

Chapter 1

‘Senior year, baby!’

Once the car door slammed shut behind me, I tilted back my head and let my eyes slide closed, drawing in a deep breath. The sun tickled my cheeks, and a smile played on my lips. The school smelled of freshly cut grass, and the air was filled with the bubbly chatter of teenagers running around the parking lot, meeting up with their classmates again after summer. Everybody always complained about how much they hated the first day of school – I was sure that everyone secretly loved it, though.

There was just something about the new school year that meant new beginnings. Which was kind of ridiculous, because it was *high school*, but it didn’t stop it feeling true.

I turned to Lee, eyes open again now, and he shot me a grin.

It may have been a Monday morning, but I felt

weightless. My smile mirrored his. 'Senior year, here we come,' I replied softly.

If there was anything worth being excited about, I was sure that the start of senior year was it.

I'd heard people say that your college years were supposed to be the best years of your life – but college sounded like it was going to be so much more hard work than high school, even if it did mean more freedom. Lee and I were convinced that senior year was the last year to *really* enjoy ourselves, before adulthood hit.

I moved round the car to lean against the hood, next to Lee. He'd always made a fuss about his precious car, the '65 Mustang he cherished so dearly; hell, it practically sparkled.

'I can't believe it's finally here. I mean, think about it: this is our *last* first day of high school. This time next year, we'll be at college . . .'

Lee groaned. 'Don't remind me. I already had that speech off my mom this morning – complete with tearful eyes. I don't even want to *think* about college.'

'Tough luck, buddy. It's inevitable. We're moving up in the world.'

Even though the thought of college applications made my stomach twist, too; I'd tried to work on my application essay over the summer, but still hadn't made any progress on it.

I didn't even want to *think* about the possibility that Lee and I would end up at different colleges. That he'd get accepted somewhere I didn't. That we might end up apart next year. We'd spent our entire lives practically joined at the hip. What the hell would I do without him around?

'Unfortunately,' Lee was saying, drawing me out of my thoughts. 'Look, you're not going to start waxing lyrical about the future or something, are you? Please say if you are. I'll leave you to your thoughts and go find the guys.'

Playfully, I shoved my shoulder into his. 'I'll stop talking about college now. Promise.'

'Thank God for that.'

'Although, speaking of the guys – has Cam told you anything about this new neighbor?'

'I'd almost forgotten about that.'

Cam, one of our closest friends since elementary school, had sprung the news on us last week that some guy had moved into the house opposite his and, since he was our age, Cam's parents had suggested he take the new guy under his wing and introduce him to us – and the way Cam had said *suggested* made it sound like they'd given him an ultimatum about it.

Lee carried on. 'I know he's from Detroit. And his name's Levi. Like the jeans. I don't know much else

about him, though. I don't think Cam knows anything else about him, either, really.' Then he stood up off the Mustang. 'I'm just hoping he's not a total asshat, since we promised Cam we'd try and help him fit in. Help Levi fit in, I mean.'

'I know what you mean,' I mumbled, but I was distracted by my cell phone, which had started to ring in my hands.

Lee's gaze went to the caller ID, and he sighed. I looked up to give him an apologetic smile just in time to see him roll his eyes at me and start to stroll away, backpack slung over one shoulder.

'No phone sex, Shelly. This is a school. Keep it PG,' he said.

'Oh, like you and Rachel never made out in the janitor's closet!' I shot back. He just gave me a thumbs-up over his shoulder.

I answered the phone. 'Hey, Noah.'

Lee's older brother, Noah, was half the reason I'd not made progress on my college application essay: after sneaking around with him behind Lee's back for a couple of months last spring (which ended in total disaster when Lee caught us kissing), and then officially dating him since the summer, we'd spent as much of our vacation together as possible. He was in college at the other end of the country, now, at Harvard.

He'd been gone barely a couple of weeks, and I couldn't get over how much I missed him. How was I going to cope with not seeing him until Thanksgiving?

'Hey, how are you?'

'I'm good. Start of senior year excitement. How's college?'

'Eh. Not much different from when I called you last night. I had class this morning. Math. It was pretty interesting. Second-order differentials.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about, and I don't think I want to know.'

Noah laughed, a soft, breathy sort of chuckle that made my heart melt. Almost everything about him made my heart melt or my knees go weak or my stomach fill with butterflies. I was a goofball, a cliché straight out of a movie. And it felt great.

