

Chapter 1

My favorite kind of beach is an empty one.

Luckily, empty beaches are easy enough to find around here, especially in the off-season. This stretch of pale, powdery sand will be crowded with campers and bonfires by next weekend, but today, it's just mine.

I slip off my flip-flops and sit, digging my toes into the warm sand and leaning back on my palms. The water is glassy down here on the south end of the lake, perfectly reflecting the large sandstone formations across the water. I put my earbuds in, turn the music up loud, and close my eyes. I relax into myself, my muscles loosening for the first time in months. I've been in a state of tightly wound anxiety since school started last August, but now that finals are over, I can breathe a sigh of relief.

The worst thing about school is all the people: the eyes on me during a class presentation, the pressure of not knowing where to sit during lunch, the endless opportunities for me to say or do something embarrassing. Social situations have always been awful, and I'm relieved to have a break from them.

My wiggling toes unearth an unbroken quagga mussel shell, and I pocket it to save for Nina before remembering that she's gone for the summer. My good mood plummets. I've got an

endless string of beach days and boat days and anything-I-want days in my future, and I should feel happier. But I can't. Not when I'm here alone and Nina is in the Valley, playing camp counselor to hundreds of mini geniuses at a STEM camp for girls. As my one and only friend, Nina is the exception to my "empty beach" rule, and I kind of wish she were here right now.

I love an empty beach, but I don't want an empty *life*.

"Heads up!" A muffled voice cuts through my music.

I pull my right earphone out and whip my head around to see Ian Radnor leaning out the driver's window of a massive pickup truck. There's a boat trailer attached to the back, and from the look of things, he's attempting to back up right over me and into the lake. I glance around helplessly, wondering why he needs this stretch of sand, and am horrified by the caravan of vehicles descending on all sides. I've heard whispers of beach parties happening here, but I've never had the misfortune of attending one.

I gather my flip-flops and dash out of the way, standing stock-still as a flurry of activity materializes around me. Loud country rap blares from an unseen speaker. A group of jocks from school unload a keg from the back of a shiny SUV. More cars pull up and my classmates spill out of them, laying towels on the sand, unfolding beach chairs, and nestling coolers under open tailgates. Each addition kicks my heart rate up another notch, like my body is preparing for battle. Music? *Threat*. Fun? *Double threat*. People? *Triple threat*. I can't dance, I don't know how to have fun, and I'm mostly incapable of being around people. In a matter of minutes, Lone Rock Beach has transformed into my literal worst

nightmare. I feel like I've stepped into a *Riverdale* set piece, only no one gave me my lines.

Or my costume. I'm wearing a baggy T-shirt with a smiling fish on the front. It used to be Dad's and it hangs well past the ends of my cutoff jean shorts. *Cool*. This is perfect. This is exactly how I wanted to be seen by my classmates.

If school hallways are bad, this is much, *much* worse. At school, my body knows what to do. I have years and years of training to fall back on. Keep my head down, do as I'm told, and don't attract attention to myself. But this is a party—something I haven't experienced since my classmates decided bounce houses aren't cool.

My shoulders inch upward as the muscles tighten on instinct. My heart beats double time. *I've got to get out of here*. I'm turning to leave when a voice stops me.

"Is this a good place to build a fire?" volleyball player Marissa Shock asks, her high ponytail swinging from side to side. She drops an armful of firewood at her feet. "I don't know where to start."

I wince. So much for escaping unnoticed. I take a breath, encouraged by the fact that I *do* know how to build a bonfire. If I can prove that I'm useful, maybe it'll distract from the weirdness of showing up to a party uninvited, even if it was an accident. I'll help with the fire, and then I'll escape. "Did you bring a shovel? We should start by digging a circle a couple of feet deep. Then we—"

"I know what I'm doing," Jazmine Clark says. That's when I notice Marissa's teammate standing by her side, a shovel in her

right hand. They're wearing matching expressions of confusion and pity, and I realize Marissa was never talking to me at all.

Acid floods my stomach. "Right. Yeah. Sorry." I scramble out of the way and up the beach, weaving around cars, looking for my dad's red pickup truck, Sunday. I find her blocked in on all sides, the worst offender being a giant white Suburban. *Fabulous*. There's no exit, not without hunting down the driver and begging them to move. Talk about awkward.

It's official. I, Gemma Wells, am stuck at a high school party.

I slump against Sunday's warm metal door, stress and anxiety building in my chest. How will I survive hours of this panicky, suffocating feeling? I'm a complete mess in social situations. If there were a prize for most socially awkward human, I'd win. Hands down, every time. Mail my prize to the oldest houseboat in the marina, please; I won't be attending the award ceremony.

My eye catches on the bumper sticker on the back of the white Chevy Suburban next to me. BUY BOOKER BROTHERS' PIZZA. WE KNEAD YOUR DOUGH.

Every sense in my body goes on high alert as I push myself into a standing position. *Beau is here*. Beau Booker, heir to the Booker Brothers' Pizza dynasty, is here at this party. I shouldn't be surprised by this, considering that Beau Booker is the most popular person at Page High. He's also the captain of the swim team and the hottest person I've seen in real life, it's worth mentioning. *Of course* he'd be at the end-of-the-year party.

I scan the beach, searching for his chestnut curls. I quickly find him standing at the edge of the water, his back to me. He's shirtless, wearing the teal swim shorts with the ripped back

pocket and the frayed hems that he must have inherited after his older brother left town last summer. (There's a picture on Beau's Instagram of the two of them on the beach, Griff in those same teal shorts, Beau in red ones, and I'm a creep who's looked at it a hundred times. Just like I'm the creep staring at him now.) My stomach swoops low and twisty, the way it always does when I see him, and *just like that*, I want to stay.

