

## Prologue

Man, I was shattered.

I'd tied my hair up before I came inside. There were three dark red bruises on my neck - small circles in a line. Last time I'd tried to hide them. Mom had seen anyway and had yelled at me for hours. This time I'd show them off just to rark her up.

It wasn't like they meant anything. They were just from some random guy I'd hooked up with at Erica's party. I didn't even like him much - he'd just been there when I'd been feeling awkward and out-of-place. Erica had disappeared into the back room with the guy I had a crush on, and my pride was feeling battered. Hooking up with a random had at least stopped me from feeling sorry for myself all evening.

I caught my foot on an uneven floorboard in the foyer and stumbled. "Stupid, cheap floor." A piece of wood chipped off as I kicked it.

"Mom?"

Nothing. Cool, no one was at home. I had the place all to myself.

The fridge looked bare, like mom hadn't been shopping in the whole three days I'd been gone. The chicken we'd eaten the last night I'd been home was still sitting on the top shelf. I tore off a piece and nibbled on it.

Dry. Gross.

I wished I'd stayed another day at Erica's. Erica's mom was a pain, but at least they always had nice food. I kicked the pantry door moodily. "More than you do, Mom. More than you ever have."

I mooched into the bathroom. At least there would be hot water here. My hair needed a good wash. Erica's mom gave me the evils if I used too much hot water over there.

I stood under the water until it ran cold. It was kind of weird that mom hadn't come back yet. She hardly ever went out in the weekends, and it wasn't time for her to pick up Simon from camp yet.

I chucked my towel onto the floor, threw on some jeans and an old top, and wandered into the hall. The silence in the house was starting to get to me.

Mom's bedroom door was ajar. I stopped and itched my nose. Something in there smelled really funky. I pushed the door open and wandered in.

The curtains were still closed, and it took my eyes a moment to adjust to the light. But what I could see brought me out in a cold sweat. Mom was lying on the bed in the darkened room. I stepped closer. Her face was pale and a thin line of vomit had dribbled out of her mouth and pooled on the pillow against her cheek.

My heart started to race, and I was trying not to gag with fear. The vomit was crusty and dry. "Mom?" I smelt

pee, and the sweet, sickly stench made me gag. Mom had wet herself.

I bent over her and put my hand on her shoulder. She gave a tiny groan, but didn't move.

The taste of puke was in my mouth and I swallowed hard to keep it down. What had she done?

"Do you want the police, a fire engine, or an ambulance?" The woman's voice was businesslike, crisp.

"Um - ambulance," I managed to choke out.

"What is the matter?" She sounded impatient, as if I might be playing a joke and she didn't have time for it.

"I-I think my mom just tried to kill herself." By now I was crying so hard I didn't hear her reply. "I don't know what to do." Tears and snot were running down my face. Putting it into words made it seem so real.

The room felt stuffy, as if there was no air left to breathe. I stumbled outside, sat down on the porch step and waited for the ambulance. I felt guilty that I wasn't inside with her but I couldn't bear to look at her like that. I told myself I didn't want them to get the wrong house.

It seemed barely a few minutes before an ambulance screeched to a stop in front of me. An officer ran over, his bulk blocking out the sun. "Are you the kid who called?"

I looked up at him, and his face blurred. The flashing lights were blinding me, and the sirens were so loud they hurt my ears. "My mom's in there." Men were already running past me, into the house. It was like watching CSI, but like falling inside the TV and being stuck inside a program I couldn't get out of, and didn't want to watch.

I sat there, my mind a total blank, as they carried her out on a stretcher and loaded her into the ambulance.

My eyes closed against the tears. What if she died?

The ambulance took off again, sirens blaring. I stayed on the porch step, my whole body too numb to move.

What was I going to do now? And what was I going to do with Simon?

## Chapter One

*One week later*

I grabbed my lunch tray and looked around the cafeteria, trying to find somewhere to sit where I wouldn't look like a loner. So far my first day at my new school had majorly sucked. It looked like lunch wasn't going to be any better.

A mass of noise and color confronted me as I searched for a friendly face. I was hoping to spot one of the girls I'd said hi to in my morning classes, or anything that would get me a table to sit at where I would be welcome.

