

Chapter 1: Not Such a Perfect Day

My birthday had fallen not only on a Saturday, but also on one of the hottest days of the year. My new, iridescent green bikini suited me perfectly. Everything was perfect, in fact—just the way it was supposed to be.

I typed a quick *See you soon* in the group chat, before throwing first my phone and then myself down on the bed. This way I could slip into my shorts with relative ease. Without sitting up, I fished my tank top off the bedside lamp and pulled it on.

In less than half an hour, Isla and the others would be here to pick me up for our day at the lake. Even Tyler was coming. I still couldn't quite believe it. I'd had a huge crush on him back when I was eleven or twelve, when I'd still had braces, French plaits and horn-rimmed glasses. We had walked home the same way and I had seen him as my bodyguard, protecting me from the neighbour's fierce dog. These days, my encounters with Tyler were limited to the school corridor and my infatuation was over. Even so, the thought of him wanting to celebrate my birthday with me still brought a smile to my face.

I remembered the lip gloss that Isla had given me. I rolled myself off the bed like a wonky piece of sushi and landed in front of my desk, where the few makeup utensils I owned were strewn in front of a mirror laden with photos, jewellery and concert tickets. I found my lip gloss and dabbed it on.

I normally wasn't the make-up type. And this glossy pink seemed far too bright next to my not-quite-blonde, not-quite-brown hair. But I was happy to make an exception for Isla's sake. It would all come off by the time I'd been in the water anyway.

I tied my hair in a ponytail, an almost impossible task since no hair bobble in the world had enough grip to keep my unruly mane under control. Of course, a few particularly stubborn strands immediately came loose, falling over my face and getting stuck to my lips. I tried to blow them away, but that just made it worse.

I rolled my eyes in irritation. My birthday breakfast of choice would have been Granny's pancakes, rather than strawberry-lip gloss-flavoured hair. But it would take more than that to bring me down today. If this was the only thing to go wrong on my seventeenth, I'd still have no problem filing the day under the *perfect* category.

I freed my hair from the lip gloss and fished around for my necklace, which I had put down in front of the mirror the evening before.

"Where the...!?" I scoured the table, rummaged through everything and knelt down to see if it had fallen on the floor. But there was nothing to see under the desk, other than a few dust bunnies, a balled-up sock and some popcorn—anybody's guess what *that* was doing there.

It occurred to me that I might have taken off my necklace in the bathroom. Life would be so much easier if I wasn't always so distracted.

I shoved my beach towel, sun cream and phone in a bag, tossed it over my shoulder and had a quick look in the bathroom as I passed. No sign of my necklace.

“Typical,” I muttered. But even that wouldn’t ruin my day. The necklace would show up again sometime. I left my room, headed down the narrow staircase, clearing the last few steps with a single bound. Like a gymnast coming off the high bars, I landed on both feet and took a deep bow.

Hearing the commotion, Dad poked his head out of the next room. He had dust on his nose and a pencil behind his ear. The tool belt around his waist was another clue that he was in the middle of another hair-brained renovation project.

He eyed my skimpy summer outfit, which hardly covered my bikini. “If you’re going to dress like that, it’s time you started behaving like an adult too and taking the stairs one at a time.”

“Nah, being an adult is totally overrated,” I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. “Nice birthday greeting, by the way.”

I pushed past him and entered the dark little room behind him. It was crammed so full of Dad’s tools, boxes, shelves and furniture that it looked more like a junk room than the quaint living room I knew.

“You’re really going through with this?” I asked, a little wistfully. I ran a finger over the dusty mantelpiece until I reached the photo of Granny holding me as a little girl. Around my neck was the necklace I had just been looking for. A triangular pendant set with a black jewel, worth no more than a couple of dollars and still my most valuable possession, because I got it from Granny. And now I’d mislaid it.

“It’s been two years,” said Dad gently. He could clearly see that thoughts of Granny had caused my mood to drop.

