

THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS.

The background of the cover is a stylized illustration. It features a large, dark, swirling shape in the center, possibly representing a person's hair or a shadow. To the right, a small figure of a person stands on a wooden pier or dock, holding a glowing orange light. The scene is set against a purple and blue gradient background with some dark, leafy branches in the top right corner and a few small birds in flight.

SOME
MISTAKES
WERE
MADE

KRISTIN DWYER

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HARPER **TEEN**
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Dedication

For David, who is always thinking of me.

And absolutely not for Adrienne Young, who said she would buy 600 copies of this book if I dedicated it to her and burn them. This book is totally not dedicated to you.

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I'M THINKING ABOUT HIM.

Again.

In this moment that doesn't have room for him. In a place he isn't invited. And I have to be careful because memories are like rain.

A harmless drop here and there fall against my mind, then suddenly, I'm standing beneath a flood.

The top of the mortarboard in my hand is blank. Forest-green satin covers the cap without a single embellishment. Unlike the other hats belonging to the rest of my graduating class. Nothing to reflect the person wearing it. Nothing about its owner.

Would the top of my graduation cap have been empty if he was here?

I push the thought aside and take a deep breath as I move out of the walkway. A group of my fellow graduates pushes past me in the huge stadium, and somehow, I still manage to be in the way. My eyes go to the blue sky above me, already turning pink.

The sunsets here feel different than the ones in the Midwest. Brighter, as if the light is really golden.

"Oh my *god*," one of the girls says in her California lilt. Everyone here talks different. I wish I was home. I wish . . .

Across the green grass of the football field, I see Tucker Albrey.

Not the *him* I was wishing for.

He weaves in and out of the chairs as he makes his way toward me. Sunglasses cover his eyes and his blond hair is messy from surfing earlier. Tucker looks like he belongs here. Hands tucked into the pockets of his fitted pants and his button-down open at the collar to reveal a peek at his tan chest. He's effortlessly handsome. Almost as if he's not from the same flat Indiana countryside we both grew up in. Like Southern California is his home.

It's not.

Tucker grins and winks at a group that passes him. They giggle as one of them looks back over her shoulder, and not for the first time I'm grateful he doesn't flirt with me. Tucker's smile is a powerful weapon.

I give him a stern frown that I don't really mean. He's been like this since we were little. Somewhere between sincere and arrogant.

All the Albrey brothers are.

"What?" He lifts his shoulders in a careless shrug.

"My graduation is not a place for you to flirt."

"Ellis Truman." He puts a tanned hand over his heart. "If not now, when? If not me, who?"

I roll my eyes at him. "Look for your next victim elsewhere."

"I am offended at your verbiage." His arm wraps around my shoulders and I feel a deep sense of relief that he's here. At least Tucker is with me. I've imagined this day a hundred times, but it was never like this. I'm grateful that one thing has survived the past year. Tucker.

He holds out his phone in front of us. "Show us your certificate of 'High School Suffering Completion.'"

I do.

"Not in front of your face, stupid."

With a sigh, I pull my diploma down so the camera can see me. Dark hair that's never truly curly and never truly straight, freckles that seem unavoidable in the endless summers here, and washed-out blue eyes.

I don't feel like smiling.

The group of shiny, tan blondes who just passed stands a few feet away. Polished and perfect.

"Now," Tucker says, "all you have to do is look mildly happy."

I give him a wide open-mouthed grin like I'm in the middle of saying *Yay! I'm free!*

Tucker snaps the photo and his arm drops as he grumbles, "You are the most difficult. . . . You know girls are supposed to like getting their pictures taken with hot guys?"

I laugh. Tucker is not a hot guy. Not to me, anyway. He's practically my brother. My best and only friend in San Diego.

Before I can respond, a pair of arms wrap around me. "You did it!"

My shoulders go stiff and my body is taut as my aunt Courtney kisses my cheek with a loud smack. When she sees the lipstick there, she tries to wipe at it with a sheepish smile. "Sorry," she mumbles. Most of her time with me is somewhere between being too friendly and too concerned.

I try to feel grateful for what she's done for me this year. But all I can focus on are the things I've lost since coming to California.

Her fingers tuck a strand of brown hair behind her ear and she clears her throat. "You're a *graduate* now." The words are sweet but timid. "How does it feel?"

Like everything else, it feels wrong.

