



How ^{to} Breathe Underwater

vicky skinner

Swoon
READS

SWOON READS | NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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HOW TO BREATHE UNDERWATER.

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For Jeremy:
without you, I'd be drowning

One

I could see the swimmer beside me every time I came up for air. His face was distorted slightly by the plastic separator that divided his lane from mine, but I could see him pushing, his arms pumping fast. I was faster. I was always faster. I pulled ahead, closing the distance between the wall and me until my fingertips touched, and I came up for a deep, refreshing breath of chlorine-scented air.

“God, Kate,” Harris (short-distance butterfly and my best friend) said, and panted. He’d come up out of the water a whole four seconds behind me. He needed to get his time down if he was going to make it to State. “Give a guy a break.”

I was sucking in air, too, but each breath seemed to scream out my accomplishment. Harris might have been bigger than I was, but he would never be faster. “Give you a break so you can get lazy? I don’t think so.”

He pressed his back to the wall and closed his eyes, sinking

into the pool just enough for his chin to dip below the surface. "Thank God I'll never have to race you for real. That could really bruise my ego. Maybe if *my* dad had quit his desk job to coach the swim team, I'd be as good as you." He grinned over at me, and I splashed him with a handful of water.

I snorted. "Yeah, right. It's called natural talent. I was mastering the dolphin kick while you were still in floaties."

"Harris, out of the pool," Coach Judd (assistant girls' swim coach) called to us. "We need girls in first."

Harris held his arms in the air, dripping. "But Coach isn't even out here yet." He gestured toward the door behind us, where Coach Masterson (head coach for the girls' and boys' swim teams, and my father) had disappeared ten minutes earlier for a parent-teacher meeting with Jenny Carther's mom. We were two weeks away from the start of school, a month away from the start of the season, and he was already lecturing parents.

Coach Judd rolled his eyes. "Doesn't matter. He'll be ready to go any minute, and I need the girls ready to go, too. Out!"

Harris sent me an irritated look but did as Coach Judd asked. I did the same, splashing up out of the water and sitting on the edge of the pool, my legs still knee-deep. Everyone else was hanging out in the stands and on the side of the pool, their suits dry. Over by the bleachers, April (a master in all events, and Harris's girlfriend) blew him a kiss. Beside her, Jenny Carther rolled her eyes.

"Hey, Jenny!" Chuck (100-yard backstroke, bulkiest and slowest on the varsity team) yelled out. "When's Mommy gonna buy you implants so you can fill out your suit?"

Coach Judd made a disgruntled noise but didn't call Chuck out. Jenny Carther (breaststroke leg of the 200-yard medley

relay and exceptionally self-conscious for someone who weighed one hundred and thirty pounds of almost pure muscle) bolted from her spot poolside and raced by me. I listened to her bare feet slapping the floor until she threw open the door to my father's office, probably to tattle on Chuck.

I didn't turn to watch the scene, instead massaging my sore calves in the warm pool water. But after a moment, everyone went quiet. I looked up at Harris to say something, but immediately forgot what it was when I realized that every member of the girls' and boys' swim teams was looking in the direction of Coach's office, like a car had just crashed into it.

I turned to look, and my mouth fell open.

Inside the office, Jenny Carther's mother and my father were making out against his trophy case, and it was embarrassing how long it took for them to realize that every athlete on the swim team was watching them.

Finally they broke apart, my father's eyes finding mine amid everyone's, and the horror on his face matched the horror that had settled in my chest.

Before the end of the day, the swim team had spread the word about my father's little slipup. It felt like everyone in Salem knew, and it didn't take long for my mother to get wind of it as well. A month later, my mother and I were moving to Portland to live near my sister, Lily, and my life was completely ruined.

o o o

"Wait, 6A?" Harris bellowed in my ear. "You can't go to a 6A school. You won't be in our division. We won't even be competing together!"

I pressed my forehead against my window and peered down at the traffic below, my body finally exhausted after a day of moving, not to mention the emotional upheaval of abandoning the house I'd been living in since the day I was born. I sighed, watching my breath fog up the window.

"I'm painfully aware of that," I told him. "It's not like I have a choice. Most of the schools out here are 6A, and seeing as how I don't have a car, I'm not going to move to a 5A school that's four times farther from home just so I can swim in the same pool as you."

He laughed, but I felt something serious settle under my skin. I was going to have to go back to the pool. I was going to have to join a different team like nothing had even happened, and it felt unreal.

"So, how's Portland? It's been a while since I've been there. I hear it's gotten smoggier. Is it extra smoggy?"

"It's not any smoggier than usual."

Our new apartment, located on the third floor of a high-rise apartment building in downtown Portland, was actually pretty nice. According to the brochure my mother had given me when she broke the news that we were relocating, the place had a heated rooftop pool, an indoor serenity garden, and a fitness center. There was even a doorman.

Out my window, I got a great view of downtown. We were in the thick of things, close to the Willamette River. I could practically smell it through the glass. It was a black blob of shadow in the darkness. Sure, it was nice, but not exactly nice enough to make me forget that my parents' pending divorce was the reason I was here.

“God, this blows.” I heard the crisp sound of a can popping open.

“Tell me about it.” My carpet was covered in boxes, suitcases, tote bags. And right in the center of everything, not yet cemented to a spot, was my bed, bare and cold. “You better not be drinking a soda. You know it slows you down.”

Without even being able to see him, I knew he rolled his eyes. “Calm down, Mom. It’ll be long out of my system before I hit the pool again. I don’t have one foot in the water at all times, like you.”

I knew he meant it as a joke, but in the process of my father’s affair being publicized, my parents splitting up, and our current migration, it had been a month since I’d been in the pool—an eternity. “What’s going on with you?” I asked, desperate to change the subject.

“Oh, you know, the usual. April’s bugging me about homecoming, like I actually plan on going. First meet in a few weeks, and if I can’t get my stroke count down, Coach is going to suffocate me in my sleep—and my dad would provide the pillow.”

I sat down on the floor, my back pressed against the window-sill. “Well, can’t say I blame them. You’re too distracted. You need to stop focusing so much on getting April to put out and spend more time doing drills.”

“Not everyone can be a child prodigy, Katherine. Hey, let’s video chat. I want to see your new place.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay.” But just as he said it, my phone beeped, letting me know the battery was about to die. “Um,” I said, pushing up off the floor and searching my room, phone still pressed to my ear.

But I was fairly certain my charger was still in the back seat of the car, where I'd tossed it in my haste. "Hey, I have to call you back. Battery's about to die. I'll call you when I'm plugged in." I didn't wait for him to answer, just hung up and tossed my phone on the bed on my way out the door.

We had a parking space underneath the building, in a parking garage. I wasn't a fan of elevators, so I took the stairs down to the lobby and then walked the two floors down to our parking space. I used the key fob to unlock the doors and reached into the back seat where, sure enough, my charger was sitting. I snatched it, ready to get back upstairs.

As I was locking the car, I heard a strange noise on the other side of the lot, like the air going out of a balloon, and then coughing. It wasn't the clearing of a throat, but a hacking, gagging struggle for breath.

On instinct, I tried to remember my CPR training. I'd gotten certified one summer so I could be a lifeguard, but it had been long enough now that I wasn't sure I could remember all the details if the person I could hear needed it.

Another series of coughs broke the silence, and when I got back to the building's entrance I stopped, just feet from the door. Parked in one of the first spots in the lot was an old station wagon, right under one of the overhead lights. The light shone down on a woman, probably in her fifties, sitting sideways in the driver's seat with her feet flat on the concrete. She was bent over at the waist, her long gray-spotted braid trailing down to her lap. Hovering beside the open door, stooping to be level with the woman, was a boy my age, a hand on her shoulder as the woman wheezed violently.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

The woman didn’t appear to need CPR. She was breathing, and she was conscious—both encouraging. When the guy’s eyes found mine in the shadows, all I saw was fear. I saw that his other hand was clutching the woman’s. Neither of them said anything for a long moment, but I could hear the rattling of the woman’s breath, the sounds of her lungs still struggling for air.

“Everything’s fine,” the guy finally said. “Thank you.”

I turned my attention to the woman, thinking that maybe she would say something different. Maybe she would tell me to call an ambulance. But instead, she coughed hard, gasping between fits. I took a step forward, feeling helpless. There had to be something I could do, but the guy sent me a strange look that reminded me that this had nothing to do with me. So I backed away and went inside, moving slowly in case he called out after me for help. He didn’t.

When I was back inside the bright lobby, Bobby, the evening doorman, looked at me with worried eyes.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I was still watching what I could see of the boy and the woman through the glass doors. “There’s a woman out there. She’s having trouble breathing.”

Bobby’s eyes widened and he rushed to the door, but as soon as he caught sight of the two out in the garage, his progress lost its urgency. “Oh. That’s Harriet. You don’t need to worry about her. She’s got a nasty case of emphysema. Consistent bronchitis. Gives her a lot of trouble. Years of smoking will do that to you. I’m sure she’ll be fine. Her son will take good care of her. If she needs medical attention, he’ll make sure she gets it.”

