



OnRead.com

Download and read the **2 MILLION FREE** books

[Download NOW The Coincidence of Callie and Kayden](#)

The Coincidence of Callie and Kayden
Jessica Sorensen

The Coincidence of Callie and Kayden

Jessica Sorensen

All rights reserved.

Copyright Â© 2012 by Jessica Sorensen

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The Author holds exclusive rights to this work. Unauthorized duplication is prohibited.

No part of this book can be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without the permission in writing from author. The only exception is by a reviewer who may quote short excerpts in a review.

For information: <http://jessicasorensensblog.blogspot.com/>

Cover Design: Mae I Design

<http://www.maeidesign.com/>



Cover Models:

Talia Haugdahl

and

Forres Rasmussen.

The Coincidence of Callie and Kayden

JESSICA SORENSEN

Table of Contents:

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

Â

For everyone who wasn't saved.

Prologue

Callie

Life is full of luck, like getting dealt a good hand, or simply by being in the right place at the right time. Some people get luck handed to them, a second chance, a save. It can happen heroically, or by a simple coincidence, but there are those who donâ€™t get luck on a shiny platter, who end up in the wrong place at the wrong time, who donâ€™t get saved.

“Callie, are you listening to me?” My mom asks as she parks the car in the driveway.

I donâ€™t answer, watching the leaves twirl in the wind across the yard, the hood of the car, wherever the breeze forces them to go. They have no control over their path in life. I have a desire to jump out, grab them all, and clutch them in my hand, but that would mean getting out of the car.

“What is wrong with you tonight?” my mom snaps as she checks her phone messages. “Just go in and get your brother.”

I tear my gaze off the leaves and focus on her. “Please donâ€™t make me do this, Mom.” My sweaty hand grips the metal door handle and a massive lump lodges in my throat. “Canâ€™t you just go in and get him?”

“I have no desire to go into a party with a bunch of high school kids and Iâ€™m really not in the mood to chat it up with Maci right now, so she can brag about Kayden getting a scholarship,” my mother replies, motioning her manicured hand at me to get a move on. “Now go get your brother and tell him he needs to come home.”

My shoulders hunch as I push the door open and hike up the gravel driveway toward the two-story mansion with green shutters and a steep roof. “Two more days, two more days,” I chant under my breath with my hands clenched into fists as I squeeze between the vehicles. “Only two more days and Iâ€™ll be in college and none of this will matter.”

The lights through the windows illuminate against the grey sky and a “Congratulations” banner hangs above the entrance to the porch, decorated with balloons. The Owens always like to put on a show,

for any reason they can think of; birthdays, holidays, graduations. They seem like the perfect family but I don't believe in perfection.

This party is to celebrate their youngest son Kayden's graduation and his football scholarship to the University of Wyoming. I have nothing against the Owens. My family has dinner over at their house occasionally and they attend barbecues at our place. I just don't like parties, nor have I been welcomed at one, at least since sixth grade.

When I approach the wrap-around porch, Daisy McMillian waltzes out with a glass in her hand. Her curly blond hair shines in the porch light as her eyes aim at me and a malicious grin curls at her lips.

I dodge to the right of the stairs and swerve around the side of the house before she can insult me. The sun is lowering below the lines of the mountains that encase the town and stars sparkle across the sky like dragonflies. It's hard to see once the lights of the front porch fade away and my shoe catches something sharp. I fall down and my palms split open against the gravel. Injuries on the outside are easy to endure and I get up without hesitation.

I dust the pebbles from my hands, wincing from the burn of the scratches as I round the corner into the backyard.

I don't give a shit what the hell you were trying to do, a male voice cuts through the darkness. You're such a fuck up. A fucking disappointment.

I halt by the edge of the grass. Near the back fence is a brick pool house where two figures stand below a dim light. One is taller, with their head hanging low and their broad shoulders are stooped over. The shorter one has a beer gut, a bald spot on the back of his head, and is standing in the other's face with their fists out in front of them. Squinting through the dark, I make out that the shorter one is Mr. Owens and the taller one is Kayden Owens. The situation is surprising since Kayden is very confident at school and has never been much of a target for violence.

I'm sorry, Kayden mutters with a tremor in his voice as he hugs his hand against his chest. It was an accident, sir. I won't do it again.

I glance at the open back door where the lights are on, the music is loud, and people are dancing, shouting, laughing. Glasses clink together and I can feel the sexual tension bottled in the room from all the way out here. These are the kinds of places I avoid at all cost, because I can't breathe very well in them. I move up to the bottom step tentatively, hoping to disappear into the crowd unnoticed, find my brother, and get the hell out of here.

Don't fucking tell me it was an accident! The voice rises, blazing with incomprehensible rage. There's a loud bang and then a crack, like bones splitting into pieces. Instinctively I whirl around just in time to see Mr. Owens smash his fist into Kayden's face. The crack makes my gut churn. He hits him again and again, not stopping even when Kayden crumples to the ground. Liars get punished Kayden.

I wait for Kayden to get back up, but he stays unmoving not even bothering to cover his face with his arms. His father kicks him in the stomach, in the face, his movements harder, showing no sign of an approaching end.

I react without thinking, a desire to save him burning so fiercely it washes all doubts from my mind. I run

across the grass and through the leaves blowing in the air without a plan other than to interrupt. When I reach them, Iâ€™m shaking and verging toward shock as it becomes clear the situation is larger than my mind originally grasped.

Mr. Owensâ€™ knuckles are gashed and blood drips onto the cement in front of the pool house. Kayden is on the ground, his cheekbone cut open like a crack in the bark of a tree. His eye is swollen shut, his lip is ruptured, and there is blood all over his face.

Their eyes move to me and I quickly point over my shoulder with a very unsteady finger. "There was someone looking for you in the kitchen," I say to Mr. Owens, thankful that for once my voice maintains steadiness. "They needed help with something, I can't remember what though."

His sharp gaze pierces into me and I cower back at the anger and powerlessness in his eyes, like his rage controls him. "Who the hell are you?"

"Callie Lawrence," I say quietly, noting the smell of liquor on his breath.

His gaze travels from my worn shoes to the heavy black jacket with buckles, and finally lands on my hair that barely brushes my chin. I look like a homeless person, but that's the point. I want to be unnoticed. "Oh, yeah, you're Coach Lawrence's daughter. I didn't recognize you in the dark." He glances down at the blood on his knuckles and then looks back at me. "Listen Callie, I didn't mean for this to happen. It was an accident."

I don't do well under pressure so I stand motionless, listening to my heart knock inside my chest. "Okay."

"I need to go clean up," he mutters. His gaze bores into me for a brief moment before he stomps across the grass toward the back door with his injured hand clasped beside him.

I focus back on Kayden, releasing a breath trapped in my chest. "Are you okay?"

He cups his hand over his eye, stares at his shoes, and keeps his other hand against his chest, seeming vulnerable, weak, and perplexed. For a second, I picture myself on the ground with bruises and cuts that can only be seen from the inside.

"Iâ€™m fine." His voice is harsh, so I turn toward the house, ready to bolt.

"Why did you do that?" he calls out through the darkness.

I stop on the line of the grass and turn to meet his eyes. "I did what anyone else would have done."

The eyebrow above his good eye dips down. "No, you didn't."

Kayden and I have gone to school together since we were in kindergarten. Sadly this is the longest conversation we've had since about sixth grade when I was deemed the class weirdo. In the middle of the year, I showed up to school with my hair chopped off and wearing clothes that nearly swallowed me. After that, I lost all my friends. Even when our families have dinner together, Kayden pretends like he doesn't know me.

"You did what almost no one would have done." Lowering his hand from his eye, he staggers to his feet

and towers over me as he straightens his legs. He is the kind of guy girls have an infatuation for, including me back when I saw guys as something else other than a threat. His brown hair flips at his ears and neck, his usually perfect smile is a bloody mess, and only one of his emerald eyes is visible. "I don't understand why you did it."

I scratch at my forehead, my nervous habit when someone is really seeing me. "Well, I couldn't just walk away. I'd never be able to forgive myself if I did."

The light from the house emphasizes the severity of his wounds and there is blood splattered all over his shirt. "You can't tell anyone about this, okay? He's been drinking and going through some stuff. He's not himself tonight."

I bite at my lip, unsure if I believe him. "Maybe you should tell someone like your mom."

He stares at me like I'm a small, incompetent child. "There's nothing to tell."

I eye his puffy face, his normally perfect features now distorted. "Alright, if that's what you want."

"It's what I want," he says dismissively and I start to walk away. "Hey Callie, it's Callie, right? Will you do me a favor?"

I peer over my shoulder. "Sure. What?"

"In the downstairs bathroom there's a first aid kit, and in the freezer there's an icepack. Would you go grab them for me? I don't want to go in until I've cleaned up."

I'm desperate to leave, but the pleading in his tone overpowers me. "Yes, I can do that." I leave him near the pool house to go inside where the very crowded atmosphere makes it hard to breathe. Tucking in my elbows and hoping no one will touch me, I weave through the people.

Maci Owens, Kayden's mother, is chatting with some of the other moms at the table and waves her hand at me, her gold and silver bangle bracelets jingling together. "Oh Callie, is your mom here, hun?" Her speech is slurred and there is an empty bottle of wine in front of her.

"She's out in the car," I call out over the music as someone bumps into my shoulder and my muscles stiffen. "She was on the phone with my dad and sent me in to find my brother. Have you seen him?"