But that's not the answer she's looking for. I pull the corners of my mouth upward. "Fine, I guess."

Her grin only falls a fraction when she looks down at the tassel in my hands. I run my fingers through the synthetic orange and white strings absently.

I hate these colors because they're the wrong ones.

They're supposed to be the blue and silver of Sylvan Lake High.

"You can hang it from the rearview mirror when you get a car." My aunt looks back to me, adjusting the sunglasses perched at the edge of her nose. "Maybe the kids don't do that anymore."

As if I would know what the kids do. She seems to have missed the part where I have no friends here.

Tucker lets out a groan as he throws an arm around my shoulder. "Do not hang those disgusting colors from anywhere." He takes my cap and holds it up. The dark green catches in the light and shines. "I still would have decorated this stupid hat, though. Dixon drew a penis on my cap in Sharpie last year."

"Tucker," my aunt says, pretending to be scandalized.

He hands it back to me. "To be fair, I drew boobs on the back of his robe when he graduated. He didn't even notice till after the ceremony."

The memory flashes in my mind. Dixon threw Tucker into the lake later that night and gave him a black eye. I can almost smell the summer grass as I remember something else.

Easton under a darkened sky. Looking up at the stars. Feet dangle off the edge of the dock and into the water. Skin so close to mine I can feel its heat.

The memory falls like rain and I close my eyes. It's too sunny for that.

"Are you going to any grad parties?" Aunt Courtney has asked five times already, as if my answer is going to change. "That boy was talking about something happening on the beach?"

"A boy?" Tucker leans forward into the space between us. "A cute boy?"

I put my palm gently on his face and push him backward. "I'm not going to a party. I don't even know those people."

My aunt's red lips press into a thin line.

"Are you busy, Tuck?" I ask. "We could go to the beach." My aunt's face is eager, so I add, "A different beach."

I hear the hesitation in his voice before he answers. "Sure."

He's lying about not having plans. Tucker always has somewhere to go.

My phone chimes with an alert. **@duckertucker has tagged you in a photo.** I open it and see the two of us smiling in front of a blue sky. I'm holding up my diploma and wearing the most unflattering green gown.

But I look happy. More proof social media is a lie.

Three days ago, my feed was filled with pictures just like this from my old high school in Indiana. My former classmates wore blue gowns and smiles. Things I should have been wearing. Pictures that should have belonged to me.

"Dinner?" Aunt Courtney asks.

I envision sitting across from her at a chain restaurant as we eat and she tries to ask me all the things she thinks an adult, a parent, should ask. But she's not my parent. Just my dad's little sister who happened to have the misfortune of being the only grown-up stable enough to take custody of me. Until this past year, I only saw her at Christmas.

An aunt you see once a year isn't who you want to celebrate one of the most important milestones of your life with. "I'm not that hungry."

"Oh." Her face falls and then recovers quickly, just like my guilt. "Do you want some money?"

"I have some," I tell her. It's another thing I don't let her do for me.

"Okay. Well. Not too late?" she says, but "too late" has no meaning. I haven't stayed out past ten since I came to live with her.

Tucker is still typing in stabbing motions on his phone, and I wonder who he's talking to. I crush the curiosity there because it feels a little too close to hope. "Hey." I bump his hip with mine and he looks up, confused for a second.

"Sorry," he apologizes as he pushes his phone into his pocket. "I was just texting . . ."

I want to ask; it's on the tip of my tongue. They could be simple words. Small ones. But I'm too afraid that they will hold more than a question.

His mother? His family? Easton?

Tucker's eyes change. Pity lines them and I swallow my frustration. I've always attracted sympathy, but it hurts worse coming from Tucker. He's supposed to see me differently. He's supposed to understand.

"Beach?"

I take a deep breath. "Yeah."

It's only two blocks away because in this San Diego beach town, everything is "not far." Aunt Courtney waves goodbye as she walks back to the parking lot and I ignore my relief. It's a shitty thing to feel for someone who has been nothing but kind to me.

I make my way toward the waves while Tucker goes to the ever-present food truck that sells burritos. The sound of the Pacific Ocean is so loud, it's almost silent. A quiet that you step into, like a fog, and at some point, you stop listening to it and start feeling. I dig my feet into the sand and watch as the sun sinks into the black water.

Tucker drops a brown bag full of chips down into the sand between us and I fall next to him. He hands me a burrito. "Al pastor, no rice, no beans. Because you are gross."

