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For my father, who tried his very best not to be his worst.
And for my mother, who made sure we never saw him at his worst.

Part One

Chapter One

As I sit here with one foot on either side of the ledge, looking down from twelve stories above the streets of Boston, I can't help but think about suicide.

Not my *own*. I like my life enough to want to see it through.

I'm more focused on other people, and how they ultimately come to the decision to just end their own lives. *Do they ever regret it?* In the moment after letting go and the second before they make impact, there has to be a little bit of remorse in that brief free fall. Do they look at the ground as it rushes toward them and think, "*Well, crap. This was a bad idea.*"

Somehow, I think not.

I think about death a lot. Particularly today, considering I just—twelve hours earlier—gave one of the most epic eulogies the people of Plethora, Maine, have ever witnessed. Okay, maybe it wasn't the most epic. It very well could be considered the most disastrous. I guess that would depend on whether you were asking my mother or me. *My mother, who probably won't speak to me for a solid year after today.*

Don't get me wrong; the eulogy I delivered wasn't profound enough to make history, like the one Brooke Shields delivered at Michael Jackson's funeral. Or the one delivered by Steve Jobs's sister. Or Pat Tillman's brother. But it was epic in its own way.

I was nervous at first. It was the funeral of the prodigious Andrew Bloom, after all. Adored mayor of my hometown of Plethora, Maine. Owner of the most successful real-estate agency within city limits. Husband of the highly adored Jenny Bloom, the most revered teaching assistant in all of Plethora. And father of Lily Bloom—that strange girl with the erratic red hair who once fell in love with a homeless guy and brought great shame upon her entire family.

That would be me. I'm Lily Bloom, and Andrew was my father.

As soon as I finished delivering his eulogy today, I caught a flight straight back to Boston and hijacked the first roof I could find. *Again, not because I'm suicidal.* I have no plans to scale off this roof. I just really needed fresh air and silence, and dammit if I can't get that from my third floor apartment with absolutely no rooftop access and a roommate who likes to hear herself sing.

I didn't account for how cold it would be up here, though. It's not unbearable, but it's not comfortable, either. At least I can see the stars. Dead fathers and exasperating roommates and questionable eulogies don't feel so awful when the night sky is clear enough to literally feel the grandeur of the universe.

I love it when the sky makes me feel insignificant.

I like tonight.

Well . . . let me rephrase this so that it more appropriately reflects my feelings in past tense.

I *liked* tonight.

But unfortunately for me, the door was just shoved open so hard, I expect the stairwell to spit a human out onto the

rooftop. The door slams shut again and footsteps move swiftly across the deck. I don't even bother looking up. Whoever it is more than likely won't even notice me back here straddling the ledge to the left of the door. They came out here in such a hurry, it isn't my fault if they assume they're alone.

I sigh quietly, close my eyes and lean my head against the stucco wall behind me, cursing the universe for ripping this peaceful, introspective moment out from under me. The least the universe could do for me today is ensure that it's a woman and not a man. If I'm going to have company, I'd rather it be a female. I'm tough for my size and can probably hold my own in most cases, but I'm too comfortable right now to be on a rooftop alone with a strange man in the middle of the night. I might fear for my safety and feel the need to leave, and I really don't want to leave. As I said before . . . I'm comfortable.

I finally allow my eyes to make the journey to the silhouette leaning over the ledge. As luck would have it, he's definitely male. Even leaning over the rail, I can tell he's tall. Broad shoulders create a strong contrast to the fragile way he's holding his head in his hands. I can barely make out the heavy rise and fall of his back as he drags in deep breaths and forces them back out when he's done with them.

He appears to be on the verge of a breakdown. I contemplate speaking up to let him know he has company, or clearing my throat, but between thinking it and actually doing it, he spins around and kicks one of the patio chairs behind him.

I flinch as it screeches across the deck, but being as though he isn't even aware he has an audience, the guy

doesn't stop with just one kick. He kicks the chair repeatedly, over and over. Rather than give way beneath the blunt force of his foot, all the chair does is scoot farther and farther away from him.

That chair must be made from marine-grade polymer.

I once watched my father back over an outdoor patio table made of marine-grade polymer, and it practically laughed at him. Dented his bumper, but didn't even put a scratch on the table.

This guy must realize he's no match for such a high-quality material, because he finally stops kicking the chair. He's now standing over it, his hands clenched in fists at his sides. To be honest, I'm a little envious. Here this guy is, taking his aggression out on patio furniture like a champ. He's obviously had a shitty day, as have I, but whereas I keep my aggression pent up until it manifests in the form of passive-aggressiveness, this guy actually has an outlet.

My outlet used to be gardening. Any time I was stressed, I'd just go out to the backyard and pull every single weed I could find. But since the day I moved to Boston two years ago, I haven't had a backyard. Or a patio. I don't even have weeds.

