

***THE BRIGHTSIDERS***

# THE BRIGHT SIDERS

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*Swoon*  
**READS**

Swoon Reads | New York

***A SWOON READS BOOK***

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*FOR EVERYONE JUST TRYING TO  
DO THEIR BEST IN THIS WORLD*

# CHAPTER ONE

**“Cheeseburgers!” I shout at** the top of my lungs.

Jessie pulls me through the club, shoving people out of the way.  
“Move, people! We’re getting cheeseburgers!”

“CHEESEBURGERS!” I shout again, but few hear me over the thumping of music and drumming of feet against the dance floor.

Everything goes dark, and I realize my eyes are closed. I take a sip of my drink and giggle as mystery shoulders rub against mine and Jessie’s grip tightens on my hand.

“Em!” she calls. Her voice sounds miles away. “Wake up, babe!”

“I’m awake,” I mumble, then open my eyes to find us walking past the bar toward the exit.

“Hey,” a cute girl by the bar calls. “Are you Emmy King?”

I do a curtsy and smile. “Indeed I am. And what is thy name, fair maiden?”

Jessie snakes an arm around my waist. “Uh-oh,” she says. “That’s *Outlander* talk. You’ve officially reached peak drunkenness.”

The girl at the bar holds her phone out. “Can I have a selfie with you?”

I stumble toward her and take her phone. “Aye, t’would be my most high pleasure.”

“Um,” the girl says. “What?”

Jessie laughs. “She means yes.”

I start taking photos with her phone, sticking my tongue out and blowing kisses and crossing my eyes and giving the finger, but Jessie snatches the phone away and gives it back to the girl.

“C’mon, Em,” Jessie says. “I’m starving.” She takes my hand and pulls me away. We’ve been dating for almost six months, but she still gets a tad protective when fans pay me a lot of attention. It’s kind of cute seeing her freckled nose scrunch up like that when she’s jealous.

I bow to the girl, spilling some of my drink. “Fare thee well, my sweet, for I musteth findeth cheeseburgers, lest I waste away from hunger. My heart doth long for the day we may meet again!”

We walk through the dining area and I spot Alfie and Ryan in a booth in the corner. I give them my widest grin. Alfie Jones and Ryan Cho are my two bestest buds in the whole universe. And they’re my bandmates. I get to rock out all around the world with my two fave people and get paid for it. Hashtag blessed.

Still grinning, I reach a hand out to Alfie as we pass. He takes it and stands.

“Where are you off to?” he says in my ear.

“CHEESEBURGERS!” I yell, and he laughs.

“I should have known,” he says.

My best friend, Chloe, is dancing their butt off in the middle of the club. I wave to them and mouth that I’m leaving. They blow me a kiss, and I pretend to catch it.

Jessie pulls on my hand and I wobble off-balance, but Alfie steadies me.

“Whoa,” he says. “You okay, Em?”

I nod. But then my stomach lurches, and I groan.

Alfie takes one look at me and furrows his brow. He taps Jessie’s arm to get her attention.

“I think Em’s gonna be sick,” he says. I shake my head slowly even though they’re not looking at me.

Jessie rolls her eyes. “She’s fine.”

“Nah,” he says. “She’s doing that face she always does before she vomts.”

They both look at me, and I smile, but it’s delayed and lopsided.

Jessie sighs and pulls me closer to her. “Em,” she says sternly. “Are you gonna hurl?”

I shake my head and pout. She gives Alfie a look that says *told you so* and turns to keep walking.

And then I barf all over the floor.

People around us jump away from me, shrieking in disgust, but I’m too drunk to care. I buckle over and heave again. Jessie stands over me, laughing and holding my hair, while Alfie takes my drink and rubs my back.

I stare at the puke-covered floor and laugh. “It’s blue.”

“It’s from the cocktails,” Jessie says.

Flashes of light hurt my eyes, and Alfie tries to cover the lenses of people’s phones as they take pictures of me. Ryan joins him, spreading his arms wide to cover me.

“Let’s get you some air,” Alfie says.

With one arm around Jessie and one around Alfie, I stumble to the door of the club.

Jessie takes a moment to fix my hair, tucking some behind my left ear and letting the right side of my bleach-blond lob hang forward.

“Remember,” she says. “Act neutral. And sober.”

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Neutral. That’s how we block the paparazzi. No weird facial expressions, no smiles, no frowns, nothing for them to use to spin fictional tales of our lives.

“Neutral,” I say, nodding. I take her hand, and she opens the door to the busy West Hollywood street.

Immediately, paparazzi start yelling questions at me and sticking cameras in my face. I shield my eyes.

“Em! Emmy! Hey, Em!” they shout. I keep my gaze on my blurred feet, focusing as hard as I can so that I don’t trip or stumble in front of them.

“What are you and your gal pal up to tonight?”

“Is Jessie your girlfriend?”

“Have you been drinking?”

“Aren’t you underage, Em?”

“Are you going back to your place to continue partying?”

Alfie steps in between us and the cameras. They start pestering him instead. It’s like I’ve disappeared. I keep my head down, letting my hair fall in front of my face.

“Hey, Alfie, did you get lucky in the club tonight?”

“What do you think about your ex being spotted with that basketball player?”

“Where’s Ryan tonight?”

“Yeah, where’s Ryan? Is there trouble in Brightsiders paradise?”

Meanwhile, it’s taking all my brainpower just to put one foot in front of the other. I hold my breath like it’s going to help me walk straighter. One stumble is all it could take for me to land on tomorrow’s front pages.

