

THE BEGINNING

Katelyn Ryan sat in front of me in chemistry. I'd stare at the back of her head and wonder what it would be like to have straight brown hair instead of the curly, dirty blonde mess that protrudes from my head, like a perm on a troll doll. I bet she used one of those big paddle brushes instead of a pick and ran it through her hair at least ten times before school.

We even spoke once.

"Do you have a pencil I can borrow?" she asked, turning around and tossing her hair over her shoulder.

"No, sorry."

"That's okay," she said, and smiled.

I dug into the front pocket of my backpack and felt the pile of No. 2 pencils at the bottom. I'm not good at sharing.

One other time, I almost asked her what conditioner she used, but the class ended and I didn't.

Last month, Katelyn Ryan's baby blue Honda Accord crashed into my white Volkswagen Rabbit. We hit head-on and she flew through her windshield. When I was getting stitched up at the hospital afterward, all I kept thinking was that I should have given her a damn pencil.

Newton's first law of motion: Every object in a state of uniform motion remains in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it.

Katelyn Ryan is dead. I know that. I just can't figure out how to get her to leave me alone.

CHAPTER 1

"Aspen Yellow-Sunrise Taylor, get your gimpy butt down here," Ninny yells from the bottom of the staircase. "I can't believe I have to drive my 17-year-old daughter to her first day of senior year like you're still in kindergarten."

I roll my eyes. "Real sensitive, Mom," I yell back as I pull my tie-dye T-shirt over my head. Its spiral rainbow matches the royal blue cast still suctioned to the bottom half of my right leg.

When the doctor asked me what color cast I wanted, I stared at him and said, "She's really dead?"

"Yes," he replied in that flat, no-nonsense tone only doctors have.

"I guess I'll take blue."

"Good choice."

It itches underneath. I stuck a marker down it last night to scratch my calf and went too far. Now one of my Sharpies has gone into the abyss of flaked-off skin and mildew.

Good choice.

On the plus side, I got to ditch the crutches a few days ago. Now I hobble around on both my legs, like a proper troll, thanks to the rubber bumper on the bottom of my cast.

"You know that's not what I mean," Ninny yells, her voice turning sweeter. "I'm still sad that girl died. I just have stuff to do this morning before work."

I hear her walk into the kitchen and pull out the coffee maker. Our house is so ramshackle, I can hear everything. Including her and Toaster doing it.

"Like what?" I bellow back.

"I need to refill my prescription."

I groan, pulling my cutoff jean shorts from my bottom dresser drawer. She got a medicinal pot prescription five years ago for anxiety, even though pot is legal in Colorado. It's sold on practically every street corner in our town. But Ninny said buying it on the street just didn't seem like a good example to set for her teenage daughter. I'm convinced the only thing she's anxious about is the prescription running out or Colorado changing its marijuana laws. She'd have to go back to scoring her stash the old fashioned way, and then what kind of example would she be?

"I'm almost ready." I look at myself in the mirror, at my curly, tangled bird's nest of blonde hair, and something moves behind me. Turning around, I check my room, searching the corners for the girl who has taken up residency here. Katelyn had this habit of running her fingers through her hair every day when the bell rang at the end of chemistry. It was like clockwork and drove me crazy. Inevitably, long strands of brown hair would fall on my desk.

My eyes shift around the small space, looking on either side of my double bed and behind the desk nestled against the wall next to my closet. An old computer, the kind from the '90s with a huge monitor and keyboard, sits on top, turned off. Ninny's ex-boyfriend gave it to me two years ago for my birthday. Uncle Hayes only lasted about four months, which was good. He refused to use deodorant, claiming it caused cancer. I'm not sure about the cancer bit, but not using deodorant definitely causes a person to stink.

I bend down and check under the bed. Nothing. Standing back up, I stop in front of the Grove. A few of my sketches rattle in the breeze coming through the window.

I started taping my sketches to the wall a few years ago. They've grown to the point where almost no space is left, each picture feeding into the next. My best friend, Kim, coined it the Grove because each tree in an aspen grove connects to the rest through a collective root system to make one the largest living organisms in the world. And each picture on my wall connects to a piece of me. It helps that my name is Aspen, too. Kim's pretty damn smart.