My gaze wandered over to the blue-green underwater painting on the wall over the fireplace. I took a step back so that I could take it in properly. Dad came and stood next to me.

The creature in this murky picture was just like the underwater monsters that Granny had described in all her stories. Part human and part fish, with scales, fangs and claws. Dangerous yet dainty, awe-inspiring and, above all, stunningly beautiful. She never tired of talking about them and warning me about them. In the final years of her life, they had become reality for Granny. She really believed that these creatures existed, cowering in the shallows and waiting to pounce on innocent people. As long as she lived, she did everything in her power to prevent me from going to the lake.

“You’re right,” I conceded. “It’s time something happened to this room, and you really need an office.”

“I can always start another day,” he suggested.

“No, it’s fine,” I played it down. “I’ll be going soon, so you won’t have anyone complaining about the noise.”

He gave a satisfied nod. “There’s a surprise waiting for you in the kitchen, by the way.”

My eyes widened. “You didn’t...?”

“I tried, that’s all I can say.” He gave a slightly shy smile.

I rushed past him into the kitchen and there they were: picture perfect, laden with fruit and with a dollop of marmalade on top. Exactly like Granny used to make: the most delicious pancakes in the world.

Only now did I realise that the dust on Dad's nose was actually flour. The mountain of dirty dishes in the sink pointed to the effort he had put into making the pancakes in accordance with Granny's recipe. I would no doubt find a shocking number of failed attempts in the bin.

Dad came into the kitchen behind me and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Are you pleased?"

"So pleased!" I turned to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"My God! What have you got on your lips?" he complained. "Honey?"

I laughed as he wiped off the remains of the lip gloss from his cheek. As I touched up my lips, he nudged me over to the table.

"You're so annoying," I moaned.

"And you act like a little kid."

I grinned. "I'm now at an age where I need to hold on to my youthful recklessness."

"Of course," he scoffed.

"What? I'm not getting any younger!"

"Very funny." He put a candle on the pancakes and lit it. "Make a wish."

Thinking of kisses, it didn't take long for me to land on a wish. To have a moment with Tyler... that would be it. A sort of closure, so to speak, after our time at school together, before heading off to different colleges next year. I closed my eyes and blew out the candle.

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Less than twenty minutes later, I heard the sound of a car horn outside. I finished off the last few bites of pancake and jumped to my feet. "See you later!" I called out to Dad, my mouth full.

He had disappeared into the side room again and was busy measuring the walls. "Enjoy your day!"

"I intend to."

When I opened the door, the heat hit me immediately. The sun was so blinding, I had to shield my eyes.

One advantage of our terraced house, tucked away in a quiet side street in Soho, Birmingham, was the way it stayed cool during the height of summer. The disadvantage was its size. The rooms were cramped, and the hallway and staircase were so narrow that there wasn't space for two people to walk alongside one another. Yet another reason to renovate Granny's old room. We needed the space.

"Happy birthday, sweetie!" Isla and the others called to me.

I shielded my eyes and saw that it was raining confetti.

Parked in front of the steps that led up to our house, straddling the pavement, was a fairly run-down, open-top green Jaguar with rusty bumpers and dents in the doors. The car belonged to Isla's sister, Bonnie, who was at the wheel. Isla was standing up in the back with her arms open wide. Most of the confetti had been blown away by the wind but the rest hung in her blond curls. Tyler sat next to her; Dustin had secured the front passenger seat.

I ran smiling down the steps to the pavement, where Isla grabbed me by the arm and pulled me towards her. She squeezed me so tight that I couldn't breathe. I stiffened.

"You know I hate this." Hugs were not my thing.

"You have to go through it once a year." She squeezed even harder. "And now come on!"

Before I knew what was happening, she had pulled me into the car.

"Woah!" I objected, as I toppled over backwards, legs flailing, and landed in between her and Tyler.

Although... I wasn't exactly *between* them, so much as looking straight up into Tyler's face, my head in his lap.

