Chapter 1

I'M SURE THERE USED TO BE A FULLY FUNCTIONING brain in my skull, brimming with semi-intellectual thoughts and everything. Now it feels more like a lump of weird squishy meat nestled in there, weighing down my head and straining at my spine.

In opposition to my full skull is my empty belly. The raw gnawing at my core, along with my mouth tasting like I've been licking armpits, drives me to push my stiff limbs onwards. Towards the exit.

I groan and drool with the others as we swarm out of the room that held us captive for so long.

Shoulders knock.

We stumble.

A hollow metal banging accompanies each collision with the lockers that line the corridor.

More groaning. More stumbling.

Our collective mass of bodies hit the heavy doors that bar the way to the outside world. We pile up until the hinges give and they burst open like a vein.

We're free.

The warm afternoon rushes in to snuff out the cold conditioned air. The change in temperature makes me stagger backwards, but the crowd behind keeps my forward momentum.

Our walking bodies flood the quad.

I lift a heavy hand to bat at the sun burning my retinas and a moan escapes my dry lips.

Turning from the glare, I see them. Huge letters sprayed across the blank brick wall.

An enormous "N".

"N" for "Nora".

That's me.



The words sucker punch me in the gut right before something lands on my back and throws me forwards. As I hit the floor, there's a pressure on my eyes and I go blind.

'Guess who!'

'Ruby! What the hell are you doing? Get off me.' My words come out rasping.

In response, Ruby sits on me.

I shake my head to get my best friend's hands off my eyes, but she's strong, and each time I glimpse daylight, they shift and darkness is restored.

'Wow, every single one of you leaving the art studios looks like something off Night of the Living Dead,' she says with a laugh.

I try again to peel Ruby's fingers away, but she's holding tight.

'What do you expect us to be like after five hours of solid arting? My brain's so overused it feels like it's turned to liquid and is trying to seep out my ears.' I give up and lie flat, resting my head on my hands. 'OK. What are you doing?'

'Nothing, just thought I'd come and find you.'

'And sit on me?'

'Why not? Lovely day to sit on someone.' She bounces a little.

'Oof! Can you *please* get off me?'

She gets up, her hands still covering my eyes, which is completely no help as I struggle to my feet.

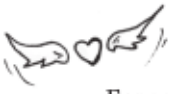
'Ruby! I've just finished the last of three five-hour exam days for my Art A level. Back-to-back! I'm so not in the mood for this.'

'OK.'

She moves me round in a circle and lets go. Colours pop and swirl as my eyes attempt to focus on our surroundings. The college quad appears hazy at first, then I can see individual leaves on the trees, the wood grain on the picnic benches and the brickwork making up the mishmash of buildings surrounding them.

A smiling Ruby steps into my line of sight, eyes alight, twisting her pink fringe, and any irritation that prickled my nerves seconds ago disappears.

I could gaze adoringly at Ruby for ever. But surely everyone feels like that about their best friend, right?



Especially if they look like Ruby with her pure hazel eyes, smile that lights up every inch of her face, and a sickeningly awesome punk aesthetic.



I was totally punching above my weight in the friend zone the day they put me and Ruby together on a Film Studies project. But from the moment we started talking, our friendship was cemented in a shared passion for cheesy horror, popcorn, feminism, and vegetarian jelly sweets. By the end of the first month sitting next to each other, we'd planned our entire career together.

My exam-addled brain remembers what I saw on the wall before Ruby pounced me. I try to twist round to see, but Ruby's quick.

'So, how did your exam piece turn out?' she asks, pushing her face in close to mine.

All I can see is her.

After a skipped heartbeat at her closeness, I realise what she's doing.

'I've already seen the graffiti,' I tell her.

'Oh,' she says, stepping aside.

The emotional fist to the gut happens again as I see the words for the second time, sprayed up the side of the science block in massive acid green letters.

The shock of seeing it again blasts away any lingering exam fug, but even with my brain functioning better, all I can muster is a defeated sigh.

'Baxter's a dick,' says Ruby.

'He IS a dick. And now I'm going home to hide from the world for ever.'

'He's a dick with balls, though.'

I frown at her.

We move to get a better view.

A bucket and broom sit on the floor under the words and the "D" from "FRIGID" is faded.

'I mean, he must have broken into college last night to do it,' she says and links arms with me. 'That takes massive balls.'

'Oh great, thanks, Rubes. Now we're discussing the fact Baxter's a dick with massive balls? That's kind of what started the whole problem.'

'I had no idea you had a *hole* problem too,' Ruby gasps. 'I would have been more sensitive.'

She giggles as I drag her away from where the caretaker has returned and is scrubbing at the letters. The smell of whatever chemical he's using burns the back of my throat.

My insides churn. This is so bad.

'Did you see it on the way into the exam?' Ruby asks.

'No, thankfully. If I'd spotted it on the way in . . .' The penny drops. 'This was sabotage! He knew I had my Art exam this week. We talked about it Monday night before—' I cut off the sentence; she knows what happened.

The word "FRIGID" is now slowly vanishing with serious caretaker-elbow-grease. It's already clear that it will inevitably leave an echo for generations of students to wonder who Nora Inkwell is and whether she really is frigid.



