

## CHAPTER FOUR

I SHOULDN'T BE HERE.

I know this as surely as I feel my recycled heartbeat pounding in my ears.

I'm not supposed to be here.

And I mean that both in the existential sense and the right here, right now, at this cemetery with a huge poster of a girl who has long blond hair with thick purple streaks and green eyes staring at me next to the words *HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MIA!* I should not be walking toward this crowd of people who all loved the green-eyed girl. I should not be letting some random girl hug me and say, "Thank you for coming. It would mean so much to Mia."

She nods at me solemnly, letting our shared grief do the talking for us. She has no idea that everything I know about Mia fits in my chest and the pages of my notebook—all the clues that led me here.

The girl gives me another sad smile. I wonder if she was friends with Mia. Maybe *good* friends. The kind who buy half-heart necklaces and spend Friday nights guzzling strawberry shakes? At least until four months ago.

My stomach feels sick.

I didn't really think this part through, what it would feel like to meet her friends . . . her family. Plus I'm breaking about a million confidentiality rules being here. My transplant coordinator would have a *fit*.

Technically, I shouldn't know anything about my donor except the basics: blood type, size, tissue match. But thanks to a nurse in my post-op room who thought I wasn't awake yet, I also know that I'm, and I quote, "the luckiest girl in the world. Getting a heart from one town over? That's like hitting the transplant lottery."

After I got home from the hospital, I pretty much went full-on donor detective on this sucker. I read all the obituaries from the only two neighboring towns from two days before and after my transplant.

I had some other clues, too, because here's the ugly truth: you have to die in the *right* way to be a donor. Your body has to keep going even if your brain doesn't. And you have to die at the right time—preferably in the hospital, where the docs can get the organs into their new home before they go bad. Kidneys get thirty-six hours, those lucky bastards. A heart gets six, max.

All the clues led me to Mia. Died at the right time, in the right way, with the right heart, literally one town over? Chatty nurse was right: I got all the luck. I should invest in scratch-off tickets.

The girl who hugged me is embracing another girl now. They're both crying. Big old boo-hoos that hang in the air. And the woman from the picture in the newspaper is crying, too, and I can see now that she's standing in front of a small rock garden with a silver urn on a pedestal, waiting to be buried.

A little chill goes through me. *Mia*.

Yeah. Chloe was right, I should *not* have come. What did I think? I could quiz people about their dead friend AT HER POSTMORTEM BIRTHDAY PARTY?

At least I left my mask in the car (forgive me, Mom and immune system), so I don't look *totally* out of place. Still, this was a bad idea. But before I can run back to my car, an older man gets up at a microphone and everyone is quieting down and I can't leave without being *super* obvious. I decide to hang back. I'll just observe—not get too close, like Chloe said.

No one has to know who I am.

The man at the mic says he was Mia's history teacher. He talks about how she was a great—though unpredictable—student. How she thought deeply about the world. *Maybe too deeply*, he says, and everyone laughs.

One by one, more people go up to speak. It's your usual memorial stuff: People cry, they recount moments with Mia, how she loved bubble gum ice cream and *always* had an opinion. How she could rock a ukulele.

I know some of this already from the newspaper articles I've read: *Flash flood death of local 16-year-old shocks Utah town*. But I make mental notes of every new morsel of information.

I can do this. I can totally do this. Get the info, get out, get on with my new life.

The boy from the family photo in my newspaper clipping takes the mic next. He looks a few years younger than the girl in the poster. Same blond hair (just shorter) and green eyes, except his are tinged pink around the edges.

“Today would have been my sister’s seventeenth birthday. . . .”

My chest tightens as he talks about how Mia was a gift to the world—to him. How her last gift was her own body.

“The doctors tell us six of her organs saved other people’s lives.”

My stolen heart skips a beat.

The thump-thump-thump inside me is deafening. I mean, I’m always aware of this foreign heart, but right now it’s *everywhere*. In my ears. In my throat. Throbbing through me with a force that leaves me with that familiar gasping-for-air feeling. What if everyone else can hear it, too? Or see the truth of who I am, why I’m here, written all over my face?

It’s one thing to talk about the pieces this girl left behind; it’s another to see the person who inherited them, in the flesh, just walking around living and breathing and waltzing into memorial services uninvited.

I inch back from the crowd, farther and farther until I’m outside the huddled circle. I consider making a mad dash back to my car, but it’s way too far.

That’s when I see it. A small doorway on my left. Without thinking, I duck into it and close the door behind me. I stand, eyes closed for a few seconds, trying to calm the heartbeat pulsing through me.

When I finally open my eyes, it’s dark.

And musty.

My eyes adjust slowly until I can see ROSE FAMILY MAUSOLEUM engraved on the stone wall.

Holy hell.

I'm in a freaking crypt. I have literally trespassed into someone's final resting place.

I am on some sort of creeptastic roll today.

I turn and start feeling my way back to the door when a rustle behind me stops me cold. A voice from the shadows ricochets off the stone walls.

"So. You come here often?"

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE VOICE MAKES ME JUMP. LITERALLY. MY HEAD SMACKS the low ceiling of the Rose family's tomb.