As I take a breath, my chest pinches, pulling tight. It's the side effect of my steering wheel banging into me like a horny teenage boy. I loosen the neck of my shirt, pulling the cotton until I hear a few threads pop.

"She's not real," I say out loud to all the sketches as they flutter in the breeze.

In the kitchen, Ninny leans back on the counter, sipping a cup of black coffee and staring at the vase of dead daisies. Each stem has only a few dried white petals left. She brought them and a container of mint chocolate chip ice cream, which she accidentally left in the car to melt everywhere, to the hospital that night. I forgot to water the flowers when we got home.

"Ready," I say, grabbing a sponge to wipe down the counter where Ninny spilled coffee.

She snaps out of her trance. "Salvador's coming over for dinner tonight, so would you please be on your best behavior?"

Ninny licks her hands and runs them over the top of my head.

"Your spit isn't going to make it straight." I pull back from her and take the empty coffee cup out of her hand. Rinsing it, I place it in the drying rack next to the sink.

"You're so pretty, baby. Your dad would be proud." Then she looks me up and down, and puts her finger on the bottom of her chin. "Maybe it was Andy Romaine?"

I groan and pull the full garbage bag out from under the sink. "How many people *did* you sleep with?" I say, tying it closed.

Ninny waves her hand through the air, jingling the silver bangles stacked up to her elbow. "It doesn't matter. What does is that I got you." She squeezes me to her boney body, her patchouli oil tickling my nose hairs. "My sweet Aspen-tree."

My mom had no idea she was pregnant with me, like one of those terrible shows on TLC, *I Didn't Know I was Pregnant* or *Crazy, Young and Stupid* or something like that. The summer before her junior year of high school, Ninny went to a four-day-long Widespread Panic show in Winter Park and did drug after drug until one morning her stomach felt weird.

"I thought it was gas. Altitude does that," she told me when I was little. She lay down under an aspen tree and tried to push the gas out. Instead, she pushed out a baby. She was seven months along. A man saw her and called for help. When he asked what the baby's name was, she said, "Aspen Yellow-Sunrise Taylor." Clearly a rookie mistake made by a high school student who had no idea what a name like that would do to her daughter in the future. I may have to change it in a few years when I want a real job.

I've asked her numerous times who my dad is, but Ninny claims she was in a "free love" phase and doesn't want to be judged on her openness. I'm not trying to judge her. I just want to know if I'm genetically inclined to cancer or heart disease when I'm older. I

keep waiting for the day I start seeing dancing bears or have kaleidoscope vision, but Ninny swears she only did drugs that weekend. If you don't count pot as a drug.

The first time I saw Katelyn, I cursed Ninny a thousand times over, sure she was some residual hallucination from Ninny's bad decisions during pregnancy. A few weeks ago, Katelyn appeared in the corner of my room, like one of the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*, except she didn't move or talk or anything. She just stood there in her soccer uniform, looking alive. I screamed at the top of my lungs and squeezed the entire tube of blue paint I was holding onto the floor. Ninny wasn't home to hear it or see the mess. Thank God. I scrubbed most of the paint out of my beige carpet. No one would notice the blue mark that's left unless they were looking for it. I haven't attempted another oil painting since that day. I prefer sketching with charcoal pencils anyway.

As much as I'd like to blame Ninny for my current hallucinogenic state, I can't. It's not her fault.

"Does Toaster really have to come over for dinner tonight? It's the first day of school," I say.

"Please don't call him Toaster." Ninny lets me go and grabs the car keys off the cracked-tile counter.

"Mom, he brought you a toaster from someone's trash."

"We needed one," she yells.

"He plays the drums on Pearl Street for a living. And they're not even proper drums. They're upside-down white buckets." I put my hands on my hips as we fall into our usual role reversal. Me, the mom, and Ninny, the petulant child.

She shakes her head and plugs her ears. "La, la, la, I can't hear you and your negative vibes."

"Whatever." I sling the garbage bag over my shoulder and take one last look at the dead daisies. Maybe today Ninny will finally throw them out. "Let's get this over with."

"Dinner to celebrate my baby's senior year. You, me and Salvador. It'll be great." My mom kisses my forehead before grabbing her patchwork bag and walking out the door into the warm sun.