"Happy birthday," he said in his deep, gruff voice.

The sun blazed above him, casting a shadow over his wry smile, in stark contrast to his shining sea-blue eyes.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Very much so," I replied.

"Where's the necklace you always wear?"

My hand shot to the spot where the pendant would normally have been. Tyler had noticed my missing necklace? An embarrassed smile spread across my face but was quickly replaced by a frown.

"What are you looking at?" I covered my neckline, half joking.

Isla took my hand and pulled me up. Dustin turned around to face us.

"We're meeting the others at the lake," he said.

"Buckle up," Bonnie instructed, releasing the hand brake.

Knowing what she was like as a driver, I was happy to oblige. She turned the music up loud. *Bad Habits* was playing on the radio and Isla joined in immediately. She sang the song at the top of her lungs—she knew it off by heart, just like every other song by Ed Sheeran. I joined in with the chorus.

The boys were less keen, but we didn't let them spoil our fun. After all, this was supposed to be a special day, and singing in the back seat was definitely part of the plan.

Half an hour later, we pulled into the car park at Kingsbury Water Park, which was always busy on a sunny day like today. Luckily, we had planned ahead and scouted out a secluded spot by one of the smaller lakes, where we would be undisturbed. The others from school were already waiting for us there. Even though they weren't close friends of mine, they had jumped at the idea of spending one of the final days of summer at the lake. Some of them were splashing about in the water, jumping off rocks and getting each other wet. Others had made themselves comfortable on bath towels at the edge of the lake. Drinks were cooling in the shallow water, summer hits were blaring from speakers and someone had set up a barbecue.

"First one in the water!" yelled Isla, already halfway to the water's edge. She dropped her bag, took off her top and didn't even stop as she peeled off her trousers. I threw everything off too, slipped out of my shoes and had barely set foot in the water before Isla soaked me.

"Just you wait, I'll get you back!" I laughed, charging after her. A wild water fight ensued, and then a couple of boys, led by Dustin, got involved, trying to dunk us under the water. Isla jumped on Dustin's back and clung on so tight that he couldn't shake her off, no matter how hard he tried.

"Devin, help me!" she yelled over to me.

I wasn't about to let my best friend down, so I raised my arms out of the water to launch myself at Dustin, when out of nowhere, a gigantic wave swept over us. It knocked us off our feet and pulled us under. For a moment, all I could see was churned up lake water and I didn't know which way was up and which way was down, until I touched the bottom and could push myself off. I burst through the surface and took a breath. One after the other, the others all came up for air.

I had lost my hair tie. I swept the curtain of swamp-brown hair off my forehead and looked around.

"Where did that come from?" asked Dustin.

That's what I wanted to know. We weren't at the coast, and this definitely wasn't a surfer beach with monster waves.

"It almost looked like you conjured up that wave," Isla laughed, mimicking my arm movement.

"Of course," I replied, sarcastically.

"Wow!" someone shouted, pointing to the left.

I looked, expecting to see another wave, but only saw Tyler getting ready to jump off a particularly high rock. It looked at least five metres high.

"You wouldn't dare!" Dustin called to him.

"Jump!" Isla shouted.

"Jump! Jump!" the others chimed in.

Tyler took a running jump and landed with a loud splash, his knees tucked against his chest. The wave he created was nowhere near as high as the previous one.

“My turn,” said Dustin, wading to the shore. A few people followed him.

Tyler swam towards us, moving away from the diving zone. “Too scared?”

“Like we’ve got anything to prove.” Isla turned to me. “Shall we find a spot for our towels?”

“Good idea,” I agreed.

She took me by the arm and pulled me ashore. “I totally get why you’re into Tyler. He’s hot!”

“I’m not into him, though. Maybe I used to be, but not anymore.”

Isla laughed. “I see how it is. You practically turn to ice if any other guy looks at you, but as soon as you have a chance with Tyler, suddenly you’re not that into him.”

