



UGLY

a novel

LOVE

COLLEEN

HOOVER

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UGLY LOVE

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COLLEEN HOOVER

ATRIA PAPERBACK

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For my two very best friends, who also happen to be my sisters, Lin and Murphy

chapter one

TAT

“Somebody stabbed you in the neck, young lady.”

My eyes widen, and I slowly turn toward the elderly gentleman standing at my side. He presses the up button on the elevator and faces me. He smiles and points to my neck.

“Your birthmark,” he says.

My hand instinctively goes up to my neck, and I touch the dime-sized mark just below my ear.

“My grandfather used to say the placement of a birthmark was the story of how a person lost the battle in their past life. I guess you got stabbed in the neck. Bet it was a quick death, though.”

I smile, but I can't tell if I should be afraid or entertained. Despite his somewhat morbid opening conversation, he can't be that dangerous. His curved posture and shaky stance give away that he isn't a day less than eighty years old. He takes a few slow steps toward one of two velvet reclining chairs that are positioned against the wall next to the elevator. He grunts as he sinks into the chair and then looks up at me again.

“You going up to floor eighteen?”

My eyes narrow as I process his question. He somehow knows what floor I'm going to, even though this is the first time I've ever set foot in this apartment complex, and it's definitely the first time I've ever laid eyes on this man.

“Yes, sir,” I say cautiously. “Do you work here?”

“I do indeed.”

He nods his head toward the elevator, and my eyes move to the illuminated numbers overhead. Eleven floors to go before it arrives. I pray it gets here quickly.

“I push the button for the elevator,” he says. “I don't think there's an official title for my position, but I like to refer to myself as a flight captain, considering I do send people as high as twenty stories up in the air.”

I smile at his words, since my brother and father are both pilots. “How long have you been a flight captain of this elevator?” I ask as I wait. I swear this is the slowest damn elevator I've ever encountered.

“Since I got too old to do maintenance on this building. Worked here thirty-two years before I became captain. Been sending people on flights now for more than fifteen years, I think. Owned

gave me a pity job to keep me busy till I died.” He smiles to himself. “What he didn’t realize is that God gave me a lot of great things to accomplish in my life, and right now, I’m so far behind I ain’t *ever* gonna die.”

I find myself laughing when the elevator doors finally open. I reach down to grab the handle of my suitcase and turn to him one more time before I step inside. “What’s your name?”

“Samuel, but call me Cap,” he says. “Everybody else does.”

“You got any birthmarks, Cap?”

He grins. “As a matter of fact, I do. Seems in my past life, I was shot right in the ass. Must have bled out.”

I smile and bring my hand to my forehead, giving him a proper captain’s salute. I step into the elevator and turn around to face the open doors, admiring the extravagance of the lobby. The place seems more like a historic hotel than an apartment complex, with its expansive columns and marble floors.

When Corbin said I could stay with him until I found a job, I had no idea he lived like an actual adult. I thought it would be similar to the last time I visited him, right after I graduated from high school, back when he had first started working toward his pilot’s license. That was four years and two-story sketchy complex ago. That’s kind of what I was expecting.

I certainly wasn’t anticipating a high-rise smack dab in the middle of downtown San Francisco. I find the panel and press the button for the eighteenth floor, then look up at the mirrored walls of the elevator. I spent all day yesterday and most of this morning packing up everything I own from my apartment back in San Diego. Luckily, I don’t own much. But after making the solo five-hundred-mile drive today, my exhaustion is pretty evident in my reflection. My hair is in a loose knot on top of my head, secured with a pencil, since I couldn’t find a hair tie while I was driving. My eyes are usually as brown as my hazelnut hair, but right now, they look ten shades darker thanks to the bags under them.

I reach into my purse to find a tube of ChapStick, hoping to salvage my lips before they end up as weary-looking as the rest of me. As soon as the elevator doors begin to close, they open again. The guy is rushing toward the elevators, preparing to walk on as he acknowledges the old man. “Thanks, Cap,” he says.

I can’t see Cap from inside the elevator, but I hear him grunt something in return. He doesn’t sound nearly as eager to make small talk with this guy as he was with me. This man looks to be in his late twenties at most. He grins at me, and I know exactly what’s going through his mind considering he just slid his left hand into his pocket.

The hand with the wedding ring on it.

“Floor ten,” he says without looking away from me. His eyes fall to what little cleavage is peeking out of my shirt, and then he looks at the suitcase by my side. I press the button for floor ten. *I should have worn a sweater.*

“Moving in?” he asks, blatantly staring at my shirt again.

I nod, although I doubt he notices, considering his gaze isn't planted anywhere near my face.

“What floor?”

Oh, no, you don't. I reach beside me and cover all the buttons on the panel with my hands to hide the illuminated eighteenth-floor button, and then I press every single button between floors ten and eighteen. He glances at the panel, confused.

“None of your business,” I say.

He laughs.

He thinks I'm kidding.

He arches his dark, thick eyebrow. It's a nice eyebrow. It's attached to a nice face, which is attached to a nice head, which is attached to a nice body.