I rummage in the bag. "Where's the green salsa?" I ask.

"She said she was out."

I look at him. "You know your voice goes high when you're lying?"

His tone turns mocking as he mimics my own. "Thank you for the burrito, Tucker. You're the best. Thank you for dropping everything to hang out. I'll go get the green salsa myself because I'm not a coward."

My groan is guttural. As if salsa is the most important thing at this moment and I will die without it. "You know she hates me. She always gives you extra salsa."

"Dramatic," he mumbles as he unwraps the foil. "I can't help that Maria loves beautiful things."

We hold up the burritos as Tucker takes a picture with the waves as the background. He captions it *celebratory burritos with my girl*. I take a bite that's mostly tortilla and stare out at the horizon as the sound of people playing in the water rises toward us. The sea has already begun to claw its way up the shore.

When the last of the food is gone, Tucker leans back on his elbows, watching the sunset. "So, what now?"

He's not asking about tonight. Or tomorrow. He's asking about what I do now that school is over. Now that I'm eighteen. Now that I'm free.

I've spent the last year of my life waiting. Waiting to finally exhale the breath I've been holding since last summer. Waiting to forget about all the things I don't have. Waiting to forget *him*.

Easton and I were always going to travel after high school. Then, once the world had sunk deep into our bones and we'd left pieces of ourselves strewn across it, we would go to college.

Together.

But instead of researching the full moon festival in Thailand or planning the best ways to get lost in Prague, I spent my senior year trying to figure out who I was when those things disappeared.

Without Easton.

"UCSD." It comes out sounding like jumble of letters, but I want it to feel like optimism. In college I can decide who I want to be. "I'll work this summer and then I'll go to school in the fall."

"That's it?" he asks.

I pick up a handful of sand and let it fall in a stream. "Maybe."

Tucker lets out a low, thoughtful sound. "She's proud of you." I don't ask who he means. That would be a waste of both of our time. He's talking about his mother. "She wanted to be here."

Of course she wanted to be here. But she doesn't get to be. I dig my foot farther into the sand. "It didn't feel like that big of a deal."

Tucker laughs, but it's without humor. "You are the worst goddamn liar."

I feel the need to justify this to him, which also feels annoying. "I did everything she asked. I came to California. I graduated from high school. I applied to college. She wanted to be here for her. Because everything worked out the way *she* wanted it to."

But I'm not sure it worked out the way I wanted.

"Ellis, I know you don't believe that, which is why I'm not burying your dead body in the sand. My mom loves you. She always has."

Maybe she did. Maybe there was a time Sandry Albrey loved me like one of her own, but that was before.

"Did you tell her about UCSD?" I ask.

He opens his mouth to speak. Closes it. Opens it again. "I think it should come from you, right?"

He's right, and I hate that the most. I want to tell Sandry. I want to watch her face transform into pride even if it strips me of mine. Because deep down, I was hoping these accomplishments would mean I had earned my place back home. I thought if I was good enough, quiet enough, obedient enough, I would be worth forgiving.

And after I've said good night to Tucker and washed my face and gotten ready for bed early, I lie awake wasting all my sleepless thoughts on telling her about UCSD. But if I'm being honest, it's not her I'm worried about.

It's him.

I'm worried that Easton will find out. Will he be hurt? Will he even care that I'm going?

It doesn't matter. He isn't a part of my plan anymore.

Without the distractions of the day, I feel the weight of the emptiness in my chest. It wraps around me like rope and cuts until I bleed. I pull up Easton's social media. A habit I can't seem to break.

Him. Friends. Smiles. Sara.

Easton Albrey is fine.

He graduated high school surrounded by his family. Had a big party at his house. He got to do all the things people are supposed to do when they say goodbye to high school. It makes me feel like the tide is pulling out from under me. It makes me do something I shouldn't.

I call him.

My fingers dial the number I've had memorized since the day he got it, but I block my own. Most people don't pick up blocked calls, but Easton does, every time.

I hold my breath as I wait for his voice to come on the line.

"Hello?" It's exactly like I remember it. Deep and a little scratched, like he's pushing a feeling back down.

I don't speak.

And then . . . and then I listen to him breathe on the other end of the line. Of the country.

I want to tell him so many things. About my graduation, my dad, his mom, Tucker, the beaches in California. I want to hear the noises he makes when he's pretending to listen to me.

