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COLLEEN
HOOVER

ALL
YOUR

PERFECTS

A NOVEL



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All Your
Perfects

A Novel

Colleen Hoover

ATRIA PAPERBACK

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To Heath. I love you more today than any day that has come before it. Thank you for being legit.

Chapter One

Then

The doorman didn't smile at me.

That thought plagues me during the entire ride up the elevator to Ethan's floor. Vincent has been my favorite doorman since Ethan moved into this apartment building. He always smiles and chats with me. But today, he simply held the door open with a stoic expression. Not even a, "*Hello, Quinn. How was your trip?*"

We all have bad days, I guess.

I look down at my phone and see that it's already after seven. Ethan should be home at eight, so I'll have plenty of time to surprise him with dinner. *And myself.* I came back a day early but decided not to tell him. We've been doing so much planning for our wedding; it's been weeks since we had an actual home-cooked meal together. Or even sex.

When I reach Ethan's floor, I pause as soon as I step out of the elevator. There's a guy pacing the hallway directly in front of Ethan's apartment. He takes three steps, then pauses and looks at the door. He takes another three steps in the other direction and pauses again. I watch him, hoping he'll leave, but he never does. He just keeps pacing back and forth, looking at Ethan's door. I don't think he's a friend of Ethan's. I would recognize him if he were.

I walk toward Ethan's apartment and clear my throat. The guy faces me and I motion toward Ethan's door to let him know I need to get past him. The guy steps aside and makes room for me but I'm careful not to make further eye contact with him. I fish around in my purse for the key. When I find it, he moves beside me, pressing a hand against the door. "Are you about to go in there?"

I glance up at him and then back at Ethan's door. *Why is he asking me that?* My heart begins to race at the thought of being alone in a hallway with a strange guy who's wondering if I'm about to open a door to an empty apartment. *Does he know Ethan isn't home? Does he know I'm alone?*

I clear my throat and try to hide my fear, even though the guy looks harmless. But I guess evil doesn't have a telling exterior, so it's hard to judge. "My fiancé lives here. He's inside," I lie.

The guy nods vigorously. "Yeah. He's inside all right." He clenches his fist and taps the wall next to the door. "Inside my fucking girlfriend."

I took a self-defense class once. The instructor taught us to slide a key between our fingers, poking outward, so if you're attacked you can stab the attacker in the eye. I do this, prepared for the psycho in front of me to lunge any second now.

He blows out a breath and I can't help but notice the air between us fills with the smell of cinnamon. What a strange thought to have in the moment before I'm attacked. What an odd lineup that would be at the police station. "*Oh, I can't really tell you what my attacker was wearing, but his breath smelled good. Like Big Red.*"

“You have the wrong apartment,” I tell him, hoping he’ll walk away without an argument.

He shakes his head. Tiny little fast shakes that indicate I couldn’t be more wrong and he couldn’t be more right. “I have the right apartment. I’m positive. Does your fiancé drive a blue Volvo?”

Okay, so he’s stalking Ethan? My mouth is dry. Water would be nice.

“Is he about six foot tall? Black hair, wears a North Face jacket that’s too big for him?”

I press a hand against my stomach. *Vodka would be nice.*

“Does your fiancé work for Dr. Van Kemp?”

Now *I’m* the one shaking my head. Not only does Ethan work for Dr. Van Kemp . . . his father *is* Dr. Van Kemp. *How does this guy know so much about Ethan?*

“My girlfriend works with him,” he says, glancing at the apartment door with disgust. “*More* than works with him, apparently.”

“Ethan wouldn’t . . .”

I’m interrupted by it. *The fucking.*

I hear Ethan’s name being called out in a faint voice. At least it’s faint from this side of the door. Ethan’s bedroom is against the far side of his apartment, which indicates that whoever she is, she isn’t being quiet about it. She’s screaming his name.

While he fucks her.

I immediately back away from the door. The reality of what is happening inside Ethan’s apartment makes me dizzy. It makes my whole world unstable. My past, my present, my future—all of it is spinning out of control. The guy grips my arm and stabilizes me. “You okay?” He steadies me against the wall. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have blurted it out like that.”

I open my mouth, but uncertainty is all that comes out. “Are you . . . are you sure? Maybe those sounds aren’t coming from Ethan’s apartment. Maybe it’s the couple in the apartment next door.”

“That’s convenient. Ethan’s neighbor is named Ethan, too?”

It’s a sarcastic question, but I immediately see the regret in his eyes after he says it. That’s nice of him—finding it in himself to feel compassion for me when he’s obviously experiencing the same thing. “I followed them,” he says. “They’re in there together. My girlfriend and your . . . boyfriend.”

“Fiancé,” I correct.

