

LOVE GOES VIRAL





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To Alex, Anton, and Misha, who taught me what true love is—C. S.

To my father, who would've been very proud—A. B.

*For my father, Michel, who gifted me writing, music,
big dreams . . . and (apparently) dance—E. L.*

CHAPTER ONE

Love

Before I even really knew who I was, I wanted the world to know my name. I don't remember learning how to sing or dance. It's just something that I had to do to get where I was going, like crawling or walking.

That's why I'm stretching for the second time this morning, studying my form in the mirror, as Mom's voice rattles in my head—*Every trophy's built on busted ankles and bloody toes, baby. Nobody claps for the bruises.*

She would know.

My hamstrings protest for a second before they give over and let me lay my torso flat on the ground in a full split. You don't get anywhere by wishing. You dance through the hurt. And one day, soon, I'm going to dance through it right out of here. Los Angeles, by way of Nashville. That's the plan. Making it is preparation plus luck, and I have to do everything possible to be ready when the opportunity finally comes my way. Which—judging by the fact that Mom had to pull yet another extra graveyard shift last night—needs to be soon.

I just have to finish high school first.

"Love! I'm back, hon. It's almost seven thirty. We're cutting it close!" Mom taps on my door as she calls out.

“I was waiting for you!” I pull myself out of my bendy state. “Just putting on my shoes!”

“Well, okay, but . . . oh, damn it.” Her phone rings, muffled. “Hello?” She drifts down the short hall, sounding upset, which means I have a pretty solid idea who she’s talking to.

I force myself not to think about him and open the closet, humming the bars to the Lil’ D song I’m going to be covering for the next upload to my channel. Lil’ D, or Damien Hunter to the fans as obsessed with him as I am, is one of my favorite artists, so I’ve been working extra hard on it. You never know which video is going to hit, but if this is the one, maybe he’ll actually see it. My voice is more fire-in-the-veins than technically perfect, but even I can hear the emotion in it, can hear how it’s different from what’s already out there. Only Damien Hunter matches my energy, which is why I’m planning something extra special to pay tribute to his music.

My closet is organized according to color, then subdivided into shirts, dresses, pants, and skirts, and it’s the one small bit of space I can claim as my own. I don’t have much, but I’ve spent hours and hours in Austin vintage stores, picking out the things that feel exactly me, and it always gives me happy shivers to see it all right where it should be. Except, when I retrieve my dance bag, looking for my lucky sneakers—

A pinprick of rage settles in my throat.

“That little knee-high pilferer,” I mutter.

My brother Forest loves to steal my shoes. I spent the entire summer working at the Cinnabon at Barton Creek Square in Austin, dealing with kids so much better off than me, to buy them. Perfect, beautiful, unscathed Air Force 1 sneakers in metal-

lic gold. They're like my ruby slippers, except for getting me out of here instead of going home.

I should have known better. Literally nothing is sacred in this house. One of the many (many) reasons I'm planning my escape.

I sling my bag over my shoulder, slide on my baseball cap, and rush down the hall, past the disaster zone my brothers call a bedroom, into the living room to confront the littlest menace.

I see Mom first though, still in her cute black scrubs, her hair a halo of frayed curls—as she unloads and puts away the groceries she must have picked up on her way home from the hospital. She must not hear me come up behind her, because she continues talking.

“I can't reschedule, Will,” she says. “It's your weekend and I need some rest!” She throws a zucchini into the crisper so viciously, it splits. “Oh, dang it,” she mutters. Then, “I do have a life. Well . . . that's none of your business, now, is it? As I recall, you didn't want it to be, and whether I curl my hair all weekend or go on twenty dates has nothing to do with you. So you can just f—”

She turns and catches sight of me and stops herself, grimacing instead.

Sorry, she mouths, and tilts her head toward the door, meaning she wants me to get the boys and skedaddle into the car to wait for her. She doesn't like it when I hear her fight with the man who has major commitment issues and an empty wallet to go with them . . . aka my father.

She and my dad hate each other, is what I'm trying to say. She pretends they don't, that they're co-parenting or whatever, but it seeps out of her pores, out of her pissed-off hair follicles, even

her tensed fingers, which are pressed tight against the refrigerator door. It's kind of divorce textbook, I guess, but she would love it if none of us knew it. Then again, if she was really trying to protect us, she wouldn't have this conversation in the kitchen.

I get on my own case for the unkind thought. It's not like she has much choice when she has to get the cold things into the fridge before we go. For sure River isn't going to help her, and Forest? Well, he's four, so he's not even a real person yet.

But he *is* a thief. Which returns me to my original purpose.

"You want me out of here? I'd love to oblige but . . . Have you seen my gold sneakers?" I stage-whisper.

She shrugs, as if she doesn't know how much I need those shoes. I'm working on the dance routine for the cover song after school, and the last time I didn't have them, I about broke my ankle. That would slow things way down if it happened now, and I don't need them to slow down. I need them to speed *up*, which they will as soon as I graduate in—I steal a glance at the X's counting down on the calendar pinned to the wall above the coffee maker—exactly one week. The path from here to stardom is as clear as can be.

