

OUR CHEMICAL HEARTS



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KRYSTAL
SUTHERLAND

HOT
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For my family, for everything, forever.

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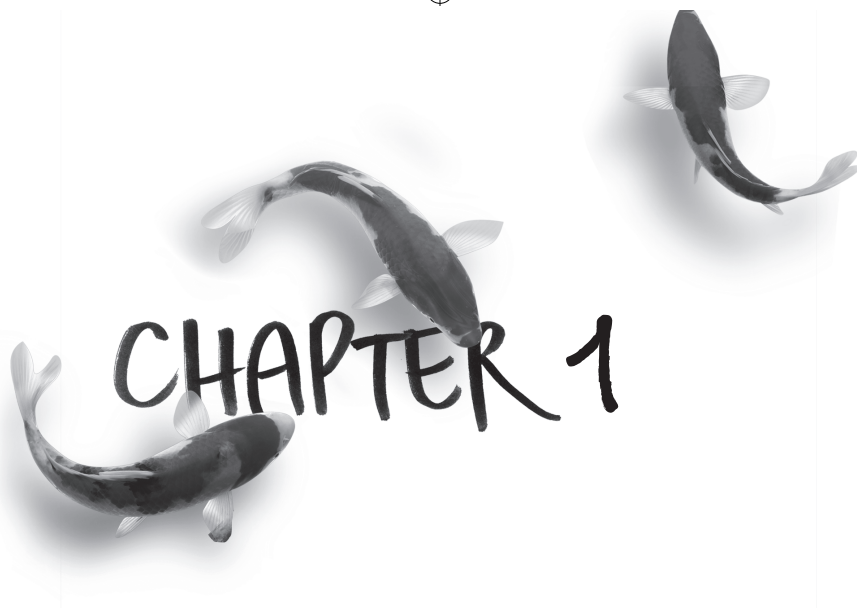
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I ALWAYS THOUGHT the moment you met the great love of your life would be more like the movies. Not exactly like the movies, obviously, with the slow-mo and the hair blowing in the breeze and the swelling instrumental soundtrack. But I at least thought there would be something, you know? A skipped beat of the heart. A tug at your soul where *something* inside you goes, “Holy shit. There she is. Finally, after all this time, there she is.”

There was none of that when Grace Town walked into Mrs. Beady’s afternoon drama class ten minutes late on the second Tuesday of senior year. Grace was the type of person who made an impression on any room she walked into, but not for the kind of reasons that generate instant and undying affection. She was of average height and average build and average attractiveness, all things that should’ve made it easy for her to assimilate into a new high school without any of the dramatic tropes that usually inhabit such storylines.



But three things about Grace immediately stood out, before her ordinariness could save her:

1. Grace was dressed head to toe in guys' clothing. Not the tomboy, skater-girl kind of look, either, but legitimate dudes' clothing that was way too big for her. Jeans that were meant to be skinny were held on her hips by a belt. Despite it being only mid-September, she wore a sweater and a checkered shirt and a knit cap, and a long leather necklace with an anchor on the end.
2. Grace looked unclean and unhealthy. I mean, I'd seen junkies that looked in better shape than she did that morning. (I hadn't really seen that many junkies, but I'd seen *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*, which totally counts.) Her blond hair wasn't brushed and was badly cut, her skin was sallow, and I'm almost certain if I'd smelled her at any point during that day, she would've reeked.
3. If all this wasn't enough to really screw over her chances of fitting in at a new high school, Grace Town walked with a cane.

And that's how it happened. That's how I first saw her. There was no slow-mo, no breeze, no soundtrack, and definitely no skipped heartbeats. Grace hobbled in ten minutes late, silently, like she owned the place, like she'd been in our





class for years, and maybe because she was new or because she was weird or because the teacher could see simply by looking at her that a small part of her soul was cracked, Mrs. Beady said nothing. Grace sat on a chair at the back of the black-walled drama room, her cane resting across her thighs, and said nothing to anybody for the entire class.

I looked at her twice more, but by the end of class I'd forgotten she was there, and she slipped out without anyone noticing.