I walk across the hallway and lean against the wall, then eventually slide down to the floor. I probably shouldn’t plop myself on the floor because I’m wearing a skirt. Ethan likes skirts, so I thought I’d be nice and wear one for him, but now I want to take my skirt off and tie it around his neck and choke him with it. I stare at my shoes for so long, I don’t even notice that the guy is sitting on the floor next to me until he says, “Is he expecting you?”

I shake my head. “I was here to surprise him. I’ve been out of town with my sister.”

Another muffled scream makes its way through the door. The guy next to me cringes and covers his ears. I cover mine, too. We sit like this for a while. Both of us refusing to allow the noises to penetrate our ears until it’s over. It won’t last long. Ethan can’t last more than a few minutes.

Two minutes later I say, “I think they’re finished.” The guy pulls his hands from his ears and rests his arms on his knees. I wrap my arms around mine, resting my chin on top of them. “Should we use my key to open the door? Confront them?”

“I can’t,” he says. “I need to calm down first.”

He seems pretty calm. Most men I know would be breaking down the door right now.

I’m not even sure I want to confront Ethan. Part of me wants to walk away and pretend the last few minutes didn’t happen. I could text him and tell him I came home early and he could tell me he’s

working late and I could remain blissfully ignorant.

Or I could just go home, burn all his things, sell my wedding dress, and block his number.

No, my mother would never allow that.

Oh, God. My mother.

I groan and the guy immediately sits up straight. "Are you about to be sick?"

I shake my head. "No. I don't know." I pull my head from my arms and lean back against the wall. "It just hit me how pissed my mother is going to be."

He relaxes when he sees I'm not groaning from physical illness, but rather from the dread of my mother's reaction when she finds out the wedding is off. Because it's definitely off. I lost count of how many times she's mentioned how much the deposit was in order to get on the waiting list at the venue. "Do you realize how many people wish they could get married at Douglas Whimberly Plaza? Evelyn Bradbury was married there, Quinn. *Evelyn Bradbury!*"

My mother loves to compare me to Evelyn Bradbury. Her family is one of the few in Greenwich who is more prominent than my stepfather's. So of course my mother uses Evelyn Bradbury as an example of high-class perfection at every opportunity. I don't care about Evelyn Bradbury. I have half a mind to text my mother right now and simply say, The wedding is off and I don't give a fuck about Evelyn Bradbury.

"What's your name?" the guy asks.

I look at him and realize it's the first time I've really taken him in. This might be one of the worst moments of his life, but even taking that into consideration, he's extremely handsome. Expressive dark brown eyes that match his unruly hair. A strong jaw that's been constantly twitching with silent rage since I walked out of the elevator. Two full lips that keep being pressed together and thinned out every time he glances at the door. It makes me wonder if his features would appear softer if his girlfriend weren't in there with Ethan right now.

There's a sadness about him. Not one related to our current situation. Something deeper . . . like it's embedded in him. I've met people who smile with their eyes, but he frowns with his.

"You're better looking than Ethan." My comment takes him off guard. His expression is swallowed up in confusion because he thinks I'm hitting on him. That's the last thing I'm doing right now. "That wasn't a compliment. It was just a realization."

He shrugs like he wouldn't care either way.

"It's just that if you're better looking than Ethan, that makes me think your girlfriend is better looking than me. Not that I care. Maybe I do care. I *shouldn't* care, but I can't help but wonder if Ethan is more attracted to her than he is to me. I wonder if that's why he's cheating. Probably. I'm sorry. I'm usually not this self-deprecating but I'm so angry and for some reason I just can't stop talking."

He stares at me a moment, contemplating my odd train of thought. "Sasha is ugly. You have nothing to worry about."

"Sasha?" I say her name incredulously, then I repeat her name, putting emphasis on the *sha*. "Sasha. That explains a lot."

He laughs and then *I* laugh and it's the strangest thing. Laughing when I should be crying. Why am I not crying?

"I'm Graham," he says, reaching out his hand.

"Quinn."

Even his smile is sad. It makes me wonder if his smile would be different under different circumstances.

“I would say it’s good to meet you, Quinn, but this is the worst moment of my life.”

That is a very miserable truth. “Same,” I say, disappointed. “Although, I’m relieved I’m meeting you now rather than next month, after the wedding. At least I won’t be wasting marriage vows on him now.”

“You’re supposed to get married next month?” Graham looks away. “What an asshole,” he says quietly.

“He really is.” I’ve known this about Ethan all along. He’s an asshole. Pretentious. But he’s good to me. *Or so I thought.* I lean forward again and run my hands through my hair. “God, this sucks.”

As always, my mother has perfect timing with her incoming text. I retrieve my phone and look down at it.

Your cake tasting has been moved to two o’clock on Saturday. Don’t eat lunch beforehand. Will Ethan be joining us?

I sigh with my whole body. I’ve been looking forward to the cake tasting more than any other part of the wedding planning. I wonder if I can avoid telling anyone the wedding is off until Sunday.