One week until I board the on-ramp to the rest of my life, starting with my full-ride scholarship to Middle Tennessee State University. I'm going to be the first person in my family ever to go to college, and because of all the bruises and sacrifices, it's going to be *free*! So many musicians who inspire me have gone there too, and I'm going to make the most of it, follow in their footsteps. Plus Nashville is *right there*. Showcases, songwriting groups, open mics. Only a matter of time before I get plucked out of the crowd.

But none of that is going to happen if I can't find my shoes.

I point frantically to my socked feet.

“Sorry, honey, I haven’t seen them,” she says, rolling her eyes toward the phone. I can hear my father, his slow, raspy, Texas drawl, taking his time with every word he says, each one designed to ensure everything goes his way and nothing is his fault, like always.

Once he’s done with this fight, no doubt he’ll be at his favorite crappy watering hole at the stroke of eight a.m., getting lit with no kids to take care of and nothing to weigh him down, exactly as he likes it.

Which is why I don’t drink. Why would I?

He does it enough for the both of us.

“Okay,” Mom says, turning back to the call, “then what about the child support you owe me?” She waits, and when he answers, she lets her elbow fall onto the counter and her head collapse into her palm.

Mom tries to shoo me away again as she snuffles, but I’m not going anywhere now. When she lets him get under her skin like this, she ends up having to spend her one night off in bed with the door closed.

Or worse, she lets him back in.

That’s where Forest came from. It was fun being a family again for, like, two-point-five seconds, and then Dad was gone once more and Mom was left pregnant AF.

“No, *you’re* the ballbuster,” Mom says. “You are. You have *no* idea.” Her voice is so sad, so lost, I give in to my inevitable lateness and rest my hand on her back. She stands up right away though, shaking me off. “Go,” she says. When I don’t move, she says, “Love. Your brothers. Now.”

I would probably ignore her except for the fact that Forest

chooses that moment to jet from his room into the kitchen, my sneakers on his feet, the shiny gold catching sunlight as he whizzes by. He shoots back down the hall, and I toss my bag on the ground as I take off after him. Forest speeds behind the couch, taking cover out of reach. Our other brother, River, sits on the couch, playing something loud and annoying on the TV that looks like *Call of Duty*, the game he plays instead of talking to humans face-to-face. His backpack is leaned against his knee like he's ready to go to school, even though I know he didn't brush his teeth. He has been a major douchebag ever since he turned fourteen, but I remind myself to focus.

"River, grab him!"

River barely moves his eyes in my direction.

"Can't. On a team."

I don't know why I even try. I creep toward the couch myself. "Forest." No answer. I soften my voice. "Forest, come on out. You know I need those sneakers."

Still nothing. I finally get close enough to see him, knees up to his chin, hand over his mouth to cover what I'm sure is the world's fattest grin. Pushing River to the side, I jump up on the couch, reach over it, and get up under Forest's pits in a swift movement I've perfected in my years of being a big sister, before laying him on his back next to River.

"Hey!" River doesn't spare us a glance, just pushes buttons, craning his head to the side to dodge us. "Not cool. I just got sniped!"

I hoist myself up to standing on the couch and pull at the sneakers, but Forest and his sticky little hands fight back with surprising vigor for such a little guy.

“I just wanted to borrow them and you *never* let me!” Forest shouts, grin gone. “Mom says we have to share and that means you *have* to share your shoes with me!”

I finally wrestle off the sneakers and clamber back to the floor. As Forest bursts into wails and runs toward the kitchen, River throws down his controller. “Can you guys ever shut up? I lost my game.”

“This is the living room,” I say as I tie my laces and wipe the smudges off my shoes. “You know . . . where people *live*. It’s not your personal space. And anyway, it’s time for you to get in the car.”

“You’re not Mom,” he says, but gets to his feet anyway.

“Well, maybe you should think about helping out every once in a while so *you* don’t become Dad 2.0.”

I am halfway back into the kitchen when I hear him say, “That’s low, Love, even for you.”

I don’t look back because it’s not like that’s some big surprise.

Let me tally it for you.

Mom hates Dad and Dad hates Mom.

Dad obviously has no love for us.

And Forest and River? Well . . .

Forest meets me in the hallway, face slathered in snot and tears. “Mom told me I should tell you about my *feelings* and I *am*.” He steels himself, balling his fists at his sides, then opens his mouth as wide as he can and screams, “I HATE YOU!”

My parents may have named me “Love,” but I’m a lot more familiar with hate.

If you thought that might change once I get to school, you’d be wrong.

My high school is a gleaming stone building that got plopped down in a giant field (all the better for the football) in the eighties. It's in a community of pretty, bland, cookie-cutter McMansions, complete with pools and Chevy trucks and minivans. Riches abound . . . except for the Sweet Pea Mobile Home Park right at the edge of town, where we live. Mom rented the trailer instead of an apartment somewhere else because it's in this school district. She thought I'd get a better education here, but I guess she forgot what it was like to be a teenager. That high school is so toxic, you need a radiation shower at the end of every day.

