

# CHAPTER ONE



**S**orrow was a witch.

Today is named for her—our whole town is named after her—but really, she’s just a convenient mythical excuse for people to get drunk and dance around on the beach. This morning I woke early, restless, like a kid waiting for Santa Claus, anticipating something special, something worth believing in. Except today isn’t Christmas, it’s the Day of Sorrow. It’s not the witch I care about— that’s only a story. It’s because today also happens to be my birthday, but I’m not excited about that. Not really.

It doesn’t feel like a birthday if we aren’t all together.

As I tug on my plaid skirt and white blouse, into the pinpoint-sharp corners of my memory comes a reel of celebrations: voices ringing out the birthday song; candles on giant cakes; laughter and gifts. Right now, hidden in the back corner of an old jewelry box, a silver

spoon ring Georgina gave me—identical to the others. She and I don't talk anymore, but I still have that damn ring. I have other things to remember her by—to remember all five of them by.

*We used to be worth believing in.*

I shake my head, pushing aside thoughts I don't need to fixate on right now, and I find my tie, fighting the violent urge to fling it off my balcony instead of putting it on. As I loop it under the collar of my blouse, my phone dings. A text, from Reuel, my best friend.

Happy birthday!! Gonna be late I overslept and can't find my stupid bloomers!!!

With a grin, I type back to her, *go commando*

The dots move, and up pops a sad emoji. A second later: *okay if I just meet you there?*

*Dislike*, I write, then add, *jk yeah it's fine happy birthday too xo*

I set the phone on my faded patchwork quilt and finish getting ready for school, raking a hand through my blue waves. I pause in front of my cheap full-length mirror with the fake sunflowers Reuel and I hot-glued to the frame, and I slather my lips with my favorite rum-raisin lipstick. My mouth is pulled down, and I tug it up, my smile a shade too wide—a Julia Roberts mouth, my mama says. Just like hers.

Even when I'm relaxed, my face ends up moving into a crooked scowl, my eyes naturally narrowing, my mouth telling the world I'm a little bit angry, all the time, even when I don't mean to be. I drop the smile. It is what it is.

I gather my phone and other things before slinging the straps of my bag over my shoulder; then I head downstairs, not bothering to be quiet in my clunky black loafers. I clomp down each step. So what if it wakes her?

In the kitchen, a small pang in my heart as I reach in the fridge to take out a store-brand string cheese and then an apple—red as blood—because just once, why can't I come down to a dozen warm muffins? Some scrambled eggs and butter toast? Something? Anything?

She doesn't know how to cook, she says. A flimsy excuse.

Because don't I remember? Pots of soup and casseroles and cookies spread on a pan?

Once upon a time she took care of me. My belly aches with the memory. Or maybe it's just my bad mood, drifting to my middle, pooling outward. It's my fucking birthday, and my mother is here, but she's not *here*. I shove the cheese in my bag and take a hostile bite of apple as I walk out of the house, banging the screen door behind me and entering the spring morning. I step down from the rickety porch with the peeling sage-colored paint. Leave our old farmhouse and eat my apple as I walk the gravel drive. Through the long stretch of green, green grass, my shoes going wet with dew, before I hit more houses. Through the cypress-thick park, where I chuck the core in a trash can; then I continue past Sorrow's only cemetery, with Reuel's home not far from it, but I don't sidetrack to meet her like usual. This morning I'm on my own.

I swallow any sort of self-pity. I may be alone, in this moment, but I'm not *alone*. I have Reuel, and tonight while our town partakes in holiday traditions—lighting bonfires on the beach and burning wishes—we will ring in our sixteenth birthday together, the two of us.

As I march forward, my mood brightens at the prospect of a half day and then spring break. My wretched uniform doesn't even bother me so much, when I know I can rip it off and change in just a few hours. Birds sing, and the morning air blows against my face, warm and damp, tasting of sunshine and fresh beginnings, and suddenly everything doesn't seem so grim. Nearby, someone is mowing their lawn, the scent grassy, sharp—one of my favorites. I bypass the familiar but slightly longer route through downtown that Reuel and I usually take.

