

TWO

SPENCER WAS SECRETLY GRATEFUL THAT her parents had left her in peace for a couple minutes. If the doctors hadn't interfered, they would continue to fuss over her, constantly asking her every five minutes if she needed anything. Sleep. Lots of sleep. Maybe some more pain meds. A snack. And a book, something mindless. Her dad, chronically unable to sit still, went to the bookstore in the hospital lobby, no doubt picking up some reading material for them all, and her mom went to the cafeteria, hopefully grabbing Spencer as much cake and chocolate as her stomach could handle.

It was her younger sister Hope's first day of eighth grade at Santa Monica Middle School, so the lumpy chair she had draped herself in while flipping through channels on the television in the corner for the past week was empty. It had been a chaotic few days since the accident, but Spencer was starting to get into the rhythm of hospital life. Wake up, nurses make the rounds, a dietary aide asks her what she would like to eat for breakfast, eat breakfast that was unfortunately not sugary enough for her unquenchable sweet tooth, nap, check her pain levels, eat lunch, nap again, check

her pain again, dinner, sleep, wake up with a nightmare, sleep, start over the next day.

Perhaps nightmare wasn't the right word. Night terror. Emphasis on the terror.

Scream. Float. Crash.

Memories of that night were still hazy, but the emotion was real. Her mind convinced her body that she was back in Ethan's Porsche, and she'd wake up in a cold sweat, screaming and crying, and the nurses would come running to make sure she wasn't being murdered. She couldn't help it. Flashbacks of the crash felt just the same as the real thing. Sometimes it would take a moment to realize where she was, but it would take hours for her heart to stop hammering in her chest and realize she wasn't actually dying.

It got bad enough that Spencer was afraid to close her eyes. She kept seeing the second before impact over and over again on a nonstop loop. They'd given her sleeping pills to help, but it could only do so much.

But being awake didn't solve her flashbacks, either. She couldn't stop it.

The doctors said she would need time.

While Spencer was alone for a glorious few minutes, she tried not to think about the crash and focused on counting the drop ceiling tiles. Two hundred six, if anyone asked. She was sick and tired of the daytime talk shows on every television channel in existence. Her phone had folded in half in the crash, completely destroyed, so she wasn't able to text anyone, hence her newfound interest in counting tiles.

Her phone had been such a fixture in her hand, sometimes she'd fumble around in the folds of the sheet trying to find it before she remembered that it was gone. She wanted to think about literally anything else other than the wreck that was her life.

Hospitals, in Spencer's opinion, were made for three things: sickness, death, and waiting, the last of which Spencer was extraordinarily familiar with. They'd kept her for a week for observation, and that meant Spencer didn't do much else but be confined to her hospital bed for the better part of week, bored to tears. Already, the skin beneath her cast on her arm was starting to itch. The surgeon had done a good job, at least from what she could tell, putting the bones back into place inside her body where they belonged.

That meant Spencer would have to get used to this cast for the next four weeks at least, plus physical therapy to get back in shape enough for field hockey. She'd played field hockey year-round since she was fourteen, and she wasn't about ready to let a broken arm, wrist, and face stop her now. Even if she did have such a huge gash on her cheek it hurt to even smile.

Voices carried down the hall. They were muffled at first but got clearer as they grew closer.

"Oh, she's my sister, it's okay."

Before the baffled nurse could say anything more, Olivia's smile entered the room first, in her bubbly Olivia way, clutching a fistful of balloons in her hand. Olivia Santos definitely wasn't Spencer's sister, but they might as well have been. Ever

since middle school, they had been next to each other on class attendance sheets, always had their lockers next to each other, and were practically joined at the hip. Muscles she didn't even know were tight loosened in Spencer's back when she saw her best friend in the whole world.

"Wow, you look terrible!" Olivia said with a grin, her cheerful face a welcome difference from the tired and professional expressions of the hospital staff.

"Hey, Liv."

Olivia snapped her gum between her teeth, dark eyebrows rising behind her round, gold-framed glasses. "Dang, you must be on some heavy-duty stuff. That's the best you can say to me?"

Dang. Olivia had the tongue of a sailor, more apt for a pirate with an eye patch and a peg leg. Even though she dressed like a woodland fairy when they weren't in their school uniforms and flitted into any room she entered because simply walking was too boring, she disarmed anyone who wasn't expecting it with her dirty mouth. She only censored herself when she was particularly upset, which was somehow more sobering than Spencer had anticipated.

Spencer hadn't looked at herself in the mirror since the crash, opting to avert her gaze whenever she hobbled to the en suite bathroom, like when she'd spook herself after playing a game of Bloody Mary at a sleepover and she was too afraid to look in the mirror and find out if the legend was true.

If it was as bad as it felt, Spencer didn't need to see.

Every time her fingers accidentally brushed over the stitches across her cheek to wipe away a stray hair, her thoughts immediately went to Frankenstein's monster. Children would see her in the street and scream and run for their lives. She couldn't blame them.

"It's not so bad . . .," she said.