Opening the garage, I fling the garbage bag into a half-full can and drag it to the end of our driveway for pickup.

The engine in Ninny's minivan putters on and a cloud of exhaust blows out the tail pipe. Her minivan looks like a meth lab, all dark blue and rusted around the bottom. These types of vans are usually on the side of the highway, abandoned. Ninny needs a new car, like, yesterday.

My car is still in the shop. The entire front crumpled like an accordion. Those were the exact words the guy at Boulder Bump Shop said when he called to say it would take at least a month to fix.

"Your car is old as shit," he said. I'm still not sure how old "shit" is, but I'm guessing it's at least as old as the '80s, when my car was built.

I yank on the van door, forgetting the lock is broken, and the pinch returns to my chest. I rub the spot right between my boobs.

"Indigestion, baby?" Ninny asks as she pops open my door, leaning across the passenger side. She took out the middle row of seats so she and Toaster could lie down in the back and do God knows what.

Before I climb in the van, I check the side mirror to see if Katelyn has followed me outside. Nothing is there but my shadow. I haven't told anyone that I see her. What would I say—"I see dead people," like I'm living in some terrible horror movie with Bruce Willis and that kid who no one hears about anymore, probably because he got un-cute during puberty? I'm already the illegitimate daughter of a teen mom who smokes more pot than Willie Nelson. I'm weird enough without the ghost.

"Something like that," I say, sliding into the seat and catching a glimpse of the green stain from the melted mint chocolate chip ice cream.

Ninny and I are quiet as she drives to school, both of us allowing the stereo to take over. Ninny taps her hand on the steering wheel, beating out the rhythm to "Peace Train" by Cat Stevens. Both of us clap at the same time in the song, right after he says, "Ride on the peace train." *Clap, clap, clap, clap.* She looks over and smiles at me.

We pull up in front of the old brick buildings of Boulder High, as throngs of kids walk in the front door. A spirit rock sits in front of the school, spray-painted all gold and purple with the words *Miss you, K* on the front. I pull a frayed thread from my shorts, yanking some denim loose, and my stomach rolls with nausea. It's like a tapeworm slowly eating away at me. Can you miss someone who's supposed to be dead but keeps popping up everywhere and scaring the shit out of you? Someone you didn't know beyond the intimate way she played with her hair? Right now, I just really miss the ability to itch my calf.

"Are you listening to me, Aspen?" Ninny barks.

"Yes," I say. "Dinner with Toaster." I jump out of the car, the marker in my cast moving further down my leg, and slam the door shut.

Ninny rolls down the window and leans over the passenger seat. "Don't leave mad. It's a new year. Who knows what could happen." She smiles, her dark brown hair falling straight over her shoulders and clear down to her waist.

"Couldn't you have slept with a dude with straight hair?" I pull on my curls, and they bounce back like a slinky.

Ninny waves her hand to clear the air of my negative vibes. "At least you got my fashion sense," she yells as she pulls away.

Ninny's van disappears around the corner, but my legs don't move. My toes start to shift in the direction of the Unseen Bean Café, just down the street from school. Kim, Cass and I went there practically every day for the past three years. Then Cass found out that massive amounts of caffeine might shrink his balls and he made us stop. "Penis-to-ball ratio is important to college girls. No one will do me if my balls are the size of peanuts," he said. I still go there sometimes and order the largest espresso size on the off chance it will shrink my ovaries.

I scuff my cast along the ground, running the rubber bumper into the cement, and stare down at my feet. I count all my unpainted toes. A pedicure might help the situation down there. People stare at my leg all the time. Their eyes start at my feet and travel up my legs to my waist and then my face. They usually end up focusing for a few extra long seconds on the scar that runs across my forehead before the creep-factor of staring kicks in and they look away. I don't blame them. After all, I'm the girl who lived, like a fuck-up Harry Potter with no magical abilities. I'm sure even Harry would say that sucks. I'd stare at me, too.

"Don't even think about it, gimp," a stern voice says from behind me. "I'll tackle you to the ground if you try to leave. I'm not going to school without you. I hate this place."

I clench my jaw and huff, turning around to see Kim. "An Asian saying she hates school is like Ninny saying she hates dope: impossible."