"Sorry hun, I haven't." She motions her hand around with flourish. "There are just so many people here."

I give her a small wave. "Okay, well, I'm going to go look for him." As I walk away, I wonder if she's seen her husband and if she'll question the cut on his hand.

In the living room, my brother Jackson is sitting on the sofa, talking to his best friend, Caleb Miller. I freeze near the threshold, just out of their sight. They keep laughing and talking, drinking their beers, like nothing matters. I despise my brother for laughing, for being here, for making it so I have to go tell him mom is waiting out in the car.

I start toward him, but I can't get my feet to move. I know I need to get it over with, but there are people making out in the corners and dancing in the middle of the room and it's making me uncomfortable. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. Move feet, move.

Someone runs into me and it nearly knocks me to the floor.

“Sorry,” a deep voice apologizes.

I catch myself on the doorframe and it breaks my trance. I hurry down the hall without bothering to see who ran into me. I need to get out of this place and breathe again.

After I collect the first aid kit from the bottom cupboard and the icepack from the freezer, I take the long way out of the house, going through the side door unnoticed. Kayden's not outside anymore, but the interior light of the pool house filters from the windows.

Hesitantly, I push open the door and poke my head into the dimly lit room. “Hello.”

Kayden walks out from the back room without a shirt on and a towel pressed up to his face, which is bright red and lumpy. “Hey, did you get the stuff?”

I slip into the room and shut the door behind me. I hold out the first aid kit and the icepack, with my head turned toward the door to avoid looking at him. His bare chest, and the way his jeans ride low on his hips smothers me with uneasiness.

“I don't bite, Callie.” His tone is neutral as he takes the kit and the pack. “You don't have to stare at the wall.”

I compel my eyes to look at him and it's hard not to stare at the scars that crisscross along his stomach and chest. The vertical lines that run down his forearms are the most disturbing, thick and jagged as if someone took a razor to his skin. I wish I could run my fingers along them and remove the pain and memories that are attached to them.

He quickly lowers the towel to cover himself up and confusion gleams from his good eye as we stare at one another. My heart throbs inside my chest as a moment passes, like a snap of a finger, yet it seems to go on forever.

He blinks and presses the pack to his inflamed eye while balancing the kit on the edge of the pool table. His fingers quiver as he pulls his hand back and each knuckle is scraped raw. “Can you get the gauze out of that for me? My hand's a little sore.”

As my fingers fumble to lift the latch, my fingernail catches in the crack, and it peels back. Blood pools out as I open the lid to retrieve the gauze. “You might need stitches on that cut below the eye. It looks bad.”

He dabs the cut with the towel, wincing from the pain. “It'll be fine. I just need to clean it up and get it covered.”

The steaming hot water runs down my body, scorching my skin with red marks and blisters. I just want to feel clean again. I take the damp towel from him, careful not to let our fingers touch, and lean forward

to examine the lesion, which is so deep the muscle and tissue is showing.

“You really need stitches.” I suck the blood off my thumb. “Or you’re going to have a scar.”

The corners of his lips tug up into a sad smile. “I can handle scars, especially ones that are on the outside.”

I understand his meaning from the depths of my heart. “I really think you should have your mom take you to the doctor and then you can tell her what happened.”

He starts to unwind a small section of gauze, but he accidentally drops it onto the floor. “That’ll never happen and even if it did, it wouldn’t matter. None of this does.”

With unsteady fingers, I gather up the gauze and unravel it around my hand. Tearing the end, I grab the tape out of the kit. Then squeezing every last terrified thought from my mind, I reach toward his cheek. He remains very still, hugging his sore hand against his chest as I place the gauze over the wound. His eyes stay on me, his brows knit, and he barely breathes as I tape it in place.

I pull back and an exhale eases out of my lips. He’s the first person I’ve intentionally touched outside my family for the last six years. “I would still consider getting stitches.”

He closes the kit and wipes a droplet of blood off the lid. “Did you see my father inside?”

“No.” My phone beeps from my pocket and I read over the text message. “I have to go. My mom’s waiting out in the car. Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” He doesn’t glance up at me as he picks up the towel and heads toward the back room. “Alright, I’ll see you later, I guess.”

No, you won’t. Putting my phone away in my pocket, I depart for the door. “Yeah, I guess I’ll see you later.”

“Thank you,” he instantly adds.

I pause with my hand on the doorknob. I feel terrible for leaving him, but I’m too chicken to stay behind. “For what?”

He deliberates for an eternity and then exhales a sigh. “For getting me the first aid kit and icepack.”

“You’re welcome.” I walk out the door with a heavy feeling in my heart as another secret falls on top of it.

As the gravel driveway comes into view, my phone rings from inside my pocket. “I’m like two feet away,” I answer.

“Your brother is out here and he needs to get home. He’s got to be at the airport in eight hours.” My mother’s tone is anxious.

I increase my pace. “Sorry, I got sidetracked, but you sent me in to get him.”

“Well, he answered his text, now come on,” she says frantically. “He needs to get some rest.”

“I’ll be there in like thirty seconds, Mom.” I hang up as I step out into the front yard.

Daisy, Kayden’s girlfriend, is out on the front porch, eating a slice of cake as she chats with Caleb Miller. My insides instantly knot, my shoulders slouch, and I shy into the shadows of the trees, hoping they won’t see me.

“Oh my God, is that Callie Lawrence?” Daisy says, shielding her eyes with her hand and squinting in my direction. “What the heck are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be like hanging out at the cemetery or something?”

I tuck my chin down and pick up the pace, stumbling over a large rock. One foot in front of the other.

“Or are you just running away from the piece of cake I have?” she yells with laughter in her tone. “Which one is it Callie? Come on, tell me?”

“Knock it off,” Caleb warns with a smirk on his face as he leans over the railing, his eyes as black as the night. “I’m sure Callie has her reasons for running away.”

The insinuation in his voice sends my heart and legs fleeing. I run away into the darkness of the driveway with the sound of their laughter hitting my back.

“What’s your problem?” My brother asks as I slam the car door and buckle my seatbelt, panting and fixing my short strands of hair back into place. “Why were you running?”

“Mom said to hurry.” I fix my eyes on my lap.

“I sometimes wonder about you, Callie.” He rearranges his dark brown hair into place and slumps back in the seat. “It’s like you go out of your way to make people think you’re a freak.”

“I’m not a twenty-four year-old who’s hanging around at a high school party,” I remind him.

My mom narrows her eyes at me. “Callie, don’t start. You know Mr. Owens invited your brother, just like he invited you to the party.”

My mind drifts back to Kayden, his face beaten and bruised. I feel horrible for leaving him and almost tell my mom what happened, but then I catch a glimpse of Caleb and Daisy on the front porch, watching us back away, and I remember that sometimes secrets need to be taken to the grave. Besides, my mom has never been one for wanting to hear about the ugly things in the world.

“I’m only twenty-three. I don’t turn twenty-four until next month,” My brother interrupts my thoughts. “And they’re not in high school anymore so shut your mouth.”

“I know how old you are,” I say. “And I’m not in high school either.”

“You don’t need to sound so happy about it,” my mom grimaces as she spins the steering wheel

to pull out onto the street. Wrinkles crease around her hazel eyes as she tries not to cry. "We're going to miss you and I really wish you'd reconsider waiting until fall to go away to school. Laramie is almost six hours away sweetie. It's going to be so hard being that far away from you."

I stare at the road that stretches through the trees and over the shallow hills. "Sorry Mom, but I'm already enrolled. Besides, there's no point in me sticking around for the summer just to sit around in my room."

"You could always get a job," she suggests. "Like your brother does every summer. That way you can spend some time with him and Caleb is going to be staying with us."

Every muscle in my body winds up like a knotted rope and I have to force oxygen into my lungs. "Sorry Mom, but I'm ready to be on my own."

I'm more than ready. I'm sick of the sad looks she always gives me because she doesn't understand anything I do. I'm tired of wanting to tell her what happened, but knowing I can't. I'm ready to be on my own, away from the nightmares that haunt my room, my life, my whole world.

Chapter 1

#4 Wear a shirt with color.

4 months later

^

Callie

I often wonder what drives people to do things. Whether it's put into their minds at birth, or if it is learned as they grow. Maybe it's even forced upon them by circumstances that are out of their hands. Does anyone have control over their lives or are we all helpless?

"God, it's like spazzville around here today," Seth comments, scrunching his nose at the arriving freshmen swarming the campus yard. Then he waves his hand in front of my face. "Are you spacing off on me again?"

I blink away from my thoughts. "Now don't be arrogant." I nudge his shoulder with mine playfully. "Just because we both decided to do the summer semester and we know where everything is, doesn't make us better than them."

"Uh, yeah, it kind of does." He rolls his honey brown eyes at me. "We're like the upper-class freshmen."

I press back a smile and sip my latte. "You know there's no such thing as an upper-class freshman."

He sighs, ruffling his golden blond locks, which look like he gets them highlighted in a salon, but they're actually natural. "Yeah, I know. Especially for people like you and me. We're like two black sheep."

"There are many more black sheep than you and me." I shield my eyes from the sun with my hand. "And I've toned it down. I'm even wearing a red t-shirt today, like the list said to do."

The corners of his lips tug upward. "Which would look even better if you'd let those pretty locks of yours down, instead of hiding them in that ponytail all the time."

"One step at a time," I say. "It was hard enough just letting my hair grow out. It makes me feel weird. And it doesn't matter because that has yet to be added to the list."

"Well it needs to be," he replies. "In fact, I'm doing it when I get back to my room."