The elevator dings and my attention is swept away from my phone and to the doors. When they open, I feel a knot form in my throat. My hand clenches in a fist around my phone when I see the containers of food. The delivery guy begins to walk toward us and my heart takes a beating with every step. *Way to pour salt on my wounds, Ethan.*

“Chinese food? Are you kidding me?” I stand up and look down at Graham who is still on the floor, looking up at me. I wave my hand toward the Chinese food. “That’s *my* thing! Not his! *I’m* the one who likes Chinese food after sex!” I turn back toward the delivery guy and he’s frozen, staring at me, wondering if he should proceed to the door or not. “Give me that!” I take the bags from him. He doesn’t even question me. I plop back down on the floor with the two bags of Chinese food and I rifle through them. I’m pissed to see that Ethan simply duplicated what I always order. “He even ordered the same thing! He’s feeding Sasha my Chinese food!”

Graham jumps up and pulls his wallet out of his pocket. He pays for the food and the poor delivery guy pushes open the door to the stairwell just to get out of the hallway faster than if he were to walk back to the elevator.

“Smells good,” Graham says. He sits back down and grabs the container of chicken and broccoli. I hand him a fork and let him eat it, even though the chicken is my favorite. This isn’t a time to be selfish, though. I open the Mongolian beef and start eating, even though I’m not hungry. But I’ll be damned if Sasha or Ethan will eat any of this. “Whores,” I mutter.

“Whores with no food,” Graham says. “Maybe they’ll both starve to death.”

I smile.

Then I eat and wonder how long I’m going to sit out here in the hallway with this guy. I don’t want to be here when the door opens because I don’t want to see what Sasha looks like. But I also don’t want to miss the moment when she opens the door and finds Graham sitting out here, eating her Chinese food.

So I wait. And eat. With Graham.

After several minutes, he sets down his container and reaches into the takeout bag, pulling out two fortune cookies. He hands one to me and proceeds to open his. He breaks open the cookie and unfolds the strip of paper, then reads his fortune out loud. “You will succeed in a great business endeavor today.” He folds the fortune in half after reading it. “Figures. I took off work today.”

“Stupid fortune,” I mutter.

Graham wads his fortune into a tiny ball and flicks it at Ethan's door. I crack open my cookie and slip the fortune out of it. "If you only shine light on your flaws, all your perfects will dim."

"I like it," he says.

I wad up the fortune and flick it at the door like he did. "I'm a grammar snob. It should be your *perfections*."

"That's what makes me like it. The one word they misuse is *perfects*. Kind of ironic." He crawls forward and grabs the fortune, then scoots back against the wall. He hands it to me. "I think you should keep it."

I immediately brush his hand and the fortune away. "I don't want a reminder of this moment."

He stares at me in thought. "Yeah. Me neither."

I think we're both growing more nervous at the prospect of the door opening any minute, so we just listen for their voices and don't speak. Graham pulls at the threads of his blue jeans over his right knee until there's a small pile of threads on the floor and barely anything covering his knee. I pick up one of the threads and twist it between my fingers.

"We used to play this word game on our laptops at night," he says. "I was really good at it. I'm the one who introduced Sasha to the game, but she would always beat my score. Every damn night." He stretches his legs out. They're a lot longer than mine. "It used to impress me until I saw an eight-hundred-dollar charge for the game on her bank statement. She was buying extra letters at five dollars a pop just so she could beat me."

I try to picture this guy playing games on his laptop at night, but it's hard. He looks like the kind of guy who reads novels and cleans his apartment twice a day and folds his socks and then tops off all that perfection with a morning run.

"Ethan doesn't know how to change a tire. We've had two flats since we've been together and he had to call a tow truck both times."

Graham shakes his head a little and says, "I'm not looking for reasons to excuse the bastard, but that's not so bad. A lot of guys don't know how to change a tire."

"I know. That's not the bad part. The bad part is that I *do* know how to change a tire. He just refused to let me because it would have embarrassed him to have to stand aside while a girl changed his tire."

There's something more in Graham's expression. Something I haven't noticed before. Concern, maybe? He pegs me with a serious stare. "Do *not* forgive him for this, Quinn."

His words make my chest tighten. "I won't," I say with complete confidence. "I don't want him back after this. I keep wondering why I'm not crying. Maybe that's a sign."

He has a knowing look in his eye, but then the lines around his eyes fall a little. "You'll cry tonight. In bed. That's when it'll hurt the most. When you're alone."

Everything suddenly feels heavier with that comment. I don't want to cry but I know this is all going to hit me any minute now. I met Ethan right after I started college and we've been together four years now. That's a lot to lose in one moment. And even though I know it's over, I don't want to confront him. I just want to walk away and be done with him. I don't want to need closure or even an explanation, but I'm scared I'll need both of those things when I'm alone tonight.

"We should probably get tested."

Graham's words and the fear that consumes me after he says them are cut off by the sound of Ethan's muffled voice.

