

u n d e r w a t e r

marisa reichardt

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Summary: Ever since the mass shooting at her California high school, junior Morgan Grant has become increasingly agoraphobic until even the idea of stepping outside her door can bring on a panic attack, a situation not made any easier by the fact that her parents are divorced—but when Evan moves in next door she finds herself attracted to him and begins to find herself longing for the life she has been missing.

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For Jon and Kai
my home

u n d e r w a t e r

chapter one

I just moved. Not from one town to another, but from one end of the couch to the other end. I don't usually sit on this side, but I'm trying to listen in on the apartment next door. I'm rather particular about where I sit because I like things to be to the left of me. I need to be able to see what's there.

The walls of our two-bedroom apartment are thin and covered in the standard off-white paint of a rental unit, but I still can't make out the words on the other side. I can only decipher the pitch of the voices.

One is high.

One is low.

Girl.

Boy.

And then I hear feet hitting the linoleum floor and the noise of the screen door as it slaps open followed by the double bang of it shutting back into place.

Someone knocks on my door. Their knuckles thrum against the flimsy wood, and the echo of it rings hollow through my apartment.

Yes, I can open the door. But I can't cross the threshold. That's my rule: *Nothing will ever hurt me if I don't cross the threshold.*

I press my shoulder against the door and grab hold of the knob. "Who is it?"

“Evan.”

“I don’t know you.”

“No kidding.” He laughs. “I just moved in next door.”

I peek through the peephole. It offers up a long, distorted version of whoever is out there. It’s not the best view, but I can tell his hands are empty. That’s good.

Even though Evan will eventually segue from new person to neighbor, I’m not eager to get the introduction ball rolling. This kind of attitude is exactly what guarantees that, by the end of the month, Evan will think of me as the weird chick with the frizzy hair who never goes outside. I’m pretty sure that’s what everyone else in my apartment building thinks of me. They leave every day and I stay here. They come home and I’m still here doing the same thing. But right now, Evan doesn’t know all of that, so I should probably open the door even though the thought of it makes my hands sweat. I pull it open a crack. A tiny crack.

Whoa.

Evan is cute.

And he looks my age.

The peephole didn’t do him justice.

He runs his hand through his hair. It’s fluffy and brown with golden sun-bleached tips. His skin is tan, sun-drenched like his hair, and his nose is peeling. He must’ve moved from the beach. Literally. Like, he had a hut on the sand. Something about the way he smells makes me want to stay near him. He reminds me of things I miss. I breathe him in, relishing the aroma of earth and ocean and bonfire smoke.

“Um, hey,” he says. “Are you sick or something?”

I consider shutting the door in his face. How can he call me out so fast?

“Why?” I can hear the edge in my voice, the *back-offness* to my tone. It’s enough to make him straighten up and push back on his flip-flopped feet.

“Sorry. It’s just—it’s Wednesday. Shouldn’t you be at school? Are you home sick?”

Of course he meant was I physically sick, like with pneumonia or explosive diarrhea. Not mentally sick.

“Why aren’t *you* at school?” I say.

“Because I’m moving in today and starting school tomorrow.” He says this like I should get it. “I can’t do both at the same time.”

I realize I’m not being the most welcoming neighbor. “Sorry,” I mumble. “I don’t do well with strangers.”

“Does the fact that I now live next door make me less of a stranger?”

“Not really.”

“Okaaay.” He runs his hand through his hair again like he’s frustrated. But also like he’s trying to understand. It’s the same way my mom looked at me on Thanksgiving four months ago when I told her I couldn’t take the trash out to the Dumpster anymore.

“What was it you wanted?” I ask.

He shakes his head, and one of those golden-tipped curls comes loose and falls down over his eye. He shoves it back behind

his ear. “Is that your car out back with the tarp on it? It says 207 on the space number. That’s you, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Cool, because my mom needs me to unload the U-Haul. I don’t want to scratch your car. Can you move it?”

My heart rate speeds up instantly. It pounds through my chest like rain on the roof. Evan can probably hear the fast and furious thump of it. I wipe my palms against my flannel pajama pants and grasp for excuses. I actually feel like I’m stretching up, reaching for apples on a really high branch.

“I can’t. I’m sick. I can’t leave. I can’t move my car.”

I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. It’s my mantra now.

Evan looks at me. Brow creased. Perplexed. “Wait, I thought you just got mad at me for assuming you were sick. Now you really are sick?”

“Yep.” I cough. “Super sick. And it’s really contagious. You probably shouldn’t get too close.”

He scoots back a couple inches. In the courtyard below, the sunlight smashes against the surface of the swimming pool and shoots a reflection at Evan’s feet so it looks like he’s standing in a puddle. “You don’t wanna move your car?”

“I can’t.”

“But like I said, it’s in the way.”

“How about if you move it?” Yes, brilliant. *Good job, Morgan.* Being quick on my feet is a skill I’m getting progressively better at as the months pass.

“You want *me* to move your car? You just called me a stranger five seconds ago. What if I steal it and sell it on Craigslist?”

“You won’t. Let me get the keys.”

I shut the door and grab the keys from the rack my mom hung in the kitchen after one too many mornings of frantically searching the apartment for lost keys. When I crack the door back open, my breath catches again, because he really is cuter than he should be.

Stop it, Morgan.

I hold the keys up to Evan, but when he reaches in to grab them, my body goes on high alert.

I flinch.

I flutter.

I drop the keys at my feet.

He bends over, calm and steady, eyes on mine the whole time, as he reaches past the threshold to grab them.

His fingertips graze my bare toes.

I jump back.

I breathe fast.

He stands up.

He straightens out.

“Hey, is the pool heated?” he asks. “Or am I gonna freeze my face off if I jump in?”

The pool. I try to ignore it. It taunts me. But I can practically feel the cool water sliding through my fingers and down my back as soon as Evan mentions swimming. I imagine him yanking off his shirt and jumping in. Then I try to unimagine it.

“It’s warm enough, but it’s too short to get a good workout. And too shallow to pull off a flip turn. Plus you have to scoop the leaves out yourself.”

“You sound like you know something about swimming. Are you on a team?”