A married body.

Asshole.

He grins seductively after seeing me check him out—only I wasn't checking him out the way he thinks I was. In my mind, I was wondering how many times that body has been pressed against a girl who wasn't his wife.

I feel sorry for his wife.

He's looking at my cleavage again when we reach floor ten. “I can help you with that,” he says, nodding toward my suitcase. His voice is nice. I wonder how many girls have fallen for that married voice. He walks toward me and reaches to the panel, bravely pressing the button that closes the doors.

I hold his stare and press the button to open the doors. “I've got it.”

He nods as if he understands, but there's still a wicked gleam in his eyes that reaffirms my immediate dislike of him. He steps out of the elevator and turns to face me before walking away.

“Catch you later, Tate,” he says, just as the doors close.

I frown, not comfortable with the fact that the only two people I've interacted with since walking into this apartment building already know who I am.

I remain alone on the elevator as it stops on every single floor until it reaches the eighteenth. I step off, pull my phone out of my pocket, and open up my messages to Corbin. I can't remember which apartment number he said was his. It's either 1816 or 1814.

Maybe it's 1826?

I come to a stop at 1814, because there's a guy passed out on the floor of the hallway, leaning against the door to 1816.

Please don't let it be 1816.

I find the message on my phone and cringe. It's 1816.

Of course it is.

I walk slowly to the door, hoping I don't wake up the guy. His legs are sprawled out in front of

him, and he's leaning with his back propped up against Corbin's door. His chin is tucked to his chest, and he's snoring.

"Excuse me," I say, my voice just above a whisper.

He doesn't move.

I lift my leg and poke his shoulder with my foot. "I need to get into this apartment."

He rustles and then slowly opens his eyes and stares straight ahead at my legs.

His eyes meet my knees, and his eyebrows furrow as he slowly leans forward with a deep scowl on his face. He lifts a hand and pokes my knee with his finger, almost as if he's never seen a knee before. He drops his hand, closes his eyes, and falls back asleep against the door.

Great.

Corbin won't be back until tomorrow, so I dial his number to see if this guy is someone I should be concerned about.

"Tate?" he asks, answering his phone without a hello.

"Yep," I reply. "Made it safe, but I can't get in because there's a drunk guy passed out at your front door. Suggestions?"

"Eighteen sixteen?" he asks. "You sure you're at the right apartment?"

"Positive."

"Are you sure he's drunk?"

"Positive."

"Weird," he says. "What's he wearing?"

"Why do you want to know what he's wearing?"

"If he's wearing a pilot's uniform, he probably lives in the building. The complex contracts with our airline."

This guy isn't wearing any type of uniform, but I can't help but notice that his jeans and black T-shirt do fit him very nicely.

"No uniform," I say.

"Can you get past him without waking him up?"

"I'd have to move him. He'll fall inside if I open the door."

He's quiet for a few seconds while he thinks. "Go downstairs and ask for Cap," he says. "I told him you were coming tonight. He can wait with you until you're inside the apartment."

I sigh, because I've been driving for six hours, and going all the way back downstairs is not something I feel like doing right now. I also sigh because Cap is the last person who could probably help in this situation.

"Just stay on the phone with me until I'm inside your apartment."

I like my plan a lot better. I balance my phone against my ear with my shoulder and dig inside my purse for the key Corbin sent me. I insert it into the lock and begin to open the door, but the drunk guy begins to fall backward with every inch the door opens. He groans, but his eyes don't

open again.

“It’s too bad he’s wasted,” I tell Corbin. “He’s not bad-looking.”

“Tate, just get your ass inside and lock the door so I can hang up.”

I roll my eyes. He’s still the same bossy brother he always was. I knew that moving in with him would not be good for our relationship, considering how fatherly he acted toward me when we were younger. However, I had no time to find a job, get my own apartment, and get settled before my new classes started, so it left me with little choice.

I’m hoping things will be different between us now, though. Corbin is twenty-five, and I’m twenty-three, so if we can’t get along better than we did as kids, we’ve got a lot of growing up left to do.

I guess that mostly depends on Corbin and whether he’s changed since we last lived together. He had an issue with anyone I dated, all of my friends, every choice I made—even what college I wanted to attend. Not that I ever paid any attention to his opinion, though. The distance and time apart has seemed to get him off my back for the last few years, but moving in with him will be the ultimate test of our patience.

I wrap my purse around my shoulder, but it gets caught on my suitcase handle, so I just let it fall to the floor. I keep my left hand wrapped tightly around the doorknob and hold the door shut so the guy won’t fall completely into the apartment. I take my foot and press it against his shoulder, pushing him from the center of the doorway.

He doesn’t budge.

“Corbin, he’s too heavy. I’m gonna have to hang up so I can use both hands.”

“No, don’t hang up. Just put the phone in your pocket, but don’t hang up.”

I look down at the oversized shirt and leggings I have on. “No pockets. You’re going in the bra.”