I missed that laugh as much as I missed feeling his arms wrapped round me, or his lips on mine. We spoke all the time – video chat, Snapchat, messages, good old-fashioned phone calls . . . but it wasn't the same. And I was a little cautious to let on just how badly I missed him, in case it made me sound too clingy. I still wasn't really sure how to go about all this relationship stuff.

'You're *such* a nerd,' I told him.

I'd never thought of Noah as a nerd. I mean, I knew he was smart. He'd had a 4.7 GPA (his mom had told

me that recently – that was when I’d realized just how smart he was). He’d narrowly missed out on being top of his class, yet he had a reputation all through high school as the resident bad boy. Up until we got together, I’d never really thought that underneath his image he might actually *like* learning stuff like second-order differentials. Whatever they were.

‘Shh, someone might hear you.’ I could hear the smirk in his voice. ‘Anyway, enough about me. I talked to you for, like, an hour straight last night about college. I just wanted to wish you luck for your first day of senior year.’

I smiled, even though he couldn’t see. ‘Well, thanks. I appreciate it.’

‘So, what’s it feel like? Being the big kids in school?’

‘Kind of scary, kind of nauseating and a lot exciting. I’m trying not to get too stressed out about college and stuff.’

‘Scary, right?’

‘Thinking about college makes me feel grown up when I feel like anything but a grown-up. I mean, my kid brother had to come kill a spider in my room last night.’

‘Tell me about it. I had to ask someone how to use the dryer in the laundry rooms the other day. I felt so stupid.’

‘You’ve never done laundry?’

‘My mom is *very* particular about how the laundry should be done, Shelly, you know that.’ I did – she’d asked Lee to spread sheets to dry once, when she went out, only to redo them as soon as she got back. She didn’t ask him to do it again. ‘Besides, those four teddy bears on your bed probably don’t help with the not feeling like an adult.’

‘I bet there are a bunch of girls at college – some guys, too, probably – who have a teddy bear or two on their beds.’

‘But not four.’

‘Hey, now, don’t you say a word against Mr Wiggles.’ I couldn’t help but let a pout slip on to my face. ‘Anyway, you’re the one with Superman boxer shorts.’

Before Noah got a chance to defend himself, there was the sound of someone pounding on a door in the background on his end of the line. He sighed. ‘Looks like I’ve got to go. Steve was in the bedroom, so I came in the bathroom to talk to you, for some privacy –’

‘Flynn, come on, man, I need to take a piss!’ his room-mate, Steve, yelled. His voice was muffled, probably by the bathroom door.

‘I should go, too. The guys will be here by now, and we’re supposed to meet Cam’s neighbor and help him feel welcome.’

‘Is that the guy from Detroit? 7 For All Mankind?’

‘Levi.’

‘That’s what I said. Well, good luck with that. And hey, tell Lee good luck at tryouts from me. I text him, but he never replied.’

A rattling noise sounded at his end, and more knocking. ‘Flynn! *C’mon!*’

‘Have a good last first day of school,’ Noah said.

‘Thanks. I love you.’

I heard the smile in his voice, and could practically see the dimple in his cheek that accompanied that smile, when he said, ‘I love you, too.’

We both lingered on the line a moment longer, neither of us saying anything, just listening to the sound of each other’s breathing. Then I took the cell phone away from my ear and hung up, making sure the ringer was off before shoving it into my satchel, where it promptly buried itself among my brand-new notebooks and other first-day necessities (namely a hairbrush, a candy bar, a tampon and a pair of very tangled earphones).

‘Elle! Hey! Over here!’

I craned my neck at the sound of my name, standing on tiptoe to look. Dixon was a few yards away, with Lee and our other friend Warren waving me over. I waved back, just so Dixon knew I’d seen him, before heading over.

I weaved between a couple of cars to get to the guys

and, just as I began to scoot past an unfamiliar green Toyota, the driver's side door opened into my hip and knocked me back against the Ford behind me.

I sucked in a sharp breath, waiting for the Ford's alarm to wail – and I let the air out in a rush when it didn't.

Guess I won't be the school klutz this year. New beginning, here I am.

'Oh, shit. Oh, man, I'm so sorry, I didn't see you there . . .'

