just let you stop? They didn't care?"

"They cared, but it's not like they could do anything about it. What were they going to do? Shake me? Yell at me and insist? Ground me? I never left the house anyway. They didn't really have a lot of options. Plus, according to my impressive collection of therapists, it was a very *natural* response, whatever that means." *Natural response to what, Sunshine? Please keep talking.* But she doesn't. Just another random piece in a puzzle made of all the wrong pieces.

"Wouldn't lying have been easier than silence?"

"No. I'm crap at it. I don't believe in doing something if you can't excel at it." She's back to sarcasm and we're effectively done with this conversation. I know how it works and I wonder how long I'll let her get away with it.

I start cleaning up and she walks over to crash in the chair while she waits, finally noticing the bag I put there earlier.

"You don't want my ass on your counters but you're putting crap on my chair," she jokes, picking it up to put it on the ground next to her.

"Open it."

She looks in the bag and pulls out the shoe box, then narrows her eyes at me. I watch because I want to see her face when she opens the box. I know it's a stupid present, probably not the thing girls want to get. I'm not really an expert on the whole thing.

And then maybe I am, because her face lights up when she sees them.

"You bought me boots?" she says, like I just gave her diamonds.

"I didn't get to give you anything for your birthday. I hope they fit. I looked at your shoes one day and they said seven so that's what I got." I shove my hands in my pockets.

She's already taking off her running shoes and trying them on.

"Steel-toed?" she asks.

I nod.

"And black." She smiles and I love that smile more because I think I put it there.

"And black," I confirm, though I don't know why.

"You didn't wrap them," she scolds.

"Yeah, I was hoping you wouldn't call me on that."

"I'm kidding," she laughs and I could listen to it forever. She stands and examines the boots on her feet. "They're perfect."

"Now you can get around the good stuff in shop."

Her smile fades. "I can't use any of it."

"You can use some of it," I say, because I want the smile back and because it's true. She can do more than she thinks she can. For some reason, she just won't try. "And I can be your other hand when you need it."

She's walking around the garage and flexing her feet to break them in and I realize that there really is nothing sexier than this girl in black work boots. "You'll have to bring them to school to change into."

"Screw that," she says, and I get the smile back tenfold. "I'm wearing these to school."

"So I did okay?" I ask, just because I want to hear her say it.

"Almost better than the pennies." She pushes herself up on her toes and kisses me and she's salty and sweaty and awesome.

“You didn’t kiss me for the pennies,” I say.

“I didn’t know I was allowed.”

She refuses to go inside once she’s got those boots, so we spend another hour in the garage, where she helps me start measuring and marking for a side table she designed for a shop assignment. It’s a really cool design with Queen-Anne-style legs. I wish she could build the whole thing herself but the hand does make some of it impossible and she doesn’t have the expertise for all of it yet, anyway. I’ve been at this for ten years and I still have trouble with a lot things. I do walk her through every step, though. She yells at me if I do something without explaining, because even if she can’t do it herself, she wants to at least know how.

I don’t get nearly as much done as I used to out here, but I think it might be worth it, because there’s something seriously hot about her bossing me around in my garage with a hammer in her hand. I haven’t been bossed around in a while and she’s really cute when she’s determined and pissed, so I don’t mind so much.

I’ve lived and breathed sawdust for as long as I can remember. I think she does now, too.

CHAPTER 43

Josh

Expected. That's what we've become and it's scarier than anything else.

We're in the courtyard at lunch every day. We don't touch each other or laugh, and of course, we don't talk, but we're together. No one bothers us. Other than an occasional visit from Clay, the force field stays intact.

I'm trying to finish reading the story Ms. McAllister assigned, because there's a quiz fifth hour today and I haven't gotten through it yet. She leans over to see what I'm reading and tilts her head just enough so that it just barely grazes my shoulder and even the slightest contact from her makes me feel home. It's instinctual. I turn toward her and kiss her hair before I realize what I've done in a courtyard full of people. For us, it's a version of PDA on par with ripping each other's clothes off and performing a live sex show right here.

I wait for the world to implode, or at least for the looks and comments to start, but there's nothing. No distinguishable change in the atmosphere at all. And I wonder if the impossible has happened. That this, us, she and I, we have become normal. As soon as the word enters my mind, I know it's the wrong one. We haven't become normal, we've become expected. And not just by everyone at school. I've come to expect us, too. I expect her. I expect her here. I expect her at home. I expect her in my life.

And it's terrifying.

CHAPTER 44

Nastya

“I like to talk, so I’m just going to imagine our conversation here,” Clay says while he’s drawing me on his back porch after school. I smile and he yells at me to put my face back, which isn’t easy, because Clay yelling at me is even funnier.

“Normally you’d hit all the gay questions first because that’s what people like to do,” he says while he draws, and I don’t know how he can concentrate on both things at once. I’m a one thing at a time type of person which is why I have so much trouble keeping my mouth shut. Silence takes a serious amount of discipline. Because when you *can* talk but you just *don’t*, part of your mind is constantly occupied with concentrating on making sure you don’t open your mouth. Some days I wonder if it would be easier if I physically couldn’t speak because then I wouldn’t have to think about it all the time.

“First question is always the classic *Did you always know you were gay?* That’s a good one,” he says, looking at me without really looking. “Answer? I don’t know. I don’t really think so, because I didn’t really know what gay was ‘til I was like ten. So I’m not sure. When I knew, I knew and I didn’t really try to figure it out but people always ask that one.”

He picks up a gray squishy eraser thing and rubs it against the paper.

“Next one is usually *Have you ever been with a girl, and if you haven’t, then how can you be sure you’re gay?* Answer? Not telling. None of your business. Next.” He puts the eraser down and looks at the picture like he’s not happy with something.

“Then there’s the one I don’t mind answering. *Were your parents pissed?*” The eraser is back again. “Not really. I don’t think they were pissed. They didn’t tell me if they were. Disappointed? Maybe. But if so, they didn’t outright say that either. I got the *It may not be the path we would have chosen for you, but we just want you to be happy* speech. It’s a classic. I think it’s on

a website or something so parents can just print it off and read it, because both of them said the exact same thing, like they coordinated it or something. They haven't been together since I was two, so I had to do the coming out thing twice with them. I think Janice, my dad's wife, was a little freaked out, but I didn't care what she thought so much. And she's been cool since." Damn, this boy can talk. I don't think he took a breath once. I wonder if I should be embarrassed that I wanted to ask him every one of those questions, and if I talked, I probably would have by now.

Clay is looking happier with the picture now. His face is relaxed. When he's frustrated, his face tenses and he twists the bottom of his shirt around. I spend a lot of time staring at him, too. Not much else to do.

"But enough about me. Let's talk about you. What first? I bet your classic is *why don't you talk?* I'm right aren't I? But I'm going to skip that one. I think there are far more interesting questions to ask."

He asks his questions. Lots of them. But he doesn't get any answers from me so he comes up with his own. He takes pleasure in telling me how the world is coming to an end because Josh Bennett lets me sit with him at lunch and has been seen not only having unsolicited conversations with people but also, *gasp*, smiling. And that thought makes me smile, which Clay seems to appreciate.

According to Clay, the prevailing explanation for my foray into the *Josh Bennett Dead Zone* is that I must already be dead. That one amuses me because they think it's funny, but I think it's kind of true. Other people are sure I'm in a cult and I'm brainwashing him. That theory is my favorite. I'll have to let Josh know.

"At least you shouldn't have to worry about that shitdick Ethan after today," Clay continues.

I look at him, confused.

"You didn't hear about that?" His eyes are wide but I don't know why, because he knows no one really speaks to me. "This afternoon, Ethan was walking down the hall and bragging about you blowing him in the bathroom."

I shrug. This isn't anything new. Ethan spews this crap all the time, especially since he's figured out that I don't dispute it. The only three people

I care about know it's not true, and I have a feeling that everyone who knows Ethan, knows it's not true also. Clay must see my lack of shock and it makes him almost giddy at the fact that he gets to tell me the rest of this story.

“Yeah, ok, not a big deal, right? But this time he did it with Josh walking behind him. It was awesome. Michelle and I had a front row seat. Josh nailed Ethan to the wall and Ethan's like ‘You don't scare me, Bennett.’ and Josh is like ‘Good. Then you won't run the next time you see me coming, because if you ever say her name again, I'll make it possible for you to suck your own dick.’ The best part was that Josh never even raised his voice. Just flat, scary freaking calm. Then he let Ethan go and walked away like nothing happened.” He raises his eyebrows at me. “See? Awesome.”

I don't really think it's so awesome. I know how much Josh hates to call attention to himself and I wish he didn't think he had to do it for me.

Clay finishes the drawing, and when he starts cleaning up, I go grab my stuff. At this point, I've paid my debt for his door-holding ten times over. I figure he owes me something now. When he's done, I pull the photograph I've been holding for days out of my backpack and hand it to him. Then I grab a sheet of paper and a pen and ask for what I want.

CHAPTER 45

Nastya

I didn't remember what actually happened to me until over a year after it did. For days, then weeks, then months, I knew what everyone else knew. I knew that I left home to walk to school to record my last audition piece. I had gone home to change and get ready first, before heading back to campus. I agonized over every aspect of my appearance that day, especially my hands. I meticulously painted my nails to perfection. I wore a pale pink blouse with pearl buttons and a white eyelet skirt and everyone knew what I was wearing because they found me in it, even if the buttons were torn off.

I knew exactly where I was found in a heavily wooded section of the preserve that separated the park I cut through that day from the subdivision behind it. I knew that they didn't find me until late that night because a thunderstorm had rolled in, making the search nearly impossible. By that time, the Amber Alert had been running all over the state for hours. My name, my picture, my description. Everywhere. Even after they found me, the morbid curiosity didn't stop. People never can get enough of tragic stories about pretty little girls. I was good entertainment for a while, especially during the *will she or won't she* period, when they didn't know if I'd live.

I knew that when they got me to the hospital I was taken into surgery immediately and my heart stopped on the table for ninety-six seconds before they were able to restart it again.

I knew what had happened to me by piecing together an extensive list of injuries. For months, that's what I felt like. A list of injuries. A sum total of hurts. My entire body was made of pain.

One day I overheard one of my many doctors talking to a police detective when he didn't know I could hear. *Have you caught that monster yet?* he asked. The detective told him that they hadn't. *You should string him up when you get him. He ruined that poor girl.* I guessed he was right, because that was exactly how I felt, and when you hear your doctor saying

that you're ruined, you figure he knows what he's talking about.

“Did you always sleep with a shirt on? Before me?” I ask Josh when we get into bed. Asher hates sleeping in a shirt. He insists that all guys hate sleeping in clothes but I don't know if it's true. Josh always sleeps in a t-shirt and boxer shorts, which is usually what I'm sleeping in, too. Josh won't let me fold his underwear, but apparently he doesn't have a problem with my wearing them.

“Before you, I didn't sleep with anything on,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice, even if I can't see it.

“Oh.” I feel my face get hot. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be,” he laughs. “It's a good trade off.”

His hand finds its way up to my cheek. He leans down and kisses me and his lips are an invitation I'm going to have to accept sooner or later. “If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were blushing.”

But the fact is that he doesn't know me better. He doesn't really know me at all.

For the first time in weeks, we're not spending half the night in the garage. It's still early, but I tell him I'm tired and I want to go to bed. I'm not tired. I'm just hoping he'll follow me. After about fifteen minutes, I hear him come out of the shower and then he climbs in next to me. He kisses the side of my head and says good night and then laces his fingers through my mine like he always does; like he's reminding me that he's still here, or maybe vice-versa.

I slide my hand under the fabric of his t-shirt, up his stomach until it's flat against the skin on his chest and I can feel his heart beating against my palm. I can just hear his breath hitch because he didn't see it coming. He's

warm and solid and I want to touch every part of him. I should stop this, because I know where it's going. But I'm the one who started it, and really, I just don't want to.

"Sunshine." It's all he says.

He rests his hand on top of mine through the fabric of his shirt. "You can take it off if you want to," I tell him.

"I'd rather take off yours," he jokes.

"That, too," I say, but I'm not joking. I feel him tense just slightly under my hand, but he doesn't move to do anything, and we lay there for a minute, just breathing and trying to read each other's thoughts.

"You have my permission," I whisper.

It isn't like I've never touched him and he's never touched me. Just never everywhere at once. I'm in one of his t-shirts, like always, and he pulls it up over my head and I let him because that's what I want. I want him to touch me. Here. Now. Everywhere. Always.

"I wish I could see you," he says.

"I'm glad you can't," I admit. Too many scars. I can blame them even if they aren't the real reason.

I'm more at peace with Josh than anywhere else in the world and I want to run away before I ruin us both. But then his shirt is off, too, and his body is pressed against mine so that there's no space between us. He pushes my hair away, muttering something about "stupid hair always in your face," but he keeps his hand tangled in it, and then he kisses me, and that's what we do for a long time.

Somehow he leaves my body just enough to reach his nightstand to get a condom which I think about telling him he doesn't need. Then he's leaning over me and kissing me again and I let myself focus on just that. Because it's real. It's true. One, real, amazing, true thing. And then his knee slips between mine gently pushing them apart and a moment later I can feel the pressure of him. I know the exact moment when he realizes—realizes one of the thousand things I never told him. Because he stops right there. Suddenly eerily still. He's not kissing me anymore. He's staring at me and his face is so close to mine that I think he can read my mind.

I know he's going to say something, but I don't want him to, because it will make me tell him things. He'll make me feel safe and safe is something I should never feel again.

There are a thousand words in his eyes but all he says is, "Sunshine?" It's not my name. It's a question. Or maybe it's more than one, but I don't let him say anything else.

I reach around him, though I'm not sure this will even work, and I tilt my hips up and shove him towards me. And, for just a second, there's tearing and burning, and then it's done. I squeeze my eyes shut because pain is familiar and grounding and I'd rather give myself to that. I'm used to pain and this really isn't so bad. It's the look on his face that I'm not used to – awe, confusion, wonder and please, please, please don't let it be love.

"Are you okay?" He's inside me but he still doesn't move. His hands are on either side of my face and he looks like he's scared of me.

"Yes," I whisper, but I don't know if it comes out. I don't know if I'm okay. It shouldn't be possible to be this close to another person. To let them crawl inside you.

CHAPTER 46

Josh

When it's over, we're both shaking, and for a moment I'm confused and comforted and loved and then I'm lost. I don't know what happened. Just that it did. And she's here, but she's not. And I want to be happy, but I can't, because she's crying underneath me. At first, it's just soft and barely there and I hardly recognize what's happening because I've never seen her cry. Then her body starts racking with it and it's so jagged and wrong. There's still barely any sound coming out, but it's the shaking that's almost worse and it steals every undeserved ounce of joy I felt just the moment before.

I need to get away from here. I wish she would stop crying, because I don't think I can take it for one more second and it's not like it's loud or melodramatic. It's not. It's just heartbreaking.

I don't know what I did, so I just hold her and whisper *I'm sorry*, because I don't know what else to do. *I'm sorry*. Again and again and again against her hair. I don't know how many times I say it or for how long, just that I can't stop. But she doesn't stop crying and I know that it's not enough.

She's gone in the morning and I don't know if she's gone from the bed or the house or from everything.

She isn't at school. I called her phone three times, even though I'm not supposed to, but she didn't answer. I didn't expect her to. I wanted to text her but I couldn't think of any words that wouldn't sound desperate.

When I get home, she's waiting in my garage. She's on the counter where she used to sit and her chair is empty on the other side.

I hit the button and the automatic door lowers, bringing all of the dread of this moment down with it. I walk into the house, because I don't want to

do this in my garage.

She's Nastya today. The hair, make-up, clothes, everything black like it is for school, except today, it's for me. I shake my head. Nothing about her is real. I've had her sitting in front of me for months and I didn't see her, I didn't hear her. I didn't know her any better than everyone else. I feel like I've failed somehow. Failed me, failed her, failed us.

I don't say anything and she doesn't say anything. I start wondering if we may never speak again and then my mouth opens.

"Did I lose you?" It's not what I expected to ask, but I want the answer. Her face doesn't change and I realize that I had forgotten what that blank expression even looked like on her.

"I lost you."

"Impossible," I answer, but the word barely comes out.

"You don't want me." Her tone is flat and she has this weird calm about her that makes me want to scream.

I want to tell her that I don't remember what it's like not to want her, that maybe there isn't anything else I do want. I want to ask her who the hell she is to tell me what I do and don't want. But nothing will come out of my mouth and maybe she thinks that means I'm agreeing with her.