Maybe I need to invest in a marine-grade polymer patio chair.

I stare at the guy a moment longer, wondering if he's ever going to move. He's just standing there, staring down at the chair. His hands aren't in fists anymore. They're resting on his hips, and I notice for the first time how his shirt doesn't fit him very well around his biceps. It fits him everywhere else, but his arms are huge. He begins fishing around in his pockets until he finds what he's looking for and—in

what I'm sure is probably an effort to release even more of his aggression—he lights up a joint.

I'm twenty-three, I've been through college and have done this very same recreational drug a time or two. I'm not going to judge this guy for feeling the need to toke up in private. But that's the thing—he's *not* in private. He just doesn't know that yet.

He takes in a long drag of his joint and starts to turn back toward the ledge. He notices me on the exhale. He stops walking the second our eyes meet. His expression holds no shock, nor does it hold amusement when he sees me. He's about ten feet away, but there's enough light from the stars that I can see his eyes as they slowly drag over my body without revealing a single thought. This guy holds his cards well. His gaze is narrow and his mouth is drawn tight, like a male version of the *Mona Lisa*.

"What's your name?" he asks.

I feel his voice in my stomach. That's not good. Voices should stop at the ears, but sometimes—not very often at all, actually—a voice will penetrate past my ears and reverberate straight down through my body. He has one of those voices. Deep, confident, and a little bit like butter.

When I don't answer him, he brings the joint back to his mouth and takes another hit.

"Lily," I finally say. *I hate my voice*. It sounds too weak to even reach his ears from here, much less reverberate inside *his* body.

He lifts his chin a little and nudges his head toward me. "Will you please get down from there, Lily?"

It isn't until he says this that I notice his posture. He's

standing straight up now, rigid even. Almost as if he's nervous I'm going to fall. *I'm not*. This ledge is at least a foot wide, and I'm mostly on the roof side. I could easily catch myself before I fell, not to mention I've got the wind in my favor.

I glance down at my legs and then back up at him. "No, thanks. I'm quite comfortable where I am."

He turns a little, like he can't look straight at me. "Please get down." It's more of a demand now, despite his use of the word *please*. "There are seven empty chairs up here."

"Almost six," I correct, reminding him that he just tried to murder one of them. He doesn't find the humor in my response. When I fail to follow his orders, he takes a couple of steps closer.

"You are a mere three inches from falling to your death. I've been around enough of that for one day." He motions for me to get down again. "You're making me nervous. Not to mention ruining my high."

I roll my eyes and swing my legs over. "Heaven forbid a joint go to waste." I hop down and wipe my hands across my jeans. "Better?" I say as I walk toward him.

He lets out a rush of air, as if seeing me on the ledge actually had him holding his breath. I pass him to head for the side of the roof with the better view, and as I do, I can't help but notice how unfortunately cute he is.

No. Cute is an insult.

This guy is *beautiful*. Well-manicured, smells like money, looks to be several years older than me. His eyes crinkle in the corners as they follow me, and his lips seem to frown, even when they aren't. When I reach the side of the building

that overlooks the street, I lean forward and stare down at the cars below, trying not to appear impressed by him. I can tell by his haircut alone that he's the kind of man people are easily impressed by, and I refuse to feed into his ego. Not that he's done anything to make me think he even *has* one. But he is wearing a casual Burberry shirt, and I'm not sure I've ever been on the radar of someone who could casually afford one.

I hear footsteps approaching from behind, and then he leans against the railing next to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as he takes another hit of his joint. When he's finished, he offers it to me, but I wave it off. The last thing I need is to be under the influence around this guy. His voice is a drug in itself. I kind of want to hear it again, so I throw a question in his direction.

"So what did that chair do to make you so angry?"

He looks at me. Like *really* looks at me. His eyes meet mine and he just stares, hard, like all my secrets are right there on my face. I've never seen eyes as dark as his. Maybe I have, but they seem darker when they're attached to such an intimidating presence. He doesn't answer my question, but my curiosity isn't easily put to rest. If he's going to force me down from a very peaceful, comfortable ledge, then I expect him to entertain me with answers to my nosy questions.

"Was it a woman?" I inquire. "Did she break your heart?"

He laughs a little with that question. "If only my issues were as trivial as matters of the heart." He leans into the wall so that he can face me. "What floor do you live on?" He licks his fingers and pinches the end of his joint, then puts it back in his pocket. "I've never noticed you before."

“That’s because I don’t live here.” I point in the direction of my apartment. “See that insurance building?”

He squints as he looks in the direction I’m pointing. “Yeah.”

“I live in the building next to it. It’s too short to see from here. It’s only three stories tall.”

He’s facing me again, resting his elbow on the ledge. “If you live over there, why are you here? Your boyfriend live here or something?”