Her eyes are blocked by a pair of small, round John-Lennon-esque sunglasses, which she pulls down on the bridge of her nose. "That's a racist stereotype, you fatherless hippie."

Kim Choi and I glare at each other, locked in a stare war until I can't handle the sun anymore and blink.

"Sucker," she laughs, wrapping an arm around my waist. "Sorry I'm late. Uma gave me the first day of school speech and it took longer than usual."

"Speech?"

"You know: 'I didn't come to this country for you to fail. I send you back to Korea in a heartbeat if you fuck up,'" Kim says in her best Korean accent. She loves the word "fuck." "Uma's a Nazi."

"I'll trade you. You can have dinner with Ninny and Uncle Toaster tonight."

"No way. I hate drummers."

"Can I ask you something?" I stop, putting my hand over my forehead to shield my eyes from the sunlight. "Would you ever call me A?"

Kim shrugs. "I might call you an A-hole. Why?"

"Nothing." I link my arm with hers as we walk past the spirit rock. "So did you decide what name to use?"

Kim claps her hands together, a wide grin across her face, "I did and it's fucking perfect. I really think I nailed it this time. My new name is Jasmine."

"Jasmine?"

"I think it suits me." She brushes her black hair over her shoulder. "Anything is better than *Kim*. Kim Choi is just so Asian. I'm more unique than that."

Kim convinced me to pierce her nose this summer. I told her I didn't think a nose ring was very "peace, love and happiness," which is kind of our thing. She told me to shut the hell up and do it. I held ice on her nose until it went numb, and then pressed the needle through. She has a hot pink hoop now. Uma saw it and almost had a heart attack. "Korean girls not supposed to have nose rings," Uma yelled. "You grounded forever!"

Kim threatened to tank her grades so badly that she'd never get into Stanford, where her older sister, Grace, is studying, and Uma backed off. Kim's been trying to change her name since junior high, when Uma sent her away to a Korean summer camp in California. Seven other girls were named Kim Choi, and each hoped to go to Stanford. "And that's only the Korean girls!" she shouted. "What about the Chinese? I'll never stand out in college." She's been using different names ever since in hopes that one will stick. They never do.

"You are unique," I say. Jasmine smiles.

We walk to the locker that's been mine since freshman year. Students pass on either side of us, people slowing for a second as their eyes move from my cast to my face. I stare at the ground and grit my teeth. Pulling the rubber band from around my wrist, I tie my hair back to control the frizz. If the staring continues, I might splurge on one of those treatments that'll straighten my hair. The curls make me too noticeable.

At my locker, I plug in the familiar combination without having to think about it. Then, digging in my backpack, I find the same picture I hung up last year of Kim, Cass and me riding the Boomerang at Six Flags. Kim insisted we ride it and then screamed the entire time. Cass stuffed his face into Kim's chest and I sat on the end, a huge smile on my face, as my hair blew up behind me. I tape up the picture where it hung last year, smiling at the moment captured so perfectly.

"I heard they're holding a memorial for Katelyn at Friday night's football game against Prairie View," Kim says, leaning back against the wall.

"It's a good thing we don't go to football games, because that might be awkward."

"You know it wasn't your fault."

I was on my way to Kim's house that night. When I didn't show up and didn't answer my phone, she called Ninny, who was at the grocery store buying ice cream and flowers, apparently to make me feel better. I've never told Ninny this, but punctuality is better than ice cream in my book. Kim actually made it to the hospital before Ninny. She burst into the ER wearing rainbow pajama pants, her hair pulled into two high ponytails.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" she screamed, launching herself onto the bed and grabbing me in a tight bear hug. "I can't believe I just said that. I'm a terrible friend. The lowest." Her breath on my ear felt so warm. At that moment, I couldn't have imagined anything better, even though her embrace practically cracked my already bruised chest.

And then I laughed. What else are you supposed to do when someone brings up your death right after you almost met your maker? She washed my hair in the sink until no blood was left in it.

"I know," I say. The nausea from earlier comes back just uttering the words.

Kim squints as she looks at me, like she can tell my words are bullshit and she's about to call me out. I keep steady. Her narrow eyes get even narrower, until they almost look closed. And then she says, "Wanna go to Cass's after school and play *Just Dance* to piss him off? I promise I won't make fun of you for looking like a drunk hobbit." Kim flicks the bun on top of my head and taps my cast.

