

# I WISH YOU WOULD

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HOT  
KEY  
BOOKS

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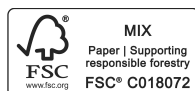
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For Justin, who loves with a love that is more than love.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Natalia*

*Prom Night, 2:08 AM*

**I CAN THINK OF** about nineteen reasons not to follow Ethan to his room right now.

One: track practice in the morning. Two: finals study group after that. Three: the whole “avoiding these feelings at all costs” thing.

But then the corner of his mouth lifts in that half smile of his, and in a voice that’s gone gravelly from the late hour he asks, “Speaker duel?” and the reasons sputter out at three.

With everyone else crashed around us in a post-prom haze, *really*, the smart thing to do would be to go to sleep, too.

I grin and follow him up the stairs.

When I shut his door behind me, it’s finally just the two of us. My favorite thing.

Or, well, it used to be.

I look around his room for changes I’ve missed in the months I’ve avoided coming over. Nothing drastic. As usual, it’s orderly but lived in. The sky-blue walls are as familiar as my own. Stacks of books sit by the bed. Devices and cups litter his massive desk. I scan the framed photo

I gave him last year of us laughing on the beach, eyes squeezed shut, shoulders pressed together, our hair wild in the wind. His whole room is cozy and quiet and comforting. Just like Ethan.

“Here,” he says, tossing me one of his sweatshirts.

I suppress a smile. I didn’t even have to ask.

“This better be clean,” I mutter.

He rolls his eyes and stretches out on his giant bed to choose some music. All limbs and length and lean muscle honed on the basketball court.

I pull the sweatshirt that smells like him over my head, dislodging a few hairpins from my updo in the process. I adjust the strands of hair that fell down and gather the too-long sleeves into my fists.

When I turn, Ethan’s gaze is fixed on me, like he was watching me. He darts his eyes back to his phone.

I changed out of my cheap black prom dress earlier and cringed as I hung it next to Ethan’s perfectly tailored suit. I’d accepted my dress would be nothing compared to the designer outfits the rest of the school wore tonight. I’m used to that. But I didn’t expect to *feel* like nothing myself. That’s new.

*Different worlds.*

The words echo in my mind. The warning I haven’t told Ethan about. I haven’t told my best friend a lot of things lately.

We settle onto his bed in our usual positions, lying side by side, arm’s length apart, propped on our elbows, facing each other. Our bodies know the choreography of our friendship, even if I don’t anymore.

I grab my phone to choose something for speaker duel, which is what we call it when we race to see which one will pair with his Bluetooth speaker first. It’s silly, but it’s classic Ethan-and-Natalia-best-friend

vibes. Which is exactly what we need to ease the tension that's found a home between us lately.

"Let me guess, you're going Sad Girl Indie Album?" he asks.

My thumb pauses scrolling. That's exactly what I was going to choose. But I refuse to give him the satisfaction. "You'll have to wait until I win."

He dips his chin so we're at eye level. "You haven't been over in so long, the speaker probably won't even remember you."

He's teasing, but there's a slight . . . *something* in the way he says it. Hurt, maybe. Confusion, for sure. I sidestep it by rolling onto my stomach, crossing my ankles like a mermaid tail.

Ethan blinks at my feet once, then looks back at me. "Natalia," he says evenly, "are you wearing shoes on my bed?"

I look over my shoulder at my dangling feet. "No? Flip-flops don't count."

"Anything that brings sand in my bed counts," Ethan says, glaring at me.

"Don't be such a Virgo," I say, kicking my feet back and forth, messing with him.

"Says the control freak," he mutters, shaking his head. He pushes up on one arm. His large hands easily wrap around my bare ankles to stop my kicking. He slowly pulls off my sandals, and they land on the thick carpet with a soft thud. My stomach swoops as his fingertips drift down my legs a little before he lets go. "You're such a monster when no one is looking."

I flutter my lashes. "Part of my charm."

"I'm aware," he says affectionately.

As he settles back into position, I can't help but study the sharp lines of his jaw and cheekbones. The angles and curves I know by heart. For

the hundredth time, my fingers itch to sketch him, and I squeeze my hands into fists to suppress the urge.

Even though he's beyond embarrassed, it's no wonder he was voted prom king tonight. As a freaking junior, no less. That inky mussed hair, those piercing eyes . . . He's a dark prince fantasy come to life.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks, squinting with curiosity.

"I don't know. Like what? Shut up," I say in a rush.

"Oh . . . kay."

A soft *bloop* sounds from the speaker, indicating a phone is now paired. We wait. When a lo-fi beat comes on, I groan and Ethan gloats. Maybe he was right and his speaker doesn't remember me. That makes me sadder than it should.