I watched the woman's back lift and fall in deep breaths, her son still bent over her.

o o o

I jerked awake the next morning and groaned at the light spilling into my bedroom. I made a mental note to hang my blinds and curtains before the end of the day. I lay in bed for a second, trying to get used to the unfamiliar smell of the new apartment. It was cold, so much colder than my father had ever kept the house, and I wanted to stay under the warm covers forever.

As soon as I opened my door, I tripped over a sewing machine. "Motherf—!" I shouted when I lost my footing and slammed into the wall.

"Language!" my mom shouted from the kitchen. "I'm glad you're up," she said when I got to her. "I made breakfast. Eggs, bacon, and toast." She shoveled some onto a plate and set it in front of me at the table with a smile pasted on her face that was so fake, she looked like a plastic doll.

"Thanks, Mom."

She went back to the stove to make herself a plate. "How did you sleep?"

The truth was that I hadn't slept much at all. The traffic sounds outside my window all night had kept me awake, along with the noise from the apartment upstairs. I'd never lived in an apartment before, and I'd never lived in the center of a huge city like Portland. We'd lived in West Salem for as long as I'd been alive, a much quieter sector of an already relatively small city.

I didn't tell my mother any of that. "Good," I said, trying to sound optimistic. I didn't want my mother to have to worry about

the fact that she had completely upturned my life by moving us out here, even if that's exactly what she'd done. It wasn't like she'd had a lot of options.

"Have a lot to do today," she said, munching on her toast. "I want to try to get a good number of the boxes in here and the living room unpacked." She finished her toast, the only thing on her plate, and rinsed her dish in the sink.

In Salem, every Sunday morning had been the same: a hard swim at sunup with dad, Mooney's Café for a recovery meal of pancakes and eggs, and a walk along the river in the late-morning sun.

This was our first Sunday without Dad in a long time, and it showed in the bags under my mother's eyes.

"I'm off to locate the trash chute," she said, picking up a bag of garbage.

"Why don't I take it?" I asked, leaving my breakfast behind to take the bag from her.

She gave a little sigh. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, no problem."

I was still in my pajamas, a T-shirt and Superman boxers, but I decided to go right then anyway. I'd just made it to the front door when I saw the planner lying open on the entry table. I recognized it immediately. Every season, my father would put my meets, practices, and workouts in a planner so I wouldn't get behind. Pages and pages of swim-related activities. My mother must have found it in a box somewhere. I glanced over my shoulder at her. She was digging through a box in the kitchen, pulling out towels and pot holders. I reached out and snatched the planner off the table before opening the door.

I was standing hopelessly in the hallway with no clue where the trash chute was when the door directly across from me opened and someone joined me in the narrow hallway.

It took me a second to place the boy in front of me as the one I'd seen in the parking garage the day before, the one leaning over the woman with the bad lungs. Dark, messy hair that might have been styled to look that way or might have been subject to nervous fingers; dark eyes, the color of which I couldn't decipher with the length of the hall between us; the sleeves of his shirt bunched up around his elbows.

I wanted to ask him if his mom was okay, or maybe ask him his name, but I saw his eyes go first to my boxers and then to my garbage bag.

"Can you tell me where the trash chute is?"

He pointed to the end of the hall. "Take a left and then a right. Last door on the left."

"Thanks."

I hauled the garbage bag up but paused when he said, "Nice boxers."

Like an idiot, I said nothing. I just turned in the direction he'd indicated. At the end of the hall, before I rounded the corner, I couldn't stop myself from glancing over my shoulder for one last glimpse. He stood by the elevator, the button illuminated, and then he glanced over his shoulder, too, his eyes meeting mine down the hallway.

I looked away quickly, turning the corner. I almost forgot I had the planner in my hand when I pulled the door open to toss the trash in the chute. The bag fell from my hand, and I looked down

at the planner. It contained my entire life. Everything I was expected to do, everywhere I was expected to be. But now it was just as much trash as the garbage I'd thrown down. A new place meant a new swim schedule.

I pulled open the chute again and tossed the planner in.

Two

When I stood in front of my closet mirror before my first day of school, I looked like myself. Same face, same girl. But I felt different. It felt like the whole universe had tilted on its axis.

I swallowed down two bowls of cereal and watched my mother type away on her laptop at the kitchen table, a newspaper open beside her. My mother hadn't always been a stay-at-home mom. She was an office manager for a small dental practice when I was younger but quit not long after my father started coaching me.

I leaned forward to see what she had circled. *Administrative Assistant. Billing Coordinator. Claims Specialist.* I wasn't sure what most of those jobs were.

"Are you taking me to school today?" I knew she wasn't trying to ignore me. She had big things to take care of today and probably not a lot of time to figure it all out. But she'd barely looked at me through breakfast, and I was feeling a little anxious.

Mornings were usually busy: rushing to an early workout, getting through breakfast as fast as possible, jumping in the car and making it in time for Dad to prep before the first bell. I wasn't used to my mornings moving like a snail, the way this one was.

"Oh, I thought maybe you could take the school bus."

"What about the car?" I was sixteen and perfectly capable of taking myself to school. It would be a luxury after the years of riding with my father, who refused to get me my own car, saying that a car in the hands of a sixteen-year-old would only lead to drunkenness, teenage pregnancy, and the state penitentiary.

My mom shook her head, her eyes moving from computer screen to newspaper as she sipped her coffee. "I need the car for job hunting today. You'll be fine. You can take the bus." Gloom must have been written all over my face because she rolled her eyes. "Stop being so dramatic. It's just public transportation; I'm certain that you'll survive."

She smiled at me, and it almost looked real against her dirty-blond hair, wide mouth, and freckled skin. I tried to erase the disappointment from my face. I wanted to make this as easy as I could for her, and if that meant taking the bus to school, then I wasn't going to argue.

"Oh, by the way, I talked to your new coach on the phone yesterday evening, and I don't think we're going to have any issues getting you prepped with the team in time for the season. Their first practice is tomorrow, and she wants to meet you then. But you just focus on having a great first day."

My stomach turned, and for a second, I thought I was going to lose my breakfast. Until then, I'd almost been able to distract myself enough to forget about swimming, about joining a new

team. I suddenly wished my mom was taking me to school just so I wouldn't have to be alone with my nerves.

"Oh, and you have your last dress fitting this afternoon."

How could I forget? Lily was getting married on Saturday, and I was the maid of honor. My sister was the one who had convinced my mother that moving to Portland to be closer to her made the most sense when my parents split. Lily had chosen to transfer to a college in Portland to follow Tom, the love of her life, when he was offered a job in the city.

"How long before the bus comes?"

"I think you've got time." Her eyes were unfocused in thought. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting. What was she supposed to do, hold my hand and drop me off at my first class?

"I'll just go ahead and go down now," I told her. I didn't think I could stand another second of sitting there, listening to her fingers typing on her laptop. I picked up my bag and moved to the front door, my eyes on her, waiting for her to offer to walk me down or at least to the door.

"Okay, sweetie. I'll see you tonight. Maybe we can meet for dinner after the fitting? Somewhere nice to celebrate your first day."

"Yeah. Okay." I hesitated, my hand on the doorknob. "I'll see you tonight."

She looked up and smiled, and I tried to let that be enough for me for the moment, but once I left the apartment, I would be in a brand-new place with unfamiliar faces and unfamiliar streets. I fiddled with the doorknob, feeling the tips of my fingers start to sweat.

When I opened the door, my heart stopped.

I immediately recognized the boy standing in the hallway,

leaning against the door directly across from ours. I gasped and he straightened up, putting both hands out quickly, like I was a rabid dog he needed to persuade not to bite him. It was the boy that knew where the trash chute was.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you. Um, your mom said I could just wait out here for you."

"My mom?" I heard my mother's chair scrape away from the table.

She rushed to my side. "I completely forgot. This is Michael." She gestured to the guy, who now had an uncomfortable tilt to his mouth. "He lives across the hall, and he rides the bus to school, so I thought the two of you could ride together."

I narrowed my eyes at her. How in the world had she had time to make friends already? We'd been in the building for a whole forty-eight hours.

She smiled at Michael and, as if she could read my mind, said, "We met in the lobby last night. It'll be nice to have a friend on your first day, won't it?"

Michael watched me, waiting. The truth was, I had eyes. Michael was cute, almost painfully so, like he was completely unaware of it. I noticed. It wouldn't kill me to be in close proximity to him long enough to get to school.

"Okay," I told them both and stepped out of the apartment.

Michael's face crept from hesitant to kind. He gestured to the elevator. "After you."

I hesitated. "I'm going to take the stairs. I can meet you down there."

He stood there, his arms hanging limply at his sides. My mother was still standing in the doorway. She laced her fingers together

in front of her hips and sent me a sympathetic smile, like I was a kindergartner on my first day, throwing a fit in front of everyone.

“When Kate was really little, she wandered into an elevator by herself at a department store and got stuck between floors. She’s had some trouble with them ever since.”