Ryan emerges from the club, carrying a bottle of water. He catches



up with us as we power-walk to the car and the questions start flying his way, too.

"Hey, Ryan!" a photographer says. "Where you headed, man?"

“You happy to see *Strange Welcome* still topping all the charts?”

The four of us ignore the interrogation and climb into Jessie's Range Rover, and I'm impressed with how well I did pretending to be sober.

“Alfie,” Jessie says, turning to him from the driver’s seat as he and Ryan climb into the back. “What are you doing?”

“Cheeseburgers,” he says.

"Same," Ryan adds.

I laugh because *cheeseburgers* suddenly sounds like the funniest word in the history of all words.

"Cheeeeeeeeeeeeeeezzze . . .," I say. "Buuuuurrrrgerrrrrrr  
zzzzzzuuuuuhhhhhh!"

Alfie and Ryan cackle. Jessie glances at me, but I'm too far gone to understand what she's trying to communicate with me.

“Do you three have to do literally everything together?” she asks with big puppy-dog eyes. “Just because you’re a band doesn’t mean you have to follow each other around twenty-four-seven.”

“Hey,” Ryan says, handing me the bottle of water. “We’re friends. Friends hang out.”

I take a long gulp of the water, hoping I can keep it down.

“Can’t me and Em have a night to ourselves?” Jessie asks.

Paparazzi surround us, sticking their lenses right up to the windows.

“Can we go, please?” I ask. “I don’t feel so good. They can’t see me throw up.”

Jessie crosses her arms over her chest, pouting. “Why can’t we just be alone? Just the two of us.”

“You two spend tons of time together,” Ryan argues. “We hardly saw Em all summer.”

Alfie leans forward between the seats, a smile on his face so the cameras don't know we're fighting. "You're not seriously going to kick us out?" he asks.

Ryan groans. "You're going to leave us to the wolves out there?"

I stroke Jessie's shoulder. "Why are you mad? It's only Alfie and Ry. Let's just go. We can drop them home and have together time. It's cheeseburger time!" I drum my hands on the dashboard, but stop when a gross burp seeps out of me. "We need to go. Don't make me spew all over you."

"No," she says, then looks at them in the rearview mirror. "Get out."

"What the hell?" Alfie asks.

Ryan shakes his head. "You know kicking us out in front of everyone is going to start a billion rumors about the band breaking up, right?"

She shrugs. "I could care less."

I giggle. "Thy mean thy *couldn't* care less. Saying thy could care less means that thy *doth* care. Thou thinks thy doths care a lot."

Alfie laughs. "Wow, you really are wasted."

"Thus!" I say, springing upright in the passenger seat. "Hence! Why we should leaveth, lest the treacherous paparazzi uncover mine drunkenness."

Jessie leans back against her seat.

Alfie sighs. "Fine. Fuck you, too."

Before I can tell them to stay, Alfie and Ryan force their way out of the car and disappear into a sea of flashes and questioning.

"Whyyyyy?" I moan, resting my head on the seat. "Why did you do that?"

Jessie starts the engine and smiles at me like nothing happened. "I just wanna be alone with you, babe."

I pull out my phone and text Alfie and Ryan.

**EM:** sorry :(

**ALFIE:** not your fault

**RYAN:** All good, Em. Good luck not vomiting!

**ALFIE:** drink lots of water :)

Jessie toots her horn at the photographers standing in front of her car before making a sharp turn onto the road.

“Huh,” she says, glancing in her mirrors. “The paps are following us.” I think I see a hint of a smile on her face, but maybe my vision is just blurry.

I turn in my seat to look out the rear window. Jessie slams on the brakes, the tires screeching across the asphalt. The Range Rover spins and skids to a halt, the force knocking me off my seat and into the dashboard.

“Shit!” Jessie cries, punching the steering wheel.

I rub my back where it hit the dash. “Ow.”

Other cars in the intersection toot their horns at us, and then something hits us from behind. It slams into us so hard that our car moves forward into the middle of the intersection. We scream as another car skids to a stop just feet away from my side of the Range Rover.

I jump out of the car and immediately throw up. My arms and legs tremble from the shock, and when I wipe my mouth I see blood smeared across my hand.

Jessie runs around the car to reach me, taking me by the shoulders. “Em? Are you . . . Oh shit, your nose is bleeding.” She lifts my chin to dip my head back and pinches the bridge of my nose. It takes a second for me to realize it hurts, and I swat her hand away from my face.

“Owwww.” I lightly touch my nose. “I think it’s broken.”

More cars pull up, and the same group of photographers jump

out and run toward us, filming video and taking pictures. Jessie unleashes her wrath on them.

“Get the fuck out of here, you vultures!” she screams. “I’ll call the police on you! I’ll have you arrested! What kind of people see a car accident and take photos to sell instead of helping the victims?”

“Jess!” I call. “Stop!”

I can taste blood in my mouth.

“Victim?” one of the photographers says to Jessie, laughing. “Doll, you’re the one who’s about to be arrested if you’ve been drinking.”

Jessie’s hands fly up to her mouth, and then she throws a punch at him, missing completely. Sirens sound in the distance, and within minutes police cars arrive in a flash of blue-and-red lights.

The last thing I see before I pass out is Jessie swearing at the police while they handcuff her.

So much for neutral.

# CHAPTER TWO

**I wake up in a** hospital bed with a bandage on my nose and a throbbing headache. The room spins, and it takes me a couple of seconds to see Alfie and Ryan sitting on either side of me, sleeping in their chairs.