I want to know if it was as easy for him to cut me out of his life as it looked.

But what I want most is to hear him say my name. Just once.

He doesn't, because even though it's what I want, it isn't what I need. Instead, he's silent. He's just there, breathing.

In and out.

Quiet and steady.

It was the one thing he always was and never was at the same time. Easton is a habit I can't break. A feeling I can't let go of. A truth I only admit in my weakest moments.

In the end, it's me who hangs up first.

But not until I'm done crying every last silent tear.

EVERY TIME I HAD been in the back of a cop car it was with Easton Albrey.

Summer had come early to our town, stealing the softness of spring from the night air. It was the kind of heat that could only be chased away from the inside. I had saved enough money from couch cushions and discarded change from Dad's pockets to get an Icee from the Quickstop.

My bare legs swung down from the edge of the school's roof as the world moved underneath my shoes. I could feel the drink painting my tongue and teeth a bright blue as I pressed the cup to the side of my neck.

Easton stood on the sidewalk staring up at me with his head cocked to the side thoughtfully. His brown hair was messy, but it didn't hide the styled cut, and his dark eyes seemed almost black in the light. I wanted to look away, but from here, I was safe to stare.

And he had started it anyway.

Looking at Easton was like looking into a funhouse mirror if it made everything opposite. He was hard; I was soft. He had a big smile that adults liked. Adults never knew what to do with me. His clothes weren't stained and worn. . . .

"How'd you get up there?" he called.

I took a drink from the straw while I found words to say back to him. "Climbed." A stupid answer, but I wasn't sure how to talk to Easton. We had only ever said a handful of words to each other despite being in the same class our whole lives.

His eyes narrowed just a bit. "Are you a good climber?"

I didn't know exactly why he was asking me, but I could guess.

Only a month before I had stood in the candy aisle of the grocery store and thought about stealing.

The packages looked like gifts wrapped under a Christmas tree. Each one shiny and bright, promising something sweet inside. Something I couldn't have.

Everyone had a better lunch than me. Better food at their houses. Better snacks. They could afford candy that looked like presents.

I deserved them, too.

When I reached out to grab the bar, something else caught my eye. Easton stood at the end of the row wearing a heavy coat and a curious look on his face. His dark eyes looked like he could read my thoughts. Like he knew I didn't have the money to pay for the bar.

For a second I thought about taking it, watching his reaction, seeing the shock on his face of someone doing something wrong. But instead, I considered what that would make *me*.

A thief.

I had avoided Easton since that day. I was embarrassed and afraid he would see the girl in the store who thought about taking what she couldn't pay for.

When Easton Albrey asked if I was good climber, I should have said no. I should have ignored him and sat on the roof till the Icee was gone and the night had grown cooler.

But instead, I told him I was.

Something about the way Easton looked at me, so confident even at eleven, made me want to agree to anything he asked. And when he told me that he needed my help, I couldn't stop the way the words expanded inside my heart.

I climbed down from the roof and met him outside the school. The unlocked second-story window led to an office where the principal was holding a comic book hostage.

They had stolen it from him. He had been wronged. You couldn't get into trouble for taking back something that belonged to you.

I believed him.

So when I heard someone shouting at us and Easton told me to run, I could have probably run faster.

But Easton didn't leave me when I tripped outside the fence we had hopped. And when Officer Thomas caught us, out of breath and frustrated that he had to chase us down, Easton tried to take the blame.

"I told her to do it. It's not her fault." He stood in front of me, blocking Officer Thomas's view. His clothes smelled like laundry soap. I wanted to stay hidden behind him.

"East, you know I can't just let you two go."

East, not Easton. Like he knew him.

Easton's shoulders shifted underneath his shirt and he leaned forward. "This is *my* comic."

I'd never heard anyone speak to an adult like that. Another way he was my opposite.

But both of us ended up in the back of the cop car that night. Riding home on hard plastic seats that were unforgiving. And I knew I had become the thing I didn't want to be.

Thief.

Easton stared at me in the dark, a frown carving through his face. "Don't worry," he said. "He's just going to call our parents and drive us home."

That's what I was worried about: Easton seeing my house. The cars parked on cinder blocks, the overgrown yard, the paint that peeled and chipped away.

I turned my head to look out the window, watching the lights color our school in a kaleidoscope of blue and red.

Easton's gaze was heavy on the side of my face. "You really are good at that."