I just stared at her. Was it completely necessary for her to divulge all my business to anyone within a two-mile radius?

Michael’s eyes were fixed on his shoes, but the generous curve of his mouth made it obvious that he was holding back a smile. “No problem. I’ve always liked the stairs better.”

We didn’t speak the whole way down, but every few seconds, Michael glanced over his shoulder at me, probably to make sure I was still there.

Out the lobby windows, I saw that large storm clouds were building up in the sky like a vast army about to attack.

“Don’t worry,” Michael said as the doorman held the door for us. It wasn’t Bobby. This was a guy who sent us a close-lipped smile and wished us a nice day without enthusiasm. “It rains way more here than it does in Salem, but it doesn’t usually last very long.”

He knew I was from Salem. What else had my mother told him? My Social Security number? The shape of the birthmark on my shoulder? Which, incidentally, Harris always said was shaped like Denmark.

When we reached the curb, I breathed in the moist air, closing my eyes and tilting my head back, like I could suck all of it into my pores if I tried hard enough. I loved the way the air smelled right before a storm. Wet and thick. I heard a whir and a click

beside me and opened my eyes just as another smell mixed in the air: the acrid, nauseating smell of cigarette smoke, pulling me out of my euphoric moment.

“God, who’s smoking?” I said seconds before I realized that Michael, standing beside me at the stoplight, was the one who had lit up. He blew out a mouthful of smoke in the direction of the stoplight, but the wind blew it back in my face. I coughed.

“Man, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize . . .” He trailed off as he walked around me to stand on my other side.

I focused on not gagging. The smell of cigarettes was the worst thing imaginable. It always got my stomach churning. How could someone so cute be a smoker? Didn’t he know what it did to his lungs? I clamped down on that thought when I remembered the shape of his mother, bent over in her station wagon.

“I’m trying to quit,” he told me, even though I hadn’t asked. I glanced over at him and watched as his full lips closed around the cigarette. He pinched it between his fingers and noticed me staring. “Should I put it out?”

I waved the suggestion away. I didn’t want to be *that* girl. “No, it’s fine.”

A silence passed between us, and then out of nowhere, he said, “Your mom told me you guys picked this building because your sister lives close by. That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah, I guess.” It certainly didn’t feel cool. It’s not cool when your dad is cheating on your mom, your parents are getting divorced, and you’re being uprooted from your entire life. But I got the feeling he meant well.

“We really only live here because my uncle owns the building.” He smiled, and I was caught for a second. The hand holding

his cigarette was down at his side, and he looked like a photograph hanging on a blank wall in an art gallery, his body tipped slightly toward mine and smoke trailing up out of the cigarette into the humid air. Black jeans, olive-green thermal top, hair shining with the moisture in the air around us so thick I could almost touch it.

I wasn't really sure why he mentioned his uncle. It was completely irrational, but I felt like everyone was staring at us.

"I'm just trying to even the playing field a little," he told me, putting his cigarette out on a NO PARKING sign beside him and flicking the butt onto the street in front of us, where it was immediately crushed under the tire of a passing car. "You know, since your mom pretty much shared your entire life story with me last night." When I didn't say anything, he lifted a hand and scratched the spot where his hairline met the back of his neck. "My uncle set us up in this fancy place. Because my mom is . . ." He trailed off and looked away from me. "My uncle owns buildings from here to Seattle."

Over his shoulder, I saw the bus approaching, but I was still looking at Michael, who seemed to have lost some of his confidence. The bus came to a hissing stop in front of us and the door folded open. I hopped on quickly, Michael behind me.

I took the first empty seat I found, and Michael slid in beside me. He didn't greet anyone, didn't even *look* at anyone, just took the seat next to me like we'd known each other forever.

He turned to me as the bus started to move. "Your mom said you were some kind of famous swimmer."

I rolled my eyes. "It's not like that. I won a few races at the

state championships last year. And I, uh, sort of set the state record in the 200-yard freestyle race. Not a big deal.” Except, of course, that it was. I’d worked harder than anyone else on the team. I knew part of that had to do with my father always working me, always pushing to make me better, but at the end of the day, it was me. I’d won that race, I’d set the record, I’d taken the medal, and it had admittedly put me on a pedestal at my old school. But I wasn’t sure I was ready for everyone at my new school to know about it.

He shrugged. “If you say so. Sounds like a big deal to me.” He was so close I could see the sprinkling of freckles spread across his cheekbones like constellations.

We fell into silence, and the question that had been at the back of my mind rushed to the surface. “So, um, is your mom okay? Because the other night . . .”

He nodded, the corners of his mouth turning down slightly. “She’s fine.” He fell silent, looking out the front windshield, and I grasped for something to say, coming up empty. Maybe I’d gone a step too far, asking about his mom?

We sat in silence for a moment, but then I could feel Michael’s eyes on me. “You nervous?” he asked.

“No,” I lied, partly because of my pride and partly because I still wasn’t so sure I wanted this guy to know *everything* about me.

“What’s your first class?” he asked.

I reached into my backpack and pulled out my schedule. “Chemistry.” He leaned in close to me, taking the other side of the paper in one hand so that we were looking at it together. Except

I wasn't looking at it at all. I was looking at the side of his neck, at his pulse beating there.

"Oh. Dr. Stewart," he said. "I had him last year." His eyes continued to scan the page. "Hey, we have American Lit together."

He looked away from the paper, at me, and I was inexplicably more nervous than I had been a second ago. "Is it a good class?"

He quirked an eyebrow at me. "If lit is your thing."

"Lit is pretty much my thing."

He grinned. "See, your mom didn't mention that to me. You still have plenty of your own secrets to divulge."

I knew he meant it as a joke, but I felt a weight in my chest at his words. Yeah, I had secrets. Like the fact that I hadn't been in a pool since that preseason practice, like a part of me was relieved to be away from my coach, like the last month still didn't feel real.

He had a strange, serious look on his face, so I turned away from him, shoving my schedule back in my bag.

We pulled up in front of the school, redbrick and separated into multiple buildings that were fanned out along the block. It was a little like a college campus, with buildings curving around each other and the streets on either side a labyrinth. According to my mom, they didn't have an on-campus pool.

I followed him into a building, and inside, Michael stopped and pointed across the open lobby. "Your classroom is down that hallway there. First one on the left." I nodded, and then we stood there in silence for a moment as students rushed past us. Maybe we'd just met, but he was officially the only person I knew in school, and the thought of being alone again made my palms sweat.

"I'll see you later?" he asked, already backing away from me.

"Okay." Once the sea had swallowed him up, I turned to the hallway he had directed me toward. I hovered awkwardly in the doorway of my classroom. No one noticed me, and I took that second of inattention to ground myself.

The bell sounded and the teacher spotted me. He was short, mostly bald, and wearing a maroon sweater-vest. "Oh, hello. Katherine Masterson? We still have a group that only has three right over here." He gestured toward a lab table at the front of the room, where two very pretty girls sat with a boy who had his head down on the table. When I took a seat beside him, the boy let out a quiet snore.

"That's Roger." One of the girls, whose long black hair was pulled into a ponytail, smiled at me. She was thin and had big, full lips that glittered with a layer of lip gloss. "He sleeps his way through first and last period. It's kind of his trademark. I'm Marisol, and this is Patrice." She nudged the girl beside her. I could tell even while they were sitting that she was almost a head shorter than Marisol. Patrice had a round face, curly brown hair, and a friendly smile.

With perfectly applied makeup, shiny dark hair, and brown skin, they were the kind of beautiful a boring girl like me dreamed of being. I crossed my arms over myself.

"I'm surprised Dr. Stewart even put you here," Marisol went on. "He wouldn't let anyone but Roger be in our group because he says we're a bad influence."

Patrice snorted. "Oh, please. He said *you* were a bad influence."

Marisol rolled her eyes, and then, like I was no longer there,

they began speaking to each other in Spanish while I sat there feeling as relevant to the conversation as my buddy Roger.

“Ladies,” Dr. Stewart sighed, “can we please start class?”

o o o

I was on my way to second period with my nose buried in my map of the school when I heard someone call my name. It was a bit surprising, as I didn’t really know anyone yet, but when I looked up, I spotted Michael’s smiling face in the crowd. I maneuvered through the throng to get to him.

“Are you lost?” he asked.

“Um.” I looked down at my map. “I don’t think so. This is Building C, right?”

His mouth made a funny shape, and then he reached out and flipped my map around so that we were now in Building F.

“Okay, yes, I’m lost,” I said.

He laughed. “Just go across the quad. The building directly across from this one.” His phone beeped and he pulled it out, concentrating on sending a text before he looked back at me. “Is our campus really that much bigger than the school you went to in Salem?”

I looked down at the map, with its string of buildings and sharp turns. “I guess not. Just . . . different.”

He held his hand out to me. “Here, let me put my number in your phone in case you need me.”

I stared at his outstretched hand for a second before surrendering my phone. I’d never let a boy put his number in my phone before. He tapped away at it while I watched, and I knew the image would be burned in my brain forever.