'It's totally my fault, don't worry about it,' I said, brushing the hair out of my face before taking a look at the driver. I didn't recognize him at all: he was all long limbs, but not actually much taller than me, and his eyes were hidden behind sunglasses so dark I could see myself in them. He pushed the sunglasses up into his curly brown hair in a fluid motion, then his arm hung limp at his side, one hand clenched round a backpack handle.

He had nice eyes. Friendly sort of eyes. They were green and they crinkled in the corners. I had to squint a little, because the sun was just behind him. He shifted his weight to his other foot, and blocked out the sun.

He was cute.

'Are you okay? Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry –'

‘Seriously, don’t worry about it. I’m fine. Really.’ I smiled for emphasis, even if my hip did hurt a little.

The sound of the passenger door opening caught my attention, and I immediately recognized Cam, with his floppy blond hair and battered blue backpack that he’d had since, like, the eighth grade. He grinned over at me.

‘Why am I not surprised? Dude, we’ve told you, you need to watch where you’re walking.’

I pulled a face at him before turning back to the long-limbed guy with the sunglasses, about to say something like, ‘You must be Levi,’ but Cam beat me to the punch.

‘I guess I should introduce you two. Elle, this is Levi. Levi, my friend Elle.’

‘Nice to meet you.’ He held a hand up in a wave, and flashed a smile that showed teeth so white I thought they had to be bleached.

‘Nice to meet you, too. Sorry for walking into your car door. When Cam told us we should meet his new neighbor, *klutz* wasn’t exactly the first impression I was going for.’

His smile went wider. ‘So are you always this clumsy, or is this just an off day for you?’

‘She’s a klutz,’ Cam pitched in, and I thought he sounded kind of snappy. Did he not like his new

neighbor, or was he just stressed? Sensing something off, I changed the topic.

‘Dixon’s just over there, with the others.’

‘Awesome.’ Cam started off in the direction I’d gestured, spotting the guys quickly, but Levi made no move to follow him.

‘Come on,’ I said to the new guy, ‘you should come meet everyone else.’

When introductions had been made, and Levi started asking about the sports here (he was on the lacrosse team back in Detroit), I nudged Cam in the side gently.

‘What’s the deal between you two?’ I kept my voice low. ‘Tell me to shut up if I’m crossing a line or something, but . . . I don’t know, it just seems like you don’t really like the new guy much.’

Cam’s grumpy expression became something more abashed. ‘It’s not that I don’t like him – I don’t really know him that well yet,’ he mumbled. ‘I just hate being responsible for the new kid, you know? I feel like I have to reign in the sarcasm and be super nice.’

‘It’ll be fine. He seems nice. At least try not to look like Brad when my dad tells him to eat his broccoli.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ he muttered. ‘The guy drives like a maniac – and my car’s still in the garage.’

'I'd like to remind you of the time that you backed into a post.'

'Ugh, don't.' But he smiled, and I grinned back. Lee's shoulder bumped into mine as he gestured in conversation to Warren and Levi about football, and I caught his eye briefly.

Senior year, here we are.

Chapter 2

I quickly remembered why the first day of school was so bad: hordes of students around us were clamoring to get to their homeroom to grab a seat for their friends before all the good ones were gone, and the freshmen stood in tiny groups, blocking the corridors, looking lost and overwhelmed – even a little sick, in some cases.

It was weird not to spot Noah's head somewhere, cutting a path through them all.

Lee's shoulder bumped against mine, and I locked my fingers round his wrist so we didn't get separated.

I looked over my shoulder. 'I've lost the others.'

'They know their way.' Lee paused for a moment, and someone barreled into me from behind before cursing at us and moving round. Lee tugged me down the nearest corridor, taking a detour to our homeroom class. Any other day, this way would have taken twice as long, but today at least we avoided being trampled.

Mr Shane, our senior-year homeroom tutor, was an English Lit teacher, so his classroom was covered in posters of the books his classes would be studying, and A4 pictures of authors like John Steinbeck, Shakespeare, Mary Shelley and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Mr Shane himself looked like the stereotypical fresh-out-of-grad-school teacher: he wore thin-framed glasses, his tie was slightly askew, and his shirt was only tucked in at the front. And he didn't have that hard look on his face that some of the older teachers did, when they were sick of having taught the same syllabus for twenty years straight. He smiled at us individually as we came into the room.

Rachel and Lisa had clearly arrived only moments before, since they were just putting their bags down on desks near the window. Lee made a beeline for the desk next to his girlfriend, Rachel, and kissed her on the cheek. I looked at the desk on his other side, but it was already taken.

