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COLLEEN
HOOVER

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PRAISE FOR COLLEEN HOOVER

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Layla

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Published by Montlake, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781542000178
ISBN-10: 1542000173

Cover design by David Drummond

*For Beckham. When I die, you'll be the first person
I haunt. You are so much fun to scare.*

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The supernatural is the natural not yet understood.
—Elbert Hubbard

THE INTERVIEW

I placed two layers of duct tape over Layla's mouth before I came downstairs, but I can still hear her muffled screams as the detective takes a seat at the table.

He has the kind of old recorder you'd see in a movie from the eighties. It's about ten inches long and six inches wide with a big red circle on the left button. He presses it down with the play button and slides the recorder to the center of the table. The wheels on the cassette begin to rotate.

"Please state your name," he says.

I clear my throat. "Leeds Gabriel."

The battery compartment is held together with old duct tape running up the sides of the machine. I find it kind of humorous. This severely outdated machine is going to record every word I'm about to say, and that's somehow going to help?

At this point, I've all but given up. There's no light at the end of this tunnel. I'm not even sure there's an *end* to this tunnel.

How can I have hope for a way out of this when things have gotten so out of control? I'm speaking to a detective I met online while my girlfriend is upstairs, losing her damn mind.

As if she knows I'm thinking about her, the noise picks up again. The wooden headboard pounds against the wall upstairs, creating an eerie echo in this huge empty house.

"So," the man says. "Where do you want to start?" He seems like he'll be able to work through the noise, but I'm not sure I can. Knowing Layla is suffering because of my actions is not something I can easily ignore. Every sound coming from upstairs makes me flinch. "Why don't we start with how the two of you met," the man suggests.

I'm hesitant to respond to questions that I know won't lead to answers, but at this point, I'd rather hear my own voice than Layla's muffled screams. "We met here last summer. This used to be a bed and breakfast. I was the bass player in the band that played her sister's wedding."

The man doesn't respond. He leans back in his chair, staring at me quietly. I don't know what else to say. Am I supposed to elaborate on that? "How does meeting Layla relate to what's happening inside this house?"

He shakes his head as he leans forward, folding his arms across the table. "Maybe it doesn't. But that's why I'm here, Leeds. Anything could be a clue. I need you to go back to the first day you were here. What was Layla wearing? Why were you both here? What was the first thing she said to you? Did either of you notice anything out of the ordinary about the house that night? The more information you can give me, the better. No detail is too small."

I rest my elbows on the table and slide my palms over my ears to drown out the sounds Layla is making upstairs. I can't take hearing her upset like this. I love her so much, but I don't know that I can go back and talk about *why* I love her so much when I'm putting her through this.

I try not to think about how perfect things were in the beginning. When I do that, it solidifies the fact that I'm more than likely at fault for how it has all come to an end.

I close my eyes and think back to the first night I met her. Back when life was easier. When ignorance really was bliss.

"She was a terrible dancer," I say to the man. "It's the first thing I noticed about her . . ."

CHAPTER ONE

She's a terrible dancer.

It's the first thing I notice about her while I'm on the stage, playing to a dwindling crowd. Long arms she seems to have no idea how to control. She's barefoot, moving around in the grass, deliberately stomping her feet without any of the delicacy the song expects. She jerks her head wildly, and her unruly black curls sling back to front like she's jamming out to a heavy metal song.

What makes it funny is that this is a modern country band. A modern *bland* country band. An entire set of songs that is excruciating to listen to and is even more painful to play.

It's Garrett's Band.

That's literally what it's called. *Garrett's Band*. It's the best Garrett could come up with.

I'm the unofficial fourth member—the last one to join the band. I play bass. Not the kind of stand-up bass people respect. I play electric bass. The underrated, invisible instrument that's usually held by the invisible member of the band—the one that fades into the background of each song. I don't mind fading into the background, though. Maybe that's why I prefer electric bass over anything else.

After I studied music at Belmont, my goal was to be a singer-songwriter, but I don't help Garrett write these songs. He doesn't want the help. We don't have the same appreciation for music, so I just write songs for myself and hoard them for a future day when I'll be confident enough to release a solo album.

The band has gotten more popular over the last few years, and even though we're in more demand, which results in better pay, my rate as the bass player hasn't increased. I've thought about bringing it up to the rest of the band, but I'm not sure it's worth it, and they need the money more than I do. Not to mention, if I approach them, they might actually offer me an official spot in the band, and to be honest, I hate this music so much I'm embarrassed I'm even standing up here.