He's walking toward the door. I turn to look at his apartment door but Graham touches my face and pulls my attention back to him.

"The worst thing we could do right now is show emotion, Quinn. Don't get angry. Don't cry."

I bite my lip and nod, trying to hold back all the things I know I'm about to need to scream. "Okay," I whisper, right as Ethan's apartment door begins to open.

I try to hold my resolve like Graham is doing, but Ethan's looming presence makes me nauseous. Neither of us looks at the door. Graham's stare is hard and he's breathing steadily as he keeps his gaze locked on mine. I can't even imagine what Ethan will think in two seconds when he opens the door fully. He won't recognize me at first. He'll think we're two random people sitting on the hallway floor of his apartment building.

"Quinn?"

I close my eyes when I hear Ethan say my name. I don't turn toward his voice. I hear Ethan take a step out of his apartment. I can feel my heart in so many places right now, but mostly I feel it in Graham's hands on my cheeks. Ethan says my name again, but it's more of a command to look at him. I open my eyes, but I keep them focused on Graham.

Ethan's door opens even wider and a girl gasps in shock. *Sasha*. Graham blinks, holding his eyes closed for a second longer as he inhales a calming breath. When he opens them, Sasha speaks.

"Graham?"

"Shit," Ethan mutters.

Graham doesn't look at them. He continues to face me. As if both of our lives aren't falling apart around us, Graham calmly says to me, "Would you like me to walk with you downstairs?"

I nod.

"Graham!" Sasha says his name like she has a right to be angry at him for being here.

Graham and I both stand up. Neither of us look toward Ethan's apartment. Graham has a tight grip on my hand as he leads me to the elevator.

She's right behind us, then next to us as we wait for the elevator. She's on the other side of Graham, pulling on his shirtsleeve. He squeezes my hand a little harder, so I squeeze his back, letting him know we can do this without a scene. Just walk onto the elevator and leave.

When the doors open, Graham ushers me on first and then he steps on. He doesn't leave room for Sasha to step on with us. He blocks the doorway and we're forced to face the direction of the doors. The direction of Sasha. He hits the button for the lobby and when the doors begin to close, I finally look up.

I notice two things.

- 1) Ethan is no longer in the hallway and his apartment door is closed.
- 2) Sasha is so much prettier than me. Even when she's crying.

The doors close and it's a long, quiet ride to the bottom. Graham doesn't let go of my hand and we don't speak, but we also don't cry. We walk quietly out of the elevator and across the lobby. When we reach the door, Vincent holds it open for us, looking at us both with apology in his eyes. Graham pulls out his wallet and gives Vincent a handful of bills. "Thanks for the apartment number," Graham says.

Vincent nods and takes the cash. When his eyes meet mine, they're swimming in apology. I give Vincent a hug since I'll likely never see him again.

Once Graham and I are outside, we just stand on the sidewalk, dumbfounded. I wonder if the world looks different to him now because it certainly looks different to me. The sky, the trees, the

people who pass us on the sidewalk. Everything seems slightly more disappointing than it did before I walked into Ethan's building.

"You want me to hail you a cab?" he finally says.

"I drove. That's my car," I say, pointing across the street.

He glances back up at the apartment building. "I want to get out of here before she makes it down." He looks genuinely worried, like he can't face her at all right now.

At least Sasha is trying. She followed Graham all the way to the elevator while Ethan just walked back inside his apartment and closed his door.

Graham looks back at me, his hands shoved in his jacket pockets. I wrap my coat tightly around myself. There's not much left to say other than goodbye.

"Goodbye, Graham."

His stare is flat, like he's not even in this moment. He backs up a step. Two steps. Then he spins and starts walking in the other direction.

I look back at the apartment building, just as Sasha bursts through the doors. Vincent is behind her, staring at me. He waves at me, so I lift a hand and wave back to him. We both know it's a goodbye wave, because I'm never stepping foot inside Ethan's apartment building again. Not even for whatever stuff of mine litters his apartment. I'd rather him just throw it all away than face him again.

Sasha looks left and then right, hoping to find Graham. She doesn't. She just finds me and it makes me wonder if she even knows who I am. Did Ethan tell her he's supposed to get married next month? Did he tell her we just spoke on the phone this morning and he told me he's counting down the seconds until he gets to call me his wife? Does she know when I sleep over at Ethan's apartment that he refuses to shower without me? Did he tell her the sheets he just fucked her on were an engagement gift from my sister?

Does she know when Ethan proposed to me, he cried when I said yes?

She must not realize this or she wouldn't have thrown away her relationship with a guy who impressed me more in one hour than Ethan did in four years.

Chapter Two

Now

Our marriage didn't collapse. It didn't suddenly fall apart.

It's been a much slower process.

It's been *dwindling*, if you will.