Seth and I have a list of things we have to do, even if we're scared, repulsed, or incapable. If it's on the list, we have to do it and we have to cross off one thing at least once a week. It was something we did after we confessed our darkest secrets to each other, locked away in my room, during my first real bonding moment with a human being.

"And you still wear that God awful hoodie," he continues, jerking on the bottom of my grey faded jacket. "I thought we talked about that hideous thing. You're beautiful and you don't need to cover up. Besides, it's like eighty degrees outside."

I wrap my jacket around myself self-consciously, gripping at the edge of the fabric. "Subject change please."

He loops arms with mine as he leans his weight on me, forcing me to scoot over to the edge of the sidewalk as people pass by us. "Fine, but one day we're going to talk about a complete makeover, in which I will supervise."

I sigh. "We'll see."

I met Seth my first day at UW during Pre-Calculus. Our inability to understand numbers was a great conversation starter and our friendship kind of grew from there. Seth is the only friend I've really had since sixth grade, besides a brief friendship with the new girl in school who didn't know the "Anorexic, Devil Worshipping Callie" everyone else saw me as.

Seth abruptly stops walking and swings in front of me. He's wearing a grey t-shirt and a pair of black skinny jeans. His hair is stylishly tousled and his long eyelashes are the envy of every girl.

"I just have to say one more thing." He touches the tip of his finger to the corner of my eye. "I like the maroon eyeliner much better than the excessive black."

"I have your approval on that." I press my hand dramatically to my heart. "I'm so relieved. It's been weighing on my mind since this morning."

He makes a face and his eyes scroll down my red t-shirt that brushes the top of my form-fitting jeans. "You're doing great in every department, I just wish you'd wear a dress or shorts or something for once and show off those legs of yours."

My face plummets along with my mood. "Seth, you know why? I mean, you know? I can't!"

"I know. I'm just trying to be encouraging."

"I know you are and that's why I love you." I love him for more than that actually. I love him because he's the first person I felt comfortable enough with to tell my secrets to, but maybe that's because he understands what it's like to be hurt inside and out.

"You're so much happier than when I first met you." He tucks my bangs behind my ear. "I wish you could be this way around everyone, Callie. That you would stop hiding from everyone. It's sad no one gets to see how great you are."

"And vice-versa," I say, because Seth hides as much as I do.

He takes my empty Styrofoam cup from my hand and tosses it into a garbage can beside one of the benches. "What do you think? Should we hit up one of the tours and make fun of the tour guide?"

"You know the way to my heart." I beam and his laughter lights up his entire face.

We stroll up the sidewalk in the shade of the trees toward the front doors of the main office, which is a few stories high with a peaked roof. It has a historical look to it, tan brick with a lot of wear and tear, like it belongs in an older era. The yard that centers all the buildings looks like a triangular maze with randomly placed concrete paths that cross the lawn. It's a pretty place to go to school, lots of trees, and open space, but it took some getting used to.

There is confusion in the air as students and parents attempt to find their way around. I'm completely distracted when I hear a faint, "Heads up."

My head snaps up just in time to see a guy running straight for me with his hands in the air and a football flying at him. His solid body collides with mine and I fall flat onto my back, cracking my head and elbow against the pavement. Pain erupts through my arm and I can't breathe.

"Get off me," I say, writhing my body in a panic. The weight and heat off him makes me feel like I'm drowning. "Get off now!"

"I'm so sorry." He rolls to the side and quickly climbs off me. "I didn't see you there."

I blink the spots away from my eyes until his face comes into focus; brown hair that flips up at the ears, piercing emerald eyes, and a smile that will melt a girl's heart. "Kayden?"

His eyebrows furrow and his hand falls to his side. "Do I know you?" There's a small scar below his right eye and I wonder if it's from where his dad hit him that night.

A tiny prickle forms in my heart that he can't remember who I am. Getting to my feet, I brush the

dirt and grass off my sleeves. "Um, no, sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"But you got the name right." His tone carries doubt as he scoops the football off the grass. "Wait, I do know you, don't I?"

"I'm really sorry for getting in your way." I snag Seth's hand and haul him toward the entrance doors where there's a big "Welcome Students" banner.

When we're in the corridor by the glass display cases, I let go of him and lean against the brick wall, catching my breath. "That was Kayden Owens."

"Oh." He glances back at the entrance as students swarm inside. "The Kayden Owens? The one you saved?"

"I didn't save him," I clarify. "I just interrupted something."

"Something that was about to get ugly."

"Anyone would have done the same thing."

His fingers seize my elbow as I attempt to walk down the hall and he pulls me back to him. "No, a lot of people would have walked by. It's a common fact that a lot of people will turn their heads in the other direction when something bad is happening. I know this from experience."

My heart aches for him and what he went through. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"Don't be sorry, Callie," he says with a heavy-hearted sigh. "You have your own sad story."

We make our way down the slender hallway until it opens up and there is a table stacked with flyers and pamphlets on it. People are standing in line, staring at schedules, talking to their parents, looking scared and excited.

"He didn't even recognize you," he comments as he works through the crowd to the front of the line, cutting in front of everyone, and he grabs a pink flyer.

"He barely recognized me ever," I shake my head when he offers me a cookie from a plate on the table.

"Well, he should recognize you now." He picks up a sugar cookie, scrapes the sprinkles off, and bites off the corner. Crumbs fall from his lips as he chews. "You did save his ass from getting beat."

"It's not that big of a deal," I say, even though it does stab at my heart a little. "Now, can we please change the subject to something else?"

"It is a big deal." He sighs when I frown at him. "Fine, I'll keep my mouth shut. Now come on, let's go find a tour guide to torture."

Kayden

Iâ€™ve been haunted by a nightmare every single God damn night for the last four months. Iâ€™m curled up near the pool house and my dadâ€™s beating the shit out of me. Heâ€™s madder than Iâ€™ve ever seen him, probably because I did one of the worst things imaginable to him. Thereâ€™s murder in his eyes and every ounce of humanity is gone, consumed by rage.

As his fist hammers against my face, warm blood pours along my skin and splatters against his shirt. I know this time heâ€™s probably going to kill me and I should finally fight back, but I was taught to die on the inside. Plus I just donâ€™t seem to care anymore.

Then someone appears from the shadows and interrupts us. When I wipe the blood from my eyes, I realize itâ€™s a girl terrified out of her mind. I donâ€™t quite understand it, why she intervened, but I owe her a lot.

Callie Lawrence saved my fucking life that night, more than she probably realized.â I wish she knew, but I never could figure out how to tell her, nor have I seen her since it happened. I heard she went off to college early to start her life and I envy her.

My first day on campus is going pretty well, especially after my mom and dad left. Once they drove away, I could breathe for the very first time in my life.

Luke and I wander around the busy campus trying to figure out where everything is, while tossing a football back and forth. The sun is bright, the trees are green, and thereâ€™s so much newness in the air it gets me pumped up. I want to start over, be happy, live for once.

On a particularly long throw, I end up running over a girl. I feel like an asshole, especially because sheâ€™s so small and fragile looking. Her blue eyes are enlarged and she looks scared to death. Whatâ€™s even weirder is she knows me, but takes off running when I question how she does.

Itâ€™s bugging the hell out of me. I canâ€™t stop thinking about her face and the familiarity. Why canâ€™t I figure out who the hell she is?

â€œDid you see that girl?â€• I ask Luke. Heâ€™s been my best friend since second grade when we both realized how mutually screwed up our home lives were, although for different reasons.

â€œThe one you just ran over?â€• He folds up the schedule and tucks it into his back pocket of his jeans. â€œShe kind of reminds me of that quiet girl we used to go to school withâ€”the one Daisy was dead set on torturing.â€•

My eyes move to the entrance doors where she disappeared. â€œCallie Lawrence?â€•

â€œYeah, I think that was her name.â€• He blows out a stressed breath as he turns around in the middle of the lawn trying to get his bearings. â€œBut I donâ€™t think itâ€™s her. She wasnâ€™t wearing all that black shit around her eyes and Callie had a haircut that made her look like a guy. Plus, I think that girl was thinner.â€•

â€œYeah, she did look different.â€• But if it is Callie, I need to talk to her about that night. â€œCallie

was always thin, though. That's why Daisy made fun of her.

"That was one of the reasons she made fun of her," he reminds me and his face twists with repulsion at something behind me. "I think I'm going to go find our room." Luke hurries off toward the corner of the school building before I can say anything.

"There you are." Daisy comes up from behind me and I'm overwhelmed by the smell of perfume and hairspray.

Suddenly I understand why Luke ran off like there was a fire. He doesn't like Daisy for many reasons; one being that he thinks Daisy is a bitch. And she is, but it works for me because she allows me to stay detached from feeling anything, which is the only way I know how to live life.

"I sure hope you weren't just talking about me." Daisy wraps her arms around my mid-section and massages my stomach with her fingertips. "Unless it was something good."

I turn around and kiss her forehead. She's wearing a low-cut blue dress and the necklace that rests between her tits. "No one was talking about you. Luke just went to find his room."

She bites down on her glossy lip and bats her eyelashes at me. "Good, because I'm already nervous about leaving my ridiculously hot boyfriend. Remember you can flirt, but you can't touch." Daisy gets bored easily and says things to start drama.

"No touching. Got it," I say, holding back an eye roll. "And again, no one was talking about you."

She twines a strand of her curly blond hair around her finger with a thoughtful expression on her face. "I don't mind if you talk about me, just as long as it's good."