The path to the front doors is more dodging-snipers energy than red carpet, but there's no other way into the main building. On rare occasions I make it through the gauntlet unscathed, but I can already tell that's not going to happen today. As I approach Bryce Prescott, who's sitting on a bench, manspreading aggressively, he shouts, "Waddup, Trailerina!" and all his equally annoying friends laugh.

The marquee outside the school reads "Congratulations, Graduates!" and graduation's so close I can taste it, so I march straight ahead, keep my chin up, and search for my best friend Patty.

My *only* friend, I should say.

Most people at school hate me because Bryce hates me and they are lemmings. What they don't know is that when we first moved here after Forest was born and I still had some new-girl cred, Bryce asked me out. When I told him no, he informed me and then everyone else that I was a trashy bitch, and that was that. I never even had a chance.

I know one thing for sure: A guy like Bryce never forgets a rejection, even with his girlfriend, Liberty, on his lap.

Fortunately, whatever insult he has planned next is inter-

rupted as Patty, my Patty, runs over to me. She's glorious, curvaceous, with short wavy hair and a nose ring, and I'm obsessed with her freckles. She has saved me every day since I got here.

"Hey, girl," she says.

"Hey, Patty," I say, and give her a smooch on the cheek.

"Fatty Patty! Fatty Patty!" Bryce calls. "Lift her over your head, Trailerina! Do a duet for us!"

"How's this duet?" I say, sending up both middle fingers. "You like that?"

Bryce's cheeks redden for a second before his smirk returns. "You'd probably get more likes for those than for any of your cringe videos."

Liberty flashes me an apologetic look. But Bryce isn't done.

"I mean, you don't *actually* think that's going to get you out of the gutter, do you?" He tilts his head. "Wait . . . you *do* think that, don't you? Aw . . . poor little Trailerina."

"You know what—" I start, but Patty ushers me away.

"Not worth it," she says, so only I can hear.

"That's right, Fatty. Get out of here and take your trash with you."

Blood rushes to my face, but Patty gives me a pleading look, and we walk away in silence.

"You're so beautiful," I say. "Don't listen to them."

"Oh, I know," she returns, unfazed. "And you are *not* trash. I promise you five years from now I'm going to be opening my bookstore/skate park and they are going to be wishing they were back in high school when they mattered." She turns to me. "And you . . . you're going to be bigger than Taylor Swift."

My heart lurches with hope.

“Do we really have to do this?” Patty says, sighing as we reach the door.

“Graduate?”

“No,” Patty says. “This week. Can’t we just go now?”

I weave my arm through hers. “I’d say yes if we didn’t have finals. If we don’t stick it out for those, we’ll subject ourselves to another hellish year.”

“Yeah,” she says with a sigh. “At least I didn’t promise my parents I’d wear a floral minidress under my grad robe.” She rolls her eyes. “LOL, psych, I totally did. I’m going to wear my Hello Kitty undies to counteract whatever terrible things are going to happen to me from shaving my legs.”

Patty’s parents are rich, conservative, and incredibly well-groomed. I don’t even know where Patty came from but she’s the opposite of all of that and her parents treat her as such.

Dinner at their house is delicious, but no fun. Trust.

“So close,” I say sympathetically. “We’re so close now.”

The rest of the morning goes okay. Patty and I have all our a.m. classes together, so we form a barricade against the noise and focus on our physics and English finals. By the time it’s lunch and I can see the light at the end of the school-day tunnel, I’m thinking about my dance lesson, putting the new moves, which I’ve been working on whenever Forest and River are busy with things other than torturing me, into practice. In those moments when the house is quiet, the lights are down low, and the living room floor is mine, I can almost pretend I’m already famous. That I’m center stage, dancing not to someone else’s songs, but my own. Singer, songwriter, dancer. A true triple threat.

I repeat my mantra: *Graduate. Nashville. College degree. Connections. Showcase. Los Angeles. Stardom.*

“Spaghetti and terrible sauce accomplished,” Patty says, bringing me back to earth. The cafeteria is peppered with round tables, and the lunch line winds its way into the hall while she joins me at our table, as close to the exit as possible.

Patty pokes suspiciously at the teensy bits of meat that dot the pasta.

“Don’t forget iceberg plus gloopy ranch,” I say. I’m a vegetarian so I can’t eat the meat pasta and instead have tried to load up on as many veggies as I can from the salad bar, which equals tomatoes that taste like paper, the aforementioned iceberg lettuce, and three soggy cucumber rounds. Thankfully, I also have my reserve BiteRite protein bar and a Ziploc baggie of walnuts.

Patty swirls her pasta onto her fork just as Bryce and his ass-hat friends walk past us, heading for their table by the salad bar.

Bryce slows and lets his bulky butt take up the whole pathway to lean over right into Patty’s space and says, “Lighten up on the carbs, Fatty Patty.”

This motherfucker will *not* leave us alone today, and once again Patty is in his sights because she’s my friend.

