



just for the season

Just for the Season

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playlists

hallie reeves

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/32IqFVLVxfO1mUtsokTgBy?si=abf496cc9a6d43bb>

finn parker

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/035Q4ml3Bem9158Uod1Ym5?si=3568e182d2d34823>

#fallie

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3tpTsuEZBzNgIwlq4Fkz6X?si=818e7e9b41434577>

entire book playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5QVQh2z97aFpb5EEflza6y?si=df246785e8c74635>

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chapter one

finn parker

The car engine finally went quiet.

For a moment, I just sat there, staring through the windshield while the ticking sound of the cooling engine filled the air.

After six hours in the car, silence felt strange.

“We’re here,” my mum said, stretching her arms above her head like she’d just finished running a marathon instead of driving one.

I blinked.

The town looked... small.

Not small in a bad way. Just quieter than the city I was used to. The road in front of us sloped gently toward the ocean, and even from the parking spot I could see flashes of bright blue water between buildings.

A salty breeze slipped through the open window.

I noticed it immediately. Salt. Sunscreen. Something fried from a nearby café.

It smelled like summer.

“Finn,” my mum said, already opening her door. “You alive over there?”

“Barely,” I muttered, pushing the door open.

The heat wrapped around me instantly. Warm, bright, and just a little humid. Way different from home.

I stepped out onto the pavement and stretched, my back cracking after the long drive.

Our rental house sat halfway down a narrow street lined with beach cottages. Some were painted bright colors – yellow, teal, faded coral – while others had chipped white paint and wooden porches covered in plants.

A couple bikes leaned against a fence nearby.

Somewhere in the distance, a seagull screamed.

“Grab your bag,” my mum called from the trunk.

I did, slinging my backpack over one shoulder as I glanced down the street again.

Everything felt... slower here.

No traffic. No loud city noise. Just the sound of waves somewhere beyond the houses.

“So,” my mum said, handing me a grocery bag full of snacks, “what do you think?”

I shrugged. “I mean... it’s nice.”

She laughed. “You’ll like it. Give it a day.”

Maybe she was right.

Or maybe this was going to be the longest, most boring summer ever.

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I found the beach by accident.

I’d only meant to go for a quick walk while my mum unpacked, but one wrong turn down a sandy path and suddenly the houses disappeared behind me.

And then there it was.

The ocean.

It stretched out endlessly, glittering under the afternoon sun like someone had spilled diamonds across the water.

I slowed without meaning to.

I'd seen the ocean before, obviously. But this one felt different somehow. Bigger. Louder. Wilder.

Waves crashed against the shore in steady rhythm, rolling in and breaking across the sand before pulling back again.

The beach itself was surprisingly empty.

A few people sat scattered along the shore – someone reading a book, a couple kids building something that vaguely resembled a sandcastle.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and started walking along the edge of the water.

The sand was warm under my sneakers.

A breeze pushed through my hair, carrying the distant sound of laughter and gulls.

It wasn't bad, I had to admit.

Actually... it was kind of nice.

I was halfway down the beach when something caught my attention.

Out in the water, someone was surfing.

I slowed again.

The surfer cut across the face of a wave like they'd done it a thousand times before – balanced, steady, completely at home in the ocean.

They rode the wave all the way toward shore before jumping cleanly off the board and paddling back out again.

I watched for a second longer.

Whoever it was made it look ridiculously easy.

Then a bigger wave rolled in, rising up between them and the shore, and the surfer disappeared behind it.

I shrugged slightly and kept walking.

Just some surfer.

I continued down the beach, the wind tugging at my shirt, the ocean roaring beside me.

Maybe this summer wouldn't be completely boring after all.

chapter two

hallie reeves

The ocean was always quietest in the morning.

I liked it that way.

The beach was still mostly empty, the sky pale and soft as the sun slowly climbed higher. A light breeze moved across the water, pushing small waves toward the shore in a slow, steady rhythm.

I stood at the edge of the water, my surfboard tucked under one arm.

“Alright,” I murmured to myself. “Let’s go.”

The cold water rushed around my ankles as I stepped in, and a second later I was wading deeper, pushing through the waves until I could climb onto my board.

Behind me, Mia barked.

I glanced back toward the sand.

My golden Labrador was sprinting back and forth along the beach like she’d just discovered the concept of running.

“Don’t dig a hole!” I called.

Mia ignored me completely.

Typical.

I laughed softly before turning back toward the ocean and paddling out.

The water lifted and dipped beneath my board as I moved farther from the shore. Out here, the sounds of the town disappeared. No cars. No voices. Just the ocean breathing in and out.

It was my favorite place to be.

It always has been. The only place where everything in my head actually went quiet.

A wave started building behind me.

I spun my board around quickly and began paddling.

“Come on,” I muttered.

The wave lifted me.

I popped up onto the board smoothly, balancing easily as the water carried me forward.

Wind rushed past my ears as I rode the wave toward shore, carving slightly to the side before letting the board glide straight in.

God, I loved this part.

When the wave finally broke, I jumped off, laughing as the water splashed around me.

Back on the sand, Mia was waiting, tail wagging so hard her whole body shook.

“You’re ridiculous,” I told her, scratching behind her ears.

Mia barked happily.

I glanced back at the ocean.

Just one more.

Okay, maybe two.

I grabbed my board again and ran back toward the water.

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By the time I finally collapsed onto my towel, the sun was fully up.

My hair was dripping onto the sand and my arms felt pleasantly tired.

Mia flopped down beside me with a dramatic sigh.

I reached for my phone.

Three notifications.

All from the group chat.

Abi:

are you alive

Lola:

she's surfing again isn't she

Abi:

100%

I grinned and typed back.

Hallie:

RUDE

My phone buzzed instantly.

Lola:

OH SHES BACK

Abi:

what time ice cream today

I rolled onto my stomach, propping myself up on my elbows.

Hallie:

you guys are so predictable

Lola:

and you love us

That was unfortunately true.

Hallie:

maybe later? i'm still at the beach

Abi:

of course you are

Mia nudged my arm with her nose.

“Okay, okay,” I laughed. “I get it. You’re bored.”

Mia barked.

I looked back at the ocean again.

The waves were getting smaller now as the morning went on. Still pretty good though.

I sighed, letting myself sink into the towel.

Best start to the day.

Better than thinking about anything else.

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By the time I got home, Mia was exhausted.

She trotted inside the beach house and immediately collapsed onto the cool kitchen floor.

“Rough morning?” I teased.

“Back already?”

Mum’s voice floated in from the living room.

I leaned my surfboard against the wall near the door. “Yep.”

Miranda looked up from the couch, smiling slightly. “Good waves?”

“The best,” I said, dropping my bag on the table.

She nodded like she understood completely. Which she kind of did. I’d been surfing since I was little.

Mia wandered over and rested her head on Mum’s knee.

“Traitor,” I said.

Mum laughed softly and scratched behind her ears.

I reached up absentmindedly and touched the small locket hanging around my neck.

The metal was warm from the sun.

I opened it for a second, glancing at the tiny photo inside before snapping it shut again.

I didn't let myself look at it for too long. I never did.

"Abi and Lola want ice cream later," I said.

"Of course they do."

I smiled.

Outside, the ocean shimmered in the distance, waves rolling toward the shore like they always did.

Summer had only just started.

And somehow...

I had a feeling this one wasn't going to stay simple.

chapter three

finn parker

I ended up back at the beach the next day.

It wasn't like I had a plan. There wasn't much else to do in town yet, and the ocean was kind of impossible to ignore once you knew it was there.

I followed the same sandy path as yesterday, the one that wound between tall grass and weathered wooden fences.

The sound of the waves grew louder with every step.

When the beach finally opened up in front of me, the water looked different than it had the day before – brighter somehow, the sunlight scattering across the surface.

