

*Meet You
at the
Peak*

CASSIE BEEBE

A MEET CUTE NOVELETTE

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Chapter One



CASEY

This day is not going according to plan.

The senior trip to The Fun Zone was supposed to be the perfect opportunity for me to confess my undying love for Jayce Malcolm. Bethany and I have been planning it for months. Our class would be spending the entire day at the park, and I would finally have a good excuse to get Jayce alone.

You see, there's an uneven number of guys in his core friend-group, so he'd be sure to have an open seat next to him on at least *one* ride. And when he did, I'd be there, hopefully having mustered the courage to actually take advantage of the opportunity and tell him how I've felt since he asked to borrow my pink, sparkly pen to finish his math exam in the fall of freshman year.

But then Bethany got sick the morning of the field trip and wasn't allowed to come. Which would be fine—just a bit of a bummer—if it weren't for the fact that she spent all of yesterday babysitting Ben Brooke's little sisters and infecting them with her contagions.

Ben is one of Jayce's best friends, and an essential part of the aforementioned odd-numbered friend-group. And thanks to Bethany's germs, instead of being here, filling in a seat and forcing Jayce to sit by

himself on a few rides, Ben is at home with his sisters eating saltines, drinking ginger ale, and cursing his terrible luck.

Darn you, flu virus!

It's getting close to time for us to head back to the school vans and start the long drive home, and the guys are arguing over what we should do with our last hour at The Fun Zone.

"I wanna ride The Tornado again," Jayce says.

"But we already did that," Sam retorts. "We should hit one of the areas we haven't gone to yet."

I have no interest in going back to the land of giant rollercoasters. My crippling fear of heights will hardly allow me to even look at them. But I'm too depressed to chime in. No matter where we go next, Jayce will be joined to Sam at the hip, and I'll never get the chance to put my plan into action.

I check my phone. No messages. Bethany's been texting me optimistic messages all day, but she must be resting now, because I haven't heard from her in a few hours.

The guys are still arguing, and it's starting to get more heated.

Chaperone Tim interjects, smoothing things over.

"Why don't we split up for the last hour? I'll take Jayce and whoever else wants to join us back to the coasters and Miss Amy can accompany the rest of you to the other side of the park. Fair?"

Jayce pouts at his friends. "None of you are gonna come with me?"

Sam sighs. "I don't want to wait in line for forty minutes to ride something we already did."

"Fine," Jayce says, stepping over to join Mr. Tim. "I'll go by myself."

A spark of hope makes butterflies flutter in my gut.

"All right, everybody, decide which group you want to go with," Mr. Tim says. "We don't have long."

I step over to Mr. Tim's group. Jayce gives me a smile, and I have to bite back the dopey grin that I can feel tugging at my lips.

The guys go with Miss Amy, and the only other students who come with us are Anna and Liz. They've had their faces buried in their phones for the whole trip. I'm not even sure why they came. I'm sure their parents wouldn't be too happy to know they wasted money buying their tickets just for them to sit on a bench and text while everyone else

goes on rides all day. But where Mr. Tim goes, they go, so I'm not surprised they chose our group.

"We'll meet you in the parking lot at eight o'clock, sharp," Mr. Tim says to Miss Amy.

"You got it, Captain," she replies with a salute.

Mr. Tim stutters an awkward laugh, then clears his throat and straightens the collar of his polo shirt. Is he blushing?

I peek back at Miss Amy and she has a smirk on her face as she turns to her group, leading them off in the direction of the smaller rides. Anna and Liz exchange dejected looks.

Mr. Tim clears his throat again. "Well, we'd better get going," he says, clicking one of the dozens of buttons on his hefty watch.

When we reach coaster-central, panic strikes my gut. What was I thinking? I can't ride any of these rides! Even if I could muster up the courage to get myself snapped into a harness, I'd be in a full-fledged panic attack before we could reach the first drop. That's not exactly the perfect picture of charm and confidence I was hoping to convey to Jayce.

We've reached the line for The Tornado, and Jayce looks around the group.

"Come on, dude, it's really not that bad," he says, giving Mr. Tim a playful punch on the arm. "You sure you don't want to give it a try?"

"Oh, no," Mr. Tim says with a chuckle, gesturing to a nearby bench. "I'll be right over there when you guys are done."

He turns to walk off, and Liz and Anna start to follow him.

He pauses. "You ladies want to sit out as well?"

Ecstatic to be addressed by Mr. Tim directly, the girls look up from their phones with wide smiles and nod.

Glancing over Mr. Tim in his khaki shorts and striped polo t-shirt, I shake my head. All the guys in our grade have been crushing on Miss Amy since the beginning of the year, which is understandable. She's pretty cool. She wears skinny jeans and has teal streaks in her bleach-blonde hair. But Mr. Tim? I don't get it.

"Casey?" He looks at me now, expecting me to join them on the bench.

Mr. Tim and I spent a lot of time warming the benches this morn-

ing, while everyone else made the rounds on all of the rollercoasters. It was kind of fun, actually. We talked about my plans for college and found out that we both have a fascination for photography. Apparently, he's even had some of his nature photos published in magazines over the years. Who knew Mr. Tim had a life outside of teaching us about political systems and the civil war?

But if I join the bench-warmers this time, I'd be giving up a chance to be alone with Jayce for at least twenty minutes. I glance at the approximate wait time for The Tornado. Make that thirty-five minutes.

My eyes shift to Jayce, and he's already looking at me. My stomach tightens.

He nods to the line. "You coming, Red?"

My breath stutters. He gave me a nickname? Not the most original nickname to give a redhead, but hey, I'll take it.

"Of course," I say without thinking.

Mr. Tim nods. "All right. Have fun, you two."

And with that, Mr. Tim and his groupies head off to their safe, comfortable bench by the ride's exit, and I follow Jayce to my worst nightmare.

Am I seriously doing this? Voices surround me as we enter the line, everyone yelling to each other to be heard over the sound of the coaster's wheels crashing against the rails above us, riders screaming for their lives as they're propelled up the high, high peak.

My heart pounds and a cold sweat breaks out on my neck. How am I going to tell Jayce how I feel if I can't even catch my breath enough to speak?

With an extra burst of panic, I realize we've been standing in line together for several minutes in silence, me taking careful, deep breaths to calm my racing heart. He probably thinks I'm a total freak.

I look up at him, trying to think of some witty way to joke away my nervousness. But he hasn't noticed my freak-out. He's doing something on his phone. Probably texting his friends about how they abandoned him and now he's stuck with the weirdo who can't breathe.

Okay. Calm down, Casey. This is your chance. You've been planning this for months. Bethany will kill you if you let your stupid fear of heights ruin this golden opportunity.

I try to remember what Bethany and I had planned for me to say, but the adrenaline coursing through me is making it hard to concentrate.

What if I tell him how I feel and he doesn't feel the same, and then we're stuck in this line together for another half-hour? That would be almost as bad as having to ride this stupid rollercoaster. Maybe worse—at least the ride will only last a few minutes.

Crap. I didn't think this through. All that planning and I'm still totally unprepared. My tongue feels like it's too big for my mouth, and my stomach is apparently trying to escape my body through my throat. Should I wait until after the ride?

Yes! That's perfect! I'm sure once the ride is over, my nerves will be gone. I'll have overcome a massive fear, we'll both be high on adrenaline, and I'll feel more confident than ever after showing my phobia who's boss.

Then, when we hop off the ride and head out the exit, I'll stop him just before we get into view of Mr. Tim and the girls, and I'll tell him. I'll tell him how I haven't been able to stop thinking about him since the moment he first spoke to me. How I sometimes lie awake at night and wonder if he could ever be interested in me. If a guy who could have any girl he wants would ever want someone so supremely average.

Okay, so I won't say that, exactly. It'll be more confident than that.

We're so close to the front of the line now, and I'm starting to feel nauseous. What if I throw up on him? Oh gosh. That would be the worst possible—

“So, any plans for college?”

The question snaps me out of my frenzied thoughts. I look up at him, and his beautiful, baby-blue eyes are staring back at me.

“Um, yeah. I got into the Berkeley School of the Arts,” I tell him.

He gives me a look like he's just realizing how little he knows about me.

“Are you an artist?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Photographer. I can't draw to save my life.”

He chuckles at that, and my heart swells at the sound.

“Yeah, me either,” he says. “I'll probably just hang out at the

community college for a couple years. Try some stuff out, see what sticks.”

He shrugs, and I feel a pang of jealousy at his easy-going nature. I could never be so unprepared for my future. The very thought of his so-called plan gives me anxiety on his behalf.

But I try to play it cool.

“That sounds cool,” I say. “Do they have a basketball team at the community college?”

He raises a brow at me, and I can feel the heat rise to my cheeks. Is it weird that I know he’s into basketball? I mean, it’s not like it’s a secret, but he seems surprised that I’ve paid enough attention to him to ask about it.

“Uh, yeah, they do,” he says, turning his eyes back to his phone.

Oh, geez. What is he texting now? Is he telling his buddies all about the weird, nerdy girl who’s been keeping tabs on his extracurriculars?

We’re getting close to the front of the line now. I look up at the ride, twisting so high above us it makes my stomach churn.

I’m trying to think of something else to say to make conversation when I hear someone call out Jayce’s name.

We both turn toward the sound, and my heart sinks when I see Sam weaving his way through the line to meet us.

No! What is he doing? He’s ruining everything!

Sam finally reaches us, and Jayce gives him a grin.

“Change your mind?” he asks.

“Yeah, I just remembered how boring those other rides are,” Sam answers.

“I know, that’s what I’m saying,” Jayce replies.

Panic rises in my chest as we step up to the front of the ride. We’re next in line, and now that Sam is here, there’s no question of who’s riding with who. Either I’m going solo, or I have to make some excuse and chicken out at the last minute, which would be ridiculously humiliating. Especially considering the kids that just got on in front of us are half my age, and they don’t look scared at all.

The guy working the ride asks us how many are in our group. Jayce raises three fingers, and the guy waves us over to the back two rows of the car.

“Nice! The back is the best,” Sam says.

My ears perk at that. Is it less scary in the back or something?

“Why is the back better?” I ask.

He looks over his shoulder at me, like he forgot I was here. “You can feel the drops more,” he explains.

Which is exactly the opposite of what I was hoping he would say. I’m standing next to the very last row of seats in the car. I’m about to offer to trade with them, so at least I can be one row closer to the front, but the worker running the ride sends over a single rider to fill in the seat beside me, and he walks up to stand behind me.

I briefly glance up at him. He’s a boy around our age, and he’s looking at his phone. Probably trying to avoid having to make awkward conversation with the stranger he’s going to have to share a row with.

The next car pulls up on the track, and everyone inside gets out. The gate in front of me opens, and Jayce and Sam step down into their seats.

I stand there, frozen, unable to move my feet.

