

WHILE *We're* YOUNG

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LO
VE





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Eva:

They're all a little bit for you, but this one is entirely yours.

Thank you for wishing on that falling star.



CHAPTER 1

GRACE

My mother found me in the bathroom. “Grace?” she said, and in a heartbeat she was at my side. “Gracie? What’s wrong?”

I slowly lifted my head from the toilet seat and, with violet sleep-deprived eyes, gave her my most lethargic of looks. I hadn’t looked this wiped since running in our town’s Spring Fling 10K the morning after junior prom. “Don’t feel well,” I mumbled. “Puked last night.”

“Oh, sweetheart . . .” She took a reluctant peek into the toilet, where a smoothie-like blend of dinner and dessert swirled in the bowl. If you tried hard enough, you could recognize a pulled pork sandwich, coleslaw, baked beans, and an ice cream sundae. Mint chocolate chip with hot fudge, whipped cream, and M&M’s. It had been *delicious*. “Scott!” my mom called. “Scott!”

"I'm sorry," I moaned when my father arrived, his blue-and-gray tie half knotted. "It happened in my room, too."

My dad crouched down next to me. "Why didn't you come get us?" he asked as I curled into a ball on our bath mat and started shivering. He put a warm hand on my back.

"I didn't want to wake you," I said. "You both have those big meetings today."

There was a moment of silence. I imagined my parents using their couple superpower, communicating with only their eyes. *Well, what do you think?* my mom was probably asking.

I think we should get her to bed, I hoped my dad was answering.

"What's going on?" another voice said, and the three of us turned to see James in the doorway. I'd heard him playing his keyboard earlier, our family's morning alarm, but now he was dressed in jeans and a well-worn concert T-shirt from The National's last tour and was shoveling Lucky Charms into his mouth.

"Your sister has a stomach bug," our mom said. "She's been throwing up all night." She sighed. "James, you know there's no food allowed upstairs."

It was one of the new rules, to keep the house spotless for eventual showings.

My brother lowered his cereal bowl, and I swallowed—now really and truly nauseous. James cocked his head with interest. "All night, huh?" He slurped some more cereal. "Too bad I didn't hear you." His smirk sped up my pulse. "I could've held your hair back."

“Let’s get you to your room, Gracie,” Dad said, helping me to my feet. “We’ll put a bucket by your bedside—”

“Wait, are you serious?” James cut in incredulously. “She gets to stay home?”

“Of course,” Mom told him, flushing the toilet for emphasis. “We don’t want her spewing all over Council Rock North.”

“I doubt there’s anything left in her stomach to spew,” James grumbled, then said, “Last month you made me go to school with a *fever*.”

Yes, I thought. A fever brought on by a hair dryer.

(It hadn’t been his best performance.)

“Because you have too many absences, James!” Mom said. “Principal Unger called us.” She threw up her hands. “I don’t even know how to explain half of them!”

My school-skipping brother backed down and turned to me. “May I have the car keys, please?” he asked. “Since you’ll be bedridden today, dearest twin?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. While we were both seniors, James and I weren’t technically twins; we’d been born ten months apart. He was older and eternally irked that our shared Subaru was known as “Grace Barbour’s car” at school.

“No, wait, it’s okay,” I said, making a weak attempt at collecting myself. “I should go to school. James is right; there’s nothing left in my stomach. As long as I don’t eat . . .” I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed a hand to my abdomen, as if waiting for a cramp to pass. “I’ll be fine.”

My dad kept his arm firmly around my shoulders.
“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I’m student body president.” My voice floated up, up, and away—lightheaded, I was so lightheaded.
“My people need me.”

“Jesus Christ,” James said. “Put the powermonger to bed.”

“The keys are in my backpack’s side pocket,” I told him before letting our parents escort me out of the bathroom and down the hall.

“Oh, wow,” my mom commented when she saw the crime scene in my room: brown sludge spurted across my beige rug. I might not have been successful, but it looked like I’d at least *attempted* to make a run for the toilet.

“Carpet cleaner,” my dad said as I climbed into bed. He pulled up my covers, tucking me in like when I was little. “Relax, Kim. We’ll get the carpet cleaner and it’ll be good as new.”

I thought otherwise. If I did say so myself, I’d done such a worthy job that a professional would need to be brought in to achieve a good-as-new level of cleanliness.

“Now, text us,” my dad told me a few minutes later, after spraying the foaming cleanser. My mom had run outside to catch James and give him my absence note. “Okay? If you need anything, don’t hesitate to text.”

