

THE SPIRAL KEY

KELSEY DAY



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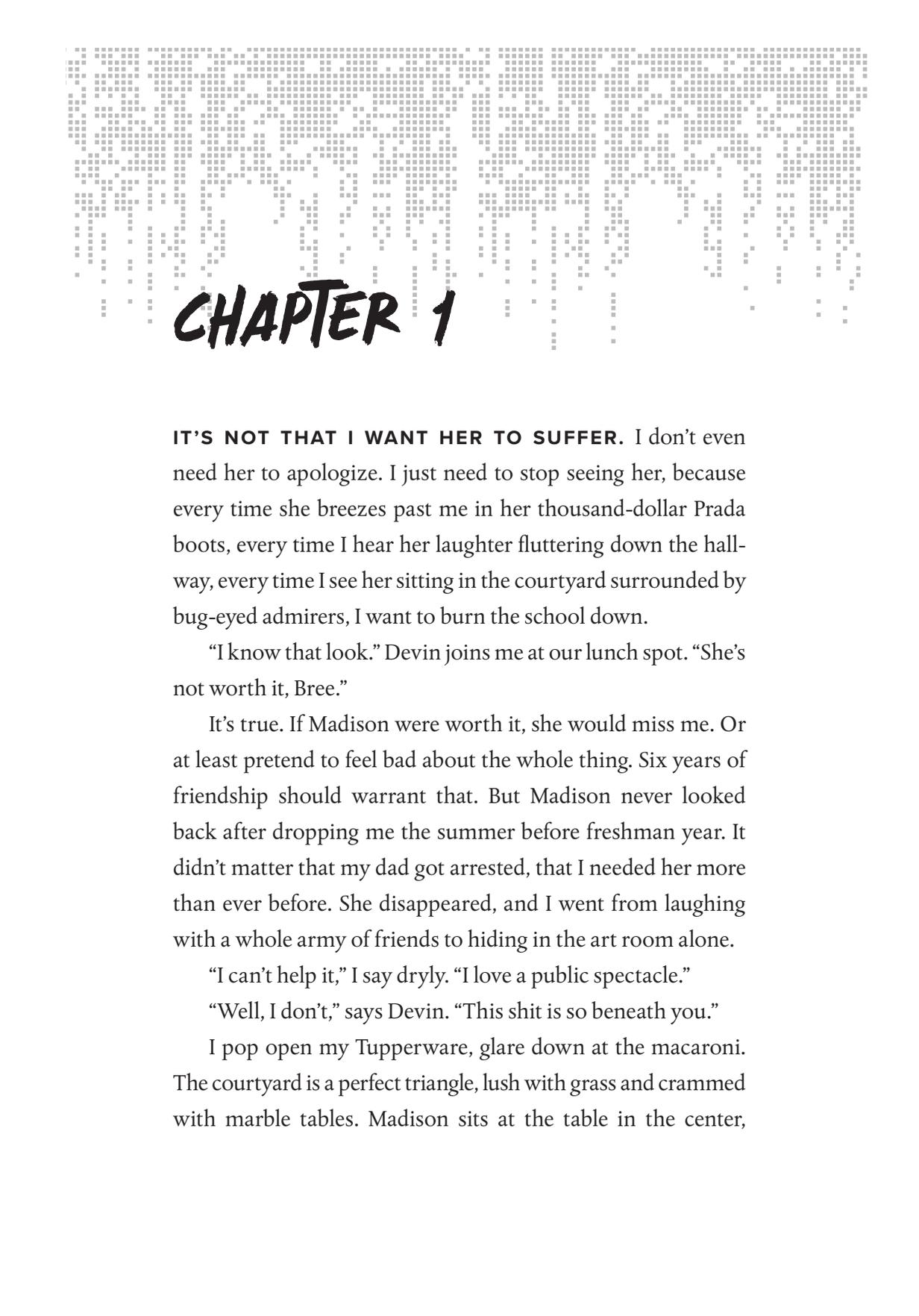
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for my friends, past and present



CHAPTER 1

IT'S NOT THAT I WANT HER TO SUFFER. I don't even need her to apologize. I just need to stop seeing her, because every time she breezes past me in her thousand-dollar Prada boots, every time I hear her laughter fluttering down the hallway, every time I see her sitting in the courtyard surrounded by bug-eyed admirers, I want to burn the school down.