After a moment of hesitation, the boy behind me says, “It’s open.”

I look up at him, and he nods at the gate, politely informing me that we’re supposed to be getting on the ride now.

“Right. Sorry,” I say, forcing my feet forward.

We settle into our seats. He snaps his seatbelt in place, giving it a tug to tighten it. I do the same, pulling it as tight as I can. But my fingers still rest on the red release button, ready to snap it open so I can hop off and run away, back to the safety of the bench outside, where Mr. Tim and the other girls are waiting for us.

But the ride operators are approaching now, moving down the line of riders, pulling on each metal harness until it clicks into place.

Nausea heaves in my stomach. My hand still hovers on top of my seat belt, and I try to imagine just exactly how embarrassing it would be if I got off the ride right now.

The operator snaps Jayce’s harness into place. I can’t see him or Sam anymore. The seats are too tall. I can’t hear them, either, but I know they’re in the row in front of me.

I’m seconds away from unbuckling my seatbelt and bolting off of this ride when the operator reaches me.

“Hands at your sides, please,” she says.

Without thinking, I obey the command, taking my hands off of my seatbelt, and my harness snaps down with a menacing click.

It's too late now. I'm stuck. The woman gives my harness a jiggle, testing its security, then moves back to her station. She clicks a button, and our car begins to move.

Chapter Two

LIAM

This day is not going according to plan.

I thought The Fun Zone would be a perfect date. Who wouldn't want to spend the day riding rides, watching a couple shows, checking out the animals, and eating as much funnel cake as I can afford?

Well, apparently the answer to that question is Annalisa Tipton, because clearly, she is *not* having a good time. There's always something to complain about.

Funnel cake is fattening, and she needs to look good in her graduation dress.

The elephants smell disgusting, so she can't possibly be expected to sit through the entire show.

The sun is too bright, and she didn't bring sunglasses.

There's no way she's going to pet a sting ray, because they're slimy and gross.

Her feet are killing her, because I guess somehow, it's my fault that she chose to wear heels to an amusement park.

And now, apparently, rides are also off the table.

"Have you seen what I'm wearing?" she asks me, giving a pointed look down at her matching cream-colored skirt and crop top. "There's

no way I'm sitting on any of those disgusting seats. Who knows how often they get cleaned?"

She makes a face, and my patience is wearing thin.

Why on earth did Brandon think she and I would be a good fit? I make a mental note to remind myself never to agree to any more blind dates.

I couldn't care less about what she's wearing or how she just paid a hundred dollars to have her nails done, so she can't risk chipping them on any of the carnival games we saw along the boardwalk.

You know what else cost a hundred dollars? The tickets I bought to take her here. More, actually, if you include the money I've spent on food and all the games she barely played.

Which, ordinarily, wouldn't even upset me. I have a pretty good part-time job and not a lot of expenses. I don't mind shelling out a bit of cash to show a girl a good time. But she's not having a good time, and neither am I, and this whole thing is starting to feel like a massive waste.

I huff a sigh.

"Look, Annalisa . . . I'm not sure why our friends thought we would be a good match, but it seems like they were wrong," I say, trying to be as gentle as possible. "Maybe we should just call it a night?"

She gives me an indignant look. "Are you seriously rejecting *me* right now?"

"I'm not trying to be mean," I say. "I'm just saying, it seems pretty obvious that neither of us are having a good time here. I just don't think this is a good fit."

With a scoff, she folds her arms. "It's this place that isn't a good fit," she says, gesturing around her. "Why didn't you take me somewhere nice? I got all dressed up for nothing."

Is she serious?

"I told you where we were going before the date," I remind her. I refuse to be held responsible for her ridiculous wardrobe choice.

She sighs, looking at her nails. "Whatever. You can just take me home now. Thanks for wasting my time."

My jaw drops. I can't even believe what I'm hearing right now. I spent all of this time and money trying to plan a nice date for her, and this is what I get?

Worst of all is that I really needed this today. I needed to get out of my head, to spend the day doing something fun instead of sitting at home and thinking about all of the things I'm trying to avoid. Today, of all days, I needed a distraction, and I chose Annalisa to join me in that distraction.

I shake my head. What a stupid choice.

When I look at her and imagine walking to the exit of the park, driving her back to her place, and then going home alone, I can't help the frustration I feel.

No. Screw that. I'm not going to let this whole thing be a waste.

I pull out my wallet and take out a few bills.

"Do you have the Uber app on your phone?" I ask her.

She frowns. "Of course. Who doesn't have Uber?"

"Then here," I say, holding out the cash. "Go get yourself a ride home, on me. Sorry you had such a bad time today."

She stares at the cash. "Are you serious? You're not even going to drive me home?"

I can't help the laugh that escapes my lips. "No. I'm not," I say. "I paid a lot of money for the park tickets, and I still have a few more hours to enjoy them."

"You're gonna stay here by yourself?" she asks.

I shrug. "Sure. Unless you want to join me."

She gives me a long look, then takes the cash from my hand and walks away without another word.

I let out a deep breath. I've never felt so free.

As I hop in line for one of my favorite rides, I realize there's a perk to riding solo—you get to use the single rider's line and skip the long wait times. Less waiting around means less time to get in my head about what today is.

I reach the front of the line pretty quickly, and the ride operator sends me to the back row. I pull out my phone, sending Brandon a quick text to very sarcastically thank him for the great set-up.

The car pulls up and the gates open, but the girl in front of me doesn't move. Everyone else is getting snapped in, but she's just standing there, zoning out.

"It's open," I politely inform her.

She looks up at me, and her eyes look a bit panicked. I nod toward the gate, and she finally walks forward.

“Right. Sorry,” she says, stepping into her seat.

I can feel my phone vibrate in my pocket as I get snapped into my seat, but Brandon will have to wait a few minutes.

The girl beside me is tapping her foot wildly against the floor. She has her hands grasped tightly to her seat belt, and the ride operator on her side of the car has to instruct her to put her hands at her sides, so she can snap the harness in place.

Once we’re snapped in, the car starts to roll forward and I hear a muttered swear from the girl.

Has she never done this before? Why would anyone go on a roller-coaster for the first time by themselves? And why would they choose the biggest one in the entire park?

I can’t see her very well anymore with our harnesses blocking my view, but I can hear her breathing heavily, close to hyperventilation, and I’m a bit worried she might pass out before we even get to the top of the first hill.

The car is clicking slowly up the highest peak of the ride, where it all begins. This is the easiest part. If she’s already freaking out this much, she’s in for a pretty bad ride. Let’s just hope she has a strong stomach, at least.

When the car reaches the top of the hill, the front begins its descent. People start to scream in anticipation, and the girl beside me swears again under her breath.

But just as the car is supposed to start its nosedive toward the ground, thrusting forward with powerful momentum and sending us into an array of loops and bunny hills and corkscrews, we stop. The clicking beneath us stops, and the lights on the side of the ride shut off.

“Wh-what’s happening?” the girl says, fierce panic in her voice.

Uh, oh. Something tells me she’s not going to be chill about this news.

“I think we’re stuck.”

Chapter Three



CASEY

Stuck? Stuck?!

“What do you mean, stuck?” I demand. “Is the ride broken?”

“No, no, it’s okay,” the boy says quickly. “This happens sometimes. They’ll get it going again soon.”

He says that like it’s supposed to be reassuring. But as soon as they get it going, we’re just going to go flying down this massive hill, which doesn’t sound much better to me than being stuck up here. Way, way up here.

Oh, my gosh. Why the heck did I do this?

Other people on the ride are groaning and booing and screaming, eager to get things started again. I close my eyes so I don’t accidentally look down and see just how high up we actually are.

I’ve been breathing heavy since the ride started, but now I can feel the real panic starting to set in. My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it behind my eardrums. My head is starting to go fuzzy from my shallow breath, but I can’t seem to force myself to breathe deeper.

“Hey, what’s your favorite movie?” the boy beside me asks.

My mind is so hazy, I can hardly focus on his words.

“What?” I ask between pants.

"Favorite movie," he repeats. "Tell me about it."

The severity in his voice tells me he's not making casual chit-chat. He's trying to distract me. It's not gonna work, but I'll play along, anyway.

"*Kingsman*," I say.

There's a pause, and I try to take a deeper, slower breath, holding it in for as long as I can before letting it out.

"Huh," he replies. "Is that that one with Colin Firth? They're spies or something, right?"

I nod, my eyes still firmly shut. "Yeah."

"Interesting choice," he says. "What do you like about it?"

I try to answer, but I can hardly speak through my frantic, panicked breaths. It's like trying to talk while running on a treadmill.

"I'm a . . . photographer," I say between huffs. "I like all the . . . action shots . . . they're really . . . cool. It has great cinema . . . cin—"

"Cinematography?" he finishes for me.

I nod.

"Who else is in that movie? Anyone I'd know?"

"Taron Egerton." I try to think through the plot of the movie to remember who else he might know. "Sam Jackson. Michael Caine."

"Hm, nice cast," he says.

"The second one's good, too," I add, starting to get a bit of a handle on my breathing now. "Channing Tatum's in that one."

"Oh, yeah?"

I nod. "And Julianne Moore. I like her."

"Me, too. She was great in that one about Alzheimer's."

"*Still Alice*," I say. "I didn't see it. I don't like movies that are gonna make me cry."

Now that my breathing is mostly under control, I decide to risk opening my eyes. I can't look down, though. That's sure to send me spiraling again. I peek carefully, keeping my gaze straight ahead at the back of the seats. It still sends a shock of terror through me when my vision is mostly surrounded by blue sky, but I manage to keep myself under control.

"I'm Liam, by the way," the boy beside me says.

Turning my head just slightly, I see that he's offering me a hand-

shake. But my hands are gripped tightly to the harness handles, and there's no way I'm going to be able to pry them off. Not yet.

"Like Hemsworth?" I ask, making sure I heard him right over the raucous of all the other riders.

He chuckles. "Yeah."

"Casey," I tell him.

"Like . . ." He pauses, thinking. "Kasem?"

I frown. "Who?"

"Casey Kasem? He was a radio guy back in the seventies or eighties, I think," he explains. "I don't know. I couldn't think of any other famous Caseys."

I laugh a little too hard at that. Every feeling inside me is so heightened right now, it's hard to regulate any of it. If I started crying, I'd probably be a sobbing mess within seconds. Let's try not to do that.

Somewhere up ahead, people must be getting impatient, because our whole car starts to shake as people try to rock us forward. I let out an embarrassingly loud shriek, my eyes squeezing shut again. One hand stays clutched to my harness, but the other snaps to my side.

"Hey! Knock it off!" Liam screams with such force and authority it sends a shudder through me. It must do the same to whatever dumb kids were messing around, because the rocking stops.

