



UNLOVED

a novel

Author of *UNSTEADY*

PEYTON CORINNE

PRAISE FOR UNLOVED

“Earnest, raw, and sexy, *Unloved* brims with tenderness and heart. In her sophomore novel, Corinne delivers the college romance of my dreams. This is more than a love story; it’s a journey of self-discovery, a beautiful coming-of-age, and a song about healing and being seen for all those pieces you hide. To be loved really is to be seen, and I guarantee you’ll find pieces of yourself in Ro, Freddy, and the rest of the gang at Waterfell.”

—Elena Armas, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Fiancé Dilemma*

“Peyton Corinne’s storytelling is unmatched! *Unloved* is an angsty, sexy, emotional journey that left me breathless.”

—Farrah Rochon, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Dating Playbook*

“*Unloved* absolutely overflows with rich emotion and utter sexiness. I was so engrossed in witnessing Ro and Freddy make their way toward a love they both deserved that I devoured it in one sitting, and then mourned the fact that it was over. Peyton Corinne navigates delicate themes with grace and empathy, and has created a cast of series characters that are so easy to root for. Don’t let the title fool you—I loved *everything* about this book.”

—Jessica Joyce, *USA Today* bestselling author of *You, with a View* and *The Ex Vows*

“Peyton Corinne delivers another slap shot with this college hockey romance. A love story brimming with well-rounded, nuanced characters that keep you hooked and wanting more—with the signature Peyton Corinne heartache wrapped in a happy ending.”

—Bal Khabra, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Collide*

“Achey and deeply sweet, with heaps of profound moments, *Unloved* will chip away at your heart but leave you with a beautiful new mosaic from the pieces by the end. I love how this author weaves serious issues into her characters’ lives and gives them such well-earned love in spite of them. I’ll read anything Peyton writes.”

—Tarah DeWitt, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Savor It*

“*Unloved* is a gorgeous coming-of-age story about finding love where you least expect it. Emotional, raw, and full of poignant lessons about seeing and being seen even when we think we don’t deserve it—Corinne is a force to be reckoned with.”

—Lana Ferguson, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Nanny*

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UNLOVED

A Novel

PEYTON CORINNE

ATRIA PAPERBACK

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For AK.

*Just in case you don't know the impact your gentle, steadfast
friendship has made on me over the last decade, this one is for you.
Our friendship wasn't founded in grief, but it was grown in it. I think that
makes it immeasurably stronger.*