I shot a fleeting glance at Tyler. He had stopped looking at us and was cheering on the others who were about to jump. Hot was an understatement. His smile was enough to make you melt, and as a member of the football team, he was in great shape.

We spread out our beach towels, put on sunscreen and basked in the sun. I was lying on my front, eyes closed, head resting on my arms, when I felt something cold touch my shoulder. I leapt up in shock. Tyler was kneeling next to me, holding out an ice-cold Pepsi.

I took the bottle and he clinked his against mine.

“To your birthday,” he said.

“To a perfect summer’s day,” I added.

“Isla’s too scared—that’s nothing new—but you’ll give it a go, right?” He nodded in the direction of the high rock.

I looked over at Isla who had dozed off sunbathing.

“If we jump together?” Tyler added.

I would have gone for it without male assistance, but I didn’t want to miss the opportunity to make the jump with him.

“Okay,” I agreed. I gave Isla a gentle nudge and handed her the Pepsi. “Will you hold this for me?”

She squinted at me, half asleep. “Sure,” she said, sitting up slightly and taking the bottle.

I followed Tyler towards the rock, but we had to beat our way through a few bushes to reach it.

Once the others were out of sight, a strange feeling took hold of me. I stood still and looked around me. I had the feeling I was being watched, as though someone was hiding in the shadows. But there was nobody to be seen. Just a bird. A crow or a magpie that flew out of its hiding place, flapping its way up into the treetops before disappearing into the distance.

“Are you some kind of birdwatcher now?” joked Tyler. “You’d be better off paying attention to the branches on the ground.” He held out his hand. I reached for it and pushed the uneasy feeling aside.

We finally arrived at the rock. We climbed to the highest point, where we could see the entire lake. It looked much higher from up there. Luckily, I wasn’t afraid of heights or water.

“You don’t need to be scared,” Tyler assured me.

“I was about to say the same to you,” I retorted, letting go of him and throwing myself backwards into the water.

The impact wasn’t half as bad as I’d expected. I went completely underwater and floated for a moment between rising bubbles and particles glinting in the sunlight.

For some reason I didn’t sense the usual urge to swim straight back to the surface and gasp for breath. Down here, sheltered from the wind and the noise, everything felt so peaceful, so liberating. I moved my hands through the water and felt it swirling around my fingers. I had the sense that I could control the current, steer it, that through my will alone I could stop the air bubbles from rising and make them dance around my body.

When we’d been watching the boys diving, the lake had seemed dark, almost black. Maybe it was something to do with the position of the sun, or maybe because I was in a different spot now, but the blackness seemed to have vanished—as if someone had lifted a curtain. The water encased me like swirling, shimmering green glass. I could make out the plants on the bottom, moving gently with the current; the schools of fish whirring around them; even the kicking legs of the others near the shore, which was at least twenty metres away from me.

Before Tyler could start to worry about me not having resurfaced, I catapulted myself out of the water and took a deep breath, throwing my hair back.

Tyler was still standing on the rock. He took a run-up and leapt in after me. Barely an arm’s length away from me, he entered the water and didn’t resurface.

I waited, but nothing happened. True, I had also taken my time, but Tyler had been under the water even longer and he couldn’t hold his breath indefinitely. I was getting uneasy and was about to go under and look for him when I felt someone touch my back.

I whipped around to find that Tyler had resurfaced right behind me. He was smiling that crooked smile that I liked so much.

“Were you worried about me?” he asked, teasingly.

“Very funny, of course I was!” Pretending to be insulted, I gave him a shove, but couldn’t stifle a smile.

Tyler grabbed my wrist and pulled me close. All of a sudden, everything went quiet. Our laughter fell silent, the music and the voices of the others faded into the background. All that was left was us and the sound of our breathing.

“Devin, I...” said Tyler, as if in a daze. He looked at me like he was really seeing me for the first time in his life and he came so close to me that our lips almost touched.

