

LIVE
THROUGH
THIS

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CHAPTER 1

I'm on my bed, under the covers, and my boyfriend is kissing my neck. He lifts my shirt, lowers his face. My heart is beating, beating, beating. I want him to do more, go further. I don't tell him—I don't say anything at all—but he figures it out and slides his hand way down. My whole body is on fire in the best possible way. Especially there. Right *there*. I tug on his boxers and he sighs.

I start awake.

A hint of cologne. Soft breathing. Darkness. It's real. This is all happening. But not with the imaginary boyfriend from my dream.

My hands, my arms, my frame go limp. His fingers keep doing what they're doing. Soon this will be over. I keep my eyes shut and hold my breath while the wave builds and builds and builds and builds and *then*—the wonderful, terrible crash.

It doesn't matter that I tried not to tense up; he knows.

Somehow, he's always been able to tell. Gently, he kisses my cheek. Then he stands, straightens my blankets, and closes the door behind him.

I press my pillow onto my face and wish that it were possible to suffocate myself.

CHAPTER 2

In the morning, my shower is extra-long. It's an ongoing joke in my family that I take forever and ever to get ready, but today is truly epic. Just looking at myself in the mirror requires extreme effort.

As I'm finishing blow-drying, I notice a red splotch on my neck: a real-life, actual hickey. Holding back tears, I separate my blond hair into sections and use my huge curling iron to get it all sleek. With shaking hands, I touch the scalding metal barrel to my skin for a fraction of a second—just enough time to cover the mark with an inch-long burn.

I make my way upstairs. As usual, the triplets—my nine-year-old half brothers and half sister—are up before they need to be, watching cartoons in their pajamas, and arguing.

Jacob: “. . . That's because Leonardo is the best Ninja Turtle and you *know* it!”

Emma: “No, he isn't.”

Zach: “Jacob, you’re stupid.”

Jacob: “Shut up. *You’re* stupid.”

Down the hall, my mom and stepdad’s conversation is equally ordinary.

Tony: “. . . No late appointments today, so I’ll be home right after I’m done with my three o’clock.”

Mom: “Dinner at six, then? Or six thirty?”

Tony: “Six should work.”

Mom: “Good. It’s hard to make the kids wait after karate.”

All these normal conversations in my normal house with my not-as-normal-as-everyone-thinks family are making me dizzy.

Usually, I eat breakfast at the table, but Reece will be here very soon, so I grab an apple and a cheese stick from the fridge, as well as a water bottle and a granola bar to put in my dance cooler. Without a word to anyone, I rush outside, down the steps, across the street.

It’s raining. I set my gym bag at my feet. I eat my cheese and wait.

Everything’s gray this winter morning: my jacket, our house, the sky, the street. Even the things that usually have color—grass, evergreens, other houses, my shoes—are under a haze somehow.

Our garage door opens and Tony backs the Lexus out of

the driveway. He pulls up next to me and lowers the passenger-side window. “Do you need me to drive you to school, Coley?” he asks, leaning across the seat and smiling at me in his caffeinated, morning-person way.

“No. My ride’s going to be here in a minute.”

“Who? That Reece kid?”

I don’t answer; I’m not getting into this with him.

Shaking his gray and silver head, Tony opens the glove box. He grabs his mini-umbrella and holds it out the window toward me. “Here you go. I know how you feel about your hair.”

I want to refuse the stupid thing, but that isn’t going to make him leave, so I just take it.

He smiles again, not quite as brightly as before. “See you at dinner. It’s taco night and your mom’s going to see if she can get Bryan to make his world-famous salsa. Woo hoo!”

I busy myself with opening the umbrella so I don’t have to acknowledge Tony and his corniness as he drives away.

After about two minutes, Reece shows up in his little blue Toyota truck. He parks in front of me on the side of the road. The wipers scrape across the windshield, over his face. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. He’s looking at me the way he does every morning: like he’s glad I exist, like he feels lucky to hang out with a girl like me.

My stomach twists. He has *no* idea.

Leaving the engine running, he jumps out and jogs around the truck. “Am I late or something?”

I have the strangest urge to throw myself at him, to put my face against his chest and tell him everything. I can’t do that, though. Not ever.

“You’re right on time. I just wanted to *not* keep you waiting for once,” I say, focusing on closing Tony’s umbrella in order to avoid Reece’s gaze.

