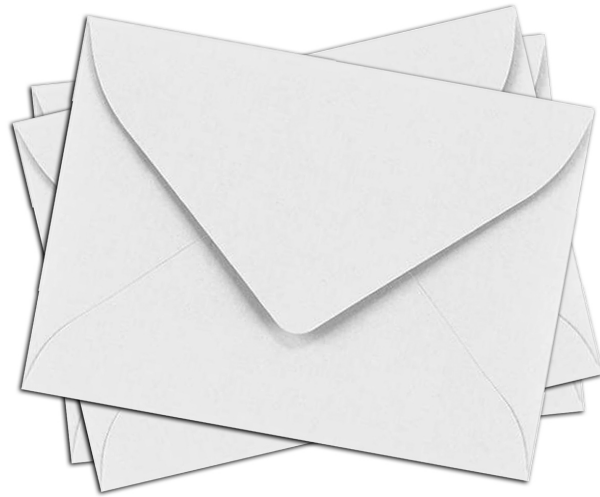


# WRONG LOCKER



MALLORY GRANT

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Book Cover by Author Illustrations by Author



For those who feel like no one sees you. For those who feel like no one hears you. I see you. I hear you. You're not alone.

# Content Warnings

This book contains scenes with child abuse, domestic violence, mild language, a parent with mental illness, mention of attempt of suicide scars, and homophobic slurs.

# Playlist

Better- SYML

I'm sorry- Camylio

Blue (Feat. Alex Hope)- Troye Sivan

Who we love- Sam Smith & Ed Sheeran

Song of the Sparrow- SayWeCanFly

If I have you- SayWeCanFly

Kissin' when we're mad- We Three

Sara- We Three

Dandelion Necklace- SayWeCanFly

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1yYm7u4KsqprKFakc4VrPF?  
si=56bbab4da9a34cdf](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1yYm7u4KsqprKFakc4VrPF?si=56bbab4da9a34cdf)



Sometimes, it's the little things in life that mean the most to us. To feel the breeze against our hair, to breathe in the air, and to have the ability to breathe again... and again. To be the calm in the middle of the raging storm. I never thought I'd ever have the chance to find my calm. My storm had been nothing but the violent shakes of metal on rooftops, the slammed trash lid as it flapped back and forth in the wind. The loud ring of the wind chime bells as they slapped into each other violently during a loud storm.

Cars lifted and beeped as they rolled around in the sky, sucked into the vortex of wind as they tumbled around like a leaf in a breeze. The crash of metal against the ground, buildings shattered into rubble, and the countless cries of those who were unhappy. The storm inside me was dark and enveloped me like a blanket. It suffocated me, drowned me, pulled me under. Then you came. You held out your hand, like a lifeline, and when I touched you, everything faded away, the calm. Once I found you, I realized I was already lost, like a blind man who wanted to take one more breath, then one more. Until all I could do was touch you, cling to you, desperate for one last breath, one last quiet, one last calm.

And to think, all of this started because of a single letter... and the wrong locker.

# Chapter 1

## Kinsley



As I sat in the classroom, desperately trying to pay attention to the lecture, I couldn't help but wonder if my teacher's voice was secretly a lullaby designed to put us all to sleep. My teacher's name was Mr. Duckett, and he was one of those teachers who were way too young to be a teacher. Sure, he was old enough, of course. Had his degrees, whatever he needed, but his personality? Well, he had the personality of a teenager.

“Rebecca! This isn't a beauty parlor, put your makeup away and pay attention. Do you even know what class this is?” he asked as he walked over toward the girl and pressed his hand against her desk. I noticed with a chuckle that she had the wrong textbook out and it was upside down and covered in different variations of makeup vials and powders.

Rebecca was one of the cheerleaders and showed it proudly by being one of those girls to constantly wear their uniforms every day all day long. As if we would forget she's popular if she were to wear the same regular clothes as everyone else. “English class, of course,” she said, splaying her hand out to indicate the textbook underneath her flood of products.

He snorted with a shake of his head at her as he pointed at the board, which held different mathematical equations. “Maybe all those products are getting to you. Let's leave the chemicals out of the classroom,” he said as most of the class gave a halfhearted chuckle. She was popular, so they didn't try too hard



to laugh at her misery, but if it was someone like me who was getting cracked on, they'd probably be rolling out of their seats and dying on the ground. Rebecca ignored Mr. Duckett and continued to paint her nails while he went to the board and resumed talking. I continued to stare at the clock, wishing it would go faster so I could be out of here. I never really was one for math class. It was easy enough that I could get about a C without really trying and that was good enough for me.

A little rectangle-shaped paper popped onto my desk, and I turned towards the sender, quirking my eyebrow at her in surprise. My best friend -my only friend actually- Isabella looked at me with an impatient glance, her brown eyes already growing frustrated as it took me longer than a second to pick up her note. I sighed, already knowing what it was about and dreading it, but still opened it anyway. Of course, it was covered in the recent picture she'd been messing with. Isabella was a tagger. Her artistic nature was what drew us together at the start of high school.

That, and the newness of it all. I had not been popular in middle school, but I had a few friends here and there. That was until I accidentally hurt Roan, and everyone turned on me. So, when high school started, I was sure I'd continue having no friends until Isabella transferred in. She was new, about three days after the school year started, but it was still noticeable. We lived in a fairly small town, and most if not all of us tended to go to the same schools from kindergarten through high school. Maybe even onto the same old community college, unless some were brave enough to try and go somewhere out of state or a few towns over to Oklahoma Baptist University.

Not only that, but the fact that Isabella stood out. Our town was pretty much nothing but white, overly religious country hicks. When a pretty Latina girl popped out of nowhere, everyone seemed to notice. Stupidly enough, instead of wanting to get to know her, everyone avoided her. She sat close to me during lunch, and no one wanted to sit next to me, leaving the table wide open. I was drawing, I remember that. I always drew when I had free time. She scooted next to me, shoved her sketchbook into my lap, and from the start of lunch to the end of it we were best friends.

Although I was that loser kid who got bullied by the basketball captain and his lackeys, no one ever messed with Isabella. There was just an aura around her that screamed '*Mess with me and I'll fuck you up,*' and no one even tried to deal with that. They might whisper rumors about us dating or something under their breath, but they mostly left her alone. Being bullied was strictly my thing, apparently.

Isabella made an annoyed sound with the back of her throat as she tapped her short nails on her desk, trying to get my attention. I chuckled under my breath, sitting up enough to look down at my desk, and slowly slid down my hood so I could see the note. I would have taken longer just to aggravate her, but I knew from experience she'd start throwing stuff at me and I didn't feel like getting detention again. The last time I pissed her off, she threw her textbook at me and I dodged it.

The textbook smacked into one of the wrestling team jocks, I couldn't care enough to try to remember's name, and he punched me. He had thought I was the one who threw it. All three of us ended up in detention. That resulted in me getting beat up even more, and it wasn't really something I strived to repeat. I smoothed down the sides of the paper and read the words I already knew were going to be sitting there. *'Tonight, at seven, meet me at our spot.'* The note read.

I frowned, slid my hand into my hood, and pulled it all the way down as I scratched the back of my neck. I shook out my hair, and my blond hair fell into my eyes as I pulled my hood back up and wrote out my reply. *'I can't. Mom and Dad want to talk to me.'* I said to her, before simply handing the piece of paper back without caring to fold it.

Mr. Duckett didn't really care about notes. He wasn't the type of teacher to flip out about it or make us stand and read it out loud. As long as we weren't getting an F in the class and we didn't start getting loud and giggling loudly over whatever was being talked about like some of the cheerleaders did, then he couldn't care less. For example, right now he was showing a math equation to Rebecca by using her makeup vials. Not giving two fucks that she never listened to him, he was instead moving them around on her desk to show her how items could help with math.

Absently she was painting his nails and he wasn't even flinching, mostly telling her she could have picked a different shade. While the girls in the class started to discuss which shade would match his eyes better, Isabella once more flicked the little triangle towards me. I gave her an annoyed look while I once more unfolded it gently, making sure I didn't rip it. So freaking dramatic for nothing. *'Is it about what I think it's about?'* She asked.