Through my window, I saw James back out of the driveway and speed off toward school. He was pissed. “Okay.”

“Or call,” my mom added, coming back into my room.
“If something’s really wrong.”

“I will.” I snuggled into my pillow. “But I wish one of you could stay. . . .”

My parents exchanged a look. I knew they were considering it, but at the same time, I knew they weren’t. Again, they had those meetings, and I was seventeen, not seven. I could look after myself.

“So do we, kiddo.” My dad kissed the top of my head. “But I’ll be home at six sharp, don’t worry.”

“I’ll try my best to swing by at lunch,” my mom said. “If you’re feeling better, I’ll make you a nice broth.”

“Mmm, that sounds yummy.” My eyes drifted shut, and I murmured in my faraway voice, “I love you.”

“We love you, too,” they harmonized before backing out of the room and quietly closing the door.

Then I listened. I listened to them finish getting ready for work; I listened to their murmured conversation as they headed downstairs; I listened to them say goodbye to our dog; I listened to the familiar *bing* of the front door opening and shutting; and I listened to the hum of their cars.

And once they were gone, most likely en route to the drive-thru Starbucks (even though we had a perfectly capable Nespresso machine here at home!), I sat up in bed and threw back my covers. *And, scene!* as my drama teacher would’ve said.

I had plans for today, and none of them involved school.



After unlocking my phone and tapping its screen a few times, my favorite eighties music pulsed through our Sonos speakers. Most of the songs were cheesy, but I loved them. Belting out lyrics, I danced out of my room and into James's. Per usual, his bed was unmade and clothes covered the floor, but his extensive vinyl collection sat organized on his big bookshelf—Adele? Frankie Valli? Kendrick Lamar? The *La La Land* score? He owned it—and his beloved keyboard waited under the window. “Who’s the master now?” I asked the empty room. “Tell me, tell me, tell me!”

Truthfully, it was still him. James had perfected the art of fake illnesses over the years, always shooting for something specific yet also vague. His faux congested voice deserved an Academy Award, and I’d never forget the time I caught him licking his palms. “For clammy hands,” he’d told me, minutes before our mom had diagnosed him with the sweats and sent him back to bed. “Always a standby.”

Not only had I licked my palms this morning, but I’d also patted my face with saliva. The skincare routine of super-models, I’m sure.

When my alarm had beeped at five a.m., I’d tried not to laugh as I crept down to the kitchen to make a fresh sundae and let it melt while mixing together some of last night’s barbeque leftovers. No one would hear me; my parents were part of the CBD oil cult, and James slept with headphones. *Combine in Cuisinart*, I thought, *then blend with liquefied dessert*. I’d chewed up a handful of M&M’s and spit them in

the bowl, along with a crumbled slice of cornbread. A bit of texture couldn't hurt, could it?

Once I was back upstairs, I'd spattered half the concoction on my floor and dumped some more in the toilet before digging out my makeup and watching a YouTube tutorial on how to create believable bags under my eyes. It was tedious, and part of me was shocked that my parents hadn't seen through the scam. Maybe I had a future as a makeup artist in Hollywood?

Or, more likely, they were both preoccupied by their busy schedules today.

Now the gray, purple, and blue eyeshadow washed down the shower drain as I rubbed coconut shampoo in my hair. Today, instead of a five-minute shower, I could stay under the hot water as long as I wanted.

It had been a high-risk plan . . . but also high-*reward*.

I knew skipping school wasn't the attitude a student body president should have. I was supposed to be ever present in the hallways, waving and high-fiving and hugging, a friend to all. I was supposed to set a good example for my peers, doing the morning announcements and studying during my free periods.

Which I did every day, to the best of my ability. I'd taken my position seriously all year and worked hard. My class workload had been astronomical, and college applications had been no picnic, but I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. There was only a month until graduation, and after that, everything would change. Teachers would soon be known as "professors," my big bedroom would shrink into a broom closet-sized dorm

room, and home-cooked meals? Nope, welcome to the dining hall, Grace! The friends I saw every day wouldn't have known me since kindergarten, and if *my parents* had it their way, I'd have to list a new permanent address on various forms.

Ugh, shout-out to my parents and their scheme to basically sell the house and disappear into the night! Besides food no longer being allowed upstairs, James and I had politely been discouraged from hanging out in the formal living room, which had once been a warm sunset orange and covered with framed family photos. These days, it was painted something called "white blush" and the pictures had disappeared, wrapped in newspaper and stored in the basement. "Prospective buyers don't want to see *your* home," I'd overheard the Realtor saying. "They want to see what the space could be for *themselves*."