I'm not even sure who is most at fault. We started out strong. Stronger than most; I'm convinced of that. But over the course of the last several years, we've weakened. The most disturbing thing about it is how skilled we are at pretending nothing has changed. We don't talk about it. We're alike in a lot of ways, one of them being our ability to avoid the things that need the most attention.

In our defense, it's hard to admit that a marriage might be over when the love is still there. People are led to believe that a marriage ends only when the love has been lost. When anger replaces happiness. When contempt replaces bliss. But Graham and I aren't angry at each other. We're just not the same people we used to be.

Sometimes when people change, it's not always noticeable in a marriage, because the couple changes together, in the same direction. But sometimes people change in opposite directions.

I've been facing the opposite direction from Graham for so long, I can't even remember what his eyes look like when he's inside me. But I'm sure he has every strand of hair on the back of my head memorized from all the times I roll away from him at night.

People can't always control who their circumstances turn them into.

I look down at my wedding ring and roll it with my thumb, spinning it in a continuous circle around my finger. When Graham bought it, he said the jeweler told him the wedding ring is a symbol for eternal love. An endless loop. The beginning becomes the middle and there's never supposed to be an end.

But nowhere in that jeweler's explanation did he say the ring symbolizes eternal *happiness*. Just eternal love. The problem is, love and happiness are not concordant. One can exist without the other.

I'm staring at my ring, my hand, the wooden box I'm holding, when out of nowhere, Graham says, "What are you doing?"

I lift my head slowly, completely opposite of the surprise I'm feeling at his sudden appearance in the doorway. He's already taken off his tie and the top three buttons of his shirt are undone. He's leaning against the doorway, his curiosity pulling his eyebrows together as he stares at me. He fills the room with his presence.

I only fill it with my absence.

After knowing him for as long as I have, there's still a mysteriousness that surrounds him. It peeks out of his dark eyes and weighs down all the thoughts he never speaks. The quietness is what drew me to him the first day I met him. It made me feel at peace.

Funny how that same quietness makes me uneasy now.

I don't even try to hide the wooden box. It's too late; he's staring straight at it. I look away from him, down at the box in my hands. It's been in the attic, untouched, rarely even thought of. I found it today while I was looking for my wedding dress. I just wanted to see if the dress still fit. It did, but I looked different in it than I did seven years ago.

I looked lonelier.

Graham walks a few steps into the bedroom. I can see the stifled fear in his expression as he looks from the wooden box to me, waiting for me to give him an answer as to why I'm holding it. Why it's in the bedroom. Why I thought to even pull it out of the attic.

I don't know why. But holding this box is certainly a conscious decision, so I can't respond with something innocent like "I don't know."

He steps closer and the crisp smell of beer drifts from him. He's never been much of a drinker, unless it's Thursday, when he goes to dinner with his coworkers. I actually like the smell of him on Thursday nights. I'm sure if he drank every day I'd grow to despise the smell, especially if he couldn't control the drinking. It would become a point of contention between us. But Graham is always in control. He has a routine and he sticks to it. I find this aspect of his personality to be one of his sexiest traits. I used to look forward to his return on Thursday nights. Sometimes I would dress up for him and wait for him right here on the bed, anticipating the sweet flavor of his mouth.

It says something that I forgot to look forward to it tonight.

"Quinn?"

I can hear all his fears, silently smashed between each letter of my name. He walks toward me and I focus on his eyes the whole time. They're uncertain and concerned and it makes me wonder when he started looking at me this way. He used to look at me with amusement and awe. Now his eyes just flood me with pity.

I'm sick of being looked at this way, of not knowing how to answer his questions. I'm no longer on the same wavelength as my husband. I don't know how to communicate with him anymore. Sometimes when I open my mouth, it feels like the wind blows all my words straight back down my throat.

I miss the days when I needed to tell him everything or I would burst. And I miss the days when he would feel like time cheated us during the hours we had to sleep. Some mornings I would wake up and catch him staring at me. He would smile and whisper, "*What did I miss while you were sleeping?*" I would roll onto my side and tell him all about my dreams and sometimes he would laugh so hard, he would have tears in his eyes. He would analyze the good ones and downplay the bad ones. He always had a way of making me feel like my dreams were better than anyone else's.

He no longer asks what he misses while I sleep. I don't know if it's because he no longer wonders or if it's because I no longer dream anything worth sharing.

I don't realize I'm still spinning my wedding ring until Graham reaches down and stills it with his finger. He gently threads our fingers together and carefully pulls my hand away from the wooden box. I wonder if his intention is to react like I'm holding an explosive or if that's truly how he feels right now.

He tilts my face upward and he bends forward, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

I close my eyes and subtly pull away, making it appear as though he caught me while I was already mid-movement. His lips brush across my forehead as I push off the bed, forcing him to release me as I watch him take a humbling step back.

I call it the divorce dance. Partner one goes in for the kiss, partner two isn't receptive, partner one pretends he didn't notice. We've been dancing this same dance for a while now.

