

LISTEN

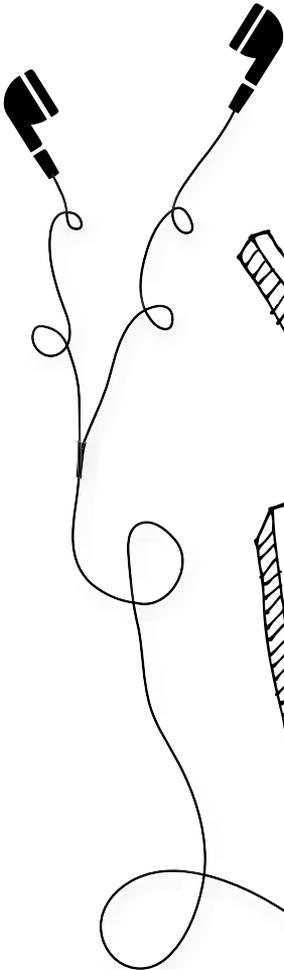
TO

YOUR

HEART

KASIE WEST

Point



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CHAPTER 1

The sky was perfectly blue. Not a single cloud marred its surface. I lay on my back on the seat of my WaveRunner, my feet up on the handlebars. I let my hand drift down to the water and skim along the surface.

“You’re teasing me, aren’t you?” I asked the sky. “Today of all days.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and took a picture of the sky. I posted it online with the caption *In denial*.

My phone rang and I startled, nearly dropping it into the lake. I sat up and answered.

“Hello?”

“Kate. Where are you?” Mom asked.

“Um . . .”

“It wasn’t a hard question,” she said, a smile in her voice. “Out on the lake, huh? You have to leave for school in twenty minutes.”

“Ugh.” School. I’d been trying to pretend it didn’t start today. If my school were in Lakesprings, the town where I lived, it wouldn’t start until after Labor Day. But there weren’t enough permanent residents in Lakesprings to support a

school. So my high school was thirty minutes down the mountain in Oak Court. Oak Court didn't care about lake season.

"Come on," Mom said. "It's your brother *and* your cousin's first day of high school. Don't make them late."

"I'll be right there," I said. I hung up and powered on the WaveRunner. Just then, another WaveRunner passed me by, sending a spray of water over my entire right side.

"Hello! Distance!" I shouted. I hated when people who clearly saw me drove too close.

I wiped off the screen of my phone on my left sleeve, tucked it back into the pocket of my board shorts, and steered back toward the marina.

Mom was waiting on the dock as I pulled up. People often said I looked exactly like my mom. Not really what a sixteen-year-old wants to hear when her mom is forty. But I knew what they meant. We both had long, light brown hair, easy-tan skin, and hazel eyes, which was really just a fancy way of saying brown with a little bit of green in them.

"Fifteen minutes now," Mom said, giving my wet swimsuit a once-over.

I flashed her a smile. "I just have to change. I'll be fine." I pulled up to the dock and she reached for the WaveRunner to tie it off.

"This one is rented out starting at eight a.m.," I told her.

"Does it need gas?"

"Probably," I said. "I can fill it."

"School, Kate." Mom gave me a side hug.

Sometimes school felt so pointless when I already knew what I wanted to do with my life—run this marina with my parents.

“Okay, okay.” I kissed her cheek. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Have a good day!” she called after me.

I walked across the street, around the corner, and through the front door to our house. A short person ran past me, followed closely behind by another little kid screaming, “Uncle Luke said it was my turn!”

Here is the thing about our living arrangements: My grandparents grew up in Lakesprings. They owned both the marina and the five acres of land across the street from the marina. When they decided to retire, they gifted the marina and the land to their three kids, who then divided the lot and built three houses next door to one another. My aunt and my uncle, who had other jobs, sold their shares of the marina to my parents, who had already been managing it. And that is how we ended up with a marina we ran while living on a family commune.

I rushed down the hall to my bedroom and quickly changed into clean shorts and a striped tee. I ran a brush through my hair; it was still damp, but it would dry on the drive to school. Then I grabbed my backpack and hurried out of my room.

