

## day one...

### chapter one

I had the dream again. The one where I'm running. I don't know what from or where to, but I'm scared—terrified, really. I wake, shooting up, drenched in sweat. Jumping out of bed, I immediately head to my computer.

I need to get some things done this weekend, and I'm running out of time. God, I hope Kaylee can help. What if she asks what I'm doing? I can't tell her, can I? No. She'd try to stop me, I'm sure of it. Shit, I hope she doesn't have to work. I should have checked. Without her Mustang, I may not be able to do this, and I want to, I need to. Otherwise, things may just continue as they always have: painful, motionless. Like treading water. You stay afloat, but you never really get anywhere. A flash, a flicker of life, that's all I want. I don't think it's too much to ask.

I sit at the computer and stare at the monitor, wondering where to begin. I need to make a list. It's hard, but soon it all comes rushing to me—people, places, things. Over and over I think of Kaylee. I want her to be there. Need her to be beside me through all of it.

I type until my thoughts die down, come to a stop. I hit print, grab the list, and shove it into the pocket of my jacket, hanging on my closet door. I look in the mirror. I've changed so much in the last year, physically, emotionally, mentally. I may be smaller now, but my heart and mind are stronger.

These last few months I've come to realize that life doesn't wait. If we stand still it passes us by, and by the time we understand that, it may be too late. The people I see this weekend—I hope they're okay with this. I want them to take hold of it and not let go. I hope they at least listen. If they don't, it will kill me.

I grab a shoebox that's been sitting in my closet. It held the new pair of green Converse high-tops my mom bought me before the school year started. Cool shoes. I take the lid off the box and put it on my bed. I pack the box with books, CDs, pictures, my poetry notebook, things that are important to me. I won't have everything I need until Sunday night. On Monday, it goes to Kaylee's for safekeeping.

It's late, and I have a full weekend ahead of me. I put the lid back on the shoebox, and place it on the top shelf of my closet. Out of sight. There's no need for my mom to find it. She wouldn't understand.

I shut off the light and climb back into bed. My body's tired, but my mind keeps working, churning. I'm anxious, nervous, thinking of what to say, what to do. Sleep comes with difficulty, but in the end, it still comes.

## chapter two

"Where are you off to?" Mom pries, like moms do, as I head out the door, down the walk, past her. She's already outside on her knees, pulling weeds, needing to keep busy these days. It's cold out, but at least it's not raining like it usually does in the Pacific Northwest in September. It wouldn't matter anyway. She'd garden in the heat, the rain— hell, probably even the snow. Gardening is a sanctuary of sorts for her, her place to escape, her place to forget. She leans on her garden heavily these days, but I'm hoping to change that. It would be nice if she could just enjoy it again.

"Just going out for a while," I answer, still groggy. My body wanted to stay in bed longer, but my mind was ready to get the weekend started.

"Is that all you're eating for breakfast?" She eyeballs me suspiciously, nodding to the shiny red apple in my hand. I don't have much of an appetite these days, and on top of the anxiety I feel this morning, the apple seemed like the only thing I could handle.

"I'm not that hungry," I answer. She doesn't press, and her suspicious expression relaxes into one that I can describe only as love with a hint of sadness.

"When will you be home?"

"I'm not sure. Probably past dinner," I answer. I hope she doesn't grill me. Telling my mom my plans would be worse than telling Kaylee. She'd probably tell me I'm crazy, that I should mind my own business. In fact, she probably wouldn't let me out of the house. It's best to remain vague.

She stares into my eyes knowingly, smiles, and says, "Watch for cars."

I'm seventeen and my mom still tells me to watch for cars. I suppose she feels like her job is near ending, but that as long as I'm here and she's here, she has to look out for my safety and well-being. After what happened to Jake, I can't really blame her. It's true what they say: a mother's work is never done. As I continue down the walkway, then the sidewalk, I feel my mom's eyes on me until I'm well out of her sight.

## chapter three

My first stop is Kaylee's house. She's been my best friend since third grade, since the day she started school at Skyline Elementary, the day I came to her rescue on the playground. It's also the day I fell in love with her. She lives four blocks away. What would be an easy walk for most drains me. I ring the bell and wait. Her mom answers the door. "Hi, Mrs. Davis. Is Kaylee here?"

