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CHAPTER ONE

Fuck.

I'm an idiot.

It's Halloween and I'm the only one in a packed club on Teen Night *not* wearing a costume. Girls are jumping and screaming lyrics in cheap shiny wigs, and all the guys, dressed in a motley of cheap polyester, are scoping out the dance floor, their gazes hopping right over me. Even the bartender, slinging water bottles, has on pink bunny ears.

This isn't an *I'm seventeen and too cool for dress up* moment. I *like* wearing costumes. I just thought I'd look like an unintentional clown doing it. We're at a club. Who wears a Halloween costume to the club? Apparently, everyone except this freak in an Old Navy hoodie and khaki shorts. I'm wearing *khaki* shorts, like a nerdy loser.

Some girl bumps into me and does a double take at the sight of my hoodie. It's Florida; I know October everywhere else is like that meme of the dog in a wig wearing a scarf because "it's sweater weather," but we're in Florida; the leaves don't change here. They just fall off sometime between hot-as-fuck and damn-where-that-wind-come-from? So even though this white girl has on a mesh shirt over a nude bra—I don't know what the hell she's dressed as—I can tell by her raised brows and attempt to act like she didn't see me that she doesn't know what in god's name I'm doing right now either.

Oh my god. Why am I like this?

This is what I get for not doing the *yes* thing. My mom bought this book by Shonda Rhimes, *Year of Yes*, and—I'm not going to lie—some rich black lady with a gazillion TV shows shouldn't be able to tell me, some sad black girl, how to be all, *Say yes to the dress!* But right now, I'm really wishing I had said yes when Dré asked, *Are you sure you don't want to put on something? It's a costume party at a club. Don't you have something sexy? Sexy nurse? Sexy vet? Hell, cut up your hoodie and go as a sexy hobo.*

I'm wishing I had scissors or the foresight to go as Sexy Hobo, because now, while my best friends are onstage at the hottest teen club in Orlando, singing their asses off like rock gods, I look like the freak who has no social shame.

The truth is I have too much social shame. So much shame that it seeps out of me like fresh cut garlic on the back of the tongue.

I make eye contact with Eli. He's on the keyboard, belting out lyrics and twisting in and out of a rap. His voice is the love child of Sam Smith and Adele. He's all suave and mysterious to everyone here, but I know him as the boy who shaved off half an eyebrow when we were thirteen and those Peretz Hebrew/Palestinian hairy genes started coming in. His mom and dad

were on that Romeo and Juliet vibe back in the day, and even though it makes for an epic love story, with real war and faking deaths to escape their families and countries (epic as hell), their genetic combo gave Eli thick brows and hair like nobody's business.

He smiles at me with his dark brown eyes just under his fedora. Of the three of us, he's definitely the broody one, writing poems about nostalgia and love.

Dré, on the other hand—he's got on shades. Who wears sunglasses inside *at night*? Dré. When we were in middle school, Dré used to hide his Spanish and pretend his name was Andrew. I don't blame him. Our school had a lot of white kids, and they always asked dumb as hell questions. I always got, "If you can't get your hair wet, how do you wash it?" One kid asked Dré if *Puerto Rican* meant *legal Mexican* in Spanish. The kid *legitimately* didn't know. I know our education system is shit, but come the fuck on.

High school has been a game changer for all of us. Our magnet school pulls in kids from all over the county. But now there are too many kids from way too many places. Now we *have* to be different to fit in—cue Dré's flashy, Spanish-heritage-day-is-every-day evolution. He's a self-proclaimed Puerto Rican papi, and he kind of radiates like a sunny day on South Beach.

Then there's me. In my hoodie, khaki shorts, and Converse, stuck in the middle of a club with hundreds of kids basking in the glory that is Dré and Eli. I look like an outcast from a bad '90s movie. I'm not uncool, but I do these uncool things as if I'm addicted to self-sabotage.

Mesh Girl looks at me again; she's probably wondering why Dré keeps pointing and making steamy eyes at me while he spits some rhymes in Spanish. I know she's thinking, *How'd she get him?* Girls *have* asked me that. They see me, with my not-slim body and my brown skin, and say, *No offense, but damn, girl, how you got with Dré?*

I'm not. Never have, never will. This flashy thing that he's doing is our signal for me to check his hair. My only job is to make sure it still looks good. I nod and sway to the music, ignoring Mesh Girl's eyebrows, which are raised to the top of her blond head. Is it bad that I like the attention? I enjoy her envy, even though I'm not the girl she thinks I am.

Some girl dressed like a pumpkin shuffles past me and reaches out to touch Dré's hand. What she doesn't know is that he's transferring half a store's worth of product onto her fingers. He spends so much time on his hair, we have to speed to school—which is the last thing we should do in Dré's rusty old car, the Bat Mobile. It's already two gearshifts away from blowing up with us inside. We call it the Bat Mobile not because it's cool, but because it looks like a hundred bats dropped turds all over it and eroded the paint.