I clear my throat, my hands gripping the box as I walk it to the bookshelf. "I found it in the attic," I say. I bend down and slide the box between two books on the bottom shelf.

Graham built me this bookshelf as a gift for our first wedding anniversary. I was so impressed that he built it from scratch with his bare hands. I remember he got a splinter in the palm of his hand while moving it into the bedroom for me. I sucked it out of his palm as a thank-you. Then I pushed him against the bookshelf, knelt down in front of him, and thanked him some more.

That was back when touching each other still held hope. Now his touch is just another reminder of all the things I'll never be for him. I hear him walking across the room toward me so I stand up and grip the bookshelf.

"Why did you bring it down from the attic?" he asks.

I don't face him, because I don't know how to answer him. He's so close to me now; his breath slides through my hair and brushes the back of my neck when he sighs. His hand tops mine and he grips the bookshelf with me, squeezing. He brings his lips down against my shoulder in a quiet kiss.

I'm bothered by the intensity of my desire for him. I want to turn and fill his mouth with my tongue. I miss the taste of him, the smell of him, the sound of him. I miss when he would be on top of me, so consumed by me that it felt like he might tear through my chest just so he could be face-to-face with my heart while we made love. It's strange how I can miss a person who is still here. It's strange that I can miss making love to a person I still have sex with.

No matter how much I mourn the marriage we used to have, I am partly—if not wholly—responsible for the marriage it's turned into. I close my eyes, disappointed in myself. I've perfected the art of avoidance. I'm so graceful in my evasion of him; sometimes I'm not sure if he even notices. I pretend to fall asleep before he even makes it to bed at night. I pretend I don't hear him when my name drips from his lips in the dark. I pretend to be busy when he walks toward me, I pretend to be sick when I feel fine, I pretend to accidentally lock the door when I'm in the shower.

I pretend to be happy when I'm breathing.

It's becoming more difficult to pretend I enjoy his touch. I don't enjoy it—I only *need* it. There's a difference. It makes me wonder if he pretends just as much as I do. Does he want me as much as he professes to? Does he wish I wouldn't pull away? Is he thankful I do?

He wraps an arm around me and his fingers splay out against my stomach. A stomach that still easily fits into my wedding dress. A stomach unmarred by pregnancy.

I have that, at least. A stomach most mothers would envy.

"Do you ever . . ." His voice is low and sweet and completely terrified to ask me whatever he's about to ask me. "Do you ever think about opening it?"

Graham never asks questions he doesn't need answers to. I've always liked that about him. He doesn't fill voids with unnecessary talk. He either has something to say or he doesn't. He either wants to know the answer to something or he doesn't. He would never ask me if I ever think about opening the box if he didn't need to know the answer.

Right now, this is my least favorite thing about him. I don't want this question because I don't know how to give him his answer.

Instead of risking the wind blowing my words back down my throat, I simply shrug. After years of being experts of avoidance, he finally stops the divorce dance long enough to ask a serious question. The one question I've been waiting for him to ask me for a while now. And what do I do?

I shrug.

The moments that follow my shrug are probably why it's taken him so long to ask the question in the first place. It's the moment I feel his heart come to a halt, the moment he presses his lips into my hair and sighs a breath he'll never get back, the moment he realizes he has both arms wrapped around me but he still isn't holding me. He hasn't been able to hold me for a while now. It's hard to hold on to someone who has long since slipped away.

I don't reciprocate. He releases me. I exhale. He leaves the bedroom.

We resume the dance.

Chapter Three

Then

The sky turned upside down.

Just like my life.

An hour ago, I was engaged to the man I've been in love with for four years. Now I'm not. I turn the windshield wipers on and watch out the window as people run for cover. Some of them run inside Ethan's apartment building, including Sasha.

The rain came out of nowhere. No sprinkles to indicate what was coming. The sky just tipped over like a bucket of water and huge drops are falling hard against my window.

I wonder if Graham lives close by or if he's still walking. I flip on my blinker and pull out of my usual parking spot at Ethan's for the very last time. I head in the direction Graham began walking a few minutes ago. As soon as I turn left, I see him duck into a restaurant to take cover from the storm. Conquistadors. It's a Mexican restaurant. One I'm not too fond of. But it's close to Ethan's apartment and he likes it, so we eat here at least once a month.

A car is pulling out of a space in front of the restaurant, so I patiently wait for them to leave and then I ease my car into their spot. I get out of the car without knowing what I'll say to Graham once I walk inside.

"Need a ride home?"

"Need company?"

"Up for a night of revenge sex?"

Who am I kidding? The last thing I want tonight is revenge sex. That's not why I'm following him, so I hope he doesn't assume that's the case once he sees me. I still don't know why I'm following him. Maybe it's because I don't want to be alone. Because like he said, the tears will come later, in the silence.