There were more people out today too.

A few kids splashing near the shore. Someone jogging along the sand. A couple surfers farther out, waiting for waves.

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my shorts and started walking.

I wasn't really sure where I was going. Just... walking.

The breeze pushed through my hair again, carrying that same salty smell from yesterday.

Honestly?

It still smelled like summer.

A wave crashed loudly nearby, drawing my attention toward the water.

A surfer rode it smoothly across the face of the wave before hopping off just before it broke.

I recognized the board immediately.

Bright blue.

The same one from yesterday.
So that surfer again.
I slowed down slightly, watching.
They paddled back out easily, like the ocean belonged to them.
I had no idea how surfing worked, but it looked ridiculously hard.
And they made it look way too easy.
I kept walking along the shore, glancing out at the water every now and then.

That's when something golden came sprinting toward me.
I blinked.
A dog.
A very enthusiastic dog.
Before I could react, the golden labrador skidded to a stop right in front of me, sand spraying everywhere.

"Whoa—"

The dog barked happily.

I looked down.

"Uh... hi?"

The dog's tail wagged like it had its own motor.

Then, without warning, it grabbed the corner of my t-shirt in its mouth and tugged.

"Hey – hey!" I laughed, trying to gently pull my shirt back. "What are you doing?"

The dog released the shirt only to start sniffing me like I might secretly be made of food.

I crouched down slightly.

"You're very friendly," I said.

The dog barked again.

From somewhere behind me, a voice called out.

“Mia!”

I turned.

Someone was running down the beach toward us.

A girl.

She slowed when she got closer, brushing wind-blown blonde hair out of her face. Her surfboard was tucked under one arm, and she was slightly out of breath when she reached us.

For a second, I kind of forgot what I was about to say.

Her hair caught the light, all gold in the sun, and her eyes – blue, I think – were way brighter up close than they should’ve been.

“Sorry!” she said quickly. “She thinks every person on the beach is her best friend.”

The dog – apparently Mia – sat proudly beside me like she’d done nothing wrong.

I glanced between them.

“It’s fine,” I said. “She didn’t steal anything. Yet.”

The girl laughed a little.

Yeah, okay. That laugh wasn’t helping.

“I’m honestly surprised.”

Mia barked like she disagreed.

The girl crouched down beside the dog, scratching behind her ears.

“You’re supposed to stay with me,” she told her.

Mia leaned into the attention.

I watched the scene for a second before realizing I was just... standing there.

“Oh,” I said awkwardly. “I’m Finn, by the way.”

The girl looked up.

“Hallie.”

Hallie.

Yeah, that fit.

She stood again, balancing the surfboard against her hip.

I gestured toward the water. “You’re the surfer from yesterday, right?”

Hallie tilted her head slightly.

“You were here yesterday?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I saw you out there.”

She smiled faintly.

“Good waves.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I admitted. “I have no idea how any of that works.”

Hallie glanced at the ocean again.

“It’s not that hard once you get used to it.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I’m pretty sure it’s extremely hard.”

She laughed.

And somehow that made me want to try it anyway.

Mia suddenly decided the conversation had gone on long enough and started digging enthusiastically in the sand.

Hallie sighed.

“See? This is why I can’t take my eyes off her for two seconds.”

I watched the dog fling sand behind her like a tiny construction worker.

“She seems committed.”

“Unfortunately.”

Hallie grabbed Mia’s collar before the hole could get any deeper.

“Alright,” she said, tugging gently. “We’re going.”

Mia looked disappointed.

Hallie glanced back at me.

“Nice meeting you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You too.”

She started walking back toward the water, Mia trotting beside her.

I stood there for a moment, watching as she set her board down and ran back into the ocean.

A wave rolled in.

Hallie paddled out easily, disappearing into the line of surfers waiting farther out.

I kept watching for a second longer than I probably should have.

Then I looked down at the sand where Mia had been digging.

Then back to the ocean.

Okay.

Maybe this town wasn’t boring.

Maybe not even close.

chapter four

hallie reeves

Hallie stayed in the water longer than she meant to.

The waves weren't as strong as they had been earlier, but they were still good enough to keep her out there, paddling back and forth while the sun climbed higher in the sky.

She caught one more wave, riding it almost all the way to shore before jumping off into the shallow water.

"Okay," she told herself, brushing wet hair out of her face. "Now we're done."

Behind her, Mia was sprinting through the surf like she had just discovered the greatest game ever invented.

"Come here!" Hallie called.

Mia ignored her.

Typical.

Hallie dragged her board onto the sand and dropped it beside her towel. The beach was busier now than it had been earlier. Families were setting up umbrellas, kids running around with plastic buckets, someone playing music from a speaker somewhere down the shore.

Hallie sat down on the towel and grabbed her phone.

Four notifications.

All from the group chat.

Abi:

HELLO???

Lola:

she's definitely still surfing

Abi:

we said ice cream

Hallie smiled and typed back.

Hallie:

i am alive relax

Her phone buzzed instantly.

Lola:

finally

Abi:

boardwalk. 20 minutes

Hallie looked out at the ocean for a moment.

Her mind flashed back to earlier.

Finn.

He'd been standing there with Mia like he had no idea what to do with her, which had been kind of funny. He'd seemed new – like someone still figuring the town out.

Hallie shook the thought away and stood up.

“Mia,” she called.

The dog trotted over, sand sticking to her wet fur.

“Time to go.”

Mia wagged her tail like that had been her plan all along.

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The ice cream shop on the boardwalk was busy when Hallie arrived.

The warm smell of waffle cones drifted through the open windows, mixing with the salty breeze coming off the ocean.

Abi and Lola were standing near the menu board outside.

Lola spotted Hallie immediately.

"There she is," she announced. "The surfer finally returns."

"I'm barely late," Hallie said, walking up beside them.

"You're four minutes late."

Abi glanced at her phone. "Three."

"Still late," Lola said.

"Have you ordered yet?" Hallie asked.

Abi gestured toward the line inside. "We were waiting for you."

Hallie raised an eyebrow. "Wow. That's surprisingly nice of you."

"Don't get used to it," Abi said.

They joined the line.

Lola stared at the menu like it had somehow changed since the last time they were there.

"I can't decide."

"You get strawberry every time," Hallie said.

"That's not the point."

Abi didn't even bother looking. "Vanilla."

"Predictable," Hallie said.

"Reliable," Abi corrected.

A few minutes later they finally reached the counter.

By the time they came back outside, Hallie had chocolate, Lola had strawberry, and Abi had vanilla exactly like everyone expected.

They sat down at one of the tables along the boardwalk railing. The ocean stretched out in front of them, sunlight glittering across the water.

For a moment, they just sat there eating their ice cream while people wandered past.

Abi was the first one to break the silence.

“Harper says hi, by the way.”

Hallie nodded. “Tell her I said hi.”

“She wanted to come but she’s stuck with family stuff today.”

“Tragic,” Lola said.

Abi shrugged. “She also said there’s a bonfire Friday.”

Lola immediately looked interested.

“A bonfire?”

“Apparently.”

“Okay, I love that.”

Hallie laughed. “You love anything that involves snacks and fire.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s completely true.”

Lola took another bite of her ice cream, then suddenly narrowed her eyes at Hallie.

“You’re being weird.”

Hallie blinked. “What?”

“You look like you’re thinking about something.”

Abi looked up.

“She is.”

“I’m literally just sitting here.”

“No,” Lola said. “You have that face.”

“What face?”

“The ‘I’m not telling you something’ face.”

Hallie sighed.

Abi leaned forward slightly.

“What happened at the beach?”

Hallie hesitated.

Lola’s eyes widened.

“Oh my god.”

“What?”

“You met someone.”

“I did not say that.”

“You didn’t have to,” Lola said.