I met Daisy when I was in tenth grade and she moved to our school. She was the hot new freshman and was very aware that she was. I was pretty popular, but hadn't really dated anyone, just messed around. I was more focused on football, like my dad wanted me to be. Daisy seemed interested, though, and a couple of weeks later, we were officially a couple. She's self-involved and she never asks where all my bruises, cuts, and scars come from. She brought it up once, the first time we fucked, and I told her it was from a four-wheeling accident when I was a kid. She didn't question the fresh ones.

"Look baby, I got to go." I give her a quick kiss on the lips. "I have to check in and unpack and figure out where the hell everything is."

"Oh, fine." She pouts out her bottom lip and runs her fingers through my hair, guiding my lips back to hers for a deep kiss. When she pulls away, she smiles. "I guess I'll go back home and try to fill up my time with boring old high school."

"I'm sure you'll be fine," I say to her as I back toward the doors, maneuvering between the people flooding the sidewalk. "I'll be back for homecoming."

She waves as she turns for the parking lot. I keep my eyes on her until she's in her car and then I go into the school. The air is cooler inside, the lights are faint, and there's a lot of shouting and disorganization.

“We don’t need a tour.” I walk up to Luke, who’s standing near the sign-up table, reading a pink flyer. “And weren’t you going to find your room or was that your excuse to escape Daisy?”

“The girl drives me fucking crazy.” He rakes his hand through his short, brown hair. “And I was headed there, but then I realized it’d be much easier if I went on a tour so I know where everything is.”

Luke is a very structured person when it comes to school and sports. It makes sense to me since I know about his past, but from an outsider’s point of view, he probably looks like a troublemaker, who failed out of school.

“Fine, we’ll do the tour.” I write our names down on the paper and the red head sitting behind the table smiles at me.

“You can go join the one starting now,” she says shamelessly pushing her cleavage up with her arms as she leans forward. “They just stepped into the hallway.”

“Thanks.” Grinning at her, I strut off with Luke toward where she directed us.

“Every time,” he says amusedly as he sidesteps around a smaller table with plates full of cookies on it. “You’re like a magnet.”

“I don’t ask for it,” I reply as we approach the back of the crowd. “In fact, I wish they’d stop.”

“No you don’t,” he states with a roll of his eyes. “You love it and you know it. And I wished you’d act on it, so you could ditch the bitch.”

“Daisy’s not that bad. She’s probably the only girl who doesn’t care if I flirt.” I cross my arms and stare at the nerdy tour guide with thick glasses, scraggily brown hair, and a clipboard in his hands. “Do we really need to do this? I’d rather go unpack.”

“I need to know where everything is,” he says. “You can go to the room if you want.”

“I’m fine here.” My eyes zone in on a girl across the crowd; the one I ran over. She’s smiling at a guy next to her who’s whispering something in her ear. I find myself entertained by the naturalness of it, no pretenses like the one’s I’m used to seeing.

“What are you looking at?” Luke tracks my gaze and his forehead creases. “You know what? I think that might be Callie Lawrence. Now that I think about it, I remember her dad mentioning something about her going to UW.”

“No way... it can’t be,” is it? I take in her brown hair, her clothes that show her thin frame, and her blue eyes that sparkle as she laughs. The last time I saw her, those blue eyes were clouded and weighted. The Callie I knew held more darkness, wore baggy clothes, and always looked sad. She shied away from everyone, except for that one night when she saved my ass.

“No, it’s her,” Luke says with confidence as he flicks his finger against his temple. “Remember she had that small birthmark on her temple just like that girl does. It can’t be a freakish



â€œFuck me,â€• I say loudly and everyone looks at me.

â€œCan I help you?â€• the tour guide asks in an icy tone.

I shake my head, noticing Callie is staring at me. â€œSorry man, I thought a bee landed on me.â€•

Luke snorts a laugh and I suppress my laughter. The tour guide huffs in frustration and continues his speech about where all the offices are as he points at each door.

â€œWhat was that about?â€• Luke asks in a low voice as he folds a paper neatly in half.

â€œNothing.â€• I skim the crowd, but Callieâ€™s nowhere. â€œDid you see where she went?â€•

Luke shakes his head. â€œNope."

My eyes travel across the hallway, but thereâ€™s no sign of her anywhere. I need to find her, so I can thank her for saving my life, like I should have done four months ago.

Chapter 2

#28 Invite Someone You Donâ€™t Know to Dinner.

Callie

â€œWhat are our plans for tonight?â€• I fold up a shirt and place it into the laundry basket on top of the dryer. â€œAre we going out or staying in?â€•

Seth hops onto one of the washing machines with his legs dangling over the edge as he pops a piece of gum into his mouth. â€œIâ€™m conflicted. On one hand, I want to stay in and catch up on The Vampire Diaries, but thereâ€™s this really awesome restaurant Iâ€™ve been wanting to try out.â€•

â€œEw, not that one with the Sushi Bar.â€• I frown, pulling a flimsy sheet of fabric softener off one of my shirts. â€œI donâ€™t like Sushi and I donâ€™t really feel like eating out tonight.â€•

â€œNo, youâ€™ve never had Sushi,â€• he corrects. â€œAnd just because you havenâ€™t tried something doesnâ€™t mean you donâ€™t like it.â€• He stifles a laugh by sealing his lips together. â€œI know this from my own factual evidence.â€•

â€œIâ€™m sure you do.â€• My phone vibrates as it lights up from on top of the stack of shirts. â€œDang it, itâ€™s my mom. Give me a second.â€•

“Hi Mom,” I answer, shuffling to the corner to get away from the rattle of the washing machines.

“Hi, baby girl,” she says. “How’s your first day of classes?”

“First day of class is on Monday,” I remind her, pushing my fingertip against my ear to block out the rattle of the machines. “Today’s just the day when everyone’s checking in.”

“Well, how’s that going?”

“I already know where everything is, so I’m catching up on my laundry with Seth.”

“Hi, Mrs. Lawrence,” Seth shouts, cupping his hands around his mouth.

“Tell him hi for me, honey, okay?” she replies. “And that I can’t wait to meet him.”

I cover the receiver with my hand. “She can’t wait to meet you,” I whisper to Seth and he rolls his eyes.

“Tell her she can’t handle me.” The washing machine stops and he jumps off to open the lid.

“He says he can’t wait to meet you either,” I tell my mom. “In fact, he’s really excited.”

Seth shakes his head, tugging a jacket out of the machine. “Moms are not my thing. You know that.”

“What did he say?” my mom wonders.

“Nothing mom.” The dryer beeps. “I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

“Hold on sweetie. I just want to say that you sound really happy.”

“I am happy,” I lie through a thick throat, because I know that’s what she wants to hear.

Seth drops his hang-dry only shirt on the edge of the basket, puts his hands on his hips, and narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t lie to your mother, Callie.”

“What’s going on?” my mother asks. “I can hear a bunch of noises.”

“I have to go.” I press the end button before she can say anything else.

“My mom is not like your mom.” I open the dryer door and scoop the rest of my clothes out with my arms. “For the most part, she’s nice. Well, at least when I’m behaving.”

“But you can’t tell her things—really important things.” He flexes his arm that was in a cast when I met him. “Just like my mom.”

“You told your mom.” I bump the dryer door shut with my hip. “It just didn’t go well and I don’t tell my mom, because it will crush her. She’s such a happy person there’s no use

cursing her with dark thoughts. I drop the clothes into the basket as one of the washing machines chugs and bangs against the cement wall.

We can try that new restaurant, if you really, really want. Picking up the basket, I prop it against my hip. I'll add it to my list of new things I'm going to try.

He grins from ear to ear. I love that list.

I do too! sometimes, I agree as he gathers a stack of clothes. And you were brilliant for thinking of it.

The list was made in the shadows of my dorm room when he admitted to me how he broke his arm and where the scars on his hands came from. He'd been walking home from his last day of school and a bunch of football players had drove up in a truck. They jumped him, beat him, and tried to break him into a thousand pieces that they could dust under the rug. But Seth is strong, which is why I told him my secret, because he knows what it's like to have something ripped away from you. Although I omitted the gory details because I couldn't say them aloud.

I'm a very brilliant man. He steps aside to let me through the doorway first. And as long as you hold onto that notion, you'll be okay.

We laugh and it's real, but a dark cloud hovers over us once the sound is stolen by the wind.

Kayden

This room is the size of a box, I remark, taking in the very small dorm room. We're in the Downey residence hall, one of the four buildings they stuff the freshmen into. There are two twin size beds and a desk in the far corner. I can cover the space between the beds in two strides and the closet on the far wall barely holds three boxes. Are you sure you don't want to get an apartment? I saw some that are really close to campus on my way in.

Luke rummages through a large box labeled Junk. I can't afford an apartment. I need to find a job just so I can buy my books and stuff.

The scholarship didn't pay for that? I grab a heavy box and drop it onto the mattress of my bed.

He balls up some tape and throws it on the floor. That only covered tuition.

I peel the tape off the top of the box. I can help out if you need some extra cash.

He shakes his head quickly with his attention immersed in a box. I'm not a charity case. If you want an apartment, then go get one. You don't have to stay in the dorms just because I am. He pulls out a headless bronze statue and his face reddens. What the hell is this?

I shrug. I didn't pack your boxes man.

Well, I did and I didn't put this in there. He chucks it across the room and it dents the wall. God fucking dammit, she's trying to mess with my mind.

