The following are the first two chapters from my first novel, *You Destroyed Everything*.

### Zero

My earliest memory of my sister is breaking her arm on a seesaw. We were two or three, and I was angry that she wouldn’t keep up the rocking motion. The fragmented recollection has me stomping up to her and using my entire body to push her to the grass in our backyard. I remember my mother, miraculously home at the time, chastising me, sending me back inside, and then ordering the nanny to get Anaïs to the hospital. This is the sequence my mind has woven over time, that I’ve pieced back together from the stories told at family holidays, the photo albums, and the small scar from where the cast dug into her toddler arm. But the sound of her screaming when she hit the ground, her tender bones breaking because I pushed too hard — that’s something I can’t possibly forget.

I have little clips of memories that follow, ones that become entire films as we age in their scenes. Of course we clung to each other from the start; not only were we bound by blood, but the only markers that made us separate people were our differing first names and genders. Mix a brother-sister bond with a birthday separated by only seconds, absent parents, and enough money to buy whatever form of happiness was on tap, and the subsequent interaction isn’t rocket science. It was as natural and expected as anything else on the planet. To find out it wasn’t — well, I was never told otherwise.

Our parents were young, loaded, and deep into their careers in international finance, as well as their self-absorbed storybook romance. My father, American with a mother from France, and my mother, French Canadian, had met in business school in Montreal, married quickly, and planted their shallow roots. When they were barely thirty, Anaïs and I happened accidentally, but our births didn’t stop their business ventures and European trysts. Three days after we turned a year old, they struck their first massive overseas account together, as if they needed any more impetus to make sure they were absent from our lives. They were back and forth to Paris and Brussels each week — always strangers in our massive stone house — leaving Anaïs and me with just each other, whatever material things we wanted, our constant stream of nannies, and the religious education into which we were essentially dumped. It was a matter of convenience that their legal documents bore an address in Montreal, nothing that had to do with our welfare or upbringing. They traveled so much that it didn’t matter where they made their home base, nor who ran the fort, nor how they ran it.

When they were around, we seldom saw them; usually, they arrived from whatever trip they were on, said a hello with nothing to it, checked in to make sure we were keeping our rooms clean (we’d convinced the nannies that this was not our responsibility), and then they were off to theatre, opera, dinner, whichever reality in which they wanted to exist until well after we were supposed to have gone to sleep. Many nights, my sister and I stayed up late with each other, pretending we’d gone to bed, instead reading pages from *Le Petit Prince* aloud, the same scenes over and over again, and dreaming about living on an asteroid that was only for us. Had our parents come to
check on us when they got home, they would have caught us awake, whispering. They never did. Those moments sowed the seeds.

Then there were times when they threw dinner parties — the only time our formal dining room ever got used — and they displayed us to their friends like they were opening a trophy case. When we were probably five, Anaïs always went down in her ballet costume while I peeked through the railings at the top of the stairs, eventually lured by her to creep downstairs, too. We performed. We were charming. Until years later, we never knew to be anything but. My parents’ friends — many of whom had foregone having children (“We’re just too busy, how on earth do you manage?”) — would delight in our novelty, in the way we looked and acted so alike. The twins.

“They’re so lucky that they have each other,” my parents would say in whatever language in which they were entertaining. From the very beginning, I recognized that this was one of the only true, meaningful things they ever said — or would ever say.

We were perfect puzzle pieces, the only consistent thing in each other’s lives. And everything pointed to it. We declined playdates with other kids, instead going straight home and retreating to the basement together. We played house, and we were the parents. We set up cushions from an old couch in the corner and made the area our bedroom, acted out a day where we had jobs and were important — I was a doctor and she was a vet — and then pretended to go to sleep on the makeshift bed. Anaïs always giggled and grabbed my hand. One day, she had the idea that we should get married. She made one of her dolls officiate, and then after we said “I do,” the only thing we knew to do, the doll became our daughter. We were six.