"At what?" I asked, but I knew what he was talking about. *Stealing.*

"Climbing." He chewed on his lip. His freckles were darker in the dim light.

I could feel the tug of a smile on my mouth. I pointed to a long scar on my knee. "From the fence at the Wilsons' pasture." I moved to the next one, on my right shin. "Hopping the gate to the raceway track."

"What about that one?" he asked, pointing at the long thin mark on my arm.

I paused. "Climbed on the roof of Walmart."

His eyes narrowed, probably sensing my lie, but he didn't correct me. It was better than explaining about the time I had to break into my own house because my mom had forgotten me.

The driver's-side door opened and Officer Thomas slid in with a huff. "Well, I can't get ahold of your parents, Ellis, but I did talk to your mama, Easton. You're in trouble. Again."

Again?

Officer Thomas started the car and let out a long breath like he was exhausted. The school was only a few blocks from the Albreys', and we drove in a weighted silence.

Easton's house was bright, even in the dark. A white porch sat under large windows that didn't have the curtains drawn and inside people moved around living a life I could see only in snapshots. The yellow paint seemed cheerful and giant bushes of gardenias bloomed under the porch. I listened as the tires crunched against the gravel drive and finally slowed to a stop.

A head of blond curls peered out the long window that lined the side of the door. Tucker Albrey. He was only a grade ahead of Easton and me, but he seemed so much older. I'd heard adults call him *precocious*, but I didn't really understand what that meant. Tucker disappeared and I watched through the window as Easton's mother pushed off from the counter with her hands on her hips and eyes filled with fire.

When the front door opened, Easton groaned as his whole family spilled onto the driveway. I felt myself recoil on instinct as two boys rushed to the window. They stood staring into the back seat as if we were an exhibit at the zoo.

"Sandry. Ben." Officer Thomas greeted Mr. and Mrs. Albrey. "I'm here to deliver your delinquent." He said it in a way that made it sound like a joke. "I've gotta take the Truman girl home."

Mrs. Albrey's eyes shot back to the car. "Ellis? Tru's daughter?" Easton's mother said my name as if she knew anything about me. "I didn't realize East was with her."

Officer Thomas nodded and then let out a groan. "She climbs like a spider."

"Did you call Tru?" She crossed her arms like there was a chill in the air despite the heat.

"Can't get ahold of him."

Mrs. Albrey's eyes became slivers as she looked at her son and then at me. Even in the moonlight, she was pretty in a completely different way than my mother.

"I can make sure she gets home, Tommy," Mrs. Albrey said, placing a hand on his arm.
"I should really be the one—" Officer Thomas shifted on his feet in the gravel.
"Do you want to deal with Tru? Do you want that headache?"
He chewed on his options. "If I hear you took her anywhere other than home . . ."
"Scout's honor." She held up three long manicured fingers.
The officer gave her a flat stare. "You weren't a scout, Sandry."
Dixon, the oldest Albrey brother, walked over to Easton's window. He slid a thumb across his throat and stuck out his tongue as if he was dead before Tucker shoved him out of the way. Dixon was bigger than Tucker but still he stumbled. Tucker cupped his hands around his face and leaned against the window. When his eyes found mine, his lips curved upward slowly.
Easton's fist came up to the spot where Tucker's face was and hit the glass. Tucker's face transformed into anger as he slapped the place where Easton sat. Dixon pulled Tucker back with a laugh and the two began shoving each other.
My door opened and Officer Thomas ushered me out to stand in front of the grown-ups.
"Hello, Mrs. Albrey." I looked at the ground when I spoke.
Mrs. Albrey smiled warmly at me. "Call me Sandry."
I pulled at my old shirt nervously. Here was the moment when she would make a judgment about me. If I would wait on the porch for parents who would never come or be driven home to a dark house.
Both would change the meaning of her smile to pity.
"Her name is Ellis." Behind me, Easton climbed over the seats and out the door.
"Elvis?" Dixon asked. His expression was a confused version of his brother's.
"Quiet," Mrs. Albrey said.
"Ellis," I repeated, trying to make my voice sound sure.
Dixon made a disappointed face at Tucker. "I like Elvis better."
"I bet you do, *Dixy*." Tucker laughed and dodged out of the way when Dixon took a swipe.
"Ellis, honey, are you hungry?" Sandry asked me.
I was, but I was embarrassed to say so.
She seemed to sense it anyway. "Do you like pie? I have some of that."
"Everyone likes pie, Mom," Dixon said.
I followed the Albreys up the porch steps and into their house that smelled like lemons and sugar. The second my feet landed on the plush blue rug I felt like I had entered another world. Giant shoes were piled by the door in a bright foyer with a table full of mail. Just like a movie. A light gray couch had a soft white knit blanket thrown over the back. Books and papers from school were strewn out on the table. At the island in the kitchen, the boys had already dug into a pie, forks scraping against the ceramic. I ran a hand over the cool marble countertop and thought about the chipped laminate at my own house.
Mrs. Albrey shooed the boys away from the pie and sighed. "Animals," she cursed them under her breath. "Ellis, would you like me to cut you a slice?"
Tucker held out a fork to me—a test. It hung in the air, waiting for me to decide what kind of person I would be here. Inside the house with giant shoes and soft blankets.
My fingers wrapped around the silverware and I took a bite from the pie. A spell broke on the boys and they continued eating, metal hitting against metal as they fought for chunks of fruit or bits of buttery crust. On my fourth forkful, I looked up at Easton, who was staring at me. His mouth pulled tight.
I lowered my fork.
"You're different than I thought, Ellis Truman."
I shrugged, but inside I couldn't help but notice that Easton Albrey *thought* about me.