Corbin makes a gagging sound as I pull the phone from my ear and shove it inside my bra. I remove the key from the lock and drop it toward my purse, but it misses and falls to the floor. I reach down to grab the drunk guy so I can move him out of the way.

“All right, buddy,” I say, struggling to pull him away from the center of the doorway. “Sorry to interrupt your nap, but I need inside this apartment.”

I somehow manage to prop him up against the doorframe to prevent him from falling into the apartment, and then I push the door open farther and turn to get my things.

Something warm wraps around my ankle.

I freeze.

I look down.

“Let go of me!” I yell, kicking at the hand that’s gripping my ankle so tightly I’m pretty sure it might bruise. The drunk guy is looking up at me now, and his grip sends me falling backward into the apartment when I try to pull away from him.

“I need to get in there,” he mutters, just as my butt meets the floor. He makes an attempt to

push the apartment door open with his other hand, and this immediately sends me into panic mode. I pull my legs the rest of the way inside, and his hand comes with me. I use my free leg to kick the door shut, slamming it directly onto his wrist.

“Shit!” he yells. He’s trying to pull his hand back into the hallway with him, but my foot is still pressing against the door. I release enough pressure for him to have his hand back, and then I immediately kick the door all the way shut. I pull myself up and lock the door, the dead bolt, and the chain lock as quickly as I can.

As soon as my heart rate begins to calm down, it starts to scream at me.

My heart is actually screaming at me.

In a deep male voice.

It sounds like it’s yelling, “Tate! Tate!”

Corbin.

I immediately look down at my chest and pull my phone out of my bra, then bring it up to my ear.

“Tate! Answer me!”

I wince, then pull the phone several inches from my ear. “I’m fine,” I say, out of breath. “I’m inside. I locked the door.”

“Jesus Christ!” he says, relieved. “You scared me to death. What the hell happened?”

“He was trying to get inside. I locked the door, though.” I flip on the living-room light and take no more than three steps inside before I come to a halt.

Good going, Tate.

I slowly turn back toward the door after realizing what I’ve done.

“Um. Corbin?” I pause. “I might have left a few things outside that I need. I would just grab them, but the drunk guy thinks he needs to get inside your apartment for some reason, so there’s no way I’m opening that door again. Any suggestions?”

He’s silent for a few seconds. “What did you leave in the hallway?”

I don’t want to answer him, but I do. “My suitcase.”

“Christ, Tate,” he mutters.

“And . . . my purse.”

“Why the hell is your *purse* outside?”

“I might have also left the key to your apartment on the hallway floor.”

He doesn’t even respond to that one. He just groans. “I’ll call Miles and see if he’s home yet. Give me two minutes.”

“Wait. Who’s Miles?”

“He lives across the hall. Whatever you do, don’t open the door again until I call you back.”

Corbin hangs up, and I lean against his front door.

I’ve lived in San Francisco all of thirty minutes, and I’m already being a pain in his ass. Figure

I'll be lucky if he lets me stay here until I find a job. I hope that doesn't take long, considering I've applied for three RN positions at the closest hospital. It might mean working nights, weekends, or both, but I'll take what I can get if it prevents me from having to dip into savings while I'm back at school.

My phone rings. I slide my thumb across the screen and answer it. "Hey."

"Tate?"

"Yep," I reply, wondering why he always double-checks to see if it's me. *He called me*, so who else would be answering it who sounds exactly like me?

"I got hold of Miles."

"Good. Is he gonna help me get my stuff?"

"Not exactly," Corbin says. "I kind of need you to do me a huge favor."

My head falls against the door again. I have a feeling the next few months are going to be full of inconvenient favors, since he knows he's doing me a huge one by letting me stay here. Dishes? Check. Corbin's laundry? Check. Corbin's grocery shopping? Check.

"What do you need?" I ask him.

"Miles kind of needs your help."

"The neighbor?" I pause as soon as it clicks, and I close my eyes. "Corbin, please don't tell me the guy you called to protect me from the drunk guy *is* the drunk guy."

Corbin sighs. "I need you to unlock the door and let him in. Let him crash on the couch. I'll be there first thing in the morning. When he sobers up, he'll know where he is, and he'll go straight home."

I shake my head. "What kind of apartment complex are you living in? Do I need to prepare to be groped by drunk people every time I come home?"

Long pause. "He groped you?"

"'Grope' might be a bit strong. He did grab my ankle, though."

Corbin lets out a sigh. "Just do this for me, Tate. Call me back when you've got him and all your stuff inside."

"Fine." I groan, recognizing the worry in his voice.

I hang up with Corbin and open the door. The drunk guy falls onto his shoulder, and his cell phone slips from his hand and lands on the floor next to his head. I flip him onto his back and look down at him. He cracks his eyes open and attempts to look up at me, but his eyelids fall shut again.

"You're not Corbin," he mutters.

"No. I'm not. But I am your new neighbor, and from the looks of it, you're about to owe me at least fifty cups of sugar."