There were four different lunch lines in the cafeteria, and as people shuffled past me, splitting off in different directions, I chose the one closest to me and got in line behind a girl I thought I recognized from second period.

I grabbed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and then found myself staring at rows and rows of mostly full tables. I searched for an empty seat somewhere, but they were all surrounded by groups of intimidating strangers, and I was beginning to lose my nerve.

Back in Salem, the swim team always ate together, and it had been a long time since I'd been confronted with this many unfamiliar faces.

"Kate?"

I turned back to the line to find one of my lab partners a few people back. She smiled at me, and I took a step back to join her. "Patrice, right?" I asked as I slid alongside her. I'd met so many new people that I was having a hard time keeping them straight.

"Yeah. Chemistry." She reached for a container of yogurt and then smiled up at me. The sincerity of it stretched all the way to her dark eyes. "Sorry we got our first big assignment on your first day. Kinda sucks."

I shrugged. "That's okay. I'm actually glad. It's better than being tragically behind."

"True."

She paid for her food, and I was just about skulk off alone when she said, "Hey, do you want to sit with Marisol and me?"

She gestured to a table in the center of the room, where I recognized Marisol sitting by herself, doing something on her phone.

“Really?”

She grinned. “Of course. Lab partners have to stick together.” She laced her arm through mine and led me to the table. “Look who I found,” she said when we sat down.

Marisol’s eyes found me across the table and she smiled. “Kate! Hey! Lunch buddies!”

She sounded so genuinely happy to see me that it made my stomach warm. Had I ever been this nice to a complete stranger in my entire life?

“What class do you have next?” Marisol asked, shoving a french fry in her mouth.

“American Lit, I think.”

Marisol’s eyes went wide. “With Hure? Or Johnson? Because everybody got Hure for Am Lit this year, *except* me and Patrice.” She rolled her eyes. “She’s the absolute best. Johnson is a walking ferret.”

Patrice smacked her on the arm. “Calm down. You’re scaring her.”

I was feeling the complete opposite of scared. I felt comforted. I consulted my schedule. “Um. Yeah. Hure.”

Marisol groaned. “*Everyone* got Hure. Even Patrice’s boyfriend.”

Patrice nodded, as if she needed to confirm the information.

“She’s thinking about breaking up with him,” Marisol said absently. I blinked at her, wondering if this word vomit was normal for her.

Patrice smacked her again. I felt like I was getting the

CliffsNotes version of their relationship. “I am not,” she clarified in my direction. “Things are just weird right now.”

Marisol chewed silently, but there was something judgmental about it. I never knew chewing could be judgmental.

Patrice groaned. “Shut up. It’s not even a big deal. We’re going to be fine.” Her natural glow dimmed a little, but it only lasted a second before she was smiling up at me. “So where are you from?”

“Salem.”

Patrice bounced a little in her seat. “Oh, I have a cousin in Salem. I like it out there.” Her face scrunched adorably. “But I’m sure you’ll love it here.”

Marisol fluttered her eyelashes. “There isn’t anyone as awesome as us in Salem.”

Patrice nodded, agreeing solemnly. “It’s true. And now you have the most awesome friends in Portland.”

I had friends in Portland. I wasn’t going to be completely alone. The thought was such a relief that I spent the rest of the lunch period listening to them talk and argue, and I knew that if I didn’t like anything else about Portland, I liked them.

◦ ◦ ◦

When I walked into American Lit and saw Michael sitting in the back of the class, I thought maybe my day had peaked.

He didn’t notice me at first, his head down as he scribbled on a piece of paper, but then his head came up, and he smiled. My brain shorted for a second, and I snapped myself out of it. I’d known the boy less than the length of one school day.

“You must be Miss Masterson.” A pretty woman with caramel-colored curls and dark skin who I assumed was Mrs. Hure

grabbed a stack of supplies off the corner of her desk. “Textbook, syllabus, and reading list. Have a seat where you like.”

There was an open seat beside Michael, so I took it before anyone else could, and as Mrs. Hure started to lecture on *The Great Gatsby*, Michael turned slightly in his seat to look at me. We were far enough in the back that he could lean over and whisper to me.

“Having a good day?” he asked, and I caught the faint smell of cigarette smoke on his clothes, clumsily covered by cologne.

I nodded and shrugged, a weird half-committed, casual gesture.

He leaned back to settle in his chair again.

“Has anyone already done the reading for Friday?” Mrs. Hure asked, and everyone chorused a resounding, “No.”

Everyone but Michael, who said yes quietly enough that I thought maybe I was the only one who’d heard him. I bit my lip, but Michael still heard me laugh. He glanced over at me, and even though he didn’t smile, there was amusement in his eyes.

In front of him, he had his book open, and I caught the color of pen marks in the margins, notes written up and down the page. Maybe they were his or maybe they were in the book when he got it, but either way, I was mesmerized by the way they seemed to devour every page as he flipped through his book during the lecture.

I tried to focus through the lesson, taking notes even though I’d already read the book last year, but my eyes kept finding their way back to him, and every once in a while, he caught me looking and I had to focus elsewhere.

When we were dismissed, we didn't speak to each other, but he lingered long enough for me to gather my stuff and we walked out together. In the hallway, he looked at me over his shoulder, already turned away from me.

"Know where you're going?" he asked with a teasing smile.

"Yeah," I said, but as he walked away from me, I wasn't so sure.

o o o

Waiting for the bus at the end of the day, I watched people gather, talking and laughing and meeting up with their friends. They moved in groups to get into cars—three, four, or five students piling into one four-door sedan. I checked my phone, but there were no messages from Harris to indicate how swim practice had gone.

Someone brushed my shoulder. When I turned, Michael was standing beside me, completely casual. *We do this every single day*, his posture seemed to say. In the afternoon sunshine, he somehow looked even better than he had in the gray morning.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. I watched him as he took one out, stuck it between his lips, and then froze, blinking off into the distance. He seemed to remember where he was: a school campus that definitely didn't allow smoking. He untucked the cigarette from his lips and put it back in the pack, coughing out a laugh. "Habit," he said, sticking the pack back in his pocket. He rocked back on his heels and smiled at me. He had great teeth and the kind of smile that came with dimples, and I had to stop staring at him.

I couldn't help noticing any time a cute boy was within ten yards of me. I liked their mouths and their arms and the way they held themselves. I liked their voices and their hands and the way their back muscles rippled every time they moved. I'd spent the majority of my life hanging around lean, muscular guys who wore little clothing and were always dripping pool water.

But my dad didn't like boys. *Any* boys. He didn't even particularly like Harris, and Harris and I had never been even remotely interested in each other romantically. My father had always been successful when it came to keeping guys away from me. No one was interested in going near Coach Masterson's daughter, especially not when she was too busy training her face off for District and State meets to focus on dating.

And now, here I was, standing next to an extremely attractive guy, and I wanted to say something. Anything. But I couldn't. Coach Masterson somehow struck again, and he wasn't even around to witness it.

"Kate!"

A line of cars had parked itself against the curb in front of the school, and there, right in the center, was my sister's Mercedes. She had her head poked out the window and was waving at me.

I waved at her and was already stepping off the curb when I remembered Michael. I turned back and his eyes were on Lily. "Dress fitting," I said, as if that explained everything, and took off toward her car.

When I hopped into the front seat, Lily wasn't even looking at me. "Who's he?" she asked.

I waited until we were out in traffic before I looked back. He had disappeared onto the bus. "His name is Michael."

“He’s cute. Please tell me you batted your eyelashes at him.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not everyone is interested in getting engaged at nineteen.”

She shrugged. “Fine. Get engaged at sixteen. I’m not judging.” She grinned over at me then and gave my shoulder a playful shove. “How are you?”

I waved off her question. “Excited for Saturday?”

She bit her lip. “I’m nervous. There are going to be so many people there! You know how Tom is. He wanted to invite everyone he knows, so there’s going to be, like, two hundred people.”

“Everything is going to be great. I used to get so nervous for big meets, but it was over so fast, it always made me feel a little ridiculous for worrying.”

She snorted and flipped on her turn signal as we pulled into the parking lot of the little boutique dress shop where she’d gotten her gown and ordered all her bridesmaids’ dresses. “Somehow I doubt I’ll feel that way,” she said, turning off the car. “But thank God, I get a big vacation afterward.”

Three

The shop was a white-lace wonderland, with so many puffy and satiny dresses poking out from every corner that I could barely see where I was going. Then I was being whisked off to a dressing room in the back, where I was told to strip down to my underwear.

My dress was strapless and turquoise. Behind me, the sales lady was tugging on the fabric of the dress, pulling it tight and putting pins into it.

“Do you think you can have it ready by Friday?” Lily asked around the finger in her mouth. At the rate she was going, she wasn’t going to need a manicure before her wedding because there would be no nails left. Pacing like she was, she looked just like our mother. Same crease between her eyebrows, same long, dishwater-blond hair, same tense posture.