Abi rested her chin on her hand. “Alright. Who is he?”

Hallie groaned quietly.

“It was nothing.”

“That means it was definitely something,” Abi said.

Hallie gave up.

“I talked to someone for like thirty seconds.”

“What’s his name?” Abi asked.

“Finn.”

Lola leaned forward immediately.

“Is he cute?”

Hallie hesitated.

Abi pointed at her. “That hesitation answered the question.”

“That means nothing.”

“Sure it does.”

"Is he new?" Lola asked.

"I think so."

"Tourist?"

"Maybe."

Abi tilted her head. "Did you flirt?"

"No."

"Not even a little?"

"I said like three sentences."

Abi nodded thoughtfully.

"Progress."

Hallie laughed despite herself.

"You two are ridiculous."

Lola grinned. "You met a mysterious beach boy and expected us not to care?"

"Mysterious beach boy?"

"That's what he is now."

Abi shrugged. "It fits."

The sun was starting to dip lower over the water, turning the ocean gold.

Lola finished the last bite of her cone.

"So," she said casually, "when do we meet him?"

Hallie blinked.

"We're not meeting him."

Abi smirked.

"Sure."

Hallie rolled her eyes and looked back out at the ocean.

She told herself she probably wouldn't see Finn again anyway.
And she definitely wasn't going to keep thinking about him.
Unfortunately, that plan lasted about five minutes.

chapter five

finn parker

I wandered down the sandy path that led from the cottages to the quieter stretch of beach. My backpack bounced lightly against my shoulder, and the sun felt hotter than the car's air conditioning had promised. There wasn't much to do yet – my mum was still unpacking, and the town hadn't revealed much to explore. So I walked, letting my thoughts drift and my legs carry me where they would.

And then I saw her.

Hallie.

She was knee-deep in the surf, guiding a younger kid – her little sister – on a boogie board. I slowed without meaning to. It wasn't just that she was skilled, though she was – every movement easy, natural – but that she looked completely at home out there, like the ocean actually listened to her.

A memory flickered back. Mia barking. That quick laugh she'd let out the other day. It had been nothing, really – barely even a conversation – but for some reason it had stuck.

And now, seeing her again, I get why.

She wasn't just someone you noticed once.

She lingered.

"Okay, steady... balance... that's it!" she called, crouched low in the water, showing her sister how to hold the board.

The kid wobbled, stayed up for a second, then tipped sideways.

Hallie laughed.

I couldn't help it – I smiled too.

It carried across the water, light and easy, like she wasn't trying at all.

Her sister splashed back toward her, and Hallie reached out instinctively, steadying her. "I've got you – don't worry, okay? Just follow me."

I leaned against a driftwood post, not really thinking about it, just... staying. Watching.

She still hadn't noticed me.

Which was probably a good thing.

Because I was definitely watching longer than I should have been.

But it was hard not to.

The way her hair kept falling into her face, all sunlit and messy, sticking slightly from the salt water. The way she pushed it back without thinking. The focus in her eyes when she was helping her sister – and how it softened completely when she laughed.

Her eyes looked bluer today. Or maybe that was just the water reflecting. Either way, it was distracting.

I exhaled slowly, the salt air filling my lungs.

She's... yeah. She's kind of amazing.

The whole scene felt slower somehow. The waves, the light, the sound of people further down the beach – it all blurred into something quiet and steady.

Like the world had paused for a second.

And I was just... standing in it.

Watching her.

I didn't even realize how long I'd been there until her sister let out a louder laugh and Hallie straightened, glancing toward the shore –

I looked away quickly.

Yeah. Definitely time to go.

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By the time I got back, the sand was warm under my sneakers and my shoulders felt sun-heavy.

Mum was halfway through unpacking groceries and beach stuff, stacking bread, cereal, and a small pile of sunscreen on the counter. The house smelled like coffee and sunscreen – kind of weird, but also... very summer.

“Everything okay?” she called, glancing up as I dropped my backpack by the door.

“Yeah,” I said, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. “Just walking around.”

“You’ve got that look,” she said, tilting her head slightly. “The one you get when you’re thinking too hard.”

I shrugged. “I’m fine.”

I moved over to the window anyway, leaning my elbows on the sill without really thinking about it.

The beach stretched out in the distance.

And yeah –

She was still there.

Hallie.

Still helping her sister with the board. Still crouched in the water, steadying her, talking her through it, laughing when she fell.

And still – somehow – not getting annoyed.

I would’ve lost patience in about thirty seconds. She hadn’t even come close.

A gull swooped low over the water, shrieking, and Hallie waved her hands at it like she could scare it off.

I smiled without meaning to.

There was something about her that just... pulled your attention.

Not in a loud way.

Just –

There.

I remembered Mia running straight at me, the way Hallie had laughed, the way she'd said *sorry* like it wasn't a big deal.

And somehow, that tiny moment felt bigger now.

Like it mattered more than it should have.

Mum called out again, asking if I wanted a snack before heading back out.

"Yeah," I said, not really paying attention.

I kept looking at the beach.

At her.

She was still laughing, still steadying the board, still completely in her element.

And I felt this weird pull in my chest –

Not bad.

Just... something.

Curiosity, maybe.

Or something I wasn't ready to name yet.

I grabbed a granola bar from the counter and leaned against the wall, drink in hand, still half-watching through the window.

The sun caught in her hair again as she crouched beside her sister, and for some reason, that was the moment that stuck.

The ocean.

The light.

Her laugh.

Her.

I looked away after a second.

Shook my head slightly.

Okay.

Maybe this summer wasn't going to be boring.

Maybe not even close.

chapter six

abi fields

Hallie was dragging her feet.

Not in a dramatic, obvious way – no sighing, no complaining – but in that subtle way she did when her head was somewhere else. Slower steps. Quieter than usual. Like she was thinking too much and trying not to show it.

I wasn't having it.

"Hal," I said, grabbing her wrist and tugging her forward, "if you don't speed up, I'm leaving you behind."

"You wouldn't," she muttered.

"I absolutely would."

Lola snorted beside me. "No, she wouldn't. She needs you for entertainment."

"Rude," I said, pushing the café door open anyway.

The bell above it jingled softly as we stepped inside, and the smell hit instantly – coffee, warm bread, something sweet baking in the back. It was already a little busy, the low hum of conversation filling the space, sunlight pouring through the front windows and stretching across the wooden floors.

Normal. Easy. Exactly how mornings here were supposed to feel.

And then Hallie stopped walking.

Not completely – but enough. Just enough for me to notice.

I followed her line of sight without making it obvious.

There was a guy sitting by the window.

New. Definitely new. You could tell instantly – the slightly unsure posture, the way he looked around like he was still figuring the place out. Backpack slung over the back of his chair, coffee in his hands like he didn't quite know what else to do with them.

Lola leaned closer to me. "Do you see him?" she whispered.

"Yeah," I murmured back. "And I think *she* does too."

Hallie had already looked away, pretending to study the menu like her life depended on it. But her shoulders were a little too stiff, her fingers tapping lightly against the laminated edge.

Interesting.

We moved into line. Hallie kept her head down, but every few seconds, her eyes flicked up – quick, careful glances she clearly thought no one would notice.

She was wrong.

Lola nudged me. "You're seeing this, right?"

"Oh, I'm absolutely seeing this."

"Do you think–"

"Yes."

We both looked at Hallie at the same time. She shifted slightly under the attention.

"I can feel you staring," she muttered.

"Good," I said lightly. "That means you're still alive."

She rolled her eyes, but there was something off about it. Distracted.

We reached the counter, and suddenly Hallie was *very* focused on ordering.

"Latte," she said quickly. "And... avocado toast."

Of course. Predictable.

Lola ordered pancakes – extra syrup, because she had no self-control—and I went for a cappuccino and a chocolate croissant. Priorities.