His comment somehow makes me feel cheap. It was too easy—an amateurish pickup line. From the looks of this guy, I know he has better skills than that. It makes me think he saves the more difficult pickup lines for the women he deems worthy.

“You have a nice roof,” I tell him.

He lifts an eyebrow, waiting for more of an explanation.

“I wanted fresh air. Somewhere to think. I pulled up Google Earth and found the closest apartment complex with a decent rooftop patio.”

He regards me with a smile. “At least you’re economical,” he says. “That’s a good quality to have.”

At least?

I nod, because I *am* economical. And it *is* a good quality to have.

“Why did you need fresh air?” he asks.

Because I buried my father today and gave an epically disastrous eulogy and now I feel like I can’t breathe.

I face forward again and slowly exhale. “Can we just not talk for a little while?”

He seems a bit relieved that I asked for silence. He leans

over the ledge and lets an arm dangle as he stares down at the street. He stays like this for a while, and I stare at him the entire time. He probably knows I'm staring, but he doesn't seem to care.

"A guy fell off this roof last month," he says.

I would be annoyed at his lack of respect for my request for silence, but I'm kind of intrigued.

"Was it an accident?"

He shrugs. "No one knows. It happened late in the evening. His wife said she was cooking dinner and he told her he was coming up here to take some pictures of the sunset. He was a photographer. They think he was leaning over the ledge to get a shot of the skyline, and he slipped."

I look over the ledge, wondering how someone could possibly put themselves in a situation where they could fall by accident. But then I remember I was just straddling the ledge on the other side of the roof a few minutes ago.

"When my sister told me what happened, the only thing I could think about was whether or not he got the shot. I was hoping his camera didn't fall with him, because that would have been a real waste, you know? To die because of your love of photography, but you didn't even get the final shot that cost you your life?"

His thought makes me laugh. Although I'm not sure I should have laughed at that. "Do you always say exactly what's on your mind?"

He shrugs. "Not to most people."

This makes me smile. I like that he doesn't even know me, but for whatever reason, I'm not considered *most people* to him.

He rests his back against the ledge and folds his arms over his chest. “Were you born here?”

I shake my head. “No. Moved here from Maine after I graduated college.”

He scrunches up his nose, and it’s kind of hot. Watching this guy—dressed in his Burberry shirt with his two-hundred-dollar haircut—making silly faces.

“So you’re in Boston purgatory, huh? That’s gotta suck.”

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

The corner of his mouth curls up. “The tourists treat you like a local; the locals treat you like a tourist.”

I laugh. “Wow. That’s a very accurate description.”

“I’ve been here two months. I’m not even in purgatory yet, so you’re doing better than I am.”

“What brought you to Boston?”

“My residency. And my sister lives here.” He taps his foot and says, “Right beneath us, actually. Married a tech-savvy Bostonian and they bought the entire top floor.”

I look down. “The *entire* top floor?”

He nods. “Lucky bastard works from home. Doesn’t even have to change out of his pajamas and makes seven figures a year.”

Lucky bastard, indeed.

“What kind of residency? Are you a doctor?”

He nods. “Neurosurgeon. Less than a year left of my residency and then it’s official.”

Stylish, well spoken, *and* smart. *And smokes pot.* If this were an SAT question, I would ask which one didn’t belong. “Should doctors be smoking weed?”

He smirks. “Probably not. But if we didn’t indulge on

occasion, there would be a lot more of us taking the leap over these ledges, I can promise you that.” He’s facing forward again with his chin resting on his arms. His eyes are closed now, like he’s enjoying the wind against his face. He doesn’t look as intimidating like this.

“You want to know something that only the locals know?”

“Of course,” he says, bringing his attention back to me.

I point to the east. “See that building? The one with the green roof?”

He nods.

“There’s a building behind it on Melcher. There’s a house on top of the building. Like a legit house, built right on the rooftop. You can’t see it from the street, and the building is so tall that not many people even know about it.”

He looks impressed. “Really?”

I nod. “I saw it when I was searching Google Earth, so I looked it up. Apparently a permit was granted for the construction in 1982. How cool would that be? To live in a house on top of a building?”

“You’d get the whole roof to yourself,” he says.

I hadn’t thought of that. If I owned it I could plant gardens up there. I’d have an outlet.

“Who lives there?” he asks.

“No one really knows. It’s one of the great mysteries of Boston.”

He laughs and then looks at me inquisitively. “What’s another great mystery of Boston?”

“Your name.” As soon as I say it, I slap my hand against my forehead. It sounded so much like a cheesy pickup line; the only thing I can do is laugh at myself.

He smiles. "It's Ryle," he says. "Ryle Kincaid."

I sigh, sinking into myself. "That's a really great name."

"Why do you sound sad about it?"

"Because, I'd give anything for a great name."

"You don't like the name Lily?"

I tilt my head and cock an eyebrow. "My last name . . . is Bloom."