I was so frustrated—angry, even—with my parents. Why? Why were they so determined to leave our wonderful, beautiful home the second James and I graduated? Did they hate it that much? It wasn't like my brother and I were leaving for good; we would still come home for college breaks. And I wanted to come back to *this* house, *my* house, not some unfamiliar condo.

So why the hell shouldn't I make some final memories? I rationalized, wrapping myself in a towel and winking at the steamed mirror. If this chapter of my life was about to come to a close, I needed to write a good ending. Why the hell shouldn't I have some old-fashioned fun?

And, more importantly, why the hell shouldn't someone else?

Isabel Cruz answered the phone after barely half a ring. “Hey,” she said, and I could tell from her voice that she was already focused on her upcoming history test. Third period with Mr. Lamb. Multiple choice, short answers, and a two-page essay.

Crap. This was going to make things more difficult.

“Isa!” I exclaimed.

“Hi, Grace!” she replied, trance broken. “I’ll meet you in the parking lot in five minutes.”

People liked to mistake Isa and me as “those girls.” The ones who travel in a pack at school, who never go to the bathroom alone at restaurants and are always within arm’s reach of each other at parties. That was totally inaccurate. She and I could stand on our own, but we didn’t want to. We’d met in kindergarten, after our first show-and-tell. She’d brought her favorite American Girl doll, and after she told our class that she wanted to “diversify Samantha’s wardrobe,” I offered to help. Because thanks to my newfound love for sewing, Molly—my American Girl doll—had *quite* the eclectic closet. Isa and I clicked after our first playdate, and once our parents became good friends, we were *inseparable*. She was my other half.

“Great, so you have time to turn around,” I said, closing my eyes so my voice wouldn’t drip with guilt. I hadn’t been looking forward to this part, the part where I lured Isa into my gingerbread house of horrors. The part where I *lied* to her.

"I kinda need you to come get me . . ."

"Come get you?" she said. "G, what are you talking about? What happened to your car?" The panic rose in her voice. "Do you have a flat tire? Are you and James stuck on the side of the road? Call Triple A!"

"No, he left without me!" I committed to my lie, matching her panic with my frantic energy. "He was complaining about how slow I was moving, and I told him I would only be a few more minutes, but then he just sped off and ditched me! And my parents had to get an early start this morning—"

"Okay, okay," Isa said. "I just made an illegal U-turn. I'm coming."

I grinned. "Ah, I love you! Thank you!"

"I love you, too," she replied, then I swear I heard her gulp. "You don't think we'll miss the first bell, right?"

"Oh, no," I assured her, biting my tongue. "We'll be fine."

"Good." She let out a deep breath. "Meet me out front?"



I did not meet Isa out front. Her cream-colored Mini Cooper whipped into the driveway, but I resisted the urge to grab my backpack and race out to meet her. *We need to do this*, I reiterated to myself. *We deserve this*.

Isa wasn't one for honking the horn, so after two minutes, my phone chimed with a text: I'm here!

Be right out! I responded, knowing that wasn't specific or

immediate enough for Isa. She liked detail, she liked speed. “Give me 5.678 seconds” would’ve been more acceptable than “Be right out.”

So naturally, Isa came *right in*. I heard the *bing* from the front door, someone stepping into the foyer, and then her voice. “G?”

Asleep in his plaid Orvis bed, Rooney woke up and raised his head in recognition. Our boxer-bloodhound mix loved Isa.

I knew I really had to own what happened next; James would’ve said that confidence was key. I needed to ignore the knot in my stomach and play it cool.

“Back here!” I called from the kitchen, and oh, how I wish someone could’ve snapped a picture when Isa found me at the stove flipping pancakes. Her gorgeous brown eyes nearly bulged from their sockets, and she froze by the kitchen island.

“You’re making pancakes,” she commented.

“Yes, this is the first batch,” I said brightly. “Don’t they smell like sugar, spice, and everything nice?”

Isa didn’t seem to hear me. “And you’re not dressed.”