“Don’t let your mom get to you. You know she’s just trying to get you to come home so she doesn’t have to deal with things on her own.” I pick up the broken statue and step out into the hall to toss it in the garbage just outside the room.

On my way back, I spot Callie walking in my direction with the guy she was with earlier and she’s smiling again. I pause in the middle of the hallway and wait for her to reach me, forcing the traffic of people to move around me. She doesn’t notice me, but her friend sees me and he whispers something in her ear.

Her head whips in my direction and she stumbles back like she’s afraid I’m going to attack her. Her friend puts his hand on the small of her back in a comforting gesture.

“Hi,” I start off awkwardly, thrown off by her skittishness toward me. “I don’t know if you remember me.”

“I remember you,” she interrupts, her blue eyes flickering to the scar on my cheekbone. “How could I not remember you? We’ve known each other since we were kids.”

“Right,” I say, unsure how to respond to her offish attitude. She didn’t act this way that night. “That was just my way of starting the conversation.”

Her lips form an “O,” then she stands silently, fidgeting with the strap on her oversized jacket.

Her friend glances at her and then extends his hand toward me. “I’m Seth.”

I shake his hand with my gaze still on Callie. “Kayden.”

“You’ll have to forgive Callie.” Seth gently pats her shoulder and she winces. “She’s feeling a little off today.”

Callie’s eyelids descend as she narrows her eyes at him. “No, I’m not. I feel fine.”

Seth presses her with a relenting look and grits through his teeth, “Then maybe you should say something. Perhaps something nice.”

“Oh.” She focuses her attention back to me. “I’m sorry, I mean.” she trails off, cursing under her breath, “Oh my God, what is wrong with me?”

Seth sighs, like he’s used to her awkward behavior. “You’re just starting school today?” he asks me.

“Yeah, I’m here on a football scholarship.” I eye him up, questioning if he’s ever touched a football.

He arches his eyebrows, rocking back on his heels, feigning interest. “Aw, I see.”

Callie’s bangs flutter away from her forehead as she lets out a slow exhale. “We have to go. We have dinner plans. It was nice talking to you, Kayden.”

going to check out.â€•

â€œYou could come with us,â€• Seth offers, ignoring the glare Callie targets at him. â€œIf you want. Itâ€™s just this new place weâ€™re

â€œItâ€™s Sushi.â€• Callie meets my gaze for the first time. Sadness and diffidence possess her pupils and I almost reach out to hug her pain away. Itâ€™s an odd feeling, since Iâ€™ve never hugged anyone, other than Daisy and I only hug her when I have to. â€œIâ€™m not sure itâ€™ll be good.â€•

â€œI like Sushi.â€• I look over my shoulder at the open door to my dorm. â€œBut Iâ€™d have to bring Luke, if thatâ€™s okay? Luke was the running back for the Broncos.â€•

â€œI know who he is.â€• She swallows hard. â€œHe can come, I guess.â€•

â€œJust a second. Let me see if heâ€™s up for it.â€• I duck back into the room where Luke is sitting on his unmade bed, sifting through a stack of papers. I brace my hands on the doorframe as I stick my head in. â€œAre you down for some Sushi?â€•

His eyes elevate from the papers to me. â€œSushi? Why?â€•

â€œBecause Callie Lawrence just invited us,â€• I say. â€œOr well, her friend didâ€¦ do you remember her being offish?â€•

He tucks the papers away into a dresser drawer, but crumples up a small one and throws it into the trash. â€œYeah, she got that way around sixth grade. It was like one minute she was normal and then the next minute she was fucking weird.â€•

My hands fall to my side and I lean back, glancing out into the hall at Callie whoâ€™s whispering something to Seth. â€œI donâ€™t remember that. I mean, I remember her being kind of normal and then not really remembering her at all. She didnâ€™t really hang out with anyone, did she?â€•

â€œNot really.â€• He shrugs. â€œWhatâ€™s with the obsession with her now?â€•

â€œItâ€™s not an obsession.â€• He pisses me off with the accusation. â€œI donâ€™t ever get obsessed with anyone. They just offered and I accepted to be polite. If you donâ€™t want to go, then we donâ€™t have to.â€•

He stuffs his wallet into his back pocket. â€œI donâ€™t care if we go. If I can make it through tons of freaking dinners with Daisy, Iâ€™m sure I can make it through a dinner with some girl we went to school with that barely says a word.â€•

I feel like an asshole. He seems to remember more about Callie than I do and I should know the girl who saved me in so many ways that I donâ€™t know if Iâ€™ll ever be able to explain it to her.

Callie

â€œIâ€™m so mad at you,â€• I hiss under my breath at Seth as we walk across the dark parking lot toward the restaurant thatâ€™s lit up by florescent lights. The four of us drove to the restaurant in the same car and the silence was enough to make me want to pull my hair out. â€œWhy did you invite

â€œTo be polite.â€• He shrugs and swings his arm around me. â€œNow relax, my lovely Callie, and letâ€™s cross off being more social from our list. In fact, we can cross off inviting someone to dinner.â€•

â€œIâ€™m going to burn that list when we get back.â€• I jerk the glass doors open and step through the doorway into the stuffy atmosphere of the restaurant. Most of the booths are empty, but the bar is rather loud, with a group of girls wearing feather boas and tiaras, like they are at a bridal party.

â€œNo, youâ€™re not. Now relax and try to make small conversation,â€• he replies and struts up to the hostess, resting his arm on top of the counter. â€œHi, are there any seats available at the bar?â€•

She giggles, twisting a lock of her red hair around her finger as she scrolls through a list, completely smitten by Seth. â€œLet me check.â€•

Seth pops a mint into his mouth and rolls his eyes at me from over his shoulder. â€œWow.â€•

I smile at him then turn toward Luke and Kayden, but canâ€™t find anything to say. I donâ€™t do well with guys, except for Seth. I wish I did, but my memories just wonâ€™t let me.

Luke plucks a waxy leaf off the artificial plant near the door. â€œI thought Laramie was supposed to be more of a party town than it seems to be.â€•

I point at the window to my right. â€œIt is farther down that way. Thereâ€™s a lot of clubs and stuff.â€•

With his buzzed brown hair, a tattoo around his forearm, and intense brown eyes, Luke always looks like heâ€™s about to start a fight and it makes me want to cower back. â€œSo you know where they are?â€•

â€œIâ€™ve heard of where they are.â€• I peek out of the corner of my eye at Kayden. Heâ€™s listening to me intently as he leans against the door with his arms crossed over his chest. â€œWhy is he looking at me like that? Like heâ€™s actually seeing me.â€• â€œBut I havenâ€™t been to many of them.â€•

â€œYeah, you were never really a party girl, were you?â€• Luke flicks the leaf to the floor.

â€œActually she kind of was at one time,â€• Kayden intervenes with a proud expression on his face. â€œI remember now.â€• It was the beginning of sixth grade and my mom was supposed to bring the cake, but she forgot or somethingâ€¦ I think it was your birthday.â€•

â€œI was turning twelve.â€• My voice is breathless as the images of balloons, confetti, and pink frosting surface, but then bleed away into a pool of blood. â€œAnd that doesnâ€™t make me a party girl, just a little girl who wanted a birthday partyâ€¦ thatâ€™s all I wanted.â€•

They stare at me like Iâ€™ve lost my mind and I try to mentally summon my lips to form words, but they are bound together by the painful memories crushing my heart.

â€œOkay, I got us a table, but itâ€™s not at the bar.â€• Seth strolls up and drapes his arm around my shoulder. â€œWhatâ€™s up? You look sick.â€•

I blink several times and then force a smile. â€œIâ€™m just tired.â€•

He knows Iâ€™m lying, but wonâ€™t bring it up in front of Kayden or Luke. â€œThen we should probably get you back early.â€

The hostess ushers us to our table and leaves the menus for us to look over, along with four glasses of ice water, flaunting Seth a grin before she heads back to the front. My vision is clouded by dark thoughts Iâ€™ve tried not to think about in a while, and I canâ€™t see a single word on the list. I press the palms of my hands to my eyes and blink.

â€œI think I need to admit something,â€ Kayden announces. When I glance up at him, a slow grin turns up at his lips. â€œI donâ€™t like Sushi. In fact, it kind of creeps me out.â€

â€œMe too,â€ I agree with a timid smile. â€œItâ€™s weird that itâ€™s not cooked.â€

â€œSheâ€™s never had it,â€ Seth divulges, turning the page of his menu. â€œSo technically, she canâ€™t put in her opinion.â€

â€œI think she can offer her opinion.â€ From beneath the table, Kaydenâ€™s knee brushes mine, whether accidental or not, Iâ€™m unsure. It sends a hot flow of heat up my body that makes my stomach somersault. â€œIt seems like a valuable opinion.â€

I donâ€™t know how to take his compliment, so I keep my lips fastened.

â€œIâ€™m not saying itâ€™s not valuable,â€ Seth explains. â€œOnly that she may like it if she tried it. A code that I live by.â€

Iâ€™m sipping my water and I snort a laugh, choking on a piece of ice. â€œOh my God.â€

Seth pats my back with his hand. â€œAre you going to make it?â€

I nod, pressing my palm to my chest. â€œYeah, no more jokes while Iâ€™m drinking, though, okay?â€

â€œItâ€™s what I live by.â€ Thereâ€™s a sparkle in his eyes as he grins devilishly at me. â€œBut Iâ€™ll tone it down.â€

â€œShit, I left my phone in the car,â€ Luke slaps his hand on top of the table and our water glasses shake. â€œIâ€™ll be right back.â€ He gets up from the booth, strolls down the aisle, and exits out the front doors.

