

A Thousand Sunsets

First Three Chapters

KAYLA MARTIN

A Thousand Sunsets Sneak Peek

A Murphy Family Novel (#1)

Kayla Martin

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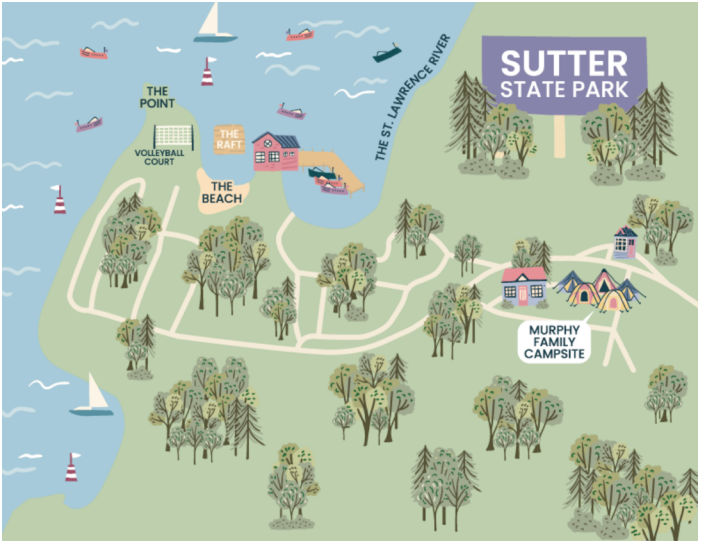
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ONE



SIDNEY

I can smell the morning summer air of fresh cut grass flowing through the open front door as I sit glued to the dining room chair in a staredown with my laptop, while Mom runs in and out of the house packing last minute things. I watch my reflection on the screen, my head resting on top of my knee, with my too-short hair falling out of a messy bun. I've been sitting here for so long the cup of coffee in my hand is now cold.

I tap the touchpad before the screen can lock, the email that's been taunting me since it arrived stares back at me. It's the final step to the next phase in my life, and for such a simple thing, it feels like more than an email.

I check on the other tabs I have opened, including the security deposit form and Google Maps with the route from my new apartment to my new job mapped out. I don't understand how a thirteen mile drive in upstate New York can take me twenty minutes, but in Los Angeles it's going to take an hour. I'm due to start an entry-level position at one of the best marketing agencies in LA next month and I know it's going to be an adjustment.

Once I submit the deposit, there's no going back. I will officially be moving across the country by myself. It doesn't sound too bad, but considering I've never lived anywhere alone, it's a bit intimidating. There's also the fact that I don't know anyone out there, but that's what I want, I think.

"Sidney! Hurry up, we have to leave," my mom calls from the kitchen, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Five minutes," I shout, taking the last sip of my cold coffee, hoping to find some courage through the caffeine to hit submit. I distract myself from my laptop and stand up to grab my mini floral backpack, double-checking to make sure I have last-minute items like my phone charger, deodorant, and my glasses case. I pivot back around and stare at the large submit button. Did it get bigger? Taking a deep breath I do a quick click of my touchpad, and it's done.

I send a short email to the landlord, rereading to confirm I didn't embarrass myself with any mistakes or misspellings of her name. One of my biggest pet peeves is when someone's name is in the email and the recipient spells it wrong. If someone's name is in their email you should be able to spell it right. It's 'Sidney' not 'Sydney', people, it's not hard. After confirming three times that her name is spelled right, I hit send and power down my laptop, slamming it closed. No turning back now. Grabbing my backpack and sunglasses, I head toward the kitchen.

"Good, there you are," my mom says as she comes whipping around the corner, forcing me to step back into the dining room so she doesn't knock me over. Her blonde curly hair, sprinkled with gray, bounces as she comes to a stop. I'm essentially a mirror of my mother with my blonde

curls, blue eyes, pale Irish skin, and short height but my face is slightly rounder like my dad's.

"Jeez, Mom, slow down."

"Sorry honey, I'm running around making sure we have everything. Here, take this." She shoves a basket of food into my arms. "This needs to go into the camper. Your dad is out there now."

I grab the basket from her and adjust my backpack, making sure I don't drop it or the food. "You've been going on this trip every year since you were born. You don't have to worry about forgetting anything."

"You say that now until we get there and have to drive to town right away to get bread." She glares at me.