THERE ISN'T A DIFFERENCE between a sunrise and a sunset, really.

The same colors paint the sky. The same light struggles against a darkened heaven, frayed and faded. The problem with the sky is that sometimes you can't tell which is the beginning and which is the end.

My apron lies on the table, stained with coffee and milk from my shift as I stare at the housing email from UCSD. I can't tell if it's a sunrise or a sunset.

"Are you off now?"

I jump even though the voice is familiar. Will stands behind me with a name tag still on his chest and a rag in his hand.

"Yeah," I answer, and look at the ocean.

He pulls out the chair next to mine and sits down. "You forgot your tips and I thought you could use a coffee." Will slides a stack of ones toward me and a paper cup with my name scrawled on the side in black Sharpie. He always brings me coffee. "I feel like I haven't seen you in forever. How was graduation? Everything you hoped for?"

It's such a ridiculous statement that I look at him, assuming he's kidding, but like most things Will says, it's sincere.

Easton would find him so annoying.

I run a hand over the back of my neck and tell myself to stop thinking about Easton. "It was nice."

"I saw a picture. You looked really pretty." He doesn't blush when he says it and I wonder what it's like to just say things like that. Without fear. "My family threw this big party at mine. My grandma got drunk and my mom cried. It was *not* everything I hoped for."

"Really?" I ask, mostly because it feels like I should.

He launches into a story and I watch the way his mouth moves, excited over the words. His hand reaches out to adjust the cup in front of me, out of habit, and I imagine those fingers touching me. His mouth against mine. His lips whispering my name.

I wonder if a different me, one who had never met Easton, could love him. Will has stuck around long after everyone else who tried to befriend me gave up. He's good and steady and kind.

He deserves a better friend than me.

Will smiles and I know I've been caught not listening.

"Sorry," I mumble, not really meaning it.

He stutters out a breath. "I'm off in an hour if you want to grab something to eat? Tacos maybe?"

"She's got lunch plans. And she likes burritos better." I turn in my chair and see Tucker standing behind me, smiling. He's wearing shorts, flip-flops, and a T-shirt that reveals the tattoos covering his lean arms.

"Tucker." Will greets him with a tight smile.

Tucker holds up his cup of coffee in a salute and pulls out another heavy metal chair. It scrapes the concrete loudly, but he doesn't seem to mind as he slides into the seat.

Will's brows pull together as he watches Tucker get comfortable next to me and realizes our conversation has come to an end. "I'll see you tomorrow?" he asks.

I nod as he stands and goes back inside.

"You're breaking that boy's heart." Tucker turns his head thoughtfully, watching him go. "He's kinda cute and he always has coffee. You could do worse."

"So generous of you," I deadpan. "Did you need something?"

He frowns and it makes me feel more uncomfortable than I thought it could. "I've been texting you."

I haven't even opened my texts. They've been piling and gathering like a collection of worrying messages in bottles. "I've been busy."

He rolls his eyes at me before his face grows serious. "Serious Tucker" makes me nervous. I've only seen him a few times before. Like when we left Indiana for California. "It's almost the Fourth of July."