We return to our menus when Seth jumps up from the booth. â€œI locked the car. He canâ€™t even get inside it.â€ He rushes off toward the door, taking his keys out of his pocket.

â€œLuke actually went to smoke,â€ Kayden tells me, spinning the saltshaker between the palms of his hands. â€œHe just doesnâ€™t like to admit it to people he doesnâ€™t know. Heâ€™s weird about it.â€

I bob my head up and down, not looking at him. â€œSo did Seth, probably. He usually does it in the car, but he was being polite.â€

â€œHe could have.â€ Kayden laughs and it lights up his eyes. â€œLukeâ€™s been smoking in my car since we were sixteen.â€

Unable to help myself, I smile at the idea as I fiddle with the edge of a napkin.

“What’s so funny?” Kayden folds his arms on top of the table and the bottom of his sleeves rise up. Tiny white lines cover the back of his wrists and he swiftly jerks his sleeves down to hide them. “Come on, share whatever’s making you smile like that.”

“It’s nothing.” I raise my gaze back to him. “I was just thinking about what my dad would have said if he ever found out his running back was a smoker.”

“I think he knew he was.” Kayden leans over the table, moving closer to me. “He always seemed to know everything that we did wrong, but never said it.”

“Yeah, maybe he did, I guess. He did catch my brother smoking once and grounded him for a very long time.” Why am I talking to him like this? It’s not like me. I tip my chin down and concentrate on the list of appetizers.

“Callie, I’m sorry,” he says abruptly, flattening his palm on the table as he glides it toward mine. As his fingers brush my knuckles, I nearly choke to death.

“For what?” I sound strangled.

“For not saying thank you for that night.” He covers his big hand on top of mine.

For a second, I like how his warmth feels, but then I’m thrown back to the place locked inside my mind, trapped and powerless.

“It’s okay.” I yank my hand away and hide it under the table. My pulse races as I stare at the menu. “You were having a rough night.”

He doesn’t say anything as he moves his hand away. I don’t look up at him, because I don’t want to see the disgusted look in his eyes.

“If I asked them if I could have a hamburger, do you think they’d make me one?” he asks, nonchalantly changing the subject.

I flip the page of the menu, with my eyebrows furrowed. “Does it say they have hamburgers?”

“No, I was kidding.” He observes me from across the table. “Can I ask you something?”

I nod warily. “Sure.”

“How come you left for college early?” he asks. “Most people want to stay home for the summer and party.”

I shrug. “I didn’t really have anything left for me there except for my parents and it just seemed like it was time to go.”

“You didn’t have a lot of friends, did you?” Recollection masks his face as he starts to put the pieces of my sad life together.

Thankfully, Seth and Luke join us at the table before he can try to dig up more details. They smell like smoke and look euphorically happy.

“Nah, they don’t really have many on campus.” Seth says to Luke as he sits down and unrolls the napkin from around the silverware. “And if they do, security usually breaks them up.”

Luke swivels a small plastic display with pictures of the beer beverages on it. “Yeah, that shit happened all the time at our school. Like this one time we had this huge bonfire, and the cops showed up and busted everyone.”

“What kind of trouble did you get in?” Seth asks, checking the watch on his wrist.

“Not too much.” Luke pops a toothpick into his mouth. “The cops in our town usually go easy on football players.”

“Figures,” Seth mutters, giving me a sidelong glance, and I offer him a sympathetic smile.

Kayden’s foot keeps bumping mine from below the table and I want to ask him to stop, but I can’t even make eye contact with him. I grow flustered because part of me likes it. I’m losing control over my feelings and I desperately need to get a hold of them again.

The waitress returns and jots down our orders. I try to do my best and order a whole meal with the intention to eat it all. When the food arrives however, my stomach clenches, and I can tell right away that I’m going to do it, just like I always do.

Chapter 3

#52 Take a Chance For God’s Sake

À

Kayden

It’s been a week since school started. Classes are a pain in the ass. I was warned that college would be harder, but I never prepared myself for how much solo work was required. Between that and practice, I’ve had zero time to focus on anything else in my life.

I’ve crossed paths with Callie twice since we ate at the restaurant and each time she avoids me. She’s in my Biology class, but sits in the back, as far away from anyone else as she can, focusing on her pen and paper. The girl has to have a whole notebook full of notes with how fixated she is with them.

I try not to stare at her, but most of the time I can’t help it. It’s fascinating to watch how oblivious she is to everyone. It would be nice to get lost in my thoughts, instead of always worrying about shit.

I'm getting ready to go to class, telling myself that I need to leave Callie alone, when I get a phone call from my dad.

"You left your shit in the garage," is the first thing he says to me.

"Sorry," I apologize, forcing myself to breathe as I grab my books. "But I thought mom said I could."

"Your mom has no say in these things," he says sharply. "If you wanted to keep your shit here, you should have asked me. God, how many times do you have to screw up before you stop?"

I want to argue, but he's right. I screw up more than I don't. I let him chew my ass off for over fifteen minutes, and he makes me feel like a fucking kid again.

After I hang up, I stare at the mirror above the dresser, analyzing every scar on my face until it just looks like one big scar. Suddenly, all this anger pours out of me and I kick the shit out of the dresser until one of the drawers falls out. Luke's stuff scatters all over the floor; lighters, photos, a few tools, and a razorblade. He hates it when his shit gets disorganized and is going to go nuts if he comes back to this mess.

I quickly put everything back inside, trying to make it look orderly, and pretend not to notice the white elephant staring me in the face as I scoop it up off the floor. But it's all I can think about as I hold it in my palm, begging myself not to use it.

My hand shakes as my mind drifts back to a time when I wasn't like this; where I thought that maybe, just maybe, everything didn't have to center around pain.

My older brother, Tyler and I were messing around in the garage. He was about sixteen and I was eight. He was working on a motorcycle he had bought with the money he'd saved up from his summer job.

"I know it's kind of a piece of shit," he said to me as he grabbed a wrench from the toolbox in the corner. "But I'll get me places away from here, which is all I fucking want."

He'd been fighting with my dad all day and had a giant bruise on his arm and cuts on his knuckles. I'd heard them arguing and then they were hitting each other. It was normal though. Life.

"Why do you want to leave?" I asked, wandering around the bike. It wasn't shiny or anything, but it looked like it could be fun. And if it could take anyone away from here, then it had to be something special. "Is it because of dad?"

He tossed the tool back into the box rather hard and raked his hands through his long brown hair, which made him look like a homeless person, or at least my dad said so. "One day, buddy, when you get a little bit older, you're going to realize that everything in this house is one fucking big lie and you're going to want to get the hell away from here, no matter what it costs."

I stepped up on a crate and climbed on top of the bike, grabbing onto the handles as I swung my short leg over it. "Will you take me with you? I want to leave too."

He rounded to the back of the bike, squatting down to check the tires. "Yeah, buddy, I will."

I pushed the throttle, pretending to drive away, and for a second I saw the possibility of a life without pain. "You promise?"

He nodded as he messed with the air pressure gauge. "Yeah, I promise."

It turned out my brother was a liar just like everyone else in the house. He ended up moving out, and leaving me behind because he'd rather be drunk than deal with life. A few years later, my other brother, Dylan, graduated and moved out of the house. He changed his number, never told anyone where he was going, and no one has heard from him since, although I'm not sure how hard anyone looked.

I was twelve at the time and the only kid left in the house, which meant I was the main focus of my dad's rage, something he made clear to me the night Dylan packed his shit and left. The beatings before that weren't too severe; slaps across the face, lashings with his belt, and sometimes he would punch us or kick us, but would hold back just enough that it hurt like hell but could be hidden.

I watched Dylan pull away from the driveway and drive down the road into the dark, pressing my face to the window, wishing I were in the car with him, even though Dylan and I had never been close. My dad walked in from outside, bringing in the cold night air with him. He'd yelled at Dylan all the way to the car, telling him he was a fucking moron for giving up his football scholarship and refusing to be on the team.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" He slammed the front door so hard the family portrait above the mantle fell to the floor.

I turned around on the couch and sat down, staring at the portrait on the floor. "Nothing sir."

He stalked toward me, his pupils swallowing his eyes, and I could smell the alcohol on his breath from clear across the room. He was bigger than me, stronger than me, and he had a look on his face that let me know he was about to use it to his full advantage and there was nothing I could do about it.

I knew the drill. Get up and hide, otherwise he wouldn't have time to cool off. But I couldn't move. I kept thinking about my brothers who were gone and had left me behind like an old t-shirt. We used to be in this together, now it was just me. I started to cry, like a stupid fucking baby, and I knew it was only going to piss him off more.

"Are you crying? What the fuck is wrong with you?" He didn't slow his momentum as he raised his fist and slammed it into my shoulder.

The pain that spread up my neck and down my arm sucked my oxygen out in one swift snap of a finger and I crumpled to the floor, blinking the black spots away from my eyes.

"Get up!" He kicked me in the side, but I couldn't get up. My legs had given up on me and with each slam of his shoe, something died inside. I didn't even bother tucking my legs in to protect them. I just let the pain take over, allowing it to numb the pain of being left behind. "You're so useless! At least your brothers fight back. But what are you? Nothing! It's all your fault!" Another kick, this time against my gut and the pain shot up into my head.