"So this is over?" I ask.

"What's left?" This is where she finally looks in my eyes and I know it's because she means it.

"You didn't tell me," I say, because I'm not ready to say there's nothing left.

"Tell you what?" She's playing dumb and it insults us both.

"You know what."

"You didn't ask."

"Ask?" I think my voice goes up an octave because I can't believe this and I feel a decade's worth of resolve shatter. "I didn't ask? Is that what you want? You want me to start asking questions? Now? I'm allowed? Because I don't think you want that, but hey, let's go for it. What the fuck happened to your hand?"

She flinches. Maybe because of the question. Maybe because I'm yelling now.

"No? Not that one? No good? Then how about what the hell happened last night?" I want this answer more than I ever wanted the other one.

She doesn't respond which isn't even the slightest bit shocking, but I don't need her to, because I'm on a tear and I have no intention of stopping.

"Tell me! You're the one who came over here and insinuated yourself into every part of my life and then you wait until I have every last thread of my existence wrapped around you and then you leave. Why? What is that about? Was it a joke? Were you bored? Thought it would be fun to fuck with me?"

"I'm ruined."

"What?" I don't even know what that means. "Because you were a virgin?" It sounds stupid and I realize how much I hate that word. Maybe I'm stupid. Actually, I am stupid for ever assuming I knew anything about this girl. But she walks around with this guttermouth spewing innuendos like she's talking about baking cookies and then I'm the prick for not realizing she's never done it before. Somehow, I'm to blame for everything here and I don't even know what I did.

"Why then? Why did you sleep with me?" I hate the desperation in my voice.

"Because I knew you wanted to." Straight. Cold. Matter-of-fact. Empty. She knows it's a lie.

"Bullshit, Sunshine." There's no controlling my voice now. I am beyond pissed. "You lost your virginity because I wanted you to? Don't you *dare* put this on me. I *never* would have done that to you."

"You didn't do anything to me. I did it to you. I used you." The dead calm in her voice is infuriating.

"For what?" I'm shaking now because I'm so angry.

"It was the last thing about me that wasn't ruined. I just wanted to finish it." She's drawing circles on the floor with her toes.

"What the fuck does that even mean?"

Nothing. That's what I'm getting. That's what I'm worth to her.

“You’re telling me that you used me to ruin you?” I’m forcing calm into my voice but I don’t even know where I’m getting it from. Maybe the ice coming off of her is starting to reach me. “That makes a lot of fucking sense.” I laugh and it’s bitter. I walk across the room and my fist is through my bedroom door. The wood splinters into my hand. I see her cringe for a second before she remembers herself. Then the nothing expression returns and all that’s left is Nastya.

“So what, then? Did I? Did I ruin you?”

She nods. And I laugh again because it’s the only sound that will come out.

“Fucking amazing.” I can’t stop the laughing and I think I might be crazy. I throw my hands up because I’m done. “Congratulations, then. You wanted to be ruined? Well, you did yourself one better because you wrecked me, too, Sunshine. Now we’re both worth shit.”

She doesn’t move. Just stares at the ground. Her hands are fists like mine.

I sit down because I think my knees are shaking now, too. I bend over and press my palms against my eyes. I can’t see her, but I know she’s still there.

“Get the fuck out of my house.”

“I told you not to love me,” she whispers, almost like she’s saying it to herself.

“Believe me, Nastya. I don’t.”

She walks out and shuts the door silently behind her. It’s the first time I’ve ever said her name.

Nastya

Nastya. The word sounds like broken glass coming out of his mouth. Sleeping with Josh isn’t what ruins me. This is what ruins me. His voice. His face. His horror at this whole fucked up situation. He looked at me like he

couldn't believe I was doing this and I can't blame him because I couldn't believe it either. But I did it anyway, because that's what I do.

CHAPTER 47

Nastya

Everything is hell now and I deserve it, but I can handle pain if it's pain of my own choosing.

Drew tiptoes around me now and I avoid him. I won't put him in the middle of this. He belongs to Josh. I spend most of my time with Clay. Or alone. Being alone would be easier if I liked myself. But, right now, I don't. Not even a little.

Fourth and fifth periods are the worst, because that's when I have to see him and I can't pretend that he never existed, like I try to every other moment of the day. As if that might help. As if anything might help. I could pretend that I don't watch him, that I have enough resolve and self-respect not to let him catch me staring, but I don't have the discipline. Every day I say I won't look, but I do. The only good thing about it is that he never catches me looking. Because he's never looking at me. And he shouldn't. I don't deserve him.

The world should be full of Josh Bennetts. But it's not. I had the only one.

And I threw him away.

One day Margot sits down at the kitchen table with me while I pretend to concentrate on reading a poem I haven't comprehended a word of. My homework is getting done more these days. I can't even tell you how many

miles I run.

“It hasn’t escaped me that apparently you live here again,” she says.

I keep staring at the poem like the words will suddenly swim up from the paper and make their way into my brain.

“I’d ask you if you wanted to talk about it.” She just barely smiles and she’s trying, but it’s pointless. Because everything is pointless right now. I’m pointless.

I even start going home on the weekends so no one will expect me at Sunday dinner. And maybe that’s the only thing I do that’s worth a damn.

No one asks me why I keep coming back all of a sudden. They just let me come.

I get another birthday present one weekend when I get home. Since I didn’t take the phone, my mother gives me a camera. It’s simpler, not as crazy as hers, but I don’t think it’s the camera she’s giving me, anyway. She’s giving me part of her. Trying to replace part of me. I don’t know if it’s a good idea or a bad idea but I’m starting to get tired of judging and second guessing everyone’s motives, because I’m starting to grasp the real problem and I know that it’s me. I don’t have Josh anymore. I’ve kind of lost Drew. I need my mother. I want the warmth of that unconditional love so much that I’m willing to ignore the price, and for the first time in almost three years, maybe I can admit that, even if it’s only in my head.

We don’t talk yet, but maybe.

My mother shows me how to use the camera and we wander around taking pictures of nothing and everything. She doesn’t even drill me about format and composition. Sometimes my hand will stutter and ruin one but we ignore it.

On Sundays, I work on teaching my dad how to make pancakes from scratch instead of a mix, because it’s really just baking in a pan and it’s something I can do.

Nothing is perfect. It’s not even good yet, but maybe.

I miss him today. I miss him every day. I went to Home Depot tonight just to walk through the lumber aisle and try to breathe.

I'm back to hiding in the bathrooms at lunch. Clay props the door open for me again, but we pretend it doesn't mean anything.

My hands are turning soft again.

Josh will be eighteen next week.

Josh

"Who's it from?" I ask when Mrs. Leighton hands me the last present on the table. We've eaten dinner and done the whole cake thing. I skipped the wishing. Nothing in me wants to be here.

"It was on the porch this afternoon. It had a piece of paper taped on it, but all it said was your name. No card."

I rip open the paper and now I want to disappear so I can be alone in this moment. I want to be allowed to see this without anyone seeing me.

The frame I'm holding in my hands is a simple black gallery frame. It's nothing special. The picture in the frame is what throws me, knocks me on the ground and kicks me around a little bit.

When I pull off the rest of the wrapping paper a photograph that had been stuck in the front of the frame falls to the floor. Drew picks it up and looks at it before handing it to me and I can tell he wants to keep holding it.

I recognize the picture. It was in a photo album on the bookshelf in my living room. It's my mother with Amanda on her lap and they aren't looking at the camera. They're smiling at each other, but you can still see their faces. They're both beautiful and I realize that I forgot that they were; like everything else I've lost to forgetting, because there's nobody left to remind me.

There are photographs all over my house. Everywhere. I didn't put all of the people I loved away. They all still hang on the walls, mostly because they always have. I didn't put them there, but I didn't take them down, either. I

left them where they were like nothing happened. But not this picture. This one has been tucked away in an album for years. I love this picture. I forgot that I did. And I can see this one. Not like the ones on the walls that I've walked by every day, so many times that they stopped registering a long time ago.

The picture in the frame is a perfectly rendered charcoal drawing, just like the photograph, only bigger. Even though it's black and white, I watch my mother's eyes crinkle with her smile and I see my sister breathe, and for a moment, I think they're alive. It's Clay's work. There isn't a question. And there's only one person who could have given him that photograph. But she isn't here, either, because she left me, too.

She has no right to do this. To make it harder for me to hate her, because I need to hate her right now more than I need anything.

"I forgot how hot your mom was," Drew says, because he detests uncomfortable situations and his way of dissolving the tension is to remind us that he's an ass. And I love him for it.

Mrs. Leighton smacks Drew's arm. His father comes around and smacks his head and then pulls Mrs. Leighton to him and kisses her hair.

And I go home alone.

It's been five weeks since she walked out of my house. I started counting the second the door closed. I wonder when I'll stop.

"So who's Corinthos having killed now?" Drew walks in after school and crashes on the other end of the couch. I switch the TV off because I'm not watching it anyway and I really just don't care.

"So," he asks, after waiting through the requisite fifteen seconds of silence, which is the maximum Drew can stand. "Are you ever going to tell

me what happened between you two?”

“No,” I say, because it’s true. Because it’s the last thing I want to talk about. Because I might actually cry if I do, and honestly, because I really don’t know what the hell happened. “I’m probably not.”

Drew nods and doesn’t argue. I know she’s been avoiding him, too, even in debate. “I miss having her around.”

“Get used to it,” I say and I turn the TV back on.

CHAPTER 48

Nastya

I turn away from the mirror to catch Drew walking into the girls' bathroom in the back corner of the drama department. The drama teachers have planning this period and I've learned that this bathroom is almost always empty. So it's my favorite.

"I assume we're alone," he says, turning and locking the door. "You know this is like the fourth bathroom I've looked for you in. I was starting to fear for my safety."

"Seriously, Drew?" I whisper and it's barely audible because I don't care if he locked the door and no one's around.

"I miss you," he says, like this is a valid excuse.

"You'll live."

"You miss me, too. Admit it, Nastypants."

He's right. I miss the crap out of him.

"What is that, anyway? Nastypants? You make me sound like I shit myself."

He looks down at my jeans as if he's considering this.

"I'm here to drag you out of your social abyss."

"You're here to ask me for a favor, so get on with it, because I don't like talking here."

"I need your bodyguard services this Friday."

"No, no, and no again. And wait. Hold on a second. No."

"What if I say please?"

"What if I say no?" He's trying to give me the look, but he and I are so far past the look that it's ridiculous. "You don't need me to get you through one night. Just tell everyone you're meeting me after. They'll buy it."

"No one will buy that after you and Josh. No one's going to believe I'd

do that.”

“There’s nothing you wouldn’t do.”

“That’s the *only* thing I wouldn’t do and everybody knows it. The only person in the world I wouldn’t screw over is Josh.”

“We’re not talking about it, so stop bringing up his name and trying to insinuate him into this conversation.”

“He is in this conversation whether I say his name or not.”

He holds his hands up in surrender at the glare I shoot him. I will not talk about Josh.

“Fine. All I have to say is that I thought I had self-destructive tendencies but you two make me look well-adjusted.”

“Is he alright?”

“Actually I’m pretty sure he’s the opposite of alright, but I’m also pretty sure that you knew that when you asked.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Nope. Not playing this game. You’re the one who made the rules. Not going to talk about Josh.” He makes himself comfortable on the bathroom counter like we’re in his kitchen at home. “Now, subject at hand. They don’t need to think that I’m with you. I just need you to come and keep me in line. If you don’t, I’ll end up walking through the house, asking every single person if they’ve seen her. And then I’ll probably say shitty things about her just to have an excuse to say her name or get her attention.” He doesn’t say her name now but it’s no secret who he’s talking about. “You have to save me from myself. And save yourself from utter boredom and solitude in the process. Win-win.”

There isn’t any win for me in this situation. I’d rather staple my lips to my tongue than go to a party tonight. I climb up next to him on the counter and let out all the air in my lungs and he does the same.

“I should just go back to the way I was before,” he says. “I used to be so awesome and she made me suck.”

“If that’s what you want, do it. Start tonight. You won’t have any problem finding some girl willing to accompany you on the road back to soulless debauchery.”

He doesn't respond, because he and I both know what he lost on that path already, and he hasn't forgiven himself for it. I don't know if there's another solution but I try to offer him one.

"Isn't there another girl you can ask out? For real? Try to have a normal relationship? You messed everything up with Tierney, but you could actually try to learn from that and do it right this time." It's an asinine suggestion. If he told me to learn from my mistakes with Josh and put that knowledge to use with someone else, I'd dislocate his jaw. But it's all I've got to go with right now. "What about Tessa Walter?" I suggest.

He shakes his head. "Crazy eyes."

"Macy Singleton?"

"Laughs too loud."

"Audrey Lake?"

This time he glares at me like I've just suggested he date the Antichrist.

"She says *supposably*." If Drew Leighton were a woman, this would be his unforgivable thing.

"So why don't you just try again with Tierney?" She's the only one he really wants. I could name every girl in this school and he would find the flaw in every last one of them.

"I can't ask her to forgive me. I wouldn't respect her if she did. I don't deserve it."

I don't deserve it either. I'm not enough of a hypocrite to argue.

"Can't we just skip it? You don't have to go. You never even drink at these parties. Why would you want to hang out with a bunch of drunk assholes for no reason?" It's true. It took me a while to pick up on it, but once I did, I never stopped noticing. Drew gets a drink as soon as he walks in and he carries it around the whole night, so everyone assumes he's drinking, but he never is.

"You noticed that, huh?" He's almost impressed. "You're the first one."

"I'm guessing there's a reason." I'm expecting him to say something about having to drive, but that's not what I get.

"Kara Matthews," he answers, like this explains everything, but he

knows it doesn't and I wait for him to give me the rest. "I don't even remember doing it. Tierney ripped me to shreds for hours that day and she was right. She was right about everything she said about me, except the fact that I didn't care about her. But everything else she nailed me on. I got so lit that night that I would have screwed anyone at that party. I shit all over Tierney and everything and I don't even remember doing it."

"And you think if you weren't so drunk you wouldn't have done it?"

"No," he replies honestly. "I probably would have. But at least I'd know. If I was going to mess everything up, at least it would have been a conscious choice."

It makes perfect sense to me. He may not revel in the pain he caused himself but at least he could say that he chose it. That's not the only thing that haunts him, though. There's a question there, too. The slim, slight possibility that, just maybe, he wouldn't have done it. Maybe if he hadn't been so wasted things might have turned out differently, and he would be with Tierney right now, not in a girls' bathroom being haunted by dead possibilities.

He shrugs in resignation. "I figure the next time I want to completely destroy all chance of happiness, at least I'll remember doing it." It'll make the self-loathing that much easier.

I could say that I have no idea why I agreed to this, but it would be a lie. I miss Drew, too. And I'm sick of myself. I'd rather drink flat beer and hang out with people who don't like me. No one at that party will hate me as much as I hate myself, so it'll be an improvement.

It's crowded already when we get to Kevin Leonard's house. The music is blaring and I wonder how long this can possibly last before the neighbors call the police. I hope they do, so I can leave, because I already regret it. I don't mind all of the people. I actually do better with crowds and numbers but the noise makes me edgy. I need the quiet to hear what's coming.

I follow Drew through the house, my fingers threaded through his belt

loops so I don't lose him. He wants me on him tonight, I'm on him.

Damien Brooks finds us first and I can't stand him but he's at least familiar.

"Drew!" He's already drunk. One word and it's evident. "Damn. I know you had her first but I didn't think you'd go back there after Bennett. Man, you've got balls." He's laughing and congratulatory. Drew's laughing, too. I'm not even in the room. Oh, wait. I am, but you wouldn't know it the way they're talking. Good thing I don't give a shit.

Then Damien's eyes go wide like he's just discovered the atom or the concept of self-pleasure. "Have you guys been sharing her this whole time?"

Maybe I do give a shit. At least a little. Because I'm not listening to this anymore. I grab Drew's hand and start to pull away. I think he's had enough, too, because he doesn't fight me.

And then there's Tierney. The sniper I'm being used as a human shield against. I actually really like her and I wish I wasn't the person being tasked with keeping Drew away from her. I don't blame her for wanting to hate Drew, but it doesn't mean she does. All of a sudden I wish they could just get their shit together, but my hypocrisy slaps me in the face before I can think any more on the subject.

We make it to the kitchen at the back of the house where Kevin Leonard is manning a keg with a crowd surrounding it. They start chanting Drew's name like he's their god, and I guess if I was a teenage boy with no game, he'd be mine, too. It takes no time before we have cups full of warm beer and are fighting our way back out of the kitchen.