“Not anymore.”

“Oh. Why not?”

“Because. Just bring the keys back whenever, okay? Or, if you sell it, bring me the cash.”

“I’ll get you a good deal.” He laughs. “I don’t back down too easy.”

I shut the door and hope my car will start. My mom takes it out once in a while to keep it running, but it’s old. She’s actually threatened to sell it. She says we could use the money. I’m pretty sure she’s bluffing. For her, selling my car would be the same as giving up. She’d rather hang on to hope.

My mom hopes I’ll go back to school when it’s time to be a senior.

I do online high school now. Going to my other school got to be too hard. I can’t control things out in the real world. Cars turn corners too fast. Doors slam. People appear out of nowhere. It’s unpredictable.

I don’t like unpredictable.

Home is predictable enough. Until just now when I realized we have new neighbors. And there’s a teenager like me next door. Well, not really like me, because I’m pretty sure Evan actually leaves the house. He looks like he surfs and watches bands play at crammed clubs with entrances in backstreet alleys that require

secret passwords. He looks like he rides his skateboard in the empty parking lots of places in town that have gone out of business or zooms down steep hills for an adrenaline rush. So not really like me at all.

Because he has a life.

I go to school online and eat tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch every day.

I form an assembly line along the coffee-stained Formica of the kitchen counter just the way my dad taught me. Bread. Butter. Cheese. Piping hot griddle.

I like the sound of the sizzle of the butter as it hits the pan. It's a reminder of how quickly things change. One second you're whole, the next second you've melted.

I like to put extra cheese on my sandwich so it drips out over the sides. That way, I can scoop it up, twirl it around my fingertip, and suck it into my mouth. I also dunk the toasty bread into the soup, sopping up what's left in the bottom of the bowl. I eat on the couch where the TV is in front of me and the closed curtains are behind me. I'm a shut-in. I'm unaware if it's foggy, sunny, cold, or hot outside unless I'm specifically paying attention. Nothing changes inside my living room. I have a television lineup, online school, the same lunch, and scheduled ten a.m. and two p.m. check-in phone calls from my mom every weekday.

My psychologist visits twice a week.

Her name is Brenda.

She has a hard edge and soft eyes.

She has tattoos that snake up and down her arms until they

get lost underneath the sleeves or the collar of whatever shirt she's wearing.

She comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays after lunch.

At one p.m.

She'll be here tomorrow.

We'll sit on the couch and she'll make me turn off the TV.

I hate that.

Sometimes Brenda forces me to say things that make me cry. But usually, talking to her calms me down. She also checks up on my medicine to be sure I have enough emergency pills. I need them sometimes. On bad days. Brenda can't prescribe them for me because she's not that kind of doctor. She's a psychologist. My regular doctor gave me the prescription after he talked to Brenda.

Today feels different because Evan is next door.

I can hear the *bang bang* of him hammering nails into the wall. I can hear the *thump thump* of him bounding up the stairs. I can hear the *slap slap* of his screen door as he goes in and out, back and forth, up and down the stairs.

Evan is next door. He smells like the ocean.

This runs through my head for the rest of the day. It's what I hear as I sop up soup and sift through soap operas.

I assume he'll bring my keys back when he's done hauling things inside. But when hours pass and he doesn't return, I wonder if maybe he did sell my car. Or at least moved it someplace far away. That would almost be a relief.

But, eventually, there is a knock at my door.

"Who is it?" I ask, as if anyone else ever comes by unannounced.

“Me again. I have your keys.”

I flick on the porch light because the evening shadows have set in and I want to be able to see him better. He’s a bit sweatier for wear, but his hair is still fluffy and curly and falling into his face in a way that makes me avoid eye contact. He dangles my Pacific Palms High School key chain out in front of him.

“Sorry it took so long, but I put her back where she belongs,” he says. “That Bel Air is a classic. How’d you end up with such a sweet ride?”

“It was my grandpa’s.”

I know nothing about cars. I only know things about this particular matador-red Bel Air because my grandpa told them to me one million times so I could commit the words to memory.

“What year is it?”

“A fifty-seven.”

“Your grandpa must’ve been one cool dude.”

“He was.” I smile and shut the door.

Evan knocks again. He knocks loud and long. I open the door because I can’t not notice him. There’s something pulling me closer to the threshold and I can feel it. There’s a tingle in my big toe. I look down and see I’ve practically got one foot out the door. I yank it back inside, stunned that I even tried.

We stand. We stare.

“Why’d you shut the door like that?” he asks.

Thankfully, my little brother comes soaring through the courtyard right then. His arms are spread out wide like an airplane. His mouth makes the sputtering noises of the engine, and his lips spritz spit into the sky. My mom comes in behind him in

dirty hospital scrubs. Her hair is knotted, sloppy, on the top of her head, and my brother's superhero backpack strains against one of her shoulders. She's not a nurse. She does the gross stuff. From Monday through Friday, she mops up blood and puke from hospital corridors. And some nights, like tonight, she comes home balancing a pizza box from Penzoni's on her hip as she struggles to open our mailbox to fish out the pile of bills inside.

My brother takes the stairs to our front door two at a time. He stops short at Evan's feet. His arms fall flat at his sides and some spittle stalls, then sucks back between his lips—*zzzzzzip*—as he eyes Evan with kindergarten suspicion.

“Who are you?”

“I'm Evan.”

“Evan who?”

Evan laughs. “Uh, Evan Kokua.”

Evan tosses out some sort of secret handshake, bumping his fist against Ben's in a way that sends my little brother into spasms of laughter.

“Are you a superhero?” Ben asks.

Evan shoots my brother a grin that lights up the otherwise dingy wraparound balcony outside our front door, then leans down to look him in the eye. “If I am, I'll never tell.”

“Awesome!”

Ben pushes past me and through the front door. I rock backward then forward, but manage to stay inside.

And then my mom shuffles up the stairs, hands the pizza box over to me, and looks at Evan. “Half cheese, half pepperoni.

I know it's not very original, but you're welcome to join us, Superman."

She brushes past him to get inside.