Every show eats away at my soul. A nibble here, a nibble there. I'm afraid if I keep doing this much longer, there won't be anything left of me but a body.

I'm honestly not sure what keeps me here. I never intended for this to be a permanent thing when I joined, but for whatever reason, I can't seem to get my ass in gear to step out on my own. My father died when I was eighteen, and as a result of his death, money has never been an issue. He left my mother and me a sizeable life insurance policy, along with an internet installation company that runs itself and employees who prefer I don't step in and change up years of practices that have been successful. Instead, my mother and I stay at a distance and live off the income.

It's definitely something I'm grateful for, but it's not something I'm proud of. If people knew how little was required of me in this life, I wouldn't be respected. Maybe that's why I've stayed with the band. It's a lot of travel, a lot of work, a lot of late nights. But the self-torture makes me feel I at least deserve a portion of what sits in my bank account.

I stand in my designated spot on the stage and watch the girl as I play, wondering if she's drunk or high, or if there's a chance she's out there dancing the way she is to poke fun at just how much this band sucks. Whatever the reason for her flailing around like a dehydrated fish, I'm thankful for it. It's the most entertaining thing to happen during a show in a while. I even catch myself smiling at one point—something I haven't done in God knows how long. And to think I was dreading coming here.

Maybe it's the atmosphere—the privacy of the venue mixed with the aftermath of a wedding. Maybe it's the fact that no one is paying us any attention and 90 percent of the wedding party has left. Maybe it's the grass in the girl's hair and the green stains all over her dress from the three times she's taken a tumble during this song. Or maybe it's the six-month dry spell I've forced myself to endure since breaking up with my ex.

Maybe it's a combination of all those things that is making this girl my entire focus tonight. It's not surprising because even with makeup smeared down her cheeks and a couple of her curls matted to her forehead from sweat, she's the prettiest girl out here. Which makes it even stranger that no one is paying her any attention. The few remaining guests are gathered around the pool with the newly married couple while we play our last song for the night.

My terrible dancer is the only one still listening when we finally finish and then start packing up.

I hear the girl screaming *encore* as I walk to the back of the stage and put my guitar in the case. I close it in a hurry, hoping to hell I can find her once we get all the instruments loaded into the van.

The four of us have booked two rooms here at the bed and breakfast for the night. It's an eleven-hour drive back to Nashville, and none of us wanted to hit that at midnight.

The groom approaches Garrett as he's closing the doors to the van and invites us all over for a drink. Normally, I'd decline, but I'm kind of hoping the bad dancer stuck around. She was entertaining. And I liked the fact that she never mouthed a single lyric. I don't know that I could be attracted to a girl who actually likes Garrett's music.

I find her in the pool, floating on her back, still wearing the cream-colored bridesmaid dress with the grass stains all over it.

She's the only one in the pool, so after I grab a beer, I walk over to the deep end, kick off my shoes, and stick my legs in the water, jeans and all.

The ripples from the disturbance at my end of the pool eventually reach her, but she doesn't look up to see who has joined her in the water. She just keeps staring up at the sky, as quiet and still as a log floating on top of the water. Such a contrast to the ridiculous display she put on earlier.

After a few minutes of me watching her, the water envelops her entire body, and she's gone. When her hands push up and part the water and her head breaks through the surface, she's looking right at me, as if she knew I was here all along.

She keeps herself afloat with small movements of her feet and waves of her arms on top of the water. She slowly closes the gap between us until she's directly in front of my legs, staring up at me. The moon is behind me, her eyes reflecting its glow like two tiny light bulbs.

From the stage, I thought she was pretty. But from one foot in front of her, I see she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Puffy pink lips, a delicate jawline I'm hoping I might get to run my hand across at some point. Her eyes are as green as the grass that surrounds the pool. I want to slide into the water with her, but my cell phone is in my pocket, and there's a half-full can of beer in my hand.

"Do you ever watch those YouTube videos of people dying inside?" she asks.

I have no idea why she asks that question, but anything could have come out of her mouth just now and it would have moved through me with the same strength those words just did. Her voice is wispy and light, like it floats effortlessly out of her throat.

“No,” I respond.

She’s a little out of breath as she works to keep herself afloat. “They’re compilations of embarrassing things that happen to people. The camera always zooms in on people’s faces at the worst moment. Their expressions make it look like they’re dying inside.” She wipes water from her eyes with both hands. “That’s what you looked like up there tonight. Like you were dying inside.”