An hour and four and a half crap beers later, I'm leaning against a wall while Drew talks to a girl in a very tiny, very sparkly top, who has no problem shamelessly flirting with him in front of me. True to form, Drew is still carrying around the same half-full cup of beer he's had since we walked in. I'm not completely trashed, but I'm tired and I want to go home. I'm tipsy enough that my brain isn't bombarding me with a diatribe on how idiotic I am. Instead it's whispering that calling Josh wouldn't be so bad. Drunk dialing the perfect, incredible, wonderful boy I pissed all over might even be enough to win me a gold medal in selfishness. I don't get to fully explore that thought, though, because I'm back on duty.

Tierney starts walking in our direction and sparkly tank top girl walks away. Tierney's like that. No one really fucks with her and I want to hug her and tell her I think she's sooooo awesome and maybe I'm a little drunker than I thought. I didn't eat today which might account for that. Rookie mistake.

I step over to put my half full beer on a really ugly end table (I notice these things now); I don't need to drink any more. Once I can pull Drew away from Tierney, I will have fulfilled my responsibilities and I can get him to take me home.

When I turn around, Drew isn't there. And neither is Tierney.

I start pushing my way through the throng of people, looking for either of them. I figure one will lead to the other, but it's not like I can walk around yelling their names and asking if anyone has seen them. I'm staying against the wall, out of the center of the chaos, when Kevin Leonard finds me.

"Enjoying the party?"

Huh? Is he expecting an answer? I give him a stupid thumbs-up and try to keep walking. Drew Leighton so owes me something for this. I start mentally making a list of what I want. There's only one thing on it, so far, but I think it's out of his control.

"Wanna have sex with me?" Kevin asks. This was not the one thing on my list. I try to walk around him and his monstrous ego. He's obviously plastered and I'm getting more sober by the minute. I really want to go home and I want to kick Drew's ass. I'm not sure which of those things I want more right now and Kevin Leonard is still talking.

"We can go to my room. I blocked off the upstairs. No one will know."

I'll know, jackass. And I'll spend the rest of my days trying to block it from my memory.

"Come on, baby." Guess that's my answer. Real boys do call girls baby. Too bad I don't feel like laughing and I don't have time to choke him. "Please."

Does he think I'm looking for manners now? Well, since you said please, I may have to reconsider my previous *hell no* stance on screwing you. I was just waiting for the good breeding to kick in. I shake my head as

definitively as I can and keep moving. Mercifully, he gives up and doesn't follow me.

He did give me an idea, though, because if I can't find Drew in the next ten minutes, I'm not waiting around to be propositioned again. I'll find another way home.

The next ten minutes are as fruitless as the last. I even give it another ten, just for shits and giggles, before I finally concede defeat. I walk the downstairs, and at least a few people have started to filter out so it's not as jam-packed, but the music is still tattooing itself on my eardrums and splitting my brain. I shoot off a text to Drew asking where he is but I don't get any response. I send him another one telling him I'm sneaking upstairs to try to find a ride. I still don't get an answer.

I hang around the bottom of the stairs for a few minutes, and when Kara Matthews starts doing a beer bong in the kitchen, I use the distraction to duck under Kevin's makeshift barricade and sneak upstairs so I can use my phone.

I may be a little shitty right now, but even with a few beers in me, I never forget to watch my back. No one follows me and I turn down the hall to the left and slip into one of the bedrooms. I stay against the wall until I can feel the light switch. The room is empty. The music is still blaring and I can just make out the muted chanting of Kara's name. I take out my phone, knowing there are only two people I can really call. Josh is the one I want to call but I don't really know if that's allowed anymore. There's Clay, who I'd have to text, but I could have done that from downstairs. I came up here for one reason and it's because I wanted to call Josh.

I dial and wait but there isn't any answer. It doesn't go straight to voicemail. It just rings. When the recording finally kicks in, I hang up. It's too pathetic to think about leaving him a message. I flip the keyboard open to shoot Clay a text and see if he can pick me up, but before I can get the first word out, the door opens.

And Kevin Leonard is there.

"I thought you'd change your mind," he slurs, and I wonder how much he struggled to get it out. I'm about to shake my head again but he's right in front of me now. And I'm not running away or saying no or pushing him. Because, really, I just don't care. If I want to ruin myself, then this is my

chance. Josh is gone, like everything that was taken from me and everything I've thrown away since. There is no Josh Bennett for me anymore. There really isn't anything.

That's the only moment I have to think before his tongue is in my mouth and he tastes like piss beer and I probably do, too, and everything about this is disgusting, but I deserve it. He's grabbing my chest through my dress with one hand and running the other up my thigh. My arms are limp at my sides and I close my eyes and just let him do it. He starts pulling my underwear down and then stops to get rid of my dress. He pulls it part of the way up and I can feel the cold air on my inner thighs and against my stomach, reminding me that I should be used and thrown away, too.

Then his hand is between my legs and I gag into his mouth when I feel his fingers. And maybe I've finally had enough and I won't choose this pain.

I break away from his mouth and his hand and I pull my dress down. If there is such a thing as rock bottom, it's where I am right now. I can lie to myself. I can lie to Josh. But it's just that. A lie. I didn't destroy any part of me when I slept with him, even if I did destroy everything after. I knew that it wasn't true when I said it and I know it now. I don't regret one minute I ever spent with Josh. What I regret is every single second after. I regret ripping his heart out. I regret sending us both straight to hell.

If I let Kevin Leonard do this, if I let myself do this, then this, here, now, will be what destroys the last good thing about me. This will be my unforgivable thing. I will never come back from it because there will be absolutely nothing left in me worth loving. And for once in my stupid, pissed on life, I can't do it. Or, more importantly, maybe I won't.

I push my hand against his chest. Not violently. Just decisively. I shake my head at him. *No*. I try to look apologetic. I feel guilty. Am I supposed to feel bad in this situation? I don't really know the rules. I yank my dress down as far as it will go, but it doesn't feel like enough.

"What the fuck, Nastya?"

I shake my head again. I mouth the words *I can't* because I need to make sure he understands. He understands, but he doesn't care.

"You're really going to blueball me up here at my own fucking party?" I don't even have a chance to bend over and pull my underwear back up before

he grabs me and kisses me again and I don't need an invitation. I stomp on his foot and grab for the door, but my hands are shaking and it's locked and I can't make my fingers work fast enough. I get the lock flipped but I don't have enough time to turn the doorknob. I should have gone at him harder but I didn't think I needed to. I just wanted to let him know it wasn't happening and give myself enough of a window to make it to the door and get out. But it's not enough. His hand wraps around my arm, turning me to face him and I grab his pinky finger and bend it back. I'm not in a position to take him down and I just want to get away. That's all. I hear his finger crack and his other hand immediately swings up and punches me. It's such a knee-jerk reaction, I'm not sure he even realizes what he's done. I catch the full force of his fist against my cheek and my balance is off, so the impact spins me face first into the corner of the nightstand next to the bed. I can feel the blood running down from the corner of my eye and I swipe it away. From this position, I flip over and try to buy myself a second by kicking him but he grabs my ankle and drags me away from the door. My underwear has worked its way down to my knees, the panic is starting to push bile into my throat and I feel myself stop breathing.

I'm panicking like this is a nightmare. He's laughing like it's a game.

"Come on. You came up here and made me think you were going to screw me. You could at least suck my dick." He doesn't even sound angry. It's like he's trying to convince me.

If I had any bad feelings about fighting dirty, they're gone now. The shit part is that I've never been as good at defending myself from the ground and nothing is as easy as it was when I was practicing in a controlled situation. Nothing. Plus, the beer isn't helping, no matter how sober I suddenly feel.

I don't have the kubotan. It's in my purse under the seat in Drew's car, right next to my can of pepper spray because I didn't have anywhere to clip it on my dress. I figured I was going to be stapled to Drew's side the entire night, anyway, so I didn't think I'd need it. Maybe the operative words there are *didn't think*.

The fact is, I don't want to use either of those things on Kevin Leonard. I just want to get out of this. I feel like I've set off a string of explosions and now I'm trying to outrun them.

It doesn't surprise me that putting myself in this stupid-ass situation is what it takes for me to finally decide not to completely incinerate what's left of my life. I'm such a fucking idiot. Maybe karma is just trying to give me what I said I wanted, but never really did. To wreck myself once and for all.

I can feel my cheek burning where he hit me and the blood from the gash is running into my eye and I'm trying to focus because I'm afraid at any moment I'm going to leave this room and be back in the trees, with dirt and blood in my mouth. And then I'll lose all control. I'll stop fighting completely. Kevin Leonard will be able to do whatever he wants, and I'll let him because I won't even be here anymore.

The focusing is almost impossible when my brain is split between staying awake in this room and trying to fight him off. He's over me, pinning my arms and legs to the floor and pushing his mouth on me again. He has every one of my limbs immobilized. I can't even shift. I lean into him to give me just enough leeway to tilt my head back and head-butt him because that's the only option I really have. I'm aiming for the bridge of his nose but my position is off and my forehead cracks against his instead. It's a mistake but he's so drunk that it's enough. My head is screaming at me from the impact as his sweaty body falls on top of mine, crushing me with the weight of every bad decision I've made over the past three years.

"Dude! Forget it." There's saliva running down the side of his mouth.

The fight has gone out of him and I think it finally hits him, in his drunken stupor, what's going on, because he looks at me like he's just now seeing me bleeding from the head on the floor in this room with him. He leans back and I haven't even had a moment to turn my body and free myself when the door abruptly opens and I'm looking up from the floor, underneath Kevin Leonard's body, at Drew Leighton's face.

"What the fuck, Leighton?" Kevin spits out. There's more embarrassment than venom in it, but I'm not excusing him any more than I'm excusing myself. He's still struggling to push himself off of me and I use the distraction to twist my hip and get the rest of the way free.

For a minute, or maybe just a second, Drew is frozen. There are so many emotions on his face that I can't sort them all now. Confusion, disgust, anger, guilt, fear, horror. I wonder how bad my face is to make him look like that.

Kevin is barely standing now and I'm dizzily getting to my feet, my head still reeling from smashing into his. Before I even register what's happening, Drew's fist is in Kevin's face and he's down again. I look at Drew and he's shaking. There is something so wrong with the sight of Drew Leighton hitting someone. Drew Leighton is supposed to be sunny and irreverent and free of every care in the world. There isn't even a glimmer of violence in him. I wish he hadn't done it. I wish he hadn't seen this, because as crazy as I know it sounds, I feel like he's just lost his innocence.

Drew is standing in front of me, knuckles bleeding, with a look of such sheer despondence that I feel like I should comfort him. But I can't. Now that this is over, my adrenaline is starting to drop and I want to get away from here, because I smell like Kevin Leonard and I'm starting to shake, too.

I lean against the wall to steady myself. Drew curses under his breath, pulling his sleeve over his wrist and trying to wipe the blood away from my eye. "Can you walk?" he whispers.

My look tells him I can and that I don't appreciate the question. I don't say anything. We turn toward the door and I realize that my underwear is still at my ankles. I stop and just stand there, looking down at them. Drew turns to find out why I've stopped, his eyes following mine to my feet, and all of his muscles tense when he sees why I'm not coming. He stifles another curse as I bend over to pull them up because I can't look at his face right now.

"Stay behind me, okay?" His words are strained and he sounds like he's in pain. He takes my hand so tightly, I think he might crush it and pulls me behind him so I'm blocked from view. I catch Tierney Lowell watching in the hall before I turn away. I drag my hair down around my face and lean into Drew's back like I'm wasted, just until we can get through everybody and out the door. And maybe wasted is exactly what I am.

My face is bleeding and swollen but I don't even care. For the first time in forever, I make a choice not to shit all over my life and I can't even like myself for it because I made it five minutes too late.

At least no one can tell me it was random.

“Are you okay?” Drew waits until we’ve gotten in his car and driven away from the house to ask. I’ve hated that question for years.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Your hand.” My eyes go to his split knuckles which are straining even more with his iron grip on the steering wheel.

“I don’t give a shit about my hand,” he bites out at me and I instinctively recoil because I’ve never heard him raise his voice. “Sorry. I’m sorry.” He pulls into the parking lot of a convenience store and parks the car. This whole situation is fucked up and he says so at least three or four times.

“What happened?” He sounds like he doesn’t really want the answer.

“Just a stupid situation that got out of hand.”

“You think?” His tone is sharp.

“Are you pissed at me?” I ask.

“No, I’m pissed at me.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s my fault you were in that room in the first place. I finally bothered to look at my phone and got your text. I thought I’d find you sitting up there and waiting, not on the floor with Kevin Leonard on top of you.” He takes a breath and lets it out watching the lighted *R* on the store sign flicker in and out. “Josh is going to kill me.”

“Josh isn’t going to care.”

“You know that isn’t true, so don’t say it. I don’t have it in me to argue with you about it tonight.” There is so much weight in his voice that I feel it physically pressing on me.

“If you knew what I did to Josh, you would hate me, too. He won’t care and I won’t blame him for not caring.”

“You’re right. I don’t know what you did to Josh. I have no idea what went on there because neither of you will tell me. I do know that whatever it was will not be enough to stop him from giving a shit about someone hurting you.”

I flip down the visor and check the bruise on my face and the cut on my eye in the mirror. It’s really not so bad, but my cheek and my forehead are already starting to swell and I know it’ll all look worse tomorrow.

“His pants were still on.” He’s tracing the logo on the steering wheel now.

I nod, even though he’s not looking at me.

“So, he didn’t—”

“No,” I answer. I don’t want to talk about Kevin Leonard anymore. “Did anybody else see?” I ask.

“I don’t think so. Tierney did, but she was looking for us so—” he cuts himself off. “I don’t think anyone else was paying attention.”

We sit there, pretending to be mesmerized by the flashing lottery sign.

“I shouldn’t have left you.”

“You and Tierney?” I ask, ignoring the unspoken apology.

“I don’t know.” He shakes his head and turns the key in the ignition. “We need to get ice on your face.”

Drew doesn’t tell me where we’re going. He doesn’t ask where I want to go. He takes me where I need to go and maybe where he needs to go, too. He takes me to Josh’s house.

The garage is closed when we get there, but Drew and I both have a key to the house. He turns his in the lock and pushes the door back for me. I walk inside and Drew follows. When we step into the dark of the foyer, it takes us a minute to process what we’re hearing. And then I wish on a thousand pennies that we didn’t have that key.

CHAPTER 49

Josh

“What the hell, Drew? It’s two in the morning.” I look at his car in the driveway and it’s empty. At first, I suspected he was bringing Sunshine back here because she was drunk, but there’s no one in the car. “You already drop Nastya off?” I ask while he follows me into the family room. Calling her Nastya sounds wrong, but I don’t feel right saying Sunshine out loud anymore.

“She’s at home.”

“So what’s going on? Weren’t you supposed to be home an hour ago?” I still don’t get why he’s here.

“Sarah’s covering for me.” Drew looks away like he doesn’t want to tell me something and it pisses me off because I’m sure it has something to do with Nastya getting shit-faced again at one of the parties he’s always making her go to and I’m getting sick of it. When he turns back to me, though, I’m pretty sure I’m mistaken.

Everything I see in his face is wrong. The look he has now is so empty of everything I associate with Drew that it wakes me up all at once.

“Why? What happened?” He doesn’t answer and I have to ask him again. “What happened, Drew?” I demand.

“I don’t really know.” His eyes are red and he looks like shit.

“In a second, I’m getting in the car and driving over there if you don’t start giving me some answers that make sense.”

“None of it makes *sense*, Josh.” He shifts from defeated to pissed and when he glares at me, I think he’s talking about more than Sunshine.

“You sound like her with the cryptic bullshit. Is she okay?”

“She said she was. Her face is messed up, but she seems all right.”

“What happened to her face?” My words are slow and my voice comes out lower than I expect it to.

“Kevin Leonard.”

“*Kevin Leonard?*” I feel like smashing Drew’s face into the wall, at least until I can get to Kevin Leonard, and I don’t even know what happened yet. “What did he do to her?” The words are forced. I’m struggling to control my anger long enough to find out what this is about, but I don’t know how long I can do it.

“I don’t know. Hit her. I think he was taking her clothes off. She really didn’t tell me anything.” Drew runs his hand through his hair again and I notice that his knuckles are bleeding and there’s blood on his shirt.

“How did she end up with him in the first place? Weren’t you with her the whole time? Isn’t that why you talked her into going with you?”

Drew studies the torn knuckles on his right hand but doesn’t answer.