Evan shifts forward, ready to make the crossing into our tiny apartment, but he stops midstride over the threshold when he looks at me. My eyes must be bugging out of my face, because he falls back into place on the other side of the door, feet firmly planted on our welcome mat.

"Nah, I better not. I've gotta nail a bookshelf to the wall. Earthquakes."

He shrugs. We all shrug.

California earthquakes. We're all waiting for them. We're all waiting for things to happen that might never come—things that, if they do come, might not be as bad as the things that have already occurred.

"I'm Carol," my mom says, shoving her hand past me to grip Evan's. They shake. He smiles.

"It's nice to meet you, Carol. I'm Evan. My mom and I just moved here from Hawaii. You'll meet her, I'm sure."

My mom throws her arms out on each side of her, accidentally thwacking the hanging planter with the dying fern in it hard enough to send it swaying under the porch light. "Welcome to Paradise Manor, Evan. Ain't it grand?"

"Yeah," I say. "I bet you didn't realize paradise has a view of the Dumpster, and no AC."

Evan lets out a genuine laugh that shakes something loose deep inside of me. I like genuine laughter in the same way I like

the warm sun on my face, but I haven't heard or felt either of those things in a long time.

"Well, good night, then," my mom says as she slips all the way inside. "You'll have to swing by for pizza some other time. Right, Morgan?" It's not a question. It's an expectation. It's a request to hurry up and have a life again.

"Um, right," I say, rolling the knotted string of my daytime pajama pants between my fingertips. I stand at the door staring at Evan. "Sorry. My mom's kind of embarrassing."

"Not really. She just tells it like it is. It's not like we don't know where we are. It's not like we don't know we're living the lyrics to a bad country song." He fakes strumming a guitar.

Something about Evan makes me want to be brave, so I fasten a fake guitar strap across my own shoulder and strum the strings at my waist.

"She lives in a rundownwwwn building on the outskirts of towwwwwn," I croon in an over-the-top country twang.

"Not bad," he says as he backs away from the door, nodding. "Not bad at all. I'm gonna have to write some music to go along with that. Right after I learn to play the guitar."

The idea of us making music together is so ludicrous that it makes me laugh.

Evan grins at me. "You have a good laugh. Like when you hand one out, you mean it. My cousin was like that."

The compliment throws me off-kilter, and I play it back in my head to be sure I heard him right. "Well, your cousin must've been one cool dude."

He smiles halfheartedly. “Yeah. I think you would’ve liked him.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Well, I hope you feel better. My mom swears by soup. Do you have any?”

That makes me laugh again.

“What?”

“That was just really funny in a way you don’t even know.”

“Oh, well, then I’m glad I could make you laugh. Again.”

“Me too.”

I’m still laughing as I say goodbye and shut the door behind me. It’s a sound that echoes inside and outside of me, and it stops my mom in her tracks when I turn to face her. She stands dead still in the center of the kitchen and looks at me, a smile creeping across her face. It’s quick. There and gone. And then she pulls a slice of pizza from the box and slaps it down on my brother’s plate.

“You eating?” she asks me.

I nod and pull myself onto my stool at the kitchen counter. The stool where my mom and Ben are to the left of me because they know the drill.

“Evan seems nice. Did you talk for long?” my mom asks. She’s fishing.

“Long enough.”

“I’m not sure it was long enough for him. He wanted to stay for dinner.”

“He shoulda stayed,” Ben says. “He’s cool.”

“Yep, too cool for me, I think.” I grab a slice of pizza and turn to my brother. “So who’d you play with at school? I want to hear all about it.”

Ben launches into a story about recess. He tells me about how they played Farm and all the kids were different animals and he got to be the farmer.

“That’s the best part because then you get to pretend to feed all the people.” He laughs, then shakes his head trying to knock his mistake loose. “I mean, the animals.”

He keeps talking, animated and stuttering with excitement. I listen to the sound of his voice. And even though the sides of his mouth are covered in tomato sauce and he smells like kickball sweat and playground dirt, I pull him into me and kiss the top of his messy head of hair.

“I love you,” I tell him. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he says through a mouthful of pizza. “I love you, too.”

chapter two

My emergency pills are in an amber prescription bottle on the second shelf of the medicine cabinet. I look at them every morning and hope today isn't a day when I'll need to take one. But knowing they are there makes me feel better. I haven't needed an emergency pill for almost two months. Since Valentine's Day. That was a bad day because my dad called. I refused to get on the phone even though he asked to talk to me. That was the last time he tried. But he did talk to my mom, which made her angry. And he talked to Ben, which made him confused. Ben asked my dad when he was coming home, because by then it had been over a year since Ben had seen him. Over a year since he'd returned from his last tour, his fifth one, in Afghanistan. Over a year since my mom had filed for divorce and full custody. Once Ben had gone into another room where he couldn't hear her, my mom told my dad he'd better not even think about showing up at Paradise Manor.

So he didn't.

And he probably never will.

After my mom and Ben have left for work and school, I hold the amber prescription bottle in my hand. I run my thumb over the label that tells Morgan Grant to take one pill as needed.

Not today.

I put it back.

I shut the door.

I hear Evan leave when I'm in my room pulling on a clean pair of pajama pants—I don't see the point of wearing real clothes since I never leave the house. *Slap slap* goes his screen door and *boom boom* go his footsteps on the stairs outside. I pull back my curtains and watch him go.

It's the first week of April, but today will be Evan's first day of school. Everything will be new, but enough of it will be the same. Because it's still high school. And high school doesn't change that much from one place to another. Evan will go to a classroom. He will sit in a desk that faces a whiteboard. A teacher will stand at a podium and tell him things that are supposed to sound smart. Evan will write them down in a notebook covered in graffiti doodles. The girls at school will like him; I'm sure of it. The pretty girls will call dibs and drag him off to the quad at lunchtime to watch them eat apples and sip Diet Coke. I know this because I used to be one of those girls.

I think about these things.

I watch a soap opera.

I eat a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup.

I complete two online lessons.

I study the Rolle's theorem.

I e-mail an analysis of colors in *The Great Gatsby* to my English teacher.

I wait for Brenda.

I wait for one p.m.