"Did you know—" he starts, then stops. He clears his throat. "Never mind—it's stupid."

"I doubt it," I prompt.

Ethan never used to call himself stupid before the popular crowd started paying attention to him, and it sets my teeth on edge. I like his conversational left turns using facts and trivia and quotes. They're clues to what he's thinking about. I give him an expectant look.

"Fine . . . Did you know that *Virgo* means 'virgin' in Latin?"

"Yeah," I say, like, *duh*. Everyone has to take one year of Latin at Liberty Prep. I use my bitchy tone because it's hard enough to lock these feelings away when it isn't prom night and I'm not alone with him. But now he's looking devastating in the moonlight and talking about virginity? What's he going to bring up next? Our ridiculous pact from freshman year?

Ethan pulls on a loose thread of his T-shirt, wrapping it around his fingertip one way, then unwinding it and wrapping it the other.

“Historically it also was interchangeable with ‘maiden,’ which is messed up, since that implies it’s a status only girls can have.”

Wait.

I sit up, eyes wide. “Ethan Forrester, is this your way of telling me you had sex with someone?”

His eyes bug. “What—no!”

My relief is annoyingly palpable. I don’t want to think about Ethan with anyone like that, but I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t wondered. He’s always been beautiful, but *everyone* noticed when Gawky Ethan grew into Hot Ethan. And it’s not like I’m immune to noticing, either.

“So, you’re still a *Virgo Virgo*?” I joke.

“I mean, it depends on your definition,” he says, not looking at me. “But, yeah, technically.”

Heat creeps up my neck. “Oh. That’s . . . specific,” I manage. “When exactly did we decide this is something we talk about?”

“You literally just asked!”

*Girls like you make boys do bad things.* Is this one of those things? I really need to change the subject.

“Besides”—Ethan cuts his eyes to me—“we talk about everything else.”

Guilt needles my sternum. Not everything.

Ugh, what am I doing? I shouldn’t be lying beside Ethan in the middle of the night talking about our sex lives. Or lack thereof in my case. But . . . I can’t make myself move, either. I chew on my lip, every nerve in my body at attention.

“I mean, I hope you know you can tell me if you ever . . . have something to share,” he says.

The silence between us is short but charged. Like when the tide pulls back just before a thunderous wave.



“Who says I don’t?” It’s definitely just my competitive streak putting that edge in my voice.

He sits up fast, dark curls falling over his forehead that he pushes back. His usually pale skin is flushed in the dim light, and we’re close enough that I can see his pulse pick up in his neck. “Do you? Was it Tanner?”

“No,” I admit. “He wanted to, but . . . no.”

It’s why I ended up flying solo at the prom I organized. Tanner Brown dumped me at the last minute for being, and I quote: “not worth it.” Not sure if he meant his time, the prom ticket, or the fact that I didn’t want to get a hotel room with him after. But we had only been together three weeks. I wasn’t about to lose my virginity with someone who hadn’t even outlasted my most recent tank of gas. No matter how curious I am about the whole thing.

Ethan flops back on the pillow beside me, obviously relieved. “Good. I can’t believe you ever went out with that guy.”

Honestly, I can’t, either. But no one else asked me to prom, and it would be pathetic if the president-elect showed up alone. Which it was. So, you know, beggars and choosers and all that.

“We don’t all have them busting down our doors the way you do,” I say.

Ethan rolls his eyes as if he isn’t constantly fielding texts. He got asked to prom by *three* different girls. He said he turned them down because he could tell they only asked him because of his dad. It’s possible, but it’s equally as possible they like him. Everyone does now.

“That doesn’t mean you should go for just anyone. Tanner’s such a dick. You deserve so much better.”

“Like who?”

Ethan nudges me with his shoulder. “I would’ve taken you.”

“Pity date? No thanks,” I say. Shoving the *feelings* away, away, away.

He frowns a little. "You were down freshman year."

I push the sleeves of the sweatshirt above my elbows because I'm warming up now. "What're you talking about?"

"Don't you remember? Our pact," he says, finally meeting my eyes.

He really went there. The canvas in my mind flushes in pinks. Blooming and vibrant and rosy.

"I remember," I say carefully.

As if I could forget. At the time, we pinkie swore to be each other's firsts if we were still virgins by senior year because I didn't want to lose my virginity to a jerk, and Ethan was so terrified of girls he figured he'd die a virgin otherwise.

"But I was also the only member of your Waluigi Appreciation Club. I wasn't exactly making great choices." I keep making jokes to quell the tingly feeling in my stomach.

He stares off into the middle distance, his expression pensive. "If you can't love me at my Waluigi, you don't deserve me at my prom king."