He opens my door, flips the seat forward, and pushes my stuff in next to his under the jump seats. “Hey, Coley. Have I ever told you you’re my hero and everything I would like to be?”

On any other day, I might have found it funny. For the past few weeks, we’ve been playing this game where one of us gives an over-the-top compliment by quoting lyrics, and then the other guesses who performed the song. For once, I’m not tempted to crack a smile or play along. I just get into the truck.

Reece walks back around to the driver’s side and sits beside me. “Bette Midler. I don’t know why, but I thought for sure you’d get that.” He steers us out of the neighborhood and onto the main street, and then clears his throat. “So I have something *awesome* to tell you. My grandparents decided to stay with us only through Christmas. The day after, they’re

heading to Portland to see my aunt and uncle. We'll go down there for New Year's a few days later."

I can't guess why this is so exciting to him, but I can tell from his voice that I'm supposed to feel the same way. "Oh?"

"Yeah! We found out last night, and my parents finally caved and said that I can meet up with you guys."

I glance over at him. "Meet up with who?"

"Um. Your family. At Whistler? You did invite me on your snowboarding trip, right? Or . . . not?"

"*Oh!* Yes. I did."

But really, I didn't. What I'd said is it would be fun if we went snowboarding together. And by that, I'd meant that we should go for a day at, like, Crystal or Snoqualmie Pass, not that he should come on vacation in Canada with my entire household.

"Okay," he says. "So I can get up there the day before you come home. And my mom is going to call your mom. Probably today or tomorrow or something. Just to make sure it's all on the up and up. Because she's like that."

My mom's the same way, and my accidental invitation isn't going to go over well. Mom and Tony are going to say no and then I'll have to tell Reece and then he'll think that they don't like him. And he'll be right. Not because there's anything *not* to like about him, but because he's a boy and they happen to be strict about boys.

I slump in my seat.

Reece goes on. "I'll probably just drive up to BC really early that morning. How long's the drive? Five hours?"

"I think so."

"Cool. But you're not going to take me on hard trails first thing, right? I read that the double black diamonds at Whistler and Blackcomb are the real deal. In other words, suicide."

"I don't go on double diamonds."

He motions as if to wipe his forehead. "Phew."

I turn away and stare at the never-ending grayness outside my raindrop-covered window. My eyes threaten to get teary, but I won't let it happen.

No.

No.

The truck coasts to the bottom of the hill that separates our town into two sections, through the intersection that leads to school, and finally, into Reece's assigned spot in the Kenburn High parking lot. He turns off the engine, but neither of us makes a move to get out.

"Is something wrong?" he asks. "You don't seem like yourself this morning."

I stare at my hands on my lap, at his hands still on the steering wheel. I breathe in. Out. "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

“Are you sure that’s what it is? Because, I mean, you’re allowed to change your mind about the trip, you know.”

“No, I want you to come with us.” It physically hurts, deep inside my chest, but I look into his eyes anyway. “I mean it.”

And I do. I really, really do. Somehow, someway, I’ll make it happen.

We walk toward the school, umbrella-less. Me, holding my gym bag stuffed with clothes and books. Him, lugging his saxophone case and slouching under the too-loose straps of his backpack.

Over the gray, under the gray, through the gray.

Snap out of it, Coley.

Deep breath.

Last night wasn’t real. It didn’t happen.

Deep breath.

It was a nightmare. Just another screwed-up dream.

Deep breath.

None of it has ever happened. This. Right now. This is what’s real.

Deep breath.

This is my life.

Sloooow exhale.

I lift my chin and put my shoulders back.

Just like always, Reece holds the door for me and we make

our way inside where lockers are slamming and dozens of conversations are in progress. Just like always, I wave and say “hi” as I pass friends. At the second corridor, we pause and Reece looks down at me.

“See you at lunch?” I ask, flashing a dance-competition-worthy smile.

He smiles back—relieved, I think. “Yes, you will.”

This is what I do; it’s what I’m good at. I was voted “Freshman Girl—Best Smile” last year for legitimate reasons.

I go my way and he goes his. But after about ten feet, I remember something important. “Hey, Reece?”

“Yeah?” he asks, turning.

“Have I ever told you that you’re just like an angel and your skin makes me cry?”

He laughs. “That’s by . . . Radiohead?”

I nod and dance away.

This is my life.