* * *

At noon, I know Brenda is coming soon. It is because of this that I feel zingy electricity in my veins. I know she's coming and I have to open the door to let her in.

I have to talk. I have to tell.

Maybe a shower will help.

I duck my head under the hot water and let it soak through to my skull. My hair suction itself to my ears, locking the noise out. I like being underwater where it's only me. Sounds and the world are far away.

I've spent a lot of time underwater because I used to be on my high school swim team. I swam every weekday, even in the off-season, from three until four thirty p.m., in the twenty-five-yard lanes of the Pacific Palms High School pool. I swam with the same three friends I'd met on youth squad when I was eleven and my dad first received orders to a base near Pacific Palms.

My mom was newly pregnant with Ben so we'd hoped my dad's transfer meant he would be home for a while. But we'd barely gotten settled when he was called up for his third tour in Afghanistan. So he returned to combat and my mom and I committed to making the best of Pacific Palms.

I got close to my swim team friends, and by the time we got to high school, we'd become an inseparable foursome. Chelsea was brilliant and beautiful in that blond SoCal way that made boys stutter when they talked to her. Brianna swam the fifty-yard free-style faster than any other girl in the history of our high school. And my best friend, Sage, was wise beyond her years, poised to

perfection on Model UN and talking about things other sixteen-year-olds didn't even know existed.

I was a little of all of that. But after October fifteenth, after that day, Pacific Palms High School shut down. My friends and I had to go to different schools so construction workers could get busy changing the parts of PPHS that would haunt us forever. The administration split up students based on a set of neighborhood boundaries they'd come up with. The four of us didn't live close enough to go to the same place, so we drifted as things continued to change.

Brianna got a boyfriend.

I started online high school.

Chelsea stopped calling.

And Sage moved away before she was even supposed to start at her new school.

But at our old school, I imagined the bright blue championship banners still hanging from the rungs of the metal fence that ran around the outdoor pool deck. I didn't know if they were still there, but I wanted them to be. Because my name was on one of them. I held a record. I was a long-distance swimmer. I was someone who could go on and on forever, steady and even, then finish hard to pull off the win.

Now my whole life is a race. Every minute leading to the next. Every day feeding into another. It's a constant crossing of the finish line. It's like playing a fast song slow.

Chelsea and Brianna don't understand that. They tried. They'd come over, but we'd only end up sitting and staring at the television.

“Come with us to the party,” Brianna would beg. “There are going to be so many cute boys.”

“So many,” Chelsea would echo.

I’d curl up tighter on the couch, tucking my slippers under me. “I don’t care about cute boys or parties right now. But don’t let me stop you from enjoying them.”

“It’s not the same without you,” Chelsea would whine.

Sage would call from her new house on the weekends. More often than not, she’d sound distant and sad and in search of solutions. “So you quit school?” she’d ask. “Is it easier?”

“A little,” I’d say.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Brenda knocks her knuckles against my door at 12:57 p.m. I want those three minutes before one p.m. to myself. But she’s here. So I breathe deep. I breathe long. And I open the door. Brenda smiles, and I can see the gap between her top two teeth that makes her look like a little kid. I know how old she is because I once asked her to tell me.

“If it really matters, I’m twenty-nine,” she said. “But why do you want to know?”

“I just wanted to see if you would tell me.”

Today, a long burgundy dreadlock falls into her face, and she tucks it back into the other chunk of dreads she has fastened with an oversize ponytail holder at the nape of her neck. I can see the string of tiny silver loops that line her lobe when she does it. And

the peace sign tattoo etched into the skin behind her ear. I pull the door all the way open, and she comes inside.

She sits. She is to the left of me because she knows. She takes out a notebook and a pen. She has pages filled about me. I'm sure she goes back to her office after we meet and types the notes into her computer. She didn't tell me that. I just know. I'd be stupid not to know. Everyone keeps everything on computers.

She pulls the remote from my hand and shuts off the TV with a click.

We stare. We start.

“So. How have the last couple days been for you?”

I tell her about the mundane stuff that happened yesterday and today. Soup. Soap operas. School assignments. And then I tell her about Evan.

“A boy? Your age?” She's intrigued. I can tell by the way she taps her pen against her notebook. “Tell me about him.”

“He's tall. And summery.”

“Summery? What does ‘summery’ mean to you?” Her voice is calm, like petting a cat.

And then I tell her about soft sand and crisp ocean water. Of bright blue skies dotted with seagulls and airplanes. Of those same blue skies turning dark and dotted with the moon and stars. I tell her of bonfire smoke and surfboards. Of tank tops and short shorts. Of beach cruiser bicycles and snow cones. Of string bikinis and tan lines. Of parties and promises. Of cold beer and warm kisses.

I tell her all the things I used to be before this. It's not the

first time I've told her, but she seems to be listening extra hard today. I think it must be because I sound wistful.

"Do you miss it?" she asks me.

And that makes me cry.

She hands me a tissue, and I sit like a lump on the couch.

"Missing summer is a good thing," she says. "It will be here before you know it. You can be ready for it. You can enjoy it again."

After she's gone, I feel better for a little bit. I don't hate thinking about summer. But then I think too much about other stuff. I curl up into the fetal position, knees tucked into my chest, waiting for the memories to pass.

An hour after that, there's a knock on my door. I'm still curled up, but I've stopped crying. My nose is stuffed up with snot, and I snort it down into my throat. My eyelids are puffy, and the throb of a headache bangs at my temples. I want to be alone. I stay very still and hope whoever is knocking will go away. But they don't. Whoever it is wants me to know they are there.

"Who is it?" I ask through the door.

"Superman."

Even though that makes me smile, I tell Evan I'm not dressed. "I can't open the door."

"Well, get dressed. I'll wait."

So I do. I don't know why, but I do.

I scrub my face. I run a brush through my hair. I dab

deodorant under my armpits. I put on a clean bra and change my stained shirt. I do it all in five minutes flat.

When I crack open the door, Evan's holding some envelopes and a white to-go cup of something. There's a lid on top with three holes poked through it, like the lids of jars Ben uses to collect bugs from the planter at the entrance to Paradise Manor.