'Elle! Sit by me!' Lisa chirped when I hesitated, gesturing at the desk next to her, in front of Lee. She'd started dating our friend Cam a few months ago and had become part of our group ever since. 'Did you guys meet Levi yet? I was over at Cam's for dinner just after he'd moved in, so we went to say hi together. He was kind of shy, I think, but he seems cool. And I'd *kill* for

eyelashes like his! And his hair – it’s just *so* curly. I’m in love with it.’

I smiled in reply and she turned to resume her conversation with Rachel. Lee had pulled his chair closer to Rachel’s, looking at her with a gooey expression, and I tried not to feel *too* stung that he’d picked a desk beside her over one next to me. I was still getting used to the new dynamic that Lee going out with Rachel had created. I hadn’t really noticed it until our time at the beach house this summer, and now Noah wasn’t around to help soften the blow of Lee choosing his girlfriend over me.

Once almost all the desks were filled, Mr Shane started with the typical first-day-back speech – how he hoped we all had a good summer, but now we had a ‘really big year ahead’ and how important this year was for each of us, and that some of us would need to ‘knuckle down and work hard’.

He was about halfway through this spiel when there was a knock at the door, and the school secretary stepped inside with a polite smile.

‘Sorry to interrupt . . . You have a new student in your homeroom, and I thought I’d bring him up here. My fault he’s late – there was some paperwork that needed to be checked.’

I turned to look at Lee, who raised an eyebrow at

me. Our heads swiveled to look at the new student, though I had a feeling I already knew who it was.

And I was right. Levi stepped in from behind the secretary timidly, and his mouth twitched, like he wasn't sure if he should smile or try to look cool. He was still wearing his sunglasses on top of his head, and where they pushed all the hair back from his face I realized how long his face was. And how his chin was sort of pointy; his jaw was defined but not as square as Noah's. Actually, seeing him from a distance, he looked taller than he was. A few of the girls across the room started to whisper to each other.

His shirt was free of creases, but only tucked in on one side, and his sweater was slung over his shoulder, underneath the strap of his backpack. It was like he was trying to make his uniform untidy to look cool, but he still looked pretty clean-cut.

Mr Shane smiled warmly at him. 'Well, welcome. Come on in, find a seat. What's your name?'

'Levi Monroe.'

When Levi spotted Lee and me, his face brightened up. Before he could zigzag between the desks to the empty one in front of me, he tripped, arms pinwheeling, alarm taking over his face. He grabbed at a nearby desk for balance, only to bring that crashing down with him.

Someone coughed, trying to cover a laugh, and

then Lee and I burst into giggles. One guy got up to give Levi a hand, another one righting the desk he'd knocked over. Even Mr Shane was laughing, though he was trying not to.

'Looks like you've got competition for class klutz,' Lee whispered to me.

Levi, without so much as a blush, tossed his head back and dropped his shoulder, turning gravely to the class. 'Let it never be said that I don't know how to make an entrance.' He bowed, and Lee whooped behind me, more people laughing as Levi made it to the seat in front of me – this time, without falling over his own feet.

He swung the chair sideways, so he could see us and the teacher.

'Hey again,' he said tentatively. I could understand why Cam hadn't wanted to be stuck with the new kid, but I felt sorry for the poor sap. It couldn't be easy, moving for senior year. I smiled to put him at ease.

'It's . . . Ella, right?'

'Elle,' I corrected him. I jerked a thumb over my shoulder. 'And that's –'

'Lee, I remember. Yeah.' He looked at Lisa. 'We met the other day, didn't we?'

'Yeah. Lisa.'

He nodded. 'Lisa. Got it.'

‘And this is Rachel,’ Lisa said, gesturing behind her. ‘Lee’s girlfriend.’

‘I’m going to have to start making a list. I’m never gonna remember who’s dating who. I’m bad enough at remembering names.’

‘If you yell “dude”, I can almost guarantee one of us will look up,’ Lee suggested.

Mr Shane started talking again, and we fell silent; he might’ve been pretty cool as far as teachers went, but we knew he wouldn’t exactly appreciate us talking through his little speech.

When our class schedules were handed out, everyone started buzzing with conversation, comparing theirs with their friends’. I snatched up Lee’s immediately, poring over it.

‘Well? What’s the damage?’