PLAYLIST

Jump Rope Gazers • *The Beths*

Lollipop • *Lil Wayne feat. Static Major*

Casual • *Chappell Roan*

mirrorball • *Taylor Swift*

Wet Dream • *Wet Leg*

My Honest Face • *Inhaler*

LOVE • *Kendrick Lamar feat. Zacari*

tolerate it • *Taylor Swift*

Pool House • *The Backseat Lovers*

don't worry, you will • *lovelytheband*

striptease • *carwash*

Motion Sickness • *Phoebe Bridgers*

Reflections • *MisterWives*

Linger • *The Cranberries*

This Side of Paradise • *Coyote Theory*

broken • *lovelytheband*

There She Goes • *The La's*

Take Care • *Beach House*

The Smallest Man Who Ever Lived • *Taylor Swift*

complex (demo) • *Katie Gregson-MacLeod*

Cool About It • *boygenius*

Young Folks • *Peter Bjorn and John*

Dreamer (Stripped Down) • *Mokita, Kaptan*

House Song • *Searows*

Chiquitita • *ABBA*

Good Looking • *Suki Waterhouse*

ceilings • *Lizzy McAlpine*

I Can't Handle Change • *Roar*

You Could Start a Cult • *Niall Horan*

Dizzy on the Comedown • *Turnover*

Scary Love • *The Neighbourhood*

Gasoline • *The Weeknd*

Hot • *Cigarettes After Sex*

The Sunshine • *Manchester Orchestra*

As I'm Fading Into You • *Blevins*

Daddy Issues • *The Neighbourhood*

Falling • *Harry Styles*

Smoke Signals • *Phoebe Bridgers*

Big Jet Plane • *Angus & Julia Stone*

Driver's Seat • *Maddis Buckley*

Glue • *Nat & Alex Wolff*

We Don't Have to Take Our Clothes Off • *Ella Eyre*

You're Somebody Else • *flora cash*

Liability • *Lorde*

Quiet, The Winter Harbor • *Mazzy Star*

I'm in Love • *Jelani Aryeh*

Fearless (Taylor's Version) • *Taylor Swift*

I Don't Wanna Wait Til Christmas • *Summer Camp*

Kissing in Swimming Pools • *Holly Humberstone*

The Very First Night (Taylor's Version) • *Taylor Swift*

Touch • *Sleeping at Last*

Keep Driving • *Harry Styles*

You're Gonna Go Far • *Noah Kahan*

Sure Of • *Caamp*

So High School • *Taylor Swift*

Jump Rope Gazers • *The Beths*

Forever • *Noah Kahan*

PROLOGUE

Freshman Year—"The Night He Doesn't Remember"

Re

I can be whoever I want to be.

I repeat the mantra in my head three more times before opening my eyes and giving myself another slow once-over in our stuffy dorm bathroom mirror.

I can be whoever I want to be.

Again, I say it as I run my hands over the tight black tank with wispy straps and the black denim skirt, pulling both down again, as if there is any material left to cover my exposed belly button and above-average-length legs. The urge to change again is overwhelming, but...

I can be whoever I want to be.

But I feel hot. I feel powerful and beautiful.

There's a knock at the door, and then, "You okay?" muttered in a bored tone through the thin wood.

I swing it open with a confident smile, flicking a few harshly straightened pieces of hair over my shoulder.

"What do you think?" I ask, eyes bouncing across the effortless sex appeal of my new roommate.

Self-consciously, I look down at myself just as she does, because next to Sadie Brown, I'm starting to think I might as well tattoo VIRGIN across my forehead.

The girl is tiny and muscular, strong legs and an ass I'd kill for currently wrapped in leather, a baby blue corset brightening her pale skin. Even her makeup—eyes darkened

with perfect winged eyeliner and ruby-red lips—makes me feel a bit like a kid who smeared some of her mom’s glitter on her eyelids before getting caught.

“You look gorgeous,” she says, then without a second glance she’s already focused on her phone, absorbed in whomever she’s rapidly texting. It stings a little, as it has a million times in the last month since we met on move-in day. But I’m determined I can get her to like me. She’ll be my friend.

I can be whoever I want to be.

“Ready?”

I smile again, bright and hopeful, even though she doesn’t return it.

“Yeah,” I breathe. “I’m ready.”

• • •

I’m overwhelmed in minutes, but in the best way, vibrating with excitement. I feel my spine loosening like a snake charmed by the intoxicating energy around me. Music thumps so loudly I can feel it in my heels, shaking me with the movement as I stumble blindly behind Sadie through the crowd—desperate to keep up with her, even though she won’t hold my hand.

I don’t need her to hold my hand. I’m not a child.

A body shoves into me, knocking my shoulder hard enough that I stumble off my overly high heels and into a wall. The guy apologizes and tries to smile at me, but I push past him, desperate to keep up with my roommate.

We stop short, standing by the entrance into the main room where everyone is either sitting on couches or dancing in a way that’s making my face hot watching it.

My stomach twists with a mixture of want and anxiety.

“You doing okay?” Sadie asks as a massive body brushes behind her and she elbows him off her with a grunted curse.

“Yeah,” I say, feeling a bit like I’m shouting. “This is cool.”

She nods and scans me again, and my neck feels hot, self-consciousness kicking up at her observation.

I can be whoever I want to be.

Flicking my hair over my shoulder, I smile brighter.

“Do you want a drink?” I ask.

“I’ll be right back,” she says at the same time, her words and voice drowning mine out easily.

“Where are you going?” I try to ask casually, but I’m gripping her wrist tightly, a life vest in the sea of bodies around me.

She pointedly looks down at where I’m holding her, and I let go.

“I’m gonna follow that one.” She points to the captain of the football team, whom I’ve seen on posters around school. He’s a senior, big and handsome and way too popular for freshmen like us.

But he’s also looking at Sadie like she’s his next meal.

“To the bathroom, but it won’t take long. Just wait here, okay?”

I want to say no, it’s not okay. That even though she didn’t promise it, I thought it was girl code not to leave your friend behind. I don’t know anyone here or what I’m doing, and I’ve never had a sip of alcohol before.