I looked up with a sigh at the front of the class and watched as the girls in the top row had sat Mr. Duckett down in a chair and stood around him, subjecting him to a makeup lesson. The guys in the class were getting up and forming their groups of friends. Clearly, the class was finished despite still having a good ten minutes or so left. Without a word, I scooted my desk up against hers

since she sat next to me, and placed my elbow on my desk, pressing my cheek into the palm of my hand. She leaned close to me since neither of us was close to anyone in this school and didn't want them to know about our lives, and ignoring the stupid whistles of the guys closest to us, I nodded at her. "They kept pressuring me, bringing it up over and over again," I whispered to her, watching her face frown in annoyance.

"*Estúpido*," She breathed out, rolling her eyes. I snorted, knowing enough of her Spanish from being her best friend for the past three years to know that meant stupid. She knew I didn't care much for my parents, and honestly, she probably hated them more than I did. "Why are they so adamant?" she asked, her brown eyes staring into mine.

I moved some of her dark brown hair streaked with purple highlights out of her eyes, earning us another whistle. I wanted to throw something at them, but I was still recovering from Roan slamming me into the locker this morning. For people who didn't like me, they were always watching me. Though those two were friends with Roan, so it made sense, I suppose.

"Kennedy got a boyfriend," I said, talking about my little sister. She was in seventh grade this year, being quite a few years younger than me, and started her seventh-grade debut by getting a boyfriend right at the beginning. My parents, being the crazy people they are, started to give me crap about it. They wondered why I was sixteen, almost seventeen, and I'd never had a girlfriend before. I told Isabella this, and she snorted, throwing her hands up in the air and disturbing one of her recent sketches.

I grabbed it before it could fall to the ground, looking down at it with a cocked eyebrow, noticing she was trying something new. Still her same style, but this time it was of a little girl when before she'd been drawing older women. Isabella spent all her time drawing, and after school, she'd go home and make a stencil. It normally took her a few days to a week to make a stencil, and then she'd have me sneak out with her at night to find a new place to tag. I didn't do that stuff, I just drew to draw, but I still went with her.

It was kind of fun, and sometimes I did help her spray the background and stuff to make it go faster, but it never really was my type of thing. Isabella didn't even seem to care as I leaned over and slipped her paper into her sketchbook, making sure it wouldn't fall again, while she started to chant things in Spanish that sounded roughly like cuss words. Her hands were moving fast as they usually did when she was angry. A few people stared at her like she was crazy, but no one really knew Spanish, so it didn't matter to them.

Honestly, I probably should have known some by now, since we've been best friends for three years and her mother rarely spoke in English. It just didn't seem like an interest to me. It was already hard enough knowing two languages, since my mother's family is Italian and she spoke it quite often, so I never really had the overwhelming need to learn a third language.

Finally, Isabella settled down, though I could see by the anger burning in her eyes she was far from calm. Her eyes flickered over me, and I already knew what she was looking at. I had a lean, slightly muscular frame that I kept mostly hidden under the overly big black hoodie I wore constantly. I wasn't very tall, most likely because I was half Italian, and I was only about five foot eight, while most of the guys here were a lot taller, hitting over six feet tall easily.

My skin was permanently tanned with an olive tint, my mom's genes were strong, but my hair was light blond like my father's. I had a light scattering of freckles that dusted my cheeks and my nose, and it made me look younger than I really was. My wide light blue eyes didn't really help either. I was often called a freshman by those who didn't really know me, and I had gotten used to it by now.

I bit my lips, self-conscious of how full they were. One of those annoying things about me was that they were darker, making it look like I constantly wore lip gloss or something. A pretty boy. Isabella often called me Pretty Boy, or she'd call me her little pretty boy. "Are you even straight?" she asked, making me snort. I looked down at my hands. One was clenching the desk tightly, while the other was absently clicking the back of the mechanical pencil repeatedly, the dull click echoing loudly around me as my leg bounced up and down in agitation over her question.

It was a question I had been thinking about for a while now, back when Isabella first became my friend. She was gorgeous, and seriously smart, with one of the best grades in our year. Having a single mom, Isabella wanted to do her best constantly and always made sure to please her mom, even though she had an extracurricular activity her mother would never approve of if she found out. She had the right curves, and she wasn't dressed like a Barbie doll who wanted to show off every bit of her body in a cry for attention. She tended to wear skirts or shorts with tights underneath. I didn't think I had ever seen her wear less than two studded belts on her hips, no matter what outfit she had on.

Her shirts were always filled with band names, and she wore a camo jacket that was fraying at the sleeves, which belonged to her father. He had died during a camping trip when she was six years old. She and her parents were camping, and someone close by was hunting illegally. They were too close to the

camping grounds and a bullet missed a deer and hit her father instead. Isabella was beautiful, confident, and amazing, and I had no idea why I wasn't attracted to her. But... I wasn't. "I don't know," I replied with a shrug. "Probably?"

"Well, it's an easy question. Do you like pee-pee's, or vaja-ja's?" she crudely asked, making me snort as I pressed my face against the palm of my hand to hide my face. She had no chill sometimes, I swear.

I turned back to look at her and shrugged again. "Not sure. Haven't found someone I've been attracted to yet. But I don't think gender matters to me. Girls are beautiful. Guys are beautiful. Whichever. I guess it really depends on who they are, probably." I said, sighing.

Isabella nodded in understanding. "Sounds pansexual to me, to be honest. Or maybe demisexual."

"I don't really care enough to figure it out. I don't want to feel pressured to label myself." I admitted. It had been hard for me the past three years, trying to figure it out. Finally, I just stopped caring. "It's less stressful to try and figure it out. Eventually, I'll love someone. And that's okay. Well, it's okay for me, that is. But my parents..." I trailed off with my hands splayed to show my predicament.

Well, it was more than them. I wasn't going to admit it out loud, but I was curious too. What did it feel like to fall in love? To be loved? I was romantic at heart. I read more love stories than I cared to admit when I wasn't drawing. "We have to figure out what to do. They know by now that you and I aren't going to get together, but, I don't know. Just look around. Stare at the girls and try to find someone you think your parents will like. Look, there are a few girls on the swim team over there, and there's one on the volleyball team." Isabella said, pointing at three girls.

I sighed, nodding. It wasn't hard to know the kind of girls my parents wanted me with. My parents were high school sweethearts. My dad was the champion of the football team, and if it hadn't been for his shoulder injury, he'd have gone pro. My mom was a cheerleader, and they met during the championships. She was from another state, but they fell in love despite that and when they got married, she moved here to be with him. Dad's family was always well-off, our family owned a few chain sports stores here and mom found a job in real estate, making us one of the richest families in town. They forced me to take up sports growing up, putting me in different ones constantly, trying to find one that I liked. That's how I ended up hurting Roan.

By the time I was in middle school, it was fairly known that I was unhappy with sports, uncoordinated, and clumsy. Basketball seemed to be easier for me for some reason and I took to it for a little bit. My parents were over the moon about it, and my little sister loved the sport too, so she loved me. Well, for a little while, that is. Roan's father was our coach in middle school and still is the coach over there. Roan hated me with a passion from the first day, probably because we both played point guard. His father gave me the position over him since he was better as a shooting guard than I was.

Roan was already picking on me, shoving me around, calling me shortie, and he made me anxious. During a big game, I tripped on air, literally. There was nothing there but air. I tripped at the last second and Roan fell over me, his knee slamming into the ground, and I swear everyone in the building could hear the loud crack of his bone. He was forced to sit out for the rest of middle school. So, he became my personal bully, even though he healed perfectly and is now the current captain of our high school team. This is the part where my sister hates me now. Roan's dad held a grudge and refused to let my sister on the middle school team because of me.

My parents were forced to drive her to the next town over for a different basketball team. They often stayed away for a weekend so she could play with the team. After middle school, I refused to play sports anymore and my parents fell away from me, not having anything in common with me. It was frustrating, and the tension was so thick whenever we were all together at home that I could barely breathe.

I stared at the three girls Isabella mentioned with a sigh. Well, they weren't attacking Mr. Duckett with makeup, so they weren't the same as the cheerleaders. Honestly, I would have rather been with someone in the art club. However, since it only consisted of: Isabella, me, and a couple of freshmen that mostly went to hang out in the back of the classroom and smoke, that wasn't going to happen. If it was my choice, there was no way in Hell I'd ever date a jock. The fact that my parents wanted it made me hate the idea of it even more. But... I sighed. If I could do something to get my parents off my back, I'd try it. I just had to figure out which one.