I sit up and stretch my back, wincing when it hurts. “What happened?” I whisper.

Alfie wakes up with a start, almost falling off his chair.

“Em?” he croaks. “Do you feel okay? Do want me to get the nurse?” He stands up, but I pull him back down.

“No, I’m okay. Why am I here?”

His eyes widen. “You don’t remember?”

I touch my nose gently; it feels sore and tender. “I remember being at the club.”

Alfie scratches the back of his head, messing up the dark, wavy mane that runs past his shoulders. “Um . . . you were in an accident. You bruised your ribs and almost broke your nose.”

I clutch my chest. “Like, a car accident? Was anyone else hurt?”

He shakes his head. “No. You’re the only one in the hospital.”

I try to remember something—anything—about the accident. But the last thing I remember is downing some blue slushie drink that tasted like pure vodka, then jumping onto the dance floor.

Tears fill my eyes. “I wasn’t driving, was I?”

“Jessie was.”

My heart is in my throat, and my stomach has curled itself into a ball, which is exactly what I wish I could do.

I look around the room. “Is she outside?”

He rests his elbows on the bed and frowns. “No, she was arrested, Em. They put her in the drunk tank for the night.”

I feel sick, but something tells me I’ve already puked out everything in my stomach. “When is she getting out?”

“I don’t know. This morning, I guess.” He rubs a hand down his face. When he speaks again, his voice is louder, angrier. “Did you know she has a previous arrest for drunk driving?”

I lay back against the scrunchy paper pillow. “No. Is she okay?”

“Honestly, I don’t give a shit if she’s okay or not,” Alfie says, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms. “You could have been killed.”

Ryan wakes up and yawns. “Hey, Em. You okay?”

“I think so,” I say quietly. “Just sore. And embarrassed.”

They exchange a look.

“What?” I ask.

Alfie shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“Try to relax,” Ryan adds, but he’s still giving Alfie a worried look. “The doctor said you need to take it easy for a few days.” His phone buzzes, and he answers it in Korean. It must be his parents. He’s first-generation Korean American, and his parents are some of our biggest fans—the kind who wear our band T-shirts to the

supermarket so they can brag to the cashier that Ryan is their son. I adore them.

That's when I notice he and Alfie are still in the clothes they were wearing at the club. Alfie in a white tee, black skinny jeans and faux-leather jacket. The fluorescent lights make his creamy white skin look a sickly gray. I've always been paler than him, so I don't even want to know how they make me look right now.

Ry has the hood of his red-and-black flannel shirt draped over his head, flattening his jet black hair, which is usually perfectly styled into a high quiff. His light brown skin is washed out by the lights, too, and his faded Ninja Turtles tee is stained blue. Suddenly I remember all the drinks I had last night.

Ryan ends the call and sighs. "My mom just saw the news. Apparently they're saying you're in a coma. She was freaking out."

Oh, hell. "I'm so sorry, Ry. Is she okay?"

He nods. "Now that she knows you're okay, she's fine."

I hate how much this is already affecting the people around me. Ughhhh. What have I done?

A woman's voice echoes down the hall outside, and I sit up. "Oh no."

Alfie groans. "Sal's here."

Sal is our manager. Well, the head manager of our vast group of managers, agents, and everyone else who runs our lives. It's ridiculous how many people it takes to handle the hectic lives of three famous teens. All the times I dreamed of our band making it big, having an entourage organizing every minute of my day never entered my mind. Everything else, though—the fans, the money, the chance to share our songs with millions of people—that makes it all so worth it. Sitting on stage, slamming my drums while Ry rocks the guitar and Alfie belts out our lyrics, that's my happy place. And one day, I'll be singing lead on stage, too. At least, I hope I will. Maybe not, after this scandal.

“Emmy King’s room, please?” Sal asks someone outside. I can already tell by the fast tempo of her voice that she’s pissed. The door bursts open, and she glides in like a warrior in stilettos and sleek hair extensions.

She leans over Ryan and takes my hands in hers. “Emmy, are you all right?”

I nod and swallow nervously. She touches the back of her hand to my forehead.

“I’m fine,” I say timidly.

She straightens and puts her hands on her hips. “Good, because I don’t want to yell at a sick person.” I hold my breath, preparing for her fury. “What the hell were you thinking, Emmy? Underage drinking? Driving under the influence?”

Ryan holds up a finger. “For the record, Em wasn’t the one driving.”

Sal throws her hands up in the air. “Do you think the press gives two fucks who was really driving? She’s the celebrity, she’s the seventeen-year-old role model with legions of teenagers looking up to her. Do you think their parents are going to shell out cash to buy your songs or go to your concerts if they think the Brightsiders are bratty party animals?”

Alfie drops his head into his hands. I sink lower into the bed and wish I could hide under the blanket and disappear. I feel like the worst person in the world right now.

“Just because you play punk rock music,” Sal continues, “doesn’t give you a pass to act like a little punk.”

Ouch. That hurts, but she’s right.

“I’m so sorry, everyone,” I say.

Alfie reaches out and takes my hand, and Ryan gives me a tired smile.

Sal’s phone buzzes. She looks at it and sighs dramatically. “Well, it’s happening. All the videos from last night have officially gone viral.”



My mouth goes dry. "Videos?"

Sal purses her full lips. "Don't act like you don't know."

"She doesn't remember anything," Alfie says, glaring at Sal.

She throws her head back and laughs. "Of course she doesn't. Well, allow me to refresh your memory." She holds her phone out to me.

"Don't," Alfie says.