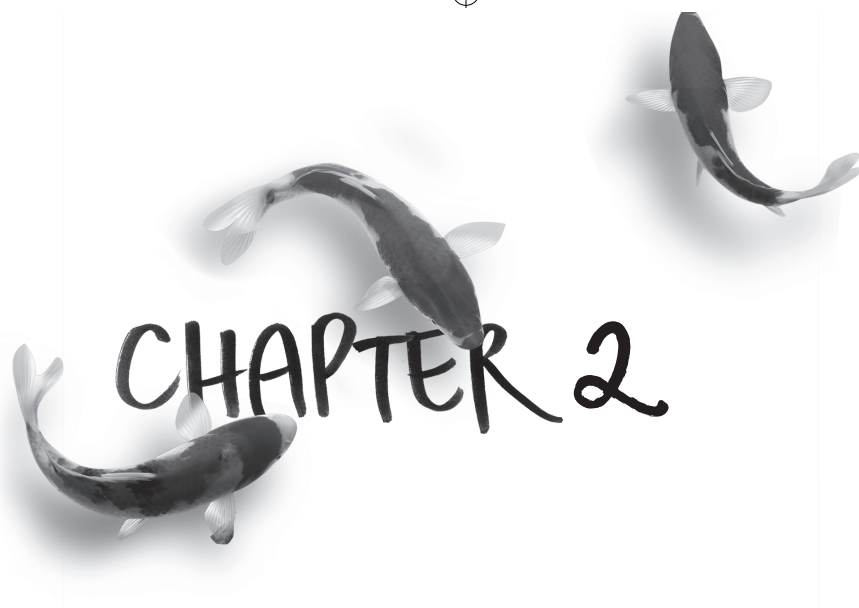
So this is certainly not a story of love at first sight.

But it *is* a love story.

Well.

Kind of.





THE FIRST WEEK of senior year, before Grace Town's sudden apparition, had passed by as uneventfully as high school possibly can. There'd been only three minor scandals thus far: a junior had been suspended for smoking in the girls' bathroom (if you're going to get suspended for something, at least make it something not cliché), an anonymous suspect had uploaded footage of an after-school fight in the parking lot to YouTube (the administration was freaking out over that one), and there were rumors going around that Chance Osenberg and Billy Costa had given each other an STD after having unprotected sex with the same girl (I wish I was making this up, dear readers).

My life had remained, as always, entirely scandal-free. I was seventeen years old, a weird, lanky kid, the type you might cast to play a young Keanu Reeves if you'd already spent the majority of your budget on bad CGI and craft service. I'd never so much as secondhand-smoked a cigarette, and no one, thank



God, had approached me about doing the no-pants dance sans a prophylactic. My dark hair skirted my shoulders, and I'd grown particularly fond of wearing my dad's sports coat from the eighties. You could say I looked something like a male Summer Glau crossed with Severus Snape. Subtract the hook nose, add in some dimples, and hey presto: the perfect recipe for one Henry Isaac Page.

I was, at the time, also uninterested in girls (or guys, in case you were wondering). My friends had been in and out of dramatic teenage relationships for close to five years now, but I had yet to even have a real crush. Sure, there'd been Abigail Turner in kindergarten (I'd kissed her on the cheek when she wasn't expecting it; our relationship rapidly declined after that), and I'd been obsessed with the idea of marrying Sophi Zhou for at least three years of elementary school, but after I hit puberty, it was like a switch inside me flipped, and instead of becoming a testosterone-driven sex monster like most of the guys at my school, I failed to find anyone I wanted in my life in that way.

I was happy to focus on school and getting the grades I needed to get into a semi-decent college, which is probably why I didn't think about Grace Town again for at least a couple of days. Maybe I never would've if it wasn't for the intervention of one Mr. Alistair Hink, English teacher.

What I know about Mr. Hink is still very much confined to what most high schoolers know about their teachers. He had bad dandruff, which wouldn't have been half as noticeable if he





didn't insist on wearing black turtlenecks every day, the color of which clearly displayed the fine white dust on his shoulders like snow falling on asphalt. From what I could gather from his naked left hand, he was unmarried, which probably had a lot to do with the dandruff and the fact that he looked remarkably like Napoleon Dynamite's brother, Kip.

Hink was also fiercely passionate about the English language, so much so that on one occasion when my math class was let out five minutes late and thus ate into our English lesson, Hink called up the math teacher, Mr. Babcock, and gave him a lecture about how the arts were no less valuable than mathematics. A lot of students laughed at him under their breaths—they were mostly destined for careers in engineering or science or customer service, I suppose—but looking back, I can pinpoint that afternoon in our sweltering English classroom as the moment I fell in love with the idea of becoming a writer.

I'd always been decent at writing, at putting words together. Some people are born with an ear for music, some people are born with a talent for drawing, some people—people like me, I guess—have a built-in radar that tells them where a comma needs to go in a sentence. As far as superpowers go, grammatical intuition is fairly low on the awesomeness scale, but it did get me in with Mr. Hink, who also happened to be in charge of running and organizing the student newspaper I'd volunteered at since sophomore year in hopes of one day becoming editor.