When the door closes behind me and my eyes adjust to the dim lighting in the restaurant, I spot Graham standing at the bar. He's removing his wet coat and laying it over the back of the chair when he sees me. He doesn't appear at all shocked to see me. He pulls out the chair next to him with the confident expectation that I'll walk over to him and take it.

I do. I sit right next to him and neither of us says a word. We just commiserate in our silent misery.

"Can I get you two any drinks?" a bartender asks.

"Two shots of whatever will help us forget the last hour of our lives," Graham says.

The bartender laughs, but neither of us laughs with him. He sees how serious Graham is being, so he holds up a finger. "I have just the thing." He walks to the other end of the bar.

I can feel Graham watching me, but I don't look at him. I don't really want to see how sad his eyes are right now. I almost feel worse for him than I do for myself.

I pull a bowl of pretzels in front of me. They're a mixture of shapes, so I begin to pull out all the sticks and I lay them on the bar in the shape of a grid. Then I pull out all the O-shaped pretzels and scoot the bowl of the traditionally shaped pretzel knots toward Graham.

I lay my pretzel in the center of the grid. I look at Graham and wait quietly. He looks at the pretzels I've strategically placed on the bar and then he looks back at me. A very slow and guarded smile makes its appearance. Then he reaches into the bowl, pulls out a pretzel knot and places it in the square above mine.

I pick the spot to the left of the center square, placing my pretzel carefully in my square.

The bartender lays two shots down in front of us. We pick them up at the same time and swing our chairs so that we're facing each other.

We sit in silence for a good ten seconds, waiting for the other to make the toast. Graham finally says, "I have absolutely nothing to toast to. Fuck today."

"Fuck today," I say in complete agreement. We clink our shot glasses together and tilt our heads back. Graham's goes down a lot smoother than mine. He slams his glass on the counter and then picks up another pretzel. He makes the next move.

I'm picking up the next pretzel when my phone starts buzzing in my jacket pocket. I pull it out. Ethan's name is flashing across the screen.

Graham then pulls his phone out and sets it on the bar. Sasha's name is flashing across his screen. It's comical, really. What must the two of them think, walking out and seeing both of us sitting on the floor together, eating their Chinese food.

Graham places his phone on the bar, faceup. He puts his finger on his phone, but instead of answering it, he gives his phone a shove. I watch as it slides across the bar and disappears over the edge. I hear his phone crash against the floor on the other side of the bar, but Graham acts as if he isn't at all fazed with the idea of having a broken phone.

"You just broke your phone."

He pops a pretzel into his mouth. "It's full of nothing but pictures and texts from Sasha. I'll get a new one tomorrow."

I lay my phone on the bar and I stare at it. It's silent for a moment, but Ethan calls for a second time. As soon as his name flashes across the screen, I have the urge to do exactly what Graham just did. I'm due for a new phone, anyway.

When the ringing stops and a text from Ethan comes through, I give my phone a shove. We watch as my phone slips over the other side of the bar.

We go back to playing tic-tac-toe. I win the first game. Graham wins the second. Third is a draw.

Graham picks up another one of the pretzels and eats it. I don't know if it was the shot I took or if I'm just confused by the turmoil of today, but every time Graham looks at me, I can feel the look trickle down my skin. And my chest. Everywhere, actually. I can't tell if he makes me nervous or if I just have a buzz. Either way, this feeling is better than the devastation I would be feeling right now if I were at home alone.

I replace the piece of pretzel grid that Graham just ate. "I have a confession," I say.

"Nothing you say can beat the past couple of hours of my life. Confess away."

I lean my elbow against the bar and prop my head on my hand. I give him a sidelong glance. "Sasha came outside. After you walked away."

Graham can see the shame in my expression. His eyebrows raise in curiosity. "What did you do, Quinn?"

“She asked which way you went. I refused to tell her.” I sit up straight and swing the chair so that I’m facing him. “But before I got in my car, I turned around and said, ‘Eight hundred dollars on a *word* game? *Really*, Sasha?’”

Graham stares at me. Hard. It makes me wonder if I crossed a line. I probably shouldn’t have said that to her, but I was bitter. I don’t regret it.

“What’d she say?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. Her mouth kind of fell open in shock, but then it started raining and she ran back inside Ethan’s apartment building.”

Graham is staring at me with so much intensity. I hate it. I wish he’d laugh or get angry that I interfered. *Something*.

He says nothing.

Eventually, his eyes lower until he’s staring down between us. We’re facing each other, but our legs aren’t touching. Graham’s hand that’s resting on his knee moves forward a little until his fingers graze my knee, just below the hem of my skirt.

It’s both subtle and obvious. My entire body tenses at the contact. Not because I don’t like it, but because I can’t remember the last time Ethan’s touch sent this much heat through me.

Graham traces a circle over the top of my knee with his finger. When he looks up at me again, I’m not confused by the look in his eyes. It’s very clear what he’s thinking now.

“You want to get out of here?” His voice is both a whisper and a plea.

I nod.