"She doesn't need to see it right now," Ryan says.

They exchange that same worried look from before, and I realize this is what they weren't telling me. It must be really, really bad.

I take the phone and hit play. It starts off innocently enough: me dancing with Jessie in the club, flirting, laughing, the usual. Then there's me with some sort of blue concoction in my hand, gulping it down. Then another. And another. And soon I can hardly walk straight. Next, videos and photos of me puking my guts out all over Alfie's boots. Then me out on the street, my lips stained blue, my hair a mess, and my mascara smudged under my eyes.

Then it gets weirder. There's video of us in Jessie's Range Rover, and Jessie looks upset. I can see the vein that always appears in her forehead when she's mad at me. Alfie and Ryan get out of the car, and we speed off. The next shot is me falling out of the car in the middle of an intersection, blood running down my face, and puking again. The final nail in the coffin hits when I see Jessie swiping at photographers and getting arrested, while I fall unconscious on the road in the background, with my skirt hitched up and my lace underwear on show.

It's like a tacky montage from a bad frat party movie.

I give Sal her phone back with shaking hands, then promptly burst into tears. I've become the starlet of the tabloids, the celebrity train-wreck everyone talks about on the morning talk shows, chastising me over their mugs of coffee while an audience cheers. No one is ever going to take me seriously again. Every time my name is mentioned,

this is going to be the moment they remember. Last night is going to be chained to me everywhere I go, for the rest of my career. For the rest of my life.

“My . . . life . . . is . . . overrrrr,” I wail.

Alfie and Ryan hug me, and even Sal seems to soften when faced with my tears of sheer humiliation.

“Come on now,” she says. “Don’t be so dramatic. You’ve got me, remember? We have a whole team of people who are already doing damage control. We’re going to spin this into a positive.”

I try to ask how, but her phone rings and she leaves the room to answer it. I turn to Alfie and Ry. “Tell me honestly, how bad is this?”

They don’t answer me. They don’t even look at me. But they don’t have to. Seeing myself in that video, it’s clear that I’m spiraling out of control. I can’t keep doing this.

Ry presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. “When we heard you had been rushed to the ER . . .” He trails off. My stomach turns.

Alfie clears his throat, like he’s trying to hold himself together. “But it’s okay. You’re okay.” But I can tell by the tears in his eyes that he doesn’t believe that. And neither do I.

I am not okay.

I need to get my shit together, ASAP. I wipe my tears away with the back of my hand. “I’m gonna fix this,” I say. “I promise.”

## CHAPTER THREE

**Later that afternoon, Sal sneaks us** out the back exit of the hospital and drives us back to my place. I've been living in a hotel for the last six months, waiting out the days until I turn eighteen and can buy my own house. It's expensive, but anything beats living with my parents.

Paparazzi wait on the sidewalk outside the revolving doors and hold their cameras up to the windows of the car, tapping on the glass as we pull up to the curb. Hotel security forces the vultures back as Sal marches through them, creating a path for me. Alfie and Ryan walk on either side of me while I hide behind my oversize sunglasses and cover my bandaged nose with my hands.

The concierge frowns when he sees us walking through the lobby. I hang my head so my hair falls in front of my face, avoiding his judgmental gaze. Sal presses the button for the elevator, and I take in a deep breath, dreaming of my beautiful bathtub. I'm going to soak

myself in hot water for at least three hours. The elevator takes us up to the top floor, where my neighbor, Dr. Bennis, waits with her little bulldog, Frenchie. I smile as we pass, but she turns her nose up at me and steps into the elevator. I'm not exactly the most popular resident here, but no one has ever snubbed me like that before. Oh God, she must have seen the videos.

"Okay, Em," Sal says once we're safely inside my apartment. "I know there's probably no point saying this, but try to stay offline for the next few days. No Twitter. No Tumblr. Not even Snapchat, okay? Maybe don't watch much TV, either, and definitely *do not* Google yourself."

"I won't," I say. She gives me a hug, and I breathe in the strong vanilla scent of her perfume.

"You'll be fine," she says. "I've got this under control. Just lay low this week." She turns to Alfie and Ryan. "You two keep her company if you can."

They both nod. Sal opens the front door but turns and points her finger at us before leaving. "And absolutely no alcohol or anything illegal! You hear me?"

"Yes, Sal," we all say. She closes the door, and a minute later we hear the ding of the elevator.

"Are you hungry, Em?" Alfie asks as he opens my fridge. "Jesus, you have, like, no food in here."

I can't look my bandmates in the eyes. "I usually just order room service."

Ryan opens my pantry, but that's bare, too. "We could order a pizza?"

"You two order," I say, yawning. "I'm not that hungry. I think I'm just gonna take a bath and go to bed."

I stand in front of my bathroom mirror and use my facial wipes to smear away last night's makeup and today's tears. Jessie's makeup is scattered all over my sink, concealers and lipsticks and eyeshadows,

each a reminder that she's not here. God, I hope she's okay. The thought of her locked up all night, scared and alone, breaks my heart. She must be worried sick after seeing me pass out after the accident. I try calling her phone for the fifth time since I was discharged, but it's still switched off.

Before I've even started running the bath, there's a knock on my door.

"I've got it, Em," Alfie calls out to me. I press my ear to my closed bathroom door to hear who it is.

"Can I speak to Miss King, please?" I recognize the concierge's snooty voice. I walk out of my room to see him standing in the doorway with two members of hotel security behind him.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"I'm afraid not," he says as he steps past Alfie and into my apartment. The guards follow him. "I need to discuss something rather delicate with you." He glances disapprovingly at Alfie and Ryan, then adds, "*In private.*"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Whatever you need to say, you can say it in front of them."