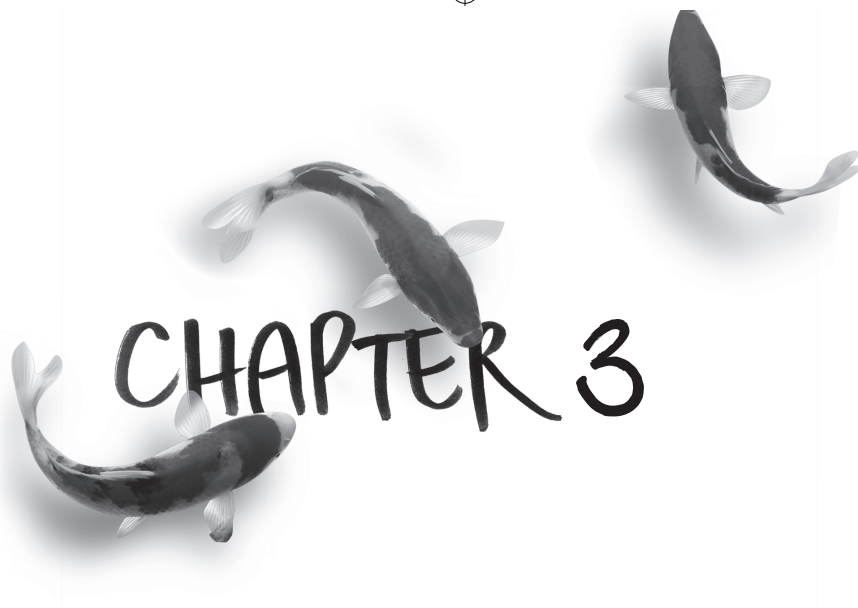


It was about midway through Mrs. Beady's Thursday drama class in the second week of school when the phone rang and Beady answered it. "Henry, Grace. Mr. Hink would like to see you in his office after school," she said after chatting for a few minutes. (Beady and Hink had always been friendly. Two souls born in the wrong century, when the world liked to make fun of people who still thought art was the most extraordinary thing humanity ever had or ever would produce.)

I nodded and purposefully didn't look at Grace, even though I could see in my peripheral vision that she was staring at me from the back of the room.

When most teenagers get called to their teacher's office after school, they assume the worst, but like I said, I was tragically free of scandal. I knew (or hoped I knew) why Hink wanted to see me. Grace had been an inmate at Westland High for only two days, hardly long enough to have given another student trichomoniasis and/or handed out any after-school beatdowns (although she *did* carry a cane and look angry a lot).

Why Mr. Hink wanted to see Grace was—like much else about her—a mystery.



GRACE WAS ALREADY waiting outside Hink's office when I got there. She was dressed in guys' clothing again today, different stuff this time, but she looked a lot cleaner and healthier. Her blond hair had been washed and brushed. It made a remarkable difference to her appearance, even if having clean hair made it fall in uneven chunks around her shoulders, like she'd cut it herself with a pair of rusted hedge trimmers.

I sat down next to her on the bench, entirely too aware of my body, so much so that I forgot how to sit casually and had to purposefully arrange my limbs. I couldn't get my posture right, so I kind of slumped forward into an awkward pose that made my neck ache, but I didn't want to move again because I could see her looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

Grace was sitting with her knees pressed up against her chest, her cane wedged between them. She was reading a book with tattered pages the color of coffee-stained teeth. I couldn't



see the title, but I could see that it was full of poems. When she caught me looking over her shoulder, I expected her to close the book or angle it away from me, but instead she turned it ever so slightly toward me so that I could read too.

The poem Grace was reading, I assumed over and over again because the page was dog-eared and food-stained and in generally bad shape, was by a guy called Pablo Neruda, whom I'd never heard of before. It was called "I do not love you," which intrigued me, so I started to read, even though Hink had not yet succeeded in making me like poetry.

Two lines in particular had been highlighted.

*I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.*

Hink stepped out of the office then, and Grace snapped the book shut before I could finish.

"Oh, good, I see you've met," said Hink when he saw us together. I stood up quickly, keen to unravel myself from the weird position I'd folded my body into. Grace shuffled to the edge of the bench and rose slowly, carefully distributing her weight between her cane and her good leg. I wondered for the first time how bad her injury was. How long had she been like this? Was she born with a bad leg or did some tragic accident befall her in childhood? "Well, come inside."

Hink's office was at the end of a hall that might've been considered modern and attractive sometime in the early





eighties. Pale pink walls, fluorescent lighting, painfully obvious fake plants, that weird linoleum that's supposed to look like granite but is actually made up of hundreds of little bits of plastic filled in with clear laminate. I followed Hink, my steps slower than they normally would be, because I wanted Grace to walk next to me. Not because I wanted her to, like, *walk next to me*, you know, but I thought she might like it, that it might be a nice thing to do, for her to be able to keep up with someone. But even when my pace felt maddeningly slow, she still hung back, hobbling two steps behind me, until it felt like we were in a race to see who could go the slowest. Hink was ten steps in front of us by then, so I sped up and left her behind and must've looked like a total weirdo.

