

Chapter One

Jamal tries to hand the bottle of beer to me. “Come on, Jaylin,” he says. “Just one drink.”

I shake my head. “You know I don’t drink. Besides, I can’t stay. I have to study.” I look down at my watch. “It’s already eight thirty-five. I should’ve been home by now.”

I look around the room. There are about twenty people from our school here. Even

though we're in the middle of exams, the music is loud, and most people are up and dancing. The party is just getting started. No one seems too worried about studying. No one, that is, but me. Truth is, for most of the people here, exams won't be a huge problem. But what Jamal doesn't know is that for me, an English exam is like climbing Mount Everest. There's a reason I need a lot of time to study. And that reason is the only secret I've ever kept from Jamal.

Jamal rolls his eyes at me. "You're the smartest girl I know. You've been studying for this English exam forever. And it's not even for another two days. Don't you want to hang with me?" Jamal gives me the sad puppy-dog-eyes look.

"Honestly. I just...can't," I say. My mouth feels like I've eaten a big spoonful of peanut butter. I stand up and grab my bag. "I'm sorry. Call you later?"

Jamal shrugs. "Sure. If you can fit me in." He looks around the room. I know he's upset. We haven't spent much time together in the last few weeks. It's just a really hard time for me right now, and he doesn't get it.

I lean over and give him a fast kiss. "I'll call you," I say. I head across the room toward the front door. As I'm about to leave, I look back to wave goodbye to Jamal.

He's sitting beside Vicky Mars on the couch. Their heads are bent close together.

And they're laughing at something on her phone. Vicky puts her hand on Jamal's upper leg. My cheeks start to burn.

I've got to get out of here. Now.

I pull open the front door and race out to the sidewalk. Tears spilling down my cheeks, I run all the way home.

"Jaylin? Is that you?" Mom calls from the kitchen. "What have I told you about slamming that door?"

"Yeah. It's me," I say. I kick off my shoes and wipe at my eyes. I don't want Mom to see me upset. She already doesn't have much love for Jamal.

Mom wheels into the front hall. She looks up at me from her chair and smiles.

"Why are you standing out here? I've made your favorite. Pizza, with lots of extra cheese. Just the way you like it."

"I'm sorry, Mom," I say. I lean down and give her a kiss on the cheek. Her skin smells like warm vanilla. For some reason that makes me want to start to cry again. "I ate at the library with Alex. I'm super sorry."

Mom's brown eyes darken with worry. She knows I'm not telling the truth. I have not hung out with any of my friends for almost a year.

"Well, make sure you take a break at some point. I know this time of year is hard." She shoots me a sad smile as she turns her wheelchair around to go back

to the kitchen. “And if you want to watch some Netflix with me tonight, I’d like that.”

She pauses. “I miss her too, you know.”

“Maybe, if I get enough done,” I say.

I go upstairs, lie down on my bed and open my computer. I still have to study. Our class has been reading *Dracula*—a novel I understand on a deep level. People think it’s just about vampires. But the main theme is wanting the people you love to live forever. I get that. When you lose someone you really love, like I have, you’d do anything to keep them with you.

Time to hit the books. I’ve been given a version of *Dracula* that my computer can read out loud. Because I have dyslexia, when I’m reading my brain doesn’t work

the same as the brain of someone without dyslexia does. But it doesn’t mean I’m not smart. I have the second-highest mark in my class. And I worked my butt off to get that grade.

After an hour of studying, it’s time for a brain break. I check my Instagram first. There’s a message. I need to see who has been sending me some Instagram love. It had better be Jamal. He’s got some explaining to do.

I click on the message.

Hey, girl! I love you and I miss you. I know it must be a shock to read this. But it’s me. For real. And I need your help. I need you to go to our spot tomorrow.

x Fatima

This must be a sick joke. Someone has hacked my best friend's account.

I slam my computer shut. My hands are shaking so hard, I have to sit on them just to think. Maybe I'm dreaming. Yeah, that must be it. I'll go to bed and everything will be okay when I wake up.

After all, there's no way this can be real. Because Fatima died exactly one year ago today.

Chapter Two

Bright sun hits my face. I bolt up in bed. What time is it?

I grab my iPhone off my bedside table. Nine o'clock? My exam starts in half an hour! How did I forget to set my alarm? Now I have zero time to review.



And that's when everything comes back

to me. The message from the sick person pretending to be Fatima. I whip open my computer. It's still there. My hands shaking, I slam my computer lid shut. I don't have time to deal with this right now. I'm late.

As I hurry to get dressed, I try not to think about last night. I need to focus on my exam. But it's super hard. First, Jamal letting Vicky be all over him at the party was bad enough. And then to have someone play such a sick joke on me? I don't want to block Fatima's account. It's one of my last links to her. But if I get another message like that one last night, I may have to.

I run downstairs. Mom's gone to work already, but I smile when I see she's stuck

a note to the fridge, wishing me good luck. I grab a breakfast bar and a juice. Then I race out the door and hop onto my bike. I've got fifteen minutes to make it to school.

By the time I get to the exam room, I'm sweating like a pig. I have no time to fix my hair, so I pull my hoodie up. I wipe my hands on my jeans. Everyone is already sitting down. I get extra time to write tests and stuff, but right now that doesn't matter because I can't remember anything I've studied. I'm too stressed.

I scan the room. Could the person who sent the message be here right now? And if they are, how did they know about my and Fatima's secret meeting place?