While we waited, I leaned casually against the counter, glancing over my shoulder. The guy by the window hadn't moved much. Still sipping his coffee, still looking out like he was watching the town instead of being in it.

Hallie followed my glance before catching herself, snapping her gaze back to the counter like she'd been burned.

Yeah. Definitely interesting.

We grabbed our drinks and food and found a table not too far from the window. Close enough to see him, far enough to pretend we weren't paying attention.

Hallie sat down first, a little too carefully, like she was trying to act normal and overthinking every movement. She picked up her cup, took a sip, then immediately set it back down.

Didn't even taste it.

Lola kicked my foot under the table.

I kicked her back.

We ate in silence for a minute. Or, well – Lola and I did. Hallie just kind of... existed near her food.

Every time the guy shifted, her eyes flicked up. Every time he looked in our direction, she looked down.

It was subtle. Anyone else might've missed it.

We didn't.

Lola leaned forward slightly, voice low. “Okay. She’s acting weird.”

“Very weird,” I agreed.

“I’m not acting weird,” Hallie said immediately.

We both looked at her.

She blinked. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said, taking a slow sip of my cappuccino.

“Absolutely nothing,” Lola added.

Hallie narrowed her eyes at us, then looked back down at her toast.

A few seconds passed.

Then—

She looked up again.

I bit back a smile.

Lola didn’t even try.

“Okay,” she whispered, “now she’s definitely acting weird.”

“Documented,” I said.

“Shut up,” Hallie muttered, but her voice was softer now, distracted again.

The café noise filled the space around us – cutlery clinking, someone laughing near the counter, the hiss of the coffee machine. Outside, the light had shifted slightly, brighter now, the kind of morning that made the beach impossible to ignore.

Eventually, the guy stood up.

All three of us noticed.

Hallie went still.

He adjusted his backpack, glanced around once more, then headed for the door.

For a split second – just one – his eyes flicked toward our table.

Hallie froze completely.

And then he was gone.

The bell jingled softly as the door shut behind him.

Silence settled over our table for half a second longer than normal.

Lola slowly turned to Hallie.

I did the same.

Hallie stared down at her plate like nothing had happened.

“Okay,” Lola said finally. “That was–”

“Nothing,” Hallie cut in quickly.

I raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t say anything.”

“You were going to.”

“Was I?”

“Yes.”

I leaned back in my chair, folding my arms. “All I’m saying is... you might want to actually eat your breakfast next time instead of staring at random people.”

“I wasn’t staring,” she said.

“Of course not.”

Lola grinned. “Totally subtle.”

Hallie groaned, dropping her head into her hands for a second before sitting back up. “You’re both so annoying.”

“And yet,” I said, finishing my coffee, “you love us.”

She didn’t answer that.

But she smiled. Just a little.

I glanced toward the door, then back at her.

Interesting morning. Very interesting morning.

I stood up, stretching slightly. “Alright. Beach?”

Lola was already grabbing her bag. “Obviously.”

Hallie hesitated for half a second – just a second – before standing too.

Whatever that had been in the café, she was still thinking about it. I could tell.

Good.

Made things way more interesting.

chapter seven

hallie reeves

The sand was already warm by the time we got there.

Abi kicked off her shoes the second we hit the edge of the beach, Lola following right after, both of them racing ahead like they hadn't just spent half an hour sitting in a café. I lingered behind for a second, slipping my sandals off slower, pressing my toes into the sand like I needed a second to think.

Or maybe just breathe.

"You coming or what?" Abi called over her shoulder.

"Yeah," I said quickly, jogging to catch up.

The ocean stretched out in front of us, bright and endless, sunlight catching on the waves like glass. It should've been enough to distract me – normally it was – but my brain was still stuck back in that café, replaying every half-second glance I definitely hadn't meant to make.

I told myself it didn't matter.

It was just some guy.

A random guy.

Not the same one from the other day. Probably.

I shoved that thought down immediately.

Abi and Lola dropped their bags near our usual spot, already arguing about something pointless. I barely registered it, my eyes automatically scanning the shoreline without meaning to.

And there he was.

Closer this time.

Not tucked away behind a café window or hidden in a reflection – actually here. Standing near the water, shoes abandoned somewhere behind him, watching the waves like he was trying to figure them out.

Finn.

My stomach did something weird.

“Earth to Hallie,” Lola said, snapping her fingers in front of my face. “You good?”

“Yeah,” I said too quickly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Abi narrowed her eyes at me like she didn’t believe a word of that, but thankfully didn’t say anything. Yet.

I grabbed my board before either of them could ask more questions and headed straight for the water.

Safe place.

The second the ocean hit my legs, everything else faded a little – the noise, the thoughts, the stupid way my heart had decided to act. Cold water, steady waves, something familiar.

I pushed out further, climbing onto my board and scanning the horizon. For a few minutes, I let myself just focus. The swell, the rhythm, the way the water moved underneath me.

Then I caught a wave.

It wasn’t huge, but it was clean. I stood, balancing easily, riding it toward shore, the wind catching in my hair, everything finally settling into something normal again.

Until I got closer.

He was still there.

Closer than before.

Watching.

I stumbled slightly as the board hit shallower water, jumping off a second too late and landing awkwardly in the surf. Smooth. Really smooth.

I dragged the board up the sand, pretending like that absolutely did not just happen, my heart suddenly racing again for no good reason.

“Nice one,” a voice said.

I looked up.

Finn was standing a few steps away, hands shoved into his pockets, like he wasn’t entirely sure if he should be there or not.

“Oh my god,” I muttered under my breath.

“What?” he asked, a small smile pulling at his mouth.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. “Just, don’t comment on that.”

“The part where you almost wiped out?”

“I didn’t almost wipe out.”

He raised an eyebrow.

I crossed my arms. “Okay, maybe a little. But you didn’t see it properly, so it doesn’t count.”

“Right,” he said, nodding seriously. “Didn’t happen.”

I huffed out a quiet laugh before I could stop myself.

There was a second of silence – not awkward exactly, just... new. Different from before.

“Hi,” he said after a moment.

“Hi,” I replied, then immediately wanted to cringe at how normal that sounded.

We just stood there for a second, waves rolling in behind us, the noise filling the space where neither of us seemed to know what to say next.

“You come here a lot?” he asked, then paused. “That sounded stupid. You obviously do.”

I smiled slightly. “Yeah. A bit.”

“A bit,” he repeated, glancing out at the water like he didn’t fully believe that.

“You?” I asked.

“First time,” he said. “Here, I mean. Not... the ocean.”

“Good to clarify,” I said.

He laughed softly, looking down for a second like he wasn’t used to it.

Up close, he looked the same as in the café – but different, too. Less distant. More real. There was a faint line of concentration between his brows, like he was always thinking about something, even now.

“You’re good,” he said suddenly.

“What?”

“At surfing,” he added quickly. “You make it look easy.”

I shrugged, trying to ignore the way my chest tightened slightly. “I’ve been doing it forever.”

“Still,” he said. “It’s... impressive.”

I didn’t know what to do with that, so I just nodded awkwardly, looking out at the water instead of at him.

“Do you...” he started, then stopped.

“What?”

“Nothing. I was going to ask something, but I forgot.”

“Sure you did.”

“I did,” he insisted, smiling again.

I rolled my eyes, but I could feel myself smiling too.

Behind me, I could hear Abi and Lola yelling something, probably about me disappearing without warning. I ignored them. For a second.

“You should go,” Finn said, nodding toward the water. “Before they come drag you back.”

I glanced over my shoulder, then back at him.

“Yeah,” I said. “Probably.”

Another pause.

“See you around?” he asked, like it wasn’t a big deal.

“Maybe,” I said, like it wasn’t either.

It was.