I headed over towards the far corner where a couple of guys were playing chess as they absentmindedly ate their lunch. I wasn't planning to sit with them, but it gave me the longest path through the crowd.

A group of girls at one table were animatedly discussing some film or book or something. I'd never heard of it so no chance of using that as an introduction. I kept walking.

I caught a whiff of sickly sweet smoke at the next table and a guy with the coolest dreadlocks smiled lazily at me. I was almost tempted to stop, but I kept going.

The middle of the room was obviously where the popular crowd hung out. The noise, the raucous laughter and

cheers came from the group. A couple of boys from different tables were chucking a football at each other across the heads of those sitting between them. A group of girls in stylish, expensive-looking clothes had their heads together at one table, whispering to each other. As I shuffled slowly past, I heard one of them brag about how expensive her new top was, and another complain about her dad not increasing her allowance.

I glanced down at my faded jeans and cheap sneakers. I didn't even remember my dad. He left when Simon was a baby. Mom had said once that he was probably in jail or dead, and it served him right. We didn't talk about him at home. I definitely didn't feel up to trying to make friends with that group right now.

I wished Erica was there. She'd been my best friend since we were six. In my old school I'd always sat with her at lunch and everyone had wanted to sit with us. We'd squish our soggy chips onto the table and flick tomato ketchup at all the losers. I bit my lip hard and tried hard not to cry.

Something out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. There was a guy sitting at the edge of the crowd that I could pick as the popular one, but somehow seeming apart from the laughter and noise of the rest of the group. Like he was with them, and not with them at the same time. I'm not sure why, but I found myself

staring at him.

He was amazingly good-looking - I guess that's what had caught my attention. He looked like he was a bit taller than me, and his hair had the kind of honey-blond streaks that usually come out of a packet. His hadn't, though. I don't know how I could tell, but I just knew it was all natural.

As I watched him, he stretched his legs out in front of him and tilted his chair back. His jeans fit him like he was a model for Levis. A tray of food lay on the table in front of him, but he wasn't eating anything.

Then he looked up and smiled. At me.

Toothpaste companies would pay him a million bucks for a smile like that. His teeth were so white and even they almost gleamed. When he smiled, he was more than good-looking. He was *gorgeous*. I decided he was hotter than anyone I'd ever seen.

I felt a tugging in my mind, and even though my legs were shaking, I walked straight over to his table. My brain was screaming that this was a bad idea, that I didn't even know the guy, that I was about to make a complete fool of myself, but my body wasn't listening. It was like I didn't have a choice, like something strange was compelling me to.

I stopped by his shoulder and just stood there, holding my lunch tray. I knew that I looked like a complete

weirdo, but I couldn't move away from him. My legs refused to move in any other direction but closer towards him.

"You must be new here. I haven't seen you before."

A girl's voice. Friendly, even welcoming. I blinked. She was sitting right next to *him*, her arm tucked into his like she owned him. I don't know why I hadn't seen her before. I guess I was so focused on *him* that I just hadn't seen her.

"Um, yeah." I cleared my throat. "It's my first day here."

"Come sit with us if you want."

I moved uneasily from one foot to the other. I'd just been staring at her boyfriend, and here she was being so friendly to me. I hoped I hadn't been too obvious. "You sure?"

I was dying to sit down but I didn't want to come off as desperate or anything. I hated this whole awkward situation of being in a new school, where everyone already knows each other and I don't know anyone.

"Sit down already." His voice was quiet, but deep and calming. As smooth as vanilla ice cream. Expensive ice cream in a waffle cone, not the budget kind you bought from the supermarket freezer in a plain pottle.

I sat down opposite him, shuffling my lunch tray awkwardly in front of me. "Thanks," I mumbled, and then

stuffed my mouth full of chips as if I was hungry so I wouldn't have to talk for a bit.

"You from out of town?" the girl asked. Now that I was sitting across the table from her, I could see that she wasn't a match for her boyfriend. Not looks-wise, at any rate. She was cute, but her face was white and her eyes had purple bags under them and were sunken into her face a little, almost like she'd been sick for a long time. Her hair was a pretty dark brown color but dead straight, dull and lifeless. And her arms were way too thin. She had a tray of food in front of her, but she'd hardly touched it. Borderline anorexic, I pegged her immediately.

