

CHAPTER ONE

I step out of the English classroom, my last final of the semester completed.

Arizona skips seasons, leaping across the months to get back to its swelter, so it's been hot since March. But the sun looks brighter, feels hotter too, now that summer is officially here. Students stream past me in groups, talking and laughing. For the first time in months—maybe since school started last fall—I feel like I could join them. Maybe say something to the girl I sat next to for four months as she passes me. I start with a smile, and even that feels groundbreaking.

I feel free. Three months without classes, I chant to myself, and my smile grows wider. Someone bumps into me from behind, and I get moving.

I head in the direction of the parking lot and find Emery on a bench, her headphones in and her foot tapping to a beat only she can hear. In the sun, her long, burnish curls glow more red than brown.

When she sees me, she pulls one earbud out and leaps to her feet. “Happy summer!”

My grin stretches all the way to my ears, my mood so buoyant I can't think of a single thing that could sink it. “Happy summer. What are you doing sitting here?”

She grimaces. “I need a ride.”

“Where's your boyfriend?” I tease.

“Well, I carpooled with Todd, but he has a study group or

something and I didn't feel like waiting for it to be over."

"If you knew he had a study group, why didn't you drive yourself?" I already know the exact response I'll get. After almost ten years of friendship, I've come to expect her theatrics.

Emery throws her head back, arms wide, as if to encompass a world full of inconveniences, and groans. "Because my car is a total shit mobile."

I roll my eyes, although she's not lying. "You've got such a divine way with words."

"I know. Seriously. I'm so fed up. I get to spend another weekend driving my dad's truck. His no air conditioning, no stereo, gas guzzling truck," she whines. "Fortunately, I've bummed enough rides from you this semester to know you come this way at this time every day."

"Great detective work."

"Thanks. When do you work next? I need a pedicure and a wax. Pronto."

"All day tomorrow. Stop by whenever and I'll get you in."

"Perfect! You're the best."

In the car, Emery fusses with the radio while I insert myself into the stream of traffic leaving campus. I catch her movements in my peripherals; she's the kind of person whose presence takes up every inch of space they occupy.

At a glance, Emery and I are nearly identical: average height, heart-shaped faces, and the same length hair. In

most other things, though, we are opposites. Every part of her always looks so alive: her piercing hazel eyes that avidly support her every word and voluminous curls which bounce and move with her. Emery has curves that are as much a part of her personality as her words. She has the full face of an apple-cheeked baby with porcelain smooth skin stretched across the expanse of it.

“I did some more research last night and have a couple of places to send you to look at. I’ll email you the links to the apartment complex websites and you can check out the floor plans and stuff. I really like this one called Sun Plex, and it’s only, like, ten minutes from school.”

I grin. “Great. It’ll be hard to top the last place we looked at, though. We should put in an application before all of the units fill up.”

Emery hesitates, pulling her hair between her fingers. “If you don’t like these new places, we’ll apply for that one.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, hey, you should come out with me and Todd tonight.”

Already, my fingers clench around the steering wheel with apprehension. I sense my impossible-to-sink mood is about to take a dive.

“Out where?”

“One of Todd’s buddies is having a get-together at his house.” Her voice is perkier than it has to be—the way it gets when she’s trying to talk me into doing something normal and fun. How sad that she has to try so hard to sell me a good time. “We probably won’t stay too long.”

My teeth dig into my lower lip while I shuffle through my supply of rejections. “I have work in the morning, so I should probably call it an early night. Unwind from the semester and make sure I’m rested, you know? Saturdays are always crazy busy.”

Emery’s mouth goes down at the corners but she doesn’t comment right away. She’s probably trying to decide whether or not this get-together is worth the fight.

There was a time when I didn’t have to be coerced from my bedroom, a time when Emery wasn’t my only friend. The fact that she still invites me out shows she’s still hurt by my sudden descent from the ledge of the social cliff, even if she has learned to expect my rejections.

“Come on, Quinn. I know you hate school. Don’t you want to celebrate that it’s over? It’ll be fun.”

“Yeah I’m just not in the mood tonight. I’m tired.”

“You’re never in the mood for anything. I’m amazed this is the second time I’m seeing you this week. I usually count my blessings if I get one face- to-face conversation.”