The woman, pins sticking out of her mouth, hummed a little and then nodded.

Lily sighed. "You look great."

"Yeah, I'll have the crowd applauding my beauty. No one will even notice you."

She shrugged in a strange, artificially indifferent way and took a seat on the high-heel-shaped chair facing me. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

I felt myself go rigid from my toenails to the roots of my hair. "Sure."

Lily bit the inside of her cheek, drummed her fingers on her knee, did everything but ask me the question.

Meanwhile, the saleswoman was trying to shimmy me out of the dress without sticking me with any of the pins. She wiggled it over my head, and I tried not get impatient as I stood on a platform in front of my sister in nothing but my underwear.

"Do you think I should uninvite Dad?" she finally asked without looking at me.

I went for my clothes, hurrying into my jeans and top before sitting next to Lily on the little pink seat. "I don't think you can do that." It wasn't what I wanted to say. I wanted to tell her to disown our father, to never speak to him again, to disinvite him and also tell him where he could shove it. But I couldn't. "He's our dad."

She balled her fists in her lap, clenching and unclenching them. "Aren't you mad?"

"Of course I'm mad. He cheated on Mom, at my school, at my *pool*. And then he kicked us out of our house. And now Mom is looking for a job, and I have to go to a new school, with a new swim team and a coach I don't even know, and boys who show up on my doorstep at seven in the morning, and I have to take the bus, and my lab partner sleeps through class, and it's all Dad's

fault.” I stopped talking and stared down at the carpet, aware of her eyes on me. Sure, I was mad. Of course I was mad. How could I *not* be mad? But what was I supposed to do about it? I’d already cut Dad out. I couldn’t erase him from the planet completely, no matter how much I wished I could.

“But it’s your wedding, and I think Dad has to be there.” It was like poison on my tongue to admit that. If it were my wedding, I’d have a very large human guarding the door to make sure Coach Masterson couldn’t come in.

She nodded, but she stared off into space, her face alive with doubt.

I tried to smile. “Look on the bright side. At least on Friday night you’ll have all those naked guys to distract you.”

She groaned. “God, I’m sorry Julie is being totally ridiculous with the strip club thing.”

I was not at all upset about not being able to attend my sister’s bachelorette party. Her other bridesmaids had decided the night would be incomplete without leather-clad men shaking their junk around, and luckily for me, no one was letting me into a strip club.

“Trust me, it’s not a problem,” I told her, getting up to put my shoes back on.

“Hey, maybe I can give Michael a call and he can come put on a private show for you.” She waggled her eyebrows at me, and I tossed my shoe at her.

• • •

After we got back to the apartment, Lily and I were discussing the validity of competitive cooking shows when I threw the door

open, and we both stopped cold. My mother was crumpled on the entry room floor, crying.

Lily and I were on our knees on either side of her before the door had even fallen closed. For half a second, our mom didn't seem to notice we were there. She sobbed into her hands, dressed in a black pencil skirt and a white blouse, her high heels discarded on the floor beside her.

"Mom?" Lily asked because I couldn't. We looked at each other in horror.

"Oh God. I'm so sorry." My mother looked for a moment like she was going to paste on a smile and face us, but when she took in a deep breath, it seemed too much for her because she exhaled a sob and was crying again.

We helped her to her feet and led her to the kitchen table, where Lily sat patting her back while I put water for tea on to boil.

When my mother met my eye, she looked a little like a fun-house clown. Her makeup had run, her eyeliner trailing black marks down her cheeks and her bright-red lipstick smudged down her chin. "I'm okay, girls. Today was just a tough one. Turns out that no one wants to hire me, even with a master's degree. That's what I get for deciding I should be a stay-at-home mom for so long."

I knew she didn't mean her comment to be hurtful, but I still felt a twinge of guilt in my chest. If it weren't for me, if it weren't for Lily, she would have kept her old job, would have been perfectly successful, wouldn't be trying to start from the bottom.

My mother sighed, her momentary bravado gone and her shoulders sinking low. "I didn't mean it like that. I loved staying home with you girls."

I nodded, but turned to pull the teakettle off the stove so that I wouldn't have to look at her anymore. What was I supposed to do for my mother? How was I supposed to help her rebuild her life when I couldn't even figure out how to rebuild my own?

I dipped tea bags in three cups and turned back to face them. "Let's stay in tonight," I said, walking the few steps from the stove to the kitchen table and setting cups of hot tea in front of them. "I don't really want to go out. I can make spaghetti or something."

My mother smiled, obviously relieved. "That sounds nice."

I went to the pantry to take out pasta and sauce, pushing aside boxes still piled in front of the oven. Mom and Lily spoke quietly at the table while I started dinner, but I kept my eye on them as I worked. How had things fallen apart so fast? A month before, I was prepping for swim season—early-morning swims with Dad, late-night stretches to keep my muscles warm—and now I was listening to my mother cry.

I put water on to boil and tried not to look at Lily and my mom while I pried the box of pasta open. It felt like maybe if I didn't look, I could pretend it wasn't real. I'd never seen my mother break down like that, not even when my grandpa died.

"I'm just going to run to the restroom," my mother said, fanning her face and disappearing down the hall.

Lily got up from the table and leaned against the stove, her arms crossed. "Has she been doing this a lot?" she asked quietly.

I shook my head. "I haven't even seen her look particularly upset."

Lily sighed. "Maybe you guys *should* come stay at my place. I can help you look after her."

I waved her off. "She'll be fine. It's just been a rough week." After word had gotten out about what happened at the pool, my mother slept in the guest room in our old house while she found us a new place to live. She'd hidden in there for over a week, and when she'd emerged, it had been with a rock-solid plan for a new home and a new life. Maybe this wasn't her first breakdown.

"What about you?"

"I'm fine." I couldn't look at her while I said it. I wasn't so positive that I was fine. Or that I would ever be fine. But my mother was getting rid of evidence of a breakdown in the bathroom and my sister was getting married at the end of the week, so it was time for me to be fine.

She nodded, like she believed me. "Do you think we're going to be like that someday?" she asked.

I put a lid on the pot of water. "Who, me and you?"

"Me and Tom."

When I turned to look at her, her eyes were vacant. "What if hurting each other is inevitable?"

"Lily, Tom is not going to cheat on you. And he's not going to be Dad. They're nothing alike. Tom has a soul."

Lily smiled a little, but I could still see that wariness in her eyes, and I wanted to tell her that she and Tom would never end up like Mom and Dad, but what if that was a lie? What if it *was* inevitable that people who loved each other would eventually tear each other apart?

"You're getting married," I said to her, "and it's going to be great." And I tried to believe it.

o o o

"Do you believe that you can really like someone after only meeting them once?" I asked Harris over the phone.

I couldn't see his face, but I could imagine him on the other end, scowling in thought. His voice came out loud from my phone's speaker while I unpacked books in my room, putting them on my bookshelf in alphabetical order.

"Sure, why not?" I heard him take a bite of something, and then he was speaking around the food in his mouth. "I don't think I believe in all that love-at-first-sight bullshit, but I *do* believe in lust at first sight."

I laughed. I supposed that made sense. What I was feeling for that cute boy across the hall wasn't love. It was definitely lust. Definitely, definitely.

"Are you asking me this because you have the hots for some guy you just met?"

"I might."

Harris snorted. "Damn. You've been gone three days, and you're already ready to give it up to the first guy you see?"

"Don't be an asshole. It's not like that. I just think he's cute. And he might be nice. But he smokes." I grimaced at the memory of cigarette smoke curling out of his mouth.

Harris chuckled. "Man, you really caught yourself a good one. So, what's the problem?"

"There's not really a problem. I'm just not good at boys."

He laughed. "It's really not that complicated. You smile a lot,

you tell him how great he is, and *bam*, he wants to follow you around everywhere. April told me she liked my abs while she was wearing that bikini, the one with the cherries all over it. That's all it took. I was done for."

I snorted. "Oh, it's that easy, huh? I'll just walk up to him, tell him I really like his hair, and we'll live happily ever after? Well, thanks, Harris. Problem solved."

"What? It worked for me!" Harris said. "My relationship with April is totally simple. No drama, no games. It's the best."

"Yes, well, good for you, but *normal* relationships don't work that way, and I'm not just going to walk up to Michael, tell him I like his dimples, and assume he'll just fall all over me because of it."

"Your loss," he said with a sigh. "You seem to have a good list worked up. Hair, dimples."

"How was practice today?" I said over him, pulling the subject away from Michael's dimples.

I could practically hear him rolling his eyes. "You know how it is. Coach yelled way too loud and everyone ground their teeth until it felt like the world was going to split open. Cal hurled in the pool."

"Can you not call him Coach? It's weird."

Harris was silent for a moment. "That's the dumbest thing you've ever said to me. He's my coach. I've always called him Coach."

"I know, but everything's different now. It's like, you guys are there, and I'm here, and how can he be Coach when I'm not there?"

"That makes absolutely no sense."

I tossed the book in my hand onto my desk, where it landed with a loud *smack*. “I know it doesn’t make sense.” Nothing seemed to make sense in my brain these days.