"I know that look." Devin joins me at our lunch spot. "She's not worth it, Bree."

It's true. If Madison were worth it, she would miss me. Or at least pretend to feel bad about the whole thing. Six years of friendship should warrant that. But Madison never looked back after dropping me the summer before freshman year. It didn't matter that my dad got arrested, that I needed her more than ever before. She disappeared, and I went from laughing with a whole army of friends to hiding in the art room alone.

"I can't help it," I say dryly. "I love a public spectacle."

"Well, I don't," says Devin. "This shit is so beneath you."

I pop open my Tupperware, glare down at the macaroni. The courtyard is a perfect triangle, lush with grass and crammed with marble tables. Madison sits at the table in the center,

KELSEY DAY

surrounded by her usual group. Her silver-dyed hair ripples past her pale shoulders as she talks.

“We can go inside, if you want,” says Devin. “We don’t *have* to sit here staring at her.”

“And miss the big reveal?”

Devin shoots me an irritated look. “Be sarcastic all you want. But you’re doing this to yourself.”

I’m not the only one. The whole school has been watching Madison this week, because this is when the invitations go out. Every year since starting high school, she’s thrown the most expensive, exciting birthday party in the city—and I have never once been invited.

“I wish people could see her for who she is,” I say.

“And who’s that?”

The word *traitor* comes to mind. “I don’t know anymore.”

A dark-haired freshman approaches Madison’s table. Tension tightens through the courtyard, draws up shoulders. The freshman carries a plastic take-out bag with both hands. Collectively, the courtyard stares. It’s like a nature documentary, where the zebra is oblivious to the lion.

“Should we stop her?” Devin covers his face with his hands. “This is so cringey.”

“No way,” I say. “At least now they’re not looking at us.”

This is the worst time of year, when people are most desperate to get on Madison’s good side. To appease her, everyone

THE SPIRAL KEY

but Devin acts like I have a rare but deadly disease—like they're terrified to approach but still can't help staring.

When Madison posted a sneak peek of invitations on her finsta story last Tuesday, it sent the school into a frenzy. One word whispered again and again like an incantation: *Ametrine*. *Ametrine*, the multimillion-dollar virtual world designed by Madison's parents. As in, *I've heard celebrities visit Ametrine*. Or, *I heard Microsoft tried to buy Ametrine*. Or, *I heard drinking laws don't apply in Ametrine*. It's the only game that the Pembrokes refuse to sell to the public. A place created for one use and one use only: Madison's perfect party.

An invitation means more than an amazing night. Receiving one sends ripples through the school's entire ecosystem. The social order bends around who has one, who doesn't, who might get one, who almost did but didn't. It's all a game of proximity—how to get closer to Madison . . . and further from me.

Madison and her friends fall silent as the freshman extends the take-out bag.

"I heard you like La Famiglia, in the North End." Her voice doesn't tremble. She stands straight as an iron rod. "My dad went into the city this morning and I had him pick this up for you."

Devin groans into his hands, and I grip his thigh under the table.

Madison tilts her head. Her friends—Everly, Chet, and

KELSEY DAY

Kyle—freeze, waiting for her reaction. Nobody moves until she smiles.

God, that smile. Clouds parting, angels screaming. The gift-giver relaxes. The courtyard collectively breathes out.

“Thank you,” Madison says. She turns to the rest of us, and I swear we make eye contact for a brief moment. “I suppose this is as good a time as any. The invitations this year will, as always, come in the form of . . .” She reaches into her skirt pocket. “A spiral key. These keys represent unlocking the door to your future. It’s our senior year, guys. My last high school party. It’s going to be more amazing than anything we’ve done before.”

She holds up a key so the autumn sunlight flicks against the metal. The teeth of the key are twisted so they look like screws. Fine. *Spirals*.

I was thirteen the last time we celebrated her birthday together. We ate Walmart sheet cake on her bedroom floor and watched *The Great British Baking Show*. Sour vanilla, stolen beer, laughing loud enough to shake the walls. This was before her mom’s tech company exploded—before she became a billionaire-in-waiting and upgraded her social life. Before Ev-erly and Chet became the center of her world, the ones she brought on family vacations to the Maldives and spent weekends with at her parents’ mansion.