My heart was pounding and my body felt as if it were one with the water. I floated, almost weightless, detached from space and time. I lifted my hand and touched Tyler’s cheek and it was as if this touch was enough to fuse me to him just like the water. As if I was connected to him far beyond physical touch.

His lips met mine, warm and soft. His hand moved over my body, until suddenly his breath faltered.

Immediately I knew something wasn’t right. I ended the kiss, pushed Tyler away from me and looked at him. His eyes were wide, bloodshot and panic-stricken. His lips had turned blue and he was about to sink. His entire body had gone stiff.

“Tyler?!” I cried out.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a movement in the water. Something narrow, almost transparent darted past us and disappeared again just as quickly. Tyler’s breathing was fitful, he was moving again, but only with great effort.

“Stay calm!”

Something must have bitten him. There was no other explanation. Whatever I had seen in the water was probably poisonous.

“Help!” I called out to the others and, turning back to Tyler, “We need to get out of the water.”

I started to help him, but he started thrashing about, moving away from me, as if I were the one who had attacked him. His head kept disappearing under water, but every time I managed to get hold of his arm, he jerked it away from me.

A few boys had heard my cry for help and swum over to us, managing to get hold of him.

“We’ve got him,” one of them said.

He calmed down enough for them to pull him ashore. Bewildered, I swam after them until I reached solid ground.

Tyler couldn’t hold himself up. He was limp in the arms of the boys who had rescued him and had to be dragged ashore before they could lay him down.

Bonnie came running over. “What the hell happened?”

“There’s a creature in the lake! Quick, everybody out!” I yelled to the people still in the water.

They waded ashore, some of them screaming. My gaze hovered a few seconds longer on the surface of the water, but I couldn’t think what sort of creature it could be. Why would there be poisonous creatures in a swimming lake? Was it a freshwater jellyfish? Or a snake? There should have been warning signs, they should have closed the beach!

I looked over at Tyler, surrounded by the others. He was unconscious and deathly pale. His cheeks were sunken, as if he hadn't eaten for days. Something tightened inside me. I could hear the blood surging in my ears. What kind of animal could do this sort of damage?

"Is he breathing?" someone asked, overwhelmed.

Most people were just standing around, at a loss, so I pulled myself together. I pushed my way through to Tyler, sank down next to him on my knees and felt for his pulse. To my relief, I could feel it.

"We have to call an ambulance," I said.

Bonnie was the first to grab her phone.

"Maybe heatstroke," someone suggested.

"Do we have an umbrella for shade?" someone else asked.

Two people came over with a large towel and held it over Tyler's head.

Bonnie knelt down next to him, her phone to her ear, and touched his cheek. "Tyler? Can you hear me? No, he's unresponsive."

I let my gaze travel over his body, looking for a clue as to what had attacked him, and I noticed something: fine red lines on his arms and legs that stood out against his sun-tanned skin. Like burns.

"Bonnie, here!" If he had been in contact with a poisonous creature, the paramedic needed to know.

"Wait a moment," she said into the phone and ran her finger over one of the lines, which disappeared under her touch. "No, it's nothing, Okay, I understand..." She stood up and moved away.

I looked more closely at the lines and noticed a pattern, resembling letters in a foreign language. How could that be? Before I could find an answer, the remaining red lines disappeared. Had I made a mistake? Had it really just been jellyfish stings that had happened to make a pattern? But then they wouldn't have disappeared without a trace after just a few minutes.

I ran my hands over my face and noticed that I wasn't just wiping away water. Tears were pouring over my cheeks. The tight feeling remained and I was still so distraught that it was difficult to think clearly.

A beach towel was laid across my shoulders and Isla lowered herself down next to me on the ground. "Are you okay?" she asked.

I shook my head. How could I be okay? Some creature had attacked Tyler, something dangerous was out there and I had spotted it too late.

Granny would have been quick to say what was lurking in this lake. But that couldn't be right. There were no monsters. Not in real life.