When we reached Hink's office (small, bland, green-tinged; so depressing it made me think he was probably part of a fight club on the weekends), he ushered us inside and motioned for us to sit in the two chairs in front of his desk. I frowned as we sat down, wondering why Grace was here with me.

"You're both here, of course, because of your exceptional writing abilities. When it came time to pick our senior editors for the newspaper, I could think of no two better—"

"No," said Grace Town, cutting him off, and her voice was such a shock to me that I only just realized it was the first time I'd heard her speak. She had this strong, clear, deep voice, so different from the broken and timid image she portrayed.

"I beg your pardon?" said Hink, clearly taken aback.

"No," Grace said again, as if this were explanation enough.





"I . . . I don't understand," said Hink, his gaze flicking to me with this pleading look in his eyes. I could practically hear his silent scream for help, but all I could do was shrug.

"I don't want to be an editor. Thank you, really, for thinking of me. But no." Grace collected her bag from the floor and stood.

"Miss Town. Grace. Martin came to me specifically before the start of the school year and asked me to look at your work from East River. You were going to take over as editor of their newspaper this year, I believe, if you hadn't transferred. Isn't that right?"

"I don't write anymore."

"That's a shame. Your work is beautiful. You have a natural gift for words."

"And you have a natural gift for clichés."

Hink was so shocked that his mouth popped open.

Grace softened a little. "Sorry. But they're just words. They don't mean anything."

Grace looked at me with this kind of disapproving expression I wasn't expecting and didn't understand, then slung her backpack over her shoulders and limped out. Hink and I sat there in silence, trying to process what'd just happened. It took me a good ten seconds to realize that I was angry, but once I had, I, too, collected my bag and stood quickly and made my way toward the door.

"Can we talk about this tomorrow?" I said to Hink, who must've guessed that I was going after her.





“Yes, yes, of course. Come and see me before class.” Hink shooed me out and I jogged down the corridor, surprised to find that Grace wasn’t there. When I opened the far door and stepped out of the building, she was already at the edge of the school grounds. She could move goddamn fast when she tried. I sprinted after her, and when I was within earshot, I shouted, “Hey!” She turned briefly, looked me up and down, glared, and then kept on walking.

“Hey,” I said breathlessly when I finally caught up with her and fell in step beside her.

“What?” she said, still speed walking, the end of her cane clicking against the road with every step. A car behind us beeped. Grace pointed violently at her cane and then waved them around. I’d never seen a vehicle move in a way I’d describe as *sheepish* before.

“Well . . . ,” I said, but I couldn’t find the words to say what I wanted to say. I was a decent enough writer, but talking? With sounds? From my mouth? That was a bitch.

“Well what?”

“Well, I hadn’t really planned this far into the conversation.”

“You seem pissed.”

“I am pissed.”

“Why?”

“Because people work their asses off for years to get editor, and you waltz in at the beginning of senior year and have it offered to you on a platter and you turn it down?”

“Did you work your ass off?”





“Hell yeah. I’ve been buttering Hink up, pretending I’m a tortured teen writer who really relates to Holden Caulfield since I was, like, fifteen.”

“Well, congratulations. I don’t understand why you’re angry. There’s normally only one editor anyway, right? The fact that I said no doesn’t impact you at all.”

“But . . . I mean . . . Why would you say no?”

“Because I don’t want to do it.”

“But . . .”

“And without me there, you’ll get to make all the creative decisions and have the newspaper exactly how you’ve probably been envisioning it for the last two years.”

“Well . . . I guess . . . But . . .”

“So you see, this is really a win-win for you. You’re welcome, by the way.”

We walked on in silence for a couple of minutes longer, until my anger had entirely faded and I could no longer remember exactly why I’d chased after her in the first place.

“*Why* are you still following me, Henry Page?” she said, coming to a stop in the middle of the road, like she didn’t give a shit that a car could come hurtling toward us at any second. And I realized that, although we’d never been introduced and never spoken before today, she knew my full name.

“You know who I am?” I said.

“Yes. And you know who I am, so let’s not pretend we don’t. Why are you still following me?”

“Because, *Grace Town*, I’ve walked too far from school now





and my bus has probably already left and I was looking for a smooth way to exit the conversation but I didn't find one, so I resigned myself to my fate."

"Which is?"

"To walk in this general direction until my parents report me missing and the police find me on the outskirts of town and drive me home."