I lift him by his shoulders and try to get him to sit up, but he doesn't. I don't think he can actually. How does a person even get this drunk?

I grab his hands and pull him inch by inch into the apartment, stopping when he's just fa

enough inside for me to be able to close the door. I retrieve all of my things from outside the apartment, then shut and lock the front door. I grab a throw pillow from the couch, prop his head up, and roll him onto his side in case he pukes in his sleep.

And that's all the help he's getting from me.

When he's comfortably asleep in the middle of the living-room floor, I leave him there while I look around the apartment.

The living room alone could fit three of the living rooms from Corbin's last apartment. The dining area is open to the living room, but the kitchen is separated from the living room by a half wall. There are several modern paintings throughout the room, and the thick, plush sofas are light tan, offsetting the vibrant paintings. The last time I stayed with him, he had a futon, beanbag chair, and posters of models on the walls.

I think my brother might finally be growing up.

"Very impressive, Corbin," I say out loud as I walk from room to room and flip on all the lights, inspecting what has just become my temporary home. I kind of hate that it's so nice. It'll make it harder to want to find my own place once I get enough money saved up.

I walk into the kitchen and open the refrigerator. There's a row of condiments in the door, a box of leftover pizza on the middle shelf, and a completely empty gallon of milk still sitting on the top shelf.

Of course he doesn't have groceries. I can't have expected him to change *completely*.

I grab a bottled water and exit the kitchen to go search for the room I'll be living in for the next few months. There are two bedrooms, so I take the one that isn't Corbin's and set my suitcase on top of the bed. I have about three more suitcases and at least six boxes down in the car, not to mention all my clothes on hangers, but I'm not about to attempt those tonight. Corbin said he'll be back in the morning, so I'll leave that to him.

I change into a pair of sweats and a tank top, then brush my teeth and get ready for bed. Normally, I would be nervous about the fact that there's a stranger in the same apartment I'm in, but I have a feeling I don't need to worry. Corbin would never ask me to help someone he feels might be a threat to me in any way. Which confuses me, because if this is common behavior for Miles, I'm surprised Corbin asked me to bring him inside.

Corbin has never trusted guys with me, and I blame Blake for that. He was my first serious boyfriend when I was fifteen, and he was Corbin's best friend. Blake was seventeen, and I had a huge crush on him for months. Of course, my friends and I had huge crushes on most of Corbin's friends, simply because they were older than we were.

Blake would come over most weekends to stay the night with Corbin, and we always seemed to find a way to spend time together when Corbin wasn't paying attention. One thing led to another, and after several weekends of sneaking around, Blake told me he wanted to make our relationship official. The problem Blake didn't foresee was how Corbin would react once Blake broke m

heart.

And boy, did he break it. As much as a fifteen-year-old heart can be broken after the span of two-week secret relationship. Turned out he was officially dating quite a few girls during the two weeks he was with me. Once Corbin found out, their friendship was over, and all of Corbin's friends were warned not to come near me. I found it almost impossible to date in high school until after Corbin finally moved away. Even then, though, the guys had heard horror stories and tended to steer clear of Corbin's little sister.

As much as I hated it then, I would more than welcome it now. I've had my fair share of relationships go wrong since high school. I lived with my most recent boyfriend for more than a year before we realized we wanted two separate things out of life. He wanted me home. I wanted a career.

So now I'm here. Pursuing my master's degree in nursing and doing whatever I can to avoid relationships. Maybe living with Corbin won't be such a bad thing after all.

I head back to the living room to turn out the lights, but when I've rounded the corner, I come to an immediate halt.

Not only is Miles up off the floor, but he's in the kitchen, with his head pressed against his arm and his arms folded on top of the kitchen counter. He's seated on the edge of a bar stool, and he looks as if he's about to fall off it any second. I can't tell if he's sleeping again or just attempting to recover.

"Miles?"

He doesn't move when I call his name, so I walk toward him and gently lay my hand on his shoulder to shake him awake. The second my fingers squeeze his shoulder, he gasps and sits up straight as if I just woke him from the middle of a dream.

Or a nightmare.

Immediately, he slides off the stool and onto very unstable legs. He begins to sway, so I throw my arm over his shoulder and try to walk him out of the kitchen.

"Let's go to the couch, buddy."

He drops his forehead to the side of my head and stumbles along with me, making it even harder to hold him up. "My name isn't Buddy," he slurs. "It's Miles."

We make it to the front of the couch, and I start to peel him off me. "Okay, Miles. Whoever you are. Just go to sleep."

He falls onto the couch, but he doesn't let go of my shoulders. I fall with him and immediately attempt to pull away.

"Rachel, don't," he begs, grabbing me by the arm, trying to pull me to the couch with him.

"My name isn't Rachel," I say, freeing myself from his iron grip. "It's Tate." I don't know why I clarify what my name is, because it's not likely he'll remember this conversation tomorrow. I walk to where the throw pillow is and pick it up off the floor.