“You could always come back.”

I thought he meant it as a joke, but there was something about the silence that followed that told me he didn’t. “Come on, Harris. You know that’s not an option. I can’t even look him in the eye without feeling like I’m going to be sick. Or claw his eyes out. Or both.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I know. This all just feels so *wrong*, you know?”

It felt wrong to me, too. The whole world felt inverted, spinning in funny directions like a kaleidoscope. I thought going back to swim would make everything feel normal, but when I thought about it, my skin prickled and went hot in fear. But how could I be scared of swimming? “Okay, new topic.”

“Yeah, um, there’s actually something I wanted to talk to you about.”

I didn’t like the hesitation in his voice. It was like sirens going off seconds before a tornado hit. “What?”

“I’m not going to be able to make it to Lily’s wedding. I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you earlier, but I didn’t want to add to your stress.”

“Oh.” It was hard to explain why, but this news was a punch to the chest. Maybe because when my dad got caught, Harris was there every second afterward, and now, I hadn’t seen him in almost a week, and that was somehow more painful than I thought it would be. “Oh. Okay. Other plans?”

“This stupid family thing. The parentals want me to look at

a college up in Seattle, and we have to visit my grandmother while we're there. We're driving up for the weekend. I really am sorry, Kate. I tried to get out of it."

"I'm not mad." It almost felt like the truth. It wasn't as much that I was mad as hurt, I supposed. "I was just looking forward to seeing you."

"Me, too. God. I didn't think I was going to miss you this much. Hey, now that you live closer, we should totally go to Hoochie's."

I laughed. "Yeah, you're right." Hoochie's was an ice-cream parlor in Hillsboro that Harris and I discovered after a meet freshman year. We used to drive out on special occasions to eat our weight in pistachio ice cream.

"Why don't we go out next week? Maybe things with your dad will have calmed down by then."

Things would never calm down with my father, but just this once, I thought I'd let Harris's optimism slide. "Yeah, maybe."



I couldn't sleep, thinking about meeting my new team the next day. I stared at the ceiling and tried to ignore the way the blood vibrated in my veins, the way anxiety started to roil in my stomach. I wasn't even sure what I was so afraid of. I knew that I could be the best here, just like I was the best back in Salem. But it felt like more than that. If I was the best, was the rest of the team going to resent me? If I came out of nowhere and outshone their hard work, was I going to be completely alone on the team, with only enemies and no friends?

I felt like a jackass, assuming I would be better than everyone when I walked in the door. But the research I'd done on my new

school's swim team had told me they weren't ranked very high and hadn't made it very far last competition season.

The apartment was quiet, and I tiptoed past my mother's bedroom and into the kitchen, looking aimlessly for something to kill my nerves. Then I remembered the rooftop pool. I hadn't been up yet, but maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to go for a swim before practice tomorrow. I ignored the heavy pounding of my heart and went for the front door.

The door to the roof was unlocked, but when I stepped out into the cool Portland air, the smell of the pool's chlorine was tainted by the bitter aroma of cigarette smoke, and I immediately turned to leave. It was the middle of the night, and I wasn't interested in being stuck on the roof with a stranger. But when I saw the outline of the person perched on the edge of a bench against the roof's edge with a cigarette in one hand and a book in the other, I stopped.

I watched Michael for a moment in the light of a wall sconce, wondering if I should leave him alone, but before I could make up my mind, he'd lifted his head and spotted me. His eyebrows furrowed. "Kate?"

I lifted a hand in an awkward wave. Part of me still wanted to bolt, but I moved closer to him instead, until my toes were hanging over the edge of the pool beside the bench. He was reading *The Great Gatsby*.

"I guess your overachievement makes sense now." I nodded at the book.

He looked down at it, like he was surprised to find it in his hand. "Yeah. I don't sleep well."

I crossed my arms over myself, cold in my barely-there

pajamas out in the exposed air. I took a second to study the pool for the first time. It was generously sized and rectangular.

“You really shouldn’t smoke,” I told Michael. I might not have had the guts to make a comment like that normally, but I was caught off guard from my anxiety. Didn’t they have health classes in Portland? I imagined the class I took at my old school. They’d shown us pictures of blackened smokers’ lungs to discourage us.

“What, is it bad for me or something?”

I looked over my shoulder at him. He was smiling at me. He stubbed out the cigarette on the bench he sat on.

“That’s the thing about addictions. They’re hard to kick.” He looked at me for a long moment, and the humor on his face seemed to fade. “You okay?”

I looked away from him, down at the water in front of me. I wasn’t sure what I was, but I didn’t think okay was it. How could I explain to someone that the girl who had set a state record in swimming was terrified to get back in the water?

When I didn’t say anything, Michael hopped off the bench. “I’ll give you some space,” he said, and I was simultaneously relieved and disappointed that he was leaving.

I watched him as he went for the door, and then I was alone with the soft beating of the water against the walls of the pool. I stripped down to my bra and underwear and stared down into the water. I took a deep breath, trying to talk some sense into myself. This was my world. What did I have to be afraid of? I dove in.

The water was warm against my skin, peaceful for a moment before the world seemed to grow loud again. With the water pressing against my eardrums, it was almost like I could hear my father screaming from the sidelines.

“You’re swimming like you aren’t even trying! You can do better than this! I know it! Push harder! Where’s your head at?”

Memories slammed into me. Harris in the lane next to me, pushing hard to beat me; Coach Judd on the sidelines; Jenny Carther and April tucking their hair into their swim caps; Chuck making obscene gestures; my hair still dripping when Jenny Carther threw open that door.

I broke the surface and pressed my head to the edge of the pool. My chest felt hot and tight, and I struggled to catch my breath. My hands shook, coming up to cover my face so that I could hear my panicked gasps against my open palms.

I pressed my back to the pool wall and looked out at the water I’d disturbed, splashing up against the sides of the pool in agitated waves. For as long as I could remember, the pool had been a safe space, an escape, a second home.

My stomach clenched, and I curled in on myself. I might not have been the most popular girl in school, and I might not have always gotten straight As or made honor roll or been voted class president. But I’d always had the water to come back to. If everything else fell apart, the pool was always waiting.

And now it felt like a trap, something that would pull me under until I suffocated beneath the weight of it. He’d already taken my home, and now he’d taken the only other place that had felt like mine.

Four

The next morning, Michael was waiting outside my door again. His dark hair was still wet from a shower, his denim button-down was rolled up past his elbows, and a cigarette was already between his fingers, prepared for the moment when we stepped outside.

As we stood on the curb, I tried not to be too obvious, but I couldn't seem to stop looking over at him, noticing every feature. I felt like I had to come up with something to say so that I didn't accidentally tell him that I liked the way his hair stuck up when it was drying in the wind.

"I'm not riding the bus home today," I told him. As soon as it came out, I felt like a complete idiot. Why did he care if I rode the bus home? He wasn't some puppy dog waiting with bated breath for me to re-enter his life.

"Why?" he asked, blowing smoke out into the air. The sky was painfully blue, the air crisp with oncoming autumn.

Well, except for the smell of the cigarette smoke.

“Meeting with my new swim coach after school.” My stomach flipped and I took a deep breath, trying to forget whatever had happened the night before.

He shrugged. “Maybe you’ll be done in time to ride the bus.”

“I have to meet her at the pool. It’s not on campus.”

Like he did the day before, he put his cigarette out on the NO PARKING sign and tossed the butt in the street. “Yeah, they practice at the rec center, right? Why don’t I walk over with you? We can take the TriMet back home.”

The bus was approaching slowly. “The TriMet?”

He motioned for me to climb on ahead of him when the doors swung open, and then he clunked up the metal stairs behind me. “Yeah. The city bus. We ride free with our school IDs.”

“You don’t have plans or anything?” Didn’t he have some beautiful girl waiting on him somewhere? Shouldn’t he be walking her to things and not me, a virtual stranger he’d met the day before?

“No,” he finally said. “No plans.” So I agreed to let him walk me, and we fell into silence as the bus rolled its way past six more stops and then on to school.

When we got inside, he pointed me toward my first period class. It was different from the day before, since the school had an alternating A-day/B-day class schedule, and when I turned to leave, he stepped in front of me, successfully keeping me from Health Science.

“Hey, Kate?”

Michael stood only an inch or two taller than me, and I barely had to lift my eyes to see his dark-blue ones. His eyes flitted over my head for a second, scanning, and then he focused on me again. “I reserved the pool this Saturday night. Some people are coming

over. It's not a party, really, just a few friends. But I thought maybe you'd want to stop by and meet some people."

"Yeah," I said without thinking. If my answer had come any faster, I would have steamrolled over his invitation entirely.

He smiled. "Great."

And then my brain kicked in. I put up a hand, like I could stop his expectations with it. "Oh crap, no. I can't. My sister's wedding is on Saturday."

His smile withered slightly. "Oh. Yeah, okay. You're in the wedding?"

"Maid of honor."

