

HALO

CHAPTER ONE CON'T

Back in my own room I looked out the window and saw dark storm clouds moving like a slow, deliberate army, making their way across the sky. The summer here in Connecticut was just as oppressive as Michigan's, with hot humid days broken violently by thunderstorms, only to return again, but I still preferred the heat of summer to the bone-chilling cold of winter. Even if there was no one to hang out with I was determined to at least enjoy what was left of the hot days.

I pulled on my swimsuit, something my mother would have liked, with straps that crisscrossed on my back. I missed her for the one-thousandth time.

The brain aneurysm that killed her two years ago gave no warning signs or symptoms. There was no chance for goodbye. She'd simply collapsed at home one day while my brother and I were at school. My teacher had sent me to the office without telling me why. The principal hadn't told me anything either, but I'd known something was wrong by the way the secretary put her arm around my shoulders as if I might break. My dad picked me up from school, telling me as I sat in the passenger seat of the car that my mother had died. Dominic was already crying in the back seat.

Sometimes at night I had dreams that my mom held me in her arms, telling me she wished she could have stayed and she loved me. The dreams felt so real I could smell her perfume and feel her arms around me, but then I would wake, and the room would be dark and silent. In the real world, she wasn't there to tell me that anymore.

After her death I carried on, going to school, running cross country and hanging out with my friends, but the pain lingered, sometimes fresh, always unwanted. Dominic did pretty much the same, though he became more guarded about his emotions. Our dad was less successful at dealing with the grief. He spent long hours at work as if he wanted to avoid being with us because now we seemed incomplete. I'd seen prescription bottles for anti-depressants in his medicine cabinet but they didn't seem to help.

I didn't know why Dominic and I had been more resilient. Maybe because we were young, and we didn't know that grief was unbearable, so we simply accepted the invisible burden as if it were supposed to be part of us. We finally moved out of our old house so Dad could try to get away from the memories, or at least come to terms with the loss.

Shrugging away my introspection, I picked up my beach towel and walked out of my bedroom, flip-flops dangling from my fingers.

Dominic was in the foyer, his keys in his hand when I came downstairs.

“Where are you going?” I asked, not really expecting an answer.

He looked back at me as he opened the front door. For a moment he looked if he wanted to say something, then he reached out and scrubbed at my hair, which I always pretended to hate by ducking my head out the way.

“Just out. See you later, Bubblegum. Stay out of my room.”

“If you keep saying that it’s almost an invitation. It’s like telling me not to think of a blue armadillo. All I can think about is a blue armadillo.”

He shook his head at me then walked out the front door and closed it. The sound echoed against the high ceilings and polished wood floors. I stood for a moment in the empty hall and sighed. It was like I didn’t exist.

Swinging my towel in one hand I went through the spacious kitchen and out to the sunroom that overlooked the pool terrace. Low clouds darkened the sky, the air stifflingly hot.

Down at the pool, a warm wind rippled the water. I kicked off my flip-flops and jumped in feet first, holding my nose the way I used to when I was a little girl.

When I surfaced the thick dark clouds rolled in a wind that was picking up. I turned over on my back, and in the corner of my eye, I saw lightning flash in the distance. The storm was coming quickly, its winds rushing to strip away the stifling heat. It wasn’t a good idea to keep swimming, but the storm was still some distance and I wanted more time in the pool.

I sank under the water, which was a dark blue color without the sun to light it. When I surfaced someone was standing over me. Startled, I let out a squeak of alarm. It was one of the young workers hired to help Randolph, the old gardener my father had kept on when we bought the house.

He’d caught my attention the first day they’d moved in. He wasn’t simply handsome. None of the common words applied. His light blond hair fell in short waves around his sculpted face, and he had a peculiar way of looking as if he’d been photoshopped into the scenery, too beautiful to be real.

“You need to get out of the pool,” he said in a British accent, which I was not expecting. I’d fantasized a few times about meeting him, but I hadn’t expected to be treated like a trespassing kid in any of those imaginary scenarios.

A little defensive, I replied, “I live here. I can swim whenever I like.”

“I know who you are. I meant it might be dangerous. The lightning is getting closer.” He said it calmly, though his gray eyes flicked up at the sky as he spoke.

I rolled on my back, pretending not to care. “I see it,” I said. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Fear fluttered through me.

“I’d feel much better if you got out of the pool.”

“What’s your name?”

“I’m just...a landscaper.” He sounded hesitant.

“I’m not going to tell on you, I just want to know who you are,” I said, listening to the thunder, wondering if it was getting closer.

“My name is Alton.”

“Are you a college student?”

There was a long silence, which made me peek over at him. He sat crouched on his heels next to the side of the pool, an unlit cigarette in his fingertips as if he were thinking. I’d seen him smoking on the grounds before, which was peculiar. It was strictly forbidden and I wasn’t sure how he’d gotten away with it.

Then he spoke in an entirely different tone of voice. “It’s not your turn to ask a question.”

