

# Chapter One

The world is ending, and I can't breathe. Correction. My world is ending, and it's all thanks to Noel Brown. Noel and his weekly parties on his giant country property. Parties I never go to because Noel and I have a bad history. Like, Noel beating me up every day back in junior high.

But here I am, standing outside his house and looking through the window. I came tonight because

my girlfriend, Lian, asked me to. Begged for us to go. Things have been rocky between us. I gave in. Told myself Noel wouldn't dare do anything. We're in twelfth grade now, and I'm over six feet tall. I tower over Noel. I thought, What's the worst that can happen?

And then the worst happened.

The window gives me a clear view of the living room and the couch. On that couch I see that deadbeat druggie Noel kissing Lian. Like, really kissing her, tongue and all. And it's painfully obvious that my girlfriend is totally into it. That's the part that crushes me. When was the last time she was that happy to kiss me? Come to think of it, when was the last time she kissed me?

"Hey, man, what are you, some kind of creeper?"

Someone claps their hand on my shoulder. It takes me a second to recognize my buddy Daniel. His gaze goes to the window. "Whoa, man. Isn't that Lian? When did you break up?"

*I don't know*, I want to say. "Uh..." I clear my throat. God, it feels like I swallowed a bunch of razors. "We didn't—" Sudden tears burn my eyes. I swipe them away and hope Daniel doesn't see.

Daniel springs forward and raps on the window. "Hey! Lian Wu, what are you doing?"

Noel and Lian snap apart.

"Josh just saw everything! Not cool!"

Lian's brown eyes go wide. She bolts upright. Her red-and-purple braid swings over her shoulder.

Noel leans back on the couch and smirks at the window.

It takes everything in me not to crash through the glass and punch him right in the mouth. Noel's been smirking at me since seventh grade. I hate that smirk. And I hate Lian for giving him another reason to think he's above me.

Daniel keeps yelling at the window, even though there's no way they can hear him. "If you're going to cheat on Josh, choose better than Noel! I've seen that

dude kiss his reflection in the mirror.” Then Daniel turns to me. He drops his voice. “I’m so sorry, man.”

“Yeah.”

Then Daniel goes quiet. That in itself is amazing. I’ve never heard Daniel go silent. That guy never stops talking.

It doesn’t last long. “You and Lian should talk,” he says. “Unless you need space?”

“From her or from you?” I ask.

Daniel grins. His teeth flash white in the moonlight. “Good one. Look, if you need me, I’m around, okay?”

I nod. As he steps back out of the bushes and heads around to the back of the house, I call out, “Hey, Daniel? Thanks.”

“Yeah, man. It sucks, but it happens. Maybe you two will work it out.” Then he’s disappearing around the corner and heading toward the firepit at the back of Noel’s property. And I head into a fight with the girl who used to love me.

## Chapter Two

With every step, my feet feel heavier. Every passing second makes me feel old. By the time I step into the warmth of the two-story house, I feel like I’m a hundred years old, not seventeen.

My heart’s wet and soggy. Maybe that’s my face. I swipe at my cheeks again, then press my fingers against my eyes. How do I do this? How do I make her feel the total horror of what I’ve seen? Or maybe

I avoid the whole thing. Should I even say anything? Maybe I should pretend I don't care. Our relationship hasn't been great for a while. I could fake like she's done me a favor.

I spot them both in the hallway. Still together.

"I told you he wouldn't do anything," says Noel as they walk toward me. "He likes to believe he's a lover, not a fighter. But we all know what a coward looks like."

Now would be a perfect time for me to punch Noel. Or say something witty to prove I'm better than him. But that's the problem. In my head, I always defeat Noel. In reality, I do a weird frozen-rabbit thing. It's humiliating.

"I got this," Lian says to Noel. She leads me back to the living room where I saw her and Noel making out. There's no one else here. They must all be out at the firepit.

"Seriously?" I ask. "This is the place you pick for us to talk?"

"It's private," she says.

"Not that private," I mutter.

Her face goes bright red.

For a second all I can do is look at her. I loved playing with her hair. Loved how it would fall against her shoulders when she laughed. But she's not laughing now.

Neither am I. I look down at my hands. My skin's gone from brown to gray. I can't tell if that's because of the ceiling lights or if I'm losing color because my heart is bleeding out. I close the drapes. "How long have you been cheating on me?"

"This was the first time, Joshie—"

"Don't call me that. Don't ever call me that again."

"Don't be mad—"

"Don't be mad!" I yell. Oh god, she has me screaming. I lower my voice. "How would you feel?"

"Well, I guess I'd feel partly to blame," she says.

*Seriously?*

Her chin lifts. "I didn't do this on my own."

“No,” I say. “You did it with Noel.”

“That’s not what I meant!” She sighs. “You played a part in this.”

“*What?*” My eyes go wide, and I have to work not to yell again. “This is my fault?”

“Not all of it!”

Now she is the one screaming. I’m happy to see her losing control. To see her face go blotchy and red. For some reason it calms me. “Tell me,” I say quietly. “How is this *my* fault?”

“You—we—” Her hands flap in the air. “You’re boring, okay? Dating you is *boring!*”

Her words smash into the middle of my chest. I am no longer calm. For a second I can’t breathe. “*Boring?*”

“Yes. We’ve dated for two years. You never do anything exciting. Noel’s a risk-taker. He takes chances and lives on the edge. You know he jumped out of a plane?”

“Are you sure he wasn’t pushed?” Usually, my being funny can break the tension when we’re fighting. This time, the tension stays. Lian just stares at me, like *I’m* the one who did wrong.

“No one likes that guy, Lian!” I add. “I can’t believe you cheated on me with him!”

Lian’s eyes narrow into slits. “That’s what bothers you? That I didn’t choose someone you like?”

“My problem is that you did it! If you were so unhappy, why didn’t you break up with me?”

“I didn’t think it would happen, okay? We were just hanging out. He’s so chill.”

“No kidding,” I say. “You know his folks are huge drug dealers, right? I bet he smokes half their stock.”

“Don’t say that.” Lian’s face tightens. “That’s a terrible lie. Noel says it’s not true.”

“What else would Noel say? *Hey, Lian, yep, everything you heard is totally true. My family is*

*in 'the biz.' That's how we afford this huge place."*

I shake my head. "His dad's an ex-con, Lian. He went to jail for growing pot. Everyone knows that."

"That was a long time ago. His dad doesn't do that stuff anymore. Noel promised."

"Two years together, but you choose to believe him over me."

She stomps over to the window. Then she whips around to face me. "I believe my heart."

I'm going to throw up. "What about your eyes and your ears, Lian? Everyone knows Noel's a user, and I'm not just talking about the drugs. He's using you for something."

Her eyes flash.

"Grow up," I bite out. "Not that. I mean for something else."

"That shows what you know." A satisfied smile crosses her lips.

Watermelon lip gloss, my brain reminds me. She wears watermelon lip gloss because it's

my favorite. Correction. It was my favorite. It breaks me that she was wearing that when she kissed him.

"Noel's interested in my photography. He wanted to know all about our project for class."

I laugh. I can't help it. It seems unreal to laugh at the same time I feel like dying, and that makes me laugh harder.

"Stop laughing!" Lian looks like she'd like to throw a lamp at me.

But I can't. My girlfriend is cheating on me. My life's in pieces. But she and Noel were talking about school? It's too weird not to laugh.

"You're so petty! Don't you even care about what happened?"

Suddenly I'm not laughing anymore.

Suddenly we're screaming at each other. She's calling me names, and I'm yelling.

"At least I know to break up with someone before I go kissing someone else!"