"So tell me," the voice continues. It's deep, but in the dim light, I can only make out a shape in the far back of the house-like tomb, sitting on what looks like a stone bench. "Do you often find yourself hiding in graves?"

I half whisper to the shadows, "I'm not hiding."

Another rustling sound is followed by footsteps. A boy a full head taller than me steps into the light spilling through a small window cut into the stone. His eyes are half-hidden by a camo baseball cap that can barely contain the dark hair spilling out from under it, and his hands are stuffed way down deep in his jean pockets. His boots, caked in mud, kick up all sorts of dust in this tiny space, making it hard to breathe again.

Or maybe it's the way he's looking at me, with a half smirk, like we're in on a secret together.

“Okay, then tell me this,” he says. “Are *you* not hiding from the same thing *I’m* not hiding from?”

“Which is . . .”

“Them.” He tilts his head toward the window. Outside, still memorializing away, a girl is talking into the mic, well, sobbing, really. Her words are indiscernible.

“Hilarious.” He shakes his head and smiles, but it’s not a *real* smile. It’s the kind mom gives when Dr. Russell says my new heart might only buy me ten more years. Like the universe is making a sick joke. “They didn’t even *know* her.”

He turns his eyes on me.

“Did *you*?”

It’s part question, but mostly accusation.

“I . . . I’m . . .” I pause, trying to figure out how to explain exactly *what* I am. My mind spins through all the things I know about Mia from the obits and the news articles. Sixteen. One brother. Flash flood in a slot canyon the day before my transplant. Died the day *of* my transplant, no more than six hours before, to be precise. Didn’t someone mention a ukulele?

It’s better than the truth.

“We met in a group,” I say. “Online. For ukuleles.”

“Ukuleles?”

“Ukulele enthusiasts.”

The boy squints, inspecting me. I stand up straighter, adjusting my shirt to make sure my scar is covered and trying to seem as legit as possible, and also maybe like someone who plays the ukulele, whatever that looks like.

“I’m Clayton,” he says, still eyeing me.

And then, he *holds out his hand*. It hangs there a second

between us while Mom's voice in my head reminds me not to touch people. But I can't *not* shake it, right? Not if I'm going to pull off this whole not-a-total-stalker/cemetery-trespasser vibe.

I shake his hand quick and commit to bathing myself in hand sanitizer later.

"Oh, yeah, um, Mia mentioned you."

I don't know why I say that.

"Well, Grave Girl, she most definitely did *not* mention you." He loosens the tie around his neck. His shirt still has the crisp folding lines running longways down the fabric, and by the way he's yanking at his tie, it's clear he's about as uncomfortable in his getup as I am at this morbid birthday party. "Where'd you say you were from again?"

"I didn't," I say. "But I live in Cherry Hill."

He eyes me again.

"So tell me this. How is it that you've heard of me but I've never heard of you or this dubious online ukulele group—which, pardon my French—seems like a load of crap?"

I should probably cut my losses and run like hell. But I'm *not* going home empty-handed just because a boy with impeccable bone structure is making me jittery. Not before I find my answers.

"Well, do *you* play the ukulele?" I ask.

He's staring at me like he has me, and my secret, all figured out. "No."

"Well, there you go. It's a pretty exclusive club." I say this way more confidently than I feel.

He scrutinizes me again. After a second studying my big-



fat-liar moonface, his face softens a bit. There's something else, too—a look, full of a kind of distant nostalgia.

“Well, Mia and I were best friends since third grade. *Also* an extremely exclusive club.” He turns back to the window, blinking so hard he blinks away the momentary softness, too. His jaw tightens as the crying girl with the mic outside passes it off to someone else. “And it most definitely did not include these phonies.”

*Her best friend.*

Suddenly this tiny tomb feels *impossibly* small. And the heartbeat in my ears feels louder. Crap. I'm about to go all “Tell-Tale Heart” in here.

“You've *got* to be kidding me.” Clayton's leaning toward the window, his mouth hanging open. A group of kids is standing by the urn now, singing an a cappella version of “Stand By Me.” This latest turn of memorial events is the last straw for Clayton's already-strained relationship with his necktie. He rips it off in one angry motion.

“Oh, *now* they love her?” He flaps his tie toward the singers. “But when Mia auditioned last year, did they give her the time of day? And just look at *him*.”

He points to the man from the family photo. He's dabbing at the corner of his eyes now, his arm still around the woman's shoulders.

“Her dad?” I ask, kind of proud that I knew that one.

“Talk about hypocrites. Acting like father of the year?” His voice is getting louder, angrier. “All because she's dead?”

He kind of yells this last word. It bounces off the walls of the mausoleum like a rubber ball, the final *d* ricocheting off the tiny plaques with the names of the deceased Roses.

He takes off his hat and rakes his fingers through his hair.

“Sorry, I—”

“No, no, it’s okay,” I say, and I’m about to add something empty and clichéd like you’re supposed to say at memorials of dead best friends, but I stop. He clearly thinks this whole birthday memorial is a joke. So, I do what Chloe would do—I laugh in the face of death. “It’s normal to be emotional. We’re in a very grave situation here.”

