

CHAPTER ONE

On Friday, July 22, 2005, Simone Knox ordered a large Fanta—orange—to go with her popcorn and Swedish Fish. The choice, her standard night-at-the-movies fare, changed her life, and very likely saved it. Still, she'd never drink Fanta again.

But at that moment she only wanted to settle down in the theater with her two best friends forEVER and lose herself in the dark.

Because her life—currently and absolutely for the rest of the summer, and maybe for all time—sucked beyond infinity.

The boy she loved, the boy she'd dated *exclusively* for seven months, two weeks, and four days, the boy she'd imagined cruising through her upcoming senior year with—hand in hand, heart to heart—had dumped her.

In a text.

done wasting time cuz i got 2 b with somebody ready to b all the way
with me and thats not u so we r done c u

Certain he couldn't have meant it, she'd tried to call him—but he didn't answer. She'd texted three times, humiliating herself.

Then she'd gone to his MySpace page. *Humiliation* was too weak a word for what she suffered.

Traded in the old DEFECTIVE model for a hot new one.

Simone out!

Tiffany in!

Shook off a LOSER and I'll be rolling through the summer and into senior year with the hottest girl in the class of 2006.

His post—with pictures—had already generated comments. She might've been smart enough to know he'd ordered his friends to say mean, ugly things about her, but that didn't lessen the sting or the embarrassment.

She grieved for days. She wallowed in the comfort and righteous anger of her two closest friends. She raged at her younger sister's taunts, dragged herself to her summer job and the weekly tennis lessons at the club that her mother insisted on.

A text from her grandmother made her snifle. CiCi might be meditating with the Dalai Lama in Tibet, rocking it out with the Stones in London, or painting in her studio on Tranquility Island, but she had a way of finding out anything and everything.

It hurts now, and the pain's real, so hugs, my treasure. But give it a few weeks, and you'll realize he's just another asshole. Kick butt and namaste.

Simone didn't think Trent was an asshole (though both Tish and Mi agreed with CiCi). Maybe he'd tossed her aside—and in a really mean way—just because she wouldn't do it with him. She just wasn't ready to do it. Besides, Tish had done it with her ex-boyfriend after the junior prom—and twice more—and he'd dumped her anyway.

The worst was, she still loved Trent and, in her desperate sixteen-year-old

heart, knew she'd never love anyone else, ever again. Even though she'd torn out the pages of her journal where she'd written her future names—Mrs. Trent Woolworth, Simone Knox-Woolworth, S. K. Woolworth—ripped them to shreds, then burned them, along with every photo she had of him, in the patio firepit during a girl-power ceremony with her friends, she still loved him.

But, as Mi pointed out, she had to live, even though part of her just wanted to die, so she let her friends drag her to the movies.

Anyway, she was tired of sulking in her room, and she really didn't want to slump around the mall with her mother and little sister, so the movies won. Mi won, too, as it was her turn to pick, so Simone was stuck with some science-fiction deal called *The Island* Mi was crazy to see.

Tish didn't mind the pick. As a future actress, she felt that experiencing movies and plays was both a duty and pre-career training. Plus Ewan McGregor ranked in Tish's top five movie boyfriends.

"Let's get seats. I want good ones." Mi, small, compact, with dark, dramatic eyes and a thick wedge of black hair, gathered her popcorn—no fake butter—her drink, and the peanut M&M's she favored.

Mi had turned seventeen in May, dated sporadically, as she currently preferred science to boys, and skimmed just above the nerd line only because of her prowess as a gymnast and solid slot on the cheerleading squad.

A squad unfortunately captained by one Tiffany Bryce, boyfriend stealer and slut.

"I need the ladies'." Tish—double-fake-butter popcorn, a Coke, and Junior Mints—pushed her snacks at her friends. "I'll find you."

"Don't fool around with your face and hair," Mi warned her. "Nobody can see them anyway, once the movie starts."

And she was already perfect, Simone thought as she juggled Tish's popcorn on the way to one of the three theaters in the DownEast Mall Cineplex.

