

Chapter 1

Rooney

Playlist: “Cowboy Blues,” Kesha

My eyes are on the road, but my head is in the clouds. Windows cracked, cool autumn air spilling in as Seattle-Tacoma Airport fades behind me and a cozy cabin staycation lies ahead.

Thoughts drifting, I soak up the view: sapphire sky, emerald evergreens mingling with burnished bronze leaves, an onyx asphalt ribbon paving the way. My rental car blasts Kesha because, hello, I’m a woman on a solo trip, figuring out her shit—of course I’m listening to Kesha. There’s just one of her songs that I avoid. Because the last time I heard it, I did A Very Terrible Thing.

I kissed Axel Bergman.

Which isn’t the end of the world. I’m over it. It’s not like I fixate on it. Or daydream about it. Not about The Charades Kiss or Axel, who I haven’t seen since.

Who I’m definitely not thinking about now, as I drive through his home state, that song filling the car before I can skip it, while a rainbow whooshes across the sky.

Ohhhh, Rooney. Liar, liar, palazzo pants on fire.

My mind isn’t on the road or in the clouds. It’s in the past, in the moment after our kiss...

The clue—kiss—scrawled on a piece of paper, flutters to the ground. My lips tingle, my cheeks are hot as I stand with my head back, staring up at Axel, who I’ve just kissed.

Maybe “mauled with my mouth” is more accurate.

A rainbow gale of confetti whips around the room, spun off the ceiling-fan blades that whirl overhead. In a haze of soft, warm lights, the air thumps with that upbeat song’s opening bars.

But it all fades as I look at him. Six feet, many inches of grumpy gorgeousness. An unreadable, dangerously kissable mystery.

Who I just crushed my mouth to for the sake of a charades clue.

I bring a shaky hand to my lips. “Axel, I-I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... That is, I shouldn’t have... I’m just viciously competitive, and I...”

He stands, silent, staring at my mouth. Then, slowly, he takes a step closer. For once, he doesn’t leave like he always seems to when I get close. He doesn’t run.

He stays.

“I think...” he says hoarsely, leaning a little closer.

I lean a little closer, too. “You think...?”

Axel swallows roughly as his fingertips brush mine. It’s the faintest touch, but it seismic-booms through me, in tempo with the music, as if it’s the soundtrack to this tenuous, almost-something-moment.

“I think,” he whispers, “I have a new appreciation for charades.”

My mouth falls open in surprise. The silent giant just cracked a joke.

He takes a step closer, placing us toe to toe, and his gaze settles on my mouth. He bends his head toward mine. He’s close. A little closer.

And just as I realize he might be on the verge of kissing me back, sharp, warning spasms clutch my stomach, punching the air out of my lungs.

In the world’s worst timing, I’m the one who pulls away. I’m the one who runs from the room. The moment stolen from me before it was even fully mine.

That’s where it always ends, where the daydream leaves me, wondering, what if?

What if I hadn’t had to run off without a word of explanation?

What if, when I finally came back, Axel was still there, waiting for me?

My daydream *what-ifs* spin cotton-candy sweet but dissolve just as easily when my phone's ringtone overrides the music. I glance at the screen, my throat tightening as I see my best friend's name: *Willa*.

The only sound in the car is the call's rhythmic ring. It's suddenly quiet—too quiet—and my thoughts have backpedaled to what I came up here to escape.

I wish I could say that kissing Axel Bergman in a moment of overzealousness for charades, then having to bolt for the bathroom in gastrointestinal agony, was the low point of my recent existence, but I can't.

Because since that night, my health nosedived to the point that I had to take a leave of absence from law school, and when I came back to the apartment after finalizing said leave of absence, defeated, exhausted, so fucking lost, I couldn't stay one second longer.

So here I am, directionless, doing something I haven't in...ever. I'm trying to take care of myself.

Willa is still calling, each ring chipping away at my resolve. I take a deep breath, push the right button on the steering wheel, and accept her call.

Finding my *I'm-okay* upbeat voice, I holler, "I'm here!"

"You're here! Just got your text that you landed. Where are you exactly?"

"Whoa now, no need for an interrogation."

"You're lost, aren't you?"

"I'm not *lost*." Squinting, I glance at the GPS on my rental's display screen and the winding trail of my directions. Then I peer up at my surroundings. "I'm...heading...west."