Clayton looks at me, wide-eyed.

“Did you just make a death joke?” he asks. “At my dead best friend’s birthday party?”

“Maybe?”

He takes a step back from me and scans me, top to bottom. I’m suddenly very aware that I’m wearing a skirt that probably went out of style when I said sayonara to life in eighth grade. And did I even brush my hair this morning?

I smooth down my hair as he stares at me.

“That is *wildly* inappropriate.” His eyes shift straight to mine, and his half smirk threatens to become a whole smile. “I can see why Mia liked you.”

The anger in his voice is gone now, replaced by something else. Something vaguely . . . flirty? So, okay, I’ll be the first one to admit that my flirt-o-meter needs some serious recalibration. Heart failure doesn’t leave a lot of time for breathless romance, so my experience on the matter comes exclusively from books like *Love at First Bite*. So, yeah, it’s probably in my head, but this Clayton kid is still looking at me with that jawline just casually being all chiseled from stone in a way that makes my stolen heart feel kind of, I don’t know, fluttery.

"I don't remember you from the funeral," he says.

"Wasn't there." I leave out the part about how it was because I was lying in a hospital bed after having my rib cage cracked open to remove my dying heart.

"Consider yourself lucky. Nothing but trauma groupies." He hangs the tie limp around his neck and unbuttons the top button of his shirt. "To them, she was just a headline—a nobody girl from a nowhere town."

I lean my arm against the cool stone. "She was *somebody* to me."

It's the truest thing I've uttered since I walked into this tomb. Clayton's face softens slightly.

"So how come I never met you before?"

"Oh, uh, Mia and I never met in person. We always meant to. Just, I don't know, ran out of time."

He meets my eyes for a moment, and something passes between us, something real, as real as the heart beating like mad inside me.

He pulls a phone from his back pocket. "What's the best way to reach you?"

The heart flutters go berserk.

"You're asking for my number? Here?" I gesture to the stone walls around us. "*Wildly* inappropriate."

He holds up his hands in defense.

"Whoa whoa whoa. Not sure what Mia told you about me, but I'm not some creeper who picks up girls at cemeteries."

"*Exactly* what a creeper would say," I reply, and if I'm being honest, *my* voice is vaguely flirty now, too. At least I think it is.

"Touché, Grave Girl. Touché." He takes a step toward me. I

have to lean my head back to look at him. From this close, I can see the freckles lining the bridge of his nose below his hazel eyes. “I’m asking for your number because if you were friends with Mia—”

“Which I was.”

“Right—*since* you were friends with Mia”—he raises his eyebrows at me for approval—“then you might be interested in something I’m working on. For her.”

Chloe’s warnings ring in my head: *Be careful. Don’t get too close.* I’m like 105 percent sure that giving my phone number to Mia’s best friend counts as *way too freaking close.*

But the heart inside me is skipping about in a way that’s new and weird and kind of amazing.

“Well, if it’s for Mia . . .” I type my number into his phone under the contact he’s started—*Grave Girl*. I hand it back. “It’s Sydney, actually.”

He looks down at me through the dark hair that’s fallen in front of his eyes. “Well, Sydney, you know what Mia would say about us hiding in here, right?”

I shake my head.

“That we’re chickenshit,” he says.

I fake a little laugh. “Classic Mia.”

I loathe myself.

“She’d say I ought to get out there and join the mob,” he says. “Show my support.”

“Yeah.”

“Soooo . . .” He draws out the word like he’s waiting for me to stop him. “I guess it’s time to return to the land of the living?”

“Guess so.”

He stops at the entrance to the tomb, the afternoon sun silhouetting him.

“Of all the graves in all the towns in all the world—”

“She walks into mine.” I finish the famous line from one of Mom’s favorite movies without even thinking. Clayton looks surprised.

“You know *Casablanca*?”

I shrug. “It’s a classic.”

“That’s what Mia says.” He pauses and his jaw clenches tight again. “Said. That’s what Mia *said*.” He shakes his head like he’s shaking off the past. “I didn’t think anybody else our age knew that old stuff.”

“Well, maybe I’m not just anybody.”

He touches the tip of his baseball cap in a mini salute and gives me an almost-grin that’s still tight, forced on his face. But his eyes seem like they mean it.

“No, Grave Girl, I don’t think you are.”

I linger inside the tomb, watching him rejoin the group. He hangs on the fringes, the brim of his hat pulled low, hands shoved back down into his pockets. All traces of even the most reticent smile vanished. I wonder why. What is *he* hiding from?

But mostly I wonder at what point my little white lies became *actual* lies. Like gigantic, shameless works of fiction.

Because I *wasn’t* friends with Mia.

I’ve never touched a ukulele in my life.

And also . . .

Clayton catches me staring and gives a little eyebrow raise

in my direction. I sink back against the stone wall, my breath catching in my lungs.

And also, I'm only alive because that boy's best friend is not.

Chloe was wrong—this isn't just a bad idea.

It's the worst one I've ever had.