Tish had long, smooth, silky chestnut-brown hair—with professional golden highlights because *her* mother wasn't stuck in nineteen-fifty-whatever. Her face—Simone loved studying faces—a classic oval, added flirty charm with dimples; and the dimples flirted often, as Tish always found something

to smile about. Simone figured she'd smile a lot, too, if she'd turned out tall and curvy, with bright blue eyes and dimples.

On top of *everything*, Tish's parents totally supported her ambition to pursue acting. She'd hit the jackpot in Simone's mind. Looks, personality, brains, *and* parents who actually had a clue.

But Simone loved Tish anyway.

The three of them already had plans—secret ones for now because Simone's parents completely did not have a clue—to spend the summer after graduation in New York.

Maybe they'd even move there—it had to be more exciting than Rockpoint, Maine.

Simone figured a sand dune in the Sahara had to be more exciting than Rockpoint, Maine.

But New York? Bright lights, hordes of people.

Freedom!

Mi could study to be a doctor at Columbia, Tish could study acting and go on auditions. And she . . . could study something.

Something that wasn't law, as her own clueless parents wanted. Not surprising, and *so* lame and clichéd because her father was a big-shot lawyer.

Ward Knox would be disappointed, but that's how it had to be.

Maybe she'd study art and become a famous artist like CiCi. *That* would freak her parents out awesomely. And, like CiCi, she'd take and discard lovers at her whim. (When she was ready to do it).

That would show Trent Woolworth.

"Come out," Mi ordered, giving her an elbow bump.

"What? I'm right here."

"No, you're in the Simone Brood Zone. Come out, join the world."

Maybe she liked it in the SBZ, but . . . "I have to open the door with the power of my mind because my hands are full. Okay, done. I'm back."

"The mind of Simone Knox is an awesome thing to behold."

"I must use it for good, and not use it to melt Tiffany into a puddle of slut goo."

“You don’t have to anyway. Her brain’s already a puddle of slut goo.”

Friends, Simone thought, always knew the right thing to say. She would rejoin the world with Mi—and Tish, whenever Tish stopped playing with her already-perfect face and hair and came out—and leave the SBZ behind.

A Friday night opening meant she walked into a theater already half-full. Mi grabbed three seats dead center, took the third one in from the aisle so Simone—still heart tender—could take the one between her and Tish, whose longer legs earned the aisle seat.

Mi shifted in her seat. She’d already calculated they had six minutes until the lights dimmed.

“You’ve got to go to Allie’s party tomorrow night.”

The SBZ beckoned. “I’m not ready for a party, and you know Trent’s going to be there with that slut-goo-brain Tiffany.”

“That’s the *point*, Sim. If you don’t go, everybody’s going to think you’re, like, hiding out, that you’re not over him.”

“I am, and I’m not.”

“Th *point*,” Mi insisted. “You don’t give him the satisfaction. You go with us—Tish is going with Scott, but he’s cool—and you wear something amazing, let Tish do your makeup because she’s got the skills. And you act like: Who, what, him? You know, you’re so over that. You make a statement.”

Simone felt the SBZ pulling her. “I don’t think I can face it. Tish is the actress, not me.”

“You played Rizzo in *Grease* for the spring musical. Tish was awesome as Sandy, but you were an equally awesome Rizzo.”

“Because I’ve had dance lessons and can sing a little.”

“You sing great—and you did great. Be Rizzo at Allie’s party, you know, all confident and sexy and up yours.”

“I don’t know, Mi.” But she could, sort of, imagine it. And how Trent, seeing her all confident and sexy and up yours, would want her again.

Then Tish rushed in, dropped down, gripped Simone’s hand. “You’re not going to freak.”

“Why would I . . . Oh no. Please!”

“The slut’s putting on fresh lip gloss, and the creep’s hanging outside the ladies’ like a good dog.”

“Crap.” Mi curled her fingers around Simone’s arm. “Maybe they’re going to one of the other movies.”

“No, they’re coming here, because that’s what my life is.”

Mi tightened her grip. “Don’t even think about leaving. He’d see you and you’d look and feel like a loser. You’re not a loser. This is your dress rehearsal for Allie’s party.”

“She’s going?” Tish’s dimples flashed and flickered. “You talked her into it?”

