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# *Losing Hope*

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## Chapter One

My heart rate is signaling for me to just walk away. Les has reminded me more than once that it's not my business. She's never been a brother before, though. She has no idea how hard it is to sit back and *not* let it be my business. That's why, right now, this son-of-a-bitch is my number-one priority.

I slide my hands into the back pockets of my jeans and hope to hell I can keep them there. I'm standing behind the couch, looking down at him. I don't know how long it'll take him to notice I'm here. Considering the grip he has on the chick straddling his lap, I doubt he'll notice for a while. I remain behind them for several minutes while the party continues around us, everyone completely unaware that I'm a fraction away from losing my mind. I would take out my phone so that I'd have evidence, but I couldn't do that to Les. She doesn't need a visual.

"Hey," I finally say, unable to contain my silence a second longer. If I have to watch him palm this chick's breast one more time without a single ounce of respect for his relationship with Les, I'll rip his fucking hand off.

Grayson tears his mouth away from hers and tilts his head back, looking up at me with glossed-over eyes. I can see the fear settle in when it clicks—when he finally realizes that the last person he thought would be here tonight actually showed up.

"Holder," he says, pushing the girl off his lap. He struggles to his feet but can hardly stand up straight. He looks at me pleadingly, pointing at the girl, who's now adjusting her barely-there skirt. "This isn't . . . it's not what it looks like."

I slide my hands out of my back pockets and fold my arms across my chest. My fist is closer to him now and I have to clench it, knowing how good it would feel to punch his face in.

I look down to the floor and inhale a breath. Then another. And one more just for show, since I'm really enjoying watching him squirm. I shake my head and raise my eyes back to his. "Give me your phone."

The confusion on his face would be comical if I weren't so pissed. He laughs and attempts to back up a step, but bumps into the coffee table. He catches himself by pressing his hand onto the glass and straightens back up. "Get your own fucking phone," he mumbles. He doesn't look back at me as he maneuvers his way around the coffee table. I calmly walk around the couch and intercept him, holding out my hand.

"Give me your phone, Grayson. *Now.*"

I'm not really at an advantage sizewise, since we're about the same build. However, I'm definitely at an advantage if you take my anger into consideration, and Grayson can clearly see that. He takes a step back, which probably isn't a very smart move considering he's backing himself straight into the corner of the living room. He fumbles with his pocket and finally pulls out his phone.

"What the hell do you want my phone for?" he says. I grab it out of his hands and dial Les's number without hitting send. I hand it back to him.

"Call her. Tell her what a bastard you are and end it."

Grayson looks down at his phone, then back up at me. "Go fuck yourself," he spits.

I inhale a calming breath, then roll my neck and pop my jaw. When that doesn't help ease my urge to make him bleed, I reach forward, grab the collar of his shirt and shove him hard against the wall, pinning his neck with my forearm. I remind myself that if I kick

his ass before he makes the call, my remaining calm for the past ten minutes will have been pointless.

My teeth are clenched, my jaw is tight, and my pulse is pounding in my head. I've never hated anyone more than in this moment. The intensity of what I wish I could do to him right now is even scaring *me*.

I look him hard in the eyes and let him know how the next few minutes are about to play out. "Grayson," I say through clenched teeth. "Unless you want me to do what I really want to do to you right now, you will put the phone to your ear, you will call my sister, and you will end it. Then you're going to hang up the phone and never speak to her again." I press my arm harder against his neck, taking note of the fact that his face is now redder than his shirt, due to lack of oxygen.

"Fine," he grumbles, attempting to free himself from the hold I have on him. I wait until he looks down at the phone and hits send before I release my arm and let go of his shirt. He puts the phone to his ear and never stops looking at me as we both stand still and wait for Les to answer.

I know what this will do to her, but she has no idea what he does behind her back. No matter how many times she hears it from other people, he's somehow able to weasel his way back into her life every time.

Not this time. Not if I have any control over it. I won't sit back and let him do this to my sister anymore.

"Hey," he says into the phone. He tries to turn away from me to speak to her, but I shove his shoulder back against the wall. He winces.

"No, babe," he says nervously. "I'm at Jaxon's house." There's a long pause while he listens to her speak. "I know that's what I said, but I lied. That's why I'm calling. Les, I . . . I think we need some space."

I shake my head, letting him know that he needs to make it an absolute break-up. I'm not looking for him to give her space. I'm looking for him to give my sister permanent freedom.

He rolls his eyes and flips me off with his free hand. "I'm breaking up with you," he says flatly. He allows her to talk while he remains silent. The fact that he's showing no remorse whatsoever proves what a heartless dick he is. My hands are shaking and my chest tightens, knowing exactly what this is doing to Les right now. I hate myself for forcing this to happen, but Les deserves better, even if she doesn't think she does.