"First off, we got some of your mail," Evan says, handing over a credit card bill and some grocery store coupons.

"Feel free to keep them."

He smiles. "Second, I brought you some soup. To make you feel better." I can smell the garlic through the lid when he holds it out to me. "My aunt owns a restaurant. They make good soup."

"I like soup."

"Well, yeah. Doesn't everybody?"

I shrug.

I watch Evan take me in. "Wow, you don't look so good."

"Okay, then." His words hit me hard. I shouldn't have opened the door. I don't need this cute boy from Hawaii to bring me soup and tell me I'm not pretty. There was a time in my life when I knew I was pretty. But I don't feel that way right now.

"Aw, man." He runs his hand through his hair, flustered. "Look, I'm sorry. That came out wrong. That sounded like I think you're ugly or something. Which you're not." He looks down at our welcome mat. "You just look sick. That's all."

Right. Sick. I push my hair back from my face with my free hand, knotting it on top of my head without a ponytail holder.

"It's okay," I say.

“I just meant you seem worse today. So maybe it’s one of those things where you have to get worse before you get better.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

I pull the lid off the soup. A stream of steam hits the air between us. The smell of garlic goes from pleasant to overwhelming.

“I didn’t want it to get cold. That’s why I needed you to open up,” he says.

“Thanks, Superman.”

He grins like he’s relieved I’m calling him that. I notice dimples digging into his tan cheeks. There’s a part of me that wants to nudge my pointer finger into one of them because they’re so cute.

“I’m not Superman. Clark Kent, maybe. Not Superman.”

“Yeah, okay.” I smile.

Evan kicks the front of his flip-flop against the edge of our welcome mat.

“So did you learn to play the guitar yet?” I ask.

“Nope.” He laughs. “Did you write any songs?”

“Oh, yeah. Dozens.”

“I better pick up the pace then.” He grins and those dimples show up again. “But right now, I better go do my homework. This trigonometry class is way ahead of where we were at my old school.”

“Trig, huh? So are you a junior?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Same.” I don’t tell him I’m already in calculus and that math is the one of the few subjects I haven’t let slip.

“Well, you need to get well so you can show me around town, okay? I don’t know anybody here.”

I think about how fun that would’ve been a year ago. When I was the way I was before. I would’ve taken him to Clyde’s Coffee for frozen hot chocolate. And I would’ve shown him the strip of beach where the locals hang out and the tourists don’t. I would’ve shown him which hill it was fun to ride down on your bike, and I would’ve let go of my handlebars and let my arms fly out like wings while the wind whipped past my ears. And on a Saturday night, I would’ve taken him to a party and leaned into him so his lips would’ve been close to my ear when he talked. That move always worked. I would’ve shown him the alcove in the hallway by the auditorium at school where I used to think I could hide and nobody would find me. I would’ve shown him my world. Now, I can’t show him anything but a tiny apartment and a girl who can’t walk out the front door.

“I don’t get out much. But thanks for the soup. I’m sure it’ll taste really good.”

Before he can say anything, I shut the door and leave him behind it.

chapter three

Ben loves pancakes. It's our Friday morning ritual, and I wake him up fifteen minutes early to make sure it happens. Today, he climbs onto a stool at the counter and I let him pour the milk and crack an egg into the batter. He stirs and talks. He tells me about kids at school and the words he's learning to spell. He talks about the library and how the section about science is his favorite.

"There's a book about electricity," he says. "And another one about rocks. Rocks are cool. Did you know diamonds can cut glass?"

Pancake mornings with Ben are the best. We eat breakfast and chat until my mom hustles him out the door to drop him off at his before-school program. She runs around the apartment and talks at the same time.

"Don't forget we'll be late tonight. I'm taking Ben to a birthday party." She stops. She stands. She puts her hands on her hips and looks up and down and all around. "Ben, where's the gift?"

"I dunno. You wrapped it."

She runs off to find it. I hand Ben his lunch and ruffle the top of his just-combed hair. "Hey, sneak me a piece of cake if you can. Especially if it's chocolate."

I bend down to zip up his sweatshirt and he plants a wet kiss on my cheek. He grabs me around the neck and holds on tight.

“Rawwwwr. I’m a dinosaur. I’ve got you. Rawwwwr. You can’t get away.”

I stand up, pretending to struggle under his grasp. He stays put, dangling from my neck like a mess of fat gold chains on a rap star. I swing him around the living room and he laughs. Then I bend down and plant a bunch of kisses on top of his head, tickling him until he loosens his grip and I can slide him back down to the floor. He struggles to stand straight, winded from laughing.

“Have a good day,” I tell him. “Don’t spend the whole time reading about rocks. Listen to your teacher. Be nice.”

“I am nice.”

My mom hands Ben the gift so he can carry it to the car, then does one final tug on the bun on top of her head.

“Do something,” she tells me. “Even something small.”

And they’re out the door. And the house is empty. And quiet. I can breathe.

I take a shower. I comb my hair and part it. I put on clean pajama pants and a soft T-shirt from a concert I went to once.

It was at an arena downtown. My boyfriend, Alexios, and I stood in a general admission pit instead of sitting in the assigned seats of the sections above us. Alexios had surprised me with tickets for my sixteenth birthday. It was my favorite band, so I wanted to be in front where I could reach out and touch the stage. Being in front meant people crowded around me, pressing in. Hip to hip. Shoulder to shoulder. Elbow to elbow. Like we were

all part of one huge mass. Back then, I didn't mind the crowds. Or the noise. Or the way the ground vibrated underneath me. I wasn't afraid. But Alexios stood behind me anyway. Protective. He was a senior, but he didn't seem too old or too hard to talk to like some senior boys can be. He was my first real boyfriend. And at the concert, his arms were wrapped around my waist. His mouth was behind my ear. He was so much taller than me that nobody dared invade our space. He pushed them off with a simple twist of his shoulder.

Onstage, there was a guy with a bass and a girl on the drums and another girl with a guitar and a microphone. I shouted out all the words because I knew them by heart. I bounced when the songs got faster, and Alexios bounced behind me, still holding on tight.