I laugh and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. His gaze follows the motion.

"I still can't believe it. I don't think a junior has ever won before," I say.

He returns his attention to the ceiling, his thick eyebrows coming together. "It was probably rigged."

"Rude. I counted those votes personally." In a tone like I'm breaking bad news, I say, "You're going to have to accept that you cornered the ironic emo vote."

He laughs, but I can tell the whole thing makes him uncomfortable. The only bright lights Ethan likes are the glow of his gaming PC and his reading light. He's shy and doesn't get why anyone would pay attention to him other than the fact that his jerk dad is just a *wee bit* famous. He has no idea how cool he is in his own right.

A sharp breeze brings the briny scent of the ocean through the window, and I close my eyes and inhale deeply. Warm fingertips start tracing a lazy path up and down my forearm. I'm not sure if Ethan knows that he does this when he's thinking, but I've always loved it. His touch leaves a trail of goose bumps in its wake. On a sigh, I settle deeper into the bed.

We lie like that awhile in contemplative silence. The plush blue bedspread is so cozy, fatigue pulls on me. Ethan tracing my arm, my eyes getting heavier.

I'm almost asleep when he says, "I think you're my favorite person, Natalia."

My eyes flutter open, and our gazes lock.

I *hate* how badly I want to kiss him.

I can't believe what I'm saying, but the words fly out of my mouth anyway. "What if we did it? Our pact."

Ethan's hand freezes. "What?"

"I mean. Why not? We're almost seniors, we're both single, we care about each other. You're not—you know, *horrible* to look at."

"Thanks?"

"I'll never feel comfortable with some random guy the way I do with you."

Whenever guys start to get to know me, they all say versions of the same thing: I'm too intense; I stress them out; I need to relax. They think they're getting the girl I pretend to be. Nice. Confident. Happy. No one wants the real me—the wreck I am inside.

Hello, dumped before prom night.

But here is my best friend who's . . . prismatic. Light shines through him, and he creates color for me. It's the way he's exactly himself. The

way he lets me be exactly who *I* am. No armor, no fake smiles. And I'm his favorite person. And he's mine.

His expression is unreadable. "You're messing with me."

I sit up, the idea gaining momentum in my mind. "I'm not. I know it's . . . kinda awkward . . ."

"Uh, yeah, *kinda*," he says, a flush dusting his cheeks. "We're just friends."

I ignore the unexpected twist in my gut. "I know—I'm not, like, proposing marriage. It would just be to try. The whole point of the pact was to learn what it's like with someone . . . familiar, right?"

I tell myself if we do it this way, our friendship will survive it. We'll get whatever *this* is out of our systems and be friends like before. No more feelings. Everything will be okay again. *We'll* be okay again.

"I mean, you brought it up. And it is prom night," I say.

"Wait, you mean *tonight*? Like right now?" His voice gets higher.

I shrug, my heart racing. "No? Maybe? What do you think?"

"Um. This is a, um, very surprising turn of events."

The more nervous Ethan gets, the more formal he becomes. It makes me pause. In that pause I hear everything I just said from his perspective and I kind of want to die.

"Totally. Never mind. This is clearly my worst idea yet."

He fights a smile. "No, that title still goes to Lobster Day."

I bury my face in my hands. "Oh god. Don't remind me."

"Hey, if it wasn't for you, I'd never know just *how* allergic I am to shellfish."

When I peek at him over my hands, we both crack up. I assume that's the end of this weird conversation where I was obviously possessed by a sex-crazed Demon Natalia who was ready to get naked with the same

guy she shot up with an EpiPen last summer after challenging him to a lobster-roll-eating contest.

But as I lie back against his pillows, Ethan starts tracing again. My arm. Then my collarbone, which is new territory. Our eyes meet. And then everything shifts when he curls his hand around my waist and brings me closer to him. He's propped on his elbow, looking down at me, searching my face. The music's stopped. The only sound is our breath, picking up faster and faster.

"Would you . . . really want to do this?" he asks.

Never one to follow, I pull both the sweatshirt and my shirt over my head with trembling hands. His eyes widen as he takes in my bare torso. I'm still wearing a bra, but I can't help but blush under his look.

I force my voice to sound calm when I say, "C'mon. We've seen each other in less at the beach."

"This is different," he says.

I swallow. "I know." I can tell by the way his gaze is lighting my skin on fire that it is. "It's okay if you don't want to."

"No, I—" His voice breaks, and he clears his throat. "I do."

Then in one smooth motion, he pulls off his shirt and drops it in a heap on the floor. I thought I could handle it, seeing him like this. But when the guy you feel safest with in the world is beautiful and his bare skin brushes against yours, apparently it unlocks . . . everything.