Graham stands and pulls his wallet out of his pocket. He lays some cash on the bar and then slips into his jacket. He reaches down and threads his fingers through mine, leading me through the restaurant, out the door and hopefully toward something that makes this day worth waking up for.

Chapter Four

Now

Graham once asked me why I take such long showers. I don't remember what my excuse was. I'm sure I said they were relaxing, or that the hot water was good for my skin. But I take such long showers because it's the only time I allow myself to grieve.

I feel weak for needing to grieve since no one has died. It doesn't make sense that I grieve so much for those who never even existed.

I've been in the shower for half an hour now. When I woke up this morning, I incorrectly assumed it would be a quick, painless shower day. But that changed when I saw the blood. I shouldn't be shocked. It happens every month. It's happened every month since I was twelve.

I'm standing flat against the shower wall, allowing the spray of the shower to fall over my face. The stream of water dilutes my tears and it makes me feel less pathetic. It's easier to convince myself I'm not crying *that* hard when most of what's falling down my cheeks is water.

I'm doing my makeup now.

Sometimes this happens. One second I'm in the shower, the next second I'm not. I lose myself in the grief. I get so lost that by the time I climb my way out of the dark, I'm in a new place. This new place is me, naked, in front of the bathroom mirror.

I slide the lipstick over my bottom lip and then my top. I set it down and stare at my reflection. My eyes are red from the grief but my makeup is in place, my hair has been pulled back, my clothes are folded neatly on the counter. I look at my body in the mirror, covering both breasts with my hands. From the outside, I look healthy. My hips are wide, my stomach is flat, my breasts are average and perky. When men look at me, sometimes their eyes linger.

But inside, I am not at all attractive. I am not internally appealing by Mother Nature's standards, because I do not have a working reproductive system. Reproduction is why we exist, after all. Reproduction is required to complete the circle of life. We are born, we reproduce, we raise our offspring, we die, our offspring reproduce, they raise *their* offspring, *they* die. Generation after generation of birth, life, and death. A beautiful circle not meant to be broken.

Yet . . . I am the break.

I was born. That's all I'm able to do until I die. I'm standing on the outside of the circle of life, watching the world spin while I am at a standstill.

And because he is married to me . . . Graham is at a standstill.

I pull on my clothes, covering up the body that has repeatedly failed us.

I walk into our kitchen and find Graham standing in front of the coffeepot. He looks up at me and I don't want him to know about the blood or the grief in the shower so I make the mistake of smiling at him. I quickly wipe the smile away but it's too late. He thinks it's a good day. My smiles give him

hope. He walks up to me because, like an idiot, I'm not holding any of my usual weapons. I normally make sure I have both hands full with either a purse, a drink, an umbrella, a jacket. Sometimes all those things at once. Today I have nothing to shield myself from his love, so he hugs me good morning. I'm forced to hug him back.

My face fits perfectly between his neck and shoulder. His arms fit perfectly around my waist. I want to press my mouth against his skin and feel the chills that break out against my tongue. But if I do that I know what would follow.

His fingers would be skimming my waist.

His mouth, hot and wet, would find mine.

His hands would be freeing me from my clothes.

He would be inside me.

He would make love to me.

And when he stopped, I would be filled with hope.

And then all that hope would eventually escape with the blood.

I would be left devastated in the shower.

And then Graham would say to me, "Why do you take such long showers?"

And I would respond, "Because they're relaxing. The hot water is good for my skin."

I close my eyes and press my hands against his chest, easing myself away from him. I push away from him so often now, I sometimes wonder if my palms have imprinted against his chest.

"What time is dinner at your sister's house?" My questions ease the rejection. If I push away as I'm asking a question, the distraction makes it seem less personal.

Graham moves back to the coffeemaker and picks up his cup. He blows on it as he shrugs. "She gets off work at five. So probably seven."

I grab my weapons. My purse, a drink, my jacket. "K. See you then. Love you." I kiss his cheek with my weapons safely separating us.

"I love you, too."

He says the words to the back of my head. I rarely give him the opportunity to say them to my face anymore.

When I get to my car, I send a text to Ava, my sister.

Not this month.

She's the only one I discuss it with anymore. I stopped talking to Graham about my cycle last year. Every month since we started trying for a baby years ago, Graham would console me when I'd find out I wasn't pregnant. I appreciated it in the beginning. Longed for it, even. But month after month, I grew to dread having to tell him how broken I was. And I knew if I was growing to dread him having to console me, that he was more than likely already tired of the disappointing routine. I decided early last year to only bring it up if the outcome were ever different.

So far, the outcome is always the same.

Sorry Babe,

my sister texts back.

You busy? I have news.

I back out of my driveway and set my phone to Bluetooth right before I call her. She answers in the middle of the first ring. Instead of hello, she says, "I know you don't want to talk about it, so let's talk about me."

I love that she gets me. "What's new with you?"

"He got the job."