

Chapter 1: Low Morrison

I first saw Freya at my high school. I hated school, found the classes as dull and simple as my fellow students. This attitude did not endear me to my teachers nor my classmates, so I was alone, as usual, when she walked through the double front doors. No one noticed her, which seemed to be her intent. She wore a ball cap and aviator sunglasses that she did not remove under the fluorescent lights. Her shoulder-length blond hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, her heart-shaped face free of makeup. She was petite but curvaceous in her faded jeans and plain white T, with the kind of figure rarely seen outside of comic books. I had a comic-book figure, too... Popeye's girlfriend Olive Oyl.

Even through the crowd in the hallway, I could tell she was *somebody*. There was no way I could have known then that she would come into my life and change it, change *me*, but I felt a magnetic pull toward her, like I had to meet her. It was destiny. The other kids were immune to her presence. It was lunch break, so they were all wrapped up in their pathetic social jockeying—gossiping, flirting, or roughhousing. We would graduate in less than three months, and everyone was already obsessing about prom, pre-parties, after-parties, and college. Everyone but me, that is.

I watched the woman head to the office as Morrissey warbled through my earbuds (unlike my pop- and rap-loving peers, I preferred to listen to angsty classics: the Smiths, Nirvana, R.E.M.). She was too old to be a student, too young to be a parent, too cool to be a teacher. As she disappeared into the principal's domain, I wondered: Who was this woman? What was she doing at Bayview High? And why was she dressed like an incognito celebrity?

A few minutes later, she emerged from the office with Principal Graph beside her. He was enamored with her; it was obvious in his attentive posture, his fawning mannerisms, the color in his meaty cheeks. The portly administrator led Freya (who had removed her shades but not her hat) to the bulletin board in the main hall. As always, it was covered in ignored bills: school-play announcements, lost-phone notices, guest-speaker posters... Mr. Graph cleared a space for her, handed her a pushpin, and she posted a piece of paper on the board. They chatted for a few seconds, the principal clearly trying to bask in her aura for as long as possible, before she donned her sunglasses and left.

I hurried to the vacated bulletin board, eyes trained on the standard white sheet she had put up. It was a typewritten advertisement in Times New Roman font.

Pottery Classes

Learn to throw, glaze, and fire in a cozy home studio. Make beautiful mugs, bowls, and vases.

Ten classes for \$100.

Contact Freya Light.

Casually, I snapped a photo of her contact details just as the bell rang to signal the end of lunch.

I waited two days to text her. I didn't want her to know that I'd watched her pin the notice on the board, that I'd recorded the information directly, that I had been thinking about her ever since. It's not as creepy as it sounds. My life was exceptionally boring. I had no friends, no hobbies, no extracurricular activities. I did, however, have a lot of chores. My family had a small hobby farm with chickens, a couple of goats, and a pig. There were always animals to feed, eggs to collect, kindling to be chopped for the woodstove. Whenever I escaped to my room to watch Netflix, my mom would insist she needed help with something. She worked from home as a bookkeeper, but she was obsessed with canning: peaches, green beans, dill pickles, kimchi, applesauce... As if we had to prepare for a nuclear war.

Sometimes, I'd escape to the beach or into the forest to take photographs of seals, driftwood, birds, and trees. My photography teacher, Mr. Pelman, said I had a good eye. He even let me sign out the school cameras, a privilege usually reserved for yearbook club members. Other times, I used my phone. I liked viewing the world through a smaller, more intimate lens. I liked the solitude. And my singular hobby gave me time to think. For the past two days, about little other than Freya.

She fascinated me, this woman who looked like she'd walked off the set of some Beverly Hills reality show. The town of Hawking, where my high school was located, had some wealthy residents. There were the bankers, the real-estate moguls, the captains of industry who summered in the waterfront mansions set along the island's rugged coastline. Year-round, the town housed a handful of professionals—doctors and lawyers and accountants. But mostly, our island was populated with organic farmers, beekeepers, or artisan candle/soap/pickle makers and those who ran the shops and restaurants servicing the seasonal tourist trade. We had the occasional celebrity pass through town, usually some washed-up old actor en route to the fishing lodge on the island's northern tip. But Freya was different. She exuded glamour, significance, and a palpable sense of cool.

After deliberating over my words for several hours, I texted:

I'd like to sign up for pottery classes

With a trembling finger, I sent the message.