He nods and holds his hands behind his back. "I've been told by management to ask you to leave the hotel."

"*What?*" I glance at the guards and realize they're here for me.

"As you are aware, we've had a number of complaints from the other residents and guests here," he explains. "Not merely about the noise from the many parties you've thrown, but also complaints about vulgar behavior directed at residents by you and your many guests." He side-eyes Alfie and Ryan, and I grit my teeth. "And given the, um"—he clears his throat—"recent events, management has decided to ask you to find alternative accommodation."

*Recent events.* Ugh. I want to fight, to argue my way out of this, but I'm just too tired. Alfie, on the other hand, jumps to my defense.

"You can't just kick her out," he says. "She has a lease."

“Yes, and in that lease it states very clearly that a resident who repeatedly breaks hotel rules and ignores warnings will be asked to vacate the premises without notice.”

“What rules have been broken?” Ryan asks.

The concierge takes in a deep breath through his nose. “As I mentioned, rules regarding noise pollution and offensive behavior. There was also the incident with the *sand*.”

Oh shit. I knew that would come back to bite me in the butt one day. For our three-month anniversary, Jessie threw me a beach party and turned the hotel rooftop swimming pool into an island, complete with tons of sand she had delivered. We first met at a beach; I was there shooting a music video and she was there for a bonfire party. So she was trying to re-create that day, which was super sweet. It was totally fun, and everyone was loving it—until the wind picked up and turned the roof into the eye of a sandstorm. We escaped the worst of it by running into the stairwell and back to my apartment, but the pool was clogged for days, and the rooftop was closed until professional cleaners collected every last grain. Some of the sand even fell to the lower balconies, resulting in lots of complaints. I ended up footing the bill, which cost more than having the sand delivered in the first place. So, yeah, that was my bad. I don’t blame them for being pissed about that.

“Miss King,” the concierge continues, “if you have further questions, I’ve been asked to refer you to our lawyers.”

“Forget it,” I say with a sigh. “Just give me a week or two to find a new place, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

He shakes his head. “I’m afraid I’ve been instructed to escort you out immediately. You have one hour to pack your things.”

Alfie straightens his back, like he always does when he’s mad and about to argue with someone, but I take his hand.

“Don’t even bother,” I say. “Just help me pack so we can get out of here.”

The concierge gestures for security to follow him. “We’ll wait for you in the lobby.”

Once they’re gone, Alfie turns to me, his brow furrowed. “You can come stay with me. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

I shake my head. “Thanks, but no. I’ll just go back to my parents’ place and tough it out until I turn eighteen.”

“No way,” he says. “They’ll drive you crazy. Just come stay with me. I’d love to have you.”

Ryan rubs the back of his neck. “I think Em’s right. I mean, there’s no way she can lay low at your place, it’s in the middle of Hollywood.”

“I’ll just go back to Venice and hide out for a while. I’ll be safer from the paparazzi there.” I think of the house where I grew up and shudder. It’s more like a museum than a home, a shrine to my mom and dad’s short-lived music career. It’s the last place I want to be right now, but it’s the only place I can go where I won’t have to worry about cameras peeking over walls or through windows. It’s the only place I can go where I’ll be left alone.

# CHAPTER FOUR

**“No one’s home,” I say** as Alfie rings the doorbell for the third time. “I told you they’d be out on a Saturday. They’re somewhere drinking mimosas with their friends.”

“Don’t you have a spare key?” Ry asks as he peeks through the window.

“Never needed one.” I start walking through the bushes and around the side of the house to the backyard. It’s littered with empty wine bottles and cigarette butts. A pair of red lace underwear floats in the middle of the pool. Looks like they had one of their Friday-night ragers and went straight to brunch. I slip off my heels and grab on to the vines that snake up the back of the house. Memories of all the times I snuck out to go to Alfie’s house come flooding back.

Through the kitchen window I see framed portraits of my parents and roll my eyes. I’m not in any of the photos that adorn the walls and the mantel over the fireplace. If a total stranger walked through



their house, they'd never even know my parents have a daughter. It's like I don't exist.

"Em?" Alfie calls from the front of the house. "You in yet?"

"One sec!" I yell back, then keep climbing. The vines are thicker than I remember; they've grown since I've been gone. But everything else here seems to have stayed the same.

I reach the roof and haul myself up, then rest for a second to catch my breath. Scaling a building after having my stomach pumped is probably not the smartest decision I've ever made, but desperate times call for desperate measures. When I'm sure I'm not going to collapse, I crawl over to my bedroom window. As usual, it opens easily, and I drop inside. Inside, everything is exactly as I left it. My walls and ceiling are plastered with posters of bands, a Pride flag hangs over the back of my bedroom door, and my desk is covered in notebooks filled with all the songs I used to write.

My bedroom was originally supposed to be their recording studio, but Mom got knocked up and, according to them, that's when everything started to turn to shit. Dad started cheating and drinking instead of writing music, so he was kicked out of his band. Mom started playing gigs in bars to pay the bills and began her own drinking habit after her shows. And I spent most of my time up in my room, way at the top of the house, separate from everything. Unfortunately, they never got around to soundproofing it, so I was constantly kept awake by their fighting or by Dad broodingly playing his guitars all through the night. The parties started when I was about thirteen, and the house was perpetually filled with loud nineties grunge and cigarette smoke. The night I got my first period, I had to sneak a tampon from the purse of some random woman who was passed out on our stairs because my mom was busy playing strip poker with a bunch of middle-aged dudes.