He's quiet. I can feel him trying to hold back his pity.

"I know. It's awful. It's the name of a two-year-old little girl, not a twenty-three-year-old woman."

"A two-year-old girl will have the same name no matter how old she gets. Names aren't something we eventually grow out of, Lily Bloom."

"Unfortunately for me," I say. "But what makes it even worse is that I absolutely love gardening. I love flowers. Plants. Growing things. It's my passion. It's always been my dream to open a florist shop, but I'm afraid if I did, people wouldn't think my desire was authentic. They would think I was trying to capitalize off my name and that being a florist isn't really my dream job."

"Maybe so," he says. "But what's that matter?"

"It doesn't, I suppose." I catch myself whispering, "*Lily Bloom's*" quietly. I can see him smiling a little bit. "It really is a great name for a florist. But I have a master's degree in business. I'd be downgrading, don't you think? I work for the biggest marketing firm in Boston."

"Owning your own business isn't downgrading," he says.

I raise an eyebrow. "Unless it flops."

He nods in agreement. "Unless it flops," he says. "So what's your middle name, Lily Bloom?"

I groan, which makes him perk up.

“You mean it gets worse?”

I drop my head in my hands and nod.

“Rose?”

I shake my head. “Worse.”

“Violet?”

“I wish.” I cringe and then mutter, “*Blossom*.”

There’s a moment of silence. “Goddamn,” he says softly.

“Yeah. Blossom is my mother’s maiden name and my parents thought it was fate that their last names were synonyms. So of course when they had me, a flower was their first choice.”

“Your parents must be real assholes.”

One of them is. *Was*. “My father died this week.”

He glances at me. “Nice try. I’m not falling for that.”

“I’m serious. That’s why I came up here tonight. I think I just needed a good cry.”

He stares at me suspiciously for a moment to make sure I’m not pulling his leg. He doesn’t apologize for the blunder. Instead, his eyes grow a little more curious, like his intrigue is actually authentic. “Were you close?”

That’s a hard question. I rest my chin on my arms and look down at the street again. “I don’t know,” I say with a shrug. “As his daughter, I loved him. But as a human, I hated him.”

I can feel him watching me for a moment, and then he says, “I like that. Your honesty.”

He likes my honesty. I think I might be blushing.

We’re both quiet again for a while, and then he says, “Do you ever wish people were more transparent?”

“How so?”

He picks at a piece of chipped stucco with his thumb until it breaks loose. He flicks it over the ledge. “I feel like everyone fakes who they really are, when deep down we’re all equal amounts of screwed up. Some of us are just better at hiding it than others.”

Either his high is setting in, or he’s just very introspective. Either way, I’m okay with it. My favorite conversations are the ones with no real answers.

“I don’t think being a little guarded is a negative thing,” I say. “Naked truths aren’t always pretty.”

He stares at me for a moment. “*Naked truths*,” he repeats. “I like that.” He turns around and walks to the middle of the rooftop. He adjusts the back on one of the patio loungers behind me and lowers himself onto it. It’s the kind you lie on, so he pulls his hands behind his head and looks up at the sky. I claim the one next to him and adjust it until I’m in the same position as him.

“Tell me a naked truth, Lily.”

“Pertaining to what?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Something you aren’t proud of. Something that will make me feel a little less screwed up on the inside.”

He’s staring up at the sky, waiting on me to answer. My eyes follow the line of his jaw, the curve of his cheeks, the outline of his lips. His eyebrows are drawn together in contemplation. I don’t understand why, but he seems to need conversation right now. I think about his question and try to find an honest answer. When I come up with one, I look away from him and back up to the sky.

“My father was abusive. Not to me—to my mother. He

would get so angry when they fought that sometimes he would hit her. When that happened, he would spend the next week or two making up for it. He would do things like buy her flowers or take us out to a nice dinner. Sometimes he would buy me stuff because he knew I hated it when they fought. When I was a kid, I found myself looking forward to the nights they would fight. Because I knew if he hit her, the two weeks that followed would be great.” I pause. I’m not sure I’ve ever admitted that to myself. “Of course if I could, I would have made it to where he never touched her. But the abuse was inevitable with their marriage, and it became our norm. When I got older, I realized that not doing something about it made me just as guilty. I spent most of my life hating him for being such a bad person, but I’m not so sure I’m much better. Maybe we’re both bad people.”

Ryle looks over at me with a thoughtful expression. “Lily,” he says pointedly. “There is no such thing as *bad people*. We’re all just people who sometimes do bad things.”

I open my mouth to respond, but his words strike me silent. *We’re all just people who sometimes do bad things*. I guess that’s true in a way. No one is exclusively bad, nor is anyone exclusively good. Some are just forced to work harder at suppressing the bad.

“Your turn,” I tell him.