"Okay, that happened one time. And no one told me I was in charge of packing the bread," I shout the last bit in my defense as she disappears back into the kitchen. I remember they wouldn't stop bringing up my mistake that year. I got embarrassed every time and hated all the attention on me. Slipping on my Crocs, I head out the front door to pass off the food to my dad.

My younger sister, Abby, is already in the backseat of the truck. Her brown hair is tied up on top of her head in a more successful bun than my own. She always looks effortlessly pretty, compared to my bun that's falling out. At least her sweatpants and crewneck are covered in fur. She's on puppy duty this morning, making sure our six-month-old yellow Lab, Sammy, doesn't get in our parents' way.

"Thanks, Sid. Got everything taken care of?" my dad asks, taking the basket from my hands and placing it in the camper. Dad's been up for a few hours now, no doubt tinkering with last-minute things in the camper. His brown salt-and-pepper hair looks like he's been running his hands through it, and there's some oil or grease on his cheek right above his beard.

“Did it a minute ago.” I give him a salute, pointing to his face and rubbing my cheek.

“Awesome. That’s a big step, kiddo. We’re going to miss you out here.” He wipes his cheek with the back of his hand and squeezes my shoulder. Meanwhile, I’m on the brink of tears. He’s right, this is a big step. I’ve graduated college, and I’m moving into the next phase of life. I’m excited but also scared shitless.

I’m normally the quiet one while Abby is the social butterfly. When I first applied to the job, I confided in her how scared the idea of leaving home and making such a big change made me. She said it was “typical Taurus behavior,” which didn’t comfort me as much as she meant it to. I’m aware I have to come out of my perfectly cozy shell, and I need to do it soon. This trip is the perfect excuse for me to see what Cali Sidney could be like. Hopefully she can find the strength to order pizza over the phone.

On top of moving to a new place, this is probably going to be my last camping trip for a while. Every summer, my family spends ten days camping at Sutter State Park in the Thousand Islands on the St. Lawrence River—or the River. When I say family, I mean everyone on my mom’s side. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, partners, spouses, second cousins, you name it. If you’re a part of the Murphy family, you go to the Islands for the annual family trip. Sometimes I think my dad enjoys it more than my mom, since he was the one to insist that he take the Murphy name when they got married.

In the past, I’ve never had a problem taking time off from my part-time jobs to go for the full trip before, but now I’m beginning to think I might not be able to attend for a few years.

With starting a new job, I’m nervous to ask for too

much time off, and I would rather fly home for the holidays, weddings, or other future events. I don't see how taking off ten days for the camping trip would pan out, and I'm afraid to admit that to my family. No one ever misses this trip without a good reason, opening them up to loving but passive-aggressive jokes about not being there. My parents and Abby know about my move, but the rest of my family has no idea. I've asked them all to keep quiet about it until I'm ready to tell everyone. Abby and I have cried a few times over the past two months, but she promised to FaceTime me during any family functions that I'll miss.

This year, I plan to soak up all the Islands will give me. If I could bottle up the feeling of being up there, I would guard it with my life.

TWO



SIDNEY

I jolt awake as my sister pokes me in the side with her dagger of a finger.

“Sid, look, we’re almost there,” she shouts, pointing out the window at a roadside rainbow-themed motel. “I’m so excited! I want to get down to the beach so bad.”

I stretch and re-adjust myself in the backseat of the truck to the best of my ability. It’s cramped back here with me, Abby, and Sammy, but I still fell asleep about half an hour into the three hour trip. Abby always wakes me up when we pass the motel, since that means we’re almost at the campground.

My family has been doing this camping trip for over fifty years. It started with my grandparents, and everyone quickly fell in love with the Islands—it’s our special place. Some of my aunts and uncles even met their partners up here. At almost every family function throughout the year I hear people saying, “Are you going to the Islands this year?” Without fail, that will start the second we leave this trip.

I’m really hoping no one asks me about next year,

because I don't have the heart to tell them the truth. We might be a bit codependent as a family, and I'm certain I'm going to get shit for it. I don't want this trip to be any different, and I don't want to be the center of everyone's jokes for ten days. I know I should tell them—but maybe toward the end of the trip.

I roll down the window and inhale the smell of the Islands. We might be a few miles away from the River, but I swear I can smell the water already.

I turn to Abby. "Same plan as usual once we get there?"

"Of course, but let's aim to beat our time from last year. I bet we can get our tent set up in under half an hour," she says confidently.

"Definitely. Do you think Ryan and Maeve are there already? If they're done, we could rope them into helping us." I open my phone tracking app to see where they are. I have almost all of my cousins in this app, which is helpful for times like this when we want to see where everyone is while traveling. "Bingo. They're there." I show her their bubbles on the map.