When I reach the brick building of Our Lady of Sorrow High School, I ease past clusters of students lingering, friends walking together, conversation and excitement buzzing in the air—everyone is smiley and full of energy today—and I go in alone. I arrive at my ugly peach locker moments before the first-hour warning bell rings. As I'm putting my backpack inside, a leggy, black-haired girl comes tearing down the hall, pushing past the crush of people heading in the opposite direction, pom-poms clutched in one hand. Reuel. I can *feel* myself lighten at the sight of her. And when she spots me, she

grins, like she feels the exact same way. We are each other's safety. Sunshine. Home.

"Hi," my best friend pants as she reaches me, her hair ribbons crooked. "Shit."

"You're late," I warn her, glancing at the clock. "Aren't you supposed to be in the locker room by now?"

"I made it on time. Pretty much. I'm only a little late."

I snort, tugging at my maroon blazer, hating the itchy feel against my skin, against the back of my neck. "Put your stuff in my locker, then you don't gotta run all the way upstairs."

"Lifesaver." Her smile is grateful as she dumps her bag into my locker, shoving it with her foot for good measure, her thick white sock scrunched lower than the other.

I give her cheerleading uniform the once-over. It looks like she just managed to throw it on about five minutes ago. When she bends forward to push her bag in farther, I grab the zipper of her shell, tugging to close the inch-long gap she missed. Her skin is like cream against the red.

Reuel scoots to make room for the freshman trying to get into her own locker beside me, and I ask, teasing, "Find your bloomers?"

She glances at the girl next to us, distracted with her belongings, then gives me a wicked grin and flashes her skirt up. Black undies, not the cheerleading bloomers she's *supposed* to wear.

A laugh bubbles out of me, but it sounds strained. I close my locker door and spin the lock before tugging on her elbow. "Come on, we better hurry. Or you better."

We speed-walk down the hall, and she asks, "What is it? Birthday stuff?" She knows me too well. I shrug and she says good-naturedly, "You better not be grumpy tonight. We're not just gonna sit in my bedroom and watch *Twilight* for the millionth time. It's not even that good."

"Hello?" I raise my brows—*Twilight's* one of our *things*. "Kristen Stewart makes it good?"

"Okay," Reuel concedes as we jog the last stretch down the hall, carefully weaving around groups of students, teachers. "But, Iz, forget about them." *Them*. She means the other four girls. She

pauses just inside the entrance to the gym, and her voice goes softer. “We’re still here, aren’t we?”

I sigh, feeling like a brat. “Of course.”

“Good. And maybe I’ll get you to actually have fun tonight. I consider it my personal mission,” she says, walking backward toward the locker room, humbly laying a hand over her heart, her black, coffin-shaped nails dramatic against the deep-red fabric.

“Ha,” I say, giving in to her charms, nodding. “We’ll see.”

“It will be,” she insists, calling louder, over the din starting as the gym fills up. “And if you decide you wanna go track down a party, I’m sure we can find a dozen options.”

“Yeah! Party!” shouts some senior with big muscles and an even bigger voice. His friends cheer, they push each other rowdily. People will use any excuse to celebrate, including centuries-old mythology—not that I blame them. What else is there to do here?

I’m jostled by students trying to get to the bleachers but call good luck to Reuel.

She looks back with a bright smile and yells, “Thanks!” With that she runs off, headed toward the locker room door, where her coach is peeking out, frowning.

“Sorry!” Reuel tells the disapproving woman, and I shake my head fondly, turning away and to the bleachers. I follow the kid in front of me to a spot in the third row and sit, staring around, a little impressed. I think they went even more all-out than freshman year.