By the end of the night, we were hot and sweaty and almost in love. We were in love enough that when he told me his parents were out of town for the weekend, I texted my mom to say I was spending the night at Sage's house. But I went home with him instead. We left our jeans and T-shirts in a tangled pile on the floor and climbed into his bed, where he gently pulled me to his mouth by my cheekbones.

We stayed together for six months.

We stayed together until we decided we liked other people. The breakup wasn't ugly or tear-filled. It was simply how it was. It was high school. Alexios was my boyfriend for six months, and then he wasn't.

And now he's in college and I'm in an apartment.

* * *

I spend the rest of the morning watching video lectures for English and calculus, then e-mail in an assignment for US history. After that, I focus on small things. I make my bed and move to the other side of the room to make Ben's bed. We share a room because we have to. We've always had to because we've lived in Paradise Manor since he was born. Ben's bed is to the left of mine. If it weren't, I'd never sleep. I clean the toilet and the mirrors in the bathroom. I pace. I watch. I sit and listen.

My mom and Ben are more than halfway through their days. Evan is, too. I don't know why I think of him, but I do.

I listen to the silence. Then I turn on the TV.

There are news people reporting live from my old high school. I feel my stomach cramp. I might have instant diarrhea.

A pretty news reporter wears a flippy dress and stands by the front office where big chunky metal letters spell out PACIFIC PALMS HIGH SCHOOL on the wall behind her. The reporter talks into a microphone as her hair blows around her face and gets stuck in the hot-pink lipstick on her mouth. She explains that my school is still closed but determined to reopen in the fall. I can hear the wind swish through the microphone. She pulls her hair back and talks about the new language arts building going up on campus. It will be called Finnegan Hall after my English teacher who died there. The building will go where the old one used to be. In between the math building and the auditorium. And the courtyard where Brianna, Chelsea, Sage, and I used to

eat lunch will still be right in the middle. The reporter talks about the memorial wall that will be there, too. I fumble for the remote.

Before I can stop it they switch to footage from October fifteenth. They show a line of police cars twisting around the block. They show my classmates filtering out of the school, single file, hands on top of their heads, daring glances over their shoulders at the chaos behind them. My insides clench when I see Chelsea. It's the way I remember her. The news people always show the footage with her in it because she's screaming and crying and looks the most panicked out of everyone.

I can't catch my breath. I feel like Ben is sitting on my chest—the way he does when we are pretending to wrestle. I finally get the remote straight between my fingers. I shut off the TV. I run to the medicine cabinet for my emergency pills. They are there, like a rope tethering me to the world. I need one. For the first time in almost eight weeks, I have to go there.

Twist, thwap, gulp.

I wait.

It's not what I want it to be.

It's not instant.

The zingy electricity is too much. I pace the living room. Back and forth. In front of the window. With the blinds closed. I might be dying.

I'm pretty sure I'm dying.

I don't know what to do, so I call Brenda. She picks up on the second ring. I tell her about what I saw on the news. Chelsea. My

school. I tell her how it made me remember. I tell her the building is gone but the memories aren't.

"Seeing it like that is too real," I say. "It makes it all come back."

She tells me to breathe. She tells me I'm okay. She tells me I'm not dying. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. She tells me to picture myself in my favorite place, which I say is on a beach towel underneath the hot sun. I miss it. She talks about that place and how I can go there, in my head, on days like this. Her voice is soft, like fuzzy slippers. And when she's done, I can think again.

I tell her I will be okay now.

We hang up. I go to my room. I pick up Ben's stuffed animals from the floor and toss them onto his bed. I lie on my own bed. I stare at the ceiling and think of more good things. I think of Ben on the day he was born, all chubby and pink and bald. We sent pictures and a short video through e-mail to my dad in Afghanistan. He wrote us back saying, *There's my boy*, and told us everyone in his platoon toasted him that day. He was good and proud. He was happy in the way I liked to remember him, because that happiness quickly slipped away when he returned and got even worse when he was deployed again. I think of the way newborn Ben wrapped his tiny fingers around one of mine. I think of sitting next to my mom's hospital bed and rocking him under dim lights while he slept in my arms. I fall asleep to a feeling of a love I never knew until my brother got here.

chapter four

Nighttime makes the darkness last forever. I'm used to being alone during the day, but when my family is gone at night, I feel it. I'm used to snuggling up to Ben before bed and reading him books. We climb between the sheets and he curls into me to turn the pages. I run my fingers along the bigger words, hoping my pointing will help him to learn them. When he drifts off, his head droops underneath my chin and I can smell his apple shampoo. The dirty boy smell has been scrubbed clean. His mouth tilts open as he breathes his toothpaste breath on me. He has dark green pajamas with dinosaurs on them. The top buttons up and has a collar like a fancy shirt someone would wear to work in an office.

Tonight, Ben and my mom are at a birthday party.

Ben is eating pizza.

And cake.

He's playing arcade games.

He will win a prize.

It will be loud and noisy with the chaos of kids.

If I were there, I'd be sweaty. I'd be overwhelmed. I'd want emptiness and I wouldn't be able to find it. I'd have to cup my hands over my ears to block out the noise. Being in the middle of the chaos would make me feel like throwing up. I'd go to the bathroom and grasp the sides of the sink to wait for it to happen.

I'd take deep breaths.

I'd talk to myself in the mirror.

After a while, I'd feel like I could breathe again.

I'd take another deep breath. I'd draw in oxygen like I'd been trapped under an ocean wave and just rose to the surface. It would feel good.

I'd splash cold water from the public bathroom sink on my face. I would think it was gross because the sink wouldn't be very clean. And there would be the faint smell of a dirty diaper coming from the trash can. But I would splash water on my face anyway because of the noise. And the flashing lights. And the screaming kids.

I know these things because I've done these things.

I tried to live in the world after October fifteenth.

I tried and I failed.