"Perfect," she claps and starts to collect her things around her, putting on her Crocs and adjusting her sunglasses. "They'll want to go to the beach, too. I'm sure they would be willing to help us."

It's the same routine every time we get there, give or take a few fights from setting up. Everyone sets up their campers and tents as fast as they can so we can head to the beach. My beach bag is already packed, with my swimsuit on the top for easy access.

Dad pulls into the campground, and my heart starts to pound. I've never felt anxious about this trip before but knowing it will potentially be the last one for a while makes everything feel different. He pulls the camper over to the

side of the road and gets out to check us in at the registration booth. From here, I can see some family members are already setting up. Everyone has “their sites,” similar to when you have a favorite seat in college, but there are no actual assigned seats. Booking sites can get intense when we have to compete with other campers—it’s like *The Hunger Games: The Islands* edition.

I can see the majority of the twelve sites reserved are already in various stages of set up. Campers are being backed in, dogs are being corralled, and some family members are finished with their set-up and are helping others with drinks in their hands.

Aunt Shan’s site is set up like she’s been here for a week, even though they got here this morning. Their site is always the central hub for our family, home to the nightly campfire and makeshift kitchen where we cook breakfast and dinner. Their two kids, Ryan and Maeve, look like they’re finishing setting up a tent.

We’re still missing a few people, but I’m sure they will all trickle in as the day goes on. By this afternoon, the Murphy family will be in full vacation mode.

Abby and I hop out of the truck, with Sammy following close behind. I attach his leash to his matching collar, and we head toward our campsite. Mom and Dad are in charge of backing the camper in, so we are tasked with keeping Sammy out of the way and mingling until it’s time to unpack. The two rows of campsites create a circle of campers with space in the center for tents and extra picnic tables. It creates the perfect space for everyone to eat together.

“Fucking finally,” Maeve shouts as soon as she sees us, throwing the bag she’s carrying toward her older brother, who catches it and drops it into the grass. She’s already in shorts and a hot pink tank top, her swimsuit strands

peeking out around her neck. Her summer-tanned skin is the perfect complement to her long brown hair and deep brown eyes. There's a glow to her skin—no doubt from sweating—that makes her look like a model and not like she just finished setting up a tent. She almost crashes into Abby as she hugs her, and Abby's hair still manages to come out unharmed and beautiful. There's a tinge of jealousy that tugs inside of me. I know I look like a mess right now and the humidity is making my hair frizzier by the second.

“Shit, what time did your parents get you up this morning?” I ask her as she breaks her hug with Abby, giving me a side hug. She bends down to say hi to Sammy, scratching behind his ears.

“Honestly, I have no idea, I blacked out and did whatever they told me to do. Ry and I finished my tent a minute ago. He's got to do his next.” She stands back up and adjusts her pink sunglasses, popping her gum right as her brother arrives with a handful of drinks. They could almost be mistaken for twins, even though he's two years older. He's also dressed for the beach, with a pair of green flamingo trunks and a matching tank top.

“Oh my gosh, you're the best.” She grabs the drinks from his hands and passes one to each of us before opening one for herself. Abby and Maeve are underage, but in the Islands, everyone drinks since the family always watches out for each other. We all have plastic Mason jar drink cups that we carry around, filled with our drink of choice. Everyone's cups have different colored lids, and it's the safest way to carry drinks around the campground, especially at night when the park rangers are on patrol.

“No problem, gotta start the vacation off right. I'm going to set up my tent. Beach in an hour?” he asks,

holding up his drink toward us and taking a sip as he skips away.

“Thirty minutes if we can do it,” Abby shouts.

“Let me hook Sammy up to the tree and grab him some water, then we are setting up this tent,” I say, downing half of my drink.

“Perfect, I’m dying to get in the water. Cy told me there’s a new lifeguard. I guess Luke got fired at the end of last year for getting drunk and trying to steal a boat from the marina. It was a shit show.” Maeve sips her drink, cocking her hip with a raise of her eyebrows.

“Wait, have you been down there already? When did you see him?” I ask her, confused as to when she talked to the head lifeguard for Sutter State Park’s small beach.