Spencer's eyes went to the IV bag, where more of the drugs were dripping through her veins. It was nice, the outside of her mind was soft and fuzzy, like the edges of a faded photograph.

"You look like you've lost about twenty IQ points. That stuff is making you dumber than you already are."

Their friendship was strong enough to consist of plenty insults-of-love, but Spencer didn't have the frame of mind to reply quickly. She felt like she would float away if not being held down by all these IV lines and weighted blankets.

"You better be bringing me coffee with that kind of roast," Spencer said, her lips lifting in a smile.

Olivia snorted and pulled out a Starbucks mocha-in-a-can from her purse, sweating with condensation and cool from the vending machine, and put it down with a flourish on Spencer's food tray saying, "That better have not been a pun."

"I love you so much," Spencer said, cracking it open.

"Me, or the mocha?"

"It's not mutually exclusive." She always had a sweet tooth.

Olivia snorted and pulled up a chair to sit next to Spencer's bed. If Spencer hadn't gotten into the crash, she and

Olivia would be at the local café, Beans, right now—a ritual during their lunch break at school—and a privilege to go off campus grounds for the hour.

Olivia kicked her shoes off and rested her bare feet on Spencer's bed, as if she wasn't here because her friend had just suffered a traumatic car crash, but like she was lounging at the beach. Her blue toenail polish was chipped. Spencer wasn't sure why she focused on that detail—the painkillers made everything slow down, allowed her to hone her focus on the minor stuff, like seeing the detective's chewed pen cap that first night. She felt like her brain was processing information at half speed.

Spencer took a sip of her mocha and the sweetness of the chocolate instantly made her feel a thousand times better. She had been sick and tired of drinking apple juice out of the little plastic cups they gave her at mealtimes.

"For real, though," Olivia said, "how are you doing?"

"I'm okay. Surgery went well. No scissors left inside me, I'd call that a major win." She wiggled her fingers in her cast.

Olivia's eyes went to Spencer's cast. "I don't just mean your arm."

Spencer's lip twitched when she tried to smile. Blink. *Scream. Float. Crash.* The memory hit her just as quickly as the car hit the tree. She should never play poker; she wore her emotions on her face like a bright neon sign. "It's whatever."

That really was all she remembered of the crash.

Everything else was too out of her reach. Scrubbed clean. A blank slate.

Olivia's full lips were pressed into a thin line, but she didn't ask any more about it. From her purse, she pulled out a purple Sharpie. Olivia's bag was like Mary Poppins's, a nether realm of infinite space. Sometimes Spencer wondered what she *didn't* have in there—a severed and cursed human hand, a toboggan, the secrets of the universe? Olivia began absently drawing on Spencer's cast. She'd broken her left arm and shoulder in the crash, her dominant arm. Olivia decorating her cast would at least be an aesthetically pleasing temporary art piece in the meantime.

Olivia was a gifted artist, having won a series of art contests at Armstrong, her usual medium being charcoal, but her talent wasn't lost on the groove of Spencer's cast.

"Sorry I couldn't come see you earlier," Olivia said without looking up from her work. "They wouldn't let non-immediate family members in at first."

"I would have said you were my sister too, for the record."

"You better! We're practically twins."

"It's nice having you here. Things have been a little strict and all. Cops everywhere, trying to figure out what happened."

Olivia nodded, soberly. "You really don't remember anything?"

"We talked to a neurologist, and a ton of doctors; they ran a bunch of tests. Apparently it's really common with

head injuries after these kinds of accidents. I might get my memories back, I might not.”

“Don’t stress about it. Just don’t hit your head anymore. You need all the brain cells you have left.”

Spencer tugged on the end of Olivia’s straight, platinum-dyed bob but let out a breathy laugh. Olivia swatted her hand away and stuck out her tongue.

“For real, though,” she said, “do you remember that night?”

Spencer shook her head. “I remember the party. But, like, bits and pieces. I remember a fight with Ethan . . .” Olivia raised her eyebrows ever so slightly at that, but Spencer didn’t point it out. Olivia always had opinions about Ethan, but she had kept them to herself, resigning herself to only the language of her eyebrows to indicate any sort of feeling.

Olivia hadn’t been at the party. Though they were best friends, they didn’t do absolutely everything together. Olivia’s definition of fun ended promptly at teenage she-nanigans and loud drunk people. Spencer simultaneously wished Olivia had been there, just so they could talk about it, but she also regretted that she hadn’t decided to stay in with Olivia instead.

Spencer still couldn’t wrap her head around the fact that Ethan had been charged for the crash. She’d heard police officers talking about it outside her hospital room a few days earlier. The tips of her ears burned at hearing his name. At one point not too long ago, her stomach swooshed with

excitement hearing it. Now his name just left her feeling bitter.

“After that, I don’t remember anything except, like, flashes. It’s hard to explain. Like, I blink, and sometimes I remember it, the tree coming right at me. But the rest is just blank.” *What with a literal gallon of painkillers coursing through my veins*, she thought.

“But you know about Chris, right?”

“Yeah. I know.” The words felt like they took up a lot of space in her throat, and she had a hard time swallowing. She couldn’t even take a sip of her mocha.