I pause before handing it back to him, because he's on his side now, and his face is pressed into the couch cushion. He's gripping the couch so tightly his knuckles are white. At first, I think he's about to get sick, but then I realize how incredibly wrong I am.

He's not *sick*.

He's *crying*.

Hard.

So hard he isn't even making a sound.

I don't even know the guy, but the obvious devastation he's experiencing is difficult to witness. I look down the hallway and back to him, wondering if I should leave him alone in order to give him privacy. The last thing I want to do is get tangled up in someone's issues. I've successfully avoided most forms of drama in my circle of friends up to this point, and I sure as hell don't want to start now. My first instinct is to walk away, but for some reason, I find myself oddly sympathetic toward him. His pain actually appears genuine and not just the result of an overconsumption of alcohol.

I lower myself to my knees in front of him and touch his shoulder. "Miles?"

He inhales a huge breath, slowly lifting his face to look at me. His eyes are mere slits and bloodshot red. I'm not sure if that's a result of the crying or the alcohol. "I'm so sorry, Rachel," he says, lifting a hand out toward me. He wraps it around the back of my neck and pulls me forward toward him, burying his face in the crevice between my neck and shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

I have no idea who Rachel is or what he did to her, but if he's hurting this bad, I shudder to think what *she's* feeling. I'm tempted to find his phone and search for her name and call her so she can come rectify this. Instead, I gently push him back into the couch. I lay his pillow down and urge him onto it. "Go to sleep, Miles," I say gently.

His eyes are so full of hurt when he drops to the pillow. "You hate me so much," he says as he grabs my hand. His eyes fall shut again, and he releases a heavy sigh.

I stare at him silently, allowing him to keep hold of my hand until he's quiet and still and there aren't any more tears. I pull my hand away from his, but I stay by his side for a few minutes longer.

Even though he's asleep, he somehow still looks as if he's in a world of pain. His eyebrows are furrowed, and his breathing is sporadic, failing to fall into a peaceful pattern.

For the first time, I notice a faint, jagged scar, about four inches long, that runs smoothly across the entire right side of his jaw. It stops just two inches shy of his lips. I have the strange urge to touch it and run my finger down the length of it, but instead, my hand reaches up to his hair. It's short on the sides, a little longer on the top, and just the perfect blend of brown and blond. I stroke his hair, comforting him, even though he may not deserve it.

This guy may deserve every single bit of the remorse he's feeling for whatever he did to Rachel, but at least he's feeling it. I have to give him that much.

Whatever he did to Rachel, at least he loves her enough to regret it.

Six years earlier

I open the door to the administration office and walk the roll sheet to the secretary's desk. Before I can turn and head back to class, she stops me with a question. "You're in Mr. Clayton's senior English class, aren't you, Miles?"

"Yep," I reply to Mrs. Borden. "Need me to take something to him?"

The phone on her desk rings, and she nods, picking up the receiver. She covers it with her hand. "Wait around another minute or two," she says, nodding her head in the direction of the principal's office. "We've got a new student who just enrolled, and she also has Mr. Clayton this period. I need you to show her to the classroom."

I agree and plop down into one of the chairs next to the door. I look around the administration office and realize this is the first time in the four years I've been in high school that I've ever sat on one of these seats. Which means I've successfully made it four years without being sent to the principal's office.

My mother would have been proud to know that, although it leaves me kind of disappointed in myself. Detention is something every male in high school should accomplish at least once. I have the rest of my senior year to achieve it, though, so there's that to look forward to.

I retrieve my phone from my pocket, secretly hoping Mrs. Borden sees me with it and decides to slap me with a detention slip. When I look up at her, she's still on the phone, but she makes eye contact with me. She simply smiles and goes about her secretarial duties.

I shake my head in disappointment and open up a text to Ian. It doesn't take much to excite people around here. Nothing new ever happens.

Me: New girl enrolled today. Senior.

Ian: Is she hot?

Me: Haven't seen her yet. About to walk her to class.

Ian: Take a picture if she's hot.

Me: Will do. BTW, how many times have you had detention this year?

Ian: Twice. Why? What'd you do?

Twice? Yeah, I need to rebel it up a little before graduation. I should definitely turn in some homework late this year.

I'm pathetic.

The door to the principal's office opens, so I close my phone. I slide it into my pocket and look up.

I never want to look down again.

"Miles is going to show you the way to Mr. Clayton's class, Rachel." Mrs. Borden points Rachel in my direction, and she begins to walk toward me.

I instantly become aware of my legs and their inability to stand.

My mouth forgets how to speak.

My arms forget how to reach out to introduce the person they're attached to.

My heart forgets to wait and get to know a girl before it starts to claw its way out of my chest to get to her.

Rachel.

Rachel.

Rachel, Rachel, Rachel.

She's like poetry.

Like prose and love letters and lyrics, cascading down

the

center

of

a

page.

Rachel, Rachel, Rachel.

I say her name over and over in my head, because I'm positive it's the name of the next girl I'll fall in love with.