She wasn't like Erica at all - she was way too neat and tidy for one thing, and she hardly had a lick of makeup on. Erica was all wild blonde curls and red lipstick, and she just about fell out of the brightly-colored, figure-hugging tops she loved to wear.

Besides which, Erica would've smacked me by now if I'd shown such interest in her boyfriend, even though I was her best friend. *Especially* seeing as I was her best friend. She didn't like other girls playing on her turf.

This girl was way quieter than Erica, but she was friendly, and I was grateful that she'd made the effort to be nice to me. Just a few words from her had made me feel a bit less awkward and alone.

I swallowed my mouthful. "Across town. I moved over the weekend."

"Sucks that your folks couldn't wait until school finished to move." Hr voice was sympathetic.

I ground a chip into the table, too miserable to be hungry. "Mom's sick. She had to go to hospital. We had to come live with my aunt." I made my voice sound tough, like I didn't care, but it was only so as I wouldn't start crying. I didn't like to think of how I'd last seen her. She'd been lying in the hospital bed looking like a zombie - so far in la-la land with all the drugs she was taking that she didn't even recognize me.

"We?"

"Me and my little brother, Simon. He's too young for college still." I didn't mention that he'd never actually make it to college. He'd stay on at his special school probably forever.

"Oh, sorry." She gave me another genuine smile that lit up her face like lights on a Christmas tree. It made me feel pretty bad for staring at her boyfriend like I had been. "I'm Claire." She elbowed *him* in the side. "And this is Leo."

Leo. Wasn't that like, the name for a lion? It suited him. He was all golden and beautiful. Looking at him made me feel slightly less miserable about Mom, about the new school, about Simon and everything. Maybe it

wouldn't be so bad having to spend a few months at this school until Mom got better. "I'm Aimee."

"Cool name." That was Leo again. He looked at me when he spoke, trapping my gaze so I couldn't look away. I couldn't even blink.

Only when he looked away again was I able to mutter a single word in reply. "Thanks."

"Hillsboro High isn't so bad," Claire said. "Is it, Leo?"

He shrugged. "You're here, so it can't be all bad." But he was looking at me, not at Claire, when he spoke, and his words sent a shiver down my spine.

"Leo moved to San Francisco over the summer. This is his first year here, too."

So, he was a newbie here just like I was. Knowing that he hadn't been born and brought up in snobby Sausalito made me feel less out-of-place. He hadn't had much time to make new friends either. "Where were you before?"

"Travelling."

The image of a gypsy caravan sprang to my mind - I don't know why. "Cool, whereabouts? Round America?"

"Europe mostly."

Okay, I was now officially impressed. "Wow. That sounds amazing." Erica and I always talked about how we wanted to go to Italy, but I'd never gotten further than looking at a guide book in the travel agent's and oohing

and aahing over the pictures in it.

Claire looked dreamy-eyed. "I can't wait to go. Leo has told me such amazing stories. We're going to leave San Francisco as soon as I've finished high school. Dad has promised to pay for it as a graduation present."

"You're going to Europe next year?" If I hadn't been jealous of her already, I would be now. A boyfriend to die for, and planning a trip to Europe when she graduated. God, I'd *die* to have the money to do stuff like that.

She nodded. "Hungary. That's where Leo is from. He's going to take me around all the ruined castles where his ancestors used to live."

Images of ruins and spiders and dank underground torture chambers filled my head. "Creepy." I was more interested in going to Milan where all the fashion shows and nightclubs were, or maybe hanging out on some Mediterranean beach with lots of hot guys.

"Of course it's creepy," Leo said, with a twisted smile that made his pretty face look almost sinister. "That's what makes it fun."

When the bell rang for the end of lunch, I lingered a little to chat and had to run to my next class. For the first time in days, I was starting to feel that things weren't so bad. Despite how plain she looked from the outside, Claire was interesting to talk to. And as for

Leo? There was nothing specific I could put my finger on, but I felt so drawn to him, as if he was an important part of my life that I simply hadn't known about before. Not to mention he really was super gorgeous. By the time lunch was over, I was already halfway to having a crush on him.