"Jesus," I whisper. "It's like I never left." I run down the stairs to let Alfie and Ry inside.

“Gross,” Ry says as he walks into the living room. “It smells like all the furniture has been soaked in bong water.”

I laugh, but I can’t help but feel a little embarrassed. “Yeah. Sorry. The party never ends here.”

Alfie gives me a sympathetic look. “Did you really expect it to?”

“I don’t know,” I say, shrugging. “Maybe.”

If I’m honest, I did expect them to change. I thought seeing me walk out six months ago would have shocked them into cleaning up their lives. But from the state of the house, it seems all I did was give them free rein to go as wild as they wanted.

“You don’t have to stay,” I say, pretending not to notice the way Ryan is surveying the living room, his eyes landing on every lipstick-stained wine glass and empty beer bottle. Just add a tiger in the bathroom and it would be a recreation of the famous waking-up scene in *The Hangover*.

This is why I never invited friends over when I was growing up.

“Sorry,” I say again. “Weekends always were the messiest here.”

Ry rubs the back of his neck and chuckles. “To be honest, I was just thinking how it reminds me of your apartment after a big night.”

I do a double take. “No way, man.” His words feel like a punch to the stomach. “It doesn’t look anything like this! That’s totally . . .” But then I scan the room, seeing it as he does, and realize he’s right. I’ve thrown a ton of parties lately, the kind that made my hotel apartment look like a tornado tore through it. Knowing that Ry sees similarities between me and my parents makes me feel so gross. I’m not like them. I’m a teenager; we’re supposed to party, right? They’re grown-ass humans. They’re parents. They’re supposed to be responsible and sensible and know their limits and all that adulting stuff. Mom and Dad are the ones looking bad here, not me.

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Once we carry all my boxes and bags up to my room, I decide to soak my bruised body in a hot bath.

My back and ribs ache as I retreat into my bathroom and lock the door. I lean over my bathtub and turn the water on, then open the window to get some air. The afternoon sunshine casts a glare on the rooftops below and makes the glimpse of ocean sparkle on the horizon. I will never tire of the endless California summer, but the sky seems so obnoxiously blue at times like this, when it feels like my life is a rolling storm cloud.

The sliding doors to my living room open below, and Alfie walks out onto the pool deck, his phone held up in front of him.

“Hey, Kass,” he says. I lean back so he doesn’t see me. He’s talking to Cassidy, my cousin who lives on the East Coast. She’s probably calling to check in on me. I wish Kass were here instead of Boston. As comforting as Alfie and Ryan have been today, I really need her right now. She knows what my parents are like.

“Where’s Emmy? I’ve been texting her all day, but she isn’t responding,” Kass says.

“I think her phone is off,” Alfie says. “I don’t think she wants to talk to anyone right now.”

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t think so. Can you blame her? The whole world is tearing her to shreds.”

“I can’t believe some of things people are saying,” Kass says. “Some people are calling her an alcoholic and a slut. Can you believe that?”

A lump forms in my throat. I feel like such an embarrassment.

Alfie sighs. “You have no idea how much I want to just tell everyone to shut the fuck up. They don’t know her; they don’t know anything about what’s going on behind the scenes. Em has had to go through so much horrible shit lately. She doesn’t deserve this.”

My chest tightens. I shouldn't be eavesdropping, but I want to hear what Kass has to say.

"Alfie, calm down," she says. "You can't say anything—it will just make things worse. You all need to lie low until this blows over. Focus on being there for Em."

"I know, I know," he says. "But I don't know how to do that. I can't tell her what to do with her life, you know? It's not my place. And it's not like her parents will do anything to help."

Alfie knows my parents; he's seen them at their worst, and been there when I needed to run away for a night or two. But, god, I hope he's wrong about this. I hope my parents see how much I need them right now. I hope coming back here will give us a chance to fix our relationship.

"She shouldn't be staying with them," Kass says. I can hear the bitterness in her voice. "That house is toxic, especially right now." There's a pause, and then my cousin speaks again, so softly I almost miss it.

"Alfie, can I tell you something?"

"What?"

She takes in a deep breath, and I lean forward. "I'm scared that if she keeps partying this hard, she's going to end up just like them."

I sink to the cold bathroom floor. Pain radiates down my bruised nose as I cry. Am I that out of control? I try to pinpoint the moment I started down this road. I don't remember seeing any signs, but it's clear now that the people around me did. Oh, god. Is this how my parents ended up the way they are? They just kept partying and partying until suddenly they're forty years old with wine-stained carpets and a house that reeks of cigarettes and regrets? This must be how the fighting started between my mom and her sister.

When I was twelve and Cassidy was fourteen, her dad got a job in Boston and they moved from three blocks away to three thousand

miles away. I hated them for leaving me. Aunt Jo and Uncle Ben were the glue holding my parents together. They were their therapists, drinking buddies, and friends. But then Jo got a DUI while driving Kass and me home from school. She and Uncle Ben started going to Alcoholics Anonymous and told my parents they weren't drinking anymore. My mom thought it was ridiculous. She even laughed, saying they were being melodramatic. We started seeing them less and less, and then one day my mom's resentment reached peak level and she unleashed on Aunt Jo. It was the biggest argument I've ever seen. Kass and I spent most of it up in her room, pretending we couldn't hear it over the One Direction album we were listening to. But I heard everything my mom said: accusing her sister of being self-righteous, of thinking she was better than us, and of being a boring old woman now. Jo, Ben, and Kass moved to Boston two weeks later, and they haven't spoken to my parents since.