‘Different classes for English Lit,’ I said. ‘And you’re in AP Calculus. I’m in Algebra II. Everything else looks good.’

‘Phys Ed?’

‘Phys Ed at the same time.’

‘Yes. You know how much I love watching you take people out in dodgeball.’

‘You know how much I love taking you out in dodgeball.’

I passed back his schedule so he could compare it

with Rachel's, but she was still busy comparing with Lisa. I looked up and saw Levi chewing his thumbnail, looking at all of us out of the corner of his eye – like he was too shy to join in, but he wanted to.

I leaned forward, and said, 'Come on, hand it over.'

His relief at being included was palpable.

We had a couple of classes together, but as we talked about our classes and teachers Levi began to look more nervous.

'Everything okay?' I asked.

He stuck his chin out, looking defiant. 'You know, I don't want you to feel like you have to hang out with me just because I'm the new kid. I told Cam he didn't have to carpool to school with me, but he said he didn't mind, at least not for the first couple of days, especially while his car's still in the shop getting repairs. But just – you know, don't feel obligated to be nice to me, or anything.'

'You haven't given me a reason to *not* be nice to you. Not yet at least. Besides, if we're in the same first class together, you may as well walk with me. Right?'

His smile was apprehensive. 'You don't have to.'

'Why? Are you an ax murderer? On the run from the cops in Detroit?' I fake gasped. 'Oh my God. I've got it. I bet you're the kind of person who agrees to terms and conditions without reading them.'

He laughed, the tension and anxiety falling away from his face. 'You caught me.'

The bell sounded, and I picked up my bag. 'Come on, newbie. The hell on earth that is algebra awaits us.'

Morning classes flew past, and my head felt like a car that kept stalling. It was like I'd forgotten how to take notes properly over the summer, and forgotten how to just sit down and learn stuff. Plus, I got distracted every time my phone buzzed, wondering if it was a text from Noah. (It never was.)

But now it was lunch, and I could breathe a sigh of relief that the day was half over.

I joined the end of the lunch queue and leaned my head back so it rested on Lee's shoulder. His chin sat on top of my head.

'Mm, smell those tacos.'

'Don't drool on my hair,' I told him sternly. 'I washed it this morning.'

Lee made a gargling noise in response and I ducked away before he did *actually* drool on me.

We were the first of our friends to the cafeteria, and once we got our food we made our way to an empty table near the middle of the room. It was one that some of the seniors used to sit at and, now that they'd moved on to college, I guessed that made it ours. As Lee and

I took seats opposite each other, he gave me his usual impish grin, and I knew he was thinking the same thing as me: being seniors was *definitely* cool.

It didn't take the others long to join us – Cam, Dixon, Warren, Oliver, and now Levi, too. Lisa and Rachel weren't far behind, taking the empty spots next to their boyfriends. A couple of girls they hung out with sat at the end of the table by Lisa.

As people started swapping stories from their mornings, I noticed Levi looking awkward again, trying to keep up with it all.

Lee was too busy giving Rachel gooey-eyes to notice anything else, so I turned to Levi. 'How're you liking California so far?' I asked him brightly. 'Hot enough for you?'

'The girls are,' he joked, with a wink that made me blush. Warren snorted, only to choke on his soda so hard that Oliver had to thump him on the back several times. Lee waggled his eyebrows at me, trying not to laugh.

'I'm kidding,' Levi said. 'Well, not – I mean, obviously you're pretty, but – no, no offense – I just . . . God, this sounded a lot smoother in my head. I was gonna sound all suave and cool and funny.' Everyone laughed then, Levi included. 'That was supposed to be a joke. And now I sound like a loser.'

'Why'd you move here, anyway?' Warren asked. We

were all wondering it, but every one of us gave Warren a wide-eyed, pursed-lips, *what are you thinking* look. Catching on, he added hastily, 'Sorry, dude, I didn't mean to pry.'

Levi didn't seem to mind too much, though. 'Nah, it's cool. My dad's a dentist and my mom was the accountant at the place where he worked, but then the company went bust and my parents lost their jobs, so we decided to move. We have some family not too far away, and my mom managed to get another job, so . . .' He trailed off, then cleared his throat. 'So, yeah. Here we are.'

'Is it just you and your parents, then?' Rachel asked, prying much less bluntly than Warren had.

'My sister, too.'

'Sister?' Oliver's eyebrows quirked and he leaned forward. 'Single?'