I sneak a peek at her even though I know she’s wearing her pouty face, and I almost always yield to it. Sure enough, she’s chewing on the ends of her hair and staring at me with wide, mournful eyes.

“You’re making me feel bad,” I tell her.

“Good! Come out with us, Quinn. Please.”

“Emery... I really don’t want to.”

“Why not?” she demands.

“You know I’m not into parties. They’re not my thing.”

“They used to be your thing. We’d go out together all the time.”

“Things change.”

We both know what changed. Emery tries to be understanding but, despite her best efforts, I’m aware she thinks I couldn’t handle the onslaught of adulthood after we graduated high school. I try not to be offended because I know it looks ridiculous from the outside: upper-class Caucasian girl claims depression in the face of real life. It’s impossible for outsiders to understand the depth of my neurosis.

She tries one more time. “Please?”

My mind screams at me with big, red, exclamatory letters: SAY NO. NO, NO, NO.

However, guilt tumbles around in my belly and I know if I say no now, I’ll have to give her a yes later. So, I may as well get it over with.

“Okay,” I concede.

My reluctance is tangible, but it’s still a victory for Emery. She squeals and does a little dance with her shoulders. “You’ll see. It’ll be so much fun.”

“Uh-huh.”

I pull into her driveway and she snatches up her purse, hand on the door handle.

“Text me when you can work your receptionist magic at

the salon. Oh, my God, look.” She juts her chin at her middle-aged neighbor out watering her lawn. “We have sprinkler systems. She’s only out for gossip.”

Mrs. Tann has always given me a bad vibe. She just doesn’t look natural. Her skin is tight against her bones as if she shrunk in the dryer. And, she’s leathery. Orange and leathery. I’m not sure if her permanent scowl is due to her disposition or if her face is stuck from all the work she’s had done.

“Anyway, I’ll text you after I talk to Todd about what time we’ll leave tonight.”

I nod, my fingers twining themselves together so tightly I wonder if I’ll have bruises, the nails biting into the back of my hand.

She gets out of my car and calls, “Hey Mrs. Tann! Great grass,” before rolling her eyes at me over her shoulder and prancing to her front door.

When she disappears inside, I check the progress of the crescent creases being embedded into my skin. Smooth red curves stand stark against my scattered freckles when I remove my fingers. I line the nails back up with those indentations and press until the stinging kicks my nervous system into automatic.

There’s a method to these scratches. The trick is to fool my brain into being upset about the mundane physical pain rather than whatever it is causing the anxiety that led to the scratches. If it doesn’t hurt enough, the distraction doesn’t work. If it hurts too much, though, the pain of it lingers and becomes a reminder of the anxiety.

They say *Hey, look what you had to do*. Then, I start thinking about why I had to do it. And then I'm thinking about it and the whole awful cycle starts all over again.

Rather than lift my fingernails away from my skin, I keep them dug in and drag them away in one swift motion as if signing off on this diversionary attempt. I shake my sweaty hands out and return them to the wheel. I back myself out of the driveway and onto the road.

When I pull up the long driveway of my own home, my dad is getting out of his beloved Porsche. He checks the clasp of his leather briefcase while he waits for me.

When I reach him, he bends his head down to my level, cheek turned toward me.

“Quinnie,” he proclaims in his booming baritone.

I kiss his cheek. “Hey, Pops.”

My parents think things like cheek kisses are the definition of class and good taste.

“Happy to be done with classes for the summer?”

“So happy,” I say with a sigh.

“Got any big summer plans?”

“Not really.”

We make it inside where my mother is flipping through bridal magazines in the living room. She's in the process of planning a wedding for one of the neighbor's daughters.

She pats the seat next to her on the sofa. “Quinn! Come sit down and socialize, why don't you.”

As I sit, she, too, offers her cheek to me. I kiss it and pray her mind is too occupied to drill me about school.

“How was your last day of class? What is your finishing GPA?”

I groan internally. “Class was fine. My GPA is fine.” I actually don’t know what my GPA is. I didn’t bother checking.

“It’s fine? You know you can’t drop below a 3.0 or you’ll get kicked out of your program.”

“Is that her per semester GPA or cumulative for the year?” Dad asks.

“It’s cumulative, I believe. Well, Quinn?”

“My GPA is fine.” I’m pretty sure. It might be a close call... I need to check it later.

