

CHAPTER ONE

"I'VE OFTEN WONDERED what it would be like to sink down into the tub, lay there for a moment or two, resurface, then take a razor blade to my wrists and bleed out. How much would it hurt? Would the blood trickle or spurt? How fast would I die? And who would find me? My sister I'd hope, the heinous bitch, always prancing around like she's God's gift or something, when she's actually a cheerleading ho-bag who's had more wiener in her than the Oscar Meyer factory." I grabbed a gummy bear from the package I'd bought from the candy store. A red one. My favorite. They never gave you enough red ones.

"Jesus, Syd, morbid much?" said my best friend, Haley, as we walked down the hall to our respective first periods, hers, Business Math, where kids who can't hack Pre-Calc go, mine, English. Haley was right, of course. I didn't want to die; the idea just fascinated me. I wasn't brave enough to kill myself even though I'd grown accustomed to pain. Sometimes I wished I simply—wasn't—you know—didn't exist. Unfortunately, I do exist, and I have to deal with that no matter how fucked up and crazy it may seem.

My mom was the main reason, I'm sure. At six years-old, I woke up one day to find her telescope leaning against the wall. I sat up, perfectly silent, glancing around to make sure I was in the right room—she never let me touch the thing. I climbed out of bed, walked over and stared for a moment. It seemed so big to me at the time, and gleamed shiny silver. Reaching out, I tapped the telescope quickly, as if hot, afraid at any moment my mom would burst in and yell at me for handling her precious conduit to the stars. I stared at my bedroom door and waited. Nothing happened so I stroked the telescope. Smooth and cold, I liked how it felt under my skin. My mom gazed through that telescope every clear night. If I asked nicely and caught her in a good mood, which was almost never, she'd let me have a peek too. I wondered again, why my mom's most prized possession leaned up against my bedroom wall.

That's when I noticed the box on my desk—my preschool pencil box, pink with different colored flowers and Hello Kitty. I reached out, but pulled my hand back, afraid something terrifying would jump out. I caressed the telescope again, decided nothing scary could probably fit in a Hello Kitty pencil box, undid the plastic latch, and peered in. Very little was inside—her sparkly pink costume jewelry I thought so beautiful at the time, a few pictures of her and me. I don't think I'd remember what she looked like without those pictures. I often considered burning them in effigy, but just couldn't. The box held a letter, too—Sorry, Sydney, but mommy isn't happy. She has to go find joy. When I do, I'll be back. She didn't sign the letter; no I love you, not even a hand drawn heart, or any XOs. And she never came back, which means possibly she never found joy—the only gratification I get from her abandonment.

It took me exactly four years to the day to pick up and use the telescope. Wandering out to the living room, I found my dad sitting in his favorite chair—a big green plushy recliner—but instead of reclining as usual, he was bent over, head in his hands, weeping. Always so strong and confident, he seemed so vulnerable in that moment, and it scared me. I began to cry silently along with him.

I dabbed my eyes, sniffled, and quietly, as not to startle him said, "Daddy?"

He raised his head, eyes red and teary, snot dripping from his nose. "What baby?"

“Where’s mommy?”

He tried to regain his composure, but he didn’t do a good job. He said in almost a whisper, “I don’t know.”

I cried harder; between sobs I choked out, “Is she coming back?”

“I’m not sure.” He slouched forward, again with his head in his hands, and took deep breaths.

Sad, mad, confused, not wanting to see my dad slumped in a chair like a rag doll, or crying, or even inhaling and exhaling long and even trying to catch his breath, I went back to my room. Taking a seat next to the telescope, I continued to blubber. Desolation engulfed me as my dad sulked in the living room and my brother and sister slept. I screamed, grabbed the Hello Kitty box from my desk and smashed it against the wall. Its contents plummeted to the floor in a pile.

Still in pajamas and bare feet, I ran out the back door and across the yard before anyone knew I was gone. The wet grass and mud squished between my toes until I hit our driveway. Cobblestones took over where the grass left off. They were damp, biting, and a little slimy under my feet. The bits of rock and dirt scattered on the surface may have stung, if I had the ability at that moment to suffer anything other than my own misery. My bike leaned against the garage. I climbed on and took off around the block, not thinking or caring about the consequences that would be waiting for me when I got back home.