I grabbed my board and turned back toward the water, forcing myself not to look back immediately.

I made it three steps before I did anyway.

He was still standing there.

Watching the waves.

Or maybe...

I turned away quickly, paddling back out before my brain could finish that thought.

The ocean swallowed me up again, steady and familiar, but this time it didn’t quiet everything the way it usually did.

Because now, every time I looked toward the shore,

I knew he’d be there.

chapter eight

finn parker

The house felt too quiet.

I sat at the kitchen counter, turning MY glass slowly between MY hands while mum moved around behind me, unpacking groceries. She was talking – something about what we still needed – but I wasn't really listening.

My mind kept drifting.

Back to the beach.

To her.

The way she'd laughed. The way she'd tried to play off almost falling like it hadn't happened.

Hallie.

I exhaled, leaning back slightly.

It had been nothing. A short conversation. Barely anything.

So why was I still thinking about it?

"You could go back," his mum said casually.

Finn glanced over. "What?"

"The beach," she said, like it was obvious. "You were gone for ages."

I hesitated.

"Yeah," I finally said. "Maybe."

She smiled faintly, like she already knew that was enough.

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The walk felt quicker this time.

Like my feet already knew where to go.

The sound of the ocean grew louder as I followed the same sandy path, the air warmer now, heavier with salt. When the beach came into view, he slowed slightly, scanning the shoreline without thinking about it.

I found her almost immediately.

Out in the water, balanced on her board like it was nothing.

And next to her –

The same younger girl from before.

She wobbled as a small wave rolled under her, arms flailing slightly, and I caught myself stepping forward before I even realised it.

Hallie reached out, steadying the board.

“I’ve got you,” she called.

“I almost had it!” the girl said.

“You did,” Hallie replied. “That was better.”

“It wasn’t.”

Hallie laughed. “Okay, yeah. That was terrible. Try again.”

The girl splashed water at her.

I stopped near the edge of the sand, close enough to see clearly now. Didn’t sit – just stood there, watching without really meaning to.

Hallie adjusted the board again, showing her something, talking her through it.

“Don’t overthink it,” she said. “Just go.”

“What if I fall?”

“You will,” Hallie said. “That’s the point.”

The girl made a face.

Hallie grinned. “I’m right here.”

There was something about that – how sure she sounded. Like she meant it.

The girl tried again, catching a small wave, managing to stay up for a second longer before falling into the water with a splash.

She came up laughing.

I smiled, just slightly.

And then...

Hallie looked toward the shore.

Our eyes met.

This time, neither of us looked away straight away.

I lifted his hand in a small wave.

She blinked, then smiled back, returning it.

Something about it felt... easier than before.

Then I did something idiotic. I took a few steps closer, stopping where the water brushed against the sand.

“Back again?” I called.

Hallie pushed her hair out of her face. “Could say the same to you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Guess I liked it.”

She gave a small smile at that, then glanced over her shoulder at the girl behind her.

“Wait there,” she said. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“I’m literally in the ocean,” the girl replied.

“Exactly. Stay there.”

Hallie rolled her eyes slightly before making her way toward the shore, water splashing around her legs, board tucked under her arm.

Up close again, it felt different. Less accidental.

“You’re teaching?” I asked, nodding toward the girl.

“Trying to,” Hallie said. “She’s not great at listening.”

“I heard that!” the girl shouted.

Her laugh. Something about it. Irresistible.

Hallie glanced back, then looked at him again, like she’d just realised something.

“Oh – um,” she said, turning slightly and gesturing behind her.

“That’s... my sister.”

The girl paddled a bit closer, squinting toward them.

“You’re just going to say ‘my sister?’” she called. “Rude.”

Hallie sighed. “Fine. That’s Cecilia.”

Cecilia lifted her chin slightly. “Hi.”

“Hi,” I said, smiling a little. “You’re doing better than I would.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’ve never even tried.”

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s how I know.”

Cecilia considered that, then nodded like it made sense.

“Told you,” Hallie muttered under her breath.

Cecilia splashed water at her again.

Hallie stepped back slightly, laughing, then looked at me.

“She’ll get it eventually,” she said. “Maybe.”

“She already looks like she’s improving,” he said.

Cecilia straightened slightly at that.

“See?” Hallie said. “Encouragement. That’s what I’ve been doing.”

“No, you’ve been bullying me,” Cecilia replied.

“That is encouragement.”

We laughed again, quieter this time.

For a second, it was easy.

Just standing there, talking like it wasn't anything.

Then Cecilia shifted her board again. "Are we going or what?"

Hallie glanced back at her, then back to me.

"I should –" she started.

"Yeah," I said. "Before she fires you as her coach."

"She's already thinking about it," Hallie said.

"I am," Cecilia confirmed.

Hallie rolled her eyes.

There was a small pause.

"See you around?" I asked, slightly hoping for a definite answer.

Hallie hesitated for a second – just a second.

Then she nodded. "Yeah. Probably."

Probably.

It was small.

But it wasn't nothing.

She turned, heading back toward the water, calling something to Cecilia as she went. The two of them drifted further out again, back into the rhythm of waves and movement like that was where they belonged.

I stayed there for a moment longer.

Watching.

Then I stepped back, turning toward the path again.

This time, it didn't feel random.

Not like before.

And definitely not like the last time I'd walked away.

chapter nine

lola clarke

The sun was already high enough to make the sand warm and sticky under my bare feet by the time we got to the beach. I dropped my towel with a dramatic flop, stretched, and squinted at the sparkling waves.

Morning light hit the water just right, and even I had to admit – it looked way better than any Instagram picture I'd ever seen.

Hallie immediately grabbed her board, muttering something about checking the waves, and Cecilia, of course, was right behind her. That kid had more energy than anyone I knew, sprinting across the sand like she was part gazelle. I rolled my eyes but smiled anyway. Watching them was like watching a hurricane in flip-flops.

"You saw him, didn't you?" Cecilia demanded suddenly, skidding to a stop in front of Hallie with sand flying everywhere.

Hallie froze mid-step, gripping her board like it could anchor her to the ground. "Cecilia – shh," she hissed, trying to tug her sister's arm.

"What?" Cecilia said, blinking innocently, though her grin gave her away. "The boy! On the beach yesterday! You waved at him, Hallie! I *saw* you!"

I couldn't hold it in. I snorted, and Abi elbowed me to try to stop me from laughing. Hallie's cheeks turned pink instantly, and she looked like she wanted to vanish straight into the sand.

"I said – quiet, Cece," Hallie muttered, but it was already too late.

Cecilia was unstoppable. She spun around, kicking sand over her own towel, then jumped toward a small wave, yelling, “He looked cool! Tall and awkward, but in a cute way! Who is he? Is he a tourist?”

Hallie groaned and planted her board into the sand, finally sitting down on the edge of the water like she was trying to become part of the ocean herself. “Cecilia... really. Stop. I don’t want him being a topic of conversation.”

But of course, Cecilia ignored her, splashing at the shallow waves, hopping around, and sending sprays of water in every direction.

Abi leaned closer to me, whispering, “So... who’s this mystery boy? Hallie looks way too flustered for it to be just any random guy.”

“I know, right?” I whispered back. “I think she’s lying. Or panicking. One of the two.”

Abi poked Hallie in the side, “Come on, spill. Tall, short, surfer dude vibes, nerdy, cute, brooding...?”

Hallie groaned, burying her face in her hands. “Abi! I *cannot* – ”

“C’mon,” Abi pressed, grinning. “You can tell us something. Did he have brown hair? Blonde? Blue eyes? Green? Did he even *look* like he belonged here, or was he all awkward tourist energy?”

Lola Clark reporting live: Hallie was *melting*. Pink cheeks, tapping her board nervously, looking anywhere but at us. I could barely stop myself from laughing outright.