“Get up! Get up. Get up!” His boot slammed into my gut and his voice took on pleading. As if it was all my fault and he wanted me to make it stop. And maybe it was my fault. All I had to do was get up. But even something so simple I couldn’t get right.

It was the worst beating I ever had, like he had channeled all his frustration with my brothers and directed it all on me. My mom kept me out of school for two weeks while I healed, telling the school, family, friends, neighbors “anyone who asked that I had strep throat and was highly contagious.

I lay in bed almost the entire time, feeling my body heal, but my mind and will to live died, knowing it would never get better, that this was it for me.

I blink the thought away as I sit down on the floor and lift up my shirt. I vowed when I went to college that I’d give it up “stop the fucking habit. But I guess it owns me more than I thought.

The next day in Biology I’m trying to hold as still as possible to keep the pain on my stomach contained, but I keep glancing behind me at Callie, who seems oblivious that I’m turning into a stalker.

Professor Fremont takes his sweet time wrapping up his lecture. By the time I make it into the hall, it’s crammed with people. I’m blocking the doorway, trying to determine whether I want to skip my next class or not, when someone slams into my back.

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry,” Callie apologizes, backing away from me like I’m a criminal. “I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I promise I’m perfectly fine, even though you ran into me.” I flash a grin at her as I move to the side, so people can get by. As my midsection turns, my muscles burn.

“I’m sorry,” Callie repeats and then shuts her eyes, shaking her head at herself. “I just have a bad habit of saying sorry.”

“It’s okay, but maybe you should work on breaking it,” I suggest, bracing my hand on the doorframe. Her brown hair is pulled up and thin wisps hang around her face. She’s wearing jeans, a plain purple t-shirt, and minimal makeup. Her tits aren’t hanging out of her top and her jeans aren’t skin tight to show off her curves, like how Daisy dresses every day. There’s nothing to check out, yet I find myself really looking at her.

“I’m trying, but it’s hard.” She looks down at the brown carpet, so shy and innocent. The girl looks like she needs a thousand hugs to erase all the sadness she’s carrying around on her shoulders. “Habits are very hard to break.”

“Can I take you out somewhere?” I ask without even thinking about what I’m doing or what the consequences will be. “I really want to say thank you for, well, you know, for what you did.”

Her eyelids flutter open and my heart skips a beat. That’s never happened before and it tosses me into a momentary state of vertigo. “I’m actually supposed to meet Seth in just a few minutes, but maybe some other time,” she says evasively and starts down the hall, swinging her bag over her



I fall into step with her. "You know, he's an interesting person. I have him in my English class and he always raises his hand, just to give the wrong answer."

A faint smile touches at her lips. "He does it on purpose."

Pressing my palm against the glass, I hold the door open for her. "Why?"

She blocks the sun from her eyes with her hand as she steps outside. "Because it's on the list."

I pause just outside the doorway, cocking an eyebrow. "The list?"

"It's nothing." She waves her hand at me dismissively. "Look, I have to go."

She picks up the pace, her thin legs moving quickly as she leaves me in the campus yard, her head tucked down and her shoulders hunched as if she's doing everything she can to be nonexistent.

À

À

Callie

My dorm room is located in the McIntyre building, which is the tallest of the residence halls. I swipe my ID card to get into the hall and then push a code to enter my room. From out the window, the people look tiny, like I'm a bird seeing everything from an Aerial view.

I pull out my journal that I keep hidden beneath my pillow and grab a pen. I started writing in it when I was thirteen, as a way to put my thoughts down on paper. I wasn't planning on making it a lifelong hobby, but I feel so much better when I write, like my brain is finally free to say whatever it wants.

The edges of the cover are tattered and some of the pages are falling off from the spiral. I sit down with my legs crisscrossed, and press the tip to a clean sheet.

It's amazing how the things you remember forever are the things you'd rather forget and the things you desperately want to grasp onto seem to slip away like sand in the wind.

I remember everything about that day, like the images have been burned into my brain by a branding iron. But I wish they would blow away in the wind.

There's a knock on my door. Sighing, I hide the notebook back under the pillow before answering the door. Seth strolls in with two iced lattes and he hands one to me.

"You sounded like you could use one of these." He shucks off his jacket, drapes it over a chair that's in front of the desk, and sinks down on the bed. "Okay, spill your guts."

"I don't know why he's talking to me and asking me to go places." I pace the floor in front of my bed and sip on the straw. There are sketches and a poster of Rise Against on my roommate's side of the wall, and her bed is covered in dirty clothes. "He's never really talked to me before."

“Who, Kayden?” Seth asks and I nod. He flops onto my bed and scrolls through my playlists on my iPod. “Maybe he likes you.”

I stop in the middle of the room and shake my head, the ice swishing in the cup. “No, that’s not what it is. He has a girlfriend—a super slutty girlfriend who he can touch.”

“He would probably touch you, if you’d let him,” he says and my breath catches in my throat. “Okay, so we’re not there yet.”

Setting the coffee on the desk, I sink down on my bed and tuck my hands under my legs. “I’m not sure I’ll ever be there. I think I’ve come to the conclusion that I won’t ever be able to handle going that far with anyone. I may end up being one of those old ladies with a thousand cats and eating cat food straight out of the can.”

“First of all, gross, I would never let you turn into that. And second of all, we should add it to the list.” He sits up and reaches for a pen on my nightstand.

“Just because it’s on the list, doesn’t mean it will happen,” I say as he stands up and marches to the board on the back of the door where our list is written.

“Yes, it does, Callie.” He grins, flipping the cap off the pen with his thumb. “Because it’s a magical list, full of possibilities.”

“I wish that were true.” I stare out the window at the people flooding the campus yard. “I really do.”

The pen squeaks as he scribbles something down. When I return my attention to him, he’s added, #52 Take a Chance For God’s Sake to the bottom of the list. He clicks the cap on, cocks his head, and smiles with pride at his cleverness.

“I do amaze myself sometimes. I’m going to have to add this one to my copy of the list when I get back to my room.” He tosses the pen onto the dresser and sits down on the bed. “So what’s your chance, Callie? Because I know you’re strong enough to at least try one.”

“But what if I take a chance and everything crumbles?” I ask. “What if I trust someone again and they steal something away from me. I don’t really have that much left before I’m hollow.”

“Take an easy chance,” he singsongs. “Come on, Callie, do it.”

“Are you trying to peer pressure me?”

“Yeah, is it working?”

“Not really, since I don’t know what you want me to do.”

He rubs his hands together with a devious gleam in his eyes. “I have an idea. You should call Kayden and take him up on his offer.”

“No, Seth.” I pull my knees up and rest my chin on them. “I can’t be around people like him.”

They make me nervous and remind me too much of high school. Besides, soon itâ€™s going to dawn on him how much his girlfriend hates me and heâ€™s going to back off.â€•

â€œHe seems nice.â€• Seth removes his cellphone from his pocket and checks the screen. â€œI even have his phone number in my phone.â€•

My brows knit. â€œHow?â€•

â€œBecause Iâ€™m scandalous.â€• He swipes his finger over the screen to turn it on. I dive for him with my arm out, but he jumps out of my reach and runs for the door. â€œHere we go.â€•

I stand up and put my hands on my hips, digging my fingers into my skin as I hunch over and force air through my lungs. â€œSeth, please donâ€™t. I canâ€™t. I donâ€™t do well around guys.â€•

He puts the phone up to his ear with a stern look on his face. â€œCallie, you have to remember that not all guys are himâ€¦. Hello, is this Kayden?â€• He pauses. â€œYeah, this is Seth. Hold on just a second. Callie wants to talk to you.â€• Covering the mouthpiece with his hand, he extends the phone toward me. â€œTake. A. Chance.â€•

I remove my hands from my hips and my skin is dotted with red-crescent moon marks from my fingernails. I take the phone from him, my pulse erratic through my fingers, my wrists, and my neck as I raise it to my ear.

â€œHello,â€• I say, my voice barely a whisper.

â€œHi,â€• he replies, sounding lost, but intrigued. â€œDid you need something?â€•

â€œHey, I was thinking that maybeâ€¦ I could still take you up on that offer to go somewhere,â€• I explain, and Seth motions his hand at me encouragingly. â€œWe donâ€™t have to do anything right now, but maybe later.â€•

â€œI was just getting ready to leave to explore the town,â€• he says as I bite on my fingernail. â€œDo you want to go with me?â€•

I nod, even though he canâ€™t see me. â€œYes, that sounds nice. Should I meet you outside or something?â€•

â€œDo you know what Lukeâ€™s truck looks like?â€• he asks.

â€œIs it that rusted one he used to drive in high school?â€•

â€œYeah, thatâ€™s the one. Why donâ€™t you meet me by it in like ten minutes? Itâ€™s parked near the side entrance of the quad.â€•

â€œAlright, sounds good.â€• I hang up and scowl at Seth.

He claps his hands and does a little dance. â€œSee, taking a chance isnâ€™t so bad. In fact, it can turn out really good.â€•

“What if I panic, though?” I hand him the phone back and grab a hoodie from my dresser drawer. “What if I do something really weird?”

I’ve never been alone with a strange guy before.”

“You’ll be fine.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and looks me in the eyes. “Just be the Callie I know.”

I zip up my jacket. “Okay, I’ll try my damn hardest.”

He laughs and then encloses his arms around me, drawing me in for a hug. “And if you need anything, you can call me. I’ll always be here for you.”