I thought about my mom and wondered what would have made her stay. Maybe if I was smarter or talented at anything? Perhaps I was too ugly. As I rounded the next corner and approached the halfway mark of my journey, I heard a boy say, “Why are you crying?” His voice was deep, kind of husky, but he didn’t scare me or anything. I stopped my bike. “Who are you?” I asked.

“Elam.”

“What kind of name is Elam?”

“Beats me. I didn’t name me. So, why’re you crying?”

“My mom left.”

“So?”

“So she’s not coming back!”

Quiet for a few seconds, I was about to ride away when he asked, “Why?”

“How should I know?”

“I wouldn’t be sad,” he said. “I’d be mad.”

“I am mad!”

“You should do something.”

“Like what?”

“Come on, I’ll show you,” he said, laughing creepily, but somehow comforting. I guess anyone would get a little screwed up after having their mom disappear, but, well, let’s just say, I got a little out of control. I can’t blame my parents, well the people I now think of as my parents—Dad and stepmom, Jen, who I’ve thought of as my real mom since I’ve known her. They’re not a total drag. Sometimes having a good life doesn’t matter, I guess. Sometimes our heads are simply messed up, or they get twisted along the way somehow.

Thank God for Elam. He kind of came out of nowhere and became my best friend—aside from Haley, of course. He made me laugh, cheered me up, and made me forget all about my stupid mom. Unfortunately, he also had a penchant for mischief. I always got into trouble when he showed up.

The first day, the day my mom left, Elam had me take all the clothes she’d left behind out of her closet, and while my dad cried his eyes out not paying attention to the world around him, Elam told me to take them into the back yard and set them on fire. Tammy came out right when the flames were getting good and tattled on me. Man, was I in trouble.

This other time Elam thought it would be a blast to break out all the cat lady’s garage windows with a croquet mallet. Another time, Elam convinced me to steal a candy bar from the 7-11. Of course, he disappeared when I got caught. He always did. My dad put me in counseling, and together he and the counselor told me I couldn’t be friends with Elam anymore. For the most part Elam stayed away, but if I needed him, he came back, as a good friend does. Sometimes he was the only person I could count on. My dad would sometimes ask if Elam was around, especially when I got into trouble, or did something that in my dad’s mind was reckless.

Yeah, so I guess my mom taking off? It fucked me up.

CHAPTER TWO

JUNIOR YEAR. THINGS spiraled out of control because of him. Every day I'd walk into English class and take my seat against the far wall, sitting sideways in my chair until he came in. My fantasy, my obsession, the subject of countless daydreams, David Meeker—tall, dark hair and eyes, a smile like something right out of a da Vinci painting.

Withdrawn and introspective, things I found completely and utterly sexy in a guy. The way he carried himself, he obviously shouldered some heavy burden, though I had no idea what. Atlas in his own right. He intrigued me, plain and simple. He sat in the row next to me and one seat back. I often gazed upon him with longing when he wasn't looking.

One day, I walked up to a couple of his friends, Brandon and Zach. "So, what's up with David?" I asked. I didn't talk to them much even though we'd gone to school together forever, so they seemed a little taken aback by my candid snooping.

They glanced at each other, doing that telepathy thing friends do—silently deciding who's going to speak. Finally, Zach, the smarter of the two, spoke up. "His dad died a couple months before school started. He doesn't like to talk about it."

I stared at Zach for a moment, trying to think of something to say. I pondered his face, sky blue eyes—not steely, though, innocent—a little sad as well. Freckles speckled his nose and cheeks like the constellation Cassiopeia. His face was stubbly, but I still caught a glimpse of the small scar on his chin. He had these wild strawberry blond dreads. Sexy. I guess he had a crush on me a couple years before. I would have totally gone out with him then. But now? Now I was obsessed with David.

Not coming up with a good response, I chose about the least profound thing I could say. "Wow, that sucks."

"Yeah, it d-d-does," Brandon said. I never noticed his stutter before. Probably because I never gave him much notice at all. "Thanks for the info, boys. See ya in chem class." I turned to go. Zach followed me.

"Why? Do you like him?" Zach said, an awkward expression materializing across his face.

"Yeah," I smirked at him. "I like him. Put in a good word for me, will ya?" I walked away.