I don’t even remember her looking up at the stage, much less eyeing me long enough to accurately assess how it feels every time I’m forced to play those shitty songs onstage.

“I’m already dead inside. Died the first night I started playing for the band.”

“I thought so. Did you like my dancing? I was trying to cheer you up.”

I nod and take a sip of the beer. “It worked.”

She grins and slinks underwater for a few seconds. When she comes back up again, she wipes all her hair out of her face and says, “You got a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Wife?”

I shake my head.

“Do you have friends, at least?”

“Not really,” I admit.

“Siblings?”

“Only child.”

“Shit. You’re lonely.”

Another accurate assessment. Although in my case, lonely is a choice.

“Who is the most important person in your life?” she asks. “Parents don’t count.”

“Right now?”

She nods. “Yes. Right now. Who is the most important person in your life?”

I reflect on her question for a moment and realize there's no one I'd take a bullet for other than my mom. I'm indifferent toward the guys in the band. They're more like coworkers I have nothing in common with. And since parents don't count, this girl is literally the only person on my mind right now.

"I guess you," I say.

She tilts her head, narrowing her eyes. "That's kinda sad." She lifts her feet and kicks the wall between my legs, pushing away from me. "I better make this a good night for you, then." Her smile is flirtatious. An invite.

I accept her invite by placing my phone on the concrete next to the now-empty beer. I take off my shirt and watch her eye me as I slip the rest of the way into the pool.

We're at the same level now, and dammit if she didn't just get prettier somehow.

We swim around each other in a slow circle, careful not to touch, even though it's obvious we both want to.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"The bass player."

She laughs at that, and her laughter is the opposite of her wispy voice. It's deliberate and abrupt, and I might even like it more than her voice. "What's your *name*?" she clarifies.

"Leeds Gabriel." We're still swimming around each other in circles. She tilts her head and gives my name some thought.

"Leeds Gabriel is a front man kind of name. Why are you playing in someone else's band?" She keeps talking, apparently not really wanting an answer to that question. "Were you named after the town in England?"

"Yep. What's your name?"

"Layla." She whispers it like it's a secret.

It's the perfect name. The only name she could have said that would fit her—I'm convinced of that.

"Layla," someone says from behind me. "Open up." I look over my shoulder, and the bride is standing behind me, holding something out to Layla. Layla swims over to her, sticks out her tongue, and the bride places a small white pill in the center of it. Layla swallows and I have no idea what that was, but it was sexy as fuck.

She can see I'm transfixed by her mouth. "Leeds wants one," Layla says, reaching out her hand for another pill. The bride hands her another

one and walks away. I don't ask what it is. I don't care. I want her so much I'll be the Romeo to her Juliet and take whatever the hell kind of poison she wants to put on my tongue right now.

I open my mouth. Her fingers are wet, and some of it has dissolved before it even hits my tongue. It's bitter and hard to get down without coating or water, but I manage it. I chew some of it.

"Who was the most important person in your life yesterday?" Layla asks. "Before I came along?"

"Myself."

"I've bumped you out of the number one spot?"

"Seems that way."

She moves fluidly and effortlessly onto her back, like she spends more time in a pool than on land. She stares up at the sky again, her arms stretched out wide, her chest rising with a huge intake of air.

I press my back against the side of the pool and stretch my arms out, gripping the concrete ledge. My heart is starting to pound. My blood feels thicker.

I don't know what kind of drug she gave me, probably Molly or some other kind of upper, because it's kicking in fast. I'm more aware of everything going on in my torso right now than any other part of my body. My heart feels swollen, like there isn't enough room for it.

Layla is still floating on her back, but her face is close to my chest. She's right in front of me. If I leaned forward a little, she wouldn't be looking at the sky. She'd be looking up at me.

Fuck, this is good shit.

I feel good. I feel confident.

The water is so calm around us it looks like she's floating on air. Her eyes are closed, but when the top of her head bumps against my chest, she looks up at me, her face upside down from mine, like she's expecting me to do something.

So I do.

I lean in just enough so that my mouth rests gently against hers. We kiss upside down, her bottom lip between both of mine. Her lips are like a soft explosion, igniting hidden minefields under every inch of my skin. It's weird and fascinating because she's still on her back, floating on top of the water. I dip my tongue into her mouth, and for whatever reason, I don't feel