“Uh-huh. You know you have nothing to prove to me, right? You’re a bio-chem geek who’s at Stanford Law. It’s okay to have a weakness and admit that you’re directionally challenged.”

“I admit that I have many weaknesses and that I am directionally challenged. I do not, however, admit to being lost.”

I swear I can hear her eye roll. “The property’s entrance sneaks up on you. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve missed it. It’s easy to drive past, so go slow when you come to that hairpin turn.”

I grimace as I stare at the directions. I have no idea what she’s talking about. “Will do. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Oh, Roo, you’re gonna love it. It’s so beautiful. I wish I was there to welcome you and watch you take it in. I would absolutely reenact an epic *Chariots of Fire* run to your car if this professional soccer gig weren’t so damn demanding. Crummy World Cup Qualifiers. Crummy flight. Crummy soccer.”

“So crummy,” I tell her. “Crummy dream come true, crummy playing for the U.S. Women’s team. Crummy honor of being a rookie who’s on the starting line-up.”

“Okay, fine, it’s not crummy, and I’m very excited. I just miss you.” After a beat of hesitation, she says, “How are you holding up?”

“I’m...okay.”

I set a hand on my stomach, which has started making warning twinges that I’m all-too-familiar with, especially since my old meds stopped working a few months ago. Thankfully, my new treatment has finally started giving me relief from my most serious ulcerative colitis symptoms, so I’m relatively much better—meaning I’m not incapacitated at home or in the

hospital for dehydration and pain—but I have lasting damage to my intestines. Even while I'm in clinical remission, some symptoms are a permanent fixture in my life.

But Willa's not asking about my GI troubles. She's asking about everything else.

Because this is the one thing I keep from her.

She and I have most of the West Coast between us these days, but we talk all the time, and she knows I've taken a leave of absence from Stanford Law. She just doesn't know the medical reason. Because Willa doesn't know I have ulcerative colitis. She knows I have a sensitive stomach and make more bathroom trips than most, but not why, not the worst of it.

When I told her I was taking a leave of absence, I explained that I was stepping back to assess if law school was still the right path for me, which isn't a lie. It's just not the whole truth.

I know. I hate keeping secrets from her, but I've had my reasons, and I believe they're good ones.

We've been best friends since we met, which was as freshman roommates and newbies on the women's soccer team at UCLA. It wasn't long into our friendship that she shared her mom's past battle with breast cancer and her new diagnosis of leukemia. That's when I knew the last thing Willa needed was someone else to worry about. With the right medication and sheer unreliable luck, ulcerative colitis is one of those diseases that can behave itself for years. Mine did through college, with only a few minor episodes that I managed to handle without raising Willa's suspicion. I hate lying, and I never wanted to keep it from her, but I simply felt in my heart that she didn't need one more thing weighing on her. The wisdom of that choice was confirmed when her mother died our junior year.

In the past few years since we've graduated, I haven't known how to tell her. I've been afraid to worry her. I haven't wanted anything to change between us. And the longer my lie of omission continues, the harder it gets to tell the truth.

That's why she doesn't know how sick I've been recently. That's why she thinks I've just been crushed by law school, and once again, it's not a lie—it's just not the whole truth. Law school *has* been stressful. I've loved it some moments, hated it others, and it's unequivocally the hardest thing I've ever done.

And then that stress, hours of studying, late nights, anxiety about doing my best, caught up with me, and I just couldn't do it anymore. *Your health or your studies*, my doctor said. *Pick one.*

"Rooney?" Willa says. "I think you cut out for a minute."

"Sorry." I shake myself and snap out of it. "Can you hear me okay?"

"I can now. I didn't catch anything after I asked how you're doing."

"Ah." I clear my throat nervously. "Well, I'm doing...okay. Just really ready for this time away. Thank you again for offering the A-frame. You still haven't told me what I can give the Bergmans for rent, though."

"I told you that you're not paying rent. You'll never hear the end of it if you even try. You're practically family to them."

Willa's boyfriend, Ryder, is the middle child of the seven Bergman siblings, a boisterous, close family that's welcomed me into their fold. His mom, Elin, is a Swedish transplant whose hugs and homemaking are the stuff of dreams. His dad, who goes by Dr. B, is one of those people who instantly makes any gathering a party. While Willa and Ryder met when we were at

UCLA, and Los Angeles is where the Bergmans now call home, their family's early years were spent here in Washington State, often at their getaway property, the A-frame.