Cecilia tilted her head, squinting at the water. “Do you think he’s going to come back tomorrow? Or the day after?” she asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I bet he’ll come back. I’d totally come back if I were him.”

Abi elbowed me again, whispering, “This is *so* going to be good. Five minutes of secret keeping, maybe ten tops.”

I nodded. “Totally. Hallie’s dead already.”

Cecilia wasn’t letting up either. “You should just tell me his name!” she insisted, kicking sand toward the water in frustration. “Or at least what he looks like! I *need* to know!”

Hallie threw her hands up dramatically. “Cecilia, he’s just a boy, okay? Can we not make a federal case out of this?”

But Abi leaned in closer, still whispering, “Seriously, Hallie. Eyes? Hair? Height? Smile? Personality? Come on – give me *something*.”

Hallie pressed her lips together and looked like she was about to burst into a lecture on how girls shouldn’t talk about boys with friends. Cecilia, of course, ignored all of it, spinning on the sand like a tiny tornado of chaos.

“I *saw* him wave!” Cecilia suddenly shouted, pointing toward the water like she was announcing a national emergency. “He smiled! He’s definitely going to come back!”

Abi grinned and nudged me. “I’m telling you, that’s all the confirmation we need. She’s toast.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Totally. And Cecilia’s on secret lookout duty now. Nothing will slip past her.”

Hallie finally looked at us, exasperated. “You two are *impossible*. He’s just some guy, okay? Can we please just enjoy the beach?”

But Cecilia was already plotting her next interrogation. “I’m keeping an eye out! He’s coming back! I *know* it!”

Abi whispered, “Five minutes, maybe ten. That plan to keep him under wraps? Gone. Totally gone.”

I laughed, and Hallie groaned, burying her face in her hands again. The waves lapped lazily against the sand, gulls squawked in the distance, and all around, it felt like a normal summer morning... except for the fact that Hallie’s secret wasn’t staying secret for long.

chapter ten

hallie reeves

The sun was already warm when I tugged my wetsuit up, trying to ignore the sticky sand clinging to my legs. Cecilia had already declared the beach hers, bouncing around like a caffeinated sea sprite.

“Hallie! Hallie, look!” she yelled, fingers stabbing toward the water.

“What now?” I muttered, squinting across the sand.

“That’s him!” She practically jumped in place, pointing directly at Finn.

I froze, stomach flipping. Of course. He’d be here. Finn. Just casually standing there, near the waves, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders relaxed. It was infuriating how calm he looked, like the world had nothing to throw at him. And maybe, just maybe, he found Cecilia hilarious.

“Finn! Over here!” she shouted, waving like she had no concept of subtlety.

“Ceci – ” I groaned, but she had already turned back to the sand and ignored me completely. Figures.

He walked toward us at his own pace, that half-smile on his face that made my chest tighten. His green eyes were calm, curious... and annoyingly easy to get lost in.

“Hi,” he said, voice calm, amused, like the ocean itself had taught him to speak this way.

“Hey,” I muttered, trying to sound casual. Failed. Totally failed.

Cecilia, of course, was not done. “Hallie said you can’t surf!”

Heat crept up my neck instantly. “I – what? No! She’s exaggerating –”

He chuckled, that soft, easy laugh. “Yeah... she mentioned that.”

I crossed my arms defensively. “I can surf. Just... not as well as she thinks I do.”

He tilted his head, that grin lingering. “Ah, so there’s hope for me yet. Maybe you could teach me?”

I wanted to roll my eyes but instead groaned quietly. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Cecilia was off on her own again, shrieking: “Hals, tell him about the boogie board disaster!”

“Ceci! Stop!” I said, but my laugh betrayed me. And he laughed too, this soft, easy laugh that made my stomach flip.

I caught a glimpse of the sunlight hitting his hair... ginger, bright in the sun, almost like it glowed. Not that I was looking. Definitely not. But... it was... wow.

“Really, you just... show up here and look casual?” I asked, trying to hide my surprise.

He shrugged, still smiling. “Is it working?”

I rolled my eyes, but I was secretly entertained. “Maybe. But I’m not impressed yet.”

Finn’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “Challenge accepted.”

I wanted to groan again, but I couldn’t. Not when he looked at me like he genuinely wanted to know me – not in a weird way, just... like he noticed.

“Do you... come here a lot?” I asked cautiously.

“First real day in town,” he admitted. “I mean, yesterday I wandered around and found... this.” He gestured vaguely at the water. “And now, apparently, your chaos committee.”

I snorted. “Yeah, that’s Cecilia.”

“She seems... relentless.”

“She is.” I nodded seriously. “And loud.”

He grinned. “I like it.”

Cecilia bounced over one last time. “You two should talk more! I’ll leave you... mostly alone!”

I shot her a glare and then turned back to Finn. We shared a brief moment of silence, just looking at each other. My stomach was doing that weird flip-flop thing again. He held my gaze, calm and steady, and I had to look away first.

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I sank back onto the sand, letting my legs stretch out as I watched him. Finn leaned casually against a driftwood post, taking in the beach like it was nothing new, like he owned a little part of it just by being there. Not that I wanted to notice that. Definitely not.

Cecilia had retreated into the shallow waves, already off on her next mission – probably digging, splashing, something. I didn’t care. My attention was glued to him, like some weird magnet I couldn’t fight.

There was something about the way sunlight hit his hair – bright, warm ginger – and the way his green eyes looked like they could see right through you without being creepy. How could someone be calm and funny and easy to watch all at once?

I shook my head, trying to focus. Little sister. Boogie board. Surf. Not Finn.

But my thoughts kept sneaking back to him. The way he laughed. That subtle tilt of his head when he was curious. How... natural he seemed even just standing there.

A gull shrieked overhead, swooping close, and he waved, shooing it away in a motion so casual it made me smile. He even smiled at Cecilia, and she looked like she'd won the lottery. And honestly... it made me like him more.

The waves curled and broke at the shore, sparkling in the sunlight. I leaned back on my hands, letting the sand warm me, letting the salty breeze carry the chaotic energy of the morning. Finn's figure, standing there, calm in the chaos... it made the world feel slower. Softer. Easier.

I had to admit something to myself. Maybe this summer wasn't just about me and the ocean. Maybe it would be about moments like this. Watching him, noticing him. Wondering if he'd actually talk to me again.

And yes, okay... maybe I wanted him to.

I closed my eyes briefly, letting the sun warm my face. When I opened them, he was gone. Maybe walking back toward the cottages. Maybe... thinking about coming back to the water tomorrow.

I smiled to myself. Maybe I'd be here too. Maybe I'd... wait and see.

chapter eleven

finn parker

A few days later, I still couldn't get her out of my head.

It was ridiculous, really.

I barely knew Hallie. A couple conversations on the beach, Cecilia's constant interruptions, Mia nearly stealing my shirt, and somehow that had been enough for my brain to decide she needed to be everywhere.

"Finn?"

I blinked, dragging myself back to the present.

Mum was standing halfway down the aisle of a tiny beachside shop, holding up two bottles of sunscreen like it was the most serious decision in the world.

"This one or this one?"

I stared at them. They looked exactly the same.

"Uh... left?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You're not even looking."

"I am," I lied.

She laughed softly and tossed both bottles into the basket anyway.

The little shop smelled like coconut sunscreen, sea salt, and those weird beach candles people always bought but probably never lit. Towels were stacked in bright piles near the register, and postcards of the beach hung beside a shelf of sunglasses.

I wandered toward the front window while Mum kept shopping.

Outside, the town moved at its usual slow pace.

A family crossed the street carrying towels and umbrellas. Someone rode past on a bike. A dog sat patiently outside the café next door, tail thumping against the pavement.

For half a second, my brain immediately went: *Mia*.

It wasn't Mia.