Grace sighed. "Where do you live?"

"Right near the Highgate Cemetery."

"Fine. Come to my place. I'll drop you."

"Oh. Awesome. Thanks."

"As long as you promise not to push the whole editor thing."

"Fine. No pushing. You want to turn down an awesome opportunity, that's your decision."

"Good."

It was a humid afternoon in suburbia, the clouds overhead as solid as cake frosting, the lawns and trees still that bright, golden green of late summer. We walked side by side on the hot asphalt. There were five more minutes of awkward silence where I searched and searched for a question to ask her. "Can I read the rest of that poem?" I said finally, because it seemed like the least worst of all my options. (Option one: So . . . are you, like, a cross-dresser or something? Not that there's anything wrong with that; I'm just curious. Option two: What's up with your leg, bro? Option three: You're definitely





some kind of junkie, right? I mean, you're fresh out of rehab, yeah? Option four: Can I read the rest of that poem?)

"What poem?" she said.

"The Pablo whoever one. 'I do not love you.' Or whatever it was."

"Oh. Yeah." Grace stopped and handed me her cane and swung her backpack onto her front and fished out the thread-bare book and pushed it into my hands. It fell open to Pablo Neruda, so I knew then for sure that it was something she read over and over again. It was the line about loving dark things that I kept coming back to.

*I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.*

"It's beautiful," I said to Grace as I closed the book and handed it back to her, because it was.

"Do you think?" She looked at me with this look of genuine questioning on her face, her eyes narrowed slightly.

"You don't?"

"I think that's what people say when they read poems they don't understand. It's sad, I think. Not beautiful." I couldn't see how a perfectly nice love poem was sad, but then again, my significant other was my laptop, so I didn't say anything. "Here," Grace said as she opened the book again and tore out the page with the poem on it. I flinched as though I were in





actual pain. “You should have it, if you like it. Pretty poetry is wasted on me.”

I took the paper from her and folded it and slipped it into my pocket, half of me horrified that she’d injured a book, the other half of me elated that she’d so willingly given me something that clearly meant a lot to her. I liked people like that. People who could part with material possessions with little or no hesitation. Like Tyler Durden. “The things you own end up owning you” and all that.

Grace’s house was exactly the type of place I expected her to live. The garden was overgrown, gone to seed, the lawn left to grow wild for some time. The curtains on the windows were drawn and the house itself, which was two stories tall and made of gray brick, seemed to be sagging as if depressed by the weight of the world. In the driveway there was a solitary car, a small white Hyundai with a Strokes decal on the back windshield.

“Stay here,” she said. “I’ve got to get my car keys.”

I nodded and stood by myself on the front lawn while I waited for her. The car, like everything else about her, was strange. Why did she walk (or hobble, rather) fifteen minutes to school every day if she had a license and a readily available vehicle? Every other senior I knew was desperate for the privilege of driving to the mall or McDonald’s during lunch, escaping the confines of the school grounds. And then, in the afternoons, bypassing the bus line and rolling right on home to food and PlayStations and sweet, sweet comfortable sweatpants.





“Do you have your license?” Grace said from behind me. I jumped a little, because I hadn’t even heard her come out of the house, but there she was, car keys dangling off her pinkie finger. These, too, had Strokes paraphernalia attached to them. I’d never really listened to their stuff before, but I made a mental note to look them up on Spotify when I got home.

“Uh, yeah, actually. I got it a couple of months ago, but I don’t have a car yet.”

“Good.” She threw me the keys and walked to the passenger side of the car and pulled out her phone. After twenty seconds or so, she looked up from her screen, her eyebrows raised. “Well? Are you going to unlock the car or not?”

“You want *me* to drive?”

“No, I thought it would be hilarious to hand you the keys and stand here until someone invents teleportation. Yes, Henry Page, I want you to drive.”

“Uh, okay, I guess. I’m a bit rusty, but yeah. Okay.” I unlocked the car and opened the door and sat in the driver’s seat. The inside of the car smelled like her, the musky, masculine scent of a teenage boy. Which was very confusing for me, to say the least. I started the engine—so far, so good—and took a deep breath.

“I’ll try my best not to kill us both,” I said. Grace Town did not reply, so I laughed at my own joke—a single, awkward “ha”—and then I put the car in reverse.

My grandmother would’ve looked cooler driving than I did on the journey home. I hunched over the steering wheel,





sweating, hyperaware that I a) was driving someone else's car, b) hadn't driven any car at all for months, and c) had only scraped through my driving test because my instructor was my violently hungover second cousin twice removed, and I'd had to stop three times to let him vomit on the side of the road.