A high school gymnasium will always look slightly depressing, but ours has been strung with red streamers and filled with black balloons. The band is enthusiastically playing a Queen song and everyone filing in has a bounce in their step—the cheerleaders literally *are* bouncing now, as they run onto the sidelines into a two-row formation to warm up, Reuel last to hurry over, looking sheepish.

And of course, I can’t *not* see Georgina, skipping over to stand beside August. August, legs for days, deep terra-cotta skin, a sparkly bow perched atop her long twists. She could be a model—the next Naomi Campbell, who August used to be obsessed with—if she weren’t planning on being a doctor. Or maybe she *isn’t* planning on it anymore. I don’t know her now, do I?

As I watch the two of them moving to the front row of cheerleaders, all of them ready to pep-rally us into break, I catch myself digging my chipped jade-green nails into my palm. I purposely loosen my hands and exhale, finding Reuel's face in the line. They're not my friends anymore. But she is. She shakes one tinselly red-and-black-and-silver pom at me.

Smiling, I focus on Reuel, refusing to look at who is standing in front of her as they do their sideline routine, warming themselves up before the main event. Why would I? I know they won't look at me.

Someone brushes against my side, and in the space left between me and some other sophomores down the bench, Bridger Leland plops down, grinning. "Hey."

"Hey," I say back at my classmate from art, smiling warmly. His black curls are slightly damp, a faint rosemary smell coming off him.

"Doing anything tonight?" he asks after a moment.

"Not really." I shake my head. "I'm not big on bonfires." My whole life, I've had an unexplainable fear of fires burning out of control, but I don't tell him that.

His brown eyes are warm. Amused. "I mean for your birthday."

My cheeks heat. I don't like to make a big deal about it, now that we're not the six of us any longer, and even before that ... it *is* such an odd thing, even I can admit that, and I never loved the attention our day of birth drew to us. Besides, I always felt if we didn't share a birthday, we'd be friends anyway, so why focus on that? Now? I realize that even that strange commonality wasn't a strong enough bond to keep the six of us together. I fidget and pull my hair up into a messy bun, finally answer Bridger, "Reuel and I are hanging out, that's it."

She and a nonbinary junior twirl and position themselves back to back and start doing flawless toe touches to the beat. Reuel's facing us, screaming for our school, our town, our legends. It was a surprise when she tried out, not at all that she made the squad. She looks bold and striking, the edge to her, the sarcastic curl of her cherry-red lips when she cheers, as if she somehow finds it all a great big joke but loves it anyway.

I cup my hands around my mouth and holler. Next to me, Bridger claps.

But thoughts about the other girls invade my mind. About today. About what we've lost. Georgina's epic parties, always something amazing to commemorate our births. Sleepovers and spa days and all sorts of fun. Georgina will probably have a party tonight, under the guise of celebrating the Day of Sorrow or not. Of course, we won't be invited. Georgina and August are friendly to Reuel, because of cheerleading, or at least they're civil to her. Me? It's like we're strangers now. Like the six of us didn't used to say we were all soul mates.

"What about you?" I ask, turning back to Bridger. His uniform tie is crooked, charmingly so. "Party or something?"

His dark-bronze cheeks crinkle with dimples when he smiles, ever easygoing. "Yeah. Going to the beach with Grady."

Grady. I smile after a delayed moment. "Cool."

"I like the blue." He points to my hair, strands falling around my face. "That's new, right? What'd you call it before?"

"Lavender? Light purple?" I hold back a laugh. For an artist this boy has a shit sense of color. "Thanks. What are you doing the rest of break?"

"Working at the garage."

I nod. I don't know Bridger *that* well, but I know some things. He's liked trains since kindergarten. He spent last summer in China, where his grandpa is from, and he's also half Black. His dad has a garage where he works part-time, and his mom ran off when he was little. We have a-parent-ditched-us in common. Plus art. He's more creative than me, though—I don't even know where he gets his ideas sometimes.

Just as easily as he sat down, Bridger rises, shrugging. "I've seen enough. Gonna go work on my project."