Within months, my parents went from backyard barbecues at Ben and Jo's to throwing three or four parties a week. It was like living in a frat house. Mom and Dad were trying to prove to Ben and Jo that they didn't need them, that they could have more fun without them.

I don't want to end up like that. Like *them*. I can't.

How did I go from being an unknown kid playing the drums in a garage to being the latest celebrity trainwreck?

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Once the bathtub fills, I dab my tears on a towel and pull myself up to turn off the water.

I pull my T-shirt over my head and unclip my bra, gasping when I catch a glimpse of my back in the mirror. Bruises cover the middle of my back, sides, and left hip.

I don't know what's scarier: the fact that I'm covered in bruises, or the fact that I don't remember how I got them. With trembling

hands, I slowly peel the bandage off my nose, and swallow back more tears when I see my face. The bridge of my nose is twice its normal size, and my eyes are black and blue.

I rest my hands on the dusty sink and try to breathe, then look myself square in the eyes.

“I am not like them,” I say. “I am not like them, and I won’t ever be like them. I won’t, I won’t, I won’t.”

I sink into the steaming hot bath, close my eyes, and try to think. All my dreams have come true. I have fame, money, friends . . . everything that’s supposed to make me happy. So why am I crying alone in my tub? Why the hell am I making headlines for all the wrong reasons?

What is so fundamentally broken in me that I keep trying so hard to screw it all up?

# CHAPTER FIVE

**I wake up to someone knocking** on my bathroom door. I sit up in the cold bathwater, and shiver.

“Emmy?” Alfie calls. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I croak. “I’m fine. Fell asleep.”

Teeth chattering, I lift myself out of the bath and wrap up in my old robe. When I walk out, Alfie is sitting on my bed and for the first time I notice how exhausted he looks. Dark circles hang under his eyes and his shoulders are hunched, like he’s the one the world hates right now.

“Are you okay?” I ask as I sit next to him.

“Me?” he says with wide eyes. “Forget me, I’m fine. You’re the one I’m worried about.”

I try to give him a reassuring smile, but it hurts my nose and I end up grimacing. He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a fresh bandage.

“The nurse gave this to me,” he says, unwrapping it. “Here.” He touches his fingers under my chin and turns me to face him. I close my eyes and hold my breath, waiting for the pain to come. But he’s so careful, so gentle, that it hardly hurts at all. The pads of his thumbs slide over the edge of the bandage, smoothing it over my skin. When he’s done, I open my eyes to find him staring at me.

Alfie tousles up his hair like he always does when he’s nervous. The first time I saw him do it was when we were around fourteen, when he came out to me as genderqueer. After he told me, I did a lot of Googling and reading and watching of YouTube videos to educate myself and unlearn all the gender binary bull I’d been programmed to believe. I held his hand while he told his parents and asked them to use he/him pronouns for him. About a year later, he changed his name to Alfie. I still remember sitting on his top bunk in his bedroom while he told me how he’d been feeling.

“I just don’t feel like I fit,” he told me. “I’ve never felt 100 percent like a girl, but I’m not a guy, either. And I don’t see why I have to fit. Why should I try to change myself to suit someone else’s binary? It’s like trying to fit a galaxy into a glass jar. I don’t want to be poked and prodded into a glass jar. How am I supposed to breathe like that? Right now, I’m poking holes in the lid, letting the light and air in and freeing pieces of me star by star. And one day, I’m just going to shatter it.”

He’s definitely done that. Being thrust onto the world stage last year turned him into a powerful ambassador for nonbinary teens like him. And as a result of his coming out and all the hours we spent trading videos, articles, and books by people in the LGBTQIAP+ community, I realized I’m totally, fantastically queer.

I’m not officially out about that yet, though. I wanted to come out publicly the moment I heard our first song played on the radio, but I was worried about what the media would do. The media loves labels.



I knew they'd demand one of me or slap one on me themselves, so I took some time to figure out what label felt right to me. And I did: I'm totally bisexual. So far, I've only come out to the people closest to me. Then I started dating people of different genders and let the gossip blogs figure it out on their own. Getting comfortable with my bisexuality has been liberating; I've never felt more myself. One day soon, I'll be officially out to the world. I've just been waiting for the right moment. And okay, yeah, I'm scared. I've spent a lot of time worrying that I'm not queer enough. I'm scared of being told I'm a poser or unwelcome or just trying to be on trend. I'm scared of screwing up and being called a "bad bisexual," even though logically I know there's no such thing. But fear isn't logical.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. "I keep screwing up, and I don't know how to stop." The tears come again, and he pulls me into his arms.

"Hey, uh, Em?" Ry calls from downstairs. "I think your parents are home. And they brought company."

I let out a long groan. Alfie's shoulders tighten against me.

"Just stay at my place," he whispers. "You'll be so much happier there."

I shake my head and pull away from him. "If I crash at yours, the media will target you, too. You're in the center of town, so there's no way either of us will be able to hide. I need to stay away from everyone for a little while."

Just then, I hear voices downstairs singing an old Pearl Jam song. My dad is doing his best Eddie Vedder impersonation while his friends cheer him on. I can tell just by listening to them that they are wasted even though it's only five p.m.

A moment later, Ryan barrels up the stairs like he's running from a serial killer.

"Whoa," he says as he closes the door behind him. "There's, like, twenty people down there. And they're all singing."