"Do you have condoms?" I ask.

His throat bobs with a swallow, and he nods.

*Girls like you . . .*

But the warning falls away when he nudges close. Resting his forehead against my shoulder, his breath hot on my neck, he murmurs, "I can't believe this is happening."

"I can't believe you're talking," I say dryly.

His chest shakes with laughter, and I smile into his hair. Hesitantly, I reach up and slowly twine my fingers through it. I can feel him tremble. He pulls back to look at me, his hazel eyes holding mine.

“God, Natalia,” he whispers.

Then my best friend leans in and kisses me.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Natalia*

*Senior Sunrise,  
Two and a Half Months Later, 7:07 AM*

**THE SKY IS FULL** of secrets today. I hate secrets.

Fingers of coastal fog weave through the cedar trees that line my street. Way too spooky of a vibe for a late August morning. If I believed in signs, it'd almost feel like the whole freaking atmosphere is trying to tell me something about today. So, it's a good thing I *don't* believe in them because Senior Sunrise has to be perfect. *Is* going to be perfect.

Even if I have to see Ethan.

The front door creaks open behind me, and Mom's slippered feet pad down the porch steps, almost catching on the edge of the giant poster board I have propped against my legs. I move it out of the way as she finishes a phone call to one of my aunts in rapid Spanish. When she's done, she settles beside me, wrapping a pink sweater tightly around herself with one hand and cradling a steaming cup of coffee with the other. Her expressive brown eyes are tired, and her black stick-straight

hair that looks nothing like my wavy tangled mane is gathered high in a sleek ponytail.

“Still not here?” she asks.

“Obviously,” I mutter.

I check my watch. I’ve been waiting for Ethan under this moody morning gloom in front of our—well, I guess now *Dad’s*—house for seven minutes. Because no matter what, no matter where, it seems like I’m always waiting for Ethan. If I could afford to get my car fixed, I wouldn’t have to rely on rides from my best friend in the first place.

If we even are best friends anymore.

I still can’t believe we haven’t talked all summer. Okay, sure, we talk on the group chat with Rainn and Sienna, but we’re both super careful to never actually respond to what the other says so it doesn’t count beyond knowing the other is still alive.

Mom sighs, heavy and foreboding. “I really wish you hadn’t planned this overnight trip. Tonight, of all nights.”

I somehow manage to control my eye roll. “It’s not some conspiracy against you. It’s Senior Sunrise.”

Senior Sunrise is a sacred tradition at Liberty Prep. The senior class gathers at sunrise the weekend before school starts to set goals and intentions and kick off our last year together by writing the infamous Lion Letters. I shudder at the thought of actually writing down anything I’ve been going through.

“When your dad went to Liberty, it wasn’t overnight.”

She’s right. It’s usually only a few hours, but I suggested we turn Senior Sunrise into a one-night camping trip to make it extra special. It’s my job as student body president to get everyone hyped for the year, even if I’m not feeling it myself.



When I don't respond, Mom sighs. "Mija, I know this summer hasn't been the easiest, but your father and I think . . ."

I look back at the dark sky, tuning out the rest of what she's saying as I drop into my head and begin mentally painting.

I imagine the way the sky will crowd with light tomorrow morning. The splash of color it'll cast across my senior class. Golds, pinks, purples if we're lucky. The new beginnings the sunrise promises. I could really use one of those right about now.

"Are you listening?" Mom's tired voice cuts through my thoughts.

"Yeah," I lie.

She sighs again. "We'll figure this out. We will."

*This*. The word my parents collectively decided represents my world falling apart. *This* meaning the divorce. *This* meaning the impossible choice I have to make by the end of the weekend. Mom or Dad.

If I stay with my dad, I have zero chance of pursuing art, since it's "a damaging, insecure lifestyle." If I move with my mom, I lose Liberty and my whole life here. The beach, my presidency. Ethan.

Finally, low headlights stream through the fog before a car comes to an abrupt and apologetic halt in front of my house.

He's here.

But this isn't right. Ethan's car is a nondescript clunker with an I NEED SPACE NASA bumper sticker on one side and a faded Golden State Warriors sticker on the other. But this thing—this sleek, fancy, electric car that only the richest, douchiest kids at school drive—is the exact opposite of Ethan.

"Looks like Roger finally got him to cave," Mom says.

My stomach sinks. Ethan's dad loves throwing his money around like it's the only thing in the world that matters. Ethan always resisted. Or, at least, he used to.

The driver's side door drifts open like a freaking bat wing, and everything slows down as Ethan climbs out.

Two and a half months apart did nothing to make this part easier.