"I'm hanging up now," he says into the phone.

I shove his head back against the wall and force him to look at me. "Apologize to her," I say quietly, not wanting her to hear me in the background. He closes his eyes and sighs, then ducks his head.

"I'm sorry, Lesslie. I didn't want to do this." He pulls the phone from his ear and abruptly ends the call. He stares at the screen for several seconds. "I hope you're happy," he says, looking back up at me. "Because you just broke your sister's heart."

That's the last thing Grayson says to me. My fist meets his jaw twice before he hits the floor. I shake out my hand, back away from him, and make my way to the exit. Before I even reach my car, my phone is buzzing in my back pocket. I pull it out and don't even look at the screen before answering it.

"Hey," I say, attempting to control the trembling anger in my voice when I hear her crying on the other end. "I'm on my way, Les. It'll be okay, I'm on my way."

It's been an entire day since Grayson made the call, but I still feel guilty, so I tack on an extra two miles to my evening run for self-inflicted punishment. Seeing Les torn up like she was last night

wasn't something I had expected. I realize now that having him call her like I did probably wasn't the best way of handling things, but there's no way I could just sit back and allow him to dick around on her like he was.

The most unexpected thing about Les's reaction was that her anger wasn't solely placed on Grayson. It was as if she was pissed at the entire male population. She kept referring to men as "sick bastards," pacing her bedroom floor back and forth, while I just sat there and watched her vent. She finally broke down, crawled into bed, and cried herself to sleep. I lay awake, knowing I had a hand in her heartache. I stayed in her room the whole night, partly to make sure she was okay, but mostly because I didn't want her picking up the phone and calling Grayson in a moment of desperation.

She's stronger than I give her credit for, though. She didn't attempt to call him last night and she's made no attempt to call him today. She didn't get much sleep last night, so she went to her room before lunch to nap. However, I've been pausing outside her bedroom door throughout the day just to make sure I couldn't hear her on the phone, so I know she hasn't made any attempts to call him. At least while I've been home. In fact, I'm pretty sure the heartless phone call from him last night was exactly what she needed to finally see him for who he really is.

I kick my shoes off at the door and walk to the kitchen to refill my water. It's Saturday night and I would normally be heading out with Daniel, but I already texted him to let him know I was staying in tonight. Les made me promise I would stay in with her because she didn't want to go out and chance running into Grayson yet. She's lucky she's cool, because I don't know many seventeen-year-old guys who would give up a Saturday night to watch chick flicks with his heartbroken sister. But then again, most siblings don't have what Les and I have. I don't know if our close relationship has anything to do

with the fact that we're twins. She's my only sibling, so I don't have anything to compare us to. She might argue that I'm too protective of her, and there may be some truth to that argument, but I don't plan on changing anytime soon. Or ever.

I run up the stairs, pull my shirt off, and push open the bathroom door. I turn the water on, then walk across the hall and knock on her bedroom door. "I'm taking a quick shower, will you order the pizza?"

I brace my hand against her door and reach down to pull my socks off. I turn around and toss them into the bathroom, then beat on her door again. "Les!"

When she doesn't respond, I sigh and look up at the ceiling. If she's on the phone with him, I'll be pissed. But if she's on the phone with him, it probably means he's telling her the break-up was all my fault and *she'll* be the one who's pissed. I wipe my palms on my shorts and open the door to her bedroom, preparing for another heated lecture on how I need to mind my own business.

I see Les on her bed after I walk into her room, and I'm immediately taken back to when I was a little boy. Back to the moment that changed me. Everything about me. Everything about the world *around* me. My whole world turned from a place full of vibrant colors to a dull, lifeless gray. The sky, the grass, the trees . . . all the things that were once beautiful were stripped of their magnificence the moment I realized I was responsible for our best friend Hope's disappearance.

I never looked at people the same way. I never looked at nature the same way. I never looked at my future the same way. Everything went from having a meaning, a purpose, and a reason, to simply being a second-rate version of what life was *supposed* to be like. My once effervescent world was suddenly a blurred, gray, colorless photocopy.

Just like Les's eyes.

They aren't hers. They're open. They're looking right at me from her position on the bed.

But they aren't hers.

The color in her eyes is gone. This girl is a gray, colorless photocopy of my sister.

*My Les.*

I can't move. I wait for her to blink, to laugh, to revel in the twisted aftermath of the sick, fucking joke she's playing right now. I wait for my heart to start beating again, for my lungs to start working again. I wait for control of my body to return to me because I don't know who has control of it right now. *I* sure as hell don't. I wait and I wait and I wonder how long she can keep this up. How long can people keep their eyes open like that? How long can people not breathe before their body jerks for that desperately needed gasp of air?