I wanted this night to be different. *I* wanted to be different.

But again, I’m left standing on the sidelines.

“Okay.” I smile brightly, tucking my hair that’s already started to frizz into curls from the humidity behind my ears. “It’s fine. I’ll wait here.”

Sadie’s gone before I even finish the sentence, working the guy like she isn’t a foot shorter than him. She barely has to say a word; he just follows her eagerly as they disappear into the darkened hall.

I’m alone, and all the bliss, that floaty feeling I chased earlier, sours in my stomach as I sink against the wall.

My eyes flit across the room, seeing directly into the stuffed kitchen where a makeshift bar has been set up. I want to ask for something to drink, but I have no idea what to say.

I want to let loose, but I’m not sure how.

Frustrated, I blow out a breath and do what I know best: people watching.

There’s a group of girls who look friendly enough, but it took me nearly a month to work up the courage to ask my own roommate to hang out. Standing together, they’re all pretty girls with cool outfits and makeup that looks professionally done.

I want to compliment them, but my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth.

The lights are off, and some weak blue and white strobes hung haphazardly from the corners of the room flicker across the crowd in a continuous, sweeping motion. It makes everything almost surreal.

One couple in the messy, twirling sea of bodies draws my attention like a spotlight. They're moving to the beat sensually, like a scene out of a movie, his hands playing along her waist as she presses side to side, back and forth into him. His hand picks up her silky hair as his chin dips into her neck and he presses a few kisses up to her ear.

It's nearly pornographic, and my neck and face feel a little like they're burning.

A good burn, one I don't want to stop. One I want to feel, explore for myself.

I can be whoever I want to be.

The boy tilts his head at me and smiles, as if he's caught me with my hand in the cookie jar. A lopsided grin that screams trouble of the best kind.

He whispers something to her before letting go, and the girl finds herself spinning into a new set of arms, continuing to dance with them. Just as sensual and jaw-droppingly beautiful. But I'm distracted by the boy now prowling toward me.

Except he takes a hard right toward a different side of the room.

The group he joins is a little rowdier, standing around a table lined with shots, tall cans of different colors clasped in their hands.

It's a group of six or seven guys, a few girls sporadically hanging on to them. All tall and muscular, handsome in a way that's almost daunting. They're playing a game, some of them half dancing to the thumping bass of Lil Wayne's "Lollipop," while their eyes stay keen on the setup before them. Somehow lackadaisical yet harshly competitive.

They're larger than life, and I accidentally stare a bit too long because I cannot physically remove my attention from that same damn guy. And he's looking at me, too.

This time he's in the light more, and I can really see him.

Even better, as he makes his way toward me.

Golden hair shorn short on the sides and slightly tousled on top, as if he knows exactly how to style it. He's got those smile lines that cut his cheeks like carvings in marble, glittering emerald eyes as he grins wider and invades my space. I'm almost certain he can feel my heart beating in time with the music.

"Want a drink?" he yells, but I barely hear him over the pounding noise around us.

My face must be the color of my roommate's seemingly permanent lipstick, but I nod.

“Great. I have an extra,” he says, lifting the small plastic cup.

Instead of handing it to me, he loops his arm over my shoulder and stalks behind me.

I grab his arm out of pure fear instinct, eyes wide as I look at the shot.

“I don’t know if I can do that.” I gesture with my head toward the gleaming drink that flashes blue and amber under the strobing lights. I look up at him, for reassurance or to stare at his gorgeous face, I’m not sure.

He smirks, lifting his hand to lick a drop of alcohol that’s sloshed out and down his hand. His tongue is slow, eyes bright, and I realize this is a bad idea.

“Don’t worry,” he says into my ear this time so I can hear. “You can take it.”

My eyes roll back a little, feet shuffling as I regain my balance.

He’s way too advanced for me. I need to try a freshman meet and greet, or one of those Super Smash video game parties—the guys there are hopefully more my speed.

I need training wheels. This guy is full throttle on the Circuit de Monaco, no way for me to slow him down.

But before I can back out, his other hand wraps around my neck, tilting my chin up, his palm warm against my throat as he lowers my head back into the cradle of his arm.

His fingers scald my chin, his palm gentle on my throat. It would be easy to step away, to say no and slip beneath the loose hold he has around my shoulders. But I don’t want to. I want this.