His mop of curls is slightly tamed with product, and the gray day makes his hazel eyes brighter, his dark eyebrows more striking. He's wearing rust-colored jeans—cuffed at the ankles to reveal black high-top Chucks—and a plain black hoodie that's snug around his lean frame.

Ethan is here, beautiful and tangible and *late*.

He jogs to me through the dense fog, and his searching look makes my fragile heart squeeze.

I'm hit with the urge to throw my arms around him and breathe in the long weeks of him that I've missed. But I can't do that. And we don't have time besides.

I pick up my tent and shove it into Ethan's arms, cutting off his chance to say anything. He grunts at the impact, and I pile the sleeping bag on top of it, blocking his flawless face for good measure.

"Oh . . . kay," he says from behind the pile. His voice is still scratchy and rough with sleep.

I'm glad he can't see my smile.

I give my mom a quick hug and grab the poster board from the porch steps before I run down the driveway to the car. Only, I can't get the thing open because there isn't a freaking handle. I stare at it a moment. There's a shiny silver strip where a handle should be but no latch. Does it want my fingerprints? A hair sample? I'm a smart girl who is more than capable of opening a door. And yet.

When I look up, Ethan's watching me, his eyes bright with amusement. It's such a familiar expression, I soften a little.

"Hi," I say. It just tumbles out, this tiny word that yearns to pull him back to me. And it's like he knows.

“Hi,” he returns, the corner of his mouth lifting.

Something beeps, and the passenger door drifts open like his did.  
“Finally—”

But I stop because Claire Wilson is sitting in the passenger seat. *My seat.*

“Hey, Natalia,” she says with a small smile.

My hackles engage. If I were a cat, I’d be puffy as hell. But I plaster on my best presidential smile to cover it. I have a lot of practice in pretending I’m okay. Apparently today will be no different.

“Hey!”

But seriously, since when do we give Claire Wilson—with her dewy freckled skin and glossy blue-streaked hair—a ride anywhere? Let alone to the kickoff event of our senior year that I’ve been planning all summer? After Ethan and I haven’t seen each other in basically a decade?

“Ethan offered me a ride,” Claire says. As if that’s a perfectly normal thing to have happened.

They’ve lived across the street from each other ever since Ethan moved to Cliffport Heights last year. The neighborhood is known for its massive houses and amazing views of the ocean. But Claire has never been on his radar. Until now, I guess. The pinch in my ribs must be from the cold.

“Great! The more the merrier!” I say brightly. “Guess this explains why you were late.”

“Nah, my fault,” a grumbly voice from the back seat proclaims. “My alarm didn’t go off.”

Rainn is splayed across the entire back seat, his long legs bent awkwardly, his hair a wild mess of sunshine blond. He’s wearing a T-shirt with a screen-printed image of a wolf howling at the moon, and tie-dyed sweatpants.

I walk around the car and climb into the back seat behind Ethan, wrestling my giant poster board inside. I'm instantly hit with Ethan's familiar scent, piney and heady and comforting, and I have to slam my eyes shut as memories of prom night flood my system. His strong grip on my waist, his hot breath on my neck—

Rainn slings his legs across my lap, and I'm back to the present. I would normally shove them off, but I'm grateful for the distraction and extra warmth.

He points to the poster board. "Oh man, are those pictures from freshman year?"

I nod. "To show how far we've come."

It took me three nights to cut out every senior's photo from three years ago and decorate it. I even hunted down photos of the few students who came to Liberty after freshman year. Rainn points to our cluster of old photos and laughs. Me and my frizzy hair and braces. Rainn with his shoulder-length surfer hair and skinny neck. Sienna with her broad grin and goggle glasses before she found sleeker ones. And then Ethan and that unfortunate buzz cut because he had no idea what to do with his glorious hair. That was right before his dad's show came out.

Even though a lot changed after that—Ethan's house got bigger, his stuff more expensive—he never did. I still want to believe that the only thing that's really different is that he knows *exactly* what to do with his hair now.

But if we're in a spaceship car giving Claire Wilson rides, that's obviously not true.

I press my hands to the heater vents and wriggle my fingers back to life. I eye Rainn's ridiculous shirt again and his surfer-tan arms that are covered in goose bumps. "Aren't you freezing?"

Without opening his eyes, he says, "Cold is a state of mind, Natalia."

"It's also a factual state of temperature, but okay."

I pull out the extra sweatshirt from my bag and toss it to him. It lands on his chest, and he cracks one eye open.

With a grateful grin, he balls it up and puts it under his head like a pillow against the window, and slumps down farther. "Always thinking of me."

I shake my head and check my phone. I note with a vague panic Sienna hasn't responded to any of my wake-up texts. "If Sienna isn't awake yet, I swear I will *cut* her."