“Where the hell were you? You drag her to these parties, you get her drunk and then you *leave her alone?*” I make sure the accusation is clear.

His head whips up and everything about him goes on the defensive.

“She’s not helpless, Josh. In case you haven’t noticed, she kind of does whatever she wants. I didn’t drag her anywhere and I haven’t gotten her drunk since the first night. She gets drunk all on her own now.” He’s trying to justify it to himself but I can tell it isn’t working.

“She hates being alone at those things. She wouldn’t have walked away from you.”

“She didn’t.” Guilt. He did ditch her. “She texted me, but I didn’t hear it. She went upstairs where it was quiet so she could call you to get a ride. When I got up there, she was on the floor and he was on top of her.” He tells me her face was bruised and bleeding, and when he gets to the part about her underwear around her ankles, he can’t keep talking because he’s trying not to cry, and if I weren’t so disgusted with everyone in the world, I might actually be crying, too.

“You left her alone.” I want to kill him. I want to blame him so I don’t have to blame myself. I can’t even think about the phone call.

“Yes, Josh! That’s exactly what I did! I guilt-tripped her into coming with me and then I left her alone because I’m selfish and that’s what I do. You don’t think I know? Trust me, I know. I don’t need you to remind me

that I'm a prick. I've been reminded all fucking night, by her face and the blood and—" he runs his hand back through his hair as his voice cracks again and I really hope he doesn't lose his shit because I can't see that. Not on top of everything else. Because, right now, I'm seeing her face and the blood, too, and I don't want to lose mine, either. "Just trust me," he says, "I know. Okay? I know."

His back is leaning against my kitchen counter and I'm leaning against the wall across from him. Neither of us says anything for what seems like an hour even though it's probably less than a minute.

"She didn't tell you anything?"

"Not really." He shakes his head wearily. "The fucked up part is that she didn't even seem surprised. It was like she just expected it."

"Why didn't you bring her here?" I ask.

"I did." He levels his eyes at me and pauses to let this sink in, because in the shock of absorbing what happened to Sunshine, I've all but forgotten what I was doing while she was alone in a bedroom with Kevin Leonard. "Think real hard, Josh. We drove straight to your house about two hours ago. The garage was closed and the lights were off so I thought you were asleep and I used my key. We walked into the house and guess what we heard?"

"She came in with you." It's not a question. It's a hand grenade.

"I thought seeing you was the only thing that would help her." The bitter-laced sarcasm is dripping from his voice and I'm not sure which one of us he despises more at this moment.

"What did she say?" I ask, but it's quiet because I really don't want to know. All I've thought about since the day she walked out of here was the day she would walk back in. And tonight she did.

"Nothing. She hasn't said a word to me since we walked into your house."

"I need to see her." I don't want to see her. I don't want to face that she knows what I did. I don't want to face that I know what I did. But I need to see her. I need to see that she's still here and still ok, even if she hates me. Her hurt might kill me but I can survive her hate.

"No."

“No?”

“No.” It’s absolute.

“Who the fuck are you to say I can’t see her?”

“Who the fuck are you to say you can?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that she looked like hell when we walked into your house and she looked worse when we walked out.”

I feel sick. Not figuratively sick. Sick like I might throw up right now. My face must tell him something, because his tone loses a little of its edge. Or maybe he’s just tired of this whole shit night. “Josh, even if I did think it was okay, which I don’t, because right now I think you’re acting like me and I don’t like you very much. But even if I did say you could see her, it’s not up to me.”

“She won’t see me.”

“She won’t see you,” he confirms. He won’t offer me hope, and for the first time tonight, I feel grateful. “Are you ever going to tell me what happened between you two?” He hasn’t stopped asking.

“No.”

“Fine. Are you going to tell me what you were doing fucking Leigh?” His tone is as cold as his expression.

“I’ve been fucking Leigh for years.” It’s true. It’s like second nature. Technically, nothing I did tonight was wrong. I didn’t take advantage of anyone. I didn’t cheat. I didn’t leave Nastya alone with a drunk asshole. I can make all of the arguments that I want, to Drew, to Sunshine, to myself, but knowing how “not wrong” I was doesn’t make me feel like any less of a prick.

I can even tell you why I did it. For the same reason I did it the first time and every time after. It was comforting and it made me feel normal. Leigh showed up, walked in and said hi, and like always, it was the easiest, most natural thing in the world. She sat on the couch and we watched television until she leaned over and kissed me and I let her because there wasn’t a price to be paid or a choice to be made anymore. Sunshine had made that choice for me.

Leigh picked up my hand and led me back to my room and I went. For one night, I just wanted to pretend that there wasn't anyone to miss.

"You don't love her." It's an accusation, and if there was any humor at all in this situation, I would laugh, because I have no idea how Drew Leighton says this with a straight face. I want to hit him for it, and for so many other things, but there's a part of me that knows that I just don't need one more thing to be pissed at myself about tonight. Maybe I should hit him just to get him to hit me back, because that's what I deserve. I want him to hit me. I want him to beat my face in so I don't have to feel anything but that pain. The other is so much worse.

I walk to the opposite side of the room to put some distance between us, but he follows, sinking down onto the couch and sighing like this has been the longest night of his life. And I know that it probably has been, but I don't have any sympathy to offer him.

"This isn't really news, Drew. Why don't you just say whatever bullshit you want to say to me and then get out?"

"You love her."

"I think we just established that I don't."

"Not Leigh. Nastya. You love Nastya." I hate that word and it sounds all wrong coming from Drew's mouth. Drew, who makes a career of mocking it, of destroying girls for hoping for it. Drew, who has no right to judge me, but is sitting on my couch, with his feet on my coffee table, doing just that. Yet I don't deny what he says. I should deny it; deny it all night until I've convinced even myself that it could not possibly be true. That I couldn't really be so self-destructive as to fall in love with any girl, much less a girl who is cracked in a thousand places and who will leave me as soon as she's put back together again. But I guess the ability to think rationally has left me because I don't deny it at all. It's late. I'm tired and scared and hurt and so incredibly sorry and I just can't think straight anymore tonight.

"She doesn't know that," I say finally, looking at Drew as if this might be an excuse for my behavior. As if it could make any of this less horrible. The words taste like the regret that is filling me up and spilling out of my mouth.

"Josh," he says, and when he does, all of the irreverence and sarcasm, all

of the judgment and condescension are gone from his voice and I hate him already for what he is going to say next.

“Everybody knows that.”

CHAPTER 50

Nastya

It's a little after two o'clock in the morning. It's late, but it feels later; like this whole night has been so epic that nothing in the world is recognizable anymore. Drew left fifteen minutes ago, saying he'd be back in a half-hour. He didn't mention where he was going, but he didn't need to. We both knew where he would end up.

I showered, and I'm trying to keep ice on my face, but really, I just want to go to bed, even if I won't sleep. I wonder if there are words I can write that will erase the images burned into my brain tonight; that will keep them from coming to find me. Not the ones with Kevin Leonard. The ones with Josh and that girl. The pictures I didn't even see. Pictures that are working like acid now, burning their way through every good memory and leaving only one behind. I already threw up once tonight at the thought of it, but as soon as the image invades my mind, my stomach convulses again and I'm back in the bathroom, hung over the toilet and retching. But nothing comes up. There isn't anything left in me.

I flip the TV on downstairs and there's a knock on the door so soft that I almost miss it. I gave Drew my key to let himself back in, so I know it isn't him, but I have no idea who else would be here. I tip-toe to the door and look through the peephole to find Tierney Lowell on my front porch.

I have to take a minute to decide whether to open the door. Finally, I turn the deadbolt and face her. She's still dressed from the party and she looks like she's been crying. I wonder if anyone came out of this night unscathed.

"Man, your face," she says almost immediately. "Sorry." She winces and her discomfort at standing here with me is undeniable. "I don't want to wake anyone up."

I shake my head as I push the door back and motion for her to come in. We stare at each other for a minute. I know why she's here, but I'm waiting

for her to ask. I wonder how she knew where I lived. Maybe Clay. She's been talking to him since they bonded over the art and science of bong construction. Her eyes move around the room, but she won't find what she's looking for.

"Is Drew here?"

I shake my head.

"Oh." There's no attempt to hide her disappointment. She takes a breath and her voice is sincere. "Are you okay?"

I'm going to start making people put a quarter in a jar every time they ask me that. I don't even know what okay means.

I nod.

"I just wanted to see if he was alright," she explains. "I don't think he's ever hit anybody before."

I don't think so, either.

"Is he alright?" There's no concealing the concern in her voice or the fact that she knows Drew well enough to realize that this is a valid question.

I don't nod or shake my head or even shrug. She has to ask him for that answer. I don't have it.

"He loves you," she says, reconciled.

I do nod for this, because I believe he does, but not the way she thinks. I need to write a note to explain it to her because she deserves to know, but before the conversation can go any further, there's a key in the lock and Drew walks in. He stops dead when he sees Tierney and if I could take a picture of the expression that passes between them, I would, and then I'd shove it in both of their faces so they could never deny it again.

"I should go." She looks from Drew to me with misguided resignation before turning to leave.

I walk over to Drew and squeeze his hand, tilting my head toward the door, and he follows her out onto the porch.

Josh

Less than an hour after Drew leaves, I'm in her driveway. It's three-thirty in the morning. Margot gets home at six and I wonder how Sunshine is going to explain her face. I grab my phone out of the cup holder and shove it in my pocket. I still haven't looked at it. I don't want to see her name on the display and all of the what-ifs lit up behind it. I can't face the reminder that if I had heard the phone, if I had picked it up, none of this would be happening.

I pass Tierney Lowell's car leaving as I pull in. Drew is standing on the porch. I walk straight past him and open the door so he won't have a chance to remind me that I'm not allowed to be here.

I don't even have time to prepare, because as soon as I walk in, she's there, standing in the kitchen. I've tried not to look at her for weeks. Seeing her, now, eviscerates me, rips me to pieces and sews me back together all wrong. I don't know if it's the cut by her eye or the bruise on her cheek or the expression on her face that does it, but I know that it's done because everything inside me hurts.

"Go home," Drew says from behind me, but I don't turn away because I can't stop looking at her.

"Just give us a minute." I don't know if I'm asking or telling.

"Not tonight, Josh," he says. It's not forceful, just defeated.

He's right. I should leave. She shouldn't have to deal with me on top of everything else. But I'm selfish. I want her to tell me she's okay, even if I know that she's not. I'll take lies right now if she'll give them to me.

"I just need one minute." I'm talking to Drew, but I'm looking at her. My voice is soft, but my tone isn't. I'm not going anywhere.

She nods to Drew, but he doesn't look convinced. He figures, if he didn't keep Kevin Leonard away from her tonight, at least he can save her from having to deal with me.

"Go home, Drew," she says gently. "If your mom wakes up she's going to be pissed. I'm good. I promise." It's such a lie, but it's so natural; it's like she's been telling it for years.

Drew still doesn't look happy, but he concedes. He walks over and hugs her just long enough to whisper *I'm sorry* in her ear and then he leaves.

“Does it hurt?” It’s a stupid question, asking a girl whose face is half swollen if it hurts, but it’s the first thing I can think to ask. She lifts the ice back up to her cheek and shakes her head.

“Not really.”

We both stand there, looking at each other across the kitchen, with all the things we’ve done to hurt each other littering the path between us.

She puts the ice down and pulls a foil-covered plate off of the top of the refrigerator. She removes the foil and puts the plate of sugar cookies on the table and tells me to sit.

“I know you said you were sick of them, but...”

I did tell her I was sick of them. It was over a month ago. She made like twelve batches in a week’s time because she said she couldn’t get the right balance between chewy and crunchy and I said she was crazy because they all seemed exactly the same to me. I finally told her that until she made me something with chocolate in it, I would not be tasting another sugar cookie.

“Did you finally get it right?” I have no clue what the point of this conversation is, but she’s my tangent girl and I’ll follow her if this is where she wants to go.

“I think so.” She shrugs like it’s really no big deal, even though we both know it was driving her crazy. “You tell me.”

She pushes the plate toward me. Her face is beat up. I just had sex with Leigh. We’re sitting at her table, in the middle of the night, and she’s making me critique her cookies.

“They taste,” I say, trying not to talk with my mouth full, “exactly like the last eight hundred you made me try.”

“I know they taste the same,” she says, undeterred, “but are they too crunchy?”

I exhale slowly, putting the cookie down on the table.

“So we’re going to talk about cookies.” I nod robotically, picking up a napkin and twisting it around in my hands.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“What?” The words should have come from my mouth, but they didn’t.

They came from hers. I know she knows what I did tonight. All I can think is *Don't apologize to me. Please don't apologize to me.* Yesterday it would have been a blessing. Today it's a curse.

I want to tell her I'm sorry, too, but they're shit words and I'm a shit person.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you," she repeats as if I need to hear it again and this time she throws the so in for good measure. Just to twist the knife.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing."

"You didn't do anything wrong."

I can't even believe that just came out of her mouth. It's worse than the apology.

"How can you say that? Everything that happened tonight was wrong. Everything! Every single thing!" I don't plan to raise my voice, but it happens, and maybe that's a good thing, because it sets her off, too.

"I know, Josh! What do you want me to say? That my heart broke a thousand times when I walked into your house tonight? That I came home and threw up, not because of what happened at that stupid party, but because I can't stop thinking about what you were doing with *that girl*? Is that what you want to hear? Because it's true!"

I know it's true. I know because the pain is all over her face and in her eyes and in her voice. I know because now it's making me as sick as she is and I can't do anything about it. It's done like everything else.

She gets up from the table and crosses the room and I feel every inch of the space between us. "And you know what the worst part is?" she continues. "The worst part is that I'm not even allowed to be angry about it, because it's my fault. Is that what you need me to say? That I know it's all my fault? That none of this would have happened in the first place if I wasn't determined to destroy myself and everyone around me? Fine. It's all my fault! *Everything* is my fault and no one knows it more than me. We're all in hell and I'm the one who put us here. I *know* and I'm *sorry*."

I stare at her for a minute because it's the first real feeling I've seen in her in forever. She's been an emotional black hole for weeks, but all of a sudden, the dead, flat calm is gone and she's as angry and frustrated and

heartbroken as I am.

I stand up and take a step towards her. She looks at me like she doesn't know what the hell I'm doing. There's a mixture of fear and confusion on her face and her eyes dart past me like those of a cornered animal looking for an opening to run. For just one second, she stops hiding the vulnerability that I always try to pretend doesn't exist. I should walk away and leave it alone, but I don't want to be in a room with her and not get to touch her one more time before everything goes back to shit again tomorrow.

"I'm going to walk over to you," I say, taking one step at a time in her direction like I'm talking down a jumper. "I'm going to put my arms around you and I'm going to hold you," I pause before taking the last step, "and you're going to let me."

"Why?" she asks, like it's the most insane thing she's ever heard and maybe, after tonight, it is.

"Because I need to."

I'm in front of her now and she doesn't back away, so I do what I said I would and put my arms around her. I feel her body soften, just slightly, against mine, but she doesn't move her arms or reciprocate. She doesn't forgive me and that's okay. I don't know if I forgive her, either.

When she does move, it's to bring her hand up to my chest and gently push me away. I lift my hand to her face, wishing I could erase the bruises and the hurt; but I stop just short of letting my fingers graze her skin and drop my hand back to my side. I wish she'd just let it go here, let me walk away without another word, but it never happens that way.

"I'd take it back if I could. I never should have hurt you." She keeps going back to that, and it's useless, because we can't undo anything at this point.

"I never should have let you," I say. It's true and I knew it from the beginning. I shouldn't have let her hurt me. I should never have cared enough to make that possible. I even did what she wanted. I never told her that I loved her; but it didn't change anything. I loved her every day and I'm the one who suffered for it.

"I had to leave." There's pleading in her voice, begging me to understand something I don't. "I can't tell you the truth and I know you want

it. I would end up disappointing you, being the thing that's never enough, just like with everyone else."

"Leaving is the only thing you could have done to disappoint me." I would have lived every day without the truth, to keep her, even if it was wrong.

"It doesn't matter now," she says, and the regret of so much more than the past few weeks is etched on her face. She's accepting it. We can both be as sorry as we want, but too much has happened that we can't take back. Some things you just have to learn to live with. We both learned that lesson a long time ago.

"I'm going to beat the shit out of Kevin Leonard," I say finally, because I can do that one thing, even if it isn't nearly enough.

"Don't." There's determination in her voice.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"It's not a good enough reason."

"You are the only good reason." I may not be allowed to love her, but that doesn't mean I'll let anyone hurt her. Maybe that's ironic since I'm the one who hurt her the most tonight.