I can be whoever I want to be.

“Open,” he whispers, the command more like a taunt, but his eyes are still twinkling.

He’s the most beautiful boy I’ve ever seen.

Will he kiss me like this? God, I want to feel his lips—they look like pillows.

Pulling myself together, heading off the blush my indecent thoughts are causing, I open my mouth and he pours the fiery liquid down my throat. At first I’m worried I’ll gag or spit it out because it burns—but my eyes stay locked on his, on the strange pride gleaming there as he bites his lip and continues to slowly pour until the plastic cup is empty.

I close my eyes for a second, pressing my lips together tightly before I realize some of it’s leaking from the corners of my mouth.

He doesn’t let me go but tilts my head toward him as he slowly licks the drops of amber liquid from the corner of my lips. I can smell the heady mix of his cologne with the

scent of alcohol for a moment,

before—

He kisses me.

Oh God. I let out an embarrassingly loud moan, thankfully drowned out by the music. His tongue is in my mouth.

His arms loop around my waist, and he tugs me tight against his body.

I barely have time to think, not that I could if I tried, because my first kiss being on the tail end of my first shot of alcohol is making me dizzy, my head swimming and fingers numb.

I stumble a little, and he keeps his hands on my lower back as he lets me fall gently against the wall. I don't even remember how or when he switched our positions.

"Whoa," I whisper. He smiles broadly and nods a little, like he agrees. "I— um—"

"Freddy!" a deep voice shouts.

His brow furrows, like he's been jerked away from a dreamy daze, and he turns to look over his right shoulder toward the full table, all watching us now.

"I told you, it's gonna be Matty."

A burly, auburn-haired man shucks his arm around my first kiss's shoulders and shakes him—which jostles me slightly as well, since his hands are still burning twin brands into the bare skin of my waist.

"You don't pick the nicknames, Freddy," he says. "We do. Now, let's go out back—we're gonna play one last beer pong game before heading out. We've still got practice in the morning."

The intruder slips from our bubble, and I'm still staring, openmouthed, up at Freddy-maybe-Matty.

"I like Freddy." The words spill from my mouth, breathy and quiet. But he hears me and smiles wide, tucking his head into my neck with a kiss and a lick that nearly makes me shout. He sucks lightly before pulling back, only after squeezing me around the middle and lifting me just off the floor.

"I like you," he says with a smirk, reddened eyes glittering like green stars as he sets me down and starts to back away. "What's your name?"

"Okay," I say without thinking. "And it's Ro."

“Okay, Ro.” He smiles again, backing away until the only part of him touching me is his hand in mine, drawing me back toward the crowded table with him.

We play beer pong, which mostly consists of Freddy patiently teaching me how to play, despite his friends’ protests. Then, as most of the group disperses, Freddy stays by my side. Our heads are pressed together as we whisper random comments about the partygoers milling about, people watching.

His phone rings, the noise loud and intrusive. He peeks down at the screen.

“Oh, um—” His entire expression sobers, and he pushes off the brick wall we’ve been leaning against. He looks flustered, almost frightened. “I need to take this. I’ll come back and get you, okay? Just, don’t move.”

He stumbles into the table and knocks over a few drinks but doesn’t bat an eye before he’s headed toward a quiet spot to take the call.

I don’t move, even as giddiness and joy threaten to force my limbs to swing and dance.

I don’t move, even when Sadie comes back—looking exactly as perfect as she did before, not a hair out of place. Meanwhile, the senior quarterback following her looks thoroughly mussed, breathing hard like he completed a full triathlon with no training.

I don’t move while Sadie gets three more shots of Fireball, which I find I love the taste of, but hate the instant swimming feeling in my chest.

I don’t move as we wait and wait until the party slowly dwindles.

I don’t move when my heart starts to hurt. Not until Sadie convinces me to go with the most sympathetic look she’s given me since we became roommates.

“I’m a little embarrassed,” I finally tell her as we walk back to our dorm. “I just thought... I don’t know what I thought.”

Sadie smiles at me as I walk past her. “You thought he wanted you. Don’t be embarrassed. It happens to me all the time.”

I stop short and Sadie follows, both of us turning to face each other.

“Really?”