“He saw us setting up when he pulled in this morning. He drove by and said hi and filled us in on the gossip.” She takes a quick look around before she leans in and whispers, “You should have seen how flustered Ry got when he came over. I swear it was the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

It’s been known for a few years that Ryan has a major crush on our favorite lifeguard, but he’s too scared to do anything about it. It seems like Cyrus is oblivious to this fact, and somehow Ryan’s lack of coherent speech whenever he is around hasn’t clued him in.

“I wonder if Ryan will finally make a move this year? It’s been a while since anyone has kissed one of the lifeguards,” I ask, finishing my drink.

“If he doesn’t, I might have to do it for him,” Maeve chuckles, heading toward our site.

“Did Cy tell you anything else? I’ve been DMing him on Instagram since last week and he said we missed a ton,” Abby asks. Both she and Maeve are great at making friends and keeping in contact with them, whereas I tend to keep

to myself and let them take charge when it comes to social events.

“OMG YES! I can’t believe I forgot the best part. They distracted me.” She stops and throws her hands up in the air. “I guess Luke did everything because he was upset his boyfriend broke up with him. Then his ex-boyfriend ended up taking the open lifeguard position. I swear this place could have its own reality show.”

“No way,” we shout at the same time.

“Way,” Maeve laughs, tossing her head back to finish her drink.

Over the next thirty minutes, the three of us each have two more drinks and manage to get the tent completely done, air mattresses and all. Which is impressive considering how buzzed we all are. I can’t tell if my cheeks are getting sunburned already or if it’s the alcohol. My parents didn’t end up needing much help since we packed light this year, and Sammy slept in the shade under one of the trees the whole time.

Abby is already in her suit, and I can see her sunscreen lip balm sticking out of the strap of her suit on her shoulder. She has fair skin like I do, but her lips always seem to burn the second she steps into the sun. For Christmas this past year, I bought her a whole makeup bag full of sunscreen lip balms because she’s always losing them. She’s currently mixing us drinks for the beach—vodka cranberries for both of us.

Grabbing my maroon one-piece out of the top of my bag, I get dressed quickly. This suit is my favorite for family events because the neckline doesn’t expose too much of my cleavage, and there are two sheer horizontal stripes across the center, making it the perfect amount of sexy while staying modest enough for family. After double-checking

my beach bag for my towel, sunscreen, and a book, I step out of the tent and zip it up.

“Cheers, bitch,” she hands me my cup, lifting hers up and taking a sip.

“Cheers to another memorable Murphy trip,” I lift my cup toward hers and sip. “How many of the cousins are ready?”

“Well, what do you mean by ‘ready?’” she asks, making an air quotes gesture with one hand and rolling her eyes.

No matter how ready they are, add twenty more minutes. Someone is always running around making a drink, going to the bathroom, finding a towel, or deciding they want a different suit—basically anything to hold us back. We’ve learned over the years if you stop waiting and leave camp, eventually people will catch up. If they end up having to sit on the grass instead of the beach, that’s on them.

“Let’s head out, I need to get into the water.” I can feel the sweat dripping down my back as I swing my bag over my shoulder. Grabbing a small bowl of strawberries for the walk, my feet automatically start heading toward the beach. The water’s calling me like a moth to a flame.

“Agreed. Maeve had her suit on when we got here, and I have no idea where she disappeared to.” Abby follows close behind me shouting across to Aunt Shan’s site, “Hey Ryan, tell Maeve we are going to the beach. Meet us down there.” He waves a hand at us, but he’s distracted with making multiple drinks.

The road down to the beach is all downhill, perfect for going there and awful for hiking back up. I remember when we were kids we always biked down, and I would never peddle down this hill, letting gravity guide me. I can’t imagine riding back up it today, and I’m not sure how we did that multiple times a day back then.

We stay silent on our way down, and the closer we get the cooler the air feels as the water grows nearer. The River is still pretty cold in the summer, which is refreshing when it's over eighty degrees. Rounding the corner at the end of the road, the area opens to a parking lot for the camp marina. Memories of fishing off the dock and boat rides flood my thoughts.

The newly renovated bathroom and shower building is right next to the marina and blocks most of the view of the River.

I stop Abby right as we approach the corner of the building. "Hold on, I want a moment to savor this."

She hooks her arm in mine. "This is always my favorite part, too." We step around the corner together.

We're standing at the top of a small hill with a man-made beach—no more than 150 feet wide—at the bottom. On the other side of the beach is another small hill and rec hall where you can play board games, paint, or do other crafts. When we were younger, we would spend all day in the rec hall making friendship bracelets and boondoggles—or lanyards, as the incorrect people would call them. We've gotten into plenty of fights in the past with other families about the correct term for them. One time it came dangerously close to turning into a physical fight.