"I don't want to be the reason for that. It's over and I want to forget it."

"How are you taking this so lightly? He could have raped you and you act like nothing happened."

"Nothing did happen. Believe me, I've seen worse." She shrugs and it's maddening.

"Worse than being raped?" I look at her incredulously.

"Worse than almost being raped."

I drag my hand down my face in frustration.

"Enough with the cryptic, Sunshine! I'm sick of it. I'm sick of *this!*" I'm losing it all over again. I've done more yelling since I've known this girl than I have in the past ten years and I can't seem to stop. "You say things like that all the time that make absolutely no sense! Like you want me to know something, but you won't tell me, so I'm just supposed to pick up random clues and figure it out. Guess what? I can't. I can't figure it out. I can't figure

you out and I'm getting sick of trying."

I guess we didn't have to wait until tomorrow for everything to go to shit again. It's happening right now.

My hands are in my hair and I can't stop walking around the room because I have so much pent-up aggression and I don't know where to put it. Now I understand the running. I think I could run out of this room right now and not stop for miles. I take a breath and start again because I can't seem to stop talking, either.

"All I know is that something happened, or more likely, someone happened who fucked up your hand and did a job on the rest of you in the process, and I can't fix it."

"No one asked you to." The words are fierce and bitter. Her eyes turn almost feral. "Everyone wants to fix me. My parents want to fix me. My brother wants to fix me. My therapists want to fix me. You're supposed to be the person who doesn't want to fix me."

We're both exasperated now. We're both angry, and for some reason, it's a relief. It makes me feel like, maybe, I'm not the only one in the room.

"I don't want to fix *you*. I want to fix *this*." I throw my arms out but I don't even know what I'm referring to. Her? Me? The whole fucked-up world?

"What's the difference?"

What *is* the difference? I don't know. Maybe there isn't one. Maybe I do want to fix her. If I do, is that wrong? Does that make me the asshole in this scenario?

"I don't know," I answer, because it's the only thing I do know. I sit back down at the table and drop my head into my hands.

The emotions in this room are bouncing all over the place and I can't keep up. It's after four o'clock in the morning and I feel like my entire body has been wrung out and I'm just done.

"I thought there was something wrong with you, too." Her voice is calmer and she sounds apologetic, like she thinks she's insulting me. But she isn't. "I thought you wouldn't care that I was wrong, because you just understood what it was like. I figured if I didn't ask you, you wouldn't ask

me, and we could just pretend not to care what happened before. I guess it doesn't work that way." She half shrugs like she's known this all along, but she's finally coming to terms with it. "I just wanted one person who would look at me and not want to see someone else."

"Who looks at you like that?" I lift my head up and lower my hands so I can see her face, and I can't imagine anyone looking at this girl and wanting to see anything but her.

"Everyone who loves me."

"Who is it they want to see?"

"A dead girl."

CHAPTER 51

Nastya

On Tuesday during fifth hour, Ms. McAllister continues the poetry unit. We covered the same lesson earlier in my class and now I just get to listen in and try not to stare too much at the beautiful, priceless boy in the back row whose heart I stomped all over. I don't even know how long we ended up talking on Saturday morning. I know that we didn't resolve anything. There wasn't anything left to resolve. We had already put everything through the shredder and it was just gone.

I walk through the aisles, passing out a list of discussion questions on the poem *Renascence* by Edna St. Vincent Millay. I pass Ethan Hall's desk and he checks out my face again. I've been able to do a good job covering it, but you can still make out the bruise.

"So you're beating your girlfriends now?" he directs at Drew. A hint of smug satisfaction crosses his face like he's telling me I got what I deserved for rejecting him. Maybe I did get what I deserved, but it wasn't for anything I did to him.

"No, that's your thing," Drew replies, unfazed.

"She did it in kickboxing."

I turn to catch Tierney Lowell glaring at Ethan. She's the only other person aside from Drew, Josh and I who knows what happened with Kevin. I'm not surprised to hear her chime in. It's Drew she's defending, even if she won't admit it. I nod almost imperceptibly in thanks to her, because if he won't acknowledge it, I will.

When I pass Kevin Leonard's desk, he reaches out to grab my hand and say something. He looks embarrassed, but before he can touch me or open his mouth, Josh kicks the back of his chair. Hard. Kevin drops his hand and looks down at the paper in front of him, muttering *sorry* under his breath, which I get the feeling is directed at Josh, not me.

Josh slides the handout across his desk when I place it there, but he makes no move to acknowledge me at all. I don't even exist. I'd trade my hand all over again to take back everything I did and hear him call me Sunshine.

"Who can explain what the poem is about?" Ms. McAllister asks to get started. She places the leftover handouts on top of a beautiful handmade oak podium that magically appeared in her room a week ago. It's a mystery where it came from.

"Trees," someone calls out.

"There are trees in the poem. That's not what it's *about*," she says.

"Aren't poems supposed to be short?" Trevor Mason asks. "Because this one was like a hundred pages long."

"Hyperbole, Mr. Mason," Ms. McAllister replies.

"Hyperbo-what?"

"Exaggeration, you tool," Tierney shoots at him and then rolls her eyes, looking up to the ceiling before exhaling in defeat. "I'll just take the detention."

Ms. McAllister walks to her desk and fills out a detention slip.

"Who's the tool now?" Drew says, smirking at Tierney. He lifts his head to catch the glare of Ms. McAllister who's still at her desk, pad of detention slips in hand. Then he glances back to Tierney. "Yeah, I know. Just give me one, too."

"Someone still needs to answer the question at hand." Ms. McAllister passes off the slips and returns to the front of the room.

Even if I wasn't watching the class, I would have been able to hear the collective turning of every head in the room when Josh's hand went up. Even Ms. McAllister looks like she doesn't quite know what to make of it.

"Josh?" she says tentatively.

He doesn't speak for a second, looking pained, like he already regrets drawing the attention.

"It's about the dream of second chances," he says finally. He hasn't raised his eyes from the paper on his desk and I feel him looking at me

without looking when he uses his grandfather's words. "The narrator doesn't respect the beauty of life and the world around her, so it crushes her into the ground and once she's dead, she realizes everything she took for granted and didn't see right in front of her while she was alive. She's begging for another chance to live again so she can appreciate it this time."

I've turned away from Josh to look at Ms. McAllister. She's watching him with an expression of pride and endearment which reminds me of the way I've seen Mrs. Leighton look at him. But I don't think Ms. McAllister's expression is as much about his answer as it is about the fact that he answered in the first place.

"And does she get that chance?" she asks Josh while I desperately focus on the poster of literary terms on the wall and wait for absolution. When it comes, I barely hear it.

"She does."

Josh

It's Wednesday before I see her again outside of school, and even there she hardly looks at me. Nothing has really changed except that, before last weekend, I felt more like a victim in all of this and, now, not so much.

It's already eleven. I've been in my garage for hours, but I haven't done much of anything. I reorganized the same tool chest twice and now I'm sweeping up sawdust. I don't have the energy to do anything worthwhile, but I have a list that's just getting longer and I have to get started at some point. I've had more time over the last six weeks than I've had in months, and I haven't accomplished crap.

I go inside, make another cup of coffee and carry it back out, resolving to start the initial cutting for the matching end table I promised I'd make Mrs. Leighton. And maybe I'm more tired than I thought, because when I open the door, the first thing I see is a set of pale white legs capped with black steel-toed boots swinging from the workbench.

"You know you're an addict. Caffeine's a bitch to break."

“Guess I won’t break it then.”

She nods and I want to ask her why she’s here but I’m glad she is, and for a few minutes, I want to pretend that everything is back to the way it used to be. Maybe that’s what she wants, too.

“It’ll stunt your growth, you know.”

“Didn’t know you were worried.”

“Only about some parts,” she smirks.

I smile for a minute, but it’s weak, and I realize that I don’t want to joke with her. Especially not like that. It makes me think of everything that happened that night and everything that’s gone wrong since, and as much as I want to pretend everything is the way it was before, I’m just not a good enough liar.

“Helps keep me awake,” I answer, not taking the bait.

“Why not just sleep?”

“Haven’t been sleeping well,” I say honestly.

“Maybe that’s because of the caffeine. Vicious cycle.”

“You don’t drink it. Do you sleep well?”

“Point taken,” she says faintly.

“Thank you.” This conversation is so civilized, it’s twisted.

She hops off the counter and walks over to me. The bruise on her face has faded, but it’s not covered with make-up now, like it is at school, and I can still see it. I have to fight the urge to run my fingers over it and then run to Kevin Leonard’s house and give him four more just like it.

“Here. Let me try it again.” She reaches for the cup in my hand.

“If you’re going to try it, you should at least put some shit in it first.”

“Sounds appetizing.”

“I drink it black. You won’t. Your taste buds are opposed to anything that isn’t sweet.”

“Give it, jackass.” I let go of the cup and she takes a mouthful while I watch her face contort at the bitterness. “Still gross.”

“You get used to it,” I shrug, taking the coffee back from her. She

relinquishes it and shudders as if she's trying to expel the taste from her mouth. I have to try not to smile.

"I'd rather not." She scrunches up her nose and goes back to sitting on the counter. Her legs start swinging again and I know how easy it would be to stay in this place and forget everything that's happened. But we'll always end up back where we were, because nothing's been resolved, and I'm not the one with the answers. Maybe, for once, I need to stop letting her dictate everything just because I want to keep her. I can't forget what she did and I can't expect her to forgive what I did and I don't know where we go from here.

"It's not the same," I say, watching her write her name in the dust on the counter next to her. "We can't act like nothing happened... just pretend that it's all good."

"I know it isn't," she says, lifting her eyes to mine with something I might actually believe is hope, "but, maybe."

She ends up staying for the next two hours. She measures and marks the wood for me and I cut. We don't talk about us or Kevin Leonard or Leigh or lost hands or lost people or long agos. We talk about furniture and tools and recipes and art competitions and debate. It's familiar and comfortable. There's something still hanging over us that we can't ignore forever, even if we do ignore it tonight. But, maybe.

It's after one in the morning when I drive her home since she ran to my house. We sit in the truck, staring at her front door, because things shifted just a little bit in the other direction tonight, and neither of us is ready to let go of it yet. I reach my hand over and lay it, palm up, on the seat between us and she doesn't hesitate. She lays her left hand on mine and I close my fingers over it.

CHAPTER 52

Nastya

I'm not sure how long we sit in Josh's truck, holding hands, surrounded by darkness and unspoken regrets. But it's long enough to know that there are no stories or secrets in the world worth holding onto more than his hand.

CHAPTER 53

Nasty

I think a lot about all the little things that happened the day I was attacked and how any one of them might have changed everything. I wonder how many thousands of variables played a part in him finding me that day and if there are as many at work in my finding him.

Clay picks me up at eight in the morning, wearing a long-sleeved button down shirt and dress pants, and not even remotely resembling the artfully unkempt mess I'm used to seeing. I doubt I look much like what he's used to seeing either. I look more like Emilia today than I have in months. I don't know if it feels right, but it doesn't feel as wrong as it used to.

I look Clay up and down and cock my head to the side in appreciation.

"You too," he says, opening the car door for me. I'm not even sure why he's bringing me. He said he wanted me to see what I sat on my ass so long for; but I've seen it all already. I doubt it will look much different hanging on a wall.

The gallery opening is at nine and all of the finalists have to be registered and checked in for interviews by ten. The drive is just over an hour, so we're good. Clay's interview is at eleven, which gives me time to wander through the exhibits and check out his competition, though I can't even imagine how Clay Whitaker could ever have any.

"Here." Clay hooks an mp3 player up to the car stereo and hands it to me. "I figured we'd need music since we've exhausted all the good conversation topics. You can DJ."

I don't really want to DJ. I just want to lean my head against the window and close my eyes and pretend I'm on my way to an Italian restaurant in

Brighton. I turn it on and flip to the first playlist and click on it. As long as it's not classical music or depressing love songs, we should be good.

I didn't go back to Josh's again after Wednesday night. When I let go of his hand and left his truck, I promised myself that the next time I stepped foot in his garage I would answer any question he wanted to ask, and I want to keep that promise.

I spend most of the drive trying to line the right words up in my head, rearranging them a hundred times, then finding new ones and starting all over again. When we pull into the gallery an hour later, my cheeks are wet and I don't even remember when I started crying.

We get Clay checked in and then find the room where they're showing his work. It's one of the bigger rooms and there are three artists sharing it. Clay's pictures are hung on the largest wall. I recognize most of them. Some are from his college portfolio. Some are the ones he's done of me. But it's hard to concentrate on any of them, because on the center of the wall I'm staring at, is something else entirely.

And it's overwhelming.

The centerpiece of the display is a sixteen picture mosaic. On each separate drawing is a part of my face and he's pieced them together like a puzzle. It's obvious that this is the reason I'm here. He hadn't shown it to me. I didn't even know he'd done it. It makes me want to run from the room.

A couple of people come in and comment on the drawings and ask questions to Clay and the two girls, named Sophie and Miranda, whose work is also on display here. I mostly try to face the wall and pretend I'm studying one of Sophie's paintings until Clay gets called for his interview.

Once he's gone, I venture out into the rest of the displays. I figure I can start at the rear of the gallery because most people haven't made their way there yet and it's quieter. I wander toward the back corner of the building into one of the smaller rooms.

For a moment, I don't know where I am. And for the third time in my life the world shifts under my feet and I just try to stay standing.

Because he's here.

It's his face. And it's not a nightmare. It's not a memory. He's here and

real and looking at me. And I'm looking back. I'm standing in the middle of a moment that I've dreaded and hoped for since the day I remembered what he did to me.

The name on the wall next to the paintings is Aidan Richter, the school is the one in the next town over from Brighton and the face in front of me belongs to the boy who killed me.

Everything in me turns on and shuts down at the same time. I am weak and strong. I am terrified and brave. I am lost and found. I am here and gone.

I'm afraid I'm going to stop breathing again.

He's older, like I am, but there is no mistaking it. I know his face like I know every one of the scars he gave me.

I want to run. I want to cry. I want to scream. I want to faint. I want to hurt him, break him, kill him. I want to ask him *why* as if there could ever possibly be a reason.

"Why?" It's a whisper and a scream.

I ask it, and not just in my head. That's the word I choose out of all of the thousands I could say to him. I ask the unanswerable question. Except that maybe it's not unanswerable. Maybe he's the only person in the world who can tell me.

I don't even know which *why* I'm asking. Why did you do it? Why was it me? Why are you here? Why am I here? Why?

He's looking at me like he's scared and it's the only thing that could possibly make me happy at this moment. Good. Lots of people are scared of me. Girls at school. My parents. Even, sometimes, Josh Bennett. But this boy is the only one whose fear I want.

"You weren't supposed to remember." There isn't one thing about his voice that is the same. It's him, but not him. There isn't any rage or darkness gripping him. It's the same boy but not the same voice, not the same eyes, not the same madness.

"You weren't supposed to kill me."

"I didn't mean to."

"You didn't mean to?" My brain is wringing out the words, trying to find the meaning of them. But there isn't any. "How do you not mean to do

what you did? You hit me in the face over and over again. You dragged me around by my hair and ripped it out of my head. You kicked me so hard and so many times that there wasn't a way to fix everything you broke. You murdered my hand. The bones were sticking out. All over the place. Do you remember it?" The last question is nothing more than a pathetic, strangled whisper.

"No." The word is almost an apology.

"No?" I don't remember what my hand looked like, either. I've only seen the pictures nobody wanted to show me. But he's the one who did it. He should have to remember.

"Not all of it. Pieces."

"Pieces? You did this to me and you don't even have the decency to remember?" I don't know where the word even comes from. I can't believe I'm talking to the boy who beat me to death about decency. I can't believe I'm talking to him at all. I'm supposed to be killing him.

"My brother killed himself."

"I'm sorry." *I'm sorry?* I said I'm sorry to this boy. I'm walking to school and smiling and saying hi all over again. No. I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I forgive myself because it was automatic. I didn't mean it. I gave him the words but I won't give him sympathy. He's looking at me like he can't believe I said it either. I think I'm insane. I don't know if this twisted conversation is real, but it must be because I don't think I could imagine this.

"I got home that day and I found him. Found his body." He's talking like he's rehearsed these words a thousand times in his head and he's just been waiting for the moment to say them.

And so he does.

He gives me the mythical why. He tells me the story. At least what he remembers of it and I think how ironic it is that I'm not supposed to remember, but I do, and the boy who is supposed to have all the answers has a mind full of blanks. But he spills everything in a mad rush like he's been holding onto it for years and he wants to get it out before I stop him.

