

## CHAPTER 1

The thing about most major, life-altering moments—and I’m not talking about the standard-yet-meaningful experiences that almost everyone encounters like marriage, kids, promotions, etc.; but instead, the ones unique to you, that completely change your whole trajectory and even the trajectories of those around you—is that you rarely see them coming. They aren’t like end-of-semester exams, where the dates are known well in advance; they’re more like pop quizzes, sprung upon you when you least expect them. A big reason for this is because these moments are often the result of a series of minor decisions, made with little to no thought, and then *BOOM*—everything changes and there’s no going back. If not for the gift of hindsight, we’d never even see how consequential our seemingly inconsequential decisions actually were.

The first decision I made after leaving my first period European History class on September 18, 2008, the day that would completely reroute the course of my life, was to tell Derek Whitney to fuck off. Not the nicest thing to do, I know. Especially, when you consider that all he’d done was stop me to say that he liked my new haircut. It’s even worse when you take into account that from second grade all the way up until just nine weeks earlier—about six weeks before we started our sophomore years at Fort Myers Preparatory School, our relaxed-in-dress-code-only private high school—Derek had been my best friend.

In my defense, I hadn't intended to unload my disdain on Derek. If anything, my words were meant for the universe, which I was in an ongoing war with, and Derek just happened to get in the way. But not for long, as I quickly dipped my shoulder and slipped past him.

Derek turned and followed me down the packed, locker-lined hallway. "I wasn't making a joke," he insisted, weaving through the crowd and quickly catching back up. "I honestly think it looks good."

I still couldn't tell if he was being honest or if he was just kidding, but I was leaning toward the latter and didn't care either way. "I bet," I said, not slowing down or turning to acknowledge him. "You said the same thing last week about my boots."

"I know. And I really like them too," Derek said, although much less convincingly.

Now I knew he was kidding. He had to be. The metal buckles on my weathered and a-size-too-big leather combat boots rattled even louder as I picked up my pace.

Derek matched me stride for stride. "Okay. Fine," he conceded. "I admit it. I'm not a fan of the boots. They're weird. I don't really get them and they look seriously uncomfortable. But I do think your hair looks good. It's cool."

We passed by the wall trophy case that proudly proclaimed "Home of the Conquistadors" and housed the school's many state athletic titles, most of which were from football and soccer, and I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass cover. I stopped, staring at my faint reflection.

The buzzed sides and jet-black mop on top—which perfectly matched my boots, jeans, and t-shirt in both shade and attitude—were so diametrically opposed to any hairstyle I'd previously sported that I had a hard time recognizing myself. I ran my fingers through the hair on the top of my head and then let it flop back. It wasn't quite as long it needed to be. While fifteen years as a blonde to dirty blonde had been undone in a matter of minutes—thanks to nine dollars,

a CVS card, and the miracle workers from Vidal Sassoon—the rest of my hairstyle was still a work in progress. The eventual goal was to have my bangs cover one of my eyes. At present, they rested in the middle of my forehead. However, if I matted them down right out of the shower, I could get them to touch the tips of my eyebrows.

“I’m serious,” Derek said, matching my gaze. “It looks really good on you.”

“Thanks,” I said, my reluctance to accept his compliments fading.

Part of the reason I’d refused to believe that he liked my haircut was because I still didn’t know how I felt about it. All I knew was that there was one person who definitely loved my new look. Her name was Grace Kwan, and she was waiting for me at my locker.

“I have a feeling that’s not all you wanted to tell me. So what do you want?” I said, moving things along so I could finally ditch him and get on my way.

“My parents wanted to invite you over to dinner tomorrow.”

“Seriously? Your parents do?”

“Yeah. I mean, I want you to come too, but they suggested it. You can also spend the night. I just got the new *Call of Duty*.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

The last time I’d had dinner with the Whitney’s house, it hadn’t exactly gone so well. In fact, that was the night my friendship with Derek had ended. It was a few days after my parents sat me down and told me they were separating. Derek invited me over for dinner and to just get away from everything. I was supposed to spend the night too, but I didn’t even make it to dessert. While the Whitneys—a family so perfect that it’s surprising they didn’t have a half-child to go along with Derek, his younger sister, Daisy, and their white picket fence—laughed and smiled and had their usual dinner table conversation about how great their days had been, I

stayed mostly silent, opting to just nod my head politely when spoken to. We were maybe ten minutes into the meal, when I asked for the peas and was promptly corrected by Mr. Whitney.