# Chapter 2

## Kinsley



"So?" Isabella asked. I didn't say anything, pretending I didn't hear her. We only had three classes together, but now that school was over, we were sitting in the art room. Every class I had with her she'd been posturing me, pointing out new sporty girls to ask out. A few of them she knew from classes she had with them, and a few she'd done group projects with. I was subjected all day to annoyingly being forced to open her tiny intricately folded little triangle papers, or listen to her constantly whispered facts about girls in my head.

Honestly, it was stressful. I didn't even remember which girl the facts went to, and by now they were all buzzing around my head, overlapping each other. I wanted a break from it all, so when the bell rang, I practically sprinted there. My haven, my favorite place in the school. The art club was placed inside a classroom that had been abandoned. When I was still in middle school, there was a lab accident that made horribly smelly green goo splatter all over the classroom. No matter how much they scrubbed at it, it wasn't possible to get it all out.

The kids complained about the smell constantly, and the teacher had asthma and was constantly coughing. They ended up leaving the classroom alone, saying they'd clean it again later, and then forgetting about it. It didn't smell bad to Isabella and me, and the random freshmen that floated in earlier this year and just ended up staying didn't seem to care either. Not that they seemed to care about anything. They were always high within a matter of minutes. Isabella had

to stop one of them from trying to jump out the window once, announcing he wanted to see if he could fly.

It was on the third floor of the building, overlooking the football field. Even then, as I pretended like my music was on, I glanced out the window and watched the coach yell profanities at one of the players while the others stood there waiting for more commands. Isabella yanked one of my earphones out of my ear and stomped on my foot, making me wince. She was so dangerous sometimes. "I feel sorry for your future boyfriend or girlfriend," I muttered, rolling my eyes at her.

She snorted but moved her hands in a '*come on*' motion, which made me sigh. "I don't know, Izzy. Honestly, if I wanted to date any of them, wouldn't I have been interested in them before now? Maybe I just don't like high school girls. Maybe I need to go to the community college and find someone,"

The look she gave me was a mixture of horror and annoyance. "Like your strict, religious parents are going to be fine with their sixteen-year-old son dating a twenty-year-old or older woman?" She asked, throwing her hands up in the air. The group of freshmen in the back lifted their hands and cheered, their eyes already bloodshot as they cheered for me to get with my imaginary girlfriend.

After a chorus of: '*You the man, bro!*' and '*Damn, son, getting some older woman fun time,*' Isabella lifted her shoe, turning to look at them all and silencing every one of them with a glare. She huffed, sliding her shoe back onto her foot before flipping her hair over her shoulder and glaring at me. "Seriously, Kinsley. Don't make me throw you out the window."

I groaned, pressing my forehead onto the desk before lifting my head to look at her. She snorted, pointing out how I got the black lead on my forehead from my drawing. I didn't care, it was nothing new. I always had black smudges on my cheeks, and the bottom of my hands were always coated to the point I had to rub them with alcohol pads to get the lead off.

I looked up at the clock on the wall. It had a crack down the middle of it, and the time was three hours off, but it was still ticking away. Honestly, I was narrowing down my pick between the three girls she earlier pointed out in our math class. There was Peyton and Abby, the two on the swim team, and there was Allison from the volleyball team. I had seen Allison making out with a guy before the bell rang earlier so she was a no-go, but the other two were pretty calm. Actually, now that I remember, I think Peyton had a project with me when I was a



freshman and she wasn't completely awful. "Maybe Peyton, I guess,"

I could remember how she always made a mess with her blond hair, pulling it up into a messy bun and complaining about how the strands hung in her eyes. I told her to cut it then and she stared at me like I was an alien. But she did participate, after all, so I guess that counts as her being a decent person. Usually, when I was paired up with someone, they tended to make me do everything so they didn't have to talk to me. "Oh! She's that pretty blond-haired one, right? I don't think she's seeing anyone. Why her? Are you attracted to her?" She asked, her brown eyes staring into mine.

I snorted, turning towards the window as the football players smacked into each other. I had no idea who was which number, but it didn't matter anyway. I never cared about football. I could see the basketball courts from here too and smirked as Roan missed the shot and kicked someone close by even though it wasn't their fault he missed. There were a few girls on the track team racing around the football field and I watched the coach pull off one of the players' helmets and fling it at another player, yelling at them to stop watching the girls run.

I shrugged, turning back to Isabella and her questioning gaze. "I guess she's pretty. I don't feel attracted to her or love or anything, but those things came when you got to know them, right? That's why people date first before anything else," I told her. It wasn't always true. As logical as it was, guys would walk up and down the halls as they talked about some party they had last weekend and the number of girls they banged in one night. It was like I was watching STDs walk down the hall. I was different from all of them, and honestly, I wasn't really bothered by it. Maybe other guys would be freaked out that they were almost seventeen and still a virgin but I didn't really care. It would happen eventually.

Isabella looked at me, lifting her finger and flicking me on the forehead. I groaned, rubbing my forehead and glaring at her as tears sprang unwillingly to my eyes from the sudden pain. "What are you, an old man? Were you my long-lost grandpa? Grandpa Kinsley," she said, earning a chorus of laughs from the group of freshmen behind us. One of them fell out of his chair and lay on his back looking up at his hand with wide eyes, informing his friends he had found all of his fingers. "You know people have sex nowadays without really caring who it's with, right? I mean, I don't. But I'm not a guy," she said with a half-hearted shrug.

I glared at her, shaking my head as I put both my headphones back in. "Not all guys are the same, Izzy," I told her. She didn't used to be so bad about

guys. The reason she and her mother moved here was because of her mother's boyfriend. He was fairly nice, and respectable, but his son wasn't. Isabella had a pretty big crush on him, and when they slept together, he moved out, telling his father he wanted to live with his mother instead. Isabella was crushed, and then her mother ended up breaking up with the guy anyway so she never saw him again.

I saw him once when I was forced to go with my family to my sister's basketball tournament and he had two girls under each arm giggling and kissing his cheeks without a care. Once Isabella found out, she practically hated all guys. I think she only liked me because I was already her friend before all of this happened. Well, that, and the fact that I walked right up to the asshole and punched him in the face. I got my ass kicked but it was worth it to see how happy it made Izzy knowing I stood up for her. "What about your crush?" I asked her, making her roll her eyes.

"I don't have a crush on them," she said, knowing instantly who I was talking about. Over the past year, Isabella had a competition. Everywhere she tagged, within the week someone else either copied over her work or put something beside it. When Isabella drew a girl, the other tagger drew another girl kissing her girl, and it infuriated Izzy to have her work messed with like that. All taggers had a signature, and the person Izzy was currently fighting with used an S as their signature. Even Izzy's old things were getting attacked and Isabella was constantly trying to fix it. "Don't even talk about that asshole," she said in a clipped tone.

I snickered at her, but before I could say anything the window was opened wider than we normally opened it and we groaned as we grabbed at our papers that were scattered everywhere. "Aw, dammit guys!" I yelled as the drawing I was working on flew out the window. I groaned as it landed near the bench with the football guys' equipment on it, banging my head on the window. I mean, it's not like I couldn't redraw it, it just sucked because I was really liking that picture.

I had been drawing the football players lined up in position on the field, the goalpost in the back, and even the girls running in the distance. I was hoping if I gave it to the coach as a present, he'd stop trying to get me to play basketball during gym class. Every time I played, they tried to get me to join the team and I didn't want to be even more under Roan's radar than I already was. I turned my head in time to see one of the freshmen try to climb out the window. "Really? I thought we realized last week we couldn't fly?" I groaned as I hauled one of them back into the classroom.

He laughed as Isabella helped me pull him back inside. She was muttering something about hammering the windows closed when the guy flopped down on the ground and grinned at me. “I wanted to get some of that cotton candy,” he said, pointing at the cloud. I snorted, shaking my head as I dug my hand into my pocket and pulled out a few twenties.

“Go get some food, normal food,” I said to him, shoving the money in his hand. He looked at it with wide eyes before getting up and shoving one of his friends towards the door, whooping about how money flew out of the sky to land in his hand.

We stared in wonder as they raced out the door, both of us turning to look at each other before laughing. “I bet that *pendejo* thinks the money came from God,” Isabella said, making me snort out another laugh. We cracked the windows but only a little bit, just enough to try and get rid of the smell the group left behind. Isabella and I had never really smoked. Her mother wasn’t as religious as my parents but she would beat her ass if she found out she was smoking. Well, she’d probably beat my ass too if I was to be honest.