A low ache presses against my rib cage.

Devin whispers, “Do you want to get out of here?”

I shake my head. If we leave now, it’ll be obvious why.

THE SPIRAL KEY

“Bree, come on,” he insists. “Watching her drama makes you miserable. Can we just—”

“Shh!” I hiss. He’s right, but it doesn’t matter. Every September I monitor the invite list as obsessively as the rest of the school. I keep tabs on the gossip, the rumors. It’s like if I keep track of it all, I’m more in control somehow. I did the same after my dad’s arrest. *He wasn’t only drunk, he was high on cocaine when he hit Mr. Greene. He’s collected at least twelve other DUIs, and that’s why Madison won’t associate with their family anymore.* Like, if I have all the data, I won’t be betrayed again.

Some aspects of the invite list are predictable. Her immediate squad is a no-brainer, and she tends to invite obvious choices like the class president and top athletes. She explicitly excludes me and most underclassmen. Then there are about twelve wild cards that she gives out and revokes at her discretion. Freshman year, she gave someone an invitation in exchange for doing her psychology homework. Last year, Robert Gray got their invitation revoked for sitting next to me at the lunch table.

Standing before Madison, the freshman looks sick with hope.

Madison turns the key over in her hands. She offers an elusive smile, meeting the freshman’s gaze for half a breath, then looks back at her friends. “Everly,” she says, setting it in her palm. “You were the easiest choice. You’ve always been my number one.”

KELSEY DAY

Anger gnaws through my chest. I dig my thumbnail into a crack in the marble table.

Everly's dark skin glows under the courtyard's attention. She makes a kissy face, hamming it up, and Madison swats at her, laughing. Then she reaches back into her skirt pocket and hands a key to Chet.

"Chet, you are my rock," she says, ruffling his blond hair. He scrambles to fix it as she turns to Kyle, the final member of her inner circle. "And Kyle. We took a chance, inviting you to the party last year. But you have totally proved yourself. Now I don't know what we would do without you."

Kyle's place in the friend group never made sense to me. I mean, he's a *junior*, and not even a cute one. Mousy orange hair, pale cheeks crowded with acne, his dark green uniform perpetually wrinkled. But there's no denying his status. Like everyone else in the inner circle, a streak of his hair is dyed silver, to match Madison's.

She hands him a key and glides back to her seat next to Everly. "This looks amazing." Madison reaches into the take-out bag, as if she might magically produce another key. The freshman inches closer. Madison rustles around theatrically for a good thirty seconds, then finally looks up at the girl, empty-handed. "Oh," she says, laughing. "You forgot the forks. Can you grab us some from the cafeteria?"

The girl's face falls. Everly and Chet burst out laughing.
"Christ," I mutter.

THE SPIRAL KEY

“Stone-cold,” says Devin. The attention of the courtyard diffuses as people break into murmurs and turn back to their own tables. He stands, gesturing for me to leave with him. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I just have to get through this week,” I say as I shove my lunch into my backpack.

We slip out of the courtyard and back into the main building, navigating to our next class. Devin holds open the tall glass door for me, touching my back as I pass through. Inside, white walls blare down the hallway—no decorations, no inspirational posters. Even the lockers are painted a smooth, pearly white. It’s a look that says, *This isn’t high school. This is a training ground for the Ivy League.* Lincoln Academy doesn’t have time for *colors*.

The air-conditioning razes down my back, goose bumps spreading across my arms. Devin pulls me to the side of the hall and takes my hand. He rubs his thumb between my fingers. “Hey,” he says.

That’s all it takes. Immediately I want to cry. Heat rushes to my eyes and my throat closes. I look down, blinking fast.

He tips my chin up. “Hey,” he says again. “Look at me.”

It never feels like Devin looks *at* me—he looks *into* me. It’s the scariest and the most wonderful thing about him. Meeting his gaze is like peering over the edge of a cliff. My stomach curls up, my heart squeezes, and I can barely think straight because he’s so unfairly beautiful, both feminine and masculine all at once. It’s the kind of beauty that sneaks up on you, unflattering

KELSEY DAY

on camera but impossible to look away from in person. Freckles splatter along his cheekbones and his dark hair falls down past his shoulders. He wears his uniform with the sleeves rolled up, his nails painted purple to match my hair.