Chris Moore, everyone’s little brother, had been pronounced dead at the scene. Killed instantly, was how everyone put it, taking away the implied edge of suffering. She didn’t want to imagine the circumstances that would kill a person instantly, so she fought to keep that thought away.

It was hard for her to believe he was dead. Spencer could still see Chris’s lopsided grin in her mind’s eye. He was the son of one of her favorite teachers, Mr. Moore, and she’d seen the family resemblance from the start. Thinking he was dead now didn’t feel right, like it was a fact she needed to disprove somehow because she’d just seen him the other day! He’d come to the Brain Freeze, the ice cream kiosk that she and Olivia worked at part-time and on weekends, and he’d ordered a large chocolate-dipped cone, extra sprinkles.

He couldn’t be gone, that just didn’t happen to kids their age. And yet it was true; otherwise Ethan wouldn’t be in so much trouble.

Oh, Ethan . . . Her stomach clenched wondering where he was now. It was a miracle he'd been able to walk away from the wreck with only a couple of scrapes, whiplash, and a broken nose. He was lucky. The bastard.

Spencer hadn't known Chris too well, of course, because he was two years younger than she was, but they mingled in the same circles, even though he was an AV kid glued to his computer.

"His funeral was today," Olivia said quietly, not looking from her work on Spencer's cast.

There was nothing to say to that. Olivia cleared her throat and started coloring in the alien creature's face on Spencer's cast with crosshatch strokes.

No one expected Spencer to be at the funeral. She was still too injured to go anywhere except the five feet it took to get to the bathroom and back. The doctors were still concerned about her concussion and resulting memory loss. The last thing they wanted was for her to fall unconscious while in their care. The funeral was off-limits. She doubted Chris's parents would want to see her anyway. Seeing her might have been a bitter reminder of what their son wasn't—alive.

Olivia didn't mention Chris again the whole time she decorated Spencer's cast. Spencer had let a rerun episode of Steve Irwin's excitement over a venomous snake fill in the silence. In Olivia's own words, she didn't do well in the whole "expressing one's feelings" department; she'd rather put it on paper with charcoal. Spencer focused on her drink

and finished it just as Olivia started sketching the outlines of a tentacled monster wrapping itself around Spencer's wrist.

In a mood to change the subject, Spencer asked, "How's the first week of school?"

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Typical. Spencer Sandoval gets into a freaking car crash and all she can think about is school and homework. Be normal, Miss Overachiever."

Spencer didn't deny it. Overachieving was in her DNA. "Please! It'll make me feel like everything's the way it used to be for a little bit." Spencer was one of the top students in her class, earning a coveted position on the Headmaster's List—the alumni of which went on to become Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists, esteemed artists, even US senators vying for the presidency. She'd worked hard for it.

Olivia didn't put up a fight. Who could argue with a bruised and bloodied girl in a cast? "Well, Becca Thompson got that nose job she was talking about. We've got a sub for history since Mr. Moore, you know, because . . . And the whole school is talking about the crash, like it's the next . . . Maybe we shouldn't talk about it." She went back to her drawing.

"What are they saying?" Spencer knew from her tone that it wasn't going to be good.

Olivia looked hesitant.

"Come on, I've got no connection to the outside world. I need to know."

Olivia took a long second, cringed, and said, "Let's just say people are . . . *happy* to see Ethan get arrested. Like, almost

rabid with excitement. There was this viral video that went around online of the cops taking him out in handcuffs and people made memes and stuff. I just think it's so crass. I mean a kid died, why do we treat this like some reality TV show? I know we live in LA, but come on."

Spencer's stomach dropped as Olivia spoke. A chill streaked down her back and she suppressed a shiver. *Scream. Float. Crash.* All other details hazy, but she could relive those few seconds over and over again without any control. Breaking up with Ethan that night was still as raw as the gash in her cheek. She remembered that much, but only bits and pieces of their fight before the crash. Breaking up with Ethan had hurt deeper than any physical pain she'd experienced.

When she wasn't remembering the crash, she was remembering the way Ethan had broken her heart.

"That junior, Peyton Salt?" Olivia said. "The one with the podcast. She's all over the story like it's her own ticket to fame. She's milking what happened for her own credibility. It's gross. She's making it seem like it's this story, and . . . well, it's working. Ethan is a bad guy everyone can hate."

It had been an accident. Why were people acting like Ethan had meant to hurt anyone? Sure, he drove a little too fast sometimes, and he got a few tickets now and again, but he wasn't a monster. Spencer and Ethan dated for two years, even when he was sent away to a behavioral rehabilitation camp. Two years of movie nights, and Valentine's Day presents, and texts goodnight. He had always been wild, full of

life, and had a way of sending a thrill down her spine, but did people really hate him that much?

Olivia sighed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to unload all of that on you.” As if sensing the shadow looming over Spencer’s head, Olivia tried to lighten the mood. “You’d be happy to know that I’ve got a metric ton of homework for you in my bag, so you’ve got something to do, you crazy person.”

Spencer smiled ever so slightly.