"Austin, I don't know why you insist on calling me Mrs. Davis. I've already told you to call me Jen. Everyone calls me Jen. Even the girls call me Jen when they're mad at me." She laughs. Two bad things happened in sixth grade. One of these things is the reason I can't bring myself to call her Jen. I have too much respect for her.

"Kaylee's still in bed, Austin," she says.

"Can I wake her?" I ask.

"If you dare."

I climb the stairs, then slowly and silently open the first door to the right, Kaylee's room. I sneak in quietly, not wanting to scare her; I sit down on the edge of her bed and stare. She's so beautiful lying there, her arms wrapped around the stuffed cat I gave her for her birthday that she so lovingly named Stinky Cat. There have been so many times I've wanted to tell her I love her but couldn't. If she didn't feel the same, it would have put this weird spin on our relationship, and I would rather have her like this, as a friend, than not at all. So, I keep quiet.

Wanting to remember her right here in this moment of beauty and sleep, I pull my Cybershot out of my pocket. A gift from my grandmother, my camera is my most prized possession. It goes everywhere with me. You never know when you might come across something funny, or strange, or moving, or even incredible, as Kaylee is to me right now. I snap the picture. I check the digital image before it disappears. Perfection, thank God, because no second chances, as the clicking wakes her. Her bright blue eyes open slowly, blink a few times, then rest on my face. She smiles up at me, a smile I could imagine only belonging to an angel.

"Yo, Kaylee. 'Sup," I say, a private joke between the two of us. We both love the movie *Superbad* and have watched it together at least a million times.

"Hey," she answers. It sends my pulse racing and my spine prickling. She stretches her arms up over her head and lets out a massive yawn.

"Ew," I say. I fan my hand in front of my face, suggesting that her breath stinks. She punches me lightly in the arm.

“Are you working today?” I ask.

“No.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Whatever you’re doing,” she answers. My heart nearly leaps through my chest.

“Well, you better get up. We have a long day ahead of us.”

“What’s going on?”

“I have a million places to go. Can you drive me?”

“Sure. I’ll be down in twenty,” she says. She throws back her covers. I catch a glimpse of her pajamas, which are just gray UW sweat shorts and a white tank top, but still my pulse quickens again. I keep that image in my head as I go downstairs to wait.

“Hi, *Aaaaauuustin*,” Jordanne, Kaylee’s youngest sister, greets me. She always pronounces my name like that, as if she has a southern drawl.

“Hi, Jordanne. How are you today?”

“Good. Whatcha doin’?” she asks.

“Waiting for Kaylee,” I answer.

“Why?”

“Because we’re hanging out today.”

“Do you love her?” The question catches me off - guard.

“We’re friends. Friends love each other.”

“I’m friends with Billy Fletcher, and I don’t love him.”

“Maybe you’re too young,” I say.

She ignores the answer, continues with the interrogation. “Are you going to marry her?”

“No.” That I knew for sure.

“Why?”

“It’s complicated,” I answer, hoping that ends it.

“Well, will you marry me, then?”

I laugh. “Let me think about it. That’s a serious commitment, you know.” She shrugs and runs off, giggling.

Seconds later, Maddie, the middle sister, comes barreling down the stairs in her pajamas. “Hi, Maddie,” I say.

When she looks up at me, her face flushes red, and then she turns around and runs back upstairs. I hear her screaming. “Kaylee! Why didn’t you tell me Austin was here? I’m in my pajamas! God, you’re such an idiot!” I can’t help but laugh. I’ve seen Maddie in her PJs loads of times, but now that she’s thirteen and has boobs, though small ones, she must feel a little more self-conscious about it. I think both Jordanne and Maddie have crushes on me. If only their sister felt the same.

A few minutes later, Kaylee comes down the stairs, smiling, blond hair still wet from showering. She’s wearing jeans and a blue sweater. She looks hot. “Ready?” she asks.

“Ready.”

“Where are you kids off to?” Mrs. Davis asks just as we’re about to leave.

“Mom! Do you have to know everything?” Kaylee cries.

“It’s okay,” I say, touching her shoulder, then turn to her mom. “I have a few things I need to take care of this weekend. Things I’ve been meaning to do for a while now. I need Kaylee to drive me. We might be out kind of late. Is that okay?”

She stares me in the face with understanding, nods, and, without a word, heads back toward the kitchen.