Based on his reaction, I think he might not want to play his own game. He sighs heavily and runs a hand through his hair. He opens his mouth to speak, but then clamps it shut again. He thinks for a bit, and then finally speaks. “I watched a little boy die tonight.” His voice is despondent. “He was only five years old. He and his little brother found a

gun in his parents' bedroom. The younger brother was holding it and it went off by accident."

My stomach flips. I think this may be a little too much truth for me.

"There was nothing that could be done by the time he made it to the operating table. Everyone around—nurses, other doctors—they all felt so sorry for the family. '*Those poor parents,*' they said. But when I had to walk into the waiting room and tell those parents that their child didn't make it, I didn't feel an ounce of sorrow for them. I wanted them to suffer. I wanted them to feel the weight of their ignorance for keeping a loaded gun within access of two innocent children. I wanted them to know that not only did they just lose a child, they just ruined the entire life of the one who accidentally pulled the trigger."

Jesus Christ. I wasn't prepared for something so heavy.

I can't even conceive how a family moves past that. "That poor boy's brother," I say. "I can't imagine what that's going to do to him—seeing something like that."

Ryle flicks something off the knee of his jeans. "It'll destroy him for life, that's what it'll do."

I turn on my side to face him, lifting my head up onto my hand. "Is it hard? Seeing things like that every day?"

He gives his head a slight shake. "It should be a lot harder, but the more I'm around death, the more it just becomes a part of life. I'm not sure how I feel about that." He makes eye contact with me again. "Give me another one," he says. "I feel like mine was a little more twisted than yours."

I disagree, but I tell him about the twisted thing I did a mere twelve hours ago.

“My mother asked me two days ago if I would deliver the eulogy at my father’s funeral today. I told her I didn’t feel comfortable—that I might be crying too hard to speak in front of a crowd—but that was a lie. I just didn’t want to do it because I feel like eulogies should be delivered by those who respected the deceased. And I didn’t much respect my father.”

“Did you do it?”

I nod. “Yeah. This morning.” I sit up and pull my legs beneath me as I face him. “You want to hear it?”

He smiles. “Absolutely.”

I fold my hands in my lap and inhale a breath. “I had no idea what to say. About an hour before the funeral, I told my mother I didn’t want to do it. She said it was simple and that my father would have wanted me to do it. She said all I had to do was walk up to the podium and say five great things about my father. So . . . that’s exactly what I did.”

Ryle lifts up onto his elbow, appearing even more interested. He can tell by the look on my face that it gets worse. “Oh, no, Lily. What did you do?”

“Here. Let me just reenact it for you.” I stand up and walk around to the other side of my chair. I stand tall and act like I’m looking out over the same crowded room I was met with this morning. I clear my throat.

“Hello. My name is Lily Bloom, daughter of the late Andrew Bloom. Thank you all for joining us today as we mourn his loss. I wanted to take a moment to honor his life by sharing with you five great things about my father. The first thing . . .”

I look down at Ryle and shrug. “That’s it.”

He sits up. "What do you mean?"

I take a seat on my lounge chair and lie back down. "I stood up there for two solid minutes without saying another word. There wasn't one great thing I could say about that man—so I just stared silently at the crowd until my mother realized what I was doing and had my uncle remove me from the podium."

Ryle tilts his head. "Are you kidding me? You gave the anti-eulogy at your own father's funeral?"

I nod. "I'm not proud of it. I don't *think*. I mean, if I had my way, he would have been a much better person and I would have stood up there and talked for an hour."

Ryle lies back down. "Wow," he says, shaking his head. "You're kind of my hero. You just roasted a dead guy."

"That's tacky."

"Yeah, well. Naked truth hurts."

I laugh. "Your turn."

"I can't top that," he says.

"I'm sure you can come close."

"I'm not sure I can."

I roll my eyes. "Yes you can. Don't make me feel like the worst person out of the two of us. Tell me the most recent thought you've had that most people wouldn't say out loud."

He pulls his hands up behind his head and looks me straight in the eye. "I want to fuck you."

My mouth falls open. Then I clamp it shut again.

I think I might be speechless.

He shoots me a look of innocence. "You asked for the most recent thought, so I gave it to you. You're beautiful. I'm

a guy. If you were into one-night stands, I would take you downstairs to my bedroom and I would fuck you.”

I can’t even look at him. His statement makes me feel a multitude of things all at once.

“Well, I’m not into one-night stands.”

“I figured as much,” he says. “Your turn.”

He’s so nonchalant; he acts as if he didn’t just stun me into silence.

“I need a minute to regroup after that one,” I say with a laugh. I try to think of something with a little shock value, but I can’t get over the fact that he just said that. *Out loud.* Maybe because he’s a neurosurgeon and I never pictured someone so educated throwing around the word *fuck* so casually.

I gather myself . . . somewhat . . . and then say, “Okay. Since we’re on the subject . . . the first guy I ever had sex with was homeless.”