Despite my efforts, tears have sprung to my eyes. But somehow, I'm able to keep them from escalating into full-blown sobs.

I flinch when a warm hand comes over mine.

"You all right there, Casey?" Liam asks.

With great embarrassment, I realize my left hand is clutched tightly to his arm, my nails digging into his skin.

Quickly, I let go, returning my hand to the handlebars.

"Sorry," I say.

"It's okay," he replies. "Just kids being stupid. But don't worry. We're perfectly safe up here. I'm sure they'll get things fixed soon."

I take in a deep, slow breath.

"Has this ever happened to you before?" I ask him. He seems perfectly at ease, confident that it won't take long for the ride to start up again.

"Not on this ride," he says.

I can feel his eyes on me, but I keep mine safely on the little sticker in front of me that tells me not to put my arms or legs outside of the car. Like I would ever have any desire to do that.

“So . . . not much of a rollercoaster fan, huh?” Liam says.

I shake my head.

“Have you ever been on one before?”

I shake my head again.

“So, you decided your first experience should be alone on the biggest ride in the entire park?”

“I’m not alone,” I say. “I have friends. They’re sitting in front of us.”

“Oh.” He pauses. “They made you sit by yourself for your first time?”

“I didn’t tell them it was my first time,” I explain. “Or that I was scared.”

“What is it that scares you, exactly?” he asks.

I think about it. Everything?

“I don’t like big drops. They make me nauseous. I’m terrified of heights. And I can’t know for sure, because I’ve never tried it, but I really don’t think I would like being upside down. I get dizzy pretty easily.”

Liam lets out a small chuckle. “So . . . everything, then?”

“Yeah,” I say with a laugh.

“What made you decide to conquer your fear today?”

That’s a good question, and the longer we’re stuck up here, the more I think my answer is infinitely stupid. It would be embarrassing to admit, but I couldn’t even if I wanted to. *Jayce is right there.*

Although, I haven’t really been able to hear anything he and Sam are saying to each other. I can tell they’re talking, but it just sounds like muffled noises. And they’re probably talking a lot louder than we are.

“Jayce?” I test, keeping my volume at the same level Liam and I have been using. “Can you hear me?”

“You’re probably gonna have to talk a lot louder if you want him to hear you,” Liam says.

“I don’t want him to hear me,” I reply.

“Oh.”

My face goes hot as I muster the courage to admit my reason for getting on this stupid ride in the first place.

"I wanted to be alone with . . . someone."

"Ah," Liam says. "Jayce, I assume?"

I nod.

"But . . . he didn't want to be alone with you, or . . .?"

I sigh. "Well, I mean, I didn't *tell him* I wanted to be alone with him," I explain. "He was gonna go on this ride by himself, and I figured that was my chance to finally . . . but then his friend decided to join us at the last minute, and they sat together."

"Why didn't you just tell him you were scared and wanted to sit by him?" Liam asks. "Guys usually like that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"You know." I peek at him and he shrugs. "Protective stuff. Makes us feel all manly and strong." His light green eyes meet mine, and he gives me a smirk.

I look away, back at the seat in front of me, where Jayce is sitting.

Why didn't I tell him I was scared? Liam's right. If Jayce liked me at all, he probably would have thought it was cute or something. Maybe he would have even held my hand as the car climbed slowly up the track and told me everything would be okay.

But . . . if he didn't like me . . .

"His friends kind of like to make fun of people," I tell Liam. "Not in a mean way or anything," I add, because that sounded bad.

But my mind flits back to last year when I overheard Sam and Tanner whispering to each other, mocking the new kid's stutter. So . . . I guess sometimes it is in a mean way.

"But Jayce isn't like that," I clarify, both to myself and to Liam. "He probably would have been nice about it. But I don't know. I guess I just didn't want anyone to think I was a wimp."

I look back at Liam. His eyebrow rises, and he looks like he wants to say something about that. But he's interrupted by a voice over the sound system.

"Attention, all riders. We're working on the issue and hope to get you moving again shortly," the voice says. "In the meantime, please stay seated with your seatbelts securely fastened. Thank you."

It surprises me how much that very vague, unhelpful announcement eases some of my worries. They didn't really say anything, but still, it's nice to at least hear that they haven't forgotten about us.

Chapter Four

LIAM

I pull out my phone to check the time. It's been about ten minutes since the ride stopped. Shouldn't be too much longer.

There's a text from Brandon, so I open it. As soon as my eyes scan his words, I wish I hadn't.

BRANDON

Sorry, man. I thought she seemed cool. I know today's probably hard for you . . . I hope you were still able to have a good time.

I shove my phone back in my pocket, putting the message out of my mind before I can think about it too hard.

"So, what about you?" Casey asks, finally releasing her steel grip on the handlebars and flexing her fingers. "What made you decide to get on this deathtrap?"

I laugh, glad to see that she seems to have calmed down a bit. "Believe it or not, this is my favorite ride."

"Really?"

"Yeah," I say. "Well, at this park, I mean. There are better ones at other places, but this one's easy access for me."

"Do you live here in Berkeley?" she asks.

I nod. "You?"

"Redding," she says. "It's a couple hours north. But I'm moving here soon, actually, for college."

"Oh, yeah? Where are you going?"

"The Berkeley School of the Arts."

My stomach sinks. Seriously? What are the odds of that? Is it really this freaking hard to avoid talking about the one thought I came here to run away from?

There's a long silence. I'm probably being rude, but I don't want to keep talking about college. Not when she just said she's going to the very school I was supposed to be going to this fall. The school I never applied to and probably never will now, all things considered.

"So . . . do you come here alone often?" Casey asks, filling the uncomfortable silence.

Grateful for the change in subject, I decide to tell her about my no good, very bad day.

"I didn't come alone, actually. I had a date."

She looks at me. "Had? What, do you think she's gonna leave, since you're stuck up here for who knows how long?"

I laugh. "No, she already left. She wasn't feeling the whole theme park thing. She was more of a five-star restaurant kinda girl. We didn't exactly hit it off. I decided to stay, though, since I paid so much for the tickets."

"Do you regret staying now?" Casey asks.

A lock of her red hair falls in her face, and she gives me a smirk, like she knows what my answer will be. But honestly, going home would have been a lot worse than getting stuck up here with her.

"No," I answer. "I'm having a nice time, actually. I've got a lovely view of the sunset, some pleasant conversation." I shrug. "I can't complain."

She scoffs. "*I* can."

I chuckle again. "Must be some crush if you felt like this guy was worth putting yourself through this."

Her cheeks go pink and a sadness falls over her face. "It's a pretty big crush," she admits in a small voice.

I can't imagine why. From what little she's said about the guy, I already don't like him.

"I never asked, do you have any college plans?"

Frick. Can we not talk about college?

"Or . . . are you already . . ." Casey squints at me. "How old are you?"

For a second, I consider lying, just to avoid the whole college conversation altogether. But I can't bring myself to do it.

"Seventeen. I'm graduating in a couple weeks," I say.

"Me, too," she says.

I decide to leave it at that, hoping she won't notice that I never answered her other question.

"So, do you have any college plans?"

I sigh.

"No," I say. "I don't think I'm gonna go to college. I already have a job that I like, so."

Technically, that's true—I do love my job. But it has nothing to do with my lack of college plans.

"Oh, yeah? What do you do?" Casey asks.

"I'm a welder," I say.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "That's neat! What kind of welding do you do?"

I shrug. "For work, it's pretty boring stuff. But I'm good at it, and I make pretty good money doing it. But in my free time, I do some more creative stuff."

My teeth clench shut. Why did I say that? She's a photographer, about to go to art school. She's going to want to know what kind of stuff I do, and the only piece I have on me is . . .

"Wow, that's awesome. What kind of creative stuff do you make?"

I'm about to give a vague response—one that hopefully doesn't invite a lot of questions—but when I look at her, I remember how freaked out she was just a few minutes ago, and this conversation has finally managed to distract her from our current situation. In fact, this is the first time I've seen her with a genuine smile. I don't want to ruin that.

I take the ring off my finger and hold it up to her.

"I made this," I say, giving the top piece a spin with my thumb. "It's supposed to be one of those fidget things."

"Wow," she breathes, leaning toward me as much as she can to see the details.

Looking at her, I realize she could probably use a ring like this right now.

"It's good for anxiety," I tell her. "You should hang on to it for a bit."

She looks up at me, her light blue eyes going wide. "Oh, no, I couldn't. I don't want to drop it."

I shrug. "If you put it on, it should be fine. Here, give me your hand."

I hold out my hand. She hesitates for a moment, then offers me hers. Her fingers are smaller than mine, so I slide the ring onto her thumb.

"There," I say. "Perfect fit."

She smiles at me, then looks down at the ring, giving it a few spins.

"Do you have anxiety?" she asks me.

"Not really," I say. "I, uh . . . made it for someone. But I never got a chance to give it to them."

"Oh." She looks down at the ring again, and I'm grateful for her eyes to be somewhere other than my face right now. "Like an ex, or something? She broke up with you before you could give it to her?"

I take a breath, holding it in for a moment before I respond. "My brother, actually. He had a lot of health problems, and being in and out of the hospital all the time was stressful, so I made that for him."

A long moment of silence passes, and I wonder if she's connected the dots yet.

She looks at me, and I peek at her sympathetic expression.

"And you . . . never got a chance to give it to him?"

I shake my head.

She nods, and I can tell by the look on her face that she gets it.

"I'm sorry," she says.

It doesn't seem like she's going to pry for any more details, but I don't want to risk it. Better to change the subject entirely.

"We should play a game," I suggest. "To pass the time."

"Okay," she agrees. "Like what?"

"Twenty questions? You can go first," I say.

She turns her eyes up toward the sky, starting to grow dark now with the sun nearly finished with its descent.

"Okay, I have one. It's a thing."

Her gaze is fixed above. Surely, she wouldn't be that obvious?

"Is it blue?" I ask.

Her expression falters, like she's unsure of how to answer. "Um . . . yes?"

I smirk. "Is it the sky?"

She bursts into a laugh, covering her blushing face with her hands. "Yes," she admits, her small voice muffled by her hands.

I laugh, too. "Maybe we should choose a category," I suggest. "One that isn't 'things we can currently see from the top of a rollercoaster.'"

Her eyes briefly flit down to her harness, then squeeze shut, like she forgot where we were and I just reminded her.

"You like movies, right?" I ask, trying to draw her attention back to the game. "I'm good with movies."

She snorts a laugh at me. "You can't be *that* good with movies. You haven't even seen *Kingsman*."

I bite back my smirk. Should I tell her?

Meeting her gaze, I decide to confess.

"I saw *Kingsman* three times in the theater," I tell her. "The second one, too, but just once. I haven't seen the new one yet, but I've been meaning to."

Confusion flashes across her face as she recalls our earlier conversation. "But . . ."