It's absurd that he thinks I haven't realized what day is coming up. It's not just the Fourth of July. It's Sandry Albrey's birthday. Every year they combine to make a super-holiday.

"Mom is going to be fifty." Tucker runs his hands over the table.

I don't speak. I leave all the things I feel on my tongue.

He takes a white envelope out of his back pocket and slides it across the table. It's so dramatic, and I would tease him about it if I wasn't scared of what is inside. "A graduation present from Dad."

My hands stay firmly knotted in my lap. "What is it?"

"You know damn well it's a plane ticket back home."

"I have a job. I can't just leave town without notice."

"Oh yes. What will happen if you're not here to wipe down these tables?" His sarcasm is as exaggerated as this moment.

"Fuck off." I say with bite, but it's not about his insult. It's about what he's asking me to do. "It's not that easy."

Tucker runs a hand down his face. "Yes, it is." He leans forward and licks his bottom lip before pulling it between his teeth. "I don't ask for a lot, but I need you to do this. Then you can go to UCSD and forget all about us."

As if I could forget about the Albreys. As if Easton will disappear from my mind. But like an addiction, I try to hide it and pretend like I don't care about Tucker's words.

"Ellis, did you hear me?" Tucker repeats himself. "Mom is throwing a big party. The kind where we all dress up and give speeches. Half the town is invited." He knows I heard him. He's just waiting for me to acknowledge it.

"I don't know if they really want me."

Tucker points down to the paper between us. "Yeah, looks like they're still not sure. Maybe you should wait till they offer first class."

Tucker uses my silence as an opportunity to take a picture of our coffees and the ticket and uploads it. I get the alert a second later that I've been tagged in the post with the caption *making plans* and I glower at him. "Why do you hate me?"

"I need proof that we had this conversation to cover my own ass." He gives me a wicked grin. "Besides, you've already basically said yes."

My teeth smash together. "I'm not going." The thought of seeing everyone. Seeing him. My heart flips behind my ribs at the idea and I hate it for being a traitor.

"Ellis. It's been a whole year. Are you just never going to go back? Never going to see anyone from home again?"

"I see you almost every day. We'll be at the same college in the fall."

"This isn't the same." Tucker leans back and studies me. His long fingers brush at the tattoo on his left arm, a nervous habit he shares with his brothers. "Are you scared?"

I laugh, but it's hollow even to my own ears. He's always been good at getting to the parts of me I try to hide. My next words sound needy and I hate it. "Did they say I should come?"

"They?" he asks. He wants me to explain because he thinks if I can say Easton's name out loud it will be some kind of breakthrough. "Ellis Truman. Your name is on a plane ticket."

"One your dad bought," I clarify.

"I already told you this the last time we talked about it. Mom has asked you to come home for every major and minor holiday celebrated in America. She wanted to be here for your graduation. Do you really think I could get away with not bringing you back for her birthday?"

I pick at the side of my nail. Graduation is a raw nerve between us. *Selfish and petulant*. That's what Tucker had called me when I told him I didn't want his mom to come. It took weeks for our anger to diminish. Him bringing it up now means that he's decided this is worth the fight.

"I know it looks like she wants me there, but—"

Tucker opens his mouth and shuts it, and then opens it again. "I'm contemplating assaulting you. You are turning me into a bad person."

Tucker would never hurt me.

"I still don't know if I'll be able to make it with work."

He gives me a measured glare and moves a finger down the side of his coffee. "Easton isn't going."

I can't help how fast I look up. I try not to. I've spent a year trying to ignore the swoop in my stomach and the way my head turns when I think I hear his name mentioned,

but some things are ingrained into us like breathing. “What do I care if he’s there or not?”

“This.” He points at me with one finger. “This is the most annoying thing you do.”

“What?”

“Out of everything that makes me want to drown you in the ocean, this is the thing that is the worst. Worse than your snoring, or the way you smack your lips when you chew gum, or the way you put on every single perfume at that stupid makeup store. I cannot stand when you pretend like I don’t know about you and Easton.”

He doesn’t, really. No one does. I’m not even sure I understand all the layers and breaths that are Easton and me.

Tucker takes a sip of his coffee and comes away with foam on his top lip. He licks it off like a puppy. “Did Easton text you? Or call?”

“No.”

Tucker relaxes like I’ve just given him great news.

I swallow. My pride mostly. “Is he really not going?” I hope he can’t hear the disappointment. I’m not allowed to feel that.