After October fifteenth, after that day, we had two weeks of candlelight vigils and celebrations of life instead of classes. Chelsea, Brianna, Sage, and I held hands and cried at every one of them. I told myself we were all hurting in the same way. I told myself I wasn't worse off or different. And then I started at Ocean High School. A school that wasn't mine. I tried to make the best of it. I slung my messenger bag crammed with books and pens and notebooks across my chest and walked through the hallways of my new school like it was no big deal. For three weeks, I pretended the slamming of lockers didn't startle me. And the endless

sea of backpacks didn't make me flinch. And the crowded cafeteria didn't make my heart beat too fast. I tried to sit in classrooms and pay attention, but the distraction was there. It was a gnawing feeling in the back of my head.

One day, in the middle of my Spanish class, I watched a girl across the room. She tossed her head back and laughed at something a boy mispronounced. She was pretty and had freckles. He was tall and lanky and had bangs that fell into his face. I gnawed on a pencil and watched them, wondering what it would be like to feel that way again. Then a door slammed across the hallway and it set off a trigger in my body.

I thought I was dying.

I was sweaty. And hot. And sick to my stomach. My heart beat so fast against my chest that I couldn't catch my breath, and I felt like my head might explode because it hurt so much. I stood up, and my teacher stopped writing on the whiteboard to stare at me.

“Qué pasa, Morgan?”

“I'm dying.” We weren't supposed to speak in English in Spanish class, but I did it anyway.

The blood drained from Señora Gutiérrez's face as her eyes darted to the shut door. She was panicked. I'd said words you weren't allowed to say in a school unless you were serious.

She picked up the phone on her desk and called whoever she was supposed to call in an emergency. People came—an ambulance and medics and police officers and firefighters. And it looked like October fifteenth. It looked like that day. And I'm sure it was very upsetting for a lot of people, because students in

my class wrung their hands and peered over their shoulders like they were waiting for the next bad thing to happen.

I was taken away in an ambulance. We went to the hospital where my mom works. She was sweaty when she got to the ER, like she'd run from far away even though it was only from the cancer ward three floors up. She'd run the whole way because that's what moms do when they hear their kids are in the emergency room. When she found me sitting on a bed with the privacy curtain wide open, she hugged me and I sank into her chest and cried.

My mom went down the hall and around the corner with me, where a radiologist took a CAT scan of my head and an X-ray of my heart. They wanted to make sure I didn't have something majorly wrong with me. I didn't. Not exactly.

My heart was fine.

My brain was fine (sort of).

It turned out I wasn't dying on the outside. I was only dying on the inside, where nobody could see.

After that, we sat in a freezing cold waiting room. I drew in deep breaths of hospital air that I was convinced smelled like blood and bleach. Then the doctor took us into a private room with a door and a window. He gave me some medicine to make me calm. Then he told me I'd had a panic attack.

"But it felt like I was dying," I said.

"It can feel that way," he agreed.

"What can we do?" my mom asked.

"It would be good to find someone for Morgan to talk to."

* * *

My mom had to be there the first time I met Brenda because Brenda had to do something called an intake. I think that meant she wanted to talk to both of us to figure out how messed up I was and how often she'd need to meet with me. My mom couldn't afford therapy. I felt guilty for needing it. But my mom was close with some of the doctors at work because she'd had her job for a while. And the doctors at work knew people. And one of them had heard about Brenda. She said Brenda did a certain number of volunteer hours every year and she was willing to use those hours on me because she was particularly interested in helping out military families. The doctor asked Brenda to call my mom. Brenda did. They set up an appointment for the next day in the middle of a bright and sunny afternoon.

I liked Brenda instantly because she was young. And she had tattoos and dreadlocks and all those earrings. It made me trust her. Like she was honest about what she was. Like she didn't have anything to hide.

We sat in cushy chairs in her office. They were deep and green and plush like the carpet underneath them. I think they were supposed to be comfortable, but I felt like I was going to sink into mine and disappear. I asked if I could stand up. My mom and Brenda looked at me funny.

"I can't go to school anymore," I said out loud, my hands fluttering against my thighs. "And I don't want to leave my apartment again."

“Are you sure? Won’t you miss your friends?” Brenda asked.

“My friends are all at different schools.”

“But you can still see them,” my mom said, and then admitted to Brenda that she was worried about the way I seemed to be pushing all my friends away.

“I can’t be social right now,” I said. “I’m sorry. And I can’t go to school. But I did some research. I found an online high school. There’s one just for California students, and I can start classes right away.”

“I don’t know,” my mom hedged. “How much is it?”

“It’s free. All my classes will transfer, and it’s fully accredited.”

“It just sounds so extreme,” my mom said.

I literally stomped my foot on the ground the way Ben would when he didn’t want to jump to me from the edge of the swimming pool when he was three. “I can’t go to school. I won’t.”

Brenda reassured my mom it might be the best thing for me since I’d made the decision myself and had done the research. “Morgan deserves to have some control.”

It felt like Brenda understood what I was going through even if I didn’t quite understand it. She asked me if maybe I could try to come to her office only twice a week and stay home the rest of the time.

I told her no. I said I couldn’t drive. “I can’t be in my car. I feel trapped inside of it. I just want to be home where I feel safe.”

“Morgan,” my mom said, “Dr. Gwynn doesn’t make house calls. If you want to work with her, you’re going to have to get yourself to her office.”

“I *can't*.” My voice caught then. I curled into myself. Broken and barely breathing. “What are you not hearing? I can't leave our apartment. I won't.”

And then I felt Brenda looking at me. Really looking. Studying silently as I sank deeper. And finally, she sat up straight, her heavy dreadlocks falling over her shoulders, and said, “I'll do it. I want to help.”

My mom looked surprised when Brenda said that. To be honest, I was a little surprised, too. Brenda sure was willing to go out of her way for me. She said I had touched her on a personal level, though I didn't know how. My mom said great. And thank you.

So I didn't go to school again. I enrolled in online high school after the Thanksgiving break. The next time I saw Brenda, we sat on the couch in my living room. I told her I needed her to sit to the left of me. She asked me why.

“I need to be able to know what's there. To know it isn't *him*.”

She said okay and sat down.

I was glad she didn't press me.

I was glad she didn't make me talk about how he was standing to the left of me the last time I saw him.

I didn't want to start with that.