He nodded, his face serious, as if that was pertinent information. "Okay, well, that's great. I'll see you after school. Meet me at the bus stop, and we'll walk over to the rec center."

I opened my mouth to answer, but he'd already turned and hurried away from me.

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I wasn't so lucky with my B-day schedule. I had zero classes with Michael, lunch period with absolutely nobody, and I felt like I was in one of those nightmares where you're wandering around school because you've forgotten where your class is. I was relieved when it was over and it was time to go to swim, even though my stomach was rocketing around inside me at the idea of it. Out of the frying pan and all that jazz.

The rec center was four blocks away from campus—not exactly a long walk, but all I could think about was what was waiting for me at the pool, and that made the walk go on forever.

"You're quiet," Michael said when we were almost halfway there.

I hadn't really noticed that we weren't talking, but as soon as he mentioned it, I became aware of the noise of the city around us: car horns, thumping music, the crunch of concrete beneath our shoes.

I hugged my arms around my waist. "Sorry. I'm just a little nervous."

"Makes sense," he said, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it without losing pace with me.

Luckily, the wind blew his smoke away from us, out into the air. "I've never done this without my dad with me."

When Michael looked over at me, it was with a completely blank expression. He was waiting for me to go on.

"My mom told you he was my coach, right?"

He nodded, even though I could see he wished he didn't have to. What was it about Michael that had made my mother think it was okay to give away all our secrets? And why did I feel like I needed to give him all the ones she hadn't, as well?

"He's always been my coach, and I've never had to do anything swim related without him right next to me. It feels . . ." I trailed off because I didn't really want to admit that I was scared. And really, it was more than fear. "Bizarre," I finally said. "Like none of this is real."

He watched me, his eyes fixed on me, until we were standing right in front of the rec center.

I smelled the chlorine as soon as we walked in the door, permeating the entire building like it had soaked into every surface. There was nothing like the sound of an indoor pool, loud with echoing voices and splashing water. The air was thick and moist, like the air before an oncoming storm, and it only took a second for it to stick to my skin.

The door slammed shut behind us, and all the movement in the room stopped. Spectators peppered the bleachers, and girls in full-body swimsuits hovered around the starting blocks. The only ones who didn't stop to rubberneck were the girls in the pool. They were running drills, and they had no idea that the universe outside of the pool had seemingly been thrown into suspension.

"Kate!" An Asian woman who I knew must be Coach Wu approached me with a smile, her face wrinkling around the edges. Her eyes went to Michael.

"I'll just wait over here," he said in lieu of an introduction. He pointed to the bleachers.

"Let's talk in here." Coach Wu gestured toward an open, generically decorated office. I turned to follow her, but at the last second, I looked behind me. Every single girl, even the ones in the pool, who had completed their drills and were floating with their arms draped over the side, was staring at me. Some of them just looked, some of them whispered to each other, and some of them watched me, their eyebrows furrowed or their faces twisted into rude expressions.

I stood there, taking it all in, and suddenly, everything turned villainous. The chlorine in the air burned my eyes, the moisture made me sweat, the eyes of the girls on me felt like pinpricks, stabbing into my skin. The room became a monster, ready to swallow me whole.

I'd been swimming for ten years. My whole life, from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to sleep, was nothing but the water, but standing in front of these people, knowing that I was an outsider, I felt the panic start in my stomach again and my head go fuzzy.

I pressed my back to the wall and bent over, trying to catch my breath, and I could feel everyone in the room looking at me. I covered my face with my hands and sucked in a breath. I couldn't believe this was happening to me here, in front of everyone.

"Kate?"

"Kate! Wake up! What was that first split? You call that pulling out ahead? You call that your best?"

He wasn't here. My father wasn't here. He couldn't make me get in that pool. I straightened up to see the look on Coach Wu's face, concern and horror.

My father's pride had turned into this woman's distress. The cheers of my former swim team had turned into the judgmental storm cloud of the girls by the pool. My satisfaction at being good at something had turned into this pain in my torso, this aching need to never do any of it again.

"I don't want to do this."

Coach Wu froze. Across the room, Michael watched us.

"I'm sorry, Coach. I know you probably had big plans for me, but I don't want to do this. I don't want to compete anymore."

"But—" Coach Wu started.

Behind me, I could hear the team talking, their whispers loud in the echoing room, some of them even giggling.

Coach Wu stepped to the side to see around me. "Girls! One-arm drills! Now! Switch off!" Her eyes were back on me then, her arms crossed tight. "Kate, your mother—"

"I know," I said. "I'll talk to her."

"I don't understand. You have so much potential. What about college?"

"I'm sorry," I muttered, and I turned and left. I heard Michael

follow me out of the building, and without speaking, he walked with me to the bus stop, where we sat on the bench under the awning.

We sat there for a long time before he spoke. "Are you okay?"

I stared down at the concrete, tires moving over it periodically with a gravelly crunch. "I don't know." The panic had started to subside, my body going back to normal. What was I doing?

"I never wanted this." It was the first time I'd ever really said it, to myself or to anyone else.

"You didn't want to swim?"

When I looked over at him, I saw the confusion written on his face, and it mirrored my own. Because of course I wanted to swim. But everything was different now, and how could I go back? "I've always loved swimming, but competing? That's always been hard for me."

"Then why did you do it?"

I looked at the cigarette dangling between his fingers, not even lit yet, and I reached over without thinking and plucked it from his hand, twirling it in my fingers before handing it back to him. "That's the thing about addictions. They're hard to kick." I wasn't sure if he knew that I wasn't talking about swimming. That the only thing I was really addicted to was making my father happy, making him proud, but I didn't say so, and he didn't ask.

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I was grateful my mother wasn't home when I got there, and I went straight to my room to call Harris. He was the only one who I thought maybe could make sense of what I'd just done. I just quit swim. I just walked away from ten years of hard work,

and why? I loved swimming. I loved being in the pool. But I could never just have the pool. With it came training and competitions and, of course, my father controlling my every move. Everything I did had to be for the next meet and the next goal and the next win.

And I kept doing it, even when I hated it or wanted it to be over. Because at the end of the day, there were two things I craved more than anything else—the feel of the water as it sucked me under and my father’s affection. And those two things kept me going season after season.

And it all looked different now. The pool was a prison cell and my father a monster, and there was no going back.

When Harris finally answered the phone, he was laughing, and then his voice became clear, and he said, “Hey, Kate! Put me on video.”

Without hesitating, I switched him over, and then it wasn’t just him. There was Chuck behind him, giving me the finger, and Cal (200-yard free and Harris’s closest friend on the boys’ team) over his shoulder, waving at me enthusiastically. I could hear the sound of splashing water and laughter in the background.

“What’s going on?” I asked as the other guys wandered off. “Are you at the pool? It isn’t practice day.”

Harris moved, and the noise got quieter until I saw the lobby of the aquatics center behind him. “We decided to meet to get some extra laps in without Coach on our backs.”

I gasped. I’d been so distracted by the guys and his surroundings that I hadn’t really looked at him. “You shaved your head,” I said. Harris had always been opposed to male swimmers

shaving their heads, saying it made them look like walking penises, but alas, there he was in front of me, completely bald.

He ran his hand over his scalp. "Coach thought it would help."

Coach. I felt that sizzle in my blood again. I took a deep breath. This wasn't about Coach Masterson. This was about me and my best friend.

"Did you change your workout regimen?" I asked him, squinting at the screen to see him as best I could.

"Uh, no. Why?"

The thing about swimmers is they're lean. Lean and toned, but there is very little muscle bulk compared to most other athletes. And Harris had always been the leanest of us all. But looking at him now, he looked bigger somehow. Bulkier.

"Well, for starters, your bicep is huge. Are you and Cal lifting? You hate lifting."

"Nah. Nothing like that. Just getting more protein." He sent me a half smile. "Anyway, why'd you call? You miss me?"

I stared at him for a moment, trying to gather the courage, trying to tell him what I'd done. But the words were buried in my chest under the weight of everything else. Looking at him practically glowing, I couldn't tell him. Seeing him in his jammers, his goggles hanging around his neck, I could almost pretend nothing had changed.

"Yep. Just needed a familiar face."

He scoffed. "I thought you'd be the star of the team by now. Slow going?"

"Something like that."

"Things haven't been so great here, either. It's tense, you know? Coach is on edge, and that's put everyone else on edge."

I stared at him. Why couldn't we go one minute without talking about *him*?

"He's been the biggest pain in the ass since you left. You thought he was bad before? Now he's a fucking tyrant. All he does is pace and scream and make us do drills until someone just gives up. He's fished more than one guy out of the pool this week."

I couldn't look at him. "Yeah, it must really put you in a bad mood to screw around on your wife and kick your family out of their house."

He was quiet for a second, watching me. I sighed.

"Sorry. Swimming is just, um, hard for me right now."

His eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

I meant having a panic attack in the pool the night before, I meant the way my heart pounded whenever I thought about getting near the water again, I meant having the stress of my parents' divorce without the comfort of the pool, I meant walking into that rec center this afternoon and feeling like I'd walked into a nightmare I couldn't escape.