I nod like it's no big deal, because this is my life. "Wait till they get to the Michael Jackson portion of the evening. Twenty drunk people trying to moonwalk. It gets dangerous." I smile, but I don't want them to see this. It's funny when my parents are characters in a story I tell to kill time on the tour bus, but seeing them up close . . . it's just sad.

"Stay here," I say. "Don't go down there without me." I grab a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt from one of my suitcases and go into the bathroom to get dressed.

When I'm ready, we carefully sneak downstairs. I successfully help Alfie and Ry out the front door so they don't have to talk to my parents, but as I creep back up the stairs, I hear my mother laugh.

"Well, well, well," she says. "Look what the cat dragged in. David! Your daughter has decided to grace us with her presence!"

I freeze. Maybe if I stay incredibly still, she'll get bored and leave me alone. But then my dad appears, and I know I'm going to have to talk to them. "Uh, hey, guys."

My mom raises her mimosa in the air. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

Dad nudges her on the arm. "I know why she's here. She needs a place to hide out after embarrassing herself last night." He turns to follow his friends into the backyard, then calls out to me, "I'd be embarrassed, too, if the whole world knew it only took three drinks for me to black out! What a lightweight."

He looks back over his shoulder and winks at Mom, and she laughs.

I wrap my arms around myself and lean against the wall. The only time I ever see my parents act like a married couple is when they're ganging up on me. Normally, Dad spends most of his time pretending Mom doesn't exist, while his mere existence seems to infuriate my mom. I sometimes think the only reason they constantly have friends

and neighbors over to the house is so they don't actually have to spend time alone together.

Mom looks me up and down, then takes a sip of her drink. "I guess you can stay. But don't expect us to drop everything now that you're back. We have lives of our own, you know."

I just nod, then she wanders back to their guests. I drag myself to my room, close the door, and fall face-first onto my bed.

Welcome home.

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The party finally dies down around sunset. I can tell because the sound of my dad's guitar fills the house, and he never plays in front of anyone anymore. Mom has probably gone to do her usual Saturday-night gig at one of the bars on the beachfront, so Dad is reliving his band days all alone.

A few hours later, I wake up to tapping on my window. "Hello?"  
*Tap, tap, tap.*

"Alfie? Is that you?" I slide out of bed and tug the window open.

"Why would Alfie be sneaking into your room?" Jessie demands. I sit back on the bed, and she climbs inside.

"Sorry," I say. "I didn't think anyone else knew I was here."

She stands over me, her silhouette tall and looming. "So? Why would *he* be at your window?"

"I dunno," I say. "I used to climb through his window, remember? I told you about that. I guess I just assumed."

She sits next to me on the bed, and even in the darkness I can tell she's tense. Sometimes I wonder if she's overprotective, or if she doesn't trust me. Either way, it makes it hard to breathe.

"I've been trying to reach you all day," I say.

"I couldn't exactly answer my phone from a drunk tank."

I find her hand in the dark and hold it. “Are you okay? You wanna talk about it?”

She softens, resting her head on my shoulder. “I don’t remember much from last night. Thank god for booze. But I woke up freezing my ass off in a corner, surrounded by strangers. Three women were throwing punches about some guy. Another girl puked on me. And I had to shit in front of all of them. It took hours for them to finally let me go. But I lost my license for a while.”

I cringe. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

“Then,” she continues, “the second I walked out of the precinct, paps attacked me like fucking zombies. I had to literally sprint away from them. Like, normally I don’t mind being photographed, but I was not having it today.” She throws her hand over her eyes. “I cannot believe you let me drive last night.”

“Huh?” I must have misheard. “Me?”

“Yeah,” she says, her voice steady, calm. “Why did you let me get behind the wheel? Didn’t you see how wasted I was?”

Wait. Is she really saying this is my fault? I shift away from her in the bed. “I was too drunk to notice anything. I woke up in the hospital with no clue how I got there.”

“I’d rather wake up in the hospital than a police station.”

I don’t say anything. I’m pissed. But she’s so sure of what she’s saying, like it’s so clear that I should’ve stopped her and prevented all this. Maybe she’s right.

My silence must tell her something’s wrong, so she snuggles closer.

“Are you hurt bad? Any broken bones?” she asks sweetly.

“My nose is busted. Hurts like hell.”

She sucks a quick breath between her teeth. “Ouch.”

I crawl farther under the covers, unsure of how I’m meant to be feeling. I don’t think it’s fair for her to act like the accident was my fault, but she’s being so cute and caring now. Anyway, I’m too tired to

argue, and it really does sound like her day was much worse than mine.

“I went to your apartment,” she says, and I slap my hand to my forehead.

“Oh shit. I’m so sorry; I didn’t get a chance to tell you about that.”

She lets out an exasperated sigh. “Did you at least pack up my stuff?”

“Of course. It’s all here.”

“Good. I guess we’re living here now.”

I pause. I didn’t realize we *were* living together. But now isn’t the time to argue. “Guess so.”

“With all the voicemails and texts you left me,” she says, “you could’ve mentioned that.”

“Please,” I say, my last drop of energy drained. “Everyone in the world hates me right now. I can’t bear to have you hate me, too. Can we just forget everything for a few hours? Please?”

Jessie wraps me in her arms. “Sorry. I’ve just had a day. Of course I don’t hate you.”

“Thanks,” I say, wiping away my tears.

She’s quiet for a few minutes, and I start to relax. But just as I’m drifting to sleep, I hear her whisper, “I still don’t see why Alfie would be at your window.”