The answer to the most important of these questions is: I think so.

'I'm nearly eighteen and still got my V-plates. That totally makes me frigid, right?' I ask.

There's a painfully long pause.

'No!' Ruby shakes her head a bit too hard. 'No, of course not.'

'You hesitated!'

'I so did not. Anyway, I've still got my V-plates and there's no way I'm frigid – my internet history proves that.'

'You have not got your V-plates,' I say. 'What about that bloke you told me about last year?'

'That doesn't count. I was checking my lesbian status.' She hunches her shoulders and an emotional storm cloud shadows her features.

'Surely you need to sleep with someone the same sex as you to check if you're a lesbian. That's the whole point, isn't it?'

Ruby scrunches her face up.

'Well, that was the original plan, but it turns out it's much easier to bag a straight guy than a lesbian lady. So, I figured, what the hell? And opted for a process of elimination.' She folds her arms. 'When I came out, I thought it'd be easy to find a girl to do all that fun stuff with. Apparently not. Monday night at the gig with Josie proves that.'

I think of Josie, the beautiful drummer from one of the support bands that played that night. The way she'd tangled her fingers with Ruby's and tugged her playfully away from me in the crowd.

Ruby shouted for me not to wait, then mouthed the word "*SEX*" with an impish grin before vanishing into the mass of dancing bodies around her. I blinked back tears. That's

when I threw myself at sexy Baxter from Body Combat, who we spotted on our way into the venue. As suggested by the graffiti, that plan didn't go so well.

Later that night, I received a text from Ruby saying Josie had a jealous ex who caught them kissing and chased Rubes all the way to the train station. I pushed the feeling of relief to the same place I'd hidden the jealousy earlier.



So many emotions crammed inside a heart-shaped box, locked away somewhere inside myself, and for the first time I'm worried there might be a limit to its capacity.

Ruby twists her hair again. 'Now I know I'm definitely lesbian, I'm ready to seal the deal. Make it official. I'm hot, right? It should be easy.'

'You're bloody gorgeous,' I say, looping arms with her. 'Anyway, there's no rush. We have our entire lives to lose our virginity.'

'You're joking, right? Nor, I told you this before. Under no circumstances can we go to university as virgins! We'll be literally eaten alive. You don't want that, do you?' She's gripping both my shoulders and shaking me.

'No?' I say.

'No! So, we have eight weeks to lose our virginity.'

I'm already regretting not pointing out that we probably won't be *literally* eaten alive.

'Eight weeks?' I swallow hard. 'As in, two months?'

'As in, one summer holiday. I'm not including the weeks we have left of our exams. I'm not a monster.'

'Haven't we got more like ten weeks' holiday before university starts?'

'Excellent, that gives us two weeks' contingency time, in case things get desperate.' She releases my shoulders and takes my hand, leading me away from the graffiti and towards the exit. 'Nora, my friend, we will succeed. Before we start university, we will have had happy, sexy, fun times, you with a guy, me with a girl, and we will arrive at the next stage of our lives triumphant.'

There's so much about that statement that has me squirming, not least that I don't think I can face reliving the events of Monday night ever again, let alone that soon.



Chapter 2

AWAY FROM THE GRAFFITI AND CLOSE TO THE college exit, I hear beats bouncing before I see a cheerful, yellow-striped gazebo at the source. Silver star balloons dance and bob in clusters tied at each corner, sending reflected sunbeams glinting and winking across the surrounding surfaces.

Pop Punk. The happy beats help lift some of the weight pressing down on me. I don't know what the balloons and music are for, and I don't care. I have three things I need right now:

Telly.

Onesie.

Popcorn.

I'm giving myself the rest of the day off before I start revising again tomorrow. I haven't decided what I'm watching when I get home yet, as long as it's suitably crap, and gory enough to float my boat.

The turnstiles that lead off site are so close, but Ruby has other ideas.

'Free stuff!' she says and drags me to join a crowd of students under the gazebo. She points to a sign. 'Free tote bags if we sign up.' Her eyes twinkle.

'Sign up for what?'

She shrugs. 'Some petition?'

I turn to leave, but Ruby still has my arm and she's not letting me go. I'm so not in the mood for this.

'Please,' she begs. 'You don't want to miss out on the pure and unadulterated joy that is a free tote bag, do you?'

'Yes, I really do.'

'Then sign up and give it to me.'

I sigh, knowing we're not getting away from here tote-bag free.

Two women talk to students as clipboards are passed around and a man paces up and down beside them, speaking loudly to himself. I watch, wondering if he's all right, until he turns to reveal an earpiece.

'The sales figures projected are astronomical, we'll need a spaceship to keep track of them.' He pauses and nods. 'Why not? We'll be able to afford to build one.' The hideously fake guffaw that follows triggers my cringe mechanism.

'Just fill in the details and sign on the back,' says one of the women, stepping in front of me and handing over a board with a fresh form on it.

I glance at it before leaning over to talk to Ruby.

'That's a lot of small print,' I point out.