I looked over at him, rolling off my back and treading water. “What?” I asked, blinking the water out of my eyes.

“You get one question and then I get a question, that’s how it works,” he said, his tone friendly and a hint of mischief in his eyes.

“Okay, go ahead with your question, then.”

“I can’t. If I asked you a question and then you were struck by lightning before I could get the answer it would be terribly disappointing.”

Suppressing a smile at the childish game, I clambered out, like an awkward crab. He didn’t offer his hand to help me out, which was not very chivalrous, but could be forgiven. I picked up my towel and wrapped it around myself, wondering if he thought I was pretty. I didn’t look half bad in a bathing suit. “Now you can ask your question,” I said.

“I’ll walk you to the house and you can answer on the way.”

Thunder cracked the sky, loud and close. I jumped involuntarily, my feet skipping toward the house. “Okay, we’re walking,” I said, hoping he hadn’t noticed my little hop of fear.

He rolled the unlit cigarette in his fingers. “Well, I know your name is Nina. I know your family just bought this house. Where did you move from?”

“Michigan.”

“Ah. That’s a long ways from Connecticut.”

“Are you from the UK?” I asked, taking my turn to ask a question.

“Can’t imagine what gave me away,” he said looking down at me, amusement in his gray eyes.

“Ha. Yes, it’s your accent. Okay, so it’s your turn.”

“What’s your favorite color?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Blue?”

He laughed at me. “You say it as if you might give a wrong answer. It’s your favorite color. It’s whatever you want it to be.”

“You can ask me anything you like and all you can think of is my favorite color?”

“Apparently. And you just wasted your turn. What’s your favorite movie?”

“What? That isn’t fair! And...you didn’t answer!”

“I said apparently. That means yes, the only question I could think of was your favorite color. So now you know I lack imagination and it’s my turn. Your favorite movie?”

“I don’t have a favorite, but I like mostly action and stuff like that. No scary movies.” The wind gusted, suddenly cold, and goosebumps stood out on my wet skin.

“I don’t like horror movies either,” he said, glancing up at the sky as it lit up again.

“Okay, it’s my turn again. How old are you?” I asked.

“I’m eighteen.”

“Oh. I’m fifteen. Wait, if I volunteer information does that mean you lose a turn?”

“This would be a tedious conversation if we did that,” he pointed out. “So you’re fifteen. And you have a father and a brother. You are younger than he is?”

“Yeah. He’s your age.” I wouldn’t say it, but eighteen seemed too old for me. Or more truthfully, he would think I was too young for him. “It’s my turn. Do you live around here?”

“It is your turn, but we’re at your house now and I have to get back. It was nice chatting with you.” His eyes were kind as he said it, as if he knew I wanted to continue talking with him.

I stood on the walkway that led to the back door, struggling to hide my disappointment. I smiled anyway. “Same. See you later.”

Thunder rumbled as he walked away, taking a lighter out of his pocket and flicking it open, the flame small but steady. I watched him, my head filled with questions I wanted to ask.

Small drops of rain splattered on the walkway to the back door as I ran the last few steps, trees swaying in a wind that was picking up speed. A flash of lightning crackled above me as I turned the doorknob, stepping into the kitchen. Alton had been right about getting out of the pool, even if I hated to admit it. Why had he come over to tell me, though? Had Randolph told him to? Or had Alton been concerned on his own?

The house was dark and silent, the rain pelting against the tall windows of the old Victorian. I turned on the lights and walked into the living room.

I heard a creak upstairs and froze. No one was supposed to be home. I exhaled. Despite its grandeur, it was an old house and it made old house noises. I went upstairs and got dressed, scrubbing my hair dry and combing it out, trying to think of excuses to see Alton again. My stomach growled so I ordered a pizza delivery.

Downstairs I propped my feet up on the coffee table, scrolling through pictures of my friends from Michigan doing fun things without me. The antique grandfather clock ticked away the minutes, the pendulum swinging back and forth, in rhythm with the rain. I listened to it, my feet bouncing in time.

Then the ticking paused, just a beat off. I looked up from my phone. The clock hesitated, hanging. The storm went quiet and so did the house. The floor upstairs creaked in the strange silence, the only sound. Then the pendulum resumed as if nothing had happened. I stared at it, listening. I thought physics made a pendulum swing back and forth. What would make it stop?

The doorbell rang, startling me. I got up and answered the door to find the delivery guy standing under the porch, soaking wet. He handed me the pizza and I paid, part of my brain still counting ticktocks. I closed the door and stood there, listening in the silence to the clock. With a quick movement, I locked the door.

In the living room I put the pizza down on the coffee table and went to get a paper plate from the kitchen. When I got back to the living room, I heard a loud thud against the front door, and for a moment I froze.

The lock rattled and the doorbell rang. I went to it, my heart beating. The doorbell rang again, impatiently, so I unlocked the door and opened it. Dominic stood on the porch, rain dripping from his hair and a cardboard box in his arms. "It's wet out here, Nina. Move."