Ethan snorts.

"You're grumpy," Rainn mutters.

"More like hungry," Ethan says, eyeing me in the rearview mirror. His gaze is steady, like he was watching us talk. This is what he's leading with after ten weeks of ghosting me?

The growling in my stomach betrays me then, and he gives me an expectant look. I have to tear my gaze away, watching my neighborhood with its small houses and apartment buildings fade as we make our way toward the beach.

"I'm just waiting to eat, since Sienna is picking up doughnuts and coffee as we speak."

"I guarantee you she hasn't even left yet," Rainn says, eyes still closed.

"Don't say that. We're already thirteen minutes behind schedule. I swear if Prashant starts setting up without me—"

"You'll cut him?" Ethan suggests.

I glare at the back of his head. Which is kind of a bad idea because my fingertips remember that's where his hair is softest, curling just so against the nape of his neck.

"Prashant's like the smartest guy in the class, why can't he set up?" Claire chimes in.

I purse my lips. Is she really that clueless? Prashant may be smart. He may be the vice president of the class and on track for valedictorian, leaving me in the dust thanks to my freaking econ final last year. He's also clever and conniving and has been trying to usurp my position as class president the past three years.

As if I'd let that happen now that I'm the student body president and finally have some real power to make a difference. Especially for scholarship students. It's the only thing keeping me upright.

"Who invited her?" Rainn jokes so only I can hear him. I hide my laugh with a cough.

Though Ethan and I have always been closest, we've been a group with Rainn and Sienna since eighth grade. They mellow us out. Usually, Rainn is closer to Ethan like Sienna is closer to me. But this summer, Rainn and I hung out more in Ethan's absence.

I rub my hands together and blow on them for extra warmth. "Can you turn up the heat? Wait, Ethan, no, don't take Main Street—all the stoplights—*ugh!*"

He turns onto Main Street, and we are now going to be stuck at an endless string of red lights when Maple Avenue would have gotten us there in half the time. I scowl at his reflection in the rearview.

"You're so stressed. I had to."

I smack the back of his seat. "You did that on purpose? What is wrong with you?"

"Lots of things."

"It's not funny, Ethan."

"I'm not laughing."

But he's smiling. One of those dagger grins that makes me feel warm all over. "Why do you insist on torturing me?"

"It's my favorite pastime."

"I hate you."

"You love me."

The air in the car goes taut, and Claire shoots us an odd look. It's the look that every girl who has a crush on Ethan gives us eventually. It holds all the questions:

*Are they flirting?*

*Do they like each other?*

*How big of a threat is Natalia Diaz-Price, anyway?*

Answers:

*Sometimes.*

*It's complicated.*

*None at all. Prom night proved that.*

"Especially because I brought treats," Ethan announces.

I perk up at that. We come to the next torturous stop, and he reaches across Claire to open the glove box. He reveals a handful of dry, slightly crumpled granola bars. The sad-tuba-sound equivalent of a treat.

I give him a long look. "I almost die of hypothermia waiting for you, and now this?"

Ethan scoffs and mutters, "Hypothermia? It's fifty-four degrees out."

"Nice try. I'm holding out for doughnuts."

Ethan shakes his head. "You know, I'm not hearing a lot of gratitude for driving your carless ass to a school function we're not required to attend *and* bringing food."

I roll my eyes. "Counterpoints?" I hold up my fingers, tapping each one as I go down the list. "As student body president, I *am* required to organize, attend, and set up Senior Sunrise. I'm only carless because mine is in the shop getting fixed, and *that* does not qualify as food." I shoot a look of disdain at the heap of wrapped bars.

Ethan frowns. "What happened to your car?"

I shift uncomfortably. “Fender bender last week. No big deal.”

“Seriously? You okay?”

I hate the way his voice softens. I pull my hair over one shoulder and begin playing with the ends. “The hypothermia was worse.”

Ethan rolls his eyes, but I can see he’s holding back a smile.

“You two are so cute,” Claire interjects, full of confidence.

“Aren’t they just?” Rainn teases, jabbing my leg with his shoe. The car lurches to yet another stop.

Claire spins around to smile at me. “Ethan told me you were close.”

I force my smile wider. She’s acting like she doesn’t know Ethan and I have been best friends since middle school. Liberty Prep isn’t that big, everybody knows everything.

Then again, Claire is one of those popular theater kids convinced she’s going to be a star. She doesn’t look outside her own bubble. Which is why her being in the spaceship car with us makes no sense.

Even less sense? That Ethan has obviously been talking to her this summer, instead of to me.

All our phones ping at the same time, pulling me out of my spiral.

“Yeah, Sienna just woke up,” Rainn announces.