SOS, I text Nina. **I came to the beach to be alone, but a party LITERALLY formed around me. Sunday is now blocked in by none other than the Booker Suburban.**

OMG. It's fate! This is your chance to finally talk to him.

I've talked to him! I respond. And I *have*. Freshman year I sat behind Beau in Señorita Bustamante's Spanish class. Once he spent the whole class period doodling song lyrics on his shoes while I spent the whole class period watching the way his curls brushed against the collar of his T-shirt, imagining what it would be like to be his girlfriend.

I'm aware it'll never happen. I'm awkward, not delusional. But I can't help but be taken by the fact that Beau is everything I'm not: confident and popular and *shiny*, always the brightest light in the room. So when he ran out of drawing space on those shoes and he asked if he could do mine, the force of his laser-bright attention landing on me for the first time, I nodded yes.

"What's your favorite band?" he asked. My mind blanked so thoroughly that I stared at him slack-jawed until he turned back around. That night, I woke up in a cold sweat, the perfect response on my tongue. *Twenty One Pilots*. An answer that would (hopefully) make me seem cool, but not like I was trying too hard. I

planned to tell him the next day, but he never turned around again.

Now, Beau collapses into a beach chair, stretching his long legs out in the sand. He says something I can't hear, and Sofía Lopez rocks with laughter as she smacks his arm. Sofía is Latina; she's short and curvy and gorgeous, with brown skin, nail polish that's never chipped, and perfect eyebrows. I didn't know perfect eyebrows were a thing until I saw hers. Once we sat next to each other at an assembly and she told me about the math test she'd just bombed, and all I could think about was how much I hated my eyebrows. It kept me from adding anything to the one-sided conversation.

A small group forms, magnets pulled in not only by Beau's energy but by Sofía's too. Helpless against the tug, even *I* take a few steps forward. I'd give anything to be sitting around that campfire, to be laughing or flirting or drinking or whatever it is the normal kids do. Instead, I'm stuck here in the sand, a stretch of endless lonely days unfurling in front of me. The weight of it is too much. I swallow the lump in my throat as I watch.

Theoretically, I could walk down the beach right now, barge into their circle, and ask Beau to move his car so I can leave. He'd say yes, and I'd be free. Or maybe the impossible would happen, and he'd convince me to stay. Either option is better than standing here alone, but I can't make my feet move, can't make my mouth form the words.

If I'm a little bit in love with him, why can't I talk to him?

Better yet, why can't I talk to anyone? Why does standing on this crowded beach make my pulse race, triggering a flight-or-fight-or-freeze instinct that I can't seem to shake?

Beau's face falls as he looks at his phone. He glances up and down the beach, and for a beat, we make eye contact. I'm caught. All alone and gawking like a creeper. My skin burns hot and I turn and yank open Sunday's door. Safe inside the cab, I pick up my phone to text Nina, but hers arrives first. **Heading to orientation. Talk later!**

I want to believe that we'll talk later, but I'm worried that her busy schedule will make that impossible. I'm even more worried about what happens if she realizes she doesn't miss me. I'd love to have faith that these next few months won't be the loneliest of my whole life, but I've never been that good at lying to myself.

A knock on the window startles me. I look up, shocked to see Beau standing on the other side. Heart in my throat, I crank the window down (Sunday is ancient), feeling ridiculous.

"Am I blocking you in?" he asks, pointing to his family's Suburban.

"Kinda," I say.

"Are you leaving already? The party just started!" He smiles, his white teeth bracketed by two dimples that are so deep they probably collect water when it rains.

I shrug, sinking deeper into my seat as my cheeks heat.

"You've got somewhere more exciting to be?" He cocks an eyebrow.

I snort-laugh. Mortified, my hands fly to my mouth. That one sound alone will keep me awake for the next three nights.

"I take that as a no?"

"Yeah, no. Nowhere else to be. Not today, and not this whole summer." *Why did I say that?*

Beau runs a hand through his curls as he considers my pathetic admission. He leans a forearm against the open window and tilts his head toward me. “Jenna, right?” he asks, and I want to die. I want to drive straight into the water and never come back up.

“Um, it’s Gemma, actually.”

“Gemma! Right, I knew that,” he says. I doubt he did, though. People don’t remember me. Silence stretches between us. Panicked by the lack of words coming out of my mouth, I smile. *Yikes*. That feels too big. I rein it in.

“Gemma’s a cool name,” he tries again.

If I were a different sort of person, I’d tell him that my mom gave birth to me on a houseboat on the lake between mile markers nineteen and twenty, under a clear sun that showered the surface of the water with sparkling gemstones. It’s why she named me Gemma. Something from that time must have seeped into my blood, because I can’t remember a day of my life that I’ve felt as comfortable on land as I do out here, wedged between layers of rock formed more than three hundred million years ago. My soul is filled with ancient sandstone walls and winding canyon paths. My heart belongs to the water.

But I’m not different. I’m the same or worse than I was a year ago when I googled *why can’t I talk to people?*, read dozens of articles and forum posts on social anxiety disorder, deleted the history from my phone, and never spoke of it to anyone.

Beau watches me now and my mind goes a particular shade of blank. The kind where I have everything in the world to say, but I can’t remember any of it. I turn my attention to my phone, frantic for him to leave, desperate for him to stay.