And that's how I've met with Brenda ever since. We started at the end of November, and now it's April. For just over four months, Brenda has been coming to my house to help me get better.

chapter five

My mom and Ben are still at the birthday party when there's a knock on my door. I know exactly who it is. I can picture Evan standing on our welcome mat. I want to see him. I can't help it. Even if all I do is look at him from the other side of the threshold. That's something at least.

I double-check the peephole, then open the door. Evan's right there, his index finger poking through the hole in the middle of a DVD.

"Wanna watch something?" he asks.

It's not like nobody ever comes inside this apartment. My mom and my brother live here. Brenda visits. Chelsea and Brianna used to visit. But Evan is here now. Can I let him in?

I do. I open the door and he comes inside.

I follow him to the living room and the lopsided couch. I try to scoot past him, to settle into my space before he can sit in it, but he's too fast. He sits down on my end of the couch and waits for me to sit on the other end. I can't.

I stand.

I stare.

I shuffle.

I swear under my breath.

I clench my hands into fists and try to calm down.

“You okay?” he asks, gripping the DVD.

I shake my hands out against the sides of my legs. Fluttery fingers. Nervous hands.

“Morgan?”

“Um, I need to sit there.”

“Where?”

“Right there. Exactly where you’re sitting.” I fidget. I fumble. I freak. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” he says, standing up. “Go ahead.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again, shielding my eyes with the back of my hand so I don’t have to look at him. “I know it sounds incredibly specific.”

“It’s okay.”

He doesn’t give me a funny look or anything. Instead he kneels down in front of the DVD player and slides the disc in. He looks over his shoulder to kick a grin in my direction. “Did the soup make you feel better?”

“It was good.” And it was. I ate it for dinner the night he gave it to me. But it wasn’t the miraculous cure-all Evan had hoped for.

“You smell like coconut,” he says, settling onto the opposite end of the couch.

I shrug. My shampoo is coconut-scented. Is it good or bad that I smell this way?

The DVD starts up, and the opening has some music that sounds like summer. It’s sweepy and dreamy and goes perfectly with the waves rolling across the screen. The TV fills up with

clear blue water crowded with surfers. And then there's a panoramic shot of the beach. We watch sand that looks like brown sugar and palm trees slanting sideways into the sun. And then the surfers are there again, the camera zooming in as one of them goes peeling down the front of a wave almost as tall as Paradise Manor. Scribbly writing shows up in the right-hand corner of the screen: *Evan "Da Hapa" Kokua, 17, Pipeline*. There's no mistaking the sun-streaked curls of the boy sitting next to me.

I turn to him, flabbergasted. He looks back at me like, *What?* "That's you," I say like he might not know.

He glances my way with one eye shut, embarrassed. "I swear I didn't play you this to show off. I haven't even seen it yet."

"What is it? Are you famous? Should I be asking you for an autograph?"

He laughs. "No. It's just a surf video. My friends and I made it. Back home."

"And home is Hawaii."

"Home *was* Hawaii."

"Lucky you." I sigh. "Why would you ever leave?"

Evan shrugs. "Family stuff. A fresh start. My mom wanted to go. There's a list."

I nod and try to think of something I could say to make a move from Hawaii to Pacific Palms, California, seem worth it, but I've got nothing.

"I bet you can't wait to get back," I say, hoping he'll tell me the opposite. Because the truth is I don't want him to leave. Not even from right here, right now, on this cruddy couch.

He smiles at me, and something about it feels so honest and whole, like he sees what I'm wishing. "Hm. Maybe not always."

His reply makes me fumble for another question. "So are you at Ocean High?"

"Yep. You too, right?"

"Sort of."

"You went to PPHS before, right?" he asks me gently, like he's coaxing a feral cat out from behind a Dumpster in a dark alley.

It's not a surprise that he knows about what happened at PPHS. The whole country knows. It was all over TV and the Internet. People grow solemn when what happened at my school comes up in discussion. But Evan's tone almost sounds like Brenda. It makes me worry he knows something more specific about *me*.

"Yes. But I don't like to talk about it," I say.

"Sorry." He tugs at his shirtsleeve, focusing his gaze on the worn edges of it. "I was just thinking maybe you knew my cousin since you were at the same school."

"Probably not." My heart speeds up. My stomach hurts. This subject needs to change. "So this is what you did in Hawaii? Went to the beach? And made surf videos with your friends?"

He looks at me thoughtfully, and I figure he wishes we could keep talking about the other stuff. But then he grins. "Pretty much. I also did ding repairs on surfboards, bussed tables, and threw lemons at rental cars."

"Whoa. That's mean."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew how many kooks visit

Hawaii every year. Millions. What can I say? My friends and I get territorial about our surf spots.”

I turn back to the TV, willing myself to get caught up again. There’s something so free, so alive, about what Evan and his friends are doing. Another boy slides down the screen on his surfboard, running his fingers through the wall of the wave he’s riding. Water skids off his slick skin and into his wake. I can imagine Evan and his posse on the beach, watching their friend from shore, stoked on the moment. And I want to be there. Some tiny part of me wishes I could be part of that day. Out there. Outside. In the sun and the sand and the water, skimming across the screen to nowhere in particular. And thinking about it makes me remember, for a split second, that feeling of just being. And I wonder if I’ll ever find it again. Really and truly find it. I twist my gaze from the screen to Evan. He isn’t watching his friends surf. He’s watching me.

“You love the water as much as I do,” he says, nodding at me. “I can tell.”

“Mm-hm.” My voice drifts. Sentimental. Nostalgic. I haven’t swum since the day before October fifteenth.

“Keep the DVD,” he says, smiling. “You should have it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That way, you can watch it whenever you want. And we should definitely go surfing sometime.”

When I don’t answer, he focuses back on the TV. I watch him watching. He has a faraway look on his face, like he remembers everything about the day that video was made. If I opened my

mouth to say it, he'd get it. He'd nod his head and agree. But I don't speak true things like that out loud anymore. The only person I tell things to is Brenda.

And that's one more thing that makes me know that even though Evan and I live next door to each other, we are miles apart.

He will leave his house every day.

He will traipse through the courtyard of our building.

I will watch him go.

He will be a boy living out in the world.

I will be a girl peeking out from behind a curtain.