He tells me about his brother. About the girl his brother was in love with who went to the same school as me. The girl who broke up with his brother

and who Aidan blamed for the suicide, even though he knows, now, that she wasn't the reason. The Russian girl. The Russian whore. The girl he went looking for that day. The girl he saw when he saw me. Just because I was there.

And then he says the words. And it isn't possible for me to hate this boy more, but I do.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

My head wants to explode. This is not the way this is supposed to happen. He's not supposed to be apologizing. He's supposed to be evil and I'm supposed to hurt him.

My hands are fists without a purpose. I don't know where my breath comes from, just that it still comes. I can't hear any more of this. Because he's stealing my rage and it's the only thing I have. He can't take that, too. He can't make me not hate him. I'll have nothing left.

He starts talking about his parents putting him in therapy after the suicide and about the guilt he lives under because he never told anybody about what he did to me. How he kept waiting to get caught and waiting to get caught but no one ever came for him. And he thought that he was being given a second chance; that I didn't die and he thought I was okay and it was some sort of new beginning. It was. Just to a shittier story.

Words. So many words. I don't need to know why he turned evil, just that he was. There is absolutely no part of me that wants to listen to him talk about his guilt and his therapy and his art and his healing. He doesn't get to feel better. He doesn't get to forgive himself. I won't give him permission.

And yet I don't think he does forgive himself. There is so much remorse and pain and self-loathing in his expression that I ache for him because I know what it feels like; and I hate myself for the aching.

He stops talking. I listened to every word he said and it's my turn now. My turn to tell him everything I've needed to tell him since the day I remembered what he did to me. My turn to make him listen. But I don't get the chance. Clay walks in before I can figure out which of the thousand words in my head I'm going to say first.

"There you are," Clay looks at me. "Did you make it all the way through already?"

He turns to Aidan Richter who looks haunted and stares at me like I'm a specter. Some spirit from the past, come to claim what's owed.

"Hi," Clay says, and walks over to offer his hand. I want to grab it away and scream not to touch him. I know what those hands have done and I don't want them anywhere near Clay's. "Clay Whitaker. You're work?"

Clay glances around at the walls which I've only now started to notice. This boy's art is so different from Clay's. There's nothing remotely similar at all. But it's amazing and I want to slap myself for thinking so. I despise him for the ability to create it.

And then I see it. And there are no words that exist to describe the hatred I feel for him. The painting. On the far side of one wall, all the way to the end, like a period or an afterthought. But it's not a painting. It's a memory that didn't happen.

I don't know anything about art so I can't tell you that it's watercolor or acrylic or that it's on canvas or anything art related at all. I can tell you that it's a painting of a hand, my hand, turned up and opened to the world and that it reaches into my body and rips out everything that's left. Because in the palm, right in the center, is the pearl button I never reached.

Aidan Richter is gone and I'm still waiting.

I need to find him. He got to say everything and I said nothing. I won't let him absolve his guilt at my expense. He doesn't get to use me for that, too. He doesn't get to make me question everything I've believed for nearly three years and then walk away without listening to me.

I want my turn to scream at him. To ask him if he knows that he's a murderer. If he knows that, even though I lived, it doesn't mean he didn't kill me. Just because they brought me back, it doesn't mean I wasn't dead. Just because they restarted it, it doesn't mean my heart didn't stop. It doesn't change anything he did. He killed the Brighton Piano Girl even if he didn't kill Emilia Ward. And I want to tell him. I want him to know what I know. I want him to hurt. I'm frantic with unsaid words.

Maybe no one found him before, but I know who he is now. I know his name. I can find him like he found me.

And when I do, it won't be random.

CHAPTER 54

Josh

When I get to Sunday dinner I'm hoping she'll be there. With everything that happened last weekend, she skipped it and I don't blame her. I would have skipped it, too, if I wasn't desperate for even the slightest chance of seeing her.

My house is too quiet and my garage is too empty so I came over here early. Dinner isn't ready, so Drew and I end up in his room because I don't feel like standing around being polite and making small talk. But I have nothing to talk to Drew about, either, and we just end up sitting here in stupid silence.

Maybe I should have stayed home. Sunshine never came back after we talked on Wednesday. I thought it was a turning point but maybe I was just deluding myself again.

"Tell me what the hell happened between you two," Drew finally demands. "And don't say nothing. And don't say you don't know. I've gotten every evasive answer there is from both of you and I'm calling bullshit."

"I don't know." I look up at Drew and stop him before he can interrupt. "That's the absolute truth, whether you like it or not. I have no fucking idea. Everything was fine. Everything was good. And then it wasn't. All I know is that, for like five minutes, I think I was happy."

"Something had to have happened, Josh."

Something most definitely did happen. I wage an internal battle over whether to ask him the question that's in my head. I've always wondered how much she talks to Drew, how much goes on between them that I don't know about.

"Did she tell you she was a virgin?"

"What? *No way.*" He looks at me incredulously. "Seriously?"

I nod. He clearly didn't know any more than I did. I feel like I'm

betraying her by telling him. But I have to tell someone. I have to try to understand. I feel like I'm drowning.

"How is that even possible? She's a virgin?"

"Not anymore," I answer.

"And that's what happened." He sobers. It's not even a question.

"That's what happened."

"Why would that break you up?" he asks, confused.

"I don't know. I don't get any of it. She said she was ruined and she was using me to ruin what was left."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I just shake my head. I have no answers. I asked her the same thing and she never gave me any.

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Nothing about her has made sense since the day she got here. She just wanted to pretend it didn't matter. I did, too." It's the most I've ever said to anyone about her and when I hear it come out of my mouth I know how it sounds.

"You know she loves you, right?"

"She told you that?" I hate the hope in my voice.

"No, but—"

"I didn't think so." I don't want him taking pity on me with false hope. She either said it or she didn't. And she didn't. Then again, neither did I.

"Josh—"

Drew doesn't get a chance to finish because his mom calls us in for dinner, and I walk out before he can say anything else.

When we get to the kitchen, Mrs. Leighton hugs me and Drew walks away to pull a playlist up on the computer because it's his turn tonight. Everything is like normal.

And Sunshine isn't anywhere.

We're just about to bring the food to the table when Mr. Leighton calls out from the family room where he always watches the news before dinner.

Mrs. Leighton yells back that it's time to eat and he needs to shut the TV off, but he calls her in again, and she must recognize something in his tone because she doesn't question it this time. She just goes, and we all follow.

And this is the moment before. The moment when everything is still familiar and understandable. The moment before everything shifts. I've had a few of these moments in my life. The moment I walk from the kitchen to the family room is one of them; the moment before I see the face on the television in the Leighton living room at Sunday dinner.

I don't even know why he called us in here until I follow everyone's eyes to the television screen. And then I know everything. I can't even hear what they're saying because the picture is screaming at me so loudly that it drowns out everything else. Mr. Leighton rewinds the DVR and turns it up, but I still barely process the words.

High school student Aidan Richter was arrested this afternoon after confessing to the brutal 2009 beating and attempted murder of, then fifteen year-old, Emilia Ward, affectionately referred to by locals as the Brighton Piano Girl. The crime had gone unsolved for nearly three years until Richter, himself only sixteen at the time of the attack, arrived with his parents and attorney and surrendered himself into police custody earlier today. No other details have been released and so far no comment has been made by either family. A press conference is scheduled to take place at 9:30 tomorrow morning.

"It's uncanny," Mr. Leighton says. But it's not and he knows it. There's nothing uncanny about it. It's like tumblers in a lock falling into place. Everything clicks.

brutal... beating... attempted murder... Emilia... Piano Girl

He pauses the TV on a split-screen of a picture of the girl I have been looking at across my garage for months. Younger. No make-up. No black clothes. Smiling. Even with the dark hair and dark eyes, there is nothing dark about her. She's all light. Like sunshine.

"I remember seeing that on the news when it happened. It was a terrible story. It looks just like her," Mrs. Leighton says, and I wonder if she can't make herself believe it, or if she honestly doesn't.

"It is her."

We all turn, and standing in the entrance to the room is Sunshine's brother.

"I knocked, but no one answered the door," he says, but he's not really talking to us. He's staring at the TV. "Where is she?"

The Leightons look at him like he's a crazy person who just barged into their house. Their faces are carved in disbelief, but there's already so much shock in the room right now that it's hard to figure out the source of it.

"Asher, Nastya's brother," I say, answering a question no one asked and hearing how wrong that name sounds coming out of my mouth.

"Emilia's brother," he corrects. "Where is she? I need to bring her home." I know the home he's talking about isn't Margot's. He's taking her home to Brighton. He doesn't sound angry. Just tired. Like he's been living under all of this for such a long time and he just wants it to be over.

"She isn't here."

"Margot said she would be here. She said to try your house first," he looks at me, "and if she wasn't there she'd be here for dinner." There's an uneasiness in his voice that matches his expression.

"She didn't come tonight," Mrs. Leighton says gently, and then turns her eyes, full of sympathy and questions, on me.

"Why don't you just track her phone?" I ask bitterly. Mostly because I can tell he's edgy and nervous and worried and he's making me all of those things, too.

"She left her phone on her bed," he answers, like he's starting to understand that she didn't just forget it. She doesn't want to be found.

Asher tells us what's happened since this afternoon in Brighton. As soon as her parents got the call from the police, he got in the car to pick her up so she wouldn't have to drive alone. In the meantime, they kept calling, trying to get hold of her, figuring they could get to her before it hit the news here. But no one's been able to reach her.

Within minutes we're all on our phones as if we actually believe it will do any good. There really isn't anybody to call, but it makes us feel like we're doing something, even if it is useless. If she left, and she didn't bring her phone, she did it for a reason, and that reason is that she doesn't want us

knowing where she is.

The story on the news has changed, but we all keep looking at the television like there's something there. Like suddenly it's going to give us an answer. Maybe we just don't want to look at each other and see our own confusion reflected on someone else's face. I'm not confused. I actually feel like I understand something for the first time in months. Maybe I understand everything.

Asher walks out of the room to make a phone call and once he does, Drew looks at me. I can tell it's been killing him to wait. "Did she tell you?" he asks.

I should be able to say yes to that question. I should have made sure of that. I should have cared enough to make her tell me. Her secrets were an open secret between us and I allowed it. There was never a question that she wasn't telling me things. *Things*. How fucked up is that? *Things*. All things. Everything. But I knew that once she told me, I could never unhear it, and I was happier being ignorant.

I shake my head and everyone's eyes are on me.

"How could she tell him? She doesn't talk," Sarah says.

Drew and I look at each other; and I don't know what's secret and what isn't anymore.

My phone rings and I grab it without looking at the caller ID, hoping it's her.

"Did you know this?" Clay asks, without even saying hello.

"No, I didn't," I say, but I don't have the energy to snap at him. Everyone assumes I should have known about this. I should have. But I didn't know anything.

"It is her, isn't it?" he asks, waiting for confirmation he doesn't need.

"It's her."

"I saw her with him yesterday."

“With who?”

“Aidan Richter. On the news. The kid who confessed.”

“You saw her with him?” How is that possible?

“At the art competition. He was one of the finalists. When I got out of my interview, she was in the room with him.”

“What were they doing?”

“I don’t know. Standing there staring at each other. It was weird, but I just thought maybe he tried to talk to her and she didn’t answer and it freaked him out.”

“Is she okay?” The concern in his voice is genuine.

“I don’t know. No one knows where she is.” I don’t even know how I get the words out without my voice breaking.

Asher walks back in while I’m still on the phone. “My parents called the credit card company.”

I tell Clay to get over here and I hang up so I can hear what Asher is saying.

He tells us she used the card at a gas station on the northbound side of the turnpike just outside of Brighton earlier today. He’s going over to pick up some things from Margot’s and then he’s heading back there. It’s beyond me what’s so important that he has to pick it up before he goes looking for his sister but I’m not in a position to put down people who love her. I said I loved her and look what I’ve done.

I haven’t been able to interrupt him, because I’m trying to formulate my own thoughts before I dropkick her brother with them.

“She was with him yesterday.” My stomach twists when I say it. I’m afraid there are answers there I don’t want to think about yet.

“What?” I don’t know who says it. Maybe everybody.

“Aidan Richter. The kid who confessed. Clay said he saw them together at the art gallery. He was there.” I force it out in one pained breath.

“Who the hell is Clay?” That wouldn’t have been my first question if I was Asher, but I answer it, just now realizing how little her family really knows about her life here.

“He draws pictures of her. She went with him to a state competition yesterday. He said he found them in a room together, and when he saw the news today, he remembered him.”

“Does he know anything else?” Asher asks, anxiously.

“I don’t know. I told him to get over here.”

Clay pulls up and he’s barely in the door before we bombard him with questions. He tells us what he knows, which isn’t much. He was meeting with the judges while she looked around at the exhibits. When he found her after his interview, she was in a room with the Richter kid and they were staring at each other. He didn’t hear anything so he has no idea if they were speaking or not. Then Richter got called in for his interview and they didn’t see him again. Clay drove her home at the end of the day and that was it.

“She was fine on the way home. She seemed fine. Not like she talks. She was upset in the morning on the way there, but in the afternoon, nothing unusual.”

“Why was she upset? I ask, because it’s the first time he’s mentioned it.

“I don’t know. She looked out the window the whole time and when we got there she was crying. She’s been a mess ever since whatever happened between you two.” He looks at me but it’s almost apologetic, like he didn’t want to call either of us out, but he had to. “I wouldn’t have said anything if this didn’t happen.”

“She was crying?” Asher looks like he doesn’t understand. I guess she doesn’t cry in front of him, either.

“Not like sobbing,” Clay clarifies. “Just tears. I didn’t even know until I looked at her. I wasn’t going to call her on it. Who knows what goes on in her head?”

“Nobody,” Asher says, and if it’s possible, he looks more devastated than before.

“I thought you knew your sister.” I say, throwing his words back at him because now I’m getting scared and it’s making me a dick.

“Nobody knows my sister,” he says. And there isn’t any argument for that.

We work out what we do and don’t know at this point. We know a lot of

things, just not the one thing we want to know. Where she is.

Basically what it comes down to is that no one has seen her since nine o'clock this morning and there's been no trace of her since she used her credit card at a gas station just after eleven right outside Brighton. There's nothing after that. But she's eighteen and she hasn't even been missing for twelve hours so no one's going to look for her except us.

Asher has his parents on the phone the second we've sorted out Clay's story. While Asher talks to his mother, his father is calling the police station to let them know what happened between Sunshine and Aidan Richter yesterday. We're all wondering the same thing. The thing that no one is saying. If she went to Brighton, she went looking for him before he ever confessed. And if she was in Brighton at eleven o'clock and he turned himself in at three-thirty—what happened in between?

Asher leaves, planning to stop at Margot's to pick up whatever it was he promised to bring his parents from his sister's room. Then he's heading straight back to Brighton. Margot's staying at her place on the off chance that Sunshine heads back this way.

Everyone knows I'm going, and Drew says he is, too. Asher gives us the address and the phone number to his parents' house and tells us he'll let them know we're coming. We decide to take our own cars in case we need to separate when we get there.

A few minutes later, I climb into my truck alone and head to Brighton. I spend the entire drive bargaining with everything I will ever have. I don't know how many times I say please. Please give her back to me. Please not again. Just please. My phone doesn't ring. It's the longest two hours of my life.

The room is full of controlled chaos. It reminds me of the day my mother and sister died. Phones ringing off the hook. Frantic calm. Poorly concealed fear. They're like zombie people. Empty. Haunted and endlessly waiting for something. I know what it looks like. These people were probably

normal once. I think about how easily this could be the Leightons if it had been Sarah. How every normal family is one tragedy away from complete implosion.

There are photographs all over the room of a girl I should know, but don't. A girl in pastel dresses, with ribbons in her hair, smiling and playing the piano in more pictures than I can count. I feel like I'm mourning all over again, but this time it's for a girl I've never met.

Her parents are both on cell phones. The land line keeps ringing, but nobody answers it because the reporters keep calling. Finally, her father rips the cord out of the wall and then it's quiet. But not really.

Drew and I sit on the far side of the room. Separated physically and emotionally from the rest of the family. The rest of the family. Whether or not they acknowledge me, I am in that category, also. She made sure of it, no matter how much I'd like to say otherwise. She's gone now, too. It fits.

Asher walks in not long after we arrive. He's carrying a stack of black and white composition books; the kind Ms. McAllister makes us use for creative writing. He puts them on the coffee table in the middle of the room. It's a hideous coffee table. I could make a better one. I think about offering.