"Are you *sure* you passed your driving test?" Grace said, leaning over to check the speedometer, which revealed I was sitting five miles under the speed limit.

"Hey, I only had to bribe *two* officials. I *earned* my license." I swear I might've almost seen her smile. "So you came from East River, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Why'd you change schools in senior year?"

"I'm all about adventure," she said dryly.

"Well, we are a particularly thrilling institution. I can definitely see the appeal."

"Hink seems like a riot. I bet he gets into all sorts of shenanigans."

"Life of the party, that one."

And then, thank God, it was over. I pulled up in front of my house and relaxed my fingers from the steering wheel, aware for the first time of how tightly I'd been clenching my muscles.

"I don't think I've seen anyone drive that tensely since . . . Do you need a minute to compose yourself?" she said.

"What can I say? I'm a rebel without a cause."





I expected Grace to slide over to the driver's side, but she told me to turn the car off. We both got out and I handed her the keys and she locked the door like she meant to come inside. I hesitated. Was I supposed to invite her in? But then she turned to me and said, "Okay. Good-bye. I'll see you tomorrow. Or maybe not. Who knows where I'll be," and she started hobbling down the street in the complete opposite direction from which we'd come.

"There's not much down there but a storm-water drain and a cemetery a block away." (The graveyard was close enough that its proximity had resulted in several counseling sessions in elementary school due to a brief yet intense period when I was convinced my great-grandfather Johannes van de Vliert's ghost was trying to kill me.) Grace didn't say anything, didn't look back, just lifted the hand that wasn't holding her cane as if to say *I know* and kept on walking.

I watched her, entirely puzzled, until she disappeared around the next street corner.

"Hola, broseph," said my sister, Sadie, the moment I closed the front door behind me.

"Jesus, Suds, you scared the crap outta me," I said, clutching at my chest. Sadie was twelve years older than me, a celebrated neuroscientist, and was generally considered both the golden child and black sheep of the family simultaneously. We looked a lot alike: black hair, slightly buggy eyes, dimples





when we smiled. Except Suds was *slightly* more cutting edge than me with her septum piercing, tattoo sleeve, and intricate dreadlocks, all souvenirs from her rocky teenage years.

“Haven’t seen or heard from you in, like, two days, kid. I was starting to think Mom and Dad had murdered you and buried you in a shallow grave.” This was, of course, a strategic lie. Suds was going through a fairly shitty divorce from her fairly shitty doctor husband, which meant she spent about 90 percent of the time she didn’t spend at the hospital at our house.

“Sadie, don’t be ridiculous,” Dad said from the kitchen, dressed in his usual getup of a Hawaiian shirt, male short shorts, and black spectacles. (His fashion sense had rapidly declined after he’d moved his carpentry workshop into the backyard three years ago. Honestly it was a miracle to find him in something other than pajamas.) Sadie and I got our hair from him. Or at least, I assumed we did. The ever-present stubble on his chin was dark, but he’d been bald for the majority of my life. “We’d make his grave at least four or five feet deep. We don’t half-ass murder in this house.”

“Toby and Gloria can attest to that,” Sadie said, referring to an event six years prior to my birth that involved a pair of goldfish, insect spray, and the accidental yet untimely death of her aquatic pets.

“Twenty-three years, Suds. It’s been twenty-three years since your goldfish died. Are you ever going to let it go?”

“Not until I have my vengeance!” Sadie yelled dramatically. A toddler started crying from the back of the house. Sadie





sighed. “You’d think after three years I’d start getting used to this whole motherhood thing, but I keep forgetting about the damn kid.”

“I’ll get him,” I said, dumping my schoolbag and heading down the hallway to where Ryan usually slept in Sadie’s old room. The kid had been, much the same as me, an accident and a surprise. Mom and Dad had only ever planned to have one child: twelve years after they had Sadie, they got stuck with me.

“Ryan, man, what’s up?” I said when I pushed open the door to find my two-and-a-half-year-old nephew, whom Dad babysat on weekdays.

“Henwee,” he rasped, rubbing his eyes. “Where’s Mama?”

“Come on, I’ll take you to her.”

“Who’s the girl, by the way?” Sadie asked as I walked back down the hallway holding Ryan’s hand.

“The girl?”