Irritation lines his handsome face. “Of course he’s going. It’s his mother’s fiftieth birthday. And you are, too. Don’t be stupid.”

“Tucker.”

He ignores me and his head cocks to the side. “You really haven’t talked to him?”

I lean back in my chair. “Not since I left.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. “You gotta call him, El.”

He must see the fear on my face because a second later he has his phone in his hand.

“What are you doing?” My voice is full of panicked edges that I can’t seem to hide.

“I’m going to fix this bullshit.” He presses three buttons.

Beasty Easty. The name flashes on the screen as he sets it down between us.

“Tucker.” The speakerphone rings once. Twice. I can feel my stomach churning with acid.

“No,” I say. “Tucker, hang up now.”

He ignores me. I tell myself to get up. Walk away.

“Please.”

Third ring.

I can’t sit here.

Fourth ring.

I need—

“What?” Easton’s voice comes through the line deep and laced with gravel.

Tucker’s eyes move to his phone as he answers, “Long night?”

I hear the sounds of Easton stretching sleep from his muscles and I remember exactly what that looks like. His long body pulling taut. His chest going wide. “What do you want?”

“How’s your trip going?” Tucker looks at me. Waiting to see if I seem surprised.

“Fucker, what do you want?” Easton repeats, using his brother’s nickname.

I feel an ache listening to them talk to each other. I’ve missed this more than I am comfortable admitting.

“Congrats on your award in that poetry magazine.” There is a long pause that eats away at time itself until Tucker speaks again. “Dixon call you?”

“About what?”

“About Mom’s thing.”

“Obviously. I have to be home no later than the third or he will make sure my dick never works again.”

I can’t help the way my brain immediately jumps to who he’s with. Is he with a girl? Is that why he cares about Dixon’s threat?

I am so stupid.

“So you’ll be there,” Tucker clarifies.

“Why are you asking dumb questions? And why isn’t this a fucking text message?”

I hear the thing Tucker holds back in his voice and know it’s me. “So. We will *all* be there.”

“Yeah. Why are you being weird?”

It stings that he hasn’t realized what Tucker is talking about. Easton has forgotten me.

“All of us will be there,” Tucker says again. “*Ellis, too.*”

My name feels like a stone tossed into the air, and the long seconds of silence from Easton on the other end fall on me.

“Cool.” One word. It doesn’t carry any of the hurt or hope that I want it to. It sounds . . . normal.

Tucker’s eyes are on me, watching my reaction. He lets out a humorless laugh. “*Cool*. This isn’t going to be awkward at all. So fun.”

Easton scoffs and it scratches at the speakers of the phone. “Why would it be awkward? I doubt she’ll care if I’m there or not, and I don’t care if she is.”

“*Easton.*” Tucker is losing his patience.

“What? Don’t worry. I won’t do anything to ruin Mom’s birthday. Ellis and I are fine.”

It’s the first time I’ve heard him say my name in almost a year.

Tucker’s had enough. “I’m not going to play this game with you, baby brother. I don’t care if you and Ellis are fighting—”

“I’m not fighting with your girlfriend, Tuck.”

The line is silent and Tucker looks to me again. Sadness is laced across his expression. It’s not for me, though. It’s for his brother. “She’s not my girlfriend, Easton. Stop saying stupid shit.”

“Fine.” His reply is muffled, but I can’t help but hope that it’s because he’s hurt. “She doesn’t need me. She has you. Call it what you want. Ellis is your problem now.”

“The arrogance of the two of you.” Tucker breathes out his words in frustration. “Dad asked me to make sure Ellis comes. I don’t want her worried you’re . . . going to be you. So can you please just reach out to her?”

Easton is getting annoyed. I can hear it in the growl of his voice when he says, “She’s not a flower.”

“How the fuck would you know what she is or isn’t? You haven’t talked to her for a year.” The words seep into my skin and lay their truth against my bones. “Just fix it. Make sure that you’re not the reason she doesn’t come, all right?”

The call ends and I look up at Tucker with my anger and gratitude in equal parts. “I didn’t ask for that.”

“I know.” He takes a final sip of his coffee. “But you’re welcome anyway.”

I wish it didn’t take six days for me to hear something from him.

I wish it didn’t mean so much to me when two words show up on my screen.

I wish they didn’t feel like a tether that pulls me home.

Just come.