Smiling, I say, "See ya," and watch him climb down the bleachers, slip out of the gym as if nobody else can see him or cares that he's leaving. And it's kinda like nobody can or does. Bridger helps in the office as an aide for a credit, so he's one of the first people you see when you walk in this building, and our school's not even that large—but there are still people who forget his name and face. Bridger could make a *killing* as a jewel thief or something, sneaking in and

out of high-security places, unnoticed ... if he didn't have a moral compass pointed straight north, that is.

Without the distraction of him now, though, it's like I can't help myself, despite my best intentions. I look around. Count us out—even if we aren't *us* anymore.

*One.* Me. Obviously.

*Two,* on the next set of bleachers over, I pick out one girl, glossy midnight hair pulled into a stylishly messy updo—Solaina, sitting with one of her friends from lit club. My mom works at the salon Solaina's mother, Marisa, owns. The two of them are actually close. But not us. Not any longer.

*Three,* a row from Solaina, a freckle-faced ginger, her virgin ponytail brushing the back of her blazer—Cori, who happens to be Georgina's cousin. Cori is cake, sweet and soft.

Reuel (*Four*). The only one I can count on, and of course she'd say the same of me.

And on the court with her, the pair of them, doing their routine in perfect harmony. *Five:* August Archer. And *Six.* Georgina Boudreau. Queen Bee. I could close my eyes and still see her. That smooth, milky complexion, her French manicure—real nails that never, ever seem to chip. The A+ papers, tucked somewhere in her expensive backpack.

Friendships die every day, but ours was never supposed to. The six of us were linked from the womb, fated to be friends, we thought. Once in a while I wonder why we would've been brought together only to be ripped asunder. But ripped implies passion, intent, reason. We fell apart like wet paper, more like. Some of us seem to care more than others.

As if on cue, Georgina gets tossed in the air.

Even if she weren't defying gravity, she'd command attention. A tiny, terrible military general. It's like slow motion, the way she floats down, nailing a flawless landing. In unison, all the cheerleaders hit their final pose, and the crowd erupts in wild applause. The squad spills off the court while the drama club runs out, to a slightly less enthusiastic reaction.

We sit through a skit about Sorrow fleeing persecution and founding this town centuries ago. If you ignore the bad wigs and



patched-up costumes, and the fact that it's all just generic regurgitation we've heard a million times before, it's actually not too awful. Then it's the boys' basketball team, doing a series of layups to "Uptown Funk." By the time they finish, the energy in the gym is palpable, everyone buzzing with enthusiasm. I give in to it, yelling right along with the rest of the students and staff. Why not? So what if it's *their* birthday too?

It doesn't make it any less mine.

We stamp our feet and whoop when members of the student council run along the bleachers and toss fistfuls of candy from buckets. A Blow Pop ricochets off the head of the boy in front of me and I stifle a giggle as it falls into my lap.

"You okay?" I tap him, and he laughs it off. I grin, peel off the wrapping, and stick the sucker in my mouth. Green apple. I don't know why apples are a tradition for today. Nobody in Sorrow even believes in the witch anymore—at least for the last few generations—but we still partake in the traditions, and we still love it. What's not to love about apple treats and parties and joy? Of course, the promise of spring break might be contributing to the students' feral exhilaration. I'm already anticipating hours lazing about, drawing. Spent with Reuel. Days to sleep in. To be free.

Our principal, Mr. Bruns, with his balding tan head and his tan suit, comes out and gives a speech—an exact replica of the one I heard last year, I think—thanking the band and the cheerleaders, the teachers, the drama club, the basketball team, all of us students. Even his *voice* is tan. Blah. I drown him out until it's clear he's wrapping up the talk.

"As we end our shortened day, and head into spring break later, please make sure you clean out your lockers and remove any food items or important things you may need. And, as always"—he pauses, mustering up the most enthusiasm I've ever seen from him, his thin lips turning up at the corners minutely—"let's give a big show of excitement for today! Everyone stay safe and healthy—watch those fires, now. We'll see y'all next Thursday."