Her mother was as much hers as she was mine at this point, and more than once I’d felt the sting of her sandal on the back of my head. I looked out the window, watching with a frown as one of the football players grabbed my picture and stared at it, before looking up at the school. I couldn’t see who it was through his helmet. They couldn’t see me from up here, right? After a few minutes, the coach blew the whistle and the player folded my drawing and slid it into one of the bags, before running back out to the field. Strange, but whatever. He folded it, I didn’t want it back now.

I groaned, walked back to the table, and started a new drawing. “You really think if I draw something for the coach, he’ll stop hounding me?” I asked, staring at the field once more. The coach had a red face as he yelled at one of the players, throwing the football at him as he threw his hands up in the air. The one he was yelling at looked pretty short, so it was probably a freshman.

Isabella was humming, but she only had one of her headphones in, so I knew she heard me. It made me remember I hadn’t pressed play yet. I pulled out one of my headphones and hit play. As the melody of *Song of the Sparrow* by SayWeCanFly, my favorite band, played softly over the headphones, she replied to me. “Of course. I drew him a picture of a uterus exploding with blood and told him this is how it feels like when he tries to make us play when we’re on our periods. He hasn’t given me or any of the other girls who sit out crap ever again.”

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open as my pencil hovered over the paper, not sure if I should laugh or freak out. “Did you... I mean... how detailed was it?” I asked, choking out a laugh.

She looked at me as if she wasn’t entirely sure why I was laughing. “Of course, it was the same type of model they put on the walls, but I did add skin. And hair, and lips. Well damn, I guess I drew a vagina, but maybe this way he’ll know how to find one,” she said with a shrug.

I pressed my head down on the paper once more, my shoulders shaking as I laughed out loud at her. I lifted my head as I laughed, wiping at the tears in my eyes and she had the audacity to stare at me like she had no idea why I was laughing.

“Did you,” I stuttered out, taking a deep breath, my finger up in the air as if telling her to give me a second as I tried to calm myself. “Did you ask him if he found it?” I asked, snorting out another laugh as she smirked at me.

She threw her hands up in the air, and let out a sentence in Spanish that I couldn’t even begin to translate, before shaking her head at me. “Of course not. Besides, he’s terrified of me now. Won’t look me in the eyes and will pretty much tell other people to tell me what to do instead of telling me himself,” I could understand why. He was probably traumatized. We sat there drawing for a little while longer. I gave up on the notion of drawing a picture for the coach, I didn’t think Isabella realized that it wasn’t the act of giving the drawing that made the coach happy, but the fact that she scared the shit out of him instead.

He probably went home and cried after that, the poor man. This time I drew the scenery. From there I could just see the Quachita mountains in the distance and I chose that to focus on. The way the mountains rose and dipped, the trees scattered over them, and the stratus clouds sitting above the mountains. In a way, it was like the back of a camel lifting and dipping down, before lifting and dipping down once more. I was just putting in a few birds when Isabella tapped her finger three times on the corner of my paper to get my attention. She waited, knowing I wanted to finish the bird I was drawing.

We were both artists, and we understood how annoying it was to bother each other when we were drawing. So we simply tapped and waited, even if we had to wait for a few hours until we looked at the other. When you were making art, concentration was the key. Finally, after about five minutes, I lifted my eyes to hers, pulling one headphone out of my ear. I could still hear the drums going off in the song I was listening to, but it was muted as I placed it on the table. “Don’t

you have to be at your house today?” she asked, pointing to the broken clock.

I groaned, rubbing my face with my hand as I turned off my music. Normally, my parents didn't notice or even care when I didn't show up. They forced me to have family dinner with them every Sunday, but usually throughout the week, everyone was too busy to care. But of course, no work on Sunday, the holy day, so everyone was expected to be home and there for dinner. The rest of the week Kennedy was always out with friends after practice. Half of the time, since she had to go to another school's team, she ended up staying with the girl whose mother drove her back and forth for a few days.

I barely even saw Kennedy anymore, and I wasn't really all that upset about it. As for my parents, they never really came home either. Unless they were dealing with Kennedy, they were at the main office of Dad's shops. Mom has her own office there for her real estate and worked out of that, while Dad worked on his own company pretty much beside her. They said it was so they could stay close to each other despite always being so busy, and that was fine with me. It meant I could stay out as late as I wanted and do whatever I wanted, as long as it wasn't anything illegal. Well, as long as I wasn't caught doing anything illegal. Isabella and I were almost caught a few times, but we always seemed to run away in time.

She snorted at me as I put my drawing into my portfolio, put my pencils in their case, and slipped it all into my backpack. Isabella was the one who talked me into making a portfolio, even though it was pointless. Dad already had my future set for me. Go to college, get a business degree, and inherit his stupid sports shops. *'It runs in the family, Kinsley,'* he'd always say. “Unfortunately, you're right,” I grumbled, standing up. She was already packed up as well, closing the windows. Our club had a teacher as all the clubs did, but our teacher didn't want to come into the room saying it smelled bad, so we were usually always by ourselves and cleaned up everything by ourselves when we were finished. Here and there, a new student came, but then they realized it was just us and no actual club activities and left. Unless they smoked, then they stayed with the freshmen. There were about five of them now. “Are you coming with me?” I asked hopefully.

She snorted as she shook her head no. “I'm not walking in there with your family all there again. The last time they called me the devil's daughter for my hair. Did I tell you they called Mami? She laughed at them and hung up.” I smirked but didn't say anything. I knew about that. They gave me a lecture about hanging out with a bad influence. Then a few days later, they seemed to forget all about it and told me to have fun with my friend at school. They really had so little care for me. “But Mom is working a double shift again, so you can give me a ride,” she said, blinking her eyes at me.

I nodded, not really caring. Our town wasn't the poorest town there was, but it wasn't the richest either. I was one of the few juniors to have a car. Honestly, I was just glad Roan had one because he'd probably destroy my car in his jealousy if he didn't. Mostly the seniors had cars, and they tended to look like their parents' hand-me-downs that were all broken and rusted. My parents' having money was pretty common, and even though they couldn't bother to really care about me, they still wanted to make sure their image was intact. So of course, I had a car. The moment we walked out of the stairwell onto the first floor, I was shoved into a locker. I groaned, shaking my hair out of my eyes as Roan muttered, "Move it loser," at me.

I looked up at him, frowning. He was just as tall as always, and his giant muscular form didn't help me much either. I'd think of him as one of the beautiful people if he wasn't such an asshole. He had his head shaved though and that wasn't really attractive to me. Everyone has an acquired taste, after all. Isabella was mumbling curses at him in Spanish as I stood, wiping my hands down my pants to straighten them. I wrapped my arm over Isabella's shoulder and started to walk her out the door. "Come on, let's get out of here," I mumbled, stopping her rants. She nodded, her eyes dancing dangerously down the hall to burn into Roan's back before she allowed me to pull her out the door.

# Chapter 3

## Kinsley



I walked into my house, shut the door behind me, and sighed in frustration. I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to deal with them all two days a week. Once a week was more than enough for me. I could smell the exquisite smell of dinner being cooked and frowned. Yeah, that was weird. Why was I annoyed to smell home-cooked meals? But for someone like me, it wasn't ever a good sign. A home-cooked meal meant the cook was here. She only ever came once a week to make our Sunday meals, but they took the time to have her come an extra day just for tonight. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I hated her cooking, I loved it. I didn't love what it meant. It meant I was going to be forced to sit there with my family.

"Kinsley! Is that you?" Mom called out from the living room. I rolled my eyes, biting my tongue to hold back the retort I had poised and ready to go, and walked into the living room. She gave me a once over, a frown on her face as she stared at me. "Honestly, I wouldn't even be able to tell under that ridiculous black hoodie. The hood is up, you could be a gangster for all I know," She said, holding her hand to the front of her chest dramatically. I stared at her, studying her. She had her hair cut into a bob, and it was a light brown color.

Like Kennedy, they both had light brown hair. Although, Kennedy liked to wear her hair long, and sit in the middle of the living room constantly complaining about how tangled it was after a match. My mom had on a black

pantsuit, and I wouldn't be surprised if she had been working up until this dinner. She probably planned on going back to work afterward. Isabella would be fine to hear that. Then I'd be able to sneak out to help her.