When we were ten, I went to the ice rink after school every day and sat in the bleachers during Anaïs’s figure skating practice. I sat and read, peeking out over the top of the pages. She always smiled at me from the ice, making sure that I was watching — but only when she did something right. I quickly learned to turn away and pretend I didn’t see when she fell. And the more we were a pair, the more we took the power and ran with it. We learned we could bend the rules in school, but also demand anything we wanted from the nannies, exploit whatever guilt our parents had. While we were educated in French, we spoke English with our parents and the stream of babysitters my father plucked out of the university one after the other. We plotted against our caretakers in French which we thought was secret, know-it-all ten-year-olds insulating ourselves from what we believed to be the entire world, and emerged only when we knew exactly what we wanted, and exactly how to get it. When a nanny took us grocery shopping after she picked us up from school, she always ended up with candy that we dropped onto the belt during the last second at checkout. When she found it while putting away the bags once we got home, she scolded us and then went to hide it. We pointed to one specific cabinet and told her that our mother put the candy in that one, and she consented, figuring it was out of reach. The cabinet, though the highest one, was right next to the stove. Anaïs used my shoulders to get onto the counter, and together, we were able to climb onto the stove and open the cabinet. After a while the manipulation was no longer a challenge, but merely part of our formula. We demanded clothes, toys, sugar, impromptu trips to wherever. We demanded to be put in the same classrooms, the right to sleep in one of our beds together, to stay up until all hours, reading, whispering, scheming. We resisted going to church, our protests always in unison. We honestly believed that the two of us together were bigger than god.
When we got to the age for separate Catholic schools, I hated that I wasn’t with her every second. We were twelve and for the first time actually making use of our separate bedrooms. She brushed her hair for what seemed like hours after getting out of the shower, and I masturbated into the tub drain at least twice daily. These events were probably connected in my mind. Still, she remained my best friend, despite whatever stupid preteen, sibling conflicts we managed to create. My life was still her life, our life, even though it operated separately during particular hours. *Le Petit Prince* stayed on the bookshelf, but I was still the irreplaceable confidant she talked to about the cute boys who were all over her — god, that dark hair of hers — and the brother who would do her math homework when she didn’t want to. She batted her eyelashes at me, cooed my name, and whined that she couldn’t understand — she was sharp, of course she could — and within minutes I wrote answers that she hastily copied into her own handwriting the next morning. We were fourteen.

Our schools shared a chapel and a courtyard. Sometimes, after being herded into the building for prayer, Anaïs and I quietly slipped out a side door that was never monitored, and hid in the courtyard. She put her palms, chapped, resisting gloves, into mine, and depended only on my care to warm her while we talked over the hymns we heard buzzing from inside the building, their familiar melodies and meaningless lyrics. The alarming aged honey color of her eyes staring into mine. We shivered with nerves waiting to get caught, even though we both knew we never would. I’m sure at some point, someone on the staff figured out we were skipping, but at that point we’d made the schools so wholly ours that they didn’t care, either. The pretense of the Catholic bullshit was just that — pretense, and they knew we knew it — and we were such a good advertisement for them that our behavior never actually mattered as long as they could still flash us as the poster children.

After we spent the rest of the day separated, we came home together. And as soon as we walked through the door, she left her uniform in a pile on the floor. It was a routine that was never broken regardless of the circumstances — boyfriends, social commitments, whatever. It wasn’t urgent, but more a ceremony. Something necessary. She always bypassed the coat hooks in the downstairs foyer and ascended the stairs, dropping first her jacket, then her cardigan, removing her black shoes, and stepping out from her plaid skirt. She did it in the doorway of her room, as if she couldn’t cross its threshold without first undressing, and she never paid mind to whom might pass her in the hall as the ritual unfolded, door wide open. Her room was at the top of the stairs. I walked past it towards mine, past the pile of clothes, and turned my head to look into the space where she was tending to something, long and upright in only dark tights and a collared shirt, which was so ill-fitting that it nearly covered her hips. Sometimes, she called my name as I walked down the hall, turned to look over her shoulder to halt me in my tracks, and I walked inside, stepped carefully, graciously over the heap on the ground, and sat down on the bed or at her desk chair. I slowly folded my blazer and placed it over the back of the chair, my own shoes lined up next to hers. She told me to come lie on her bed and read next to her until the sunset caused the ambient light to fade to a point where we could no longer make out words on the pages. Usually, she lay with her head on the pillows while I lay opposite, my head resting at the foot of the bed. Those days, she never dressed back into street clothes. Well before the light made it impossible to read, I stopped concentrating on my book, and my eyes would trace the silhouette that her
toes made in the tights, the black threads smothering nearly any hint of her skin, of something lighter beneath the surface.