I'm suddenly standing. Walking toward her. I might be smiling, pretending I'm not affected by those green eyes that I hope will one day be smiling just for me. Or that red-as-my-heart hair that doesn't look like it's been tampered with since God created it specifically with her in mind.

I'm talking to her.

I tell her my name is Miles.

I tell her she can follow me and I'll show her the way to Mr. Clayton's class.

I'm staring at her because she hasn't spoken yet, but her nod is the nicest thing a girl has ever said to me.

I ask her where she's from, and she tells me Arizona. "Phoenix," she specifies.

I don't ask her what brought her to California, but I do tell her my father does business in Phoenix a lot because he owns a few buildings there.

She smiles.

I tell her I've never been there but I'd like to go one day.

She smiles again.

I think she says it's a nice town, but it's hard to understand her words when all I hear in my head
her name.

Rachel.

I'm gonna fall in love with you, Rachel.

Her smile makes me want to keep talking, so I ask her another question as we pass Mr. Clayton's
room.

We keep walking.

She keeps talking, because I keep asking her questions.

She nods some.

She answers some.

She sings some.

Or it sounds that way.

We get to the end of the hallway, right when she says something about how she hopes she likes the
school because she wasn't ready to move away from Phoenix.

She doesn't look happy about the move.

She doesn't know how happy I am about the move.

"Where's Mr. Clayton's classroom?" she asks.

I stare at the mouth that just delivered that question. Her lips aren't symmetrical. Her top lip is
slightly thinner than her bottom lip, but you can't tell until she talks. When words come out of
her mouth, it makes me wonder why words are so much better coming from her mouth than any
other mouth.

And her *eyes*. There's no way her eyes aren't seeing a prettier, more peaceful world than all the
other eyes.

I stare at her for a few more seconds; then I point behind me and tell her we passed Mr. Clayton's
classroom.

Her cheeks grow a shade pinker, like my confession affected her in the same way she's affecting me.
I smile again.

I nod my head toward Mr. Clayton's class.

We walk in that direction.

Rachel.

You're gonna fall in love with me, Rachel.

I open the door for her and let Mr. Clayton know that Rachel is new here. I also want to add, for
the sake of all the other guys in the classroom, that Rachel is not theirs.

She's mine.

But I don't say anything.

I don't have to, because the only one who needs to be aware that I want Rachel is *Rachel*.
She looks at me and smiles again, taking the only empty seat, all the way across the room.

Her eyes tell me she already knows she's mine.

It's just a matter of time.

I want to text Ian and tell her she isn't hot. I want to tell him she's volcanic, but he would laugh at
that.

Instead, I discreetly take a picture of her from where I'm seated.

I send the picture in a message to Ian that says, "She's gonna have all my babies."

Mr. Clayton begins class.

Miles Archer becomes obsessed.

•••

I met Rachel on Monday.

It's Friday.

I've said nothing to her since the day we met. I don't know why. We have three classes together.
Every time I see her, she smiles at me like she wants me to talk to her. Every time I work up the
courage, I talk myself down.

I used to be confident.

Then Rachel happened.

I gave myself until today. If I didn't work up the courage by today, I'd be giving up my only shot
with her. Girls like Rachel aren't available for long.

If she's even available.

I don't know her story or if she's wrapped up in a guy back in Phoenix, but there's only one way to
find out.

I'm standing next to her locker, waiting for her. She exits the classroom and smiles at me. I say
"Hi" when she walks up to her locker. I notice that same subtle change in her skin color. I like
that.

I ask how her first week was. She tells me it was fine. I ask her if she's made any friends, and she
shrugs as she says, "A few."

I smell her, subtly.

She notices anyway.

I tell her she smells good.

She says, "Thank you."

I push through the sound of my heart pounding in my ears. I push past the sheen of moisture
developing on my palms. I drown out her name, which I keep wanting to repeat out loud, over and
over. I push it all down and hold her stare while I ask her if she'd like to do something later.

I keep it all pushed away and make room for her response, because it's the only thing I want.

I want that nod, actually. The one that doesn't require words? Just a smile?

I don't get her nod.

She has plans tonight.

It all comes back tenfold, spilling over like a flood and I'm the dam. The pounding, the sweaty palms, her name, a newfound insecurity I never knew existed, burying itself in my chest. All of it takes over and feels like it's building a wall around her.

"I'm not busy tomorrow, though," she says, obliterating the wall with her words.

I make room for those words. Lots of room. I let them invade me. I soak those words up like a sponge. I pluck them out of the air and swallow them.

"Tomorrow works for me," I say. I pull my phone out of my pocket, not even bothering to hide my smile. "What's your number? I'll call you."

She tells me her number.

She's excited.

She's excited.

I save her contact in my phone, knowing it'll be there for a long, long time.

And I'm gonna use it.

A lot.

chapter three

TATE

Normally, if I were to wake up, open my eyes, and see an angry man staring me down from my bedroom doorway, I might scream. I might throw things. I might run to the bathroom and lock myself inside.

I don't do any of these things, though.