Sadie furrows her brow, the same displeased expression she usually has. “All the time. I mean, finding a boy at a drunken frat party or a bar is a gamble, Ro. Like, I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“But you do it all the time.” The alcohol makes my lips a little looser and I admit, “I just want to be normal.”

Sadie grabs my hand—it's the first time she's reached for me, and she gets me to walk close enough that she can wrap an arm around my waist.

"Wrong roommate for you if you want normal. My life is kind of a shit show— But, honestly, no one is normal. Normal is stupid, okay? Just be whoever you are."

"I don't know who I am."

"No one does. Just—" She huffs like she's annoyed with me, but I'm starting to realize that's how Sadie Brown is. "Just, do what you want and fuck anyone who says you can't, okay? If you want to party, do it. But if you don't want to, don't."

We've reached the dorms by the time she stops talking. There are a few loiterers outside, kissing or laughing or eating fast food, the smell making my mouth water, and I have to resist the sudden urge to beg Sadie to go to Taco Bell.

Turns out I don't have to, as I watch Sadie waltz up to a boisterous group of boys by the fountain in the center of the quad. Of course she struts straight up to the most handsome one—not a moment of insecurity or hesitation.

The tall blond one smiles when he spots her, and pulls her in for a quick hug, which she shoves out of quickly, taking the bag of food from The Chick—which definitely closed hours ago—from his hand.

"Hang out soon?" I hear him say as she starts back toward me.

"Maybe," she calls over her shoulder before giving me a look that screams absolutely not.

I wait until we're back safe in our little dorm, sitting on twin beds opposite each other, before I ask exactly how she does it—so brazenly goes after whatever she wants, especially with boys.

Sadie's expression shifts, her perpetual frown sinking deeper before she puts her half-eaten food back into the bag and sets it aside.

"I mean..." I hurry to explain. "You seem so confident. You sleep with whoever you want."

"It's not a crime," she snaps. "I enjoy sex, just like everyone else."

My stomach sinks. "Right." Somewhere in my head an alarm sounds *virgin* over and over. Can't she hear it?

"Are you asking me for advice?" she says, but her tone has lost none of its heat. "Because if so, I've only got one thing I can give you. Don't be like me. Don't even *want*

to be like me. Okay? You're pretty and I'm sure you're smart, and trust me, you can be whoever you want to be."

"But I think you're great." The words come out unbidden and I blush, a little embarrassed. It's like I'm wearing a sign that says I Want to be Your Friend So Badly.

"Well, don't."

Her voice cracks slightly and my brow furrows, wondering if she might cry. My arms tingle, ready to hold her, to hug her if she needs one. Like real friends do.

But instead, she straightens and slips off her bed, stepping over to the mini fridge to save her probably already stale food.

Our fragile camaraderie from the night disappears like smoke in the wind. She turns off the lamp and goes to sleep. There is so much anger in her small body; she carries herself like she's always ready for a fight. It makes my chest hurt.

Trying to sleep, I close my eyes and picture Freddy-maybe-Matty, the happy smile across his face, the sound of his voice, the warmth of his skin. I touch my lips again, swearing they still feel swollen from his kiss.

CHAPTER 1

Senior Year—End of July, Present Day

Ro

“Give it to Ro.”

I stop short, pausing to survey the open office space filled with the other teaching assistants and tutors for our department. The toe of my sneaker kicks against the moderately heavy door again, managing to hold it open long enough that I can slip through without dropping the giant stack of papers currently blanketing my arms.

Not one of the boys I work with offers to help. No one even bats an eye at my struggle as I plop the over-full folders onto my clean desk space.

It’s quiet, but it always is during summer semester—especially finals week—which is why I always opt to come back early. That and the desperate itching need to get back that seems to plague me beginning early July.

“Give me what?”

Rodger, one of the other tutors in our department, tosses me the folder in his hands while Tyler, my boyfriend of two years now, slinks behind me and rests his head on my shoulder, playing with the ends of my hair.

“Rodger doesn’t want his student.” Tyler laughs, pressing a kiss into my hair. I bristle and freeze, because the last time we spoke over the phone he told me we definitely *weren’t* together.

Tyler and I met my sophomore year, my first year as a tutor in my declared major. I’d come to Waterfell knowing I wanted to study biomedical sciences, but not sure of what