The Bergmans are the chaotic, tight-knit family my only-child soul always wanted, and they've done nothing but make me feel welcome. Since Willa is as good as theirs, and I'm hers, now I'm as good as theirs, too. At least, I was, until *The Charades Kiss* with Axel, the oldest Bergman son.

Not that *they* made it awkward. Apparently only Axel and I were traumatized by my rogue charades move. Nobody seemed remotely fazed afterward. Sure, they gasped when the kiss happened—I mean, it shocked everyone, including me—but by the time I came back from the bathroom, and found Axel pointedly absent, they'd moved on. Laughing, teasing, setting the table for dinner. Like it was nothing.

They're either incredible actors or they weren't terribly surprised that I'd finally flung myself at Axel after nursing a long-standing crush I've tried very hard to hide—Axel, who threw me a rare bone of humor when he made that crack about “a new appreciation for charades,” but who was clearly scared away by my antics. The whole situation was mortifying.

I felt sick. I was embarrassed. So that night I made my excuses, and since then, the past six weeks, I've made myself scarce, which hasn't been hard because I've been sick as a dog.

Do I wish I could figure out how to smooth things over? Yes. Do I wish I knew how to re-engage without dying of embarrassment? Yes. But I have no idea where to begin, and I can't deal with that right now. I don't have the spoons to think about the Bergmans, especially Axel. I have the spoons to stay at their empty A-frame for the next few weeks, hiding from reality while figuring out how I'm going to eventually face it again.

It's an escape I desperately need. Which is why I really want to give the Bergmans something for my time here.

“Willa, I don't like the idea of staying at the A-frame for free.”

“Too bad,” she says. “It's there. Unused. Ryder said it should be empty until New Year's. That's when Freya and Aiden have their turn, so stay as long as you like up until then.”

“Willa, seriously, I couldn't—”

“Listen, Roo, the place is paid off. It's there simply to be enjoyed. Ryder's parents barely bother coming up, so it's free for the siblings to use how and when they want. There's no need to pay when none of us are paying. We just do the minimum upkeep.”

“I can do upkeep!”

She sighs. “You're *not* spending your staycation replacing lost shingles and resealing the deck.”

“Don't tempt me. I love DIY projects.”

“You're supposed to be *relaxing*.”

“Fine. I'll settle for scrubbing the bathroom grout with a toothbrush.”

Willa snorts a laugh. “God I miss you. Do you think you'll stick around long enough for us to catch up? I'm back in two and a half weeks. I'd be home sooner, but after we play, I've got to do a bunch of press and sponsorship shit—aka, the stuff that actually pays the bills.”

I glance in the rearview mirror at my reflection. I still look like I'm sick. Pale skin, shadowy half-moons under my eyes. Well, at least when we meet up, and I finally find the courage to tell her I'm sick, I'll look the part.

“I should still be here.” Technically I don't have to be back until a few days before Christmas, to celebrate with Dad, then meet up with my advisor to discuss how I plan to proceed

at school, but I'll probably come home at the end of the month for Thanksgiving. The holiday is always a bit of a bust, since it's just Dad and me, but it feels odd to consider spending it apart from him. Even though, I bet if I weren't home, he'd probably be happy working in his office or on set without feeling guilty about leaving me alone.

"Yay! I can't wait," Willa says. "But listen, no worries if plans change. If you head home before I'm back, we'll make it to Thanksgiving. We'll eat. Then nap. Then play board games. Then there's the soccer tournament in the backyard..."

A wave of guilt crashes through me. Willa assumes I'm coming to the Bergmans for Thanksgiving, like I did last year, after Dad's and my brief, early meal. I don't want to tell her how unsure I am that I'll make it. If I'll feel well enough, because I just never know when it's going to be a rough day and home is the only place I can handle being. If I can stand the embarrassment of seeing Axel since Kissgate.

Willa's still talking happily, planning our day. "...You better brace yourself. I'm going to tackle-hug you. I'm going to squeeze you so hard, you squeak like a puppy chew toy."

That makes me laugh. "You're disturbing."

"But you love me. All right, I have to get going. I just wanted to catch up quickly before I had practice. Love you! Text me when you're safe at the cabin?"

"Love you, too. I will."

"And text Ryder for help when you're ready to admit that you're lost."

"I'm not lost!" I yell right as she hangs up. Then I refocus on the GPS.

Okay. Maybe I'm a *little* lost.