'Uh, well, considering she's eight years old and still thinks boys have cooties . . .'

The guys jeered at Oliver, and he blushed. Levi grinned, running a hand through his curls, relaxing. 'I take it back,' Olly mumbled, head in hands. 'Next time, specify *little* sister, maybe.'

'I'll bear that in mind.'

'Anyway,' Dixon said, 'speaking of siblings . . . Lee, how's your brother doing at college?'

‘He loves it there. I’ll be surprised if he even wants to come home for Thanksgiving.’

Wait, what?

I shot Lee a look, but he seemed oblivious. Had Noah said something about not coming home for the holidays? When was I going to see him next? But, no – surely he would’ve told me.

I took a breath. He definitely would’ve told me. I was definitely overreacting.

‘Have his classes started yet?’ Cam asked me.

‘Uh . . . Yeah. He had Math this morning.’

‘Ugh.’

‘He loved it.’

Warren snorted again. ‘Who’d have thought Flynn was such a geek, huh? He hid it pretty well. I bet he used to hide textbooks in the seat of his motorcycle.’

‘Flynn,’ Levi said, and looked between Lee and me. ‘Is that your brother?’

‘My brother,’ Lee explained. ‘His name’s Noah – our surname’s Flynn – but everyone’s always called him Flynn. He’s dating Elle.’

‘Oh. *Oh!* I – sorry, I thought you two were related or something. I mean, you don’t look that much alike, but the way you guys act, I figured . . .’

‘It’s okay,’ Lee said reassuringly. ‘Easy mistake.’

Lee and I were twins in practically everything except

blood: we'd been born on the same day and had grown up together. We'd been best friends our entire lives. Sometimes people seemed to forget we weren't actually related.

'Lee and Flynn – Noah – God, I don't know what to call him now he's gone,' Cam muttered the last comment to himself, 'threw some epic parties over the last couple of years. There was one, a few months ago . . .' He started chuckling, chest heaving as he tried to suppress it to finish his story. 'And Elle got so drunk . . . she started dancing on the pool table, then tried to strip off to go skinny-dipping. Funniest. Thing. Ever.'

Levi raised his eyebrows at me. 'And here I was thinking you were a wholesome, all-American, average girl next door.'

'It was the single most humiliating experience ever,' I groaned, blushing over it. The guys were busy laughing at me. I had only vague memories of that night, and I hadn't had more than a few sips of beer at a party since. Although, the night *had* ended with Noah totally coming to my rescue, so . . . it hadn't been a total disaster. And I'd seen him in his underwear – Superman boxers, which I'd teased him about endlessly.

'Aw, come on, Shelly,' Lee said with a wicked gleam in his blue eyes, taking my mind off the image of Noah

in his boxer shorts. 'I can think of far more embarrassing things you've done.'

'Shelly?' Levi asked.

'Short for Rochelle,' I explained.

'You should call her Shelly,' Warren told him. 'She totally loves it.'

'Do *not* call me Shelly.'

'But –' Looking lost and helpless, Levi glanced at Lee.

I might let Lee and Noah get away with calling me Shelly, but it wasn't exactly a nickname I loved. I narrowed my eyes now at Lee, who was shaking with silent laughter.

I pointed my fork at him, a french fry dangling off the end. 'You dare bring anything else up, and I will personally rummage through the photo albums in your attic to find those photos of you dressed up as Elvis to show Rachel. Or the Halloween we went as Sonny and Cher.'

Lee sobered up at that, and mimed zipping his lips shut. Then he stole the fry off the end of my fork and ate it, ignoring the mock-glare I gave him.

'Speaking of parties . . .' Dixon, playing peacemaker as usual, asked who we thought was most likely to host the first party of the year, and then tried persuading Lee or Warren to host, but they both seemed apprehensive.

I looked over at Lee, who was holding hands with Rachel on top of the table and talking to her in a low voice, looking at her like she lit up his entire world.

Noah looked at me like that sometimes.

The thought sent a pang through my stomach. Not just because I missed Noah, but because seeing Lee so wrapped up in his girlfriend made me worry again a little that I might lose him. I mean, of course I wanted my best friend to be happy, and I was thrilled that he was so in love with Rachel. But, now that Noah wasn't around, I was starting to notice how little time Lee and I spent just the two of us, since he had Rachel. Not that I was jealous.