There's a volleyball net near the rec hall and the land comes to a point with a rocky shore where it meets the River. We've always called it the Point, but I don't know if other campers do, too. The River is wide and goes on for miles, and if you stand on the shore you can see Canada on the other side. Our phones never work up here because the service is never any good. If we bring them too close to the Point, we get "Welcome to Canada" texts. Now we leave our phones at our campsites, going full vacation mode. Liam is the only one who constantly complains

because he can't text his long-term, long distance, low-commitment, casual girlfriend who we all think is made up.

The sight of the water is truly breathtaking, I glance over at Abby who's smiling from ear to ear, as happy as I am. Suddenly, we hear footsteps fast approaching and flip-flops getting closer, until our cousins are running past us down the hill. They run down and start throwing down their towels and kicking off their flip-flops, running straight into the water. Maeve comes up next to me and hooks my other arm.

"Holy shit, I see him," Maeve says, pointing with her free arm to the lifeguard sitting in the middle of the beach. "That's the new lifeguard."

All of our eyes go straight to the lifeguard chair, the view partially blocked by the umbrella that sits to the right. I can't see much of the new lifeguard, but I can tell from his shoulders that he's probably tall and muscular—and shirtless. He lifts his left arm to the back of the chair, revealing a full sleeve of tattoos.

"Oh fuck me." The sentence is out of my mouth before my brain can stop me. My face heats, and they both stare at me before we break out into laughter and run down to the beach.

THREE



ZACH

This morning I woke up and could tell there was something different in the air, and it wasn't the fresh smell of fish coming from the River. Fridays are usually pretty busy for the beach at Sutter State Park. It's always the start of new families coming to camp for the weekend, which I don't usually care about. However, Cy has been talking about this specific Friday all month. Apparently his favorite family, The Volleyball Kids, arrive today for ten days. The regular camp staff has nicknames for the yearly campers that everyone knows. This family has a tradition of playing volleyball against the lifeguards to start their trip, hence the nickname.

I've heard some stories about them over the last two years when I would hang out with Cy, but this year it's like he talks about them more than usual. It might be because I see him more since he helped me get the lifeguard gig.

I've been up on the River now for two years. We met in college, and he would never shut up about living here. When I dropped out of college sophomore year, and my

dad kicked me out of the house, Cy graciously offered to help me find a place I could afford on my own.

Ever since then, I've been saving up my money and picking up odd jobs around town to go to The Culinary Institute of America this coming fall. A year ago, I got a line cook job at an Italian restaurant in town, but I usually work the dinner shift, which is why the park makes perfect sense. With all the additional income, I finally have everything saved for school in the fall, and it's so satisfying to not be constantly stressed about money anymore.

I enjoy working at the park. All the other lifeguards are already part of my social circle, and the quick turnover of campers always makes each weekend different. I've already been roped into different activities not in the lifeguard job description.

The Volleyball Kids' game is one example. Connor can't do it tonight, which means the game will have to be tomorrow after work. It seems like Cy has a special liking for this family, and I can't figure out why. They sound like your average middle-class family that comes up here every year, but he keeps telling me, "You'll see, they're one of the most fun annual families." He won't give me much more to go on.

Right after noon, a loud group runs onto the beach, dropping their stuff and heading right into the water. I get a better look at them as they emerge from the water, and it looks like they're a mix of older teenagers, and some in their early twenties. These must be the ones Cy keeps talking about because the second I look down from the guard chair at him he's grinning from ear to ear at me. It's honestly unsettling. With his dark hair and brown eyes peering over his sunglasses, he resembles a mad villain.

Four lifeguards are working today, and we rotate between the three positions every half-hour. Allison is

currently out on the raft, I'm in the chair, and Taylor and Cy are on the beach, ready to handle anything quickly. They're both sitting on the picnic table to the right of the lifeguard chair, which he stands on to talk to me.

"This is them." He points toward the water at the group. I notice his cheeks suddenly turn pink, standing out against his light skin. I have a suspicion he's interested in this family for other reasons he failed to mention.

"They're not a bad-looking family," I nod toward the ones in the water, keeping an eye on my best friend. His blush deepens, confirming my suspicions, and now I need to figure out which Volleyball Kid he's crushing on.

"I—I mean yeah, I guess so, I never noticed before. Anyways, it doesn't matter, they're just cool." He waves his hand at me, brushing me off.

"Sure, man, whatever you say. How many are there?"