"Tempting," I exhale my held breath. "But I can't. I have to work, and then it's dinner with Uncle Toaster, remember."

"Right. That'll be a banging good time." Kim plays the air drums. "You know you can talk to me if you need to. Today can't be easy."

"Thanks, but I'm fine," I say, unloading notebooks from my backpack and putting them into my locker.

"Hey, Aspen." Tom Ingersol sidles up next to me, opening his locker, his shiny blond hair shaped into a faux-hawk. It takes a second for a response to actually cross my lips. Tom's locker has been next to mine for three years and he's never spoken a word to me. Literally. Last year, my entire backpack spilled over the floor, tampons and all, and he just stared at me before stepping on my English book and walking away.

"Hi." My voice has an upswing.

"You look tan. Did you go on vacation?" Tom smiles, his white teeth so straight they almost look fake.

"No. Must be from mowing the lawn."

He nods, his grin never wavering.

"You look tall," I finally say to fill the uncomfortable silence.

Tom puffs out his chest. "Runs in the family." He glances at Kim, who's staring

at him like he has a third eye. Then, like everyone else, Tom looks down at my cast and then up at my scar. "Well, if you need anything, just let me know. We're locker buddies after all," he says, before walking down the hallway.

"Oh, my God," Kim says in her best valley girl voice when Tom's out of earshot. "Did Tom Ingersol just talk to you? You are *so* fucking cool."

"Did he say 'locker buddies'?"

"Seriously, how much gel do you think it takes to get his hair to stand up like that?"

"Half a bottle, at least," I say as the first bell rings, starting our senior year.

Before I slam my locker closed, I take one last look at the Six Flags picture. How is it possible to want to go back in time and at the same moment to want to forget everything?

As Kim and I turn down the hall, a poster catches my eye. Someone has plastered Katelyn's smiley-faced junior year picture, her soccer number written beneath it in purple and gold, to the wall like a paper gravestone. The caption reads: *Boulder's best and brightest, lost but not forgotten.*

"Let's go to Moe's for lunch. There's a new guy there and he's fucking hot. Uma would hate him. He's perfect," Kim says, but her voice sounds muffled in my head. I can't peel my eyes off Katelyn's picture. "Aspen, are you okay?" Kim follows my gaze to the poster.

"I'm fine," I stutter and force my eyes off Katelyn. "I need to hit the bathroom before class."

"Okay." Kim's voice sounds hesitant, as if she might wait for me outside. I flash a smile, making it as genuine as possible. Her suspicious look lightens slightly and she says, "Lunch: you, me and Cass," before heading down the hall toward her first class, her straight black hair hanging down her back.

When she rounds the corner, I pull the mirror out of my purse, a slight shake in my hands, and check the dull red line on my forehead. It's all that's left of the cut I got when my face hit the steering wheel. My old car is a little short in the airbag department. I thought it would take longer to heal, but the doctor said the body gets better faster than we think.

"It'll give you character," he said.

"Have you met my mother? I have enough character."

The doctor also said I'd been through something "traumatic." I looked up the definition on my phone as I waited for Ninny to show up at the hospital. I know what traumatic means, but I wanted to see what the dictionary had to say.

*Traumatic (adj.): of, or produced by, a physical trauma or wound;
psychologically painful*

The hallway empties as I stand in front of Katelyn's paper gravestone. *Boulder's best and brightest.* Except I distinctly remember her getting a C on a chemistry test.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of a lone girl walking down the hallway, like a shadow creeping up on me. Her purple and gold soccer uniform almost shines in the fluorescent light. My heart rate picks up as I try not to look in Katelyn's direction. If I ignore her, she'll go away. She always does. I pull in breath after breath, my eyes fixed in front of me, until her brown hair disappears from my peripheral vision.

When she's gone, I use one of my No. 2 pencils to scratch out the word *brightest*.

"You're welcome," I say to her picture before leaving the pencil under the paper gravestone and walking away. I'm sure one of her friends will get mad that I defiled the poster, but there are enough lies floating around in the world. The least I can do is correct one of them.