'You're right,' she says, suddenly serious. 'We should absolutely take the time to read through every word on every page to make sure we aren't signing our souls away to the devil.'

'Really?' This isn't like her.

'No way! Free tote bag! Look, it's got a little shark with a heart on its tummy. It's super cute! Just fill it in. People aren't allowed to put anything dodgy in terms and conditions, anyway.'



Too tired to form any kind of argument, with a hand still cramping from hours of meticulously painting details onto elaborate latex prosthetics in my Art exam, I fill in the short form.

'Nora, look!' Ruby elbows me in the ribs and points at the guy who appears to be having an enthusiastic conversation with himself about how important he is. 'It's that rich guy who studied here.'

'Hmmm?' I finish filling in my details, inwardly cursing Ruby for all the random promo crap that'll soon be bombarding my inbox, just so she can enjoy a free tote bag. The shark *is* cute though.

'The, like, super-trillionaire?' I ask, frowning at the man and realising I do recognise him from prize-giving. And our college drops his grinning face onto every piece of marketing they put out. He's their success story. 'Mum showed me him in one of her health magazines a while ago. Doesn't he make diet pills?' The last words curl my features into an involuntary scowl.

'Yeah, him. I think he's married to some director lady.'

'Good for him. Now, can we get the tote bags and go? It's been kind of a long day.' I wave the clipboard about to indicate I've finished filling it in.

The woman returns to collect it.

'Thank you, Miss . . .?' she says.

'Inkwell.' I keep my tone flat and uninviting, hoping she'll just hand over the freebies so we can get away from here.

The rich guy abruptly turns to face me.

'Sorry, I have to go. Something just came up,' he says.

I look around, unsure who he's talking to until he taps and pockets a shiny phone.

'Inkwell?' he asks, striding over. 'Nora Inkwell?'

I blink.

How does this guy know my name?

Apart from Ruby and my tutors, no one here really knows I exist. As a medium-build white girl with average-length brown hair, a regular amount of spots, and no distinguishing features to speak of, I'd say that I'm all but completely forgettable.

'That Nora Inkwell?' Rich Guy points over to where the graffiti is unsuccessfully being scrubbed off.

Oh. I clench my teeth and glare at the ground. Baxter's such a dick.

Taking my lack of response as a yes, he asks, 'Do you know who did that?' His eyes colour with concern and it looks like he genuinely cares. 'You could press charges—'

'No!' I blurt. 'I'm good, thank you.' I hope my voice sounds bolder than I feel, hiding my alarm at the thought of having to talk to anyone other than Ruby about Baxter, and what events led to him breaking into the college campus to deface the hugest and blankest of walls with my name.

People stare as whispers fly around the crowd that I'm Nora Inkwell. *That Nora Inkwell.* I'm glad when Ruby throws an arm over my shoulder. At least, I am until she talks.

'She is totally not frigid,' she says. 'There's this idiot guy who was a rubbish kisser—'

'Thank you, Ruby.' I jab her in the ribs.

'Ouch! OK!'

'And you are . . .' He turns to Ruby and takes her clipboard. 'Miss Ruby Rutherford,' he reads. 'Ruby, Nora, a pleasure to meet you both.' A smile, which I bet has sealed a thousand deals, shines down at us from the top of a blue open-collared shirt.

Rich Guy offers a suntanned hand to us from a rolled-up sleeve. It isn't the kind of tan you get in England and it isn't like Ruby's skin tone that came from countless generations of ancestors living in the heat of the Indian sun. This guy's tan looks like it cost mega money and enough air miles to melt a glacier.

After running a hand down my vintage Evil Dead T-shirt to get rid of any clamminess from the hot day, I shake his. It's soft and dry.

'Elroy Pherson, inventor, entrepreneur, alumni and all-round good guy.'



He flashes a grin my way. We've all seen the photos of when Elroy was a student at our college, looking completely adorable, with puppy fat and glasses. He's grown into a chiselled adult, and it's easy to see that the grin, filled with perfectly straight white teeth, is part of the secret to his success.

'I went to school with an Inkwell,' he continues, my hand now sandwiched in his.

'Yeah?' I say, trying not to look too much like I have better places to be. Even though I do. The sofa awaits.



'Do you have a Henry in the family?' Pherson asks, still gripping my hand.

Well, this is awkward. He's all grin and quiff and holding my hand prisoner. Trying to pull it free I take in the local celebrity. I'd expected his head to be bigger.

'Nope.' My hand pops free. 'No Henrys—' My brain catches up with my mouth. 'Wait, yes, sorry. Dad's

a Henry, but no one calls him that.' I flex my recently released digits. 'Everyone calls him Harry.'

Elroy's eyes narrow. 'Really?' He looks me up and down, a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. Why do I feel like Little Red Riding Hood on her first encounter with the Big Bad Wolf?

'Yep.' I so don't want to be here.

'Perfect.' Elroy lets the first syllable roll like a contented cat, while hugging our forms close to his body. He says it again. 'Perfect.'

Not creepy at all.

When he turns to add our papers to a pile, I take the opportunity to bolt through the turnstiles leading out of college, and power walk to freedom and my sofa. Ruby can have the totes.