Ethan bursts out laughing. It’s been so long since I’ve heard his laugh, loud and rolling like that. Everything about him is so . . . overwhelming. Different. Sienna on the other hand is exactly the same. For someone who can do complex equations in her head, she is the most scatter-brained class treasurer ever.

“Uuuughhhh,” I groan.

Ethan’s arm appears over his seat, bent at the elbow and dangling a granola bar behind him like a taunt. I grab for it. When our hands touch, my freezing fingers against his warm ones, he squeezes them—whisper soft, but there. A signal of some kind. Ethan language I can never quite



decipher despite spending years trying to become fluent in him. He could be saying *hi*. Or *calm down*.

Or *I can't stop thinking about that night, either*.

We lurch at the next stoplight, and Rainn's legs fall off my lap. He stretches, his neck audibly popping, then slings his long, outstretched arm around me, pulling me close in that flirty way he has all summer. "This is going to be such a good year. I can feel it."

I snuggle closer to Rainn's heat and optimism and return his smile. I hope that's true for everyone, even though I know it's not for me. No matter what decision I make about where I end up living. But I can't say that because nobody knows.

Ethan's gaze snaps to mine in the mirror again.

Yeah. Secrets suck.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Ethan*

*Senior Sunrise, 7:19 AM*

**COOL. SUPER COOL. LIKE,** ice-cold cool. I hate camping and setting up tents and sleeping on the ground. I only agreed to come to Senior Sunrise to try to fix this thing with Natalia, and now I guess she and Rainn are . . . what? Into each other? Together?

After what he told me at prom, I guess it's possible.

I mean, they've never been the kind of friends that *touch*, and I'm not hallucinating that his arm is *still* around her, and she is *still* smiling up at him. I grip the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white.

This is a disaster.

When I saw her standing on the porch, I swear her blue eyes lit up the way I felt inside. But I obviously imagined it, since she's barely even looked at me since.

The quote "Sometimes not getting what you want is a wonderful stroke of luck" pops into my head. I think the Dalai Lama said it. But even that doesn't help. I rip open a granola bar with my teeth and shove the thing in my mouth, the stale flavor just this side of offensive. She's right as usual. These suck.

I have to double back when I miss the turn toward the beach campsite, and I barely register Natalia's groan of annoyance from the back seat. Why didn't anyone fucking tell me about her and Rainn? Why didn't *Natalia* tell me?

Oh, right, because she ghosted me all summer.

I'd hoped that the summer would have chilled us both out, that she'd be ready to talk about what happened, but that was wishful thinking. It's Natalia. World's Best Grudge Holder. People think she's nice, but she's really not. I mean, yes, she's kind, she's thoughtful, she's generous, but *nice*? Nope. That's the armor she wears. Inside, she's petty and sharp and angry. God, she's one of the most twisted people I know.

She's the best.

I shouldn't be surprised she disappeared on me. She started drifting away long before prom. She does that, retreats into her head or her art or her to-do lists so she doesn't have to actually talk. But on prom night, she was present. It was like she swallowed the moon; she was glowing from the inside out. I finally had her to myself after months of her pulling away, and then . . . I don't know, my asshole brain drugged up that pact.

One minute we were talking on my bed, and the next, her shirt was on the floor, my fingers exploring her skin. When our lips touched, a dam broke inside me. I could hardly process what was happening except that I liked it too much, never wanted it to stop. This was *Natalia*. It should have felt weird or funny or wrong. Nothing had ever felt so right.

That's the problem.

I barely got a taste of her before she made it very clear she didn't feel the same way.

"This is better," she'd said almost to herself after we'd kissed like the world was ending, after I drew out that shaky, fragile sound from her

when my lips found that dip between her collarbones. “If we do it this way it won’t change anything.”

And I froze. It was clear. She didn’t want me for real. She never would’ve touched me if it hadn’t been for the pact.

“Talia . . .” Her nickname scraped across my throat. “I—I don’t think I—this is stupid. I don’t—with *you*—not like this.”

It all fell apart then.

She wrenched herself away from me, stumbled off the bed, groping for her shirt. “Totally. You’re right. I’m sorry—ugh, *move*.”

“Wait, whoa, Talia, hold on,” I said. I reached for her, grasped only air.

“It’s fine, Ethan.”

“You’re pissed.”

She was a frenzy of hairpins as she yanked them out, her dark hair falling in lush waves down her back. I wanted to push my fingers through them again, bury myself in them. But it was too late.

“I’m fine. I’m—I’m just going to go home,” she said.

I followed her down the stairs as she cycloned through my house, grabbing her stuff, never looking back at me. Not *once*.

“Wait—don’t leave,” I said from the front porch as she climbed in her car.