"There are fourteen cousins, but the oldest ones are all partnered up, and I mainly hang out with the ten around our age. The youngest ones are eighteen now." He points with two fingers toward the group, then toward another group walking onto the beach. I turn to see a group of three setting down their towels and bags. I can't get a good look at most of them because the girl in front runs toward us in a blinding bright pink bikini. I swear you could probably see her at night in that thing.

Cy jumps off the picnic table, the girl jumps into his arms, and he spins her before setting her down. She's brushing her long brown hair out of her face when she looks up at me and gives him a hip bump.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to the newest Sutter State Park lifeguard?" She puts her hand on her hip and blows a bubble with her gum.

"Right, right. Maeve, this is Zach Moretti, my good

friend and newest lifeguard,” he gestures up toward me, still in the chair.

She waves up at me, the sun bouncing off her hot pink sunglasses. “Hiya, Zach, it’s so nice to meet you.”

I wave back. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard great things.”

“You better not be gossiping about me,” she shouts, hitting Cy on the shoulder.

“I swear, I was only saying good things.” He puts his hands up in defense.

I’m quick to defend him. “He really did. I heard there are a lot of you?”

She slaps her palm to her forehead. “Duh, you need to meet them too.” She spins toward her family on the beach. “Hey ladies, come over here.”

Since I’m in the chair, I can’t talk to them too much. I’m supposed to be watching the water for any sign of danger, but Cy is the head lifeguard, so he won’t yell at me for being a bit distracted. I do a quick scan of the water before turning back to them as the other two girls come up next to her.

Seeing the three of them lined up, you can tell they’re related. They could be mistaken for sisters with the same fair skin, similar small rounded noses, and soft cheekbones. My eyes move down the line, taking them all in, until my heart stops at the instant draw I feel toward the last girl. She has her sunglasses on, and I can’t see her eyes, but her blonde curly hair barely falls past her shoulders. I have the urge to run my fingers through it. She’s wearing a maroon one-piece, and now maroon is my new favorite color. Her full lips are wrapped around a strawberry, and I can’t take my eyes off of her. My heart doesn’t start beating again until Maeve starts to introduce them.

“Ladies, this is Zach Moretti, the newest lifeguard.”

She gestures up toward me and back down toward them. “Zach, meet Abby and Sidney.”

A unison “hi” rings out between them, both giving a wave, but I’m only looking at Sidney.

“Nice to meet you both, I’m looking forward to this volleyball game I keep hearing about,” I say, hoping to keep them talking longer.

“We’re looking forward to kicking your butts,” Abby quips, giving Sidney a hip bump. Sidney nods and directs her gaze anywhere but at me. I can see a faint flush on her chest, disappearing under her suit. I crave to find out how far her body flushes, what color her eyes are, what her voice sounds like. I don’t know why, but I’m being pulled to her like I’ve never experienced before.

“We’d love to stay and chat, but we just set up our whole camp and need to get in this river ASAP,” Maeve chimes in, pointing to the water.

“Of course. Enjoy the water,” I say with a wave. They head to the water to join their other family members. Lucky for me, it’s my job to watch the water, and you can’t tell where my gaze is with my aviator sunglasses on.

Cy glances down at his watch and then up at me. “Allison is coming in from the raft soon, then she’s going on break. Do you need anything before heading out there for the next rotation?”

“No, I’m all set. Do you want me to come down and head out there now?” I ask, gesturing toward the raft where Allison sits on the guard chair. There isn’t anyone out there with her, so switching over will be easy. Maybe I’ll get lucky, and Sidney will swim out while I’m there.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” he nods, as I climb down from the chair and head toward the water.

STAY TUNED FOR MORE!

Thanks for reading the first three chapters of Sidney and Zach's story! I hope you enjoyed this sneak peek, make sure to keep an eye out for [A Thousand Sunsets](#) - releasing May 21, 2024. Pre-order and save now:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kayla Martin (she/her) lives in Upstate New York with her husband and Neptune – her tuxedo cat and writing assistant. As an avid reader and audiobook lover, Kayla loves to write swoon-worthy stories that will pull at your heartstrings. Using her big family as inspiration, there is no shortage of hijinks and family meddling involved in each character's story. She believes in writing love stories that help you find joy while also exploring different human experiences about sexuality, mental health, and everything in between.

Connect with Kayla on her website at www.kaylamartinauthor.com to sign up for her newsletter and get early access to news about her latest book! Find Kayla on the following platforms:



