

CHAPTER ONE

She thrust her arm forward and clawed at the open water—reaching—reaching—grabbing handfuls of water and violently thrusting them behind her. Her entire body begged for oxygen—for one tiny breath—just one. *Where was the surface? Was she swimming down instead of up?* Panic stormed her heart, sending blood thundering through her ears. She kicked her legs into a wild thrashing hysteria until the deep, desperate ache in her lungs became unbearable.

The imprisoning blackness surrounding her began to soften and wrap her in a welcoming embrace. Her head felt pleasantly fuzzy. Insulated in peace. There was no more fighting, just a sleepy smile when she decided to give in to her body's demands and *b r e a t h e . . . b r e a t h e i n t h e w a t e r .*



Six days earlier.

As if designed for the set of a TV show, the peaceful street preened gloriously in all its suburban harmony. Tidy monochromatic homes flaunted vibrant flower gardens that surrounded their plush, cushiony, dandelion-free lawns. Three happy chattering kids rode bicycles down the middle of the road without a care, waving to the mail carrier as he greeted each of them by name.

This beautiful summer morning continued its idyllic day until it was savagely murdered by the deafening revs of a furious car engine. No one heard the much-anticipated cheery jingle of the ice cream truck as it

turned the corner and drove on by.

Mae sat in the driver's seat, unaware of the unpleasantness she was causing, singing without inhibition to the music in her earbuds. With her foot propped on the gas pedal, she awaited further instruction from her boyfriend, whose head was buried somewhere between the carburetor and the dark abyss.

“Got it!” Greg’s greasy hands reached up and slammed down the hood. “You did good, babe—now get over here.” He stepped back and grabbed at the empty air in front of him. Mae jumped out of the car, nearly tripping in her four-inch heels, and launched herself into his arms. Catching her mid-air, he swung her around, leaving dirty prints behind where he squeezed her butt. For anyone else, engine grease on Mae’s favorite jeans would have been followed by a heated lecture. But with Greg, she adored everything he did and simply giggled, wrapping her hands around his neck for an inspirational kiss.

For the tenth time in the last half hour, her phone vibrated from her pocket, and she groaned. “Sorry, I’ve got to get home. My mom needs help with something,” she said, following it with an exasperated eye roll.

“Not just yet,” he said, deep and seductive. Weaving his dark brown fingers through her light brown ones, he led her into his parents’ house.

“Um, don’t you have class?” Mae didn’t really expect an answer, nor wanted one, and shut the door of his bedroom behind them.



An hour later, Greg dropped Mae off in front of her cottage-sized house. Her mother had been busy that morning suffocating the tiny porch in even more hanging baskets and terracotta pots overflowing with pink and orange geraniums. Mae slipped off her heels to make it safely through the narrow path her mom remembered to leave to the door.

Dropping his arm out his car window, Greg slapped the metal. “Love you, babe. See you tomorrow.” He pointed his finger. “Early.” He added an

exaggerated wink for clarity.

She leaned over the porch railing and blew him a kiss. “Wouldn’t miss it.” The warm breeze stole away a few wisps of her espresso-brown hair and lapped them against her rosy cheeks. Most people wouldn’t consider Mae all that pretty, but what she lacked in looks, her body made up for in curves.

The budget was tight living with her mom, Carmen, a single mother without a steady job, and a lack of interest in getting one. Besides, right now, Carmen’s career seemed to be finding the perfect husband. Mae had only been four when cancer took her father away and ever since had endured a lifetime of almost-stepdads, though each would eventually fizzle out for one reason or another.

Just before she could turn the knob, the front door opened and a heavysset man with the stench of stale cigarettes sidled past her while his eyes took a slow, uninvited walk up and down her body. Her startled expression shifted to disgust, and she aided his exit by quickly shutting the door behind her.

“So glad you’re back, honey.” Her mom rushed over and greeted Mae with her usual smothering hug as if it was a miracle her daughter had returned home once again.

Mae needed space when she got home, not asphyxiation in needy love. Yet, if she showed any negative feelings, her mom would launch into sobs, and she would need to comfort her even more.

“Hi, Mama,” she said, hugging her back. “Who was that creep?”

“Oh, just the plumber,” Carmen said, dismissing the subject, then went to clear two teacups and a small plate of cookie crumbs from the coffee table. Mae didn’t want to further that particular discussion either, so she failed to point out that the “plumber” didn’t have any tools with him. “I have lunch made so we can get to work right away.”

“Work? It must be important then—calling every five minutes and leaving a message each time.”

“You should try to keep your ringer on, honey.” Carmen arranged the silverware on two floral placemats trimmed with ruffled lace. “What if something terrible happened? What if Nonna was in the hospital, or I got into a car accident—or *married*? Wouldn’t you want to know?” She slid her laptop in between them and sat down, placing a napkin on Mae’s lap and then her own.

Mae stared at the mountain of lettuce on her plate, topped with unappetizing cold cubed tofu. Carmen waved her own plate of roasted herb-crust chicken under Mae’s nose, trying to entice her to drop this silly vegetarian fad. After fifteen years of this, Mae learned it was best just to say, “Yum,” or listen to her mom quoting an hour’s worth of healthy reasons to eat meat that she found on some web page. After two small bites, Carmen pushed her dish to the side, hit a key on her computer, and the screen lit up opened to a dating website.

“Oh, really, Mom? *This* was the emergency? I thought you had some critical news or something.”

“Now honey, you know how you need a father. I thought you should have some say in it too.” Her mom continued opening an assortment of web pages, tapping keys with the tips of her perfectly manicured fingernails, which matched her perfectly made-up face and hair. She often reminded Mae to *always* be ready for Mr. Right. He could come knocking on your door any day, handing out brochures.

“For God’s sake, Mom. I’ll be a sophomore in college this fall. I don’t need a father anymore. Especially not some creepy old man fumbling his way into my bedroom in the middle of the night.” This particular vision of her future stepdad always made Mae cringe.

Carmen brushed Mae’s comment off. “Anyway, I want you in on this decision.”

“Find one who doesn’t smoke. Please.”

“Well, honey, my prospects aren’t that plentiful anymore. Maybe if I were under fifty.” She patted the loose skin under her chin. “Do you think I look forty? I’d have more opportunities if I was forty.” She moved in

closer to the screen and scrutinized her retouched profile picture—which was taken ten years before—when she was actually in her forties. “Yes. I’m going to say I’m forty.”

“Do you really want to start off a new relationship with a lie?” Mae asked as her mom logged into one dating site after another, updating her new age. “Geez, how many singles sites do you belong to? Are you paying for all of these?” Carmen didn’t seem to hear, so Mae sighed in surrender. “Okay, what *exactly* are you looking for in a man?”

“I’m thinking cinnamon-colored skin and a mustache. He doesn’t need to be Latino like us, but I *do* like the dark meat.”

“Yuck.” Mae covered her ears. “Are you aware of the damage you can cause a child?”

“You’re not a child anymore. We’re like girlfriends now,” Carmen said, contradicting her earlier statement while rearranging browser windows in order of preference.

“See? I don’t need a father,” Mae said to deaf ears. She picked up her cell phone to text Greg an assortment of heart emojis.

“Your father died when you were very young. You need the experience of having a father.”

Mae had only been four when cancer took her father away and the few memories she had of him could never be replaced. “You’re enough. You’ve done a good job at both.” But her mother’s mind was already set, so she conceded. “Okay. Let’s find me a new father.” Mae slammed her spirited fist on the table. “What else do you require of him?”

“Well, I know what I don’t want. I don’t want some over-baked potato that sits on the couch with caramel corn embedded in his backside. Someone that doesn’t spend half the day on the toilet and the other half watching sports.” Her list went on for some time, then slowed. Her eyes glazed over, and she looked wistful. “Oh, honey, your father was such a handsome man.” Her hand pitter-pattered over her heart. “One hundred percent pure Mayan decent.” Carmen touched Mae’s cheek. “You look a lot like him. But you’ve definitely got my spunk.”

Mae repeated the word “spunk” softly, not sure if it was truly a word she liked. “I sure do.”

“Sass. That’s another thing we’ve both got. Spunk and sass—”

“And a big fat ass,” Mae added, causing them both to laugh.

After Carmen cleared away the plates, she handed them each a pen and paper. It was time to get to work. Mae stretched her arms and yawned, accepting the fact that this was just the beginning of a very long afternoon.

CHAPTER TWO

Fridays meant live nude models in Toke's figure drawing class. He was even on time this morning, which was particularly challenging in the 105-degree heat for a single-unit summer semester course. Two years as a full-time freshman at Sacramento City College just wasn't impressing the ladies.

The air conditioner blasted him as he flung open the classroom door. Unpleasantly chilled in his sweat-soaked t-shirt, he sauntered across the room and dropped into the seat next to his friend, Greg. He flipped his sunglasses up on his windswept blond hair but groaned when he saw their model for the day. His eyes met Greg's, who mirrored his expression. Exhaling his disappointment a little too loudly, Toke grudgingly pulled out his art supplies.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he leaned back in his chair and studied the nude model perched on a stool in the center of the classroom. He held a contemplative pose, seeming perfectly comfortable having thirty pairs of eyes crawling over every inch of his tired, sagging body. In a curious sort of way, Toke found the old man intriguing. Where clothing usually covered, his skin remained baby smooth, not one wrinkle. A disturbing contrast to the armadillo-like leather on his arms, hands, and face.

Greg coughed, and said under his breath, "Nutsack," gesturing to the long, hairy pendulums spilling over the top of the stool and grazing the upper rung, overstretched from so many years of gravity. Toke let out a stifled gagging sound. This was beginning to feel more like a science course studying deformity in geriatrics than an art class.

Moments later, Toke sensed the teacher standing behind him. She spoke softly, like a yoga instructor strung out on chamomile tea. "May

I?” Her arm breezed over his shoulder and held out an open palm. Relinquishing his charcoal stick, she took it into her long fingers and sketched right over his feeble scratches with deliberate, confident lines. She leaned into his side a bit more to get the proper perspective, and that was all it took. His focus shifted from the charcoal pencil to this woman pressing against him. The heat of her body radiated, and he breathed deeply, letting his lungs fill with the honey musk of her sweet skin. His eyes sought more and slipped away unnoticed, meandering up her arm, and comfortably lounging on her chest. Her shy, plump cleavage peeked in and out from the top of her blouse with each stroke she drew, begging to escape their imprisonment. Maybe, if he fixated on it long enough, one would get the courage to break free, popping a button on its way out to embrace its new wild freedom. Then he'd have to catch it with his cupped hand, none of this being his fault, he was only helping. She would have to insist he stay after class to instruct him further...

“Now you try it on a clean piece.” The teacher whipped her drawing to the back of the large sketchpad, jolting Toke back into reality. He picked up the charcoal and made a single long wavy stroke that started at the model's neck and finished at the bottom of his foot. This solitary line revealed the fundamental curves of a human body, allowing the viewer's subconscious brain to fill in the rest.

The instructor beamed enthusiastically. “That's it—you got it.” She moved on to the next student, leaving Toke with not only more confidence but a slide show of images playing through his mind of their special time together. This was one of those days he was grateful he wore baggy jeans.

Leaning far out of his way, Greg's eyes followed the retreating teacher. “Damn. If she was the nude model, I could be so inspired.”

An hour later, class was over, and Toke hurriedly packed up his drawing tools, not wanting to put in one more extra minute than he had to. Flipping his sketchpad closed, he stuffed it under his arm, and he and Greg walked out of the classroom.

Standing six feet tall, Greg was nearly the height of Toke, but half his girth. “So, where you off to this summer?”

Fingering the pack of cigarettes in his pocket, Toke squinted at the Five Years Smoke-Free and Proud sign securely fastened to the concrete partition. “My dickhead dad’s been on my case about me getting a job. He said if I don’t, I have to start some bullshit therapy,” Toke rolled his eyes, “so I can be his younger clone.”

Greg snorted. “I’m picturing you and your dad in matching jogging suits and new white tennis shoes. You’re smiling at each other, drinking bright green smoothies. Then he makes a delightful G-rated joke, and you both laugh hysterically.” He finished with a labored sigh and wiped a fake tear away. “It’s just beautiful, man.”

When they got to the bike racks, Toke bent down and spun a number combination into his lock. “So, what’s up with you this summer?”

“I’m hooked up, on the weekends at least, starting tomorrow.” Greg straddled one of the bikes pretending he was riding it over jumps. “Shit work, pulling rocks and crap, but they pay by the piece, and it promises to add up fast.”

“What’s he paying?” Toke yanked impatiently at the stubborn lock.

“The boss says each day we could come home with three hundred dollars in our pockets. Where else can you make that in a few hours, here in Sacramento?” Toke glanced at him sideways, so Greg added, “Legally, I mean. Dude says he’s looking for more people. You down?”

Toke breathed out, “Yeah, sure,” wiping the sweat from his forehead with his t-shirt. “Sounds hella better than bagging groceries at the market or handing burgers and fries to a screaming carload of wasted chicks through a drive-up window.” Catching what he just said, he adjusted his words, “Okay, that last one wasn’t really a good example of torture.”

“Cool. Tomorrow morning, then. Pick you up a little past seven.”

“Seven—like a.m.? What the hell, dude? It’s summer.” Toke unwound the cable, freeing his longboard, and stuffed the lock in his pack.

“Up to you, man. Gets frickin’ hot by noon, so we cram it all into the morning, and you’ve still got your day left.” Greg fished around in his

pockets for his car keys. “My buddy Dex is picking me up. You’ll get to meet Mae. She’s pulling rocks, too. Trying to save money for school but keeps spending it on random shit, and then more shit.” He eventually found the pocket with his keys and tossed them in the air. “But yeah, about a half hour southeast of Sacto. Still at that place off Third?”

“Yeah.”

“K, see ya.” They swiped hands and Greg jogged off to the parking lot, his glistening coils of black hair bounced rhythmically, doing their own style of spunky dance.

With a single swift motion, Toke flipped his board to the ground, lit a cigarette, and checked his messages in transit. Once past the city college sign, without slowing down in the least, he traded his cigarette for a half-smoked joint. Like being reunited with a long-departed lover, he engulfed the smoke, letting it meander slowly through his lungs before exhaling with a contented smile.

Under the blaze of the afternoon sun, heat rose in lazy waves off the roasting pavement. Toke peeled off his drenched t-shirt and tucked it in his belt, revealing a soft stomach that bounced like Jell-O over every bump, broadcasting his passion for chocolate Pop-Tarts.

With a wide swing, he pulled up to his dad’s simple and tidy cookie cutter townhouse. No neighbor dared break the rules of the homeowner’s association by exposing even the smallest hint of character, with his father getting an A+ in that contest. Even a potted rose bush or hanging musical chimes could unbalance the conformity of the complex and open themselves up to neighbors’ judgments. Toke found their over-obedience entertaining, so occasionally brought home pieces of discarded art from the ceramics building’s dumpster and thoughtfully displayed them in random neighbors’ front yards. Just to stir things up.

Stepping off his board, he flicked it up with skater precision, swiped his hair back with his free hand and walked through the front door. His dad, Ron, stood, leaning against the kitchen counter, stabbing at an intensely green organic salad. “Hi, buddy,” he said a little too cheerfully, attempting to hide his annoyance at his son’s sloppy appearance.

“Hey,” Toke breathed, flinging open the refrigerator. He bathed in the chilled air, examining its contents, then settled on a jar of peanut butter. “I told you I don’t like it cold.”

“Would you rather your body be infested with cancer-causing aflatoxins?” Ron put down his fork, ready to talk about any questions his son might have on the subject. Toke didn’t answer, but dumped three packets of hot cocoa mix in with the peanut butter, found a spoon and stirred.

“Jeremy.” His dad refused to call him by his nickname. “Your eyes...I see pain. You’re only making it worse by feeding your hurt with calories.” Stepping back, Ron held out his arms to display his fit physique. “Look at me. All this doesn’t come easily.” He waited for some kind of inspired nod from his son, but Toke was completely consumed peeling a banana, which also went into the peanut butter. After a short stir, he shoved a spoonful of the sticky sweet concoction into his mouth, left the kitchen, and walked down the hall to his room.

Ron called after him, “I’m here if you would like to process what’s going on inside. I haven’t been there, but I can listen and help you become the person you’ve always wanted to be. I know he’s in there, lost somewhere inside of you.” Then, as if being pulled by a strong magnet, Ron whisked down the hallway and wedged up against Toke’s bedroom door. “Jer, I know you’re in there,” he said, tapping lightly with his knuckles.

“What?” Toke muttered.

“Can I come in?”

“No.” Video game gunfire blasted in the background.

“I think this would be a good time to begin a session with you. We can work out some of the issues you’re having. Whether it’s about girls or your weight, it doesn’t matter. I’m here to help.” Ron considered himself a psychologist, having read a myriad of self-help books.

“I’m fine. No issues. Go away.” More gunfire.

“Knock-knock,” Ron said out loud while opening the door and walking in. His nostrils twitched as they picked up the offensive odors of a

post-teenager's room: sweaty socks, spilled beer, and mildewing wet towels. He crunched a trail through the potato chips that littered the carpet to the unmade bed, smoothed out a spot, and sat. With his expression now adjusted to concern, Ron used his practiced, soft, "engaging" voice. "Jeremy, we need to talk about your actions lately—"

Toke handed his dad the controller, walked out of the room, peanut butter jar in hand and spoon hanging out of his mouth. In the living room, he grabbed the TV remote and launched himself over the back of the couch, landing flat onto the overstuffed cushions. The first thing that came on was a porn station, which his father had apparently been watching last, so Toke just sat there and let it play.

Finding his way to the living room, his dad was now standing behind the couch and continued talking where he left off, "...Because I understand, son. I've been there. Well, not to your extent. But, to be self-aware, we need to uncover your destructive patterns..."

The white noise of his father's wisdoms finally found their place, and Toke's eyelids grew heavy, fluttered twice, then closed.

CHAPTER THREE

Groggy, lacking sleep, Mae filled her water bottles from the refrigerator door while a strong pot of coffee brewed. She gazed dreamily into the cold stream of water, imagining all the ways she could wake Greg up that morning.

Then like rude party crashers who let themselves in, images of gray-bearded men in sunglasses, sitting on their new mid-life crisis Harleys, speedboats, and convertible sports cars from her mom's dating sites flashed through her head, ruining all her romantic ideas.

She slid the plastic bottles into the elastic of her waist pack, stashed it all into her backpack, and poured herself a large steaming cup of coffee. She stared, half asleep, mesmerized with devoted affection as the french vanilla creamer transformed the bitter black into a caramel seduction. Then with a quick glance at the time, she downed what she could and dashed out the door at the ungodly hour of six a.m. Since her mom needed the car for the day, she trekked the five blocks to Greg's house on foot. He would just have to appreciate her "sporty" scent without complaints.



Under the discreetly brightening sky, Mae rounded the last corner and spotted Greg's house. She turned down the walkway and headed to the front door, preparing to slip silently inside. "Good morning, Mae!" Startled, Mae jumped, grabbing hold of a small trellis for balance as Greg's mom smiled and waved her pruning shears from behind a rose bush.

Taking a slow breath to calm her racing heart, Mae waved back. "Hey, Mrs. B.!" She couldn't help but wonder what drove Greg's mom to be up

gardening at six a.m. on a Saturday. When Mae had the option, she could sleep well into the afternoon, snuggled deep into her four-inch memory foam topper, and block out an entire world.

Mae loved Greg's mom, even with all her oddities. She was eternally cheerful, patient and exceedingly kind. Just like a TV mom. In fact, they called her Mrs. B because of her obsession with the old 70s show, *The Brady Bunch*. As if that wasn't weird enough, she insisted they name their firstborn Greg, after the oldest Brady son on the show. They named their next son Peter, and the two girls, Marcia and Jan, following the Brady pattern. Greg's dad simply went along with it, shrugging a, "Why not?"

But Greg wanted no part of this weird Brady Bunch cult. And especially to be named after a fictitious suck-up white boy. "If you notice, I'm black. My whole family is black. So why would we want to be like a candy-coated white family? Why not some cool black family? There were plenty of those on TV."

All Mae could do was take his hand and pat it reassuringly. "They didn't *have* cool black families on television in the early 70s when your mom was young."

"Ha—what about *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, or *What's Happening—Dy-no-mite!*" He acted it out as anyone who knew it would.

"Those came in the late 70s. Your mom was in high school by then and had better things to do than sit in front of the TV at home while being verbally and physically abused by her strung-out parents."

By six-fifteen, Mae had finished complimenting each one of Mrs. B's rose bushes, and walked through the front door like she lived there. With a "hi" to Marsha and Jan, who were making breakfast popcorn balls out of cereal, she continued down the hall to Greg's room.

Saturday at Greg's house was TV day. Everyone, except Greg, was up as soon as the sun broke the horizon, then sat in front of the television where they ate all three meals—eyes glued to the set. It was like a Superbowl Sunday, but every Saturday and without the sports, favoring the nostalgic sitcoms. They sang all the show theme songs together with trained

perfection and watched all the commercials for the rare chance there might be a jingle to sing. Dinners were much anticipated on TV day. Mrs. B. microwaved frozen meals and called them “TV dinners,” which made them taste even more delicious. She didn’t like how they stopped making them in the sectioned foil trays. “It’s just not right,” she said regularly, shaking her head.

For family dinners the rest of the week, they went around the table, and each person described their day as if it were an exciting adventure. By dessert, they’d be reenacting their favorite scenes from TV Saturday and laughing hysterically at jokes that were far from funny. Greg often tried to shock them with gruesome news stories of the real world, peppered with as many vulgar words as he could fit in. But they would only smile through their rose-colored blinders and say things like, “Thank goodness that didn’t happen to us!”

By age fourteen, Greg had saved enough money to buy the electric guitar he had his eyes on since he was ten. Now it was his turn to give back and fill his family’s bizarre utopian bubble. What he was unsuccessful at expressing with snide comments, he could now express through the sweet melodies of his soulful music. With pick in hand, he plowed through all six strings, releasing an ugly aberration of dismembered chords that devoured the peace like a screaming tantrum on steroids. He continued to play his guitar, at all hours of the day and night, letting it hatchet its way through the walls, dominating the house with blaring compositions of unhinged madness. He explained to his family that he was channeling Jimi Hendrix, and Jimi never slept. But, like everything else, they remained unfazed. Simply a note under his door suggesting he take guitar lessons, signed with a smiley face at the bottom.

Exhausted and defeated, Greg eventually stopped rebelling and gave up the guitar. Then he met Mae, who changed his world and took all his misery away. She helped him appreciate what he had, and whenever he would start up his frustrated rant, she would remind him, “You take your family for granted. Sure, they might be a little quirky, but your house is so full of love. Imagine what it’s like for poor Dexter.”