Even though it's pretty much trash on wheels, I'm so jealous. I can't even get my mom to let me practice my learners in her car. The queen of burning out engines thinks I'll mess something up. Then again, here I am on Halloween, the only girl in the club not having fun because of my shitty choices.

Mesh Girl bumps me with her shoulder. “He’s hot, right?” She’s talking about Eli, and I do a weird laugh thing and nod, because I’m the worst at small talk, and it’s too much to yell, *Yeah, I’ve thought that for years. I can like the way he looks, right? That’s normal, right?*

She doesn’t seem to care that my laugh was borderline psychotic. “Oh my god, we should totally dance for them. Guys love that shit.” Suddenly this girl that I don’t know from Eve is pulling me toward the stage, and I start freaking out.

I’ve watched enough romance movies to have this scene planned in my head—but those are fantasies, and this is getting too real. People are staring at us as she starts twerking and swinging her arms around.

She waves at me. “Come on!”

Nope. I just smile and shrink back into the crowd. She’s clearly one of those people who *really* believes in herself—like, no one has ever told her she can’t do a damn thing, because, here she is, shaking her ass like she invented the booty pop.

Mesh Girl isn’t looking at me anymore. She’s dancing and looking at Eli, and—he’s looking at *her*. I know I’m not supposed to care, because he’s just my best friend and he and Dré are supposed to interact with the crowd—that’s part of the gig—but he’s looking at her and smiling like he’s impressed. He thinks this girl’s half-baked dance moves are cool. He thinks *she’s* cool.

I can dance better than that. *I could be that cool.*

Except I’m not.

I’m the girl who hides in the crowd. I’m the girl who isn’t even in costume. And now, the guy I maybe-sorta-like is smiling and singing to the girl who is doing the scary thing, even though she’s not that good at it.

Fuck my life. My crush is about to go up in tired-ass flames like the rest of my dreams. This isn’t the first time I’ve passed up doing what I want because I’m afraid of looking like a clown. It isn’t even the tenth or the hundredth.

Hell, just this morning I walked by a flyer for the school musical auditions, and when the drama teacher offered me one, I did the weird laugh, and—let’s just say she’ll probably never make eye contact with me again.

All I had to do was say *yes*. All I had to do was tell myself I’d *try*.

Why am I so chickenshit?

I make my way to the bar and order a soda.

The guy at the bar eyes me as he sprays Coke into my glass. He puts the Coke down in front of me, and just when I want him to walk away and leave me in my despair, he pulls off his pink bunny ears and puts them next to my bubbly soda. “Take these. I don’t want you to stand out.”

I shake my head. Honestly, he's got long hair and it's kind of greasy, so there is no way I'm putting that on my head. "I'm cool. Don't need pity ears, but thanks."

He laughs, and it's low-key judgmental. "Yeah, because cool people don't wear costumes, right? You must be a blast at parties." He looks around at the club behind me. "Oh, wait."

Rude. "Look. I happen to be a very cool person, thank you very much." I shouldn't talk when I'm in my feelings, because my voice goes up an octave and I can never get my eyebrows to stay still. They're up in my hairline now, showing the whole damn world that I have no chill.

Dude puts his bunny ears back on and leans on the bar. "Yeah, it's so cool sitting by yourself at a Halloween party with no costume." He shrugs. "I'm not saying high school is going to be the best time of your life, but you should get over yourself enough to have a little fun while you can. Otherwise, you'll be a cool adult sitting alone at a bar wondering why your life sucks." He stands up, crosses his arms and looks proud of himself.

Is there a sign on my head that says, *I'm having a hard time. Please do pile on?* I take a deep breath and hate myself, because my first reaction is to smile and nod. But I stare him dead in the eye and say, "Because being a bartender at thirtysomething is so great." I feel a little badass for saying it, but also super guilty for being a bitch.

"Well, one of us is having fun." He wiggles his bunny ears. "And the other one is at a party full of kids and only has the bartender to talk to." He pulls the white towel off his shoulder and starts wiping down the bar. "Don't forget to tip." And then he's moving away and pulling out waters for a group of guys in some anime costumes.

I drop my head to the bar, which, regrettably, is sticky. That turd of a bartender doesn't know me, but he's kinda right. Some girl on YouTube—the one with the minimalist white walls that look chic instead of broke as hell—said everyone has a moment in life when there are two paths before them. The cool one where you change your pathetic ways and everything gets brighter and better. And the other one where you die sad and alone.

She obviously knows what she's talking about, because she manages to make millions of people listen to her talk about *hacking procrastination* and how to make your room over with just a succulent and a few black-and-white photos strung up on the walls.

I don't want to be sad and alone, or to freeze every time my moment comes to shine. I want to be the fierce inner beast I know I am. I want Eli to look at me like I'm the only one in the room.

Something has to change, because that bartender and the succulent girl are right. If I don't, I'm going to disappear like I was never here.