The last thing she said to me before she disappeared all summer was: “Please forget about this.”

I watched her drive off into the dark, taking the possibility of us with her.

I flick my gaze back to her now. She has a hold on Rainn’s shirt, tugging it between two fingers while she teases him for how awful it is. He laughs, and she bites back her own smile.

This is all my fault. What if I've really lost her because I was too scared to tell her the truth that night?

"Thanks again for the ride," Claire says, cutting through my thoughts. I'd forgotten she was here. "Oh. Yeah."

"It makes sense, us carpooling. We should do it more." She gives me a sweet smile.

"Sure," I say.

Claire's cute, but she literally never looked in my direction until recently. Things started changing after the Showdown basketball game last season, and then the weird prom king thing after that, but it still doesn't make sense to me.

When I got back from my summer in Seattle last week, she'd showed up at my house with a book she'd borrowed during the school year that I'd completely forgotten about. We got to talking, and then, out of nowhere, she kissed me. And, I mean, I didn't hate it, but I haven't really thought about it again. Natalia and everything going on at home has taken up every square inch of my brain lately.

God, I miss Natalia. No matter what happened that night, I should've texted her. This summer sucked for me in a way I could only tell her about. The messages I found on my dad's phone, Adam's struggle with recovery.

I'd hoped visiting my older brother for the summer would help get my mind off everything—Natalia, Dad, school, the team, *Natalia*—but instead it just made it clear how much I couldn't say. Like every time I wanted to tell Adam about our parents, what it's really like at home now that both he and Dad are gone, *why* Dad is gone, the words got stuck. I can't stress him out with what I know. I won't risk his recovery.

He asked about Natalia until I caved and told him everything. All he said was "Dude, don't get in your own way. You've wanted her *forever*."

“No, I haven’t,” I answered automatically.

He just rolled his eyes, then he snatched the basketball out of my hands and spun around me to make a fadeaway jump shot.

*Riiiiiiing!*

The entire car erupts as my phone rings. A picture of my dad’s face appears on the mission control–esque screen that I still can’t get used to. This fucking car. One of the many things I’ll never be able to forgive my dad for.

I hit **DECLINE**. No thanks. A few seconds later, *riiiiiiiing!* I hit **DECLINE** again.

When it rings a third time, I have to count my breaths. What part of *Leave me the fuck alone* does he not understand?

“You’re not going to answer it?” Claire asks.

My jaw hurts with how hard I’m clenching it. “Nope.”

“Seems like it might be important,” Rainn says.

“It’s not.”

Even if it is, I don’t care. I notice Natalia and Rainn exchange a look, and the way it slices through me is a new kind of pain. They have a shorthand now. Like we do. Did.

I scrub a hand across my jaw, the slight stubble scratchy against my palm.

“Isn’t he on location right now?” Claire asks, her voice filled with excitement. “I read the new season takes place in New York.”

I shift uncomfortably. “Um—”

“Ugh, it’s so overcast! It better not be like this tomorrow,” Natalia exclaims, cutting me off.

I look at her in the rearview, and she won’t meet my eyes. But I know she did that on purpose, and I try to telepathically thank her. She knows I hate talking about my dad and his job.

I was friends with Rainn, Sienna, and Natalia long before his show, *The Beltway*, premiered. They were by my side as Dad started being . . . everywhere. The only thing any of them outwardly said about the shift was from Sienna after my gaming PC died.

“Tell Daddy Warbucks to get you Alienware. He can afford it now.”

Honestly? It ruled. Them not giving one shit about the celebrity thing.

But not everyone is like that.

“Do you think we’ll even be able to see the sunrise tomorrow?” Claire asks, looking out the window.

“Yes,” Natalia says, a note of finality in her tone. She says it like she has total control over the weather. Adorable.

“Even if we don’t, it’s still a fresh start. Every day is if you think about it,” Rainn says.

Natalia bumps him with her shoulder. “That was profound, Rainn.”

He grins. “Don’t sound so surprised.”

She laughs, and the soft tripping sound of it makes my chest hurt.

“Did you know astronauts on the International Space Station see sixteen orbital sunrises a day?” I blurt. When no one says anything, I blaze on. “The first art ever created in space was a drawing of an orbital sunrise. You can look it up, it’s really cool.”

“You’re so smart,” Claire says, rubbing my arm.

For a second, I’m sure she’s making fun of me. But there’s no sarcastic glint in her eye. Only a wide, cute smile as she scrunches her nose. So I return it with a self-conscious one of my own.

“We don’t have sixteen chances, Ethan,” Natalia says, her tone turning icy again. “We have one.”

I get the feeling we aren’t talking about sunrises at all anymore.