“We’re working on it. Just sit.” Mi angled herself just enough. “You’re right, they’re coming in. Just stay,” she hissed as Simone’s arm trembled under her hand. “You don’t even notice them. We’re right here.”

“Right here, now and forever,” Tish echoed, giving Simone’s hand a squeeze. “We’re a . . . a wall of disdain. Got it?”

They walked by, the blonde with the tumble of curls and snugly cropped jeans, and the golden boy—tall, so handsome, quarterback of the championship Wildcats.

Trent gave Simone the slow smile that had once melted her heart, and deliberately ran a hand down Tiffany’s back, letting it slide to her butt and linger there.

Tiffany turned her head as Trent whispered in her ear and looked over her shoulder. Smirked with her perfect, freshly glossed lips.

Brokenhearted, her life a Trent-less void, Simone still had too much of her grandmother in her to take that kind of insult.

She smirked right back and shot up her middle finger.

Mi let out a snorting giggle. “Way to go, Rizzo.”

Though Simone’s broken heart thudded, she made herself watch as Trent and Tiffany sat three rows ahead, and immediately began to make out.

“All men want sex,” Tish said wisely. “I mean, why wouldn’t they? But when that’s all they want, they’re not worth it.”

“We’re better than she is.” Mi passed Tish her Junior Mints and Coke. “Because that’s all she’s got.”

“You’re right.” Maybe her eyes stung a little, but there was a burning in-

side her heart, and the burn felt like healing. She handed Tish her popcorn. “I’m going to Allie’s party.”

Tish let out a laugh—deliberately mocking and loud. Enough to make Tiffany jerk. Tish shot Simone a grin. “We’ll rule that party.”

Simone clamped her popcorn between her thighs so she could link hands with her friends. “I love you guys.”

By the time the previews ended Simone had stopped watching the silhouettes three rows down. Mostly. She’d expected to brood through the movie—actually planned on it—but found herself caught up. Ewan McGregor *was* dreamy, and she liked how strong and brave Scarlett Johansson came across.

But fifteen minutes in, she realized she should’ve gone to the bathroom with Tish—though that would’ve been a disaster with lip-gloss Tiffany in there—or she should’ve taken it a lot easier on the Fanta.

Twenty minutes in, she gave up. “I’ve gotta pee,” she whispered.

“Come on!” Mi whispered back.

“I’ll be fast.”

“You want me to go with you?”

She shook her head at Tish, gave her what was left of the popcorn and Fanta to hold.

She shuffled by, strode quickly up the aisle. After making the turn to the right, she hurried to the ladies’, shoved the door open.

Empty, no waiting. Relieved, she grabbed a stall, and contemplated as she emptied her bladder.

She’d handled the situation. Maybe CiCi had been right. Maybe she was close to realizing Trent was an asshole.

But he was so, so cute, and he had that smile, and—

“Doesn’t matter,” she muttered. “Assholes can be cute.”

Still, she thought about it as she washed her hands, as she studied herself in the mirror over the sink.

She didn’t have Tiffany’s long blond curls or bold blue eyes or killer bod. She was, as far as she could tell, just average.

Average brown hair her mother wouldn’t let her have highlighted. Just wait until she hit eighteen and could do whatever she wanted with her *own*

hair. She wished she hadn't worn it in a ponytail tonight, because it suddenly made her feel juvenile. Maybe she'd cut it. Spike and punk it up. Maybe.

Her mouth was too wide, even if Tish said it was sexy, like Julia Roberts.

Brown eyes, but not deep and dramatic like Mi's. Just brown, like her stupid hair. Of course Tish, being Tish, said they were amber.

But that was just a fancy word for brown.

That didn't matter, either. Maybe she was average, but she wasn't fake. Like Tiffany, whose hair was brown, too, under the bleach.

"I'm not a fake," she said to the mirror. "And Trent Woolworth's an asshole. Tiffany Bryce is a slut-bitch. They can both go to hell."

With a decisive nod, she held her head high and walked out of the bathroom.

She thought the loud pops—firecrackers?—and the screams were from the movie. Cursing herself for stalling and missing an important scene, she quickened her pace.