“You mean please,” he said.

“Yeah, peas,” I mumbled, obviously not hearing him correctly.

“Yes. You would like the peas, but you didn’t say *please* pass the peas.”

Instead of apologizing and kindly asking for the peas again, I just glared at Mr. Whitney. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea; I’m not allergic to good manners. I did a whole week of charm school in fourth grade—my private elementary school had required it. I know where the forks, spoons, and knives go for table setting, and up until that point, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, I guarantee I would’ve said please when asking for the peas. I just didn’t that night. I had a lot on my plate—with my parents, not the peas or lack thereof—and I’d forgotten. And I definitely wasn’t in the mood to be chided by Mr. Whitney or anyone.

“*Please* pass the peas,” he repeated.

“No!” I snapped. “Just give me the goddamn peas or don’t give me the peas.”

All of the Whitneys froze; like I was Medusa, and they’d been turned to stone. After a few seconds of awkward silence, where the whole family just stared at me, unsure how to respond, I shook my head and said, “Forget it. I don’t need the peas.”

“No, no, no,” insisted Mrs. Whitney, a pre-penitentiary Martha Stewart clone, in a measured yet nervous tone. She was clearly trying to smooth things over but couldn’t hide the fact that she was still taken aback. “It’s all right. Everything is all right. You can have the peas. Clifford, please pass Jordan the peas.”

“Yeah, of course,” Mr. Whitney said, nodding excitedly as he offered the bowl. “Have as many peas as you’d like.”

I took the bowl and dumped a heaping spoonful onto my plate, with half of the tiny green veggies tumbling over the edge of my plate and onto the table.

“Jeez, Jordan,” Derek said as he cleaned up my mess. “Don’t take it out on my parents.”

“It?” I asked, turning my anger on him. “What do you mean it?”

“I, uh, I don’t know,” Derek stuttered.

“No. I think you do. What’s ‘it’?” I demanded.

“You know ...” Derek swallowed hard. “Your problems. With your parents.”

“Screw you,” I said. I chucked my napkin on my plate and shot up from the table.

“Come on,” Derek pleaded, getting up as well. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Where are you going?”

“I’m going back to my broken home.” I started for the door and then stopped, turning back to the wannabe Cleavers, who stared at me, their jaws ajar. “You guys act all perfect, like you have this perfect, happy family and life, but no one is this perfect. No one!” And with that, I stormed out of the house.

To his credit, Derek called every day for a couple weeks, but I never answered or listened to his voicemails. Eventually, the calls stopped. The cord was cut, with Derek and the rest of our little group of friends. When school started back up, Derek and I would have our awkward interactions every couple of days or so, passing in the halls and stuff like that, but that was about it. His dinner invite was the closest thing to a conversation that we’d had in months.

Derek continued trying to sell me on the idea. “You know, my parents have really loosened up,” he said with a smirk. “I don’t have to say please for anything anymore. I still do, out of habit, but I don’t really have to.” His grin grew, like we sharing some inside joke. But his little joke and sales pitch backfired. It only brought back memories of that night and the lingering

animosity the came with it. I could just imagine how much his parents would judge me now and all the things they'd say since I'd "gone goth."

With my rage renewed, combined with the added agitation of Derek refusing to just leave me alone and let me get to my locker and Grace, I decided to end the conversation once and for all. "That's great to hear," I said. "Lucky you. Do me a favor and tell your parents thanks for the invite, but *please* fuck off." I turned and walked away.

Derek didn't follow me this time. He just stood there, stunned, for a few seconds before calling after me, "No, you fuck off! All I ever did was try to help you. You're such an asshole."

I didn't look back or say anything. I just keep walking down the hall, ignoring the stares of the rest of the students who stopped whatever they were doing to watch me.