Before I could answer him, he said, "I know this whole thing is really fucked up, but it won't be like this forever. You're the best swimmer I know, a hard-core athlete. You'll bounce back from this. Give it time."

"Yeah, I guess," I said, because everything else I needed to say felt stoppered up inside me.

"I should get back," he said. "They're calling for me."

And I was left staring at a blank screen. Harris was the only one who held my hand when I was trying not to pass out in the locker room; he was the one who snuck me my favorite foods

when my father insisted I was taking in too many calories; he was the one who let me whine and complain to him when I didn't want to go to practice, and I wondered if all Harris and I had was swimming. If to him, like everyone else, all I'd ever been was the swimmer girl. And if so, where did that leave us now that I'd quit?



When we sat down to dinner that night with Lily, I was fully prepared to tell my mother about the swim team. I'd spent the afternoon preparing myself to explain to her what I'd just come to realize myself: I couldn't go back to swimming now that everything had changed. The pool was no longer a safe haven, and the sport had lost its appeal.

But my mother didn't ask about Coach Wu, not at first. Instead, she smiled over her plate at us. "Lily, I hope you don't mind, I invited someone to your wedding."

Lily grimaced. "Um, we don't really have room for anyone else." She darted a look at me, and I saw the panic in her eyes. "The catering company has the head count already."

"Oh, the number won't change. Didn't Kate tell you? Harris won't be there."

Lily scowled at me. "Harris isn't coming?"

I felt that familiar disappointment turn in my stomach. "No. He has a family thing."

My mother nodded sagely and then gestured to me. "And after you told me that, I ran into Michael in the elevator, and I invited him to take Harris's place."

I froze, thoughts of Harris vanquished. "You did what?"

Lily looked up at me, her eyes excited. “Michael, the cute boy at the bus stop?” She turned back to Mom. “How do you know Michael?”

My mother’s eyes flew between us. “He lives across the hall.”

Lily looked at me with wide eyes. “He lives across the hall? That’s perfect!”

“Why is it perfect?” My mother seemed thoroughly confused, and so was I.

“Because Kate has a thing for him.”

My mouth fell open. “I do not.” I didn’t think it was a lie. Or at least, I didn’t think I could make a decision about that yet. I’d only know him for a day, and thinking someone was completely gorgeous wasn’t the same as having a thing for them. Unless that thing was serious physical attraction. Then, sure, I had a thing for him.

“Oh, sweetie,” my mother said like I was a little kid with her first valentine, “I didn’t know you had a crush on Michael. Well, now I’m really glad I invited him.”

“Mom, I don’t have a crush on Michael, and besides, you can’t go around inviting random people to Lily’s wedding.”

Lily smiled. “Oh, it’s totally fine. I completely approve.”

Great.

“I just thought you’d like the company,” my mother went on. “Seeing as how you won’t really have any friends there. And since Michael is really the only person you know—”

“Michael isn’t the only person I know,” I said, feeling a little defensive.

And then my mother gasped. “Oh, of course! The girls on the swim team! I can’t believe I completely forgot. How was

your meeting with your coach? When's your tryout? Not that you need one." She winked at Lily, like they were sharing some kind of inside joke.

My brain was so jumbled by the events of the last few minutes that I didn't have the courage to try to confess everything to her now. It was too much all at once.

So, stupidly, I said, "It was great," and hoped she wouldn't see that I was lying. "No tryout. They had a spot open. Practice starts next week."

"Oh, perfect," my mother said, already going back to her food. But when I glanced up at Lily, she was looking back at me, her eyes narrowed.

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"Before you say anything," I said to Michael when I stepped into the hallway the next morning, "I just want to say I'm sorry my mom tried to wrangle you into coming to my sister's wedding. It was totally uncalled for, and I don't even know why she thought that it would be okay. I mean, you barely know us, and you certainly don't want to spend your Saturday at a boring wedding, and I was thinking last night that you have that party going on, so you can totally use that as an excuse, and you won't have to hurt my mom's feelings. If you're worried about her feelings. Which you don't have to be. She'll totally be okay."

When I finally stopped talking, Michael was looking at me with an amused smile. He leaned against his doorjamb. "The wedding's at one, right? People aren't showing up at the pool until seven. Plenty of time for both. And you can come to the party after."

“Oh.” *Oh*. He wanted to come to the wedding? “Don’t feel like you have to come just because she invited you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’d like to come. I mean, if you want me to.”

I could feel my face heating up. If I wanted him to? If I wanted to spend my sister’s entire wedding with him and then go to a party with him, almost like a *date*? “Yeah. I’d like that.”

He did this thing with his mouth, a kind of half-cocked knowing smile that drew my eyes and also made me panic a little. Why was it easier to talk to boys when we were both in swimsuits?

“We’re going to be late for the bus,” I said, and bolted for the stairs.



“So, we were just wondering if you maybe wanted to go.”

I didn’t realize I wasn’t listening to Marisol until she and Patrice were both watching me, apparently waiting for some kind of answer. I’d been thinking about a wedding and a party and a cute boy. “I’m sorry,” I told them, “What is it, again?”

Patrice’s eyebrows turned in slightly. “A party. Saturday.”

I made a motion with my head like, *Oh, right, a party. Of course*. “Oh. Actually, my sister is getting married on Saturday.”

Marisol grinned. “Oh, cool. Are you in the wedding?”

I nodded and picked at the Tater Tots on my plate. “Maid of honor.”

“Here, in town?” Patrice asked, her eyebrows shooting up.

“At that Lutheran church right off the highway? Tom, my sister’s fiancé—his family’s been going there forever, so the whole thing is going to be there. Service and reception.”

When I looked at them again, Marisol looked a little dreamy. She bit her lip and looked over at Patrice. “Do you think that’ll ever be Jesse and me?”

Patrice’s eyes widened a little, but I saw the moment that she took control of her expression. She smiled gracefully, the way she always managed to, and shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“That’s my boyfriend,” Marisol said, her eyes shining. “He’s so gorgeous. Right, Patrice?”

Patrice rolled her eyes. “Not my type.”

Marisol snorted. “Right. Your type is scrawny white boys.”

Patrice put her hand in Marisol’s face. “I’m pretending I didn’t hear that.”

I watched the whole exchange with a smile on my face because I couldn’t help but think that if it weren’t for Marisol and Patrice, I’d be sitting alone in a corner right now, catching up on literature homework.

Patrice turned to me then. “Are you sure you can’t come?”

“Sorry. After the wedding, I have this thing.”

Marisol gasped. “Oh man. I’ve seen that look before. Are you going on a date or something?”

I was quick to shoot that idea down. I’d decided this was definitely not a date. How could it be, anyway, if we were going to be surrounded by people the whole time? My family would be at the wedding, and his friends would be at the party, or whatever it was, and there was no way it could be even remotely considered a date. Right?

“Nothing like that. Just a hangout thing after the wedding. Meeting people, you know.”

Patrice nodded. “Good. You’ll make a ton of friends, I’m sure.

But if something doesn't work out, you're more than welcome to come to our thing. I can absolutely hook you up with a cute boy. We have quite a few in our circle."

Marisol bit a Tater Tot off the end of her fork. "But you can't have either of ours." She smiled at Patrice, but Patrice looked weirdly uncomfortable. Marisol's smile vanished. She put her fork down. "Hey, is everything okay?"

Patrice shrugged, her whole body slumping. "I don't know. He's acting funny again. Probably nothing. You know how he gets."

Marisol pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows in my direction. "That, I do." She rubbed Patrice on the back, and Patrice sighed.

"Forget I said anything," she said, trying to smile again but failing miserably.

"I'm not going to forget you said anything."

Patrice seemed to wilt even further. "Boyfriends are hard work," she said, staring down at her plate.

I was starting to feel a little uncomfortable, partly because I didn't know anything about her boyfriend (and boyfriends, in general), so I couldn't exactly agree with her and partly because I was just terrible at consoling people. "I've never had a boyfriend," I said because I had no clue what else to say.

Marisol's eyes turned on me, wide. "Really? Never?" She said it like I was divulging this information at thirty-five instead of sixteen.

"Never. But my best friend is a guy, so I know how it is. Plus, I had to put up with a whole swim team of rowdy guys all the time, and I know what a pain it can be. It was like having fifteen older brothers all the time. And I know that's not really anything

like having a boyfriend, much less fifteen of them, but I get the basic idea that guys are hard to deal with sometimes.”

When I finally stopped blabbing, Marisol and Patrice both stared at me. Yes, I was terrible at consoling people.

“You know who would be perfect for her?” Marisol finally said just as the bell rang. She was looking at me, but she was obviously talking to Patrice.

“Who?” Patrice stood up, grabbing her tray.

“Ben.”

Patrice’s face split into a grin. “Oh God, you’re right. It really sucks that you can’t come to this party on Saturday. We could have totally introduced you to Ben. Maybe next time.”

“Next time,” I said to myself as I followed them to the trash cans.