He perks up and faces me. “Oh, I’m gonna need more of this story.”

I stretch my arm out and rest my head on it. “I grew up in Maine. We lived in a fairly decent neighborhood, but the street behind our house wasn’t in the best condition. Our backyard butted up to a condemned house adjacent to two abandoned lots. I became friends with a guy named Atlas who stayed in the condemned house. No one knew he was living there other than me. I used to take him food and clothes and stuff. Until my father found out.”

“What’d he do?”

My jaw tightens. I don’t know why I brought this up when I still force myself not to think about it on a daily basis.

“He beat him up.” That’s as naked as I want to get about that subject. “Your turn.”

He regards me silently for a moment, as if he knows there’s more to that story. But then he breaks eye contact. “The thought of marriage repulses me,” he says. “I’m almost thirty years old and I have no desire for a wife. I *especially* don’t want children. The only thing I want out of life is success. Lots of it. But if I admit that out loud to anyone, it makes me sound arrogant.”

“Professional success? Or social status?”

He says, “Both. Anyone can have children. Anyone can get married. But not everyone can be a neurosurgeon. I get a lot of pride out of that. And I don’t just want to be a great neurosurgeon. I want to be the best in my field.”

“You’re right. It does make you sound arrogant.”

He smiles. “My mother fears I’m wasting my life away because all I do is work.”

“You’re a neurosurgeon and your mother is *disappointed* in you?” I laugh. “Good lord, that’s insane. Are parents ever really happy with their children? Will they ever be good enough?”

He shakes his head. “My children wouldn’t be. Not many people have the drive I do, so I’d only be setting them up for failure. That’s why I’ll never have any.”

“I actually think that’s respectable, Ryle. A lot of people refuse to admit they might be too selfish to have children.”

He shakes his head. “Oh, I’m *way* too selfish to have children. And I’m definitely way too selfish to be in a relationship.”

“So how do you avoid it? You just don’t date?”

He cuts his eyes to me, and there's a slight grin affixed to his face. "When I have time, there are girls who satisfy those needs. I don't lack for anything in that department, if that's what you're asking. But love has never appealed to me. It's always been more of a burden than anything."

I wish I looked at love like that. It would make my life a hell of a lot easier. "I envy you. I have this idea that there's a perfect man out there for me. I tend to become jaded easily, because no one ever meets my standards. I feel like I'm on an infinite search for the Holy Grail."

"You should try my method," he says.

"Which is?"

"One-night stands." He raises an eyebrow, like it's an invitation.

I'm glad it's dark, because my face is on fire. "I could never sleep with someone if I didn't see it going anywhere." I say this out loud, but my words lack conviction when I say it to him.

He drags in a long, slow breath, and then rolls onto his back. "Not that kind of girl, huh?" He says this with a trace of disappointment in his voice.

I match his disappointment. I'm not sure I'd even want to turn him down if he made a move, but I might have just thwarted that possibility.

"If you wouldn't *sleep* with someone you just met . . ." His eyes meet mine again. "Exactly how far would you go?"

I don't have an answer for that. I roll onto my back because the way he's looking at me makes me want to rethink one-night stands. I'm not necessarily against them, I suppose. I've just never been propositioned for one by someone I would consider it with.

Until now. I *think*. Is he even propositioning me? I've always been terrible at flirting.

He reaches out and grabs the edge of my lounge chair. In one swift movement and with very minimal effort, he drags my chair closer to him until it bumps his.

My whole body stiffens. He's so close now, I can feel the warmth of his breath cutting through the cold air. If I were to look at him, his face would be mere inches from mine. I refuse to look at him, because he'd probably kiss me and I know absolutely nothing about this guy, other than a couple of naked truths. But that doesn't weigh on my conscience at all when he rests a heavy hand on my stomach.

"How far would you go, Lily?" His voice is decadent. Smooth. It travels straight to my toes.

"I don't know," I whisper.

His fingers begin to crawl toward the hem of my shirt. He begins to slowly inch it upward until a slither of my stomach is showing. "*Oh, Jesus,*" I whisper, feeling the warmth from his hand as he slides it up my stomach.

Against my better judgment, I face him again and the look in his eyes completely captivates me. He looks hopeful and hungry and completely confident. He sinks his teeth into his bottom lip as his hand begins to tease its way up my shirt. I know he can feel my heart thrashing around in my chest. Hell, he can probably *hear* it.

"Is this too far?" he asks.

I don't know where this side of me is coming from, but I shake my head and say, "Not even close."

With a grin, his fingers brush the underneath of my bra, lightly trickling over my skin that is now covered in chills.

As soon as my eyelids fall shut, the piercing of a ring rips through the air. His hand stiffens when we both realize it's a phone. *His* phone.

He drops his forehead to my shoulder. "Dammit."

I frown when his hand slips out from beneath my shirt. He fumbles in his pocket for his phone, standing up and walking several feet away from me to take the call.