When we turned fifteen, our parents took us to Paris. We arranged to stay with my father's relatives, but when we got there, the same bullshit that we supposedly left at home resurfaced. My parents declared they'd be staying alone in their apartment in Montmartre, and left us with the family we didn’t know, the cousins who were nearly ten years older than us. We had free reign of the city and spent days just wandering, at all moments trying but failing to act much older and more responsible than we actually were, which translated into chocolate croissants for nearly every meal, wine that tasted like vinegar from the corner shops, and carrying a baguette everywhere we went because simply, that was what we were supposed to do. The second to last day, we passed a sex shop in the Marais. Anaïs dared me with her eyes, my eyes, to step inside. Just the look of her stretching to peek in, and how she grabbed my hand and let me lead her in — it was my first shot of a tension with which I later became very familiar, my nerves and veins and senses stinging in my throat. She passed through the black curtain, too shy to acknowledge the person at the counter, who couldn’t have cared less that we were far too young and looked far too alike for such an adventure. And as we paced the small shop’s filthy blue carpet, her face just grew redder. Staring at the photos on the video packages, curiously fingering the edges of sex toys whose uses she couldn’t even comprehend, she ran her hands and her eyes over nearly everything in that shop. Just seeing her with these objects injected me with a sickness and a wildness and an unbridled fucking need. She giggled at the sight of flavored condoms, then stood in awe in front of a shelf of rubber dildos, their vulgar contours the same jewel tone pinks and purples of her bedroom. We left the shop without buying anything, my fists balled in my pockets and Anaïs’s head down as we went back through the black curtain and out onto the narrow street. We walked to the house. She lay down for a nap. I went back to the shop and bought a magazine with a thin girl on the cover, her hair long, dark, her eyes ready. The sweat from my hands curled the corners before I even got back.

PART ONE

One

I see the world through a very specific set of eyes. The eyes of addiction. Obsession. I’m not talking drugs. None of those collegiate boredom remedies. I’m not stupid enough to stick a needle in my arm, to cower in a corner at four in the morning, poking and prodding to find the perfect place to satiate. But the need for sustenance — that’s the most familiar feeling I know. That throbbing that runs under my skin, replaces the blood in my veins with pure adrenaline. It creeps up the hairs on my back, shuts down the mitochondria in my cells, snips the nerves of my corpus callosum one by one. Bundles of little vermicelli dissolving into worm shit until the halves of my brain aren’t connected anymore. Or at least until I get that next shot, and then not only am I stitched up brand new, but I’m ten times the person I was ten seconds ago. It’s the only kind of
magic there is. Not the sawing-Vegas-showgirls-in-two kind of magic, but the explosions of chemical reactions. Maybe manipulation and the fabrication of perfection are amphetamines. And if they are, then I’m guilty of abuse. Of addiction.

The way they lean their elbows against coffeehouse tables, dig their heels into New York sidewalks, I know I need them, but most importantly, that they need me. Girls who want to sink their teeth into something so badly, crave someone inside of them so deep, want love so much that they turn a darker shade of lonely the minute I walk into the store, through the subway doors, wherever. They tuck a strand of hair behind their ears with their unpainted nails, the same ones that are always manicured the next time I see them, the same ones that dig into my back a few hours from first encounter. They shift their weight back and forth until they’re standing perfectly pencil straight. This is where the rush of need starts. Their gazes peek over the top of little silver laptops, sketchbooks, whatever soul-searching crap keeps them busy. Those eyes dart back down the minute I look up at them, flashing my own tangle of dark lashes. I feel it deep in my gut when their glances come back up again, the montages of blue and brown and green and hazel becoming a watercolor created with lust instead of a paintbrush, and slim lips, full lips, plush lips crack sheepish, tight smiles. They’re the ones I’ll penetrate with my tongue — and whatever else I give them — t-minus two hours and twenty-five minutes from when my small black coffee slides across the counter. There’s always one sitting in there, wherever there is, and I always know that she’s inside, can smell the brown rice maki still lingering on her breath — all before we lock eyes for the first time.

This isn’t about the chase. If it were, I wouldn’t be looking into the eyes imploring me to take them home. The eyes that don’t know they’re doing it. The instant her body’s covering me, her pores breathing through mine, that’s when I start to feel the braces holding reality in place.

While they’re easy to spot, and even easier to tear down, they’re all a little different. They all have their stories. Names and details I’d never forget, the warped childhoods and deep-seated insecurities that fashion the perfectly imperfect girl. They’ll cover up their flaws with the blankets when we’re in bed, or fall asleep clutching a pillow sandwiched