As she neared the theater door, it burst open. The man, eyes wild, took one stumbling step before he fell forward.

Blood—was that blood? His hands clawed at the green carpet—the carpet where red spread—then stilled.

Flashes, she saw flashes through the door that was wedged open a few inches by the man's legs. Blasts and blasts, screams. And people, shadows and silhouettes, falling, running, falling.

And the figure, dark in the dark, walking methodically up the rows.

She watched, frozen, as that figure turned and shot a woman in the back who was running.

She couldn't breathe. If she'd been capable of drawing a breath, it would've expelled in a scream.

Part of her brain rejected what she'd seen. It couldn't be real. It had to be like the movie. Just pretend. But instinct kicked in, had her running back to the bathroom, crouching behind the door.

Her hands didn't want to work, fumbled on her purse, fumbled on her phone.

Her father had insisted on nine-one-one as her first memory code on the phone.

Her vision wavered, and her breath came now, came in ragged pants.

“Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?”

“He’s killing them. He’s killing them. Help! My friends. Oh God, oh God. He’s shooting people.”

Reed Quartermaine hated working weekends. He wasn’t crazy about working in the mall, either, but he wanted to go back to college in the fall. And college included this little detail they called tuition. Add in books, housing, food, and you had to work weekends at the mall.

His parents covered most of the freight, but they couldn’t manage it all. Not with his sister heading off in another year, and his brother already three years in at American University in D.C.

He sure as hell didn’t want to wait tables the rest of his life, so college. And maybe before he donned another cap and gown he would figure out just what the hell he did want to do for the rest of his life.

But summers, he waited tables, and tried to look on the bright side. The restaurant’s mall location worked okay, and the tips didn’t suck. Maybe waiting tables at Mangia five nights a week with a double shift on Saturdays killed his social life, but he ate well.

Bowls of pasta, loaded pizzas, hunks of Mangia’s renowned tiramisu hadn’t put much meat on his long, bony frame, but it wasn’t for lack of trying.

His father once had hope his middle child would follow in his football-star cleat-prints, as his oldest son had—resoundingly. But Reed’s complete lack of skill on the field and skinny frame dashed those hopes. Still, standing on a yard of leg by the time he’d hit sixteen, with a willingness to run all damn day, had made him a minor sort of star on varsity track, so that balanced it out some.

Then his sister took the heat off with her fierce talent on the soccer field.

He served a table of four their starters—*insalata mista* for the mother, gnocchi for the dad, mozzarella sticks for the boy, and fried ravioli for the girl.

He flirted harmlessly with the girl, who gave him long, shy smiles. Harmless because he figured she was maybe fourteen and off the radar for a college man heading into his sophomore year.

Reed knew how to flirt harmlessly with young girls, older women, and pretty much all in between. Tips mattered, and he'd honed the charm for customers after four summers of waiting tables.

He covered his section—families, some old couples, a scatter of date-night thirty-whatevers. Probably dinner and a movie, which made him think he'd see if Chaz—assistant manager at GameStop—wanted to catch the late showing of *The Island* after their shifts.

He ran credit cards—chatting up table three had bagged him a solid twenty percent—turned tables, swung in and out of the insane kitchen, and finally hit break time.

“Dory, taking my ten.”

The head waitress gave his section a quick scan, gave him the nod.

He stepped out of the double glass doors and into the Friday night mayhem. He had considered texting Chaz and taking his ten in the kitchen, but he wanted out. Plus he knew Angie worked the Fun In The Sun kiosk on Friday nights, and he could take four or five of his ten for some not-so-harmless flirting.

She had an off-and-on boyfriend, but the last word he heard said off. He could try his luck there and maybe score a date with somebody whose miserable schedule matched his own.

He moved fast on long legs through shoppers, through cliques of teenage girls and the teenage boys who scouted them, around moms pushing strollers or herding toddlers, through the incessant brain-numbing music he no longer heard.

He had a mop of black hair—his mother's Italian half. Dory didn't bug him about getting a trim, and his dad had finally given up. His eyes, deep set, pale green against olive-toned skin, brightened when he saw Angie at the kiosk. He slowed his pace, slipped his hands into his trouser pockets—casual—and sauntered over.