Alright, so maybe I was a *little* jealous. Just a teeny tiny bit.

I glanced over at Levi again. Levi, who wanted to fit in and make friends. Sure, the other guys seemed to like him well enough, and they'd hang out with him – but without Lee attached to my hip, it looked like I might be hanging out with the new kid this year.

And weirdly enough, the idea didn't sound so bad.

Chapter 3

'Jesus, Lee,' I mumbled. 'Some of these guys are huge.'

Lee was bulked out with pads and a helmet, and he wasn't exactly small: shorter and leaner than Noah, still kinda tall, and strong. But some of the guys out on the field looked three times the size of him, psyching themselves up for tryouts. Some of them had already been on the team last year.

And, up until then, I'd thought Lee would be a shoo-in for the team.

'Sure,' he replied, bouncing on his toes, 'but I'm fast, and you know I can catch the ball. That wide receiver shirt has my name on it.'

'Actually, I think the quarterback shirt does.'

He pulled a face at me. Lee had always been into football – and pretty good at it – but he'd never wanted to be on the team before now. Not when Noah had been the shining star as the quarterback. I kind of couldn't blame him.

Lee started whistling, and it took me a minute to recognize the song.

‘Is that that song? “I Hope I Get It”, or whatever it’s called?’

‘Yu-huh. From *Chorus Line*.’

‘You what now?’

‘Hey. I watched a lot of musicals online with Rachel this summer so she could prep for drama club. She’s going for a leading role this year. I’m a good supportive boyfriend, you know. Ask me to sing you Fiyero’s part from “As Long as You’re Mine”. I rock that.’

First he picked a desk next to Rachel instead of me, and now I was finding out that he’d been spending time this summer singing musicals with her? What else wasn’t he sharing with me?

But I rolled my eyes good-naturedly. ‘Whatever you say, buddy.’

The coach’s whistle shrilled across the field. ‘Line up, boys! We’re starting with running drills!’

‘Guess you’d better go.’

‘Wish me luck.’

‘Hey.’ I put my hand on Lee’s shoulder so he looked me in the eye. I nodded at him. ‘You’ve got this.’

‘And you’ve got a zit on your chin.’

‘Love you too!’ I yelled after him, watching him run out on to the field to join the rest of the hopefuls. I took

a spot in the bleachers to watch, and couldn't help comparing him to how Noah had once played. Lee wasn't *as* good, but he was still a strong player.

When they were done, Lee started toward me in the bleachers rather than following the rest of the guys to the locker room. I hopped down a few rows, grinning at him, but Coach Pearson got to him first, clapping him on the shoulder.

'You did good, Little Flynn. Maybe you'll live up to your name yet.'

'I made the team?'

'I'll post the sheet tomorrow morning, but it's looking good. Your brother help you with some of those passes?'

'Yes, sir.'

'He did a damn fine job. Now, go on – hit the showers. You can celebrate with your girlfriend later.'

'Oh, no, she's not –'

Coach Pearson was already gone.

I'd made my way down to the field, and did a little dance. 'You did it! You did it, you made the team!'

Lee stared at me blankly for a second before breaking into a grin, and throwing his arms round me before I could protest. I gagged. 'Did you even put deodorant on?'

'Why? Can't handle my manly man stink?'

He wrestled my head into his armpit before I squirmed away, shoving him back.

‘I’m so proud of you, Lee. This is awesome.’

‘Guess I’ve just gotta be as good as Noah now,’ he mumbled. ‘Keep up the Flynn reputation.’

‘Oh, come on. Don’t worry about that. Pearson’s a jackass sometimes. That was a stupid thing to say. Now go shower before I actually vomit from your manly man stink.’

Lee saluted me before practically skipping off to the locker room. I cheered after him, whooping, and it turned to giggles as I watched him jump up, clicking his heels together and throwing his arms out.

Sitting back down to wait for Lee, I got my phone out to video-call Noah.

It was only after he picked up that I realized this was something Lee would probably want to tell his brother himself.

‘Hey, one sec,’ Noah yelled at the phone, holding it half against his chest as he walked. There was a lot of background noise. It sounded kind of like a party. I saw blurred figures in the background as he moved around, saying ‘excuse me’ and then, finally, ‘Right. Hi. I’m back.’ He grinned at me, showing off the dimple in his left cheek. His cheeks were flushed and his long, dark hair stuck to his forehead a little.