Wrong dog.

Still, the thought stuck.

I looked toward the beach road at the end of the street, where I could just barely see the ocean flashing between buildings.

The water.

And instantly, Hallie.

Her laugh. Her voice. The way she'd stood there rolling her eyes while Cecilia exposed every embarrassing thing possible. The sunlight catching in her blonde hair.

I looked away from the window and wandered toward a display of beach stuff near the back.

A row of mini surfboards hung on the wall as decoration.

One of them was bright blue.

My chest did that stupid little jolt thing again.

Her board.

Or close enough.

"You've gone quiet."

Mum's voice beside me made me look up.

She was smiling in that way parents somehow always do when they know *exactly* what's going on.

"I'm fine," I said automatically.

“Mhm.”

She picked up a pair of sunglasses from a nearby rack and held them up to my face. “These scream tourist.”

I snorted. “That’s because I *am* a tourist.”

“For now.”

The words stayed in my head even after she moved away.

For now.

I glanced back at the flash of ocean through the shop window.

Was Hallie there right now?

The thought slipped in so naturally it almost annoyed me.

Maybe she was surfing.

Maybe Cecilia was there too, yelling something into the wind.

Maybe Mia was sprinting circles in the sand.

I shoved my hands into my pockets.

Why was I even thinking about that?

I barely knew her.

And yet somehow every part of this town kept leading back to her.

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Later that afternoon, I told myself I was just going for a walk.

Not to the beach.

Just... a walk.

The sandy path between the cottages had other ideas.

My feet found it almost without me noticing, carrying me between weathered fences and tall grass moving softly in the breeze.

The closer I got, the louder the waves became.

By the time the beach opened up in front of me, the sky had started turning gold.

The late afternoon light made everything softer.

The ocean rolled in gentle waves, glowing under the lowering sun. There were fewer people now. A couple kids near the rocks, someone walking a dog farther down, a pair of surfers paddling out in the distance.

I stepped onto the sand and started walking.

My eyes scanned the shoreline before I could stop myself.

No Mia.

No Cecilia.

No bright blue surfboard.

No Hallie.

A weird disappointment settled in my chest.

I kept walking anyway, hands in my pockets, the waves curling up near my shoes.

It was stupid.

I hadn't come here *for her*.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

But the truth sat there quietly, impossible to ignore.

I'd hoped she'd be here.

Even if it was just to see her from a distance.

Even if we didn't talk.

Even if Cecilia interrupted everything again.

A laugh carried over the sand somewhere behind me.

I turned automatically.

A blonde girl was walking near the dunes, her hair catching the sunlight.

For one split second, my heart jumped.

Then she turned.

Not Hallie.

I exhaled slowly, almost laughing at myself.

Okay.

This was getting kind of pathetic.

I stopped near the shoreline, watching the water pull in and out.

The ocean looked different now than it had that first day.

Not because it had changed.

Because now it reminded me of someone.

The waves.

The salt in the air.

The golden light on the water.

It all felt tied to Hallie somehow.

I stared out at the horizon, letting the breeze push through my hair.

Maybe I'd come back tomorrow.

Just for the beach.

Just because there wasn't much else to do.

Definitely not because I was hoping to see a blonde surfer with a chaotic little sister and a dog who thought everyone was her best friend.

Definitely not.

...Probably.

I smiled to myself and kept walking as the sun dipped lower over the water.

Maybe this summer was becoming something else entirely.

chapter twelve

hallie reeves

The beach felt softer in the late afternoon.

The sun had dipped lower, turning everything warmer, gold spilling across the water in streaks that made the ocean glitter. Mia was asleep beside my towel, sprawled on her side like she'd spent the whole day working instead of chasing birds and trying to eat seaweed.

I sat cross-legged in the sand, phone in one hand, absentmindedly drawing lines through the sand with the other.

My phone buzzed.

Abi:

sleepover tonight?

A smile pulled at my lips before I could stop it.

Lola:

YES. abis house. immediately.

I laughed softly.

Me:

bossy much

Abi:

bring snacks

and your charger

last time u stole mine

Me:

allegedly

Lola immediately sent about six laughing emojis.

I looked up from my phone for a second, letting my eyes drift over the shoreline.

A couple people walked near the dunes. Kids splashed in the shallows. Farther down, someone stood near the waterline with their hands shoved into their pockets.

My stomach did the tiniest flip.

Finn.

Even from this far away, I recognised the way he stood, like he was still getting used to this place.

Why do I notice that?

The breeze lifted my hair across my face, and I pushed it back, pretending I hadn't looked twice.

He's just there. It means nothing.

Still, my eyes found him again.

The sunlight caught in his ginger hair, brighter than usual, almost gold at the edges. He looked like he was staring out at the water, completely lost in thought.

Stop looking.

I looked away fast, dropping my gaze back to my phone.

Abi:

7pm don't be late

Lola:

if she's late it's because beach boy distracted her

I rolled my eyes so hard it almost hurt.

Me:

you're insane

But my face still felt warm.

Mia lifted her head sleepily, and I scratched behind her ears.

“Come on,” I murmured, standing up. “Let’s go get ready.”

As I slung my bag over my shoulder, I let myself glance down the beach one last time.

Finn was still there.

For one stupid second, I wondered if he’d noticed me too.

Why do I care?

I turned away before my thoughts could go anywhere worse.

Tonight was about my girls.

Not him.

Definitely not him.

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Abi’s house always felt alive.

The second I walked in, music was already playing from somewhere upstairs, and I could hear Lola laughing before I even made it to Abi’s room.

I dropped my overnight bag by the door.

The room was exactly what I expected: blankets everywhere, pillows thrown across the floor, snacks spread out in the middle like a crime scene.

Abi flopped dramatically onto her bed. “Finally.”

Lola pointed at me from where she was sitting cross-legged on the rug. “You’re late.”

“I’m three minutes late.”

“That’s late.”

I tossed a packet of lollies at her. "Be grateful."

For a while, it was easy.

Music. Snacks. Talking over each other. Lola telling us some ridiculous story from dance. Abi scrolling through random photos on her phone and nearly crying laughing at one of me mid-sneeze from last summer.

Then Abi sat up straighter.

"Oh," she said slowly, with the exact tone that meant danger. "Truth or dare."

Lola gasped. "YES."

I groaned. "Absolutely not."

Abi grinned. "Too bad."

This is going to end badly.

At first, it was harmless.

Lola had to text a random emoji to the last person in her messages.

Abi had to admit the most annoying person in Year 8.

I had to reveal my most embarrassing childhood fear.

"Seaweed," I muttered.

Abi blinked. "Seaweed?"

"It touches your leg underwater and suddenly it's over."

Lola laughed so hard she nearly fell sideways.

Then it was my turn again.

Abi tilted her head, eyes way too innocent.

"Truth or dare?"

"Truth," I said carefully.

Abi and Lola exchanged a look.

Immediately, I regretted everything.

Abi leaned forward. "What's going on with beach boy?"

My face heated instantly.

"Nothing."

Lola snorted. "That was too fast."

"There is literally nothing going on."

Abi raised an eyebrow. "So you *don't* keep noticing him?"

I crossed my arms. "No."

That's a lie.

Lola smirked. "Not even the hair?"

Oh, absolutely not.

"What about his hair?"

Abi grinned. "The ginger."

I stared at them.

"I hate both of you."

"That's not an answer," Lola sang.

The sunlight in it was kind of pretty.

I shoved a handful of popcorn into my mouth so I wouldn't say something stupid.

Abi's eyes narrowed. "And?"

"And what?"

"And his eyes."

I froze.

Lola burst out laughing. "OH MY GOD SHE DOES KNOW."

"I never said that!"

"You didn't have to," Abi said.

Green. Definitely green.

Heat climbed all the way up my neck.