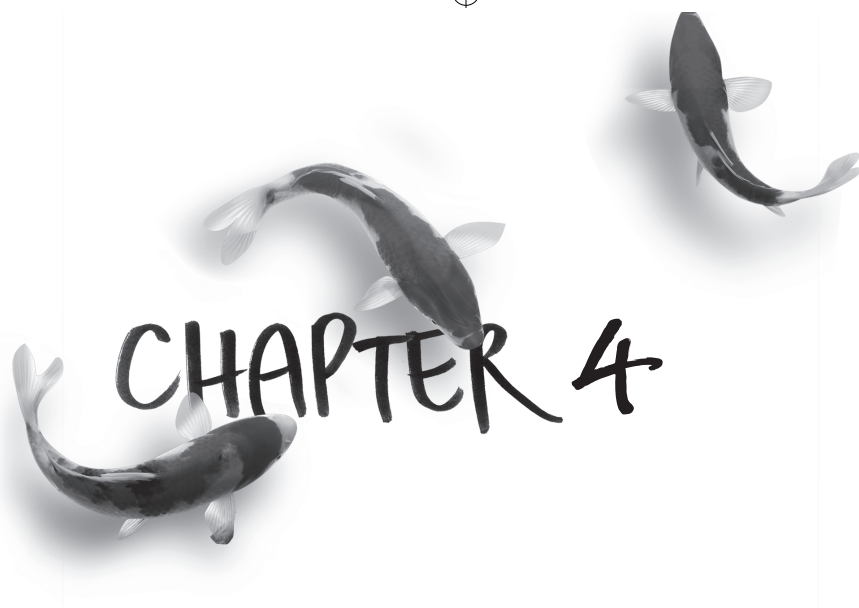
“The one who drove you home.” As she scooped Ryan up, Sadie had this thin, lopsided grin on her face. I’d seen that look many times before, when she was a teenager. It always meant trouble.

“Oh. Grace is her name. She’s new. I missed my bus, so she offered me a ride.”

“She’s cute. In a weird, Janis Joplin, will probably die at twenty-seven kind of way.”

I shrugged and pretended I hadn’t noticed.





ONCE RYAN WAS settled, I went down to the basement, which Sadie had turned into her teenage den of iniquity more than a decade ago (and I'd inherited upon her departure for college). It wasn't fancy. It kind of looked like a postapocalyptic fallout shelter. None of the furniture matched, the concrete floor was covered with a patchwork of faux-Persian carpets, the refrigerator was older than my parents, and there was a poorly taxidermied elk head on the wall. Everyone claimed not to know where it came from, but I had a sneaking suspicion Sadie had stolen it as a teenager and my parents were either too embarrassed or too impressed to return it to its rightful owner. Maybe both.

My two best friends were, as always, already down there, playing *GTA V* on my PS4. They were, in order of appearance (i.e., seating order on the couch):

- Murray Finch, 17, Australian. Tall and tan and muscular with curly blond hair to his shoulders and a seedy teenage mustache. His parents had immigrated to the States like six years ago, but Muz still (purposefully) sounded like Steve Irwin and said things like “g’day” and “drongo” and “struth” on a regular basis. He was of the strong opinion that *Crocodile Dundee* was the best thing to ever happen to Australians. Girls loved him.
- Lola Leung, 17. Dark-skinned, dark-eyed, dark-haired (cropped short). My next-door neighbor for my entire life, and a self-described “diversity triple threat”: half Chinese on her dad’s side, half Haitian on her mom’s, and one hundred percent gay. For as long as I could remember, La had been “randomly selected” to appear front and center in all of our school’s promotional material, including but not limited to front cover of the yearbook, on the billboard outside school, on the website, and even on bookmarks that were handed out at the library. She’d also been my first kiss three years ago. Two weeks later she’d come out as a lesbian and entered into a long-term, long-distance relationship with a girl named Georgia from the next town over. People still thought my kissing skills were the reason she decided to start batting for the other team. I

was still trying not to be offended. (Girls also loved her.)

At the foot of the stairs, I leaned on the banister and watched them. “I love that even though I failed to make it onto the bus and was possibly dead and/or dying, you two still saw fit to come to my house, eat my food, and play my games with-out me. Did my father even notice I wasn’t with you?”

“Let’s be honest,” Lola said, twisting around on the couch to grin at me. “Justin does love us more than he loves you.”

“Who’s the sheila, mate?” said Murray without looking away from the screen, where he was plowing a tank over a line of police cars. “Saw you going off after her like a raw prawn.”

“Roll back the slang, Kangaroo Jack,” I said, crossing the room to boot up Sadie’s old iMac computer, which was, after almost two decades of service, still wheezing along with life. “There are no unsuspecting American girls in the room for you to charm.” Murray was, for the most part, capable of speaking like a normal human being, but he’d discovered somewhere along the way that sounding like a bushman from the outback endeared him to the womenfolk. Sometimes he forgot to turn it off.

There was only one folder on the iMac’s desktop, entitled “Missing/Funeral/Manhunt Headshots,” that contained attractive pictures of everyone in the room (plus Sadie), to be used in the event that any of us disappeared/died/became



wanted felons. Our parents had strict instructions to access the photos and provide them to the media before journalists went snooping on Facebook and picked random, unfortunate-looking pictures we'd been tagged in against our will.