I stare back, because I'm confused about how this is the same guy who was passed out drunk in the hallway. How is this the same guy who cried himself to sleep last night?

This guy is intimidating. This guy is angry. This guy is watching me like I should be giving him an apology or explaining myself.

It is the same guy, though, because he's wearing the same pair of jeans and the same black T-shirt he fell asleep in last night. The only difference in his appearance between last night and this morning is that he's now able to stand up without assistance.

"What happened to my hand, Tate?"

He knows my name. Does he know it because Corbin told him I was moving in or because he actually remembers my telling him last night? I'm hoping Corbin told him, because I don't really want him to remember last night. I suddenly feel embarrassed that he might recall my consoling him while he cried himself to sleep.

He apparently doesn't have a clue what happened to his hand, though, so I hope that means he has no recollection of anything beyond that.

He's leaning against my bedroom door with his arms folded across his chest. He looks defensive, like I'm the one responsible for his bad night. I roll over, still not quite finished with sleeping, even though he thinks I owe him some sort of explanation. I pull the covers over my head.

"Lock the front door on your way out," I say, hoping he'll take the hint that he is more than welcome to go back to his place now.

"Where's my phone?"

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to drown out the smooth sound of his voice as it slides into my ears and makes its way through every nerve in my body, warming me in places this flimsy blanket failed to do all night.

I remind myself that the person that sultry voice belongs to is now standing in the doorway rudely demanding things without even acknowledging the fact that I helped him last night. I'd like to know where my *Thank you* is. Or my *Hey, I'm Miles. Nice to meet you*.

I get none of that from this guy. He's too worried about his hand. And his phone, apparently. Too worried about himself to be concerned about how many people his carelessness might have inconvenienced last night. If this guy and his attitude are going to be my neighbors for the next few months, I'd better set him straight now.

I toss the covers off and stand up, then walk to the door and meet his gaze. "Do me a favor and take a step back."

Surprisingly, he does. I keep my eyes locked with his until the bedroom door slams in his face and I'm looking at the back of the door. I smile and walk back to my bed. I lie down and pull the covers over my head.

I win.

Have I mentioned I'm not much of a morning person?

The door opens again.

Flies open.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he yells.

I groan, then sit up on the bed and look at him. He's standing in the doorway once again, still looking at me like I owe him something.

"*You!*" I yell back.

He looks genuinely shocked at my harsh response, which kind of makes me feel bad. But *he's* the one being the jerk!

I think.

He started it.

I think.

He eyes me hard for a few seconds, then tilts his head slightly forward and arches an eyebrow.

"Did we . . ." He motions his finger back and forth between us. "Did we hook up last night? I mean, that's why you're pissed?"

I laugh when my initial thoughts are confirmed.

He's being the jerk.

And this is great. I'm neighbors with a guy who gets shit-faced on weeknights and obviously brings home so many girls in the process that he can't even remember which ones he messed around with.

I open my mouth to respond but am cut off by the sound of the apartment door closing and Corbin's voice yelling out.

"Tate?"

I immediately jump up and rush to the door, but Miles is still blocking the doorway, glaring at

me, expecting a response to his question. I look him straight in the eyes to give him an answer, but his eyes catch me off guard for a short moment.

They are the clearest blue eyes I've ever seen. Not at all the heavy-lidded, bloodshot eyes from last night. His eyes are so light blue they're almost colorless. I continue to stare at them, half-expecting to see waves if I look closely enough. I'd say they were as clear blue as the waters of the Caribbean, but I've never actually been to the Caribbean, so I wouldn't know.

He blinks, and it immediately pulls me away from the Caribbean and back to San Francisco. Back to this bedroom. Back to the last question he asked before Corbin walked through the front door.

"Not sure if you can call what we did *hooking up*," I whisper.

I stare at him, waiting for him to move out of my way.

He stands taller, putting up an invisible wall of armor with his posture and his rigid body language.

Apparently, he doesn't like to envision the two of us making out, based on the unyielding look he's giving me. It almost seems like he's looking at me in disgust, which makes me dislike him that much more.

I don't back down, and neither of us breaks eye contact when he steps out of my way and allows me to pass him. Corbin is rounding the hallway when I exit my room. He glances back and forth between me and Miles, so I quickly shoot him a look to let him know that's not even remotely a possibility.

"Hey, Sis," he says, pulling me in for a hug.

I haven't seen him in almost six months. Sometimes it's easy to forget how much you miss people until you see them again. That's not the case with Corbin. I always miss him. As much as his protectiveness can get old at times, it's also a testament to how close we are.

Corbin releases me and pulls at a lock of my hair. "It's longer," he says. "I like it."

This may be the longest we've gone without seeing each other. I reach up and flick the hair hanging across his forehead. "So is yours," I say. "And I *don't* like it."

I smile to let him know I'm kidding. I actually like the shaggier look on him. People have always said we look a lot alike, but I don't see it. His skin is a lot darker than mine, which I've always envied. Our hair is the same rich hue of brown, but our facial features are nothing alike, specifically our eyes. Mom used to tell us that if we put our eyes together, they would look just like a tree. His were as green as the leaves, and mine were as brown as the trunk.