“Hey. How's it going?”

She flashed him a smile, rolled her pretty brown eyes. “Busy. Everybody’s going to the beach but me.”

“And me.” He leaned on the counter with its display of sunglasses, hoping he looked smooth in his uniform of white shirt, black vest and pants. “I’m thinking of catching *The Island*, it’s got a ten-forty-five last show. It’s almost like a trip to the beach, am I right? Want in?”

“Oh . . . I don’t know.” She fussed with her hair, a beachy blond that went with the golden tan he suspected she got from the self-tanner in another display. “I do kind of want to see it.”

Hope sprang, and Chaz was bumped off his list.

“Gotta make some fun, right?”

“Yeah, but . . . I sort of told Misty we’d hang after closing.”

Chaz jumped back on the list. “That’s cool. I was heading down to see if Chaz wanted to catch it. We could all go.”

“Maybe.” She flashed that smile again. “Yeah, maybe. I’ll ask her.”

“Great. I’m heading down to see Chaz.” He shifted to give more room to the woman waiting patiently while her kid—another who hit about fourteen—tried on half a zillion pairs of sunglasses. “You can text me either way.”

“If I could have two pairs,” the girl began, checking herself out in a pair with metallic blue lenses, “I’d have a spare.”

“One, Natalie. This *is* your spare.”

“I’ll text you,” Angie murmured, then shifted to work mode. “Those look awesome on you.”

“Really?”

“Totally,” Reed heard Angie say as he headed off. He quickened his pace—he had to make up time.

GameStop buzzed with its usual crowd of geeks and nerds and, for the younger geeks and nerds, the glazed-eyed parents trying to move them along.

Monitors previewed a variety of games—the PG variety on the wall screens. The less friendly ones were on individual laptops—for use with over-eighteen ID or with parental supervision.

He spotted Chaz—king of the nerds—explaining some game to a confused-looking woman.

“If he’s into military-style game play, strategy and arc building, he’d go for it.” Chaz shoved his coke-bottle glasses up his nose. “It’s only been out a couple weeks.”

“It seems so . . . violent. Is it appropriate?”

“Sixteenth birthday, you said.” He gave Reed a quick nod. “And he’s into the Splinter Cell series. If he’s good with those, he’d be good with this.”

She sighed. “I guess boys are always going to play war. I’ll take it, thanks.”

“They’ll ring you up at the register. Thanks for shopping GameStop. Can’t hang, man,” he told Reed as the customer walked away. “Slammed.”

“Thirty seconds. Late show, *The Island*.”

“I’m all about it. Clones, baby.”

“Solid. I’ve got Angie on the hook for it, but she wants to bring Misty on.”

“Oh, well, I—”

“Don’t let me down, man. It’s the closest I’ve got to a date out of her.”

“Yeah, but Misty’s a little scary. And . . . Do I have to pay for her?”

“It’s not a date. I’m working on turning it into a date. For me, not for you. You’re my wingman, and Misty’s Angie’s. Clones,” he reminded Chaz.

“Okay. I guess. Jeez. I wasn’t figuring on—”

“Great,” Reed said before Chaz changed his mind. “Gotta book. Meet you there.”

He rushed out. It was happening! Group nondate could clear the way for a one-on-one let’s-hang-out and that opened the door to the possibility of a little touch.

He could use a little touch. But right now he had three minutes to make it back to Mangia or Dory would scorch his ass.

He started to lope when he heard what sounded like firecrackers or a series of backfires. It made him think of GameStop’s shooting games. More puzzled than alarmed, he glanced back.

Then the screaming started. And the thunder.

Not from behind, he realized, from up ahead. The thunder was dozens of people running. He jumped out of the way as a woman careened toward him racing behind a stroller where the kid inside wailed.

Was that blood on her face? “What—
”

She kept running, her mouth wide in a silent scream.

An avalanche rolled behind her. People stampeding, stomping on discarded shopping bags, tripping over them, and as some fell, over each other.

A man skidded over the floor, his glasses bouncing off to be crushed under someone’s foot. Reed grabbed his arm.

“What’s happening?”