"Muz raises a very good point, though," La said. "Who was the strange girl you were sprinting after? Did you think to yourself, 'Here's finally one that can't get away,' but then she proved you wrong?"

"Ha-ha. I can't believe you both saw that." I grabbed a can of Coke from the refrigerator and went back to the computer, where Facebook was loading pixel by painful pixel. "Her name is Grace Town. She's new. Hink offered her editor but she turned it down, so I got pissed and went after her."

"Her name is Grace Town? Like *Gracetown*?" said Murray as he, too, cracked a can of Coke and took a swig. "Christ. Poor chick."

Lola was already on her feet. "Hink offered her editor over you? That *bastard*. No way am I designing that glorified newsletter if you're not in charge!"

"No. Calm down. He gave it to us *both* but she turned it down because she—and I quote—'doesn't write anymore.' The way she said it was so ominous."

"Oh," Lola said. Murray yanked her back down to the couch. "Maybe bad things happen when she writes. Oh! Maybe the things she writes come true? Or maybe she has a voodoo curse on her so that every word she writes breaks a bone in her leg and that's why she walks with a cane?"





“Let’s take a shufti at old FB, shall we?” Murray said. “Nothing like a little cyberstalking to clear these things up.”

“Way ahead of you.” When I typed Grace’s name in the search field and hit return, a list of all the people I knew with Grace in their name showed up. Sadie Grace Elizabeth Smith was the first, followed by Samantha Grace Lawrence (we went to elementary school together), Grace Park (some kind of distant relative) and Grace Payne (I had no idea). Underneath them was a list of exact matches—five or so genuine Grace Towns—none of whom I had mutual friends with, and only one of whom lived in my geographical area.

I slouched forward. “None of them are her.”

“Wait, what about that one?” Lola said, pointing.

I clicked the profile picture of the closest geographical Grace Town, a girl in a red dress with red lipstick and loose curls in her honey-blond hair. She was smiling brilliantly, her eyes closed, her head tilted back in laughter so that the sharp lines of her collarbones were visible beneath her skin. It was a good handful of seconds before any of us recognized her. Because it *was* her. It was the same Grace Town who had driven me home. The lips were the same, the shape of her face.

“Holy *shit*,” Murray said. “Blokes would be on her like seagulls at a tip.”

“Translation: She’s an attractive female who likely gets a lot of attention from males,” Lola said. “And lesbians,” she tacked on after a moment, leaning closer to the screen. “Damn. She’s got that Edie Sedgwick thing going on. That girl is stupid hot.”



And she was. On Facebook, Grace Town was tall and lean and tan, with the kind of limbs that makes you think of words like *gracile* and *swanlike* and *damn, son*. *It must be an old picture*, I thought, but no. According to the date it was uploaded, it'd only been a little over three months since Grace had changed it. I scrolled through the five other public profile pictures, but each of them told the same story. None were more than a few months old, but the person in them was very different from the one I'd met. Her hair was much longer, down to her waist, and fell in soft, clean curls. There were pictures of her at the beach, pictures of her in makeup, pictures of her smiling this incredibly wide smile, the kind that models smile in ads when they're super jacked up about eating salad. There was no cane at her side, no black circles under her eyes, no layers upon layers of guys' clothing.

What had happened to her in the last three months that'd left her so changed and broken?

Sadie called us upstairs then, to help Dad finish dinner before Mom got home from the art gallery she curated in the city. ("Thank Christ. I could chew the crutch out of a low-flying vulture," Murray said.) All of us quickly forgot about the mystery of Grace Town for a few hours as we ate and did the dishes and watched Netflix together, as was our Thursday-night routine. It was only after I'd said good-bye to my friends and gone back down into the basement and noticed the screen of the poor iMac still wheezing with life that I thought of her again, but once I did, I was hooked.



I didn't brush my teeth that night. I didn't shower or change out of my clothes from school or go to say good-bye to Sadie and Ryan when they finally left around midnight. Instead, I stayed in the basement and spent the rest of my night listening to every song the Strokes had on Spotify.

You say you wanna stay by my side, crooned Julian Casablancas. *Darlin', your head's not right*.

If I'd been older or wiser or if I'd paid more attention to the dramatic teenage feelings my peers had described to me the first time they'd had crushes, I might not have misdiagnosed the burning, constricting sensation in my chest as indigestion from the four overfried chicken chimichangas I'd had for dinner instead of what it actually was: an affliction far more serious and far more painful.

That was the first night I dreamed of Grace Town.