I always envied that he got to be the leaves of the tree, because green was my favorite color growing up.

Corbin acknowledges Miles with a nod of his head. "Hey, man. Rough night?" He asks the question with a laugh, as he knows exactly what kind of night Miles had last night.

Miles walks past both of us. "I don't know," he says in response. "I don't remember it." He

walks into the kitchen and opens a cabinet, retrieving a cup like he's comfortable enough here to do so.

I don't like that.

I don't like comfortable Miles.

Comfortable Miles opens another cabinet and takes out a bottle of aspirin, fills his cup with water, and pops two of the aspirin into his mouth.

"Did you get all your stuff brought up?" Corbin asks me.

"Nope," I say, glancing at Miles when I respond. "I was kind of preoccupied with your neighbor most of the night."

Miles nervously clears his throat as he washes the glass and places it back in the cabinet. His discomfort with his lapse in memory makes me laugh. I like that he has no idea what happened last night. I even kind of like that the thought of being with me seems to unnerve him. I might keep this façade going for a while for my own sick enjoyment.

Corbin looks at me as if he knows what I'm trying to pull. Miles steps out of the kitchen and glances my way, then looks back to Corbin.

"I would have gone back to my place by now, but I can't find my keys. You have my spare set?"

Corbin nods and walks to a drawer in the kitchen. He opens it, grabs a key, and tosses it to Miles, who catches it in midair. "Can you come back in an hour and help me unload Tate's car? I want to shower first."

Miles nods, but his eyes cut briefly to mine as Corbin starts walking to his bedroom.

"We'll catch up when it's not too morning," Corbin tells me.

It may have been seven years since we've lived together, but he apparently remembers I'm not much of a talker in the morning. Too bad Miles doesn't know this about me.

After Corbin disappears into his bedroom, I turn and face Miles again. He's already looking at me expectantly, like he's still waiting for me to answer whatever questions he asked me earlier. I just want him to leave, so I answer them all at once.

"You were passed out in the hallway last night when I got here. I didn't know who you were, so when you tried to get inside the apartment, I might have slammed the door on your hand. It's not broken. I checked it out, and it's bruised at best. Just put some ice on it and wrap it for a few hours. And no, we didn't hook up. I helped you into the apartment, and then I went to bed. Your phone is on the floor by the front door where you dropped it last night because you were too shi-faced to walk."

I turn to head to my room, just wanting to get away from the intensity in his eyes.

I spin around when I reach my bedroom door. "When you come back in an hour and I've had a chance to wake up, we can try this again."

His jaw is firm. "Try *what* again?" he asks.

"Getting off on the right foot."

I close my bedroom door, putting up a barrier between me and that voice.

That stare.

•••

“How many boxes do you have?” Corbin asks. He’s slipping on his shoes by the door. I grab my keys off the bar.

“Six, plus three suitcases and all my clothes on hangers.”

Corbin walks to the door directly across the hall and bangs on it, then turns and heads toward the elevators. He pushes the down button. “Did you tell Mom you made it?”

“Yeah, I texted her last night.”

I hear his apartment door open just as the elevator arrives, but I don’t turn to watch him walk out of it. I step in, and Corbin holds the elevator for Miles.

As soon as he comes into view, I lose the war. The war I didn’t even know I was fighting. It doesn’t happen often, but when I do find a guy attractive, it’s better when it happens with a person I *want* it to happen with.

Miles is not the person I want to be feeling this for. I don’t want to be attracted to a guy who drinks himself into oblivion, cries over other girls, and can’t even remember if he screwed you the night before. But it’s hard not to notice his presence when his presence becomes everything.

“Should just be two trips,” Corbin says to Miles as he presses the button for the ground floor.

Miles is staring at me, and I can’t quite judge his demeanor, because he still looks pissed. I start to back up, because no matter how good-looking he may be with that attitude, I’m still waiting for the *thank you* I never got.

“Hi,” Miles finally says. He steps forward and completely ignores unspoken elevator etiquette by stepping too close and holding out his hand. “Miles Archer. I live across the hall from you.”

And I’m confused.

“I think we’ve established that,” I say, looking down at his outstretched hand.

“Starting over,” he says, arching a brow. “On the right foot?”

Ah. Yes. I did tell him that.

I take his hand and shake it. “Tate Collins. I’m Corbin’s sister.”

The way he steps back and keeps his eyes locked with mine makes me a little uncomfortable since Corbin is standing only a foot away. Corbin doesn’t seem to care, though. He’s ignoring both of us, preoccupied with his phone.

Miles finally breaks his stare and pulls his phone out of his pocket. I take the opportunity to study him while his attention is off of me.

I come to the conclusion that his appearance is completely contradictory. It’s as if two different creators were at war when he was envisioned. The strength in his bone structure contrasts with the soft, inviting appeal of his lips. They seem harmless and welcoming compared with the harshness

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