Kayden isn’t out in the parking lot. As I wait by Luke’s truck, I watch the other students hurry to and from class and I almost bolt. As I step up onto the curb to head back to my dorm, Kayden exits out the side doors of the building. He’s talking to a girl with wavy black hair that runs all the way down her back.

He’s wearing jeans that hang low on his hips and a long-sleeve, dark grey Henley. The way he moves is captivating. He’s got a lot of swagger in the movement of his hips, yet his shoulders bend in and his whole stomach area looks stiff, as if walking causes him pain.

I step back to the truck and wait with my arms crossed over my chest. When he sees me, his lips turn upward and he waves good-bye to the girl, who I think is in my Philosophy class.

“Sorry I’m late.” He hitches his thumb over his shoulder at the girl walking away. “Kellie needed help with an English assignment. Were you waiting here a long time?”

I drop my arms to my side then fold them over my chest again, unable to figure out what to do with them. “Not for too long.”

He steps off the curb and I began to recoil as he reaches toward my side. But he grips the door handle and I relax, sidestepping so he can open it.

“Are you okay?” He pulls the door open and the hinges creak as bits of rust fall off the edge.

Nodding, I put one foot up on the floor of the truck, and hop in. The vinyl fabric of the seat is frayed and pokes through my jeans, scratching at my skin. He slams the door and I wring my hands on top of my lap. It’s the first time I’ve been alone with a guy in a car before, except for Seth, and my heart challenges my chest to endure its wrath.

“Callie, are you sure you’re okay?” he asks with his hands on top of the steering wheel. “You look a little pale.”

I force my eyes to concentrate on him, trying not to blink too much. “I’m fine. I’m just a little tired. College wears me out.”

“I completely agree on that.” He offers me a smile that crinkles around his eyes as he starts up the engine. It chugs and then backfires. “Sorry, Luke’s truck is a piece of shit.”

I spread my sweaty palms flat on my knees. "What happened to your car? The one you used to drive to school. Did you leave it at home?"

His throat muscles work to swallow a lump in his throat. "My dad has a rule that once we leave the house, we're on our own. The car was bought by him, so therefore it's his."

I nod, reaching over my shoulder to grab the seatbelt. "I don't have a car either. My parents offered to give me my brother's old car, but I declined."

"Why?" He shoves the shifter into gear and the tires roll forward. "It seems like life would be easier if you had one."

I click the buckle into the lock and then watch the leafy trees zip by as we pull out onto the street and away from the campus. "It seemed like too much responsibility, I guess. Besides, I wasn't really planning on leaving the campus very much."

He turns on the wipers to wash the grime off the windshield. "I kind of have a question and feel free not to answer it." He dithers. "How come you never hung out with anyone in high school? After I started thinking about it, I just don't remember you doing anything."

I scratch at the back of my neck until it stings. "That's because I didn't do anything."

He watches me, waiting for me to elaborate, his eyes on me instead of the road, but I can't tell him anything. It's my secret and I'll take it to the grave of shame.

"There's this really awesome place I heard about where you can stand up on the hills and see the whole town," he says. "I was thinking we could go there. It's not too far of a hike."

"A hike?" I question. "Like we would walk up a mountain?"

He laughs and I feel like a moron. "Yeah, like we'd walk up hills and everything."

I scrunch up my nose at my brown boots that fold down at the top. They're a size too small and just walking around campus gives me blisters. "Okay, I guess we can go on a hike."

His lips part as he starts to say something, but his phone rings from inside his pocket. His brows decline as he reads the name on the glowing screen. "Can you be quiet for a second?" he asks with a guilty face.

I nod, eyeing his phone. "Sure."

"Hey baby, what's up?" he answers and I can hear Daisy's voice on the other end.

"Then don't say that to them and maybe they won't get mad." Kayden pauses. "Yeah, I know. I miss you too. I can't wait until homecoming! No, I haven't got a tux yet."

A hint of jealousy burns in my heart. When I was younger, I dreamt of going to prom and wearing a pretty dress with lots of sparkles on it. I even wanted a tiara, which seems silly now.

“I love you too.” He says flatly and then quickly hangs up the phone.

My jealousy lifts and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

He tosses the phone onto the seat between us. “That was Daisy, you know Daisy McMillian, right?”

“Yeah, a little.”

“By your tone, I’m guessing you don’t like her.”

“Why would you guess that?”

His hands grip the wheel as his eyes evaluate me. “Because most people don’t.”

“If that’s the case, then why do you date her?” I ask, wondering where the forwardness is coming from.

He shrugs, his jawline rigid. “She’s a nice girlfriend. She keeps me happy for the most part.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m being pushy, aren’t I?” I grip the edge of my seatbelt as he turns onto a dirt road with large potholes and a very sharp drop off on the side of it. It weaves up into the mountains that are green with trees and grass.

“You weren’t being pushy. I was asking you questions first.” He grinds his jaw and his fingers tighten on the wheel.

We’re quiet for the rest of the drive and I can tell something must have upset him. The wheels in his head are turning as his mind sorts through something complex.

A ways up the hill, he cranks the steering wheel to the right and veers the truck toward a turnout. A long ditch sections across the entrance and he gradually slows down. The truck bumps and then slants as he pumps the gas again and ramps back up, jolting us from left to right. When we’re on flat land again, he directs the bumper at the trees and inches it forward until it’s close, then shoves the shifter into park and turns the engine off.

A steep hill slopes up in front of us and there is graffiti on the side of a rock in various colors marking dates, lyrics, poems, and declarations of love. There are other vehicles parked next to us and on the road. People are on the path and up on top of the hill. I’m glad we’re not alone, but don’t like that there are a lot of people. It’s kind of problematic.

He flips the handle and prods the door open with his elbow. “I promise it’s not that far. At least that’s what I’ve been told. If it ends up being intense, just let me know and we can turn back.”

“Okay, I will.” I push my door open and swing my feet out, avoiding a puddle. I meet him around the front of the truck and tuck my hands into my pockets that are lined with soft fabric and the feel of it brings me comfort, because it reminds me of a teddy bear.

We walk up the dirt path and pass by a couple sitting on a boulder in hiking boots with backpacks on.

They wave at us and Kayden returns the wave while I stare up at a rock that is stained with paint.

“What is that?” I wonder aloud and read one of the quotes. “Seize the day, take hold of it, and make it whatever you want.”

He dodges to the side of the path to avoid a large hole and his shoulder accidentally bumps into mine. “I guess it’s a tradition for the seniors at UW to come up here and write words of wisdom to all future seniors.”

“Rock on and prosper.” I glance at him, my lips quirking. “That’s very deep.”

He laughs and lines form around his mouth. “I never said they were all words of wisdom, only that I heard that’s what they are supposed to be.”

I scoot over toward the rocky hill to gain a little distance between us. “It seems like a good idea, kind of. To mark the end with whatever you want.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” He hops over a massive rock, his lengthy legs stretching as he lands on top of it, and then leaps off the other side. He’s panting, smiling, and proud of himself. “It’s kind of like the whole bonfire thing back in Afton, where we write down our thoughts on a piece of paper and then burn it.”

“I never went to that,” I admit, clenching my hands into fists. If I had, I would have been tortured by people whispering that I was a devil worshiper who never ate anything. “Because my hacked job hair, excessive black eyeliner, and antisocial behavior could have only been the work of the devil.”

“Oh.” He examines me for a while as I pretend not to notice. “Callie, I’d like to get to know you. I mean, you saved my ass and I barely know anything about you.”

I pluck a leaf off a bush and peel at the waxy edges. “There’s not much to know, really. I’m kind of a boring person.”

“I doubt that’s true.” He kicks a rock over the ledge of the cliff. “How about I’ll tell you something about me and then you can tell me something about you?”

“What kinds of things?”

“Whatever you want.”

We halt as we reach the end of the path. It widens to an area bordered by hills and boulders and there’s an enormous cliff paved by edges that look like stairs. It’s steep, but climbable.

“How do we get up?” I drop the leaf onto the ground and tip my head back to look at the top.

Rubbing his hands together, he grabs a hold of one of the stairs and props his shoe onto the lower one. “We climb up.” With a bounce of his knee, he jumps up, like he’s ascending up a rock wall. Once he’s halfway up, he looks over his shoulder at me. “Are you coming?”

I glance behind me at the path curving down the hill, and then back up at the cliff. Take a chance for

God's sake. Even though I'm afraid of heights, I grip the coarse edge, bounce onto my toes, and heave myself up. Positioning each of my feet on a ledge, I maneuver my way up to the next one, getting lightheaded the higher I climb. When I look down, I freeze with the fear of splattering against the rocks below. The wind sneaks through my hair and pieces slip loose from the elastic.

"Are you going to make it?" He stands at the top with his hands on his hips like he's the king of the world, which would be an awesome job, if it existed. "I could wear a crown and everyone would have to listen to me. If I said stay away, then they would."

I inhale through my nose and move my hand to the next step. "Yeah!" As my fingers slip, I squeeze my eyes tightly and my back bows inward. I'm not going to fall, but it makes me feel helpless and I can't move.

"Fuck, Callie," he says. "Give me your hand."

My fingers snag another ledge and I dig them in as my airflow decreases. Dizziness swarms through my brain and my knees tremble, about to buckle underneath me.

"Callie, open your eyes," Kayden says in a soft, but commanding voice and I crack an eyelid open. He's climbed down and his feet are just above my head with his long arm stretched toward me. "Give me your hand and I'll help you get up."

I eye his hand like it's the devil, because that's what hands

...

[Click here to read more The Coincidence of Callie and Kayden](#)