“Sorry, Bryce, we can’t all survive on a diet of Muscle Milk and human misery,” I say, directing his attention back to me.

Of course he takes that as a compliment, flexing unsubtly. Not exactly my intention, but it soothes his ego enough for him to turn his attention to the girls at his usual table, who are very much watching the flexing. He struts over to them and plops his vanilla Muscle Milk down with a thud, spreading himself into his seat like a lord.

“He’s so heteronormative, it actually makes me want to vom,” Patty says. “How messed up is it that the rest of our class voted for him to give a speech at graduation? Like we need to hear any more out of his mouth.”

“Assholes love assholes,” I offer, as Bryce and Noah chest-bump, congratulating each other on their existences.

“I didn’t know he was capable of original thought.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll go for something real deep, like ‘cherish the memories’ and ‘you’re all the leaders of tomorrow.’ Like, at best.”

Patty chews a hearty bite of pasta before she says, “I wish, just once, someone would give an honest graduation speech.”

“Oh yeah? What would yours be?”

“I hated you all as much as you hated me and I hope you rot in hell. Thank you!”

That makes me laugh, harder and louder than is allowed for subhumans like us. I’m immediately rewarded with a whack to the head. An empty Diet Coke can lands at my feet, and the same anger that reared up when Forest stole my shoes overtakes me. My forehead starts pulsing. One look at Bryce’s table and his stupid ugly smirk, and I know that’s where it came from.

I try to grab the spork off Patty’s plate, but she pulls it away from me. “What are you going to do with that, Thompson?”

“Gouge an eye out?” I suggest. “Slowly slice off a single ball?”

Patty eyes Mrs. Vasquez, the lunch monitor on duty today. She’s walking around, arms crossed, stopping to chat with students here and there, like a beat cop trying to be friendly with the neighborhood riffraff. Patty gently pulls my hand back down to the table. “Dude, ignore them. Four and a half days.”

“Yeah,” I say. Except I’m not going to ignore them. I’m not going to shake it off. I’m going to swallow it, and feel it burn in my stomach. I’m going to let it drive me. I am going to turn this anger into rocket fuel and use it to launch me to my destiny.

Wherever that is.

Because yeah, I know a whole hell of a lot more about hate than I do about love.

But someday, that’s going to change.

When the heinous school day is done, I take the bus into Austin, where the Sugarplum Dance Studio lives. Danny Roth runs the most desirable program in Texas there and I think he’s the only person besides Mom and Patty who actually believes in me. Danny is from Dallas but moved to Austin ten years ago because of his husband’s work. He says he found himself here and then he found me.

“Oh,” he says as I blaze past him and take my spot on the floor, the first one there like always. “Hard day?”

I nod. “Would you mind if we didn’t talk today? I would really like to just dance.”

“That’s my girl,” he says, lips shiny, green eyes piercing. He nods toward Raven, his assistant, a goth girl who definitely renamed herself. “Play something loud, would you, darlin’?”

As soon as the music starts, I feel the day start to metabolize. I draw each memory to the surface, spin it around, look at it for all it is and everything it means. I don’t try to make it go away; I transform it. My dad, Bryce, the school system, Trailerina, and Fatty Patty—I use it all. I make it work for me, burn it until I fade into the music and pain loosens its hold so that what’s primal

and free takes over. By the time the other dancers arrive and class begins, I feel like I belong.

After it's over, I stay for a private lesson to review the choreography for my next video. It's complicated yet plays to my strengths. Danny works from what he knows I can do, then refines it to show off my best. He's hard on me, stretching me to the edge of my abilities, tapping and clapping to the beat until I get it right, but I wouldn't have it any other way. By the end, I've sweated through my clothes and still he has me run through it again. He disappears into the shadows at the back of the room so I can totally get into it, imagine it's just me, and that the only people watching are the ones who can help change my life. When I finish the combination, Raven kills the music and the words “. . . get it to you next week” rip through the room at full volume.

My peace evaporates as I turn, chest still heaving, and see my mom at the back of the room, in pink scrubs with little hearts on them, mouth dropped open in surprise. She's glancing toward me worriedly as Danny puts a comforting hand on her shoulder. His expression is strained though. Danny has me here on a partial scholarship, but he's the best, and even with that assistance the classes aren't cheap.

When we walk out after, the cool night air blows on my skin soothingly, but the guilt still has me. My mom has given up everything to give me everything. I've worked since I was old enough to get a job to pay for lessons, to pay for shoes, but at a certain point we realized I couldn't go to school full-time, work, *and* develop myself as a dancer or a singer well enough to get to the top. We had to make a choice. She is betting everything that it was the right one.

When we get to the car, she wraps her arms around me and says, “This is going to be so good, baby. You’ll see. You’re special, Love, and the world is going to turn out for you.”

I look at her, really look. Forty, nails and lashes done, lips plump with gloss, but plagued with an exhausted slump. There’s a direct line between that look and the life she’s made for me, all the lessons she’s invested in instead of doing anything for herself.