I can only see the front of the book on the top of the pile. Chemistry is written in red marker on the cover. It's Sunshine's handwriting and seeing it breaks me a little.

Her mother steps toward the stack of books like it's a bomb. "Is this them?"

Asher nods. He's pale and looks older than he did the first time I met him. Everyone here looks older than they should. Like they've seen too many horrible things and now they're just tired. I wonder if I look like that, too.

Nastya/Emilia/Sunshine. I don't know what to call her. Her mother picks up the book on top and opens it, flipping through the first few pages. "It's just chemistry notes," she says, relieved, but confused.

"Keep going, Mom." Asher sounds like he's delivering a death blow.

A moment later her face contorts in the most wretched expression and her hand goes to her mouth and I look away because just seeing it feels like an invasion. She looks exactly like Sunshine. Drew doesn't look away. He

just stares at her. He looks older, too. I think it might have happened, just now, when he saw the look on this woman's face.

"It took her all of these to write this?" she asks to no one in particular. Her husband, Sunshine's father, the man who's been standing behind her the whole time takes the book out of her hands and she shakes her head at him. Not like she doesn't understand something, but like she's telling him *no*. She doesn't want him to look. It's like someone telling you not to look at a dead body, because if you look at it, you won't ever be able to not see it again. It will always be in your head and you won't ever close your eyes without the image being there. That's how she looks when she shakes her head at him. Like she's seen the body and she doesn't want him seeing it, too.

"No," Asher says. "It's all the same thing. In all of them. It just repeats like it's on a loop. Over and over and over again." His voice breaks on the third over and he starts to cry but no one consoles him. They don't have any comfort to offer.

There's a knock at the door and a girl walks in. She doesn't say anything. She just walks straight over to Asher who doesn't move until she reaches him. Then he wraps his arms around her and folds her up until she's almost gone and I miss Sunshine.

The mood in this room is so familiar. No one feels anything but everyone keeps moving because there are so many things to do. But right now no one seems to know what they are.

The police said Aidan Richter is admitting to seeing her yesterday, but continues to deny having any contact with her today. No one knows whether or not it's true. There's nothing to go on. No place to even begin.

Finally they decide that Asher and Addison and Mr. Ward will take separate cars and go looking for her, even though they have no idea where to start. Asher was right. Nobody knows his sister, at least not the sister he has now.

Her mother is staying here to man the phone. They don't know what to tell Drew and me to do. We don't really know the area and we have no idea where she would go. We're just useless and waiting.

"You can wait in Emilia's room if you want," her mother offers. Everyone in this house calls her Emilia and it sounds more right than Nastya

ever did.

Her room is insane and I feel like I've walked into her mind. There are no walls. You can't see them. Every inch of space is covered with newspaper clippings, computer printouts, and handwritten notes on scraps of paper. They almost seem to move, to shimmer; swimming in and out of my vision like an optical illusion. Like her. I want to close my eyes but I can't. I just turn in a circle waiting for it to stop, but it goes on forever. I think I might run from the room but now this is in my head, too. Like whatever dead body is hiding downstairs in those books.

We step in and get closer because you can't read any of it unless you're almost on top of them. Names. They're all names and origins and meanings. Some of them are from the newspaper, like the ones I've seen her cutting out at my house. Some were obviously printed off of the internet. Others she's written herself.

I don't know how long we stare at the walls before Drew speaks. "Where's Nastya?"

I look at him. I don't know. How would I know? But he's looking at the walls, not me. He's searching for her name. I start looking, too, but it's impossible.

"Your name means salvation," he says at one point, looking at a handwritten scrap of paper taped up next to the window.

Salvation. Such a load of shit.

"Did she tell you that?" he asks.

"No." I never asked. I never asked a lot of things. "This is pointless. We could look it up faster," I say, needing to look away.

Drew pulls out his phone and finds a baby name site on the internet. He types Nastya in, and a second later, we have our answer.

"Rebirth," he says. "Resurrection. Russian origin."

"I think that's why she picked it. The resurrection part. I guess the

Russian, too.” Her mother is standing in the doorway. She’s pulled her hair back and it makes the dark circles under her eyes more noticeable.

“Why resurrection?” Drew asks.

“Because she died,” her mother says, looking so much like Sunshine that it unnerves me. “And she came back.”

Her mother tells us what happened that day. I don’t know if we want to hear it, but she needs to tell it, so we listen. She talks about the things we didn’t hear on the news and the little they know of Aidan Richter. She tells us about the part that came after. The not remembering. Then, later, the not talking. The surgeries and the physical therapy. Wanting to go back to school where no one would know who she was. The Russian name her mother didn’t understand until now.

Then she talks about before. We hear story after story about a girl and a piano and a whole community who took ownership of her. Her eyes light up at the memory of it. But that’s what it is—a memory. Like Sunshine said. I know what she’s seeing. A dead girl.

And as I listen to these stories, in this shrine of a house, I start to understand why she left.

I feel like I learn more in one evening about the girl who has practically lived at my house for months than I have since the moment I met her. And I don’t want to know any of it.

Her mother thanks us but I don’t know why and then she leaves to make more phone calls. I think she just needs something to do.

Drew lies back in Sunshine’s bed, staring at the ceiling. I sit on the floor and lean against the wall. Every time I move I can hear paper crinkling against my back.

“I don’t understand,” he says, eventually.

“Don’t understand what?” I ask. There are so many possible answers to that question.

“I don’t get why he didn’t rape her.”

“*What the fuck kind of a question is that?*” I practically growl at him.

“I’m not trying to be a dick. I’m serious,” he says, and I can tell he is being serious and it’s uncomfortable for him. All of this is uncomfortable for him. In the last few weeks, Drew has had to handle more emotionally-charged, disturbing situations than he has in his whole life and he’s not equipped for it.

“Sorry,” I apologize to him, because I am, for more than just biting his head off. He was going to have to start growing up at some point, but I feel bad that it had to be like this.

“I just don’t get it. Gorgeous girl, alone, why doesn’t he rape her? Why does he just beat the shit out of her and leave her there. It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Would it make sense if he had raped her?” I ask, because nothing about what happened to her makes sense.

“No. I guess I just want to understand why he did it. I want there to be a reason.”

“Too much pain, rage, grief. Too much reality.” There are so many things that can break you if there’s nothing to hold you together.

“That’s not an excuse,” he says.

“No, it’s not an excuse,” I reply. “You asked for a reason. It’s a reason. Just not a good one.”

I can tell he’s still struggling to understand, to make this fit into his view of the world; but it never will. And it shouldn’t. It has no place in the world, no matter how often it happens.

I feel the clock cursing me with every minute that passes and I force myself not to look at it because I don’t want to count them. I don’t even know how long the silence persists before I have to say what’s in my head because I don’t want it in there anymore.

“I wasn’t supposed to have to do this again... I can’t do this again. It was done. It was everybody. All of them... gone... and then her. Why? What did I do that was so wrong? Why even give her to me, just to take her away?” I know Drew wants to tell me not to let my mind go there, but he can’t even make himself say the words. It’s the only place left for my mind to go. “It’s my fault. I never should have thought it was okay to love her.”

He sighs, staring up at the ceiling. “It *is* okay, Josh. *She’s* okay.” He wants to believe it, but he doesn’t, and it’s worse than if he’d said nothing.

“No one is ever okay.”

It’s well after midnight, but no one is sleeping. We’re on our third pot of coffee. I’ve made the last two, which is only right, since I’ve been the one drinking most of it.

Asher and Addison and Mr. Ward got back an hour ago. None of them said a word, but they didn’t need to. If they had found anything, it would have spoken for itself. The quiet in this room is like a vise that just keeps tightening on us, little by little, until we’re all suffocating from it. The piano hovers in the corner like a ghost and I can’t look at it, because now I know what it means, and it’s haunting me, too.

Drew and I are at the dining room table. Mr. and Mrs. Ward are on one couch far enough away from each other that there’s no danger of them touching. Addison is stretched out on the other couch with her head resting on Asher’s lap, his hand mindlessly running through her hair.

The back door opens and it’s a bomb detonating into the room. Everyone turns at once. And she’s there.

No one moves. No one jumps up and runs to her or shrieks with joy. Everyone just stares, like we’re all trying to make sure she’s really here. She looks at all of us, her eyes passing over every battered face in the room, until she reaches mine. And then there’s nothing else. I can’t move, but she does. And then she’s right in front of me and all at once her mother says *Emilia* and Asher says *Em* and her father says *Milly* and Drew says *Nasty* and I say

Sunshine and then she shatters.

All the pieces of all the girls go flying and I'm holding the one who's left.

My arms are wrapped around her, but I don't say anything. I don't think anything. I don't even know if I breathe. I'm so afraid that I am not going to be able to hold her together. I've seen her cry once before but it was nothing like this. She is gone, disappeared into some otherworldly oblivion of pain. The sound. It's raw and primal and horrifying and I don't want to hear it. Her hand is pressed between my chest and her mouth, trying to stifle it, but it's not working. She won't stop shaking, always the shaking, and I'm begging in my head for her to stop. I can feel everyone in the room watching, but I can't think about them right now.

She's still standing, but she's not. All of her weight is on me. All of it. The weight of her body and her secrets and her tears and her pain and her regret and her loss and I feel like I'm going to break, too, because it's too much. I don't want to know any of this. Now I understand why she spent so much time running. I want to run away, too. I want to drop her and fling the door open and not look back, because I can't do this. I'm not strong enough, not brave enough, not comforting enough. I'm not enough. I'm no one's salvation. Not even my own.

But I'm here and so is she and I can't let go. Maybe I don't need to save her forever. Maybe I can just save her right now, in this moment, and if I can do that, maybe it will save me and maybe that can be enough. I tighten my arms as if I can still the shaking with that alone. The crying has turned silent. Her face is buried against my chest. I'm watching the light reflect off her hair on top of her head and I focus on that, because I can't look around me and see all of those faces asking me for answers I don't have.

Gradually, she calms. Her breathing slows and her body settles into mine and it steadies. Then I feel her take her own weight back, for just a moment, before she pulls away from me.

I loosen my arms and let her go, but my eyes stay on her. Her face goes blank, the way it was the first time I saw her and I see every emotion being put away. It's like watching a video of an explosion played backwards, every piece of debris being sucked back into place, like nothing ever happened.

I'm afraid to look away. Afraid she'll fall apart again. Afraid she'll disappear. Afraid. I never should have left my garage. I never should have let her in it.

Then she sees the pile of notebooks on the table and everything about her goes still. Her eyes won't leave them. They are a question and an answer all at once.

"How?" her mother asks, finally. Confused. Betrayed. Relieved. "You didn't remember."

I look at the faces of the people who love her, who haven't heard her voice in nearly two years. No one expects a response. But they get one.

"I remember everything," she whispers, and it's a confession and a curse.

The only other noise in the room is the sharp intake of her mother's breath at the sound of Sunshine's voice.

"Since when?" her father asks.

She pulls her eyes away from the notebooks to face him when she answers.

"Since the day I stopped talking."

Somehow, everyone eventually sleeps; scattered across the house on beds and floors and sofas. I end up on the twin bed in Sunshine's room, with her body curled up against mine, and I don't care how small the bed is, because she will never be close enough.

No one made any attempt to stop me when I climbed in with her. I think they all knew they couldn't prevent it. There was nothing in this house or on this earth that was going to keep me from being next to her.

Drew is on a makeshift bed on the floor because I don't think he wanted to be far away from her, either.

I listen to her breathing; the soft intake of air reminding me that she's here, her body pressed against mine, the way we've slept so many nights that

I've lost count.

Sometime during the night, her mother comes in and looks at us on the bed together. Her expression is one of acceptance, if not understanding.

"What did you call her?" she asks, but I don't think it's her real question.

"Sunshine," I say, and she smiles like she believes it's perfect and she may be the only person other than me who would think so.

"What is she to you?" she whispers. The real question and I know the answer even if don't know how to say it.

Drew's muffled voice rises up from the floor before I can respond.

"Family," he says.

And he's right.

CHAPTER 55

Emilia

My parents leave the next morning for the news conference, and Asher goes to school, even though they told him he could skip today.

I walk Drew to his car and I think I could hug him forever.

“I’ll miss my Nastypants,” he tells me.

“There will never come a day when I won’t be your Nastypants.” I smile and let go. “Tell Tierney to give you another chance. If you screw up this time, I’ll take you down myself.”

And then he’s gone; and it’s just me and Josh Bennett and all of the unasked questions.

I hand him one of the notebooks because it’s the only way he’ll know, and he looks at it like it’s a viper.

“I don’t ever want to know what’s in those books,” he says, and he won’t take it out of my hands.

I tell him that I don’t want to know what’s in them either. But I do know and I need him to know too. So he reads it and his face tenses along with every other muscle in his body and I can tell he’s trying not to cry. And when I show him the pictures, he shoves his fist against his mouth and I think he wants to hit something, but there’s nothing here to hit. When he gets to the one of my hand, the one with the bones coming through the skin in so many places it’s hard to believe they ever put it back together again, he throws up. And I don’t blame him.

I show him videos of me playing the piano and photo albums full of pictures and introduce him to the me he never met; but we don’t say very much.

“You were really good,” he says, his voice faint as it breaks the silence.

“I was fucking amazing,” I try to joke, but it just comes out sad.

“You still are,” he responds with quiet conviction, piercing me with his

eyes the way he does when he wants to make sure I'm listening. "Every way that matters."

The silence returns and we sit on the couch, photo albums on our laps, staring at the wasted piano in the corner.

"I wish I could have saved you," he says, finally. And this is what it always comes back to. Salvation. Him saving me. Me saving him. Impossibilities, because there is no such thing, and it's not what we ever needed from each other anyway.

"That's stupid," I echo his words from my birthday. "Because it's an impossible wish." I pick up his hand and he laces his fingers through mine, holding on tighter than he needs to. "You couldn't have saved me," I tell him. "You didn't even know me."

"I would have liked to."

"Mrs. Leighton told me you needed to be saved, too. But I can't do that either," I confess, and he looks at me skeptically because I never did tell him about that conversation. "I don't want you to save me and I can't save you," I say, because I need him to hear me say it, but also because I need to hear me say it.

He closes the photo album and lays it down on the coffee table and cringes, because I've found that's what he does every time he looks at that coffee table. And then he turns and puts his hands on either side of my face and kisses me with a reverence I may never understand. And maybe I'm a liar and I do need it, because being kissed by Josh Bennett is kind of like being saved. It's a promise and a memory of the future and a book of better stories.

When he stops, I'm still here, and he's still looking at me like he can't believe I am, and I want to keep that look forever.

"Emilia," he says, and when he does, it warms me to my soul. "Every day you save me."

CHAPTER 56

Josh

I say goodbye to her in her driveway two days after I got here. Two days after I learned the truth. Two days after I got her back. Two days to wrap my mind around losing her again.

I was planning on leaving tomorrow, but I know I have to leave today.

We're both leaning against the side of my truck, looking at the ground like it holds the secrets of the universe. Her hand is in a fist and she's tracing circles again with her foot and I hate it because it reminds me of things I don't want to think about.

She told her parents that she was considering coming back with me, and they didn't like it, but they know her well enough to realize that telling her not to wouldn't accomplish much. And yet that's what I'm planning to do.

I take both of her hands and pull her in front of me because I want to face her when I say everything I have to say. And maybe it's a mistake, because when I look at her now, I think, for just one second, that God doesn't hate me so much after all. But then I look again and all I can see is the goodbye all around us and I need to touch her one more time. If there has to be a last time I kiss her, I want to know that it's the last time. I trace the line of the scar by her hair. I don't know who moves first, but her lips are on mine and my hands are in her hair and we kiss each other with the regret and desperation of so many days I can't count them. Her body is crushed against mine and I hold her there so tightly it's as if I'm trying to absorb her through sheer force of will.

But I can't; and when we stop, I rest my forehead against hers and start to say goodbye.

I know that if I don't talk now, I may never talk, and I'll just stay here until tomorrow and let her convince herself to come with me. And I'll convince myself that it's okay.

“I’m leaving today,” I tell her and I wait.

“Do you want me to go with you?” she asks so softly it’s like she doesn’t want me to hear it.

“Yes.” It’s honest, even if it goes against everything I’m going to say to her next. “But you shouldn’t.”

She nods like she’s thought about it, too, and she knows it’s true. But, like me, I don’t think she wants to admit it.

She made me look at those pictures and read those books and now I know everything that she knows. But I don’t know how to help her. I don’t understand how she lived with that in her head every day and still held onto any thread of sanity.