“Nope.” I watched as she unblinkingly assessed my fluffy turquoise bathrobe, matching slippers, and my hair, which was twisted up in a striped towel. Meanwhile, I chef’s-kissed her outfit of the day: Taylor Swift circa 2014 meets preppy college student perfection. Her long brown hair was tied up in a high ponytail with a deep purple-and-gold silk Hermès scarf (eBay!), and she wore a high-waisted lavender miniskirt with a pastel yellow cropped cardigan. The finishing touch was a pair

of metallic gold caged-toe high heels. She was *immaculate*.

But this outfit was another sign of why she needed today so much. Deep down, I knew my best friend had a taste for adventure, but the only way she could show it was through her sense of style. Wearing high heels all day, every day was as daring as it got for her.

Isa, still assessing my Lazy Sunday Morning look, opened her mouth, then closed it. The kitchen was silent except for the sizzling griddle. She finally blinked but didn't speak until I offered her a plate of banana-walnut pancakes. "What . . .," she said slowly, "is happening here?"

"Oh, I thought it was obvious." I flashed her a smile. "I'm taking the day off."

"You're what?" she sputtered.

"Taking the day off," I repeated.

"Skipping school?!"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess that's another way of putting it."

Isa took a step backward and accidentally stumbled into a barstool. Her untouched pancakes fell to the floor; I gasped when the ceramic plate shattered, but also couldn't help but giggle at Isa's wide eyes. Just wait until she saw the disaster zone that was my bedroom floor. "Are you kidding, Grace?" Isa righted herself and reached for a roll of paper towels. "You can't skip school . . . or take the day off . . . or whatever you're calling it."

"Why not?" I asked. "Why can't we?"

Isa stopped cleaning. "No." She glared at me. "You did *not* just say *we*."

I nodded. “You and me, like always. My parents think I have a stomach bug—”

“Do you?”

“Do I look like I do?”

She chuckled the paper towels at me. “Well, my parents think I’m at school,” she said, standing up and straightening her cardigan. “And I want to keep it that way.”

“But *why*?” I said when she turned to leave. “You just got into Brown! What could possibly be left on their list of expectations?”

Isa’s parents were relentless when it came to academics. *Ivy League, Ivy League, Ivy League*, had been an incantation for the Cruz family over the years, but even though Isa now had her hard-earned acceptance letter, we both knew her work wasn’t done. Mr. and Mrs. Cruz still expected their only child to make honor roll, deliver our class’s valedictory address, and easily achieve perfect attendance . . .

Isa sighed. “I have a test today, Grace.”

“Yeah, on the rise of ochlocracy,” I said. (I’d needed to google “ochlocracy” when Isa had signed up for the class). “You mentioned it’s open book, too. Everyone’s going to get an A!” I dramatically threw up my hands. “Why give the test at all?”

The corners of Isa’s mouth curved into a small smirk. She was warming to the idea, I could tell. “I tried telling my mom that last night, but she *still* made me study for two hours.”

I laughed, and she did too before the kitchen went quiet

again. “C’mon,” I said after a few seconds. “Let’s do it, Isa. Let’s forget about ochlocracy and just live it up today.”

Isa’s smirk shifted into a straight line of skepticism. “Grace . . .”

“We deserve this,” I told her, summoning my Tom Hanks voice. Confident, comforting, capable, inspiring. “You and I have worked so hard over the past four years—we’ve busted our asses! Schoolwork, student council, sports, homework, exams, community service, college applications, and the constant pressure buzzing in our heads. Don’t you want a break from everything? One day to recharge?”

Isa responded by hiding her face behind her hands.

“For old times’ sake,” I added, because once upon a time, Isa didn’t second-guess fun. “Before everything ramps up and we go off in different directions . . .”

My stomach sank when Isa turned to walk out of the kitchen toward the front door.

“Please, Isa,” I urged. “Please just consider it for five seconds.”

She stopped in the kitchen doorway.

“You aren’t going to be remembered for missing one day of high school,” I continued with caution. “Honestly, you aren’t. You’re going to make your mark on the world by doing something extraordinary.” I took a deep breath. “Allow yourself a day of spontaneity.”

I swallowed hard when she pivoted back to look at me. “Okay,” she agreed, starting to nod. “For old times’ sake.”

My heart leapt into my throat. “Thank you” was all I could manage to say.

She smiled—nervously, but she smiled. “All right, what’s next?” she asked twenty minutes later, after a replacement plate of warm, buttery, syrupy, powdered sugar-kissed pancakes. “I’m assuming you have an agenda?”

I put down my fork and clapped my hands together. “Yes.” I beamed. “For our first act, Isa Cruz, we are going to kidnap someone.”