“He’s got a gun. He shot—he shot—”

The man shoved to his feet, ran on in a limping sprint. A couple of teenage girls ran weeping and screaming into a store at his left.

And he realized the noise—*gunfire*—came not only from in front of him, but also from behind him. He thought of Chaz, a thirty-second sprint behind him, and his restaurant family, double that ahead.

“Hide, man,” he muttered to Chaz. “Find somewhere to hide.”

And he ran toward the restaurant.

The cracking, popping sounds went on and on, seeming to come from everywhere now. Glass shattered and crashed, a woman with a bloodied leg huddled under a bench and moaned. He heard more screams—and, worse, the way they cut off, like a sliced tape.

Then he saw the little boy in red shorts and an Elmo T-shirt staggering like a drunk past Abercrombie & Fitch.

The display window exploded. People scattered, dived for cover, and the kid fell down, crying for his mother.

Across the mall, he saw a gunman—boy?—laughing as he fired, fired, fired. On the ground, a man’s body jerked as the bullets tore into him.

Reed scooped up the kid in the Elmo T-shirt on the run, hooking him under one arm like the football he’d never been able to handle.

The gunfire—and he would never, never forget the sound of it—came closer. Front and back. Everywhere.

He’d never make it to Mangia, not with the kid. He veered off, running on instinct, did a kind of sliding dive into the kiosk.

Angie, the girl he'd flirted with five minutes before, a lifetime before, lay sprawled in a pool of blood. Her pretty brown eyes stared at him while the kid hooked under his arm wailed.

"Oh God, oh Jesus. Oh Jesus, oh God."

The shooting wouldn't stop, wouldn't stop.

"Okay, okay, you're okay. What's your name? I'm Reed, what's your name?"

"Brady. I want Mommy!"

"Okay, Brady, we're going to find her in just a minute, but now we have to be really quiet. Brady! How old are you?"

"This many." He held up four fingers as fat tears splashed on his cheeks.

"That's a big guy, right? We have to be quiet. There are bad guys. You know about bad guys?"

With tears and snot running down his face, eyes huge with shock, Brady nodded.

"We're going to be quiet so the bad guys don't find us. And I'm going to call for the good guys. For the police." He did his best to block the boy's view of Angie, did his best to block his own mind from the idea of her, of her and death.

He yanked open one of the sliding doors for storage, shoved out stock. "Climb in there, okay? Like Hide and Seek. I'm right here, but you get in there while I call the good guys."

He nudged the kid in, got out his phone, and that's when he saw how badly his hands shook.

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?"

"DownEast Mall," he began.

"Police are responding. Are you in the mall?"

"Yeah. I've got a kid with me. I put him in the stock cabinet in the Fun In The Sun kiosk. Angie—the girl who worked it. She's dead. She's dead. God. There are at least two of them shooting people."

"Can you tell me your name?"

"Reed Quartermaine."

"Okay, Reed, do you feel you're safe where you are?"

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Sorry. You’re in a kiosk so you have some cover. I’m going to advise you to stay where you are, to shelter in place. You have a child with you?”

“He said his name’s Brady, and he’s four. He got separated from his mother. I don’t know if she’s . . .” He looked around, saw Brady had curled up, eyes glazed over, as he sucked his thumb. “He’s probably, you know, in shock or whatever.”

“Try to stay calm, Reed, and quiet. The police are on scene.”

“They’re still shooting. They just keep shooting. Laughing. I heard him laughing.”

“Who was laughing, Reed?”

“He was shooting, the glass exploded, the guy on the ground, he kept shooting him and laughing. Jesus God.”

He heard shouting—not the screams, but like war cries. Something tribal and triumphant. And more shots, then . . .

“It stopped. The shooting stopped.”

“Stay where you are, Reed. Help is coming to you. Stay where you are.”

He looked down at the boy again. The glassy eyes met his. He said, “Mommy.”

“We’re going to find her in a minute. The good guys are coming. They’re coming.”

That was the worst part, he’d think later. The waiting . . . with the smell of gunfire burning the air, the calls for help, the moans and sobbing. And seeing the blood on his own shoes of the girl he would never take to the movies.