I raise my eyes.

“Thank you,” he murmurs. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “You know it’s okay to be upset, right? Whatever you’re feeling right now, it’s okay.”

“I’m sick of caring about her,” I say. “It’s been three years. Why does this shit still hurt?”

He draws me into a hug, and I press my nose into the warmth of his shoulder. He smells like Tide and pine-scented deodorant. I breathe in, out. In, out. His lips brush against my neck, then find my mouth. I kiss him back, gently. Sometimes I love him so much it’s painful.

A yell bursts out behind us. I jerk back, spinning toward the sound. “What the—”

A gangly kid with a black ski mask over his head streaks through the hallway, winding between students. Startled shouts flare up across the hall as the figure sprints past, then screeches to a stop next to Mark Sato’s locker.

Mark plays it cool. He always plays it cool—I don’t know if he’s capable of being surprised. Most kids here don’t have to worry about money, but he’s on a different level, second only to Madison.

“Hey, dude,” he says to the masked student.

THE SPIRAL KEY

The student silently drops a key and a notecard into Mark's hands.

"Uh, thanks," says Mark.

Someone across the hall calls out, "Fourth year in a row!"

Mark raises the key with a bewildered smile. He moved here in first grade from Japan. He's always worn that same endearing, slightly indifferent expression. Even at soccer games, when the bleachers roar, even when he misses a goal or loses a game, his posture stays the same. Relaxed, easy grin. Loose shoulders, open hands. Madison has been obsessed with him from the beginning.

The masked student veers off, thundering toward the exit sign. Right before he gets to the door, he wrenches to a stop and slings a key at another student—some girl on the swim team. Vanessa? Veronica? I don't even know her name. But she gets a key, and everyone whoops in delighted surprise, and she beams like a pageant queen.

Devin steers me through the crowded hallway, then down the stairs. He jabbers a mile a minute about how it's tacky, actually, it's all juvenile high school shit, I shouldn't think about it, this will be over in a week and the party doesn't matter and I'll be shipped off to a kick-ass art school at the end of the year anyway, all I've got to do is hang on until then. I'm trying to listen to him, I'm trying to believe him, but everyone we pass is talking about Madison and her keys and her party, and honestly? I want to disappear.

KELSEY DAY

We stop at his locker, and he pauses mid-monologue to examine the white metal. He's been in a silent war with the school janitor, a war that consists of Devin putting DIY climate action stickers on the outside of his locker and the janitor peeling them off. Neither will cede their position.

Devin scrubs his thumb against the sticker residue and sighs. "That bastard."

"Which one was it this time?"

"The bunny one," he says. "The one where it's holding a knife, and its thought bubble says 'become ungovernable.'"

"Rest in peace, anarchist bunny."

He spins the lock and pops open the door, cursing when something clatters to the tile.

"I've got it," I say, reaching down for him.

"Wait," he says. "Is that—"

Both of us freeze, staring down at what fell out of his locker.

A spiral key.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I say.

He picks up the thick, milk-colored notecard attached, and I read the familiar loopy handwriting over his shoulder.

To Devin,

*Welcome to Lincoln Academy. It's time we finally
hung out!*

Madison

THE SPIRAL KEY

He transferred here last year, so it's insultingly late to welcome him—especially because the school has collectively ignored him since he started dating me. He unsticks the key from the paper and rolls it between his fingers. For a split second, I catch a flash of longing in his gaze. Who wouldn't want to be invited to the biggest party of the year?

Instantly the nightmare spools out in my mind like toilet paper hurled into a tree: Devin hesitantly attending the party, then returning best friends with Madison's crew. Devin sitting next to Everly at their lunch table. Devin making jokes with Kyle, getting rides to school from Mark, circling deeper and deeper into their friend group. They'd convince him I'm a loser, that dating me is a mistake, and he'd doubt them at first but eventually realize they're right. We'd break up and he would discuss it with the crew at lunch, Everly offering sage wisdom and Madison smiling like a shark.

I'd go to prom alone. I'd graduate alone. I'd be entirely, completely alone.

Devin shoves the key in his locker and scoffs. "Not interested," he says.

But I saw the temptation, if only for a moment. He's never been invited to a party like this before. Anyone could see the thought forming behind his expression: *They chose me. Why?*

I have a good guess.