My younger brother, Max, was waiting by the front door with his backpack on.

“You ready?” I asked him.

“So ready,” he said drily.

“Where’s Liza?” I looked around for our cousin.

“Not here yet.”

“I’ll go get her.”

I walked outside and turned right. Our house was in the middle, sandwiched between Uncle Tim’s house to the left and Aunt Marinn’s to the right. My aunt and my uncle were each married, and each had a bunch of kids.

I knocked on Aunt Marinn’s front door. Nobody else in the family felt that knocking was a necessary step before entering a home, but I hung on to that courtesy, hoping others would follow my example. When nobody answered, I sighed and walked in.

“Liza!” I called. “We have to go!”

My fourteen-year-old cousin appeared at the door in a cute sundress and a cloud of fruity fragrance.

I coughed. “What is that and did you shower in it?”

“It is Mango Dreams and it will fade.” She tossed her blonde hair and pulled me by my arm out the front door like she had been the one waiting on me.

Max was already in the passenger seat of my car. Liza climbed in behind him and squeezed his shoulders. “Freshman year!” she cried. “This is the start of a new chapter where anything is possible!”

“Sure,” I said. Or it would be exactly the same as the year before—a placeholder until summer.



The first bell was ringing as I pulled into a parking spot at the high school. Max and Liza were out of my car faster than I'd ever seen them move. They were already halfway across the parking lot by the time I'd locked the car and stashed my keys in my backpack.

"Late on the first day of school?" Alana said, walking over to me and hooking her arm through mine.

"I'm not late yet. And you didn't have to wait for me."

"What kind of best friend would I be if I didn't?"

"The kind that wants to be on time."

"We're juniors now. Bells are arbitrary," Alana declared, pushing her sunglasses up on top of her head.

"I think you said something similar last year."

Alana shrugged as we walked into the building together. "You can't expect me to remember the things I say."

Sequoia High was exactly what the name implied—a high school that stood in the middle of a lot of sequoia trees. It was one big building, three stories high. The cafeteria and library were separate, though, so we did get a taste of freedom and fresh air occasionally during the day.

This year, Alana and I had managed to score three of our six classes together, including first period, which was probably the real reason she'd waited for me. As we headed down the hall, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I waited until we were

sitting in History class, listening to Mr. Ward talk about expectations for the year, before I pulled my phone out.

Hunter had posted a first-day-of-school picture online. It was a selfie of him and his sister standing outside their new house. Well, *new* was relative; they'd been there for three months now, since they moved when school got out last year. Beneath the picture, he'd written *Wish us luck*.

He looked . . . happy. His dusty blond hair was styled off his forehead and his blue eyes shone. I clicked on his profile and scrolled through his old posts until I found his first-day-of-school picture from last year—the two of us standing by his car. I was staring up at him, my eyes squinting with a smile. He was looking at the camera. His caption read: *I fished this girl out of the lake to join the rest of us at school*. I had forgotten I'd gone to the lake before school last year, too.

Alana cleared her throat and I looked up, thinking Mr. Ward had called me out. He was still writing away on the board. Alana lowered her brows and nodded toward my phone, clearly wondering what was up. I mouthed *Nothing*, and x-ed out of Hunter's profile. I needed to stop. I was over Hunter. We'd said we'd keep in touch but over the summer he slowly stopped responding to texts and emails until I had to admit defeat. I put my phone away and tried harder to listen the rest of class.

“What were you looking at on your phone?” Alana asked after the bell rang and we were walking down the hall to our next classes. “You were staring at it dreamily for like ten minutes straight.”

“I was not. I was just looking at everyone’s first-day-of-school posts.”

“Yeah right,” she said. She probably wouldn’t have let the subject drop so easily if something at the end of the hall hadn’t captured her attention. She gasped.

“What?”

She pulled me to the side, out of the flow of traffic. “Do you know Diego?” she whispered.

“Who?”

“Diego Martinez. From last year?”

“No, I don’t remember him.”