“You should stay here and try to, I don’t know, get better. Get better sounds stupid.” It does sound stupid, but I don’t know what won’t sound stupid. *Get well? Heal? Fix things?* It’s like she has a broken leg. Or she’s a handyman. And I’m a shit for thinking it, but there’s a part of me that knows that when she does get well, heal, fix things, she may not want me anymore. She may be so changed that we won’t even know each other, if we ever did. And when that goodbye comes, it won’t be temporary.

If none of this had ever happened, she would be still be here in Brighton where she belongs – the beautiful, talented, unattainable girl. And I’m a bastard, because I know the truth of her now, but I don’t know how to regret it. Because to regret it would mean to regret that I ever met her and I can’t make myself do that.

Part of us has always known that we were together because we were damaged. We had that life experience bond that neither of us ever wanted. And maybe when she’s not so damaged anymore, I won’t be enough for her. Maybe she’ll want someone whose life isn’t as tragic as hers. And that won’t be me.

When I think about it, I want to rewind and go back to where I just said yes and leave it there. Yes, come with me. We’ll play house and bake cookies and build chairs and life will be perfect. But I’ve started now; I’m in this and I can finish it.

“I’m going to say this and it probably won’t sound good or eloquent or whatever and I’m probably going to ramble, but just let me say it, okay? Will

you listen?”

Her eyes are soft on me. Her lips just barely turn up.

“You’ve listened to every word I’ve ever said. Even the ones I didn’t say. I’ll listen to anything, Josh.” It’s like a razor that slices through whatever is left holding me, and I just go.

“Maybe one day you’ll come back. Maybe you never will and that’ll suck, but you can’t keep doing this. The blame and the self-loathing and the bullshit. I can’t watch that. It makes me hate you for hating yourself. I don’t want to lose you. But I’d rather lose you if it means you’ll be happy. I think if you come back with me today, you’ll never be okay. And I’ll never be okay if you aren’t. I need to know that there’s a way for people like us to end up okay. I need to know that there even is such a thing as okay, or maybe not just okay, maybe even good, and it’s out there and we just haven’t found it yet. There’s got to be a happier ending than this, here. There’s got to be a better story. Because we deserve one. *You* deserve one. Even if it doesn’t end with you coming back to me.”

The last part chokes me. Steals my air and burns my eyes. I’m kicking myself when I say it. I tell myself to shut up and keep her. Grab her and kiss her and tell her everything will be okay because I’ll make it okay, good, even. Tell her that there’s absolutely nothing wrong with her. Lie to her with every pretty lie I have. But I can’t do it. I’ve done goodbyes before, and I can do this one, too. Somehow this one hurts worse than the others; because this one I could prevent if I wanted to, since I’m the one saying it. This goodbye comes with a choice the way none of the others ever did. And as much as I’m telling her to stay here, as much as I know she needs to stay here, I still want her to choose to come with me. To say fuck sanity and healing and closure. To say that I am the only thing she needs to be well and whole and alive. But we both know that’s not true. She’s going to say goodbye to me today and I have to let her and neither of us knows if she’s ever going to come back.

I’ve been trying to leave for twenty minutes, but neither of us knows

how to say goodbye. Even now, I know that all of the words I've given her today haven't been enough, because I haven't said the one thing that needs to be said the most. And if I want to leave here without regrets, I need to know that there are no more unsaid words left to haunt me.

"Wait." I catch her as she walks away, taking her hand and turning it over in mine, tracing the scars like I've done so many times before. She's searching my face and I can almost feel her eyes reaching into mine, wondering what more there could possibly be to say.

I don't know how to say it—after all this time, I'm not even sure that I can—but I have to break her last rule, because if she knows nothing else, I need her to know this one thing.

"I love you, Sunshine," I tell her, before I lose my nerve. "And I don't give a shit whether you want me to or not."

CHAPTER 57

Emilia

I never realized that grief and self-pity weren't the same thing. I thought grieving was what I was doing all this time I had been feeling sorry for myself, but it wasn't. So for the first time in nearly three years, I let myself grieve.

Josh let me go. Or maybe I let him go. I'm not sure it matters. He left the day after Drew. He told me he loved me, but he wouldn't let me say it back, because he didn't want to hear it if I was lost to him. Then he kissed the palm of my left hand and gave it back to me and he got in his truck and he left.

I think the goodbye was harder on him, because he's used to losing people who die, but he's not used to losing people who walk away; and that's what I was doing. I don't know how long I'm going to stay. I don't even know if I'm going to go back at all. All I know is that it's time.

It's time for a lot of things, even if I can't make them happen all at once. And I'd like to, because patience has never been my thing.

I crawl into my mother's arms in a silent apology because I don't know the words that will ever be enough. And when I speak, I tell her what I know is true: that I hate myself, that I am so very not okay, that I am afraid I'll feel like this forever and I don't know what to do. And then I tell her to make the phone call. I'll go.

I go to therapy nearly every day in the beginning. And I talk. And I talk. And I talk. And then I talk some more. And then I cry. And when I'm done crying, my parents come, and then my brother, and we try to find a way to crawl out of this hole together.

We finally found a therapist for me who doesn't have a lot of patience, either, and has no tolerance for my crap. I kind of love her. Because let's face it, when it comes to therapy, I don't need a kindergarten teacher; I need a drill sergeant. She gives me homework which I actually do, and if and when I leave, we have a schedule for phone and weekend appointments. I know there really isn't an end in sight for me with the therapy. At least not for a while.

I even tried the group thing again, but only once, because I still don't like it. I still don't feel better just for knowing that shitty things happen to other people, too, and so I don't do that again. And I don't feel bad about it.

Yesterday, I sat down at the piano, but I didn't touch the keys. I think I'd like to keep that coffin closed. I'd like to remember that the last piece of music I played was beautiful and perfect, even if it wasn't. I won't even try to act like it doesn't still kill me; my lying skills haven't improved enough for that. I mourn it every day and I wonder if I'll ever stop.

The nightmares haven't come back, but I expect them every night. All the secrets and stories are spit out of my head now. Everyone knows everything, so I guess the memories have nothing to hold over me anymore. I still itch for the notebooks like a sleeping pill before bed every night, but they're gone now. My father helped me build a fire in the fire pit in the backyard and he and my mother and Asher and I all took turns throwing them in until the smoke was burning our eyes and we could blame the tears on it. I'll never forget the words, but I won't write them down again either.

I don't have the camera my mother gave me here, but we use hers, and we take more pictures than we will ever need and we try to make new memories. We spread the proofs out over the kitchen table and I show her my favorite one and she shows me hers and we print them and start a new wall together.

Aidan Richter is being held, but none of the lawyers will let me talk to him, even though he's confessed. And maybe there really isn't anything left to say. I've learned a lot about the why of Aidan Richter. About the why of what happened that day. How he came home. How he found his brother's body. How reality became so unbearable in that moment that his mind just shattered. They say he had a psychotic break. I know that's the defense, but I don't want to hear it. I don't want to get it. Because I can't excuse it. I can't

forgive it. I won't. But my hate will never be as clearly defined again, either. Aidan Richter wasn't prepared for the shit life threw at him any more than I was. He just broke in a very different way. I feel like everything I've spent the past three years believing isn't quite as true as I thought it was. Like the glass I've been looking through is coated in the dust of my own perception and I haven't seen what's real. Because before it was black and white, evil and not. And that's the most confusing part – figuring out what's true.

For the nearly two years since I remembered, I've had a picture of evil in my head and it had his face. I spent that time planning to hurt him and feeling justified, like it was owed to me. But when I came back to Brighton for him, I wasn't sure I could do it. So I sat in the dirt. Under the trees. In the place where he beat me. And I waited. I waited for the words. I waited for the courage. I waited to decide. But I waited too long; and he took that from me too.

I never did see him again after that day in the gallery. I never did get to make him listen. I'll be allowed to speak at his sentencing, whenever that is. I haven't decided if I will. I know there are still things to say, but I don't know what they are anymore, and there are days when I miss the silence.

Sometimes I wonder whatever became of the real Russian girl who I was supposed to be that day. I wonder if she heard about what happened and if she knows what part she played in it simply by existing.

One afternoon Josh calls, and in the understatement of the century, I tell him that I'm tired of being angry.

"Then don't be," he says, as if this is the most logical thing on earth. And maybe it is.

"But if I'm not angry then isn't it the same as saying it's okay? Doesn't it mean I'm condoning it?"

"No. It means you're accepting it." He takes a breath and exhales. "I'm not telling you that you shouldn't be pissed. You should be furious. You're entitled to every ounce of anger you have." He stops speaking for a moment

and when he starts again I can hear the tension in his voice. “You have no idea how much I want to kill him for what he did to you, and if he hadn’t been arrested, I don’t know that there is anything that would have stopped me from doing it, so don’t think that I don’t believe your hatred is justified. But you have a choice now and I’d rather you choose to be happy. And I know that that sounds stupid. Maybe it sounds like the most impossible thing in the world, but it’s still what I want. He took the fucking piano, Sunshine. He didn’t take everything. Look at your left hand. It’s probably clenched in a fist right now, isn’t it?”

I don’t need to look. It is. He knows it.

“Now open it up and let it go.”

And I do.

I think about the day I died and about the story Josh’s grandfather told and three days later I write a letter to the court for whenever they want to read it.

My name is Emilia Ward.

I have a list of nevers I started when I was fifteen. I will never be the Brighton Piano Girl again. I will never carry a child. I will never walk down the street in the middle of the afternoon without wondering if someone is waiting to kill me. I will never get back the months of my life that I spent in rehabilitation and in and out of hospitals, instead of in recitals and in and out of school. I will never get back the years I spent hating every last person in the world, including myself. I will never not know the meaning of the word pain.

I understand pain. I understand rage. Aidan Richter gave me the gift of that understanding. He understands it, too.

I spent the past three years despising the person who did this to me; the person who stole my life and took my identity. I learned to despise myself in the process. I spent the last three years fortifying my rage, while he spent the last three years healing his.

I will never forget what he did to me. I will never forgive it. I will never stop hating him. Please don't ask me to. I wish I could say that I am a big enough person; but I'm not. I will never stop mourning what he stole from me. But I can't steal it back from him and I don't want to anymore. I think maybe I can believe in spite of Aidan Richter; or maybe I can believe because of him. If he can heal his life, then maybe I can, too.

I can't tell you what I believe is the appropriate punishment for him. I just don't know. But I would like to believe in the dream of second chances. For both of us.

Nothing is perfect. It's not even good yet. But maybe.

And after five weeks, I go home.

CHAPTER 58

Emilia

I haven't gotten better. I'm not even close to okay. The only thing I've done is to decide to get better. But I think that may just be enough.

I'm trying to see the magic in everyday miracles now: the fact that my heart still beats, that I can lift my feet off of the earth to walk and that there is something in me worthy of love. I know that bad things still happen. And sometimes I still ask myself why I am alive; but now, when I ask, I have an answer.

I get back on a Sunday morning and that evening I walk into dinner at the Leighton house, unexpected, but always welcome. I can tell the music is Sarah's and it makes me smile because I still hate it, but not her. Everyone is laughing and helping and sniping, and other than the fact that Tierney Lowell is setting the table, everything is the same.

Seeing Josh is my homecoming. I didn't tell him I was coming back. He doesn't say anything when he sees me, and neither do I, because the fact that I'm here is an answer. We just look at each other and speak in the silence like we always have and no one interrupts the conversation.

"Hi—" Mrs. Leighton says, her eyes wide, when I walk into the kitchen without a stitch of black on me, carrying the same chocolate cake I brought the first time I had dinner here.

"Emilia," I fill the pause, because everyone is still trying to figure out what to call me. Except maybe Josh, who's always known.

"Emilia," she says, and hugs me. "You have a beautiful voice."

And maybe some things aren't the same.

“Answer me something,” Josh says, a month after I’ve gotten back. I’m in the chair in his garage and I’m doing homework, not woodworking, because I may never catch up. I could go inside and study in the air conditioning, but I love this place. And being out here, breathing sawdust in Josh Bennett’s garage with him, is worth any amount of sweat.

“I’ve answered everything, Josh. I don’t think there are any questions left to ask.”

“Just one,” he says, laying down a screwdriver and coming over to lean against the workbench opposite me. He pushes his boots out far enough so that they just touch mine.

I close the book and try not to smile at him, because I know what’s coming. It’s the question I’ve been waiting for him to ask since the day I got lost and ended up at his house in the middle of the night, before he even knew what the question was.

“What did you see when you died?” He has that tentative half smile, like he’s almost embarrassed by what he’s saying. “Because I’m guessing it wasn’t the Sea of Tranquility.”

And when I look at him, I’m not so sure it wasn’t.

“Where did you go?” His voice drops just slightly and he loses even the suggestion of a smile.

He’s watching me like he’s not sure he’s allowed to ask the question, and he’s not even sure he wants the answer. I can almost see his grandfather’s words and Josh’s doubts about them swimming in his head. On every side of me are the lights and the tools and the wood and the boots and the boy I want to see forever. And if my Sea of Tranquility were real, it would be this place, here, with him.

I don’t say anything right away, because I just want one minute to look at his face before I give him my last secret.

And then I tell him.

“Your garage.”

Thank You

Life is short and TBR lists are long. I know time is precious and I thank you for spending yours with this book.

—Katja

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Table of Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Prologue](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)
[CHAPTER 32](#)
[CHAPTER 33](#)
[CHAPTER 34](#)
[CHAPTER 35](#)
[CHAPTER 36](#)
[CHAPTER 37](#)
[CHAPTER 38](#)
[CHAPTER 39](#)
[CHAPTER 40](#)
[CHAPTER 41](#)
[CHAPTER 42](#)
[CHAPTER 43](#)
[CHAPTER 44](#)
[CHAPTER 45](#)
[CHAPTER 46](#)
[CHAPTER 47](#)
[CHAPTER 48](#)
[CHAPTER 49](#)
[CHAPTER 50](#)
[CHAPTER 51](#)
[CHAPTER 52](#)
[CHAPTER 53](#)
[CHAPTER 54](#)
[CHAPTER 55](#)
[CHAPTER 56](#)
[CHAPTER 57](#)
[CHAPTER 58](#)

Table of Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Prologue](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)
[CHAPTER 32](#)
[CHAPTER 33](#)
[CHAPTER 34](#)
[CHAPTER 35](#)
[CHAPTER 36](#)
[CHAPTER 37](#)
[CHAPTER 38](#)
[CHAPTER 39](#)
[CHAPTER 40](#)
[CHAPTER 41](#)
[CHAPTER 42](#)
[CHAPTER 43](#)
[CHAPTER 44](#)
[CHAPTER 45](#)
[CHAPTER 46](#)
[CHAPTER 47](#)
[CHAPTER 48](#)
[CHAPTER 49](#)
[CHAPTER 50](#)
[CHAPTER 51](#)
[CHAPTER 52](#)
[CHAPTER 53](#)
[CHAPTER 54](#)
[CHAPTER 55](#)
[CHAPTER 56](#)
[CHAPTER 57](#)
[CHAPTER 58](#)

Table of Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Prologue](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)
[CHAPTER 32](#)
[CHAPTER 33](#)
[CHAPTER 34](#)
[CHAPTER 35](#)
[CHAPTER 36](#)
[CHAPTER 37](#)
[CHAPTER 38](#)
[CHAPTER 39](#)
[CHAPTER 40](#)
[CHAPTER 41](#)
[CHAPTER 42](#)
[CHAPTER 43](#)
[CHAPTER 44](#)
[CHAPTER 45](#)
[CHAPTER 46](#)
[CHAPTER 47](#)
[CHAPTER 48](#)
[CHAPTER 49](#)
[CHAPTER 50](#)
[CHAPTER 51](#)
[CHAPTER 52](#)
[CHAPTER 53](#)
[CHAPTER 54](#)
[CHAPTER 55](#)
[CHAPTER 56](#)
[CHAPTER 57](#)
[CHAPTER 58](#)

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Prologue

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER 23

CHAPTER 24

CHAPTER 25

CHAPTER 26

CHAPTER 27

CHAPTER 28

CHAPTER 29

CHAPTER 30

CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34
CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41
CHAPTER 42
CHAPTER 43
CHAPTER 44
CHAPTER 45
CHAPTER 46
CHAPTER 47
CHAPTER 48
CHAPTER 49
CHAPTER 50
CHAPTER 51
CHAPTER 52
CHAPTER 53
CHAPTER 54
CHAPTER 55
CHAPTER 56
CHAPTER 57
CHAPTER 58