My determination returns as I glance up at the full moon. Someday she’s not going to have to work anymore. Someday I’m going to take care of *her*. Make this all worth it.

“When I’m famous, I’m going to buy you a house,” I tell her, voicing for the first time the thing I usually think in secret. “And a new car, and a whole new wardrobe.”

“Oh, hon,” she says, “you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do. I have now promised that big full moon up there.”
I pause. “You watch me.”

Hours later, after a silent car ride home and when I’m done with the very last of my high school homework, I open my school laptop, the one I’ll have to give up in a few days. I slide on my headphones and pull up YouTube.

I type in the letter *M*, and the algorithm knows me so well, the song “Me Without You” by Lil’ D pops up first in the list of suggested videos.

I select it and wait, ready to watch and get inspired for my own upload.

There’s something about him. He’s . . .

Talented.

Perfect.

Successful.

Confident.

He's everything I wish I was. No one would throw a can at *his* head. Everyone loves him.

But . . . he's raw, too, in a way that makes him feel almost familiar to me, like I know him.

Salt on my lips reminds me of you, babe

Sun in my eyes makes my heart ache

He walks along the beach with a girl, wind tousling his blond hair. Beautiful, with his brown eyes, long muscles covered in tattoos. The lyrics might be a little cheesy, but there's something in those eyes, a hunger that aches inside me, too. I do a rough blocking of my dance steps in my room, make sure I have the space I need, while I hum along to his words, warming up my throat.

Blue skies, all I see is blue eyes

Me without you is life without highs

Damien kisses the girl in the water. For just a second I can imagine it's *me* he's holding, *me* he's singing to, telling me I belong there. That I'll get there.

The house still smells like the eggplant we ate for dinner, River is still *pew-pewing* in his room, and our neighbor's dog Sundae is outside, howling at the moon by the Adirondack chairs like she always does when it's full. But things won't always be like this.

In the meantime, I set up my phone, turn on the softbox lights I bought last summer, and get ready to hit Record.

CHAPTER TWO

Love

will cherish these memories. And don't forget, you're all the leaders of tomorrow. Thank you!"

Bryce stands at a podium in his cap and gown, while the faculty and staff sit behind him, pretending to be oh-so moved.

The audience claps, including Mom, who is recording the entire graduation ceremony on her phone. Patty spins around in her chair, mouth dropped open, and gives me the biggest eye roll. We're still sitting, but it's almost time for us to mount the stage, get our diplomas, and flee this place forever.

Mrs. Messerole takes Bryce's place at the podium.

"Thank you, Mr. Prescott," she says. "Excellent job. All right. Is everyone ready?" Howls and whistles go up among the seniors. The parents chuckle. "Please rise."

We shuffle with excitement as "Counting Stars" by OneRepublic starts to play and we get in line, just like we practiced. Everything seems good. We're here. We've *arrived*. But as Bryce goes to find his place in alphabetical order, he bumps into Patty. Something doesn't feel right, and when he moves along, I see a sign stuck to the back of her gown. I can't make out what it says because I'm all the way back in the *T*'s, but whatever it is, it can't be good.

“Patty,” I hiss, but the music is too loud. As we walk down the aisle toward the stage, I call out to her again. “Patty!” This time she looks over her shoulder, forehead creased in confusion. But she’s passing in front of her parents, and before I can communicate, her head whips forward again, her shoulders tensing as she hyperfocuses on them. She’s not going to listen to me now. She’s wearing a dress. She shaved her legs. She is *trying* to be the kid her parents want one last time.

And now I’m not going to be able to stop whatever final insult high school has to deliver to her.

As we climb the stage, none of the teachers seem to notice the piece of paper flapping on Patty’s back or Bryce high-fiving his awful friends. I try to repeat my mantra about getting out of this place and everything Patty and I are going to do with our lives while these jerks melt slowly into their couches, but this time it doesn’t work.

Mrs. Messerole calls out, “Blake Armstrong.”

Oh God, Patty is next. She’s about to be in front of all these people, in front of her parents, with whatever is on her back visible to all of them.

Mrs. Messerole announces, “Patricia Avalos.”

It’s like everything is moving in slow motion. Patty walks carefully to center stage, tottering a bit on her shoes. Now I can clearly see what the sign on her back says: Fatty Patty. Complete with a crappy doodle of a pig. A swell of laughter rises from the audience and Patty freezes, then looks around. She finally realizes something is flapping off her.

I leave my spot in the line, rushing toward Patty. Miss Jenkins calls out, “Love! Love, where are you going?” and tears after me,

probably to corral me into place rather than help the person who actually needs it. I dodge her as Patty desperately tries to pull off the sign, but her arms can't reach it.

Patty scans the crowd helplessly, and as I near the stage, I'm caught between bravery and the knowledge that my mom and brothers are in the audience, that my mom is recording this for posterity, as are hundreds of other cameras. Patty tries and tries again to get the sign off her, and finally just pulls the gown up over her head, revealing the sweet floral baby-doll dress she agreed to wear today. I watch in horror as Patty's dress gets caught on her mortarboard, the one she decorated with block letters reading, Byeeeee! And then, as if the whole universe is conspiring against her, she slips and falls flat on her stomach. She hasn't smashed her face, but there for everyone to see is her epic, lucky Hello Kitty underwear.