"I was just trying to give you something to focus on besides . . . well, you know," I say, not wanting to bring it up again and send her back into a panic.

She takes a moment to process that. Her lips turn up in a smile.

"Oh. Well . . . thanks for that," she says.

I return her grin. "No problem."

Chapter Five



CASEY

It's Liam's turn for twenty questions, and I've narrowed his pick down to two key factors: she's female and she's in *Stranger Things*. Problem is, I only have two questions left, so I have to make them count.

I could narrow it down by age, but that would only help if his pick is Winona Ryder. If he says his pick is under thirty, then that wouldn't narrow it down at all.

I squint at him, trying to read his mind. He smirks back at me. I can only really see one side of his face most of the time, but even from that, I can tell he has a nice smile.

"Okay . . . is she well known from other stuff besides *Stranger Things*?"

It's a carefully curated question, and I'm hoping he says yes. That would pretty much narrow it down to two.

"Yes," he says.

Yes!

"Okay, let me think," I say.

"Last question," he reminds me.

"I know, I know."

I'm trying to analyze how quickly he said yes to my question. Was it really fast, like it was an obvious answer? I don't think so. It seemed

like he had to think about it for a second. So, probably not Winona, then.

"Okay, I've got it." I look at him, mentally crossing my fingers. "Millie Bobby Brown?"

He smiles wide. "You got it! Nicely done."

"Woo!" I cheer, lifting my arms in the air—something I never expected I would be doing on a rollercoaster. "I love that show, by the way. One of my top five favorites, for sure."

"Well, in that case, I have an important question for you," he says.

I look at him, waiting.

"Are you Team Jonathan or Team Steve?"

I snort a laugh. "Does that even need to be asked? Steve, obviously."

He laughs. "Yeah, I figured. Ladies love Steve Harrington."

"What about you?" I ask. "Which girl would you pick?"

He narrows his eyes. "Isn't there really only one age-appropriate choice?"

"Not really." I shrug. "The characters might be a little young for you, but the actresses are, like, twenty or something, I think."

"Really?" His eyebrows shoot up. "Oh, well, then Mad Max, for sure. I've always had a thing for—"

His sentence cuts short, and he glances at me.

I smirk, guessing by the blush on his face that he was about to say he's always had a thing for redheads.

"Uh . . . skaters," he says instead, but we both know that's a lie. "Yep, that's definitely what I was going to say."

"Mhmm," I mutter, and he laughs uncomfortably.

"Anyway," he says, clearing his throat. "Your turn. Unless you want to do something else?"

We've been playing this game for a while and still haven't had any more news about the status of the ride. I wonder how long it's been. It feels like hours, but it's probably less.

I'm getting a little sick of twenty questions, but I don't know what else we would do. Or how long we're going to be up here. It's already dark, and I'm sure it's long past the time we were supposed to be back on the road. The ring on my thumb spins and spins as I fidget nervously.

"Do you have any pictures on your phone of the other stuff you've made?" I ask Liam.

"Um . . . yeah, I think so," he says.

"Can I see them?"

He hesitates. "Only if I get to see some of yours."

I try to think if I have any good pictures on my phone.

"I usually take pictures with my camera, but I guess I probably have some on here," I say, pulling my phone out of my pocket carefully.

I hold it up high in front of my face, so I don't have to look down and risk catching a glimpse of how far up we are. Scrolling through my photo gallery, I find a folder with some nice nature shots I got on our last science field trip.

"Here," I say, handing Liam my phone.

He passes me his, and I grip it tight. Dropping his phone right now would be terrible. Even if it fell by our feet, in the car, we probably wouldn't be able to reach it with our harnesses snapped in place. Once the ride starts up again and sends us flying around sharp turns and upside-down corkscrews, his phone would be gone for good.

Maybe this was a bad idea. But as I flip through a few pictures, I'm grateful for the idea, because these pieces are incredible.

When he said he was a welder and that he sometimes made creative stuff in his spare time, I expected smaller, less elaborate stuff, like the ring on my thumb. But these pictures are amazing.

His pieces are nothing like I expected. They're not little kitschy paperweights. They're like . . . art. Legit art. Intricate sculptures that seem to have meaning and tell a story.

"Oh, my gosh," I breathe, blown away by his talent. "Liam, these are incredible."

I'm starting to feel a little self-conscious about letting him look at my basic snapshots of leaves and trees. I wish I had some of my better photos with me, but I don't take those with my cell phone.

Scrolling on, I flip to a picture of him mid-project, a focused look on his face as he sketches out the design he plans to form with the metal scraps that surround him. It's weird being able to see all of him, instead of just the side of his face. He's leaning over a desk, so I can't really tell

how tall he is. But his intensely focused face is about as handsome as I expected, from the half I've been able to see in person.

It's such a professional shot. His phone has a great camera. He could totally use this picture as a headshot on a website or something, to sell his pieces. Especially if he set it in grayscale.

"This is a great picture of you," I say, angling the phone so he can see. "You look like a professional artist."

I peek at him, expecting a smile, but his face is blank and smooth.

"Um . . . that's not me," he says. "It's my brother."

"Oh." I study the photo again, blushing at having just been thinking about how cute his brother is. "You guys really look alike."

He gives me a wry chuckle. "Yeah, that tends to happen with twins." Twins. Wow.

I've always been an only child, so I have no idea what it feels like to lose a sibling. But I would imagine losing a twin would be even harder.

I look at the date on the picture of his brother. It was only taken a little over a year ago.

Peeking at Liam, I watch as he flips through my pictures.

"How long has it been?" I ask him, my voice quiet and small.

His thumb hesitates its swiping. He pauses for a second, then keeps flipping through photos.

"A year," he answers. After a moment of silence, he adds, "Today."

My eyes widen. "Today?"

He peeks back at me and nods.

He must decide that he's done sharing pictures with me, because he shuts off my phone screen and passes it back to me. I let him take his from my hand, and he slips it back into his pocket. I put mine away, too, and try not to stare at him.

There's a long silence, and I'm not sure how to fill it, or if I even should. I didn't mean to bring up something he's probably trying not to think about. He probably doesn't want to talk to a stranger about today being the one-year anniversary of his twin brother's death.

"I thought The Fun Zone might be a good distraction," Liam says, breaking the silence.

I peek at him. "Did it work?"

He's staring at the back of the seat in front of him, and he shakes his head. "No."

Should we play another game or something? If he's looking for a distraction, I can help with that. It's the least I can do, after everything he's done to help distract me from being scared up here.

"Your pictures are great, by the way," Liam says, breaking me out of my thoughts. "If those are just your casual cell phone shots, I'd love to see what you've taken with a real camera. The Berkeley School of the Arts is lucky to have you."

I smile, thinking of all the amazing sculptures I saw in his photos. "They'd be lucky to have *you*, too. Your work is beautiful. Have you ever thought about applying?"

He bites his lip, letting out a breath. "That was . . . kind of the plan, actually."

"Was?"

"That's where my brother and I always planned to go after high school," he explains. "We were . . . kind of a team. He always had this vision for big, out-there concepts. He would sketch his ideas for me, and I would bring them to life."

"I see."

He chuckles, gesturing to my hand. "In fact, that ring was the first thing I ever really made without his help. And even that I didn't come up with myself. There are rings like that for sale all over the place. I just studied the design and made one myself, so it would be a more meaningful gift than buying one online."

"I'm sure you have vision, too," I say. "Have you ever tried to make something without a prompt? I bet you could do it."

Liam shakes his head. "You said it yourself. The guy in that picture looks like a professional artist," he says. "You're right. He was the artist. I'm just good with a torch."

I want to protest that, but when I think about it more, I realize that I really don't know Liam at all. Maybe he's right. Maybe his brother was the artist, and he was just the one who knew how to use the tools. But when I think about all of the pictures I just saw, I can't believe that. Taking something two-dimensional and transforming it into a perfect 3-D metal piece takes more than just useful hands.

I'm about to say all of that, but a bird interrupts me, swooping past us nearly a foot from our heads, then taking a nose-dive toward the ground. My eyes automatically track its movement, following it as it dives down by my side of the car.

Oh, crap.

My gaze fixes on the ground far, far below us, and a dizzying rush of terror shoots straight through me. My head swims, and I quickly sit back against my seat. A panicked sound bursts through my mouth, and my eyes sting with tears that are already falling down my cheeks.

Chapter Six

LIAM

“Casey?” I say for the third time, but she doesn’t seem to hear me. She just keeps crying, her breath coming in short gasps.

I reach over and take her hand in mind, giving it a squeeze.

That seems to break through her fear. Her breath stutters and she looks down at my hand.

“Casey,” I say again, and her red, watery eyes move up to meet mine. “You’re okay. You’re safe.”

She lets out another sob, but she also nods, accepting that truth.

“Just keep looking at me, okay?” I suggest, trying to hold her gaze.

Her eyes stay fixed on mine. She takes deeper breaths, in and out slowly. Tears still stream from her eyes, but she seems to be getting a handle on her panic.

She makes a sound of frustration as she drops my hand, moving her palms up to hide her face.

“No, no, no,” she mutters to herself, under her breath.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

She sighs, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “I was trying so hard not to cry. My face gets all red and puffy when I cry. Now everybody’s gonna know.”

That’s what she’s worried about?

“So, what?”

She gives me a look, like I’m being obtuse. “They’re gonna think—”

“What, that you were scared?” I ask. “It’s okay to be scared, Casey.”

She shakes her head, unconvinced by my encouragement, and I can’t help but think about what she said earlier about that guy she likes and how his friends like to make fun of people.

“Can I ask you something?”

She looks at me.

“Why do you care so much about what a bunch of bullies think about you?” I ask.

Her eyebrows pull together. “Bullies?”

I let out a chuckle. “Yeah, bullies. That’s what people are usually called when they like to make fun of other people.”

She shakes her head again. “Jayce’s friends aren’t bullies. I’m just not explaining it right.”

“Okay, give me an example,” I say. “Tell me something these guys have made fun of you for.”

“They’ve never made fun of me,” she says. “Just . . . other people, sometimes. Or each other. It’s just one of those guy things. They like to rib each other, you know?”

That’s not what it sounded like earlier. “Just each other?” I question.

She pauses. “No . . . not always.”

“So, give me an example, then,” I repeat. “When’s the last time you heard one of them making fun of someone? Tell me about it, and I’ll tell you whether or not it’s ‘just a guy thing.’”

She thinks for a minute, and I can tell by the look on her face that she knows the example she just thought of doesn’t look good.

“Tell me,” I say.

She sighs. “A kid in the cafeteria tripped on his shoelaces and dropped his food. Tanner said he should have stuck to Velcro a little longer, and the other guys kind of laughed about it.”

Wow. Nice one.

My face must display exactly what I think about that, because Casey rushes to defend her crush.

"But Jayce isn't like that," she says. "I've never heard him say anything like that."

"Right," I say. "He just hangs out with the guys who do and laughs at the mean things they say."

I watch as it all sinks in. Casey's face falls.

"Oh, my gosh," she mutters. "He's a jerk, isn't he?"

"I mean . . . I don't know him," I say. "But yeah. He kinda sounds like a jerk."

She lays her head back against her seat. I can hardly see her anymore with the harness blocking my view.

"What does that say about *me*?" she asks. "I've had a crush on him for years. Am I a jerk, too?"

"I mean . . . I don't know you," I say. "But no. You're not."

She leans forward again and gives me a questioning look. "What makes you so sure?"

I look at her for a minute, thinking. It's a good question. Truthfully, I don't really know what it is. I just know. And I'm pretty sure whatever reason she liked this guy had nothing to do with his friends being bullies.

"Well, why did you like him?" I ask her, giving her a chance to prove to herself that she's not a bad person for having a crush.

"Honestly?" She thinks for a second and cringes. "I . . . can't really remember. I know he was really nice to me when I first moved to Redding and started high school there. But that was a few years ago. I guess I kind of just had it in my head that we should be together, and I never really questioned whether that was still what I wanted."

"Hm," I mutter. "Well, that'd probably be a good question to ask yourself now."

She lets out a deep sigh. "I never should have gotten on this ride," she says. "You know, I used to come here all the time with my parents, and I loved it. None of us liked these kinds of rides. We never even came over to this part of the park. There was no point."

"What did you like to do?"

She cringes, peeking at me. "You'll laugh."

What? Why would she think I would laugh at her?

"No, I won't," I promise her. "And if I did, then screw me, right?"

Who cares what some jerk you just met a couple hours ago thinks of you?"

She frowns. "You're not a jerk."

"Yeah, but I *would* be if I laughed at you for liking something I might not be interested in," I explain. "That's my point. That would make me a jerk. You shouldn't care what someone like that thinks."

She considers that for a minute. "I guess that's true."

"So, what did you like most about coming here with your parents?"

I ask her again.

With a small smile, she replies, "The animal shows."

I return her smile. "Which one's your favorite?"

"The sea lions," she says.

I try to remember that one, but I can't recall any sea lions.

"I don't think I've seen that one," I admit.

She laughs. "Of course, you haven't. It's for little kids."

"But you like it?"

"Yeah," she says. "The story is really cheesy, but they pretend like the sea lion is a detective solving a crime. It's pretty cute."

I smile at her enthusiasm. I can't believe she thought I would laugh at her for that.

"That sounds cute," I say, and she grins back at me.

Her dark orange waves blow in the gentle breeze, and she gathers her hair with her hands, giving it a twist and letting it fall behind her neck.

I watch her fuss with her hair, trying to keep the strands from tickling her face, and it occurs to me that pretty soon, this ride is going to start back up. And once it's over, I'm probably never going to see her again.

My heart sinks at that thought. Should I give her my number? Or is that too weird? After all, we really did just meet a couple hours ago. Maybe we could catch a few more rides together after this. But she wouldn't want to do that, unless this ride surprises her and she ends up liking rollercoasters after all. Somehow, I doubt that will be the case.

I wonder if there are any more shows tonight? I've never seen that sea lion one. Did she see it already today?

"Maybe we could go see that show together after this," I suggest.

She looks at me, her red eyes focusing on mine.

“Oh . . . um . . .” she mutters.

Crap. She’s not interested.

I mentally kick myself. Of course, she’s not interested. She literally got on this ride to impress some other guy.

“Well, I’m here on a school field trip, and we were supposed to be leaving a long time ago,” she explains. “This was probably gonna be our last ride, and obviously it’s taking a lot longer than it was supposed to. We’ll probably have to leave right after this and get back on the road.”

“Oh,” I say.

So, it’s not that she doesn’t *want* to see the show with me. She can’t. She’s leaving right after this. And she didn’t exactly sound happy about that. Maybe I should give her my number . . .

“Maybe . . .” Casey pauses, and I meet her eyes again. “Maybe when I move down here for college, we could—”

Loud music blares through the speaker system, interrupting her. The colorful lights of the ride come back to life, and I have to blink a few times against the sudden brightness.

Everyone else in our car cheers, excited for the ride to finally begin. But I’m disappointed, wishing I could have heard what the end of that sentence was going to be.

I look at Casey, hoping maybe she’ll finish what she was starting to say. But she’s bracing herself—eyes squeezed shut and hands gripped tight to her handlebars—and I remember how terrified she was when all of this first started.

“Hey,” I call to her over the loud music and the sound of everyone’s screams.

The car starts to move forward, clicking up the rest of the hill, and she looks at me with fear in her eyes.

I hold out my hand. She looks down at it, pries her fingers from the handlebar, and grips my palm tightly.

“Close your eyes,” I tell her, giving her hand a squeeze. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

Chapter Seven



CASEY

One and a half terrifying minutes later, the ride finally starts to slow. I feel warmth on my arm as Liam places his other hand there—the one I’m not currently crushing with my death-grip.

“It’s over,” he says, sounding a little out of breath from the adrenaline. “You can open your eyes.”

It takes a second for me to force my eyes open. When I do, I let out a strangled sound of relief at the sight of the ground—the real, actual ground, not the floor of the rollercoaster car—just a few feet away. There aren’t very many people in line, probably because the ride was shut down for so long. But now that it’s running again, everyone is rushing toward the entrance to get there before the line gets long again.

My breath is heavy, and I try to calm myself, taking a deep intake of fresh air as the car pulls into the docking station.

“Was it as bad as you thought it would be?” Liam asks me.

I nod vigorously, and he laughs.

With great effort, I manage to release my bone-crushing grip on his hand. Our car comes to a stop, and the harnesses release with a loud click.

I push mine up as soon as I can, quickly unsnapping my seat belt and reveling in the feeling of freedom.

Liam stands up and offers me a hand. Which is probably a good thing, since my head is still woozy as I try to step out of the car. My legs wobble a bit as everyone rushes toward the exit, grateful to finally be back on solid ground.

I look around, but I don't see Sam or Jayce. They must have gotten off faster than me. They're probably already telling Mr. Tim all about their crazy adventure.

Everyone is filing out of the ride and through the wide walkway that leads to the exit. But I stop halfway down the path and turn to look at Liam.

He's a little bit taller than me. He's wearing jeans and a black Mumford & Sons T-shirt. His dark hair is wind-whipped by the ride. When I meet his light green eyes, he gives me a smile. It's even more beautiful now that I can see the whole thing.

I smile back, and he lets out a nervous chuckle, fidgeting with his fingers.

"So . . . I guess you probably have to go now, huh?" he asks.

I don't know if it's just leftover adrenaline from the ride or something else, but talking to Liam like this, face to face with no metal harnesses creating a barrier between us, is making my heart pound like crazy.

"Yeah. I should probably go let the chaperones know I'm okay," I tell him.

He nods, but neither of us moves. Everyone else from our car has exited the ride already, and we've been standing here for so long, another car has returned to the dock, sending more riders filing out, rushing around us.

Liam puts a hand on my back as a few kids push past us, and he steps aside, guiding me out of the way of everyone trying to exit the ride.

As I look up at him, anxiety starts to rise in my chest. Is this really it? We're just going to part ways and never see each other again?

"Maybe I'll see you around when I move down here for college," I say, but it seems unlikely. There are a lot of people in Berkeley. The chances of running into him again are slim.

"Yeah," he says, but I can tell he doesn't like those odds, either. Biting his lip, he adds, "Maybe I could give you my—"

“Casey, there you are!”

My head snaps toward the sound, and I see Jayce rushing up to us through the exit gate.

“Jayce,” I say, and in my peripheral vision, I can see Liam shift uncomfortably on his feet.

“Mr. Tim’s freaking out,” Jayce says. “Sam and I have been over there for a few minutes, but you never showed. They’re all worried about you.”

“Oh. Sorry. I was just—” I cut off as I look at Liam again, unsure of how to explain.

“Well, come on,” Jayce says, nodding toward the exit. “Come show Mr. Tim you’re alive, so he can stop freaking out.”

“Okay,” I say, expecting Jayce to walk away. But he just stands there, waiting for me to follow him.

I look up at Liam again.

“Um . . . I’ll see you around,” I say, following Jayce to the exit.

Liam gives me a nod, shoving his hands in his pockets as I walk away.

Jayce chuckles, and when I look at him, he’s studying my face.

“The wind must have gotten you,” he says. “You look like you’ve been crying.”

My face goes hot, and I untuck my hair from behind my ears, letting it fall around my shoulders to hide my face.

But then Liam’s voice springs up in my mind, and I tuck my hair back again.

“Actually, I was crying,” I say.

Jayce glances at me, but I don’t look at him as we make our way to where the rest of our group is waiting.

“Oh,” he mutters.

My face is probably as red as my hair right now, but I press on.

“Yeah, I’m, like, super terrified of heights,” I admit. “I was totally freaking out.”

Jayce is silent for a moment. “Why did you go on the ride, then?”

I peek at him. This is it. This is the moment I’ve been trying to create all day. Jayce and me, alone, still several yards away from the rest of our group. To my surprise, I’m not even scared about the idea of

admitting to him why I wanted to go on the ride, so I could tell him I like him. But . . . suddenly, everything I had planned to say to Jayce today doesn't seem to matter anymore.

"I guess I just didn't want you to have to go alone," I say instead.

He looks down at me with guilt in his eyes. "I should have asked you if it was cool if I sat with Sam," he says. "Sorry. I didn't think about it."

I shake my head, giving him a shrug. "It's cool. It all worked out."

We walk in silence as we make our way to the rest of our group. Mr. Tim is frantic with worry and grateful to see that I'm okay.

He and Miss Amy inform all of us, then, that since we've had such a stressful past few hours, they've decided to extend our trip until the park closes. They've called all of our parents and gotten permission from the school to give us some more time, so we can end our senior trip on a positive note.

Everyone's ecstatic about the news, but I'm disappointed I didn't know this a few minutes sooner. I could have asked Liam if he wanted to hang out a little longer. I look back at the exit of the rollercoaster, but I don't see him. He's probably already in line for something else by now.

I sigh as everyone starts talking about what they want to do with the rest of our time at the park. Nervously, I fiddle with my fingers, spinning the ring on my thumb.

The ring. I still have Liam's ring!

That's it. That's got to be a sign. Now I *need* to find him again, so I can return his ring. I step away from the group a few feet and look around, really searching as I try to remember what he was wearing.

There! He's standing in line at a frozen lemonade kiosk by the entrance to The Tornado.

"Mr. Tim, can I go get a frozen lemonade?" I ask. "It's just right over there. I have my own money."

Mr. Tim looks at where I'm pointing and nods. "Sure, that's fine. Just come back over here when you're done."