When she didn't respond, I fretted. Were my carefully chosen words somehow off-putting? Or had she seen me in the school hallway watching her with barely concealed wonder? Could she read my thoughts—which, while harmless, were perhaps a little... *much*? It was possible that she had reconsidered offering classes to teens. Why had she wanted to in the first place? Kids my age were assholes. They wouldn't take learning pottery seriously. They'd joke around, make a mess, show up stoned. Except me. I would treat it like surgery.

Finally, a week later, she texted back.

Hi. Classes start next Monday at 4. Bring a friend!

Ha.

I had one more problem. Or should I say, I had sixty-two more problems.

I decided to steal the shortfall from my younger brothers. I didn't feel guilty as I rifled under their twin beds for their piggy banks. They were nine and eleven; they had significant birthday money and no expenses. When I got a summer job, I would pay them back... if the little brats even noticed the money was missing. And I would have held up a bank to get the cash I needed. I would have rolled an old lady. These pottery classes, my meeting with Freya, had to happen. It was fated.

That Monday, I drove my battered 1997 Ford F-150 SuperCab pickup truck from school to the address Freya had texted me. I hadn't fussed with my appearance; there wasn't much point. But my hair was washed, my lips were coated in enough cherry ChapStick to give them some sheen, and I'd doubled up on deodorant... which was a good thing. My anticipation had me sweating like a hog.

Freya's isolated home was stunning—a cedar-and-glass structure perched on a rocky cliff above the ocean. It was surrounded by arbutus trees, their naked limbs straining toward the water, and seaside juniper perfuming the air with the tangy scent of gin. The building wasn't large, but it was sleek, modern, and expensive. The opulence of Freya's home did not surprise me. She was clearly a somebody, her effortless glamour indicative of wealth. This house, with its ocean view and modern architectural design, would be worth millions. My curiosity about her was further piqued.

I parked in the drive and headed toward the pottery studio. It was a small cottage nestled in the trees about fifty yards to the right of the main house. With its clapboard siding, multipaned windows, and wood-shingled roof, it must have been a remnant of the home's previous iteration. A chalkboard sign mounted next to the door read: *Welcome to the Studio*, in a swirly script.

My height allowed me to view her through the window at the top of the door. Freya wore black tights and a loose denim shirt—her pottery smock—her blond hair pulled back in a stylishly messy bun. I watched her plunk a heavy bag of gray clay onto a slab table, arrange her various tools into plastic containers. She was preparing for my arrival, and I found it oddly touching. Before I became mesmerized by my observations, I knocked briefly and entered.

"Hi." Her smile was broad and white and sincere. "I'm Freya."

She held out her hand, and I took it. It was smooth and warm, her grip strong from the clay work.

"I'm Low."

"I'm so happy you came." Her eyes flitted behind me. "Just you?"

"Yep."

But she wasn't disappointed. "One-on-one always works best. Let's get started."

Freya handed me a man's plaid shirt that was too big even for me. As I rolled the sleeves, Freya sliced several one-inch pieces from a block of clay using a wire with two wooden handles—a garrote. We began by “wedging,” pressing the clay into itself, making it malleable and releasing any air bubbles. I watched Freya intently, copying the movement of her small but powerful hands. Afterward, we filled two metal containers with warm water from the back sink and moved to the wheels. Here, we encountered our first hurdle.

“Are you right-handed?” she asked me.

“No, I'm left-handed.”

“Oh.” Her brow furrowed. “You'll turn your wheel clockwise then. I'll try to do a left-handed demonstration, but I'm not very ambidextrous.”

“It's okay,” I assured her. “I'm used to learning everything opposite.”

And so we began. Freya chatted as I got used to the feel of wet clay spinning beneath my hands, of the force of my touch to morph it into a vessel. She had moved to the island just four months ago, she told me. It was her husband's idea. She had a husband. Of course she did. A beautiful woman her age would not be single.

“He wanted a fresh start,” she elaborated, eyes on the perfect clay cone taking shape upon her wheel.

“And you?” I asked.

She didn't answer right away. Her hand slipped over the top of the mini mountain, palm compressing it into a small, round hill. “I don't want to be here. But I have no choice.”

“That makes two of us,” I muttered.

She looked up at me, a slow smile spreading across her face. She saw me. She really saw me. I was not simply a misfit teenager, tall and awkward and outcast.

I was a kindred spirit.