"Dr. Kincaid," he says. He listens intently, his hand gripping the back of his neck. "What about Roberts? I'm not even supposed to be on call right now." More silence is followed with, "Yeah, give me ten minutes. On my way."

He ends the call and slides his phone back in his pocket. When he turns to face me, he looks a little disappointed. He points to the door that leads to the stairwell. "I have to . . ."

I nod. "It's fine."

He considers me for a moment, and then holds up a finger. "Don't move," he says, reaching for his phone again. He walks closer and holds it up as if he's about to snap a picture of me. I almost object, but I don't even know why. I'm fully clothed. It just doesn't feel that way for some reason.

He snaps a picture of me lying in the lounge chair, my arms relaxed above my head. I have no idea what he plans to do with that picture, but I like that he took it. I like that he had the urge to remember what I look like, even though he knows he'll never see me again.

He stares at the photo on his screen for a few seconds and smiles. I'm half-tempted to take a picture of him in return, but I'm not sure I want a reminder of someone I'll never see again. The thought of that is a little depressing.

“It was nice meeting you, Lily Bloom. I hope you defy the odds of most dreams and actually accomplish yours.”

I smile, equally saddened and confused by this guy. I’m not sure that I’ve ever spent time with someone like him before—someone of a completely different lifestyle and tax bracket. I probably never will again. But I’m pleasantly surprised to see that we aren’t all that different.

Misconception confirmed.

He looks down at his feet for a moment as he stands in somewhat of an unsure pose. It’s as if he’s suspended between the desire to say something else to me and the need to leave. He glances at me one last time—this time without so much of a poker face. I can see the disappointment in the set of his mouth before he turns and walks in the other direction. He opens the door and I can hear his footsteps fade as he rushes down the stairwell. I’m alone on the rooftop once again, but to my surprise, I’m a little saddened by that now.

Chapter Two

Lucy—the roommate who loves to hear herself sing—is rushing around the living room, gathering keys, shoes, a pair of sunglasses. I’m seated on the couch, opening up shoeboxes stuffed with some of my old things from when I lived at home. I grabbed them when I was home for my father’s funeral this week.

“You work today?” Lucy asks.

“Nope. I have bereavement leave until Monday.”

She stops in her tracks. “Monday?” She scoffs. “Lucky bitch.”

“Yes, Lucy. I’m *so* lucky my father died.” I say it sarcastically, of course, but I cringe when I realize it’s not actually very sarcastic.

“You know what I mean,” she mutters. She grabs her purse as she balances on one foot while sliding her shoe onto the other. “I’m not coming home tonight. Staying over at Alex’s house.” The door slams behind her.

We have a lot in common on the surface, but beyond wearing the same size clothes, being the same age, and both having four-letter names that start with an *L* and end with a *Y*, there’s not much else there that makes us more than just roommates. I’m okay with that, though. Other than the incessant singing, she’s pretty tolerable. She’s clean and she’s gone a lot. Two of the most important qualities in a roommate.

I'm pulling the lid off the top of one of the shoeboxes when my cell phone rings. I reach across the couch and grab it. When I see that it's my mother, I press my face into the couch and fake-cry into a throw pillow.

I bring the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

There's three seconds of silence, and then—"Hello, Lily."

I sigh and sit back up on the couch. "Hey, Mom." I'm really surprised she's speaking to me. It's only been one day since the funeral. That's 364 days sooner than I expected to hear from her.

"How are you?" I ask.

She sighs dramatically. "Fine," she says. "Your aunt and uncle went back to Nebraska this morning. It'll be my first night alone since . . ."

"You'll be fine, Mom," I say, trying to sound confident.

She's quiet for too long, and then she says, "Lily. I just want you to know that you shouldn't be embarrassed about what happened yesterday."

I pause. *I wasn't. Not even the slightest bit.*

"Everyone freezes up once in a while. I shouldn't have put that kind of pressure on you, knowing how hard the day was on you already. I should have just had your uncle do it."

I close my eyes. *Here she goes again.* Covering up what she doesn't want to see. Taking blame that isn't even hers to take. *Of course* she convinced herself that I froze up yesterday, and that's why I refused to speak. *Of course she did.* I have half a mind to tell her it wasn't a mistake. I didn't freeze up. I just had nothing great to say about the unremarkable man she chose to be my father.

But part of me does feel guilty for what I did—specifically

because it's not something I should have done in the presence of my mother—so I just accept what she's doing and go along with it.

“Thanks, Mom. Sorry I choked.”

“It's fine, Lily. I need to go, I have to run to the insurance office. We have a meeting about your father's policies. Call me tomorrow, okay?”

“I will,” I tell her. “Love you, Mom.”