“Good. Now, what are you doing home?”

“Please don’t sound too pleased to see me. My ego may inflate beyond containment.”

She gestures dismissively. “Well, of course, I’m pleased to see you, dear. I simply thought you might be busy celebrating the end of the academic year.”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon,” I tell her.

“So? Do you have plans tonight, at least?”

I detect the thinly-veiled hope, now fully marred by resignation, in her words and feel somewhat proud that I can actually give her good news this time.

“Actually, I’m going out with Emery and Todd tonight. Someone Todd knows is having a party.”

My parents exchange a not-so-subtle look, their faces colored with awe.

“That’s wonderful, Quinn,” Mom says.

“Sounds like fun,” Dad agrees.

No, it doesn’t sound like fun. It sounds like a disaster waiting to happen.

“Yep,” I say, phantom nails throbbing where the red marks are now fading.

“And what about the apartment hunt? How is that going?”

Finally, a topic I’m more than happy to throw myself into. Emery and I have been planning to move in together for two years. After spending freshman year in the dorms, Emery suggested we live at home for a year to save money and carpool the half-hour to campus. I agreed although she ended up only carpooling with me when Todd was unavailable.

“It’s good. Emery found some more places she wants me to look at.”

“I thought you decided on the two bedroom. You’ll never find a two bedroom that cheap anywhere else.”

“I know. I love that place, but she wants to be thorough, I guess.”

“Of course, you do. You have to be smart about these

things. Have you talked about it with your therapist?”

“A little.”

Mom purses her lips. “What did you speak about this week?”

“That’s supposed to be confidential.”

“I don’t know how comfortable I am with you spilling all of your secrets and disclosing information about our family to this woman.”

I’m not in the mood for a lecture, so I prepare to disengage. “Right. Okay, well... I’m gonna go upstairs.”

“All right,” she mutters, grudgingly. “Forward me the new apartments Emery sends, will you?”

“Sure, Mom.”

I pace my room. My hands tingle slightly, almost like the pins and needles that happen when limbs fall asleep, but not. My skin vibrates with a creepy-crawly sensation, my palms sweat, and my breath comes shorter with each step I take across the worn carpet of my bedroom. I go to the Jack- and-Jill bathroom I’d share with a sibling if I had one and wash my hands, trying to scrub the tiny jumping beans from beneath the surface.

Emery and Todd will be here in less than ten minutes to pick me up. I open the medicine cabinet above my sink, targeting the small bottle of anxiety relief medication tucked away on the middle shelf, and shake two onto my palm. I swallow them dry and wash my hands again. I try

distracting myself by pulling the hair tie from my haphazard ponytail and brushing through the dull, blond strands. It hangs limp along my cheeks, down past my shoulders. When I lift my arms to tie it back up at the top of my head, my eyes zero in on the two damp spots darkening the armpits of my shirt.

“Ugh!”

Irrational tears prick my eyes, adding to my frustration. I rip the shirt off and tear back into my room where I yank a dresser drawer open and dig for a new one.

My phone beeps in my pocket.

Outside! :) :) :) :

“Ugh,” I moan again.

I pull the new T-shirt over my head, dislodging strands from my ponytail, give myself one last, hopeless glance in the mirror, roll my eyes, and slam my bedroom door shut behind me.

When I slide into the back of Todd’s car, Emery turns around in the passenger seat and flashes her teeth at me. “Yay!”

“Hey, Quinn,” Todd says, pulling out of my driveway.

“Hi, Todd.”

Emery’s smile falters when her eyes drop to appraise my attire. Her gaze rakes from my beat-up Converse sneakers, up my faded jeans, to my borderline-too-small T-shirt and my bedhead pony. Not the sexy, “I actually spent an hour in front of the mirror” bedhead, but the real

“I forgot to shower” kind.

“Awww, couldn’t you have tried a little harder?”

I point at my head sarcastically. “I did my ponytail, like, twice, Emery.”

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a stick of gum, unwrapping it and offering it to me. “I’m glad you’re coming. I won’t push my luck,” she chirps.

Gratefully, I take the gum and grind it up with my teeth, channeling my nervous energy into chewing. My eyes trace the line of Emery’s shoulder down her arm, where her hand is covered by Todd’s on the center console. I feel strangely lonely, out on a raft by myself while Emery and Todd float together.