How fucking long before I do something to *help* her?

My hands are touching her face, grabbing her arm, shaking her whole body until she's in my arms and I'm pulling her onto my lap. The empty pill bottle falls out of her hand and lands on the floor but I refuse to look at it. Her eyes are still lifeless and she's no longer looking at me as the head between my hands falls backward every time I try to lift it up.

She doesn't flinch when I scream her name, and she doesn't wince when I slap her, and she doesn't react when I start to cry.

She doesn't do a goddamned thing.

She doesn't even tell me it'll be okay when every single ounce of whatever was left inside my chest is propelled out of me the moment I realize that the very best part of me is dead.

## Chapter Two

“Will you look for her pink top and the black pleated pants?” my mother asks. She keeps her eyes trained on the paperwork laid out in front of her. The man from the funeral home reaches across the table and points to a spot on the form.

“Just a few more pages, Beth,” he says. My mother mechanically signs the forms without question. She’s trying to keep it together until they leave, but I know as soon as they walk out the front door she’ll break down again. It’s only been forty-eight hours, but I can tell just by looking at her that she’s about to experience it all over again.

You would think a person could only die once. You would think you would only find your sister’s lifeless body once. You would think you would only have to watch your mother’s reaction once after finding out her only daughter is dead.

Once is so far from accurate.

It happens repeatedly.

Every single time I close my eyes I see Les’s eyes. Every time my mother looks at me, she’s watching me tell her that her daughter is dead for the second time. For the third time. For the thousandth time. Every time I take a breath or blink or speak, I experience her death all over again. I don’t sit here and wonder if the fact that she’s dead will ever sink in. I sit here and wonder when I’ll stop having to watch her die.

“Holder, they need an outfit for her,” my mother repeats again after noticing I haven’t moved. “Go to her room and get the pink shirt with the long sleeves. It’s her favorite one, she’d want to wear it.”

She knows I don't want to go into Les's bedroom any more than she does. I push my chair away from the table and head upstairs. "Les is dead," I mutter to myself. "She doesn't give a shit what she's wearing."

I pause outside her door, knowing I'll have to watch her die all over again the moment I open it. I haven't been in here since I found her and I really had no intention of *ever* coming back in here.

I walk inside and shut the door behind me, then make my way to her closet. I do my best not to think about it.

Pink shirt.

*Don't think about her.*

Long sleeves.

*Don't think about how you would do anything to go back to Saturday night.*

Pleated black pants.

*Don't think about how much you fucking hate yourself right now for letting her down.*

But I do. I think about it and I become hurt and angry all over again. I grab a fistful of shirts hanging in the closet and rip them as hard as I can off their hangers until they fall to the closet floor. I grip the frame on top of the door and squeeze my eyes shut, listening to the sound of the now empty hangers swinging back and forth. I try to focus on the fact that I'm in here to grab two things and leave, but I can't move. I can't stop replaying the moment that I walked into this bedroom and found her.

I fall to my knees on the floor, look over at her bed, and watch her die one more time.

I sit back against the closet door and close my eyes, remaining in this position for however long it takes me to realize that I don't want to be in here. I turn around and rummage through the shirts that are now on the closet floor until I find the long-sleeved pink one. I

look up at the pants hanging from their hangers and I grab a pair of black pleated ones. I toss them to the side and begin to push up from the floor, but immediately sit back down when I see a thick, leather-bound notebook on the bottom shelf of her closet.

I grab it and pull it onto my lap, then lean back against the wall and stare at the cover. I've seen this notebook before. It was a gift to her from Dad about three years ago, but Les told me she'd never use it because she knew the notebook was just a request made by her therapist. Les hated therapy, and I was never sure why Mom encouraged her to go. We both went for a while after Mom and Dad split up, but I stopped attending the sessions once they started interfering with junior high football practice. Mom didn't seem to mind that I didn't go, but Les continued with the weekly sessions up until two days ago . . . when her actions made it clear the therapy wasn't exactly helping.

I flip the notebook open to the first page and it doesn't surprise me that it's blank. I wonder, if she had used the notebook like the therapist suggested, would it have made a difference?

I doubt it. I don't know what could have saved Les from herself. Certainly not a pen and paper.

I pull the pen out of the spiral binding, then press the tip of the pen to the paper and begin to write her a letter. I don't even know why I'm writing her. I don't know if she's in a place where she can see me right now, or if she's even in a place *at all*, but in case she can see this . . . I want her to know how her selfish decision affected me. How hopeless she left me. *Literally* hopeless. And completely alone. And so, so incredibly sorry.