I jog over to the stand, trying to get there before anyone else gets in line behind Liam. When I get close, I stop jogging and walk up behind him.

"Hey," I say.

He turns around and a wide smile spreads across his face. "Hi," he greets me.

I take the ring off my thumb and hold it out to him. "I just realized I still had this."

"Oh, that's okay," he says, dismissing it with a wave. "You can keep it."

"But . . ." I look at him, then down at the ring. "You made it for . . ."

"He'd want you to have it," Liam says. "*I* want you to have it. If I miss it, I can always make another one."

It feels wrong to keep the ring that meant so much to him. But honestly, I've kind of gotten used to it already. My thumb feels cold and bare without it.

"Okay," I say, sliding it back on. "Thanks."

"So . . . I guess you're headed out, then?" he asks, looking disappointed by that thought.

"Actually, since the ride broke down, our chaperones decided to give us some more time, so we can end the day on a positive note," I explain. "We're staying at the park for a couple more hours."

He perks up at that news. "Oh, cool."

"Yeah." I bite my lip. "So, do you wanna, maybe, hang out?"

He grins. "I'd love to. In fact, I'd really like to see that sea lion show you were telling me about."

I chuckle. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to," he says.

I smile. "Okay. Well, Mr. Tim will be happy. He loves the shows, but nobody ever wants to go see them."

Liam's brows pull together. "And, Mr. Tim is . . .?"

"Oh, one of our chaperones," I say. "He would have to come with us. Is that okay?"

He chuckles. "Yeah, of course. That's fine."

"Okay. I'll go ask him if we can go," I say, turning to head back to the group.

"Did you want one of these?" Liam asks, gesturing to the frozen lemonade stand.

"Oh. Sure, but I can pay for it," I say, reaching for the cash in my pocket.

He shakes his head. "It's cool. I've got it."

While Liam waits for our lemonades, I go back to where the rest of our group is still deciding on a plan of action for the last few hours in the park. I ask Mr. Tim if we can see the sea lion show, and his face lights up. Of course, Anna and Liz agree to come with us, and Miss Amy says she'll take the rest of our group wherever they want to go.

I jog back over to the lemonade stand to tell Liam the plan. He's standing just beside the kiosk, two frozen lemonades and his cell phone in hand.

"Mr. Tim says he'll take us to the show," I inform him.

"Great," he says. And then he passes me his phone.

I give him a questioning look, and he nods toward the screen.

"Just in case we get interrupted again, and I don't get another chance to ask," he says.

I look down at the screen. It's on a new contact page, and the name at the top reads "Casey Kasem."

With a giggle, I type in my phone number, hit save, and pass the phone back to him.

He smiles, handing me my lemonade as he types something.

My phone vibrates, and I look down at my pocket.

"That's me," he says.

I open the message—a smiley face—and save him in my phone as "Liam Hemsworth."

We start to walk over to Mr. Tim and the girls as we dig into our frozen lemonades.

"So . . . would your chaperone freak out if I held your hand?" Liam asks.

My heart goes wild at the idea of holding Liam's hand again. But . . .

"Yeah, he would, actually," I answer.

Liam laughs. "All right. Fair enough."

When we get to the rest of our group, I decide to introduce Liam as a friend. Mr. Tim might not be too keen on the idea of him joining us for the show if he knew we just met a few hours ago.

We make our way to the sea lion show, getting there just in time for the final show of the night. Liam laughs at all the cheesy jokes I remember from every time I came here with my parents, and after the

show's over, he suggests we check out as many of the other animal shows as we can before the park closes.

For the first time since I got here, I'm actually having fun. The last couple hours of the night go by way too fast, and before I know it, we're headed up to the front of the park to meet up with Miss Amy and the other students.

Liam stays with us as long as he can, but eventually it's time to head to the vans, and we have to say goodbye.

It's a little awkward in front of all of my fellow students and our chaperones, so we make it quick. He says he'll text me, and I give him a wave as he heads for his car and my group heads for our school vans.

I'm just settling into my seat, preparing for the long trip back to Redding, when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

LIAM HEMSWORTH

Hey

I smile, typing out a response.

CASEY KASEM

Hey. Long time, no see.

LIAM HEMSWORTH

I know, right? It's been, like, a whole four minutes.

I laugh under my breath, relaxing into my seat as I think of something else to say. Suddenly, I'm much more excited about this car ride than I was a few hours ago. Texting with Liam for the next three hours sounds like a great way to pass the time. But then a thought occurs to me.

CASEY KASEM

Hey, aren't you driving? You shouldn't be texting me while you're driving.

He answers quickly.

LIAM HEMSWORTH

Haven't left yet. I'm sitting in my car in the parking lot.

The mental image of him sitting in his dark car, unable to wait until he gets home to talk to me, makes me smile. But if he doesn't drive home now, he'll be sitting in his car for so long they'll probably shut down the parking lot.

CASEY KASEM

You do know I'm going to be sitting in a car for the next three and a half hours, right? You should go home before it gets too late.

In case it isn't clear, I add more.

CASEY KASEM

And then keep texting me once you get there.

I wait while he types out his response.

LIAM HEMSWORTH

Deal. Talk to you soon.

Chapter Eight

LIAM

When I walk through the door and see my father sitting on the couch, watching old videos from when Cole and I were growing up, guilt weighs heavy on my chest. I should have been here today, instead of running away to chase distractions.

Dad looks up when he hears the front door close.

“Hey, son,” he says, wiping the tears from his cheeks. “How was your date?”

Despite the fact that the date portion of my night sucked, it was, overall, a surprisingly great evening. So, I decide to answer based on the whole night.

“It was really good,” I say, standing beside him, my eyes drifting to the video playing on the screen.

Cole and I are so small in this clip. It must have been a birthday or something, because we’re opening presents, but I can’t remember which one. In fact, I don’t remember any of this. But I’m sure Dad does.

“Where’s Mom?” I ask.

“She decided to turn in early,” he answers. Shutting off the TV, he sniffs and lets out a sigh. “I think I’m gonna head that way, too. Just wanted to make sure you got home okay.”

He smiles and gives me a pat on the shoulder before trudging down the hallway toward their bedroom.

“Hey, Dad?”

He turns toward me. I don’t know what to say. All I know is that my throat is tight when I imagine him and Mom here without me, watching old videos and mourning, waiting up for me to come home.

“I . . . I’m sorry I wasn’t here today,” I say, blinking back the water forming in my eyes.

His eyebrows pull together, and he steps back over to me, pulling me into a hug.

“Nonsense,” he says, patting my back firmly. “Don’t apologize for having a good day. All your mother and I want is for you to be happy.” He pulls back from our embrace and looks at me. “Understood?”

I nod, a few tears falling onto my cheek.

He gives me another small smile and ruffles my hair. “Sleep well, kiddo.”

I retreat to my room then, changing into pajamas and falling back onto my bed.

My phone is in my hand, but I don’t know if I want to talk anymore tonight. Distractions have worked for as long as they’re going to. Lying here, exhausted, surrounded by memories, I can’t run away from this any longer. Casey doesn’t need to deal with that tonight.

But I told her I would text her when I got home. If I never respond again, she might worry. Or she’ll just think I ghosted her, and I’m not sure which of those would be worse.

So, I pull up my messenger app and send a brief text.

LIAM HEMSWORTH

I’m home.

I expect a quick response, since she’s probably just sitting in a car with nothing better to do but wait for me to text her. Her reply comes quickly.

CASEY KASEM

Finally! I was getting bored without you.

Guilt flares again, because she's expecting me to keep her company with the same kind of pleasant conversation we've been having all night. But I'm not up for that anymore. I don't know how to explain, or if I even should. I don't want to bring her down when she's still riding the high of such an unexpectedly magical night.

I stare at my phone, trying to think of what to say. My mind is a million miles away, lost in memories of Cole. Flirty banter isn't my forte right now.

After a few minutes have passed, I get another text.

CASEY KASEM

Sorry, was that too . . . pressure-y? I mean, if you're busy or tired or something, you can totally go. I'll survive. I've got some pretty cool games on my phone.

LIAM HEMSWORTH

No, it wasn't too pressure-y. It was nice.

I send my initial response right away, so she doesn't have to wait and continue wondering what I'm thinking. But now I take a moment to consider how else I can explain my sudden change in mood.

LIAM HEMSWORTH

I guess today's just kind of catching up to me.

There's a lengthy pause as I wait for a response. Looking over my message again, I'm not surprised it's taking her so long to reply. What is she supposed to say to that?

I sigh, setting my phone on my chest and staring up at the ceiling. It feels normal now, but I remember all the months when staring at the ceiling in bed felt foreign and strange. It used to be the bottom of Cole's bunk that I would stare at in the middle of the night. Mom and Dad got me a new bed a few weeks after he passed, but it took a while for me to get used to not having him above me.

Water starts to leak out of the corners of my eyes, falling onto my pillow. My phone vibrates on my chest, but not with the single *buzz* of a

text message. It keeps buzzing, and I turn it over, looking at the bright screen.

Casey Kasem calling . . .

My stomach clenches. I hesitate for a second, but I don't want to miss the call and have her think I'm ignoring her. I click "accept" and press the phone to my ear.

"Hey," I say in a quiet voice, so I don't disturb my parents sleeping in the next room.

"Hi," she says, her voice low, too. "Is this weird? Because if so, that's totally cool. I can just hang up and we can go back to texting."

"Oh, um . . . no," I say. "It's not weird. I'm just . . . not really sure how good of a conversationalist I'll be right now."

"I know. That's why I called," she explains. "With texting, it's like you always have to have something to say, you know? When you're on the phone, you can just sort of . . . be there. And that's enough."

"Hm."

I never thought about it like that, but she's right. Even right now, this silence feels a lot less awkward than it would if she had texted me all of that and I just didn't respond.

"So . . . is this okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, it's okay."

There's another long silence as I listen to her quiet breath, steady and calm. Nothing like it was on the rollercoaster.

"So, what's everyone else doing over there?" I ask her.

"Sleeping, mostly," she says. "Except the driver. He's still awake for now."

I chuckle.

"What about you?"

"Just lying in bed." I look around the room, my eyes resting on all of the familiar items, each holding a sea of memories. "We used to share this room."

Casey lets out a long breath. "That must be really hard."

After a few minutes, she makes a sound like she wants to say something, but she stops herself.

"What?" I ask, prodding her to speak.

"Well . . . I was just wondering . . . is that why you're not going to

college?" she hesitantly asks. "Because you don't want to do it without him?"

Nobody's ever asked me that before. My parents haven't asked because they don't have to. They know that's exactly why I'm not going to college, but they don't want to make things worse by trying to force me to change my mind.

"Yeah," I admit. "It is."

The other line is quiet, and I can tell Casey's formulating her response, trying to figure out a way to say what obviously needs to be said without upsetting me.

"But . . . don't you think he would want you to go?" Her voice is even smaller now, like she's not sure if she even wants me to hear her. "Don't you think he would want you to finish the plans you guys started together?"

I sigh. "Sure. But I can't. I can't do those plans without him."

Those words were meant to be about my lack of artistic skill, how I quite literally cannot do the same work we used to do with half of my team missing. But saying that out loud hit me harder than I expected. Cole's face flashes through my mind, and a sob escapes my lips.

I can't do this without you.

The tears start flowing rapidly now, and I turn the mouthpiece of my phone away so Casey can't hear me crying.

"How much do your sculptures cost?" she asks.

I sniffle, trying to calm myself before I turn the phone back.

"I don't sell them," I tell her. "I either give them away or keep them. Why, was there one you were interested in? If I still have it, it's yours."

"No, I don't want one of the ones you've already made," she says. "I want to commission a piece from you. A new one. A Liam Hemsworth original."

"Casey . . ." I sigh. "I can't . . ."

"I believe in you," she says. "I want you to make something for me. Anything you want."

I can practically feel my blood pressure spike from the pressure of having to come up with an original idea of something to make for her. I don't have any ideas. I'm not the idea person. Cole was. I'm the guy with the torch and the steady hands.

"I'll give you fifty bucks," Casey says. "And I'll even pay for shipping."

If she thinks, for one second, that I'm going to let her pay me fifty bucks to make her something, she's nuts. I'd do it for free, any day. If I had an idea . . . which I don't.

And shipping? What does she mean by that? That we're not going to see each other again?

"I'm going to make you an original sculpture, and you're not even gonna come pick it up from me in person?" I ask.

There's a short pause.

"Good point," she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice. "That'll be your incentive. As soon as you come up with an idea and make me something pretty, I'll come down to Berkeley and visit you."

Oh, great. Now the stakes are even higher.

"And . . . if I can't think of anything?" I mutter.

"I'll . . ." She pauses, thinking. "I'll go on every rollercoaster at The Fun Zone."

I scoff. "You'd never do that."

"Exactly," she says. "That's how much I believe in you."

Through a deep yawn, I say, "I'll think about it."

"Are you tired?" she asks. "You should go to bed."

There's a small part of me that fears that if I hang up this phone, everything that happened today will fade away like a dream. It all feels so surreal. This morning I didn't even know anyone named Casey, and tonight I'm already wondering when I'll be able to talk to her again.

"Can I call you tomorrow?"

I cringe at myself for sounding so desperate, but she just giggles.

"Sure," she says. "You can tell me all about the brilliant idea for my sculpture that came to you just as you were drifting off to sleep."

I laugh. "Yeah, sure. I'll do that."

"Goodnight, Liam," she says.

Biting my lip, I let go of my silly fear that I need to hang on to this girl as tightly as possible, in case she slips away. Not everyone leaves.

"Goodnight, Casey."

I hang up the phone and set it on my nightstand. My eyes are already drifting shut. My mind fades back to that moment at the top of

MEET YOU AT THE PEAK

the peak, when the ride started up again. Watching Casey's face as she squeezed her eyes shut and clenched my hand in hers, bracing for the free fall that was to come. That moment when you fall away and leave everything—heart, stomach, and fears—behind. And all that's left is you and her and now.

Epilogue

CASEY

Pulling into the parking lot of the park, I can't help but feel nervous. Anxiously, I spin the ring on my thumb. Liam and I haven't seen each other in person since the day we met two months ago.

Sure, we've talked on the phone and texted practically every day since then, but what if it's awkward seeing each other in person again? What if our memories of that day at The Fun Zone have been altered and heightened, and when we actually see each other again, we realize that the spark we had was only temporary?

I shake my head at myself, putting the car in park. I'm being silly. Things with Liam have been so effortless since the moment he asked me what my favorite movie was at the top of that rollercoaster. There's no reason to think all of that is going to change just because it's been a while since we've been together in person.

Stepping out of the car, I look around at the vast expanse of green lawn. There are people scattered everywhere, having picnics, playing soccer, kids chasing bubbles. Then, finally, I see him.

He's several yards away, sitting on a blanket on the grass, fiddling with something in his hands. Is it my sculpture?

When I get closer, he looks up at me, and I'm welcomed with a smile

that warms my insides. He sets whatever he was messing with down inside a small box, then gets up to meet me.

As he walks over, I see that he's wearing the same Mumford & Sons shirt he was wearing the day we met. I laugh, because I had a similar thought when I got dressed this morning. I couldn't decide what to wear, so I put on the same jean shorts and green tank top I wore to The Fun Zone that day.

When he finally reaches me, his eyes scan my outfit, and he chuckles to himself.

"Hi," he says, his light green eyes meeting mine.

I smile. "Hi."

He steps forward and wraps his arms around my shoulders. I weave mine around his waist, giving him a gentle squeeze. He smells like leather and sandalwood. It's weird to think that after two months of near-constant communication, this is the first time we've hugged. It feels so natural.

When we pull away from the embrace, he looks down at me with a smile, taking my hand as he leads me to the blanket he set up for us.

We make small talk for a little while. He asks me about my drive, and I ask him about his day at work. And all the while, he can't keep the grin off his face every time our eyes meet.

"Can I ask you something?" he says.

"Of course."

"But you have to answer honestly," he adds.

I frown. "Oh, well, then no."

He laughs.

"What is it?" I ask.

He bites his lip. "Were you, like . . . kind of freaking about this?" he asks. "Seeing each other again, I mean. Did you think that . . . maybe, after all this time . . ."

"Feelings might have changed?" I finish for him.

He nods.

"Yeah," I answer. "I did worry about that a little. You?"

He nods again. "Yeah."

"And . . . the verdict?" I ask.

He gives me a grin. "I don't think my memory did you justice."

I can't help but giggle, because it's exactly how I felt when I saw him here and he pulled me into his arms. I don't know why I ever worried things wouldn't be as good as I remembered. They're even better.

"Same," I tell him.

He lets out a contented sigh. My eyes shift to the box by his side.

"So, do I get to see my sculpture now?" I ask.

I can see the nervousness in his eyes, but he sits up from his lounged position and opens the top flap of the box.

I'm nearly bouncing with excitement over whatever he's made. He hasn't told me anything about it, but every time the subject comes up in our texts or phone calls, I can tell he's proud of what he came up with. Which is exactly what I wanted, for him to see that he's capable of making his own art without his brother's help and being proud of the things he creates.

Liam reaches into the small box beside him.

He looks at me. "Ready?"

I smile and nod.

He pulls out a small metal dog.

It looks like . . . a pug, maybe? But I'm not quite sure. Its face is a little melted.

"Well?" he asks, watching my face for my reaction.

"It's . . ." I trail off, taking the small figure in my hand, turning it over to see it from all angles. "It's cute. I like it."

He searches my eyes, and I hope he can't detect the hint of disappointment there. It's definitely not a bad sculpture—certainly way better than anything I could have done—but it's not exactly what I was expecting after all those photos I saw of his other pieces.

"You said I should come up with my own concept, so I tried to think of things that inspire me," he explains. "And, well, this was the first thing that came to mind."

I nod, listening to his explanation. "Pugs . . . inspire you?"

He stares at me, reading my expression for a long moment. A grin starts to spread across his face, and finally, he bursts into laughter.

"Your face," he says as he laughs. "Did you really just ask me if pugs inspire me?"

"I . . . don't understand what's happening."

He snorts another laugh and takes the metal dog from my hand.

"This isn't the sculpture I made you," he says. "This is a practice piece I made when I was, like, twelve. And yeah, I guess back then, maybe pugs did inspire me."

"What?" I ask. "Why did you—"

"Because I needed to establish a baseline," he says, tucking the dog back into the box beside him. "I needed to see what your face looks like when you're full of crap, so when you see the actual piece and tell me how much you love it, I'll know if you're telling the truth or not."

My jaw drops. "That's diabolical."

He smirks, proud of himself.

"Now, are you ready to see what I really made for you?"

"I don't know," I admit. "I'm kind of scared now."

He laughs. "Don't be. You'll like it."

His confidence in his first solo creation makes me smile. "Okay. I'm ready," I say.

He pulls another metal sculpture out of the same box. This one's slightly larger, but still small enough to fit in one hand. He holds it out to me, and I take it, looking it over with a grin.

It's a miniature replica of a rollercoaster, but not one I've ever seen before. It doesn't look like any of the rides at The Fun Zone. The track makes a big loop in the center, in the shape of a heart.

"This piece moves," Liam tells me, pointing to the little car that sits on the track.

I put my finger on top of it, pushing it along the track. But when it gets up to the top of the first hill, it stops, clicking into place and staying frozen there. I look up at Liam, and now that I actually have the piece in front of me, he looks nervous again.

"So, um, I call this piece 'The Peak,'" he says. "Of course, it's kind of reminiscent of how we met. But that's not the only reason I made the car stop there."

I look down at the sculpture again as he explains his vision.

"It stops just at the crest of the hill, before the fall, because I wanted to capture that feeling you get when you're right on the edge of something . . . big." He shifts a little closer. "When your heart is pounding so hard in your chest and you feel like you can hardly breathe, because you

know you're about to fall into something amazing and wild and totally terrifying."

When I look up, Liam isn't looking at the sculpture. He's looking at me. Our eyes meet, and my heart races.

"That anticipation . . ." He pauses, his eyes searching every bit of my face, lingering on my lips. "It's the best part."

I can feel it—every sensation he just described. We're at the peak right now, and I can't wait to fall.

His face inches closer, the anticipation rises, and I think he's right. This is the best part.

Until his lips finally meet mine, and I change my mind. *This* is the best part. It's the dizzying rush of the fall, leaving my stomach behind and my heart in my throat.

He pulls away far too soon. After a moment to catch our breath, he opens his eyes and nods to the sculpture in my hand.

"So, what do you think?" he asks.

"Liam, it's beautiful," I say, looking down at the little rollercoaster again. "And not just the craftsmanship. The story. The whole vision." Meeting his eyes again, I give him a grin. "You're a great artist."

He smiles. "I made it small, because I figured you might not have a lot of space in your dorm room when you move down here. And I signed the bottom for you."

I turn the piece over and see a tiny, cursive "Liam Hemsworth" etched into the metal base. I giggle.

"Now when you show it to your friends, you can tell them your boyfriend is Liam Hemsworth," he says.

My eyes snap up to his face. "My . . . boyfriend?"

He looks bashful with nerves as he bites his lip. "I mean . . . if you want."

"I do," I say. With I smirk, I add, "But you probably shouldn't tell your friends that you're dating Casey Kasem."

He laughs. "Yeah, that could be a little confusing. I'm pretty sure he's dead."