This is a travesty beyond imagining. Patty *loves* that underwear. It is a beautiful reminder of everything that is badass about her: her spiky spirit, her playful nature, who she is when she's not here. And her beloved undies will now be forever polluted by this event. This isn't just another prank or insult—it's a social assassination designed to follow her well beyond this botched graduation.

My eyes skitter to her parents, who have both blanched and are scanning the room for some kind of exit strategy, I'm sure. I suspect our plan of lounging in Patty's pool eating Doritos for the rest of the day is off the table. They won't be kind about this. Oh, no they will not.

The laughter goes monstrous. I mean, grandmas, younger siblings, even teachers . . . everyone is howling and hooting. The

level of glee is insane. Our class, however, is dead silent. Not out of pity, but I'm pretty sure everyone is thinking about their imminent walk across the stage and praying to some lesser God to have mercy on them, to make Patty the day's only victim. My throat locks up, and my heart is beating so hard, I can barely breathe, everyone in the audience blurring. But I can't let this go on. I. Can't.

I run up onstage and rip into action.

That action turns out to be some combination of a twerk, an interpretive dance, and an avant-garde burlesque routine. I feel possessed, burning with energy. It's like I'm making up for eighteen years of only being myself at Danny's dance studio, for eighteen years of stress and anger and loss. I take everything that just happened and the past four years of hell, and I use it to distract attention away from Patty.

"Love Thompson!" Mrs. Messerole says. "Love! Oh God, no. Not graduation. Love . . . please get back in line?"

In my peripheral vision, Patty clambers to her feet and grabs her cap and gown, then takes her diploma from the principal's hands as quickly as she can.

Once I know she's made it offstage, something shifts. I'm no longer jerking around to distract the audience from Patty's embarrassment. I'm in the music, just like in dance class. So I keep going. I yank off my own cap and gown and throw them to the side, revealing my cropped lace blouse and black pants. I am not warmed up but I drop into the splits anyway, and start popping my booty like I've been practicing. The teachers approach, but I'm already back up, prancing upstage. I grind my body close to Mrs. Messerole; then I spin and twirl her, making her my partner.

The auditorium goes *wild*. This time though, they're not laughing. They're screaming and yelling and it sounds like . . . applause. Like they actually like what I'm doing. Teachers aren't allowed to touch students, so even as they form a half circle around me, trying to block me from view, I know they can't actually force me offstage. I pretend they're background dancers, and weave around them until the song finally comes to its triumphant end and I bow, sweating hard.

When I bring my head back up, everyone is on their feet. Even my mom is jumping up and down, phone still raised and recording. Quickly, I dash past the teachers and over to the mic. "Thanks so much to Mrs. Messerole for allowing Patty and me to flash-mob at graduation. Haha . . . pranks rule! And now, please return to your previously scheduled graduation ceremony."

I jet back into the line and wait to see if I'm going to be in trouble, if they'll hold back my diploma, or worse. But Mrs. Messerole just gives me one intense look that tells me we'll be having a nice long chat after. Once the crowd begins to quiet, she says, "Our next graduate is . . . Dante Brown. Come on up, please."

The recovery is instant. Everyone settles back down. But my performance is still in the air, and the auditorium crackles with energy until every last diploma has been conferred. And I know something has happened, something irreversible.

I have come to life.

CHAPTER THREE

Austin

Fred, the nice man from the Jewish funeral home, knows what he's doing. I watch him as he speaks to his employees in a hushed tone, swooshes back and forth busily in his corduroy jacket and button-down shirt that strains slightly over his belly. He does this almost every day, I'm sure.

I mean, people die.

All the time.

Can't be stopped.

If anyone has job security, it's Fred. He seems genuinely kind, but I don't know. Can you *really* care about every person's loss all the time? Or do you stop seeing people individually after a while and learn how to wear a convincing mask?

I know a lot about convincing masks. I've been wearing one since I was here a few months ago, when Dad's numbers started going steadily in the wrong direction. He made me come along to make his own funeral arrangements while he was still strong and clear enough to make decisions for himself. The whole time I didn't know what to say, and Dad didn't ask me to do anything at all until Fred went to the printer in his office to get the hard copy of the plan. That's when Dad put his hand on my shoulder and said, *This way, your mother won't have to deal with it. You're*

going to have to hold steady for her, bud. She's going to need that.

I didn't understand then because my mom has always been so tough. Both my parents have.

But over the last few weeks, I've started to get it. So today I'm trying to be there for her and my little sister, Zoe, putting on a convincing mask of someone who can hold them together, even when I feel myself falling apart.

I can't believe it was only yesterday morning that Dad took his last breath, the IV bag dripping morphine through him as all of us told him what a great job he'd done being a dad, a husband, a man. After a week of the house being full of people from the neighborhood, the family, the diner, all taking turns saying goodbye and dropping off food in the kitchen, at the end it was just me, Mom, and Zoe. Even though we knew it was coming and had made all the preparations, when he took that last breath, it didn't feel real.

Not until they came and took him away but left the hospital bed and the machines that had kept him alive stacked in a corner, haunting the living room like unemployed poltergeists. Even though it'd been a few days since he was conscious enough to speak, the space he took up, just his existence in the house, made us all feel like we were still in a world we could recognize. Now everything is as new and painful as shiny, burnt skin. None of us can really believe we're here, about to have his funeral, about to say goodbye to his body forever and be left with . . . what?

Dad is everywhere. Dad is nowhere. I can smell the clean lime of his aftershave, the mint of his toothpaste. I can feel his hand on my shoulder, encouraging me to be a man, to face this with as much dignity as he did. So I steel myself as Mom and I

wait in the funeral home's comfortable easy chairs. Tears streak her cheeks, falling so continuously, she's stopped trying to brush them away. They leak down her shirt, past the pendant Dad gave her for her birthday, which hangs at her throat. My parents met in high school, and they loved each other like they were sixteen every day of their marriage. I think right until the end, that's how they saw each other still. Then, not now.

Fred comes padding over to us, the plush carpet absorbing the sound of his steps, his face fixed into an expression of empathy, but without the pity I've seen on so many others. He takes a look at Mom, then at me, and decides I'm the one to address. "We're ready to close the casket to begin the service." He clasps his hands and his voice is even, yet filled with emotion. It sends me back to Dad at the very end, when he finally gave in to the tears.

It takes a lot, Dad said, to let go of this life.

"Would you like to say goodbye, first?" Fred asks now, pulling me back to the present. "This will be your last opportunity. There is no rush, but we are ready to proceed if you are."

Panic creeps up my throat. When we leave here, we will go to the grave site. All the people who have come in and out of the house will be there, dressed up, ready to pay respects. We will lower my dad into the ground, and then I will have to face everyone who loved him. There will be many people whose hands I will need to shake and whose condolences I will need to receive.

I feel ripped apart but also oddly and intensely alive. Like everything that happens is important and I should remember every second of it. I feel like my dad is giving me a tailwind from beyond.

"Where's your sister?" Mom says, sniffing, blinking like she

just woke up. “She needs to be here. We have to . . . we have to do this thing.”

Zoe. I didn’t even notice she never came back from the bathroom.

“I’ll go get her, Mom,” I say, getting to my feet. “You go be with Dad and we’ll be right back.”

“Okay, honey.” She comes over to me, raises her hand, and touches my cheek. “You’re so handsome. You know that? You look just like him. He would be so proud of you.”

I don’t know what to say to that, the pressure in my chest is too much, so I just take her hand in mine, squeeze it, and then let it fall.

When I knock on the bathroom door, there’s no answer. I check out the window and there is Zoe, crouched down on the steps, a little ball of black clothes, her curly brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. The day is crisp. It’s May and the tulips, daffodils, and azaleas are in full bloom. A row of black locust trees casts shadows across the grass, white petals dropping to the ground like snow. It would be a beautiful day to be doing anything else.

Zoe’s only eleven, and was still always in his arms until he got too sick for it. At least I got Dad until I was almost grown. I open the front door gently, and see that she’s curled over her phone with a distant smile on her lips. I pause for a second, not wanting to take that smile away.

She lets out a little giggle, responding to whatever she’s looking at. I haven’t heard her laugh in weeks, and Zoe loves to laugh. It’s so familiar, for a second I almost feel safe.

“What’s so funny, Zoe?” I ask, taking a few steps toward her.

“Nothin’,” she says quickly.

I can tell she’s embarrassed I caught her experiencing joy when we’re supposed to be sad. It’s the opposite of what I meant to do.

“C’mon. Don’t be stingy,” I say. “Really. What is it?”

“It’s so stupid though.” She tucks her screen under her arm, where I can’t see it.

“The stupider, the better.” I sit down next to her, nudge her softly, until she takes out her phone again and places it between us so it balances on both our knees.

“I’ll put it back to the beginning.” She slides her finger along the screen. “Some girl in Texas turned her principal into a stripper pole.”

In the background, a girl is lying on her face and it looks like her dress is up over her waist. Another girl bursts onto the stage and starts dancing. The attention shifts. The principal is tall and boxy with a prim bob, and the dancing girl is tiny by comparison. Teachers chase her across the stage as kids in caps and gowns look on, and this girl . . . she does not care at all. She just slides herself up and down the principal, using her as leverage to kick up her legs and then slide down into a split.

“See, I told you,” Zoe says. “Stupid. Just some girl being chaotic.”

“Watch it again,” I say. “I think she was trying to help someone. I think her friend was in trouble and she was taking the heat.”

Zoe drags her finger across the screen and pauses on the girl in the background. “You’re right,” she says. “Huh.”

“What?”

“Just figured everyone does everything to get attention. Especially on the internet.”