“Really? I could’ve sworn I mentioned him once . . . or five hundred times. Remember when I had to do a stint in Math lab last May? He was the tutor. He was dating that Pam girl so I couldn’t pursue him but . . . No?” Alana asked when I was clearly still searching my brain. “He snuck his puppy into school once because his mom had gone out of town and couldn’t watch her. And he got away with it.”

“Are you making this stuff up?” I asked. “Because I don’t remember any of these things.”

“It’s because he’s not lake stock, isn’t it?” Alana asked, putting her hands on her hips. “You don’t even *try* to know the city kids.”

We called them “city kids” even though Oak Court didn’t really qualify as a city. It boasted only fifteen thousand people. But that was thirteen thousand more than Lakesprings.

“So not true!” I argued. “I don’t try to know *any* kids. You know I hate people.”

Alana laughed because she knew it was at least partially a joke.

“I remember the guy with the nose ring you talked about—Duncan,” I said, tilting my head to one side. “And there was someone else named Mac . . .”

“Okay, I get it. You proved my ‘lake’ theory wrong.”

Her theory was kind of right. I didn’t spend a lot of time in Oak Court. I preferred the lake over all else. “It’s not city versus lake,” I said. “It’s the fact that you talk about a lot of different guys.”

“I appreciate them. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“No. I was just explaining to you why I might not remember *this* one.”

“Even though I talked about him five hundred times?”

“You didn’t. *That* was Brady, the guy who lit a sparkler in the cafeteria for you on your birthday and got detention for a week.”

Alana was the kind of girl who guys did things like that for. She was tall and curvy with dark hair and nearly black eyes. She was Polynesian and had stories about growing up in Hawaii that everyone loved to listen to, like Hawaii was some alternate universe. I loved her stories, too, so I didn’t blame them.

She waved her hand in the air. “Brady is so last year.” She took me by the shoulders and pointed me toward the end of

the hall. A guy with shaggy dark hair stood in front of a locker. “*He* is so this year,” she said.

“This is the bring-a-puppy-to-school guy?”

“Yes. Diego.”

“I thought you said he was dating that Pam girl.” I had no idea who Pam was, either. I was just repeating information.

“Apparently they broke up over the summer.”

“Okay, I have made a note. Can we go now?”

“First, you have to tell me what you think.”

“Of what?”

“Of him.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my best friend and if I’m going to devote all my time to thinking and talking about a boy, I want your approval.”

I laughed. Alana never asked for anyone’s approval. I patted her on the cheek. “That’s sweet of you to make me feel needed.”

“No, I’m serious. What do you think of him?”

“You’re asking me to assess him from fifty feet away based on zero knowledge?”

“Based on initial impressions and the puppy story.”

I narrowed my eyes at the boy, as if that would give me better insight into who he was. “I think he takes an inordinately long amount of time at his locker.”

As if he heard me, Diego retrieved a book, shut his locker, and whirled toward us.

Alana still stood behind me, a vise grip on my shoulders, making it more than obvious we had been staring at him. He met my eyes with his soft brown ones, and then his gaze shifted to Alana. Now that I could see his face I understood why Alana was willing to devote hours to thinking about it. He was cute. Wavy brown hair, light brown skin, big eyes, high cheekbones, full lips.

“Hey, Alana,” he said as he walked by, acting like this was the most normal thing in the world. Like girls lined up at the end of hallways to watch him exchange books in his locker all the time.

Then he was gone. Alana released my shoulders and I faced her.

“So? What do you think?” she asked.

“I think that was really embarrassing.”

“No, about him. I want your advice.”

“Yes, he’s cute. Plus, it was obvious by the way he said hi that he’s halfway to falling in love with you. I approve.”

She smiled. “Thanks.” The late bell rang, signaling that it was *really* time to get to our second-period classes.

“See you at lunch,” I called, waving as we parted ways.

“See you. Oh, and don’t forget we have our podcasting class last period!” Alana said, waving back.

“How could I?” I groaned. “I still can’t believe you talked me into it.”

Alana shot me a triumphant smile before turning and racing down the hall.