"Which, of course, is the main reason it would be confusing," I say.

"Of course."

He smiles and leans back on his hands, shifting closer to my side. We

both look at the sculpture, and he shows me how to release the car so I can move it back to its starting position again.

“You should apply to the Berkeley School of the Arts next year,” I tell him.

His eyes meet mine, and I watch as he considers that.

After a moment, he nods. “I will.”

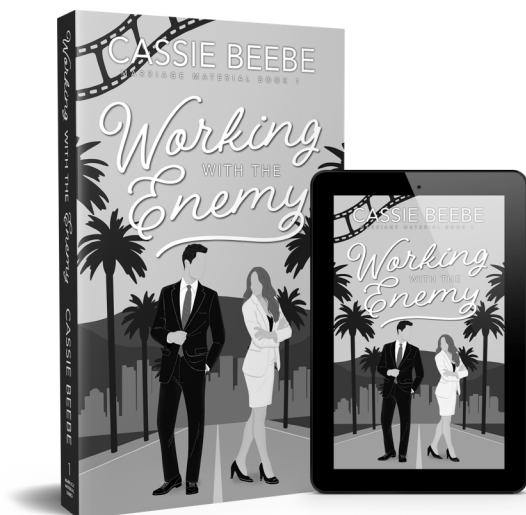
My gaze shifts to his lips, and I long to feel that happy, dizzy falling again.

He must read my mind, because he sits up, taking my face in one hand and pulling my lips to his again. I set down the sculpture and take his other hand in mine, weaving our fingers together.

My thoughts fade back to that first night, at the top of the peak. My racing heart, my shallow breath, and Liam’s warm, steady hand in mine as we finally inched over the hill and fell.

Close your eyes, he said. It’ll be over before you know it.

Except this time, I never want this ride to end.



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After all, how professional can you be while *Working with the Enemy*?

NEW RELEASE!



HOW PROFESSIONAL
CAN YOU BE WHILE

*Working with
the Enemy?*



Sneak Peek: Moving On

CHAPTER ONE

May 5, 2017. That was the day I was supposed to die.

Contrary to how these stories usually begin, the day did *not* start “just like any other.”

It was a Saturday, and if it had begun like any other, I would have sprung out of bed at the stroke of seven and met my mom in the kitchen for our weekly run. Not daily, because neither of us were actually into fitness, but we were both determined to exercise at least three times a week, so as not to fall into the “sedentary lifestyle” category. So, we had Pilates on Sunday evenings, a mid-week class on Wednesdays that depended on our mood of the month (current mood: kickboxing), and a morning run every Saturday, to start the weekend off well.

If I hadn’t woken up with a splitting headache, I would have gotten up the minute my alarm sounded, slipped into some yoga pants and my favorite motivating tank top (*Run like Chris Evans is waiting for you at the finish line!*), and bounded down the hall.

If I hadn’t shuffled gently into the kitchen, stomach already churning in preparation for the vicious attack it had planned for the evening, I would have enjoyed one of my mother’s epically delicious pre-workout smoothies. It was no fancy trick, really. She just hid all of the healthy, green stuff beneath so much peanut butter, bananas, and cocoa

powder that you felt like you were getting away with eating dessert for breakfast. In retrospect, it probably wasn't much of a healthy meal after all of that, but drinking something blended out of a motivational tumbler (*Strong is the new skinny!*) made us feel good about ourselves for a minute.

But I *did* wake up with a splitting headache, and my stomach *was* trying to destroy my body from the inside out. So that morning, I slinked down the hall, slumped onto a stool at the kitchen counter, and let my face fall against the cool faux-marble, wrapping my blankets tighter around myself as my mom hovered over me, making worried sounds.

"Oh, sweetheart," she cooed, running gentle fingers over my back in soothing patterns. "I'll crush up some medicine into your smoothie."

I groaned at the thought of the sweet, thick liquid, bile rising in my throat.

"Maybe if you rest up, you'll feel better before tonight," she mused, not sounding at all convinced of the possibility.

My gut clenched, half sickness and half disappointment at the horrible timing of it all.

You see, for the first time in over a year, my father was home, sleeping soundly a few rooms away from where I sat. And tonight, we had plans. Big ones.

For as long as I could remember, it had just been the two of us—me and Mom—against the world. Such was the life of a military brat. There were letters and phone calls, of course, and I loved my dad, but more often than not, he was on deployment. It could be months or longer in between the brief stretches of when we got to see him.

It wasn't all bad, though. We got to move around a lot, which would probably be a tally in the "negatives" column for some people, but my mom was all about adventure. Which meant that ever since I could remember, I had been, too.

Every new city, new state, new country, new house was an opportunity for new experiences. Food, culture, hobbies, wardrobe, home décor—they all changed from place to place. Home, for me, was never a city or a building. It was my mom and me together, loving our crazy, chaotic, ever-changing life.

I was always more of an introvert than she was, which resulted in a few spats here and there over things like whether to put on our craziest outfits and explore Harajuku, or order in sushi and binge-watch Japanese game shows in our PJs. But those tiffs never lasted long. She never ceased to sacrifice her own desires for mine, and she always did it with a smile, getting herself so hyped up for the new plan, I could almost forget it was my idea and not hers.

Oh, there's a great sushi place just down the road! Let's get two rolls each, and we can share. And what was that one show called? The one where they get shot in the butt with a confetti cannon when they lose? Let's watch that one!

It was easy to say that my mom had been my best friend for seventeen years. There was no real competition, honestly, given how often we moved around. It was tough to make any real, lasting friendships when you didn't know how long you were going to be at that school, or even in that country. But even if we had settled down in one place, nobody could have compared to Mom. Growing up with Liza Benson as a mother has been the greatest joy of my life.

But of course, having my father around added something extra special to Team Benson. We were always a team of three, even when Mom and I were holding down the fort on our own, but on these rare, special occasions when our third musketeer was home, we tried to plan as many family activities as possible in the short time we had together.

Normally, we got about a week at a time with Dad, sometimes more. But this time, it was only a few days before he had to be back on a plane. So instead of our usual chill, weeklong Dad-Time Marathon, we planned a full weekend of events to make up for the lost time, starting with a fancy five-star dinner and tickets to *Wicked* on Saturday night.

We were living in NYC at the time, and Mom and I had been staving off our urges to see a Broadway show for months, saving it for when Dad would be home and we could enjoy it all together for the first time. Mom and I had even bought brand new dresses for the event, hers maroon and slinky with a low back, and mine multicolored with a form-fitting bodice and a small train of thin, wispy chiffon in the back. We even sprung for new shoes when I discovered none of my heels were tall enough to keep me from tripping over the train.

But alas, my body had betrayed me. Despite my mother's blind hope that morning, there was no improvement in my condition by the time our dinner reservations were rapidly approaching. Ever the self-sacrificing woman, Mom immediately began reshaping the plans for the evening to cater to my ailing body.

"Maybe that restaurant can do some kind of special take-out or delivery? Could you call and ask, Jack?" She turned to my dad, and he hoisted himself out of his recliner to fetch the phone. "Is there a movie version of *Wicked* we could rent?" she asked herself, searching her sweatpants pockets for her cell phone to google. "I mean, of course, there's *Wizard of Oz*, but that's not the same. There's gotta be something."

"Mom, this is ridiculous," I moaned from my makeshift sick bed on the other couch, taking my eyes off the *Friends* marathon we had all been watching together for the past several hours. "I'm not going to let you guys miss *Wicked* for me."

"Honey," she demanded with a firm look.

"No," I said, straining up to a sitting position as my dad returned to the room with the phone. "You guys have been miserable with me all day. Let me be miserable on my own for a few hours."

"But it's family night!" Mom protested.

"We can't go without you," Dad agreed.

"Of course, you can," I said, my chest already squeezing at the idea of them leaving. "All I have the energy for tonight is this." I gestured to the TV. "You two cats are young and in love. You've gotta get out there and paint the town."

Mom giggled at my phrasing.

"Well, I don't know about the *young* part," Dad chuckled. "But the rest is true."

He and Mom exchanged a look, deciding.

She bit her lip. "I'll keep my cell phone on the whole time," she reassured me, patting her empty pocket, then momentarily distracting herself searching for it again.

Dad nodded to the end table by her side, and she picked up her cell, raising it to me in a tight fist as proof that she had it.

“If you need absolutely *anything* at all, Charlotte, you *call me*, okay? We’ll come right home.”

I reassured her, again, that I would be fine, and that they shouldn’t have to miss out on all of our plans just because I was sick. Besides, they could probably use a date night, just the two of them, every once in a while.

Eventually, the reluctance faded, and they got ready to go, leaving me to flip through channels. When they returned from their room an hour later, they each gave me a kiss and told me, again, to call if I needed anything. When they reached the door, they paused, looking back at me on the couch one last time.

Mom was gorgeous, with just the perfect amount of sexy in her new dress and side-swept auburn hair that fell to below her chest. Dad looked dapper in his old, classic black suit. I couldn’t remember the last time I saw him that dressed up and formal, outside of his official military uniform.

My father’s hand rested on my mother’s waist. She gave him a sweet smile that felt private, like I was intruding on something intimate just by catching a glimpse of it. They looked like a couple ripped straight from a high-end magazine.

They were happy. They were in love. And Dad was wrong. They were *so* young.

They will always be young in my memories. Never aging, never gray or wrinkled or haggard from time passed. Just happy, young, and in love, all dressed up for a night they’d never forget.

I’ll never forget it, either.

Because that night, at approximately eleven o’clock, on the corner of 21st and Jackson, a truck plowed into the side of my parents’ taxi at fifty-five miles per hour, sending their car spinning into oncoming traffic, only to be struck again on the other side. If I hadn’t woken up sick, or if I had decided to toughen up and join them anyway, or if any number of things had gone wrong instead of right, or right instead of wrong, I would have been there, too.

Maybe my joining them would have made them leave later, or earlier. Maybe that would have been enough to send us all on a different path. Or maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference. Maybe fate was set,

and my being there would only have ended my life that night as well. I don't know. I've learned to stop asking those questions, as they never provide the solace I hope they will.

All I know is that they're gone. And all that's left is that last mental picture I have of them.

My father, suited up, his hand on my mother's waist. His short-cropped hair slicked back as much as he could manage.

My mother, beautiful as ever—her hair perfectly curled, her deep red lips giving her husband a shy smirk at the simple touch she had been missing for however long he had been away that time.

And me, taking it all in, as if I knew, even then, how important that memory would become. How often I would pull it from the depths of my mind and examine it again and again, savoring every detail of the last time I saw my parents alive, young, and in love.

Want More?

If you enjoyed that sneak peek and would like to continue following Charlotte's journey, click on the photo below to cozy up with a heartwarming sweet-romance trilogy that will make you laugh, cry, and swoon!



Also by Cassie Beebe