She lets the video play through again and I cannot take my eyes off the dancer. Someone else would have made this whole thing seem super trashy, but instead there’s something, like, . . . rebellious about it. She’s super cute and super alive, and I find myself laughing too.

“Thanks for that.” I sling my arm around Zoe’s shoulders. A breeze kicks up, sending swirls of petals into a mini cyclone.

“There’s another funny one where a cat is stuck in a laundry basket,” she says.

“Maybe you can show me when we get home.”

At the mention of home, we both get quiet again. Home means something different now, without Dad. Which reminds me why I came outside in the first place.

“Z, they’re closing Dad’s casket in a minute. You want to come inside?”

Zoe stiffens and then slumps over, leaning her head into my shoulder like it’s too painful to speak. But I understand anyway.

“I don’t want to say goodbye either,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says. “This is a bad day.”

“It is,” I say, “but at least we know it can’t get any worse.”

It can get worse, and it does. I thought I was prepared, but there’s something about them lowering that casket that feels so . . . final. So horrible.

Mom throws in the first handful of dirt. Zoe and I are next, and then a whole line of mourners follows. Fred guides Mom and Zoe and me like a mama duck to form the receiving line,

where we have to listen and say nice things back to everyone we know—all the guys from the team, all the regulars from Nathan's, so many people—like we didn't just have to do the worst thing imaginable.

When it's over, Mom and Zoe begin to retreat, while the undertakers continue to shovel dirt into the grave. Mom looks back at me. "You coming?"

"In a minute," I say. I'm not ready to leave Dad with strangers. I still need his strength, especially for what's next. Not just the days and weeks to come, but because I've made a decision:

I'm going to finally tell Emma that I love her.

I've never done that before. My family is all about love, but we don't *say* it. Or at least we didn't until it was almost too late. I don't want to leave anything unsaid anymore. Life is too precarious, too much like . . . well . . . this. You never know what the future will bring.

Dad always said the best time to do anything is now.

So now, it is.

Like she can read my mind, Emma—who has been hanging back with Chad and Tyler and Paige—slips her hand into mine, grounding me just when I need it most. It makes me even more sure I've wasted too much time already. We've been together a year and a half and I've hesitated so long, it feels like a decision I didn't even make. The world has just been *happening* to me. I have to live in it now. For him.

"It's hard to say goodbye," Emma says, giving my hand another comforting squeeze. "Especially when it was all so fast."

"Fast and slow. A fat dose of each. This whole shitty year felt like one nonstop do-or-die."

She furrows her brow adorably as she tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Say more.”

“Sports analogy incoming,” I say, half smiling. She always gives me a hard time for those, but today she just nods, waiting.

“You ever watch a baseball game, bottom of the ninth, two outs, two strikes, and your team is down by one? We call it ‘do-or-die.’ It’s this moment where the only way to win is to do the near impossible. You have to hit a three-inch ball moving at a hundred miles per hour out into the stands. Time slows down—adrenaline floods your veins, but you need to stay so calm . . . it’s exhausting.”

Emma nods again, but I’m not sure she really understands.

“My dad getting sick . . . it was literally do-or-die.” I inch a bit closer to her. “You convince yourself you can hit a home run even with the odds against you, but this time the game was rigged, you know? With the kind of cancer he had, by the time they found it, he was too weak to even swing the bat.”

“You did everything you could, Austin,” she says. There’s a glimmer of something pained behind her eyes. “I was there. I saw. Your whole family was amazing, but you especially.”

“Because I had you in the stands.”

Emma smiles. Her hair is black, long and glossy, and her lips are red and chapped, raw where she chews on them in that cute, nervous way. Her nails are short and clean, her eyes blue and wide open. She is familiar and loving and always there when I need her. She was at every important family gathering . . . anytime I asked her to be somewhere, she was there. She and her mom organized a food train and took care of the whole thing. And when it got really bad and we stopped having people over at all, Emma FaceTimed me every night to check on me. I’ve leaned on

her so much this year and I can't imagine not having her by my side. For graduation. For college. Hopefully for everything after, like Mom and Dad.

Dad's voice echoes again. *The best time to do anything is now.*

Now, Austin.

"Emma, I—" I begin. It's like approaching a gate and on the other side of it is everything I've ever wanted and been too afraid to reach for.

Finally, I walk through it.

"I love you, Emma."

I expect to see her features soften at the words she's been waiting to hear from me.

But instead her face pinches.

I wait, my stomach on a plane plummeting to the ground. I don't know what I thought was going to happen, but not this.

Not this . . . nothing.

I glance around. This was not the best time; I see that now. It was the worst.

A graveyard on the day of my father's burial? Now she probably thinks I'm a dick.

Oh God.

"I'm sorry . . . I know it's not the most romantic place to say it. I should have done something creative. It was a bad call." I rush over the words because I can't take another second of silence and because I'm still hoping for some glimmer of reciprocity. But when I frantically search her face, I find only fear.

Fear is something I'm familiar with, that I might be able to make better. Take it away from her the way she has from me. "You don't have to worry. I'm not just saying it because of . . ." I stare at