"Hello, Mother," I replied in a mono-toned voice as I pulled back my hood absently. She clicked her tongue at me as she stood, coming to stand in front of me. I cringed as she ran her fingers through my hair, tugging on the ends of it painfully.

She sighed, waving her hand at me as she sat back down. "Consider getting your hair done, it's been too long since the last haircut," I nodded, even though I had no plans on cutting my hair. I was starting to like how it looked. I had it styled to fall over my left eye, and the longer it got the less I could see. It was even with the bridge of my nose for now, but I was planning on growing it longer. The rest of my hair was just resting like a wavy mess around my ears. Maybe I'd cut that part and leave my bangs long. Isabella would love it; she'd try to dye it.

She was always trying to dye it but I hadn't agreed to it. I just didn't want to mess up the light blond hair color. Who knew what it would look like after she ruined it with dye? "Also, I got you something to wear for dinner. Try to consider being presentable," she said with her eyebrow raised. It was probably her way of telling me I wasn't allowed to argue with her, but I wasn't going to wear it. I never did.

Without another word, I turned around and nearly collided with my father. He grunted in surprise as he grabbed my shoulder while he steadied me. I tried not to flinch at the sudden pain as he let go. Despite his shoulder injury stopping him from going pro, he still worked out constantly when he wasn't working, and he had the body of a pro football player even now that he was older. Big and muscular, and about twice the size of me, if not more. Being close to him made me think about Roan and his friends and the flinch was pretty much automatic now.

"Hey, champ," He said with a grin. I frowned, already on the defense. Normally he ignored me or glared at me, never calling me names. Not unless it had to do with sports. He only called me things like champ when I was playing basketball. He rubbed his fingers through my hair and I grimaced, my legs bowing under his hand from the weight of it. He frowned, pulling his hand back as he looked at me. "You still have your muscles; I could feel it when I touched your arm. Working out again? Did you join the team?" He asked, hope in his voice. I tried to stifle my sigh; I knew it had to be about sports.



I knew what he was talking about. It was pretty obvious that the only sport I was good at was basketball. At night when I was home alone and bored, my fingers tired from the constant drawing, I would shoot hoops in the backyard since we had our own net back there. So, while I was keeping up with my lean muscular form, it was just for fun and to pass the time. There was no way in hell I could join the team again, not with Roan there. “No, Dad. I didn’t join the team or any other sports,” I told him sternly.

He glared down at me, annoyed. While my mother and Kennedy had brown eyes, Dad and I had blue eyes. It was the only thing about me that matched anyone since Dad had dark brown hair. Mom said my blond hair came from her mother. Sometimes when I felt really sorry for myself, I would lay there in my bed and wonder about how great it would be if some stranger came and claimed she was my real birth mom or these crazy people kidnapped me or something. Wishful thinking.

Taking a step back from me as if I had smacked him, he frowned, and instantly I was in the dark again. I knew that look, the look of disgust. Unwanted, disdain. They didn’t have anything in common with me, they didn’t understand me. They didn’t want me. They probably counted down the days I graduated and moved out like I was. “Hurry up and get ready for dinner,” he grumbled as he thundered past me into the living room. Almost like a light switch, he laughed as he pulled my mother into his arms. They said their hellos and kissed each other as if they hadn’t been in the same building together all day.

Kennedy brushed past me, not even trying to talk to me as she gave me her familiar stink eye. She slammed her shoulder into mine and walked into the living room, adding to the nice and warm happy gathering. I turned to watch as Dad lifted her into his arms and called her his princess, and as she was placed back down on the ground, they watched her talk animatedly about her recent game and all I could do was sigh. It looked so warm over there. Where I was standing, all I could feel was the chill. I turned around and walked up the stairs, heading up to my room. I just wanted to get this all over with.

Our house had a fairly normal layout, but it was much bigger than we needed. All the houses in our neighborhood belonged to the richer crowd of our town, and Mom and Dad were friends with most of them. A lot of them used to know Dad from school, and they had parties at each other's houses a lot. Those nights I stayed with Isabella and gladly slept on her couch. We had five bedrooms, which was ridiculously stupid for having two kids and parents. We only needed three bedrooms if even. But Dad turned one of the bedrooms into a gym and the other into another office for Mom in case she wanted to work from home. We had

a kitchen, a dining room, and two living rooms, and everyone had their own bathroom. The office was downstairs, and the gym was on the other side of my bathroom. In a sense, I'd probably have to share my bathroom if it was a bedroom, but I was lucky it was made into a gym, I guess.

Mom had one of those long narrow tables down the whole hallway upstairs filled with various decorations, along with a mirror above it. Sitting underneath the table were a couple of bags indicating she took time to shop or made someone else do it for her. I sighed, grabbed the bags, and went into my room, shutting the door behind me. My room was bigger than I needed it to be. I had one of those L-shaped desks in the corner.

It was the most important place to me, because on one side of the table sat my laptop computer, and on the other side sat my drawing supplies. I had cabinets filled with drawing supplies propped up against the side of the desk and as much as I could feel my fingers twitching to grab something and start drawing, I knew it would have to wait. Mom had two dressers in here, but I only used one. She seemed to think I should have more clothes than I have, but I didn't spend all of my allowance on clothes, I spent it on art supplies instead.

My bed was a queen-sized bed, perfectly made not by me ever. Mom had a housekeeper who did all the cleaning. I kicked off my shoes and left them in the middle of the room, pulling off my socks and sinking my toes into the soft carpet. Probably the best part of this house was the carpet. There was just something about the feel of your skin against the carpet. The other side of my room was filled with a few bookshelves and two doors. One led to my walk-in closet, which was only half full, and the other went to my bathroom. My bookshelves were filled with books on art, and my own portfolios. I had about ten now since Isabella made me start keeping my drawings.

Every time I filled one in, I just started another one. I sat down on the bed and looked into the bags, pulling out boxes. One had a shirt that was light purple and buttoned up, with long sleeves. I guess I could deal with that, but it was too big. The pants were black dress pants, also too big. Even the shoes were too big, and I threw everything crumpled up back into the bags and chucked it back into the hallway, before closing the door once more. You'd think my own parents would know what size clothes I wore, but nope, they could never figure it out. I pulled off my hoodie and the rest of my clothes, threw them in my laundry basket, knowing the housekeeper would have them washed and folded for tomorrow morning, and went to take a shower.

My bathroom was just as extravagant as you'd think. There was a giant

shower that could fit more than one person, and glass doors that were made to possibly show the outline of your body through the glass but not really much else. Trays filled with various body washes, shampoos, and conditioners. I didn't take a long shower, knowing they were waiting, and stepped out pretty fast to dry myself off. I cringed, looking at my body in the mirror.

My side and my stomach had various healing bruises; my upper arms were covered with new bruises from Roan slamming me into the locker earlier. I had a tattoo on the inside of my arm that only Isabella knew about. It wasn't too big, a birdcage with a songbird trapped inside it. I frowned, running my finger over it, annoyed there was a bruise on it. With a sigh, I finished drying off and pulled on a long-sleeved black shirt, grabbed a pair of ripped jeans, and ran my fingers through my hair.

It was presentable enough to me, and they weren't going to pay more attention to me for five minutes anyway. If they tried, I'd just ask Kennedy about her latest match and they'd forget all about me. I didn't put any socks or shoes on. Something told me once the dinner was over, they'd all leave and I'd be alone again. Either I'd stay in and go to sleep or I'd go out and meet with Isabella.

The moment I walked into the dining room I was met with the delicious smell of ham, potatoes, and carrots. It made my mouth water and I couldn't help but smile to know there'd be plenty of leftovers for me to eat until Sunday. The cook only came for family dinners, after all, the rest of the week I either had to cook for myself or just heat up leftovers. "I think we should have another kid. Kennedy will be in high school soon, you know, and I've always wanted a boy," Dad was saying as I stepped into the room.

I sighed, very loudly, but none of them even cared enough to look up at me. "You have a son, did you forget? Or am I just a ghost?"

"Maybe he'll be a football player like you were," Mom said, patting Dad's hand with a soft smile. I rolled my eyes, mumbling under my breath as I sat down next to Kennedy and started to fill my plate. None of them waited for me of course. They had already started to eat as they talked about how they should add another child to their family. How lovely they were.

Finally, Dad looked up at me, his eyes pierced into me as he looked me up and down. I pretended like I didn't notice his strange creepy stare as I cut my ham and took a bite of it, quietly savoring the taste. Even when Dad looked under the table, probably cringing over my ripped jeans, before looking at me again. "Did you do the test?" he asked, making me sigh. I purposely took forever chewing

my food, aggravating him. “Kinsley, did you pee in the damn cup?”

I rolled my eyes, swallowing my food. “Yeah, it’s on the counter in my bathroom,” I said, frustrated. “I’m not doing drugs though, so it’s pointless. But have fun playing with my pee,” I said, shrugging as I took a bite of my carrots. Every few weeks there was a new cup sitting there for me to pee in. At first, I fought it, saying it was stupid and they didn’t trust me, but after a few years of that, I just accepted it and peed in the damn thing. It’s not like I ever did drugs anyway, so it didn’t really matter. Maybe a younger me cared that they didn’t trust me but I was used to it at this point.

Dad gripped his fork tightly in his hand, annoyed with my words or my tone, probably both, and Mom cleared her throat to change the subject. “Why are you not wearing the new clothes?” She asked, a frown on her face. “Did you not like them?”

I wished tonight was already over with. “They were too big, mom. They’re always too big. I keep telling you my size, it hasn’t changed,”

She grimaced since I was still eating when I started to talk, but I was getting aggravated by all this scrutiny. Normally, they didn't pay this much attention to me. She quickly regained herself and straightened her spine, staring at me. “I do so much, Kinsley. I can't be expected to remember everything. It was the size your father wore when he was your age. Maybe you needed to start using the gym more, you always look so weak and skinny,” she said with an exhausted sigh as if I made her life so hard for her. She could remember Dad’s clothes size from high school, but not mine? Because that made so much sense.

“Did I tell you guys about my boyfriend?” Kennedy asked, batting her eyelashes at me. Of course, she wasn't even changing the subject much, just giving them something else to grill me about. The main topic of this stupid dinner after all.

For about twenty minutes, I was forgotten as Kennedy rambled on about some kid named Wyatt who was, of course, a football player. Dad told her to bring him over so he could give him some pointers and she was eating it up while mom joked about planning their wedding. Freaking seventh grade. If she stayed with him and married him when they were eighteen, I would be surprised. Eventually, everyone started to quiet down, and once again, all eyes were on me. I contemplated if I should grab the last four rolls and shove them in my mouth. Suffocate myself and knock myself out for the night, but I wasn’t sure if they’d even attempt to save me.

I put my fork down and looked at them all. It was now or never, I guessed. At least I was somewhat prepared. Peyton. I was going to ask out Peyton tomorrow. "I'm actually asking out a girl tomorrow. A girl I've had a crush on for a while. I was waiting for her to be single; you know. Now that she is, I'm going to go for it," I said, shrugging like it wasn't that big of a deal. Half of that wasn't even true. Well... most of it. I had no idea if Peyton was recently single, I just knew she was currently single. And I never had a crush on her or even cared about talking to her if it wasn't for my stupid parents. They were quiet, just staring at me, and I knew what they were waiting for. "She's on the swim team," I added.

All of a sudden, everyone was excited. Dad even smiled and reached over the table, patting my back and nearly smashing my face into my plate in the process. "Way to go Kinsley! The swim team is really good! They had won for three years straight!" He said, grinning at me.

Honestly, I didn't even care enough to know that, but I gave him the fakest smile I could manage. "She's probably going to turn you down, you know," Kennedy added, and honestly, I wasn't going to argue with her. Peyton was probably going to look at me like I was a small bug and tell Roan to come to beat me up for bothering her. Oh God, I wasn't looking forward to this at all.

"Now, now, be nice. He's a Bryant, he'll do just fine. Who'd turn down a Bryant?" Mom said with a beaming laugh as she nudged her elbow into Dad's arm while they laughed at each other. I wasn't entirely sure if I could roll my eyes wide enough over how stupid that sounded, but I flashed her my fake smile and asked to be excused.

It was like me asking to be excused had unlocked the secret magic word, and everyone was instantly talking about how busy they were. Mom and Dad left to go back to the office, despite the fact that it was about seven o'clock now, and Kennedy went with them, wanting a ride to her best friend's house for the night. It was funny, how I was the one who asked to be excused, but I was the last one sitting at the table. The cook, Gloria, came into the room and I stood, smiling softly at her. "Thank you for the delicious meal," I said to her, grabbing the plates.

She smiled softly at me, pinching my cheek. "I made sure to pack up a lot of leftovers for you, and I baked a cake too. Don't tell the others," she said pressing her finger to her mouth as she winked at me.

I laughed, helping her clear the table. "Of course not. They're never

home to go in the kitchen anyway,” I replied. After the kitchen and the dining room were clean, she left and I went up to my room, putting away the laundry that had been cleaned and folded as we ate dinner. I considered going out with Isabella, but I was drained after that ordeal. Instead, I lay down on my bed with a deep sigh as I closed my eyes. I dreaded tomorrow. I couldn’t help but wish there was a way out of it.

# Chapter 4

## Kinsley



"Kinsley Bryant, you quit flopping over your desk like a fish, *cabrón*," Isabella said. I grumbled as I rolled back and forth over the desk. The moment the first period started earlier that day she had been hounding me.

She wanted to know when I would ask out Peyton, and why I hadn't asked her out yet. If she wanted her to be asked out so badly, she should just ask her out herself. "*Sei un pesce*," I mumbled in Italian.

My arms were draped over the top of the desk, my face pressed against the cold surface as my hood fell over my head, masking me in darkness. For a second I felt safe and warm in the dark cocoon I had created, until Isabella started to poke me with her finger. "What did you call me?" She asked with frustration in her voice. I lifted my head with a sigh.

"I said you're a fish," I mumbled, earning a smack on the back of my head with her shoe. The third period hadn't started yet and there was only half the class in the room, but the smack was loud enough to make everyone turn to look at us, even some of them calling out their stupid '*Oooohs*,' as if Isabella and I were about to fight each other. I merely rubbed the back of my head through my hood, cocking my eyebrow at her. "If you're going to talk to me in Spanish, I'm going to talk to you in Italian. It's only fair, you know," I reminded her. It was a fight we had since we first started to be friends in freshman year.

She threw her hands up in the air in exasperation, then slipped her shoe back on her foot. Seeming to realize we weren't actually fighting, the rest of the class went about their normal rumors, probably adding in a few more about how Isabella and I were having a lovers' spat. Then again, Roan had spray-painted the word *'fag'* on my locker that morning, so they might not think Isabella and I were dating anymore. It took me all of the second period to get the paint off my locker, but it had been there long enough for most of the school to gossip about it. "Just go ask her! It'll stop the rumors," she whispered with a frown.

"I don't care about the rumors," I reminded her with a shrug. I mean, I could end up with a boy or a girl. It was a mystery for me too. Kind of like those mystery grab bags in the dollar store; you grab one and you never know what you're going to pull out. "She's definitely not going to say yes. She was way out of my league, and now everyone thinks I'm gay. She's just going to laugh in my face. Can't I just tell my parents she said no and go on with my life?"

She shook her head sternly. "You know your parents aren't going to get over this. Look at their bright idea of you doing drugs. You've been forced to pee in a cup for years now. They stick to their strange commitments and you know it."

"If we can last until the end of this year and then senior year, we'll be out of here," I reminded her. "Both of us, getting an apartment together in New York."

Isabella looked down at her recent drawing. "You just want to go to New York because I want to go there. You can have dreams too, Kinsley. What do you want to do when high school is over?"

I traced the engraving on the side of my pencil as I thought. "My parents want me to—" I started to say before she cut me off.

"I don't give a flying rat's ass what those ingrates want! What do you want?" she nearly shouted as everyone turned to look at us once more. Whispers of Isabella being crazy were voiced throughout the room but one quick glare and the twitch of her fingers near her foot made them all shut up and turn away from us again.

I didn't reply to her question though, because thankfully the teacher came in just as the bell rang. I wasn't in the same class as Peyton for that period, and I was glad I wasn't being forced to stare at her in any way. It seemed like the moment I decided it was going to be her, I couldn't stop staring at her. She was pretty, had a slender athletic body, was well taken care of, and had messy hair that was always pulled up with just the most attractive messiness on top of her



head. Her neck was nice and lean, which was mostly all I could see since the classes I had with her I sat behind her.

For some reason, I wasn't attracted to her. Of course, that didn't mean that we couldn't eventually be attracted to each other. I mean, sure Romeo and Juliet were instantly attracted to each other, but were all of the great romances of our lifeline?

There had to be some out there who chose to get to know each other first, and passion came second. The longer I dwelled on it, the more I didn't want to do this. I had no idea what I was scared of, it wasn't like I thought she'd say yes. I was absolutely sure she would say no. Probably threw Roan at me since the swim team had always been really friendly with the basketball team. Then, if it wasn't that, what was it? What was I afraid of?

"Mr. Bryant, do you know the answer to the question?"

"Obviously I don't, otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here dwelling on it," I replied without thinking. My cheeks heated up in embarrassment. Wait... class, teacher... good job me.

Mr. McCormick simply cocked his eyebrows at me from the front of the class, holding the ruler poised in between his fingers. He liked to slap it down on people's desks when they fell asleep, and one of those days I kind of hoped a piece of it would break off and cut someone so he could get fired; I hated this teacher. "Obviously, you have a lot on your mind, but would you mind pulling out your actual textbook and paying attention? It's page forty-three," he frowned. I swore he hated me because, despite everything, I still got the best grades in his class. English was so freaking easy for me.

I grumbled in annoyance as I pulled the hood further over my head and I opened my textbook to the right page, just as a perfectly folded little triangle slipped onto my desk. I nearly threw it back at her, as frustrated as I was. I hated how she folded these things. So tight and tiny, making me have to try to unfold them so I didn't break the note. Couldn't she just fold it like a freaking square? Was it that hard to do?

I took a minute to close my eyes and counted to ten, knowing I was being incredibly unreasonable and shouldn't take my frustrations out on a piece of paper. Once I was sure I wasn't going to burn the whole room down just to kill this perfectly folded little triangle, I opened my eyes and pulled it under the desk to slowly unfold so Mr. McCormick didn't see. He was a really loud man, his country accent boomed so loudly sometimes that other teachers poked their heads

in to ask him to keep it down.

I wasn't entirely worried about him hearing the paper rustling, but he'd notice me fumbling with it. Once it was finally unfolded, I smoothed it out over my desk and covered the top of the paper with my textbook as I read what she had written. To think it would take three exaggerated hours just to find one freaking sentence quickly pulled my frustration back out again but I ignored it. Of course, she was going to try and get me to ask her out during lunch. I quickly replied to her stupid message. *'There's no way in Hell I'm asking her out in front of everyone,'* I wrote, before folding it like a freaking square and throwing it back at her.

Her reply was fast, and thankfully she folded it like a square so I didn't have to fight with it anymore. Either she was being nice or she realized I was about to blow a fuse. I wasn't normally a violent angry person, but there was so much pressure on me. With my parents I tried to appease them, to keep them off my back. On top of constantly getting picked on by Roan and his friends, I just wished more than anything high school was over and I could be out of there. It didn't matter if I wanted to go to New York or not. Anywhere was better than where I am now.

*'Then what are you going to do? What about a note? Write her a note and hand it to her. That way she'll read it all, and maybe she'll write you a note back so it's less scary?'* She asked.

I stared at her note for the longest time with a frown. A note. Just like this piece of innocent paper in front of me. Mr. McCormick started to walk down the aisles with last week's test results and I quickly scooted the textbook over the note. Honestly, I was glad about the need to hide it, because I started to have an idea and I wasn't sure how to word it. Mr. McCormick handed me my paper, an A, with a permanent scowl on his face. He took so long handing out the tests that the bell rang. I jotted down the homework he had on the board really fast as I started to pack everything away and followed the flow of children out the door.

It was lunchtime, and while most people headed down towards the cafeteria, Isabella and I headed to my car. Our high school didn't really have many rules for lunch, and I think that was mostly because most of the students didn't really have cars. It was only the seniors and a handful of the juniors, myself included. As long as we were back in time for our next class, they didn't really care if we left. A few students were walking down the road towards the closest place, fast food, while those of us with cars usually took our friends to other places farther away. Roan always had as many people as he could fit in his

car, while I always just took Isabella.

She used to complain about it. She hated how I always took her to get food and paid for it. Then she realized I had an unlimited credit card, and the more that was spent the less my parents had. Her hatred for my parents allowed her to accept whatever I was willing to buy her. I tended to supply most of her art supplies as well when her mother didn't notice. Isabella might not have had a problem with using my parents' money, but her mother didn't like it. As far as her mother knew, Isabella went to the cafeteria every day to get free lunch, but usually, we went to a cozy little cafe that both of us liked.

It wasn't too far from the school, kind of like a seven-minute drive without traffic, and they had the best sandwiches. We weren't really coffee drinkers, but we loved hot chocolate. It was another shared passion of Isabella's and mine, but while she drank hers plain, I tended to put whipped cream, cinnamon, and sprinkles on mine. She thought it was disgusting and I thought it was Heaven. We ordered our food, and as the waiter walked away, I could tell almost instantly that Isabella wasn't going to wait any longer for this conversation. I held up one finger, noticing the waiter was coming back with our drinks, and fairly enjoyed watching Isabella squirm with annoyance as she ran her fingers through her purple-streaked hair.

The purple was starting to fade, which meant she'd either dye it something else or re-dye the purple fairly soon. "Kinsley," she whined. I merely gave her a look, waiting for the man to put down the hot chocolates and the sodas we ordered, before slowly walking away. The blast of hot air filled the cafe as the bell over the door chimed, and in walked some of the football team. I frowned, fairly annoyed. They never really came here. There were six of them, which meant they either all piled illegally into one car, or Bobby Fisher was the one who drove them. He was another junior who had a vehicle, he had a flatbed truck. It wasn't hard to know who had vehicles, they tended to belong to all of the kids who lived in the ritzy neighborhood and whose parents were friends with my stupid parents.

I took a deep breath of relief as they chose a table far away from ours, and the moment they started to get loud the manager came to kick them out. It didn't surprise me; his wife always came to work with him and she had constant headaches; she hated loud noises. I waited for the football players to grumble and complain as they left. The manager took a minute to apologize to everyone for the disturbance before I finally turned to Isabella. "I have an idea, but you're probably not going to like it,"

She narrowed her eyes at me, her fingers twitching towards her shoe, but she stopped herself as she moved her hands on top of the table and cupped her fingers around her hot chocolate. I could tell she didn't like how it sounded but she was going to give me the benefit of the doubt. "Well?" She asked when I had grown quiet.

I lowered my hood with a frown for a moment as I raked my fingers through my hair. Out the window, I could see the football players attacking a hotdog vendor. They shoved each other around and laughed. One of them trailed behind the others. He had a flat-bill cap over his head to shade his eyes from the sun, and a spring jacket with the hood over the top of the cap. For a moment, I wondered about him. I couldn't tell which one he was, not that I really ever cared to know who any of the football players were, but I was curious simply because while all of the others were loud and rowdy, he was quietly staring at a wind chime.

I wished I could see the expression on his face, but before I could really think more about it, Isabella snapped her fingers in front of my face to get my attention again. I pulled my eyes away from the random guy to stare at her. "Fine," I grumbled as the waiter came back and placed our sandwiches in front of us. We thanked him before I told Isabella my idea. "I'm going to write a note." She squealed quietly so she didn't disturb the owner or his wife. "Wait, there's more. The part you probably won't like," I added. Her squeal instantly died down and I smirked, already feeling the slap of her shoe on my head. Subconsciously, I pulled my hood back over my head to give it an extra cushion. "I'm not going to hand it to her. I'm going to put it in her locker."

She barely even blinked before telling me exactly how stupid that was. "What's the point of that? She's going to think you're a chicken! You have to be man enough to hand it to her, or else she might not even know who you are! Just writing your name on it isn't going to do anything. This isn't going to work, I swear,"

I tapped my finger against my chin with a frown. "No, wait. I don't think you understand me. I'm not going to put my name on it. Wait, let me explain. Obviously, she's going to reject me right away. Everyone thinks I'm gay apparently, or dating you. What if I sign it as a code name? It adds mystery to it all. She'll think it's romantic because a stranger is going out of their way to mysteriously tell her how much they're thinking about her. We'll get to know each other through secret letters back and forth through our lockers. That way, if we can't stand each other, we can tell them to stop talking to us and we'll never have to deal with a confrontation. But if we do end up falling for each other, then

eventually we can see each other and go from there,” I said with a smile.