A smile spreads on my face. It's not even the things I get to add to my life without the confines of school. It's the things I will get to remove, even if our break isn't even a whole week. Six glorious days

with no school and no math. No itchy blazer. No ex-friends. No Georgina.

Exhilarated, I rise with the other students and shuffle out of the bleachers, forming a line to flow, kids dancing their way out of the gym. In the commotion, someone bumps into me and I get pushed out of the line ... and run right into Georgina.

I take a quick step back before I realize how it looks, how *weak* it makes me look. To put distance between us, I tell myself, not because I'm intimidated by her. But face to face like this, maybe that's a lie. She somehow *looks* more intimidating, more disapproving in her crisp uniform, the V-neck, the hint of flat midriff barely peeking out, sneakers snow white, bloomers hidden under her cheer skirt and probably still ironed. More intimidating, the way she's staring at me. Like I'm drawn with invisible ink. Like I'm being heated into existence and she'd rather I not.

August walks up, oblivious, eyes on her bestie, but her smile falters when she spots me. She looks even better in their uniform, her height and willowy figure carrying it well. As she glances from me to Georgina, her face is uncertain, like she's wondering if she interrupted something. Nobody says anything. The gym is emptying out, students flooding the halls to head to a shortened second hour. And soon the three of us could be alone in here. Won't someone say *something*?

I lift my chin. "Hi."

Like usual, I get nothing from Georgina. Not a smile, not a flicker of compassion or recognition in her gaze. Praline-brown eyes that lack warmth—that actually manage to look chilly. But she's not rude enough to ignore me completely ... I don't think. I never actually *speak* to her. Just when I'm beginning to wonder if I imagined greeting them, Georgina's lips lift in acknowledgment.

"Blue, hmm?" Her smile is sweet, as sticky and sugary as her voice. She slow-glances at my hair. "How fun. Reminds me of a snow cone."

Before I can help it, stunned silent by her snark, my hand reaches up to touch the crown of my head. I'd describe the color as snow-cone blue too. But I don't want *Georgina* to.

With that obvious win, she gives me one last pointed smile, flouncing away with August beside her, their cheeky bloomers peeking out the back of their cute, swinging skirts. Nothing was said about what today is. Of course not. What did I expect? *Happy birthday, Iz? We miss you, Iz? I'm sorry, Iz?*

Face burning, I follow them with my gaze. Midway to the door, they both pause to meet up with Cori, a curvy Amazonian goddess with golden retriever energy. While their backs are turned, Cori notices me watching, gives me a guilty smile, mouthing *Happy birthday*. It should make me feel better, at least, the acknowledgment. A little bit, it does. I give her a half-hearted nod. *You too*. Cori was always the kindest, but she won't rock the boat too much, won't go against her cousin. Georgina hates me for some reason now. I just never figured out exactly why. Well, fine. I hate her, too.

Impatiently, I turn to find Reuel, who's talking to her coach, nodding along. I can't interrupt them. She's probably getting yelled at for being late. It's not the first time. She sees me waiting and gives me a barely perceptible head shake. *Go on without me*, it means.

Georgina's laugh echoes as the three of them go off together, leaving the gym and me behind. Somewhere, Solaina is with *her* friends, kids from lit club, yearbook staff. We're all happy with our new lives, aren't we?

Except I remember when we held each other through life's misfortunes. When we laughed so hard, we cried. When we played Barbies in Georgina's basement. Remember when she sobbed in my arms when she got stung by a wasp. When her baby brother was born still. When we were *us*. Remember. Remember. Remember.

But I don't care. I'm *fine*. Screw Georgina. I hope she gets chia seeds in her teeth today. Smoothie-bowl-eating snob. She doesn't miss me. None of them do.

So why do I ache a little? Why do I still miss *them*?

I erase them from my thoughts. And I walk on to second hour alone, the fake tart-apple taste cloying on my tongue, choking me.