Emery swivels to face me again and asks if she should change up her hair and I feel silly, as I always do, for imagining Emery deserting me. If anything, it’s been the other way around.

“Your hair is beautiful, Emery,” Todd says. “Hey, Quinn, did she tell you she wants to chop it off?”

I pull my jagged fingernails from between my teeth.

“Huh? No, she didn’t. How short, Emery?”

“Just to my chin.”

“Just to her chin,” Todd scoffs, reaching across to swipe her long curls over her shoulder.

Emery and Todd argue over what movie to see this weekend while I sit here pulverizing a piece of gum. I’m tempted to ask Emery for a second stick. I close my eyes

and press my forehead into the window, trying to think back. When was the last time I didn't weigh my decisions based on its toll on my sanity? My first mental breakdown is so vivid in my memory that it's tough to remember a time before it.

Two years ago, on my first day of classes, every professor talked about how much dedication his or her class would take. One said we, as students, would need to be genuinely invested in our career paths in order to succeed.

I'd asked myself if I was invested. I made lists and I did research online. I obsessed over my invested-ness for a whole semester.

And then, as I was packing up to go home for the holidays my first year, I was struck with such a hopeless thought that I sat, stunned, for a few long minutes.

There is no point.

All of the money I was spending on school, the triumph of scoring placement in a highly- competitive program, all the hours I spent studying and doing homework, all the time I expended sitting in lectures... none of it mattered. Because I was not invested in my career path.

What am I invested in, then? I asked myself. *Nothing*, I answered myself. I wish I'd thought, *I don't know, I should think about that*. But, I hadn't. Just a flat nothing. I was not invested in life. I didn't care about school, I didn't care that I needed an education to get a good job because I needed money to live comfortably and to support a family. Then, I started thinking about needing to find a husband to have a family with and I lost my cool. I stopped packing,

I curled up on the floor, and I surrendered to the spiraling, negative thoughts. It was like this long chain of events that needed to occur, each leading to the next but then... what's the last step? Death? What am I working so hard for? What's the point?

I felt a moment of crazed hysteria and bit my lip, holding my breath. When I released the burdened breath and went to inhale again, there was no oxygen left in the room. I felt so big sitting on the floor, like a human in a dollhouse.

It was that thing that happens sometimes— on a minor scale usually—when you're feeling too many conflicting emotions. Just experiencing so much all at once, and the emotions are all tangled to the point where you can't separate and name them. You don't know how to sort yourself out because you don't know what to do with it all. When you've got yourself a big math problem, for example, you break it down into steps. You don't try and swallow it whole.

However, this cyclone was going to consume me before I could even attempt to get my teeth into it.

Instead, my teeth went back to my lip and, this time, they broke the skin. My lungs burned as if I had just run a marathon and my head swam from a shortage of breath. The room became unfocused and my eyes glazing over. I was too hot. I was sweating, yet shivering at the same time. I couldn't get a grip on myself, and that started the crying. Once that faucet was turned on, the handle rusted over and I couldn't do a thing to stop the tears. They came faster than I could catch them. They sailed into my mouth, drowning me.

I remember turning to stone. Time stopped. I sat there leaking for an hour, maybe two, maybe twelve. I don't know. Eventually, though, I just... dried up. My mouth eased closed, the skin of my cheeks dried and hardened. My eyes felt tight. They refocused, but stared straight ahead. Everything inside of me hardened, from the top down.

I got to my feet, I got my bags, and I got into my car. I drove home in silence. There was a solid hollowness carved into my middle, I felt. There wasn't anything left in there. When I got home, I was sure my parents would take one glance at me and want to rush me to a hospital or something. I couldn't find it in me to care, though.

However, they didn't say a thing about it. They asked me what I wanted for dinner. Confused, I ignored them and went straight upstairs to my room. In the bathroom mirror, my face leaped into its first emotion since my insides froze: shock.

I looked fine, perfectly normal. If I leaned in closer, I could see some lingering puffiness. My cheeks were ruddier than usual, but at a distance... nothing. Odd, I thought. My entire existence had crumbled into meaninglessness, yet I still looked like me. I don't know what I expected—a zombie version of myself, maybe.

Nope. This monster hides in plain sight.

That holiday season two years ago, I shut down, taking on an attitude of total apathy I wear to this day.