David and I didn't say a word to each other until we both found ourselves at one of Lacy McKenna's keggers. The best cure for shyness is a red sixteen ounce plastic cup full of frothy goodness. I sat in the corner by myself since Haley was off getting us a couple more beers.

David came up and slurred, "You're the girl that shits by me in English."

I giggled and said, "Yeah, I'm the girl that sits by you."

He sat down next to me and put an arm around my shoulders. "I've seen you lookin' at me. Why?"

“Because I find you interesting,” I said.

“Why?”

“You’re so quiet and always look like you’re in deep thought. I sometimes wonder what you’re thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Kinda cool.”

An uncomfortable silence suspended in the air between us. Figuring things couldn’t get any more awkward I said, “Sorry about your dad.”

He contemplated for a moment then said, “You want to go talk somewhere? Quieter, I mean?”

“Sure.”

He grabbed my hand and led me through the living room. Haley was heading back with my beer, so I snatched it from her and said winking, “Be back in a bit.” Knowing how much I crushed on David, she gave me the thumbs up. She shook her head from side to side, tossing her wavy blond hair about, and slinked her pixie-like body through the crowd, more than likely trying to gain the attention of a potential suckface partner. She would succeed. She always did.

David took me up a staircase, and opened the first door on the right, which he immediately slammed closed again saying, “Oops, sorry.” He turned and gave me a sheepish grin. I giggled. He did the same at door number two. It was like we were contestants on *The Price is Right*. What’s behind door number three? You’ve won . . . an empty room!

He led me to the bed where we sat in silence for a moment sipping our beers. He eyed me cautiously and finally he said, “I’ve never talked about it and no one up to this point ever asked.”

“About your dad?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s because people trip over their tongues when talking about the hard stuff.”

“I guess so,” he said, staring into his cup, name scrawled messily on the side in Sharpie.

“You want to talk?” I asked, leaning over to gaze up into his face—his beautiful face that reminded me of the erotic-but-angelic perfection you find in a Calvin Klein ad. His eyes so dark they bordered on black, and full of emotion and depth, I wanted to dive into them. His face, flawless—nose, jaw, even the pockmark right between his eyes, which I know is a paradox, being a flawless imperfection. And his lips, wet, sensual, delicious. I wanted to kiss him but we were about to talk about his dead dad.

He hesitated, eyes squinched together as if a battle raged behind them. Then he began his story. “We’d been camping for the weekend at Cedar Lake for a guy weekend—me, my little brother Dylan, and my dad. The day we were supposed to come home, my dad didn’t feel good, so I offered to drive. He crashed in the back seat of the truck, I drove, and Dylan sat in the passenger seat. We’d spent the weekend hiking, fishing, staying up late. I got tired. I caught myself dozing off a couple times—I should have pulled over, but I wanted to get home.”

He looked up at me, a yearning in his eyes. I didn’t know if he wanted me to say something, and I couldn’t think of anything anyway, so I simply nodded. He paused, searched for meaning at the bottom of his beer cup. “I fell asleep. I veered off the road and down an embankment. Dylan and I were banged up a little, but we were wearing our seatbelts. Dad was thrown from the van. They say he died instantly, but still—”

“Oh my god, David.” I threw my arms around him and held tight. “It was an accident, you know that, right?”

“Sure, but it was still my fault, accident or not, and it doesn’t change anything. Not a day goes by when I don’t think about him and wish I would have pulled to the side of the road. My mom, she’s not the same. She’s empty. She can’t even look at me anymore.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. I placed my hand on his leg, and he took it in his own.

He turned to me, our faces so close together I could smell the beer on his breath intermingled with his cologne. He brushed his lips against my cheek and up to my ear. “Thank you,” he said. He kissed my earlobe, my neck. His lips found mine and our tongues intertwined like an ouroboros. We both placed our cups on the floor and fell back onto the bed. We kissed, our hands wandered. Then it stopped. More accurately, I stopped. He backed away and stared at me.

“What? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I like you, David, I do,” I said as he stroked my hair. “I don’t want you like this...drunk.”

“But I really like you, Sydney.” He kissed me again, caressed my arm. Though difficult, I stopped him again, pushed him back gently. “I’m serious, David.”

He sat back and contemplated me with a glossy eyed drunkenness. “So, what do you want to do?”

“Can we go out sometime?” I asked.

“Sure, how about tomorrow night?”

“Okay,” I said. “It’s a date.”