She tilted her head to the side. "I mean, it might work. But it's not the kind of relationship your parents want. But then again, who knows, right? Tell them some lie or something. Everyone knows the swim team has a meet soon and they'll be gone for a few weeks before Christmas break. Just say it came early this year. Use it as an excuse to grow feelings, then after a few weeks, meet each other."

I didn't like that I only had a few weeks as a deadline, but nodded in agreement. If it was the best I had, maybe it'll work. I pushed my uneaten sandwich to the side and pulled out a notepad, turning it to the last page, the only blank page left, and pulled out a pencil. I didn't bring my school pencils with me and all I had was a drawing pencil. I was going to have to stop at the store to get another notepad after this. I wanted to write it down, while it was still fresh in my mind.

*Hello,*

*How is your day going so far? That's probably a stupid question, pretty cliché, right? Obviously, that's the first question that gets asked. Though, when talking to someone who doesn't know you, that tends to be the go-to. Scratch that. Literally, scratch that. I don't have an eraser to get rid of it and I don't have any more paper.*

*I'm sorry, I'm going to start over. Ignore the ramble, I tend to do that when I'm nervous. I just wanted to tell you that I've been admiring you. I don't really know you, and I don't think you even realize I exist, but I'm hoping you'll give me a chance to get to know each other. Besides, what could it hurt? We might be complete opposites, or we might have a lot in common. Maybe it's better to do it this way? No pressure, no names, nothing. What's there to lose? Maybe we'll end up hating each other. It wouldn't matter anyway though, because no names, right? Or maybe...just maybe...we'll end up falling in love. Maybe we'll be the type of romance that's talked about, the type of romance that everyone envies and wishes they could have. If you want to get to know me, if you're interested, my locker number is 342.*

*Sincerely, Sparrow.*

I smiled down at the letter, admiring it, before Isabella pulled it out from in front of me and read it. "Sparrow?" She wondered as she stared up at me with her eyebrows raised.

I shrugged. I felt slightly embarrassed as she stared at my letter. “All I could think of was my favorite song right now. You know, from the band SayWeCanFly,” I mumbled.

She nodded, seeming to accept that as she reread the letter. “Are you sure you want to go with this? We can get more paper and rewrite it,”

I grabbed the paper from her and ripped it out of the notepad. I folded it into a square twice and shoved it into my pocket. “No. I’m scared if I try to rewrite it, I’ll throw up all over it and she’s definitely not going to like that. Come on, I have to run to the store to get a new notepad. I’m going to get some envelopes too,” I replied as I stood.

She had already finished her lunch so she stood up and stretched as I pulled out a twenty and put it on the table next to the receipt. I grabbed my sandwich and together we walked out of the cafe. The good thing about this cafe was the fact that it was fairly close to a bunch of stores. My parents would probably be annoyed to see a simple little dollar store purchase on my card, but I didn’t really care. They always wanted us to shop in rich places, to show how pristine we were.

I walked into the dollar store and within minutes the shopping cart was filled with things we hadn’t even come in here to get. Isabella had raided the stencils, spray paint cans and tape, more hair dye, and accessories, while I simply grabbed the notepad and envelopes. At the last minute, I grabbed a new pack of pencils for school, but mostly there was only so much a dollar store had. We grabbed some boxes of cookie dough bites and threw those in the cart too before checking out. “Do you even know which locker is hers?” Isabella wondered.

I nodded as I handed the cashier my card while we grabbed the bags. We pretty much moved everything to the next register to get out of the way of those behind us so I could put the note in the envelope. “Yeah, I saw her stand next to it earlier when we left. She had been leaning against it and everything,” She nodded, seeming to accept that answer as the cashier handed me back my card. Ignoring a grumbling old woman and her rowdy granddaughter, we searched through our bags to find the envelopes. I quickly slipped my note into it and tucked the top inside the envelope. I didn’t really want to lick it and she probably would reuse the envelope if she replied back to me. It’s not like people just randomly walked around with a box of envelopes to wait for someone to slip a letter into their locker.

We hurried back to school moments before the bell rang for the next

class. Isabella went to her class on the third floor near our lockers. Mine was on the second floor, which was lucky for me because so was Peyton's locker. I had seen her at it when we were walking down the stairs earlier. Locker 213 was fairly close to the stairs. I passed my class and went to the locker and stared at it for a moment. No one was around since the bell had rung when I had walked up the stairs, and I creepily stared at it.

The cheerleaders tended to have stickers and magnets on their lockers, and I assumed most girls did, but it did not look like Peyton did. The locker next to this one was covered in pink and purple magnets, which was how I remembered without seeing the number. A strangely colorful locker like that stood out. I shrugged. I guess Peyton wasn't the type of girl to care about decorating her locker. I slipped the note through the three little holes at the top.

I started to freak out and regret it the moment I let go of the paper, but there was nothing I could do now. Taking calming breaths I told myself that she did not know my name or who I was. Once calmer, I clutched my notebook and pencil to my chest and went to class.

# Chapter 5

## Green



*'Maybe I should try again.'*

Those words echoed through my mind as I lazily laid my head against my right hand, my elbow propped on the desk. I kept remembering this morning, the screaming and the yelling, how my little brother ended up going to school with a cut on his cheek from a stray broken piece of plate my mother threw at my father. The plate broke against the wall, and none of them noticed he was bleeding. He didn't care, simply pressed a towel against the cut, and all I could do was stare.

Just the same morning, the same scene, over and over and over again. *'Maybe I should try again.'* The words echoed in my mind once more. Why not? What was the point? My left arm was lying lazily on the desk, the pencil perched in between the fingers of my right hand without care of the rambles of the teacher as they droned on and on in front of the room. I felt my left hand twitch and I stared at it with a frown. I wondered if it was remembering the memories of the past, or if it was anticipating the thoughts of what could happen in the future.

The bell rang and I got up and packed, moving like a robot going through the motions. Claps on the back, girls giggled hello, fake... all of it was fake. Would any of them really notice if I was gone? Sure, I was the captain.



They'd notice, fake cry for the guy they pretended to know. But they'd move on. What would it feel like to have someone who actually cared? To have someone who actually loved me? Someone who didn't just cry when I died, but someone whose world shifted without me? Someone who couldn't breathe if I wasn't breathing. What would it feel like to have someone know me?

I wasn't sure I'd ever find out. Not me, not when I was only surrounded by fake smiles and pretenders. I swept my eyes through the halls, ignored the heys from the guys who saw me, and the shy giggles of the girls who thought I looked at them. In a sea filled with copies, was there actually someone out there who was genuine? *'Maybe I should try again,'* the voice echoed in my mind as the bell rang. I had taken too long, but I needed to get my books for the sixth and seventh periods so I lingered. No one cared if I was late anyway, not me. Not the star of the team. Just a big fake in a sea of fakes, hiding my scars under my sleeves and my sadness under smiles and nods.

I opened my locker and the first thing I noticed was a letter. I almost threw it away. It wasn't my first and it certainly wasn't going to be my last, but then I noticed something. It was simple, a simple plain envelope. No drawings, no heart stickers, no curly names, no reek of perfume. Just a simple envelope with the top folded inside. I sighed, curiosity getting the better of me, and I opened it. For the longest time, all I could do was stare at it. My eyes were wide as I reread it, over and over again. My hands shook as I took deep breaths, and looked around the halls- despite how empty it was- as reality crashed down around me.

Hurriedly, I smoothed out the letter and placed it inside my textbook. I pulled out a new piece of paper, sat down right there in the middle of the hallway, and replied to the letter. I felt the biggest grin tug on my face, and I realized as I slid an extra piece of paper and small little thin erasers inside the envelope, that it was a real smile. I sat there for who knows how long, but as the bell rang once more, I folded the note and slid it back into the envelope. I accidentally ripped the top of it in my haste as the hall quickly filled up once more.

My seventh period was on the third floor, so I didn't have a problem with the location of the locker. I stood up and stared at the hallway once more, my eyes scanned over everyone around me with a newfound light as I closed my locker and walked towards the stairs. Maybe, just maybe, there was someone here that would care if I died. Someone who would be destroyed without me. At least for now, the little voice wasn't echoing inside my mind anymore.