“You guys are making this weird.”

Abi laughed. “No, *you’re* making it weird.”

I threw a pillow at her face.

She barely dodged it, laughing harder.

“Okay,” Lola said, still grinning. “New truth. If he walked in right now, what would you do?”

“Leave.”

Both of them screamed laughing.

“I’m serious!”

Abi wiped under her eyes dramatically. “That’s the worst answer possible.”

Would I leave?

Honestly...

Maybe.

Because the idea of standing there while they both stared at me and him in the same room sounded like actual torture.

But also –

I’d definitely notice if he smiled first.

That thought made my stomach flip in the most annoying way.

I hated this game.

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By the time we got bored of truth or dare, it was late enough that the whole house had gone quiet.

Abi sat up suddenly. “Slushie run.”

Lola pointed at her. “Yes.”

I laughed. “At, like, midnight?”

“Exactly.”

Ten minutes later, we were walking through the quiet streets with oversized hoodies thrown over our pyjamas, slushies in our hands, and absolutely no real plan.

The town felt different at night.

Softer.

The air cooler, the roads almost empty, the beach breeze still drifting through the streets.

We ended up at the park, of course.

Lola claimed the swings immediately.

Abi sat on the slide platform like she owned the place.

I stayed near the monkey bars, sipping my drink and looking up at the stars.

For a while, we just talked.

Random things.

School.

Summer plans.

People we hated.

Songs we were obsessed with.

Then Lola glanced at me over the rim of her cup.

“So.”

I groaned. “No.”

Abi smirked. “Yes.”

I sighed dramatically.

“You are both actually insufferable.”

Lola grinned. “You were looking at him.”

“That means nothing.”

Abi tilted her head. “Then why are you blushing?”

I pressed my cold slushie cup against my cheek.

“I’m literally not.”

I absolutely am.

The truth was, every time they brought him up, my mind went straight back to the beach.

The way he stood with his hands in his pockets.

The ginger hair catching the light.

The almost shy smile.

The way he still looked a little out of place here.

Cute, a voice in my head whispered.

No.

I stared out toward where I knew the beach was, hidden beyond the dark houses and sleeping streets.

The ocean was somewhere out there.

And for some reason, lately, the beach didn’t just feel like mine anymore.

It felt tied to him too.

That thought sat heavy in my chest.

Warm.

Uncomfortable.

Exciting.

“I don’t like him,” I said finally.

Abi and Lola went suspiciously quiet.

Then Abi smiled.

“Okay.”

Which somehow felt worse than if she’d argued.

Because it sounded like she didn’t believe me at all.

And maybe, deep down, I wasn’t sure I believed myself either.

chapter thirteen

abi fields

I woke up to Lola snoring.

Not softly. Not peacefully. Proper dramatic, like she was trying to win an award for it.

I threw a pillow at her without even opening my eyes properly.

“Oi,” I muttered.

She made a noise, rolled over, and somehow continued sleeping like nothing happened.

Hallie was already awake.

Of course she was.

She was sitting cross-legged on the floor with her phone in her hand, hair slightly messy in that way that still somehow looked intentional. Lola’s hoodie was hanging off one shoulder, and she was scrolling through something like she hadn’t just spent half the night getting interrogated about beach boy.

I watched her for a second.

She’s thinking about him.

I didn’t even need proof. It was just obvious.

“Morning,” I said.

Hallie looked up quickly, like she’d been caught doing something.

“Hey.”

I stretched and sat up, kicking Lola lightly in the ribs.

She groaned. “If that’s Abi I’m moving out.”

“It is Abi,” I said. “So good luck.”

She finally opened one eye.

“Why are you both awake and I’m suffering?”

“Because you snore like a broken engine,” I said.

Hallie laughed softly at that, but it was quick. Slightly distracted.

Yep. Definitely thinking about something.

I got up and wandered downstairs.

Mum had already left for work, which meant the kitchen was ours.

Dangerous.

I opened the fridge.

“Breakfast?” I called.

“Whatever’s edible,” Lola yelled from upstairs.

Hallie came down a minute later, hair tied up now, acting like she hadn’t just been mentally somewhere else entirely.

We ended up eating toast, cereal, and whatever random snacks we could find in the cupboard.

Classic sleepover recovery meal.

Lola leaned back in her chair. “Okay, what are we doing today?”

“Beach?” Hallie said automatically.

I raised an eyebrow at her.

She shrugged. “It’s just... nice.”

Nice. Sure.

“Beach it is,” Lola said.

I smirked a little. “You say that like we had options.”

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We got ready in chaos.

Music blasting from Lola’s phone.

Hallie borrowing my hoodie even though she pretended she didn't want to.

Me trying to find matching socks and failing immediately.

It was normal. Easy. The kind of morning that didn't feel like anything important.

Except I kept watching Hallie.

Not in a weird way.

Just... noticing.

She kept checking her phone.

Not constantly.

Just enough that it stood out.

Waiting for something? Someone?

I already knew the answer.

We all did.

Lola bumped my shoulder as she walked past. "You're staring."

"I'm not."

"You are," she said, grinning.

I rolled my eyes. "She's right there."

"That's not what I meant," Lola said quietly.

I didn't answer that.

Because I knew exactly what she meant.

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The beach was already warm when we got there.

Not packed. Not empty. Just the right amount of people scattered across the sand like it had been arranged on purpose.

Hallie dropped her bag down immediately and kicked off her shoes.

Mia appeared out of nowhere like she had been summoned.

“Of course she’s here,” Lola said, watching the dog barrel straight toward us.

Hallie crouched down, laughing when Mia nearly knocked her over.

She looks happier here.

I sat down on my towel and pulled my sunglasses on, pretending I wasn’t observing everything like it was my job.

Lola flopped down next to me.

“So,” she said casually.

I groaned. “Don’t start.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“You’re about to.”

She smiled innocently. “I was just going to say... he’s here.”

I followed her gaze before I could stop myself.

Finn.

Same spot as before. Hands in his pockets. Looking out at the water like he was still trying to figure the place out.

Except this time –

He looked up.

And saw us.

Well.

Saw *her*, really.

Hallie froze for half a second.

Just a flicker.

Then she acted like she didn’t.

Classic.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

Lola nudged me. "Watch."

"Don't," I said immediately.

But I did anyway.

Finn started walking over.

Slow. Normal. No hesitation.

Like he'd decided it wasn't a big deal.

Hallie stood up a little straighter without meaning to.

Yep. Definitely a big deal.

He stopped a few steps away from us.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," Hallie replied too fast.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop smiling.

Lola, absolutely useless, waved like this was the most entertaining thing she'd ever seen.

"Finn, right?" I said, just to make it less awkward.

He nodded. "Yeah."

Mia immediately tried to eat his shoelace.

"Of course," Hallie muttered, grabbing her collar.

Finn laughed. "She remembers me."

"She remembers everyone," Hallie said quickly.

"That feels less special," he replied.

Hallie made a noise that was almost a laugh but tried very hard not to be.

Oh, she's gone.

Lola was watching them like she was watching a show.

I leaned back slightly, sunglasses hiding my expression.
This was going exactly how I thought it would.
Finn glanced at Hallie again.
Just for a second longer than necessary.
And Hallie noticed.
Of course she did.
She always did.
“I should go,” Finn said after a moment, gesturing vaguely toward the water.
“Yeah,” Hallie said.
Too fast again.
Then she added, “I mean – okay.”
Smooth.
He smiled slightly. “See you around.”
And then he walked off.
Just like that.
Back to the ocean.
Back to wherever he’d been before.
But Hallie didn’t sit down straight away.
She watched him go.
Just for a second.
Long enough for it to mean something.
Then she looked away like it didn’t.
I turned to Lola.
She was already smirking.
I sighed.

This is going to be a long summer.