I end the call and toss the phone across the couch. I open the shoebox on my lap and pull out the contents. On the very top is a small wooden, hollow heart. I run my fingers over it and remember the night I was given this heart. As soon as the memory begins to sink in, I set it aside. Nostalgia is a funny thing.

I move a few old letters and newspaper clippings aside. Beneath all of it, I find what I was hoping was inside these boxes. And also sort of hoping *wasn't*.

My Ellen Diaries.

I run my hands over them. There are three of them in this box, but I'd say there are probably eight or nine total. I haven't read any of these since the last time I wrote in them.

I refused to admit that I kept a diary when I was younger because that was so cliché. Instead, I convinced myself that what I was doing was cool, because it wasn't technically a diary. I addressed each of my entries to Ellen DeGeneres, because I began watching her show the first day it aired in 2003 when I was just a little girl. I watched it every day after school and was convinced Ellen would love me if she got to know me. I wrote letters to her regularly until I turned sixteen, but I wrote them like one would write entries in a diary.

Of course I knew the last thing Ellen DeGeneres probably wanted was a random girl's journal entries. Luckily, I never actually sent any in. But I still liked addressing all the entries to her, so I continued to do that until I stopped writing in them altogether.

I open another shoebox and find more of them. I sort through them until I grab the one from when I was fifteen years old. I flip it open, searching for the day I met Atlas. There wasn't much that happened in my life worth writing about before he entered it, but somehow I filled six journals full before he ever came into the picture.

I swore I'd never read these again, but with the passing of my father, I've been thinking about my childhood a lot. Maybe if I read through these journals I'll somehow find a little strength for forgiveness. Although I fear I'm running the risk of building up even more resentment.

I lie back on the couch and I begin reading.

Dear Ellen,

Before I tell you what happened today, I have a really good idea for a new segment on your show. It's called, "Ellen at home."

I think lots of people would like to see you outside of work. I always wonder what you're like at your home when it's just you and Portia and the cameras aren't around. Maybe the producers can give her a camera and sometimes she can just sneak up on you and film you doing normal things, like watching TV or cooking or gardening. She could film you for a few seconds without you knowing and then she could scream, "Ellen at home!" and scare you. It's only fair, since you love pranks.

Okay, now that I told you that (I keep meaning to and have been

forgetting) I'll tell you about my day yesterday. It was interesting. Probably my most interesting day to write about yet, if you don't count the day Abigail Ivory slapped Mr. Carson for looking at her cleavage.

You remember a while back when I told you about Mrs. Burleson who lived behind us? She died the night of that big snowstorm? My dad said she owed so much in taxes that her daughter wasn't able to take ownership of the house. Which is fine by her, I'm sure, because the house was starting to fall apart anyway. It probably would have been more of a burden than anything.

The house has been empty since Mrs. Burleson died, which has been about two years. I know it's been empty because my bedroom window looks out over the backyard, and there hasn't been a single soul that goes in or out of that house since I can remember.

Until last night.

I was in bed shuffling cards. I know that sounds weird, but it's just something I do. I don't even know how to play cards. But when my parents get into fights, shuffling cards just calms me down sometimes and gives me something to focus on.

Anyway, it was dark outside, so I noticed the light right away. It wasn't bright, but it was coming from that old house. It looked more like candlelight than anything, so I went to the back porch and found Dad's binoculars. I tried to see what was going on over there, but I couldn't see anything. It was way too dark. Then after a little while, the light went out.

This morning, when I was getting ready for school, I saw something moving behind that house. I crouched down at my bedroom window and saw someone sneaking out the back door. It was a guy and he had a backpack. He looked around like he was making sure no one saw him, and then he walked between

our house and the neighbor's house and went and stood at the bus stop.

I'd never seen him before. It was the first time he rode my bus. He sat in the back and I sat in the middle, so I didn't talk to him. But when he got off the bus at school, I saw him walk into the school, so he must go there.

I have no idea why he was sleeping in that house. There's probably no electricity or running water. I thought maybe he did it as a dare, but today he got off the bus at the same stop as me. He walked down the street like he was going somewhere else, but I ran straight to my room and watched out the window. Sure enough, a few minutes later, I saw him sneaking back inside that empty house.

I don't know if I should say something to my mother. I hate to be nosy, because it's none of my business. But if that guy doesn't have anywhere to go, I feel like my mother would know how to help him since she works at a school.

I don't know. I might wait a couple days before I say something and see if he goes back home. He might just need a break from his parents. Same as I wish I could have sometimes.

That's all. I'll let you know what happens tomorrow.

—Lily

Dear Ellen,

I fast-forward through all your dancing when I watch your show. I used to watch the beginning when you danced through the audience, but I get a little bored with it now and would rather just hear you talk. I hope that doesn't make you mad.

Okay, so I found out who the guy is, and yes, he's still going over there. It's been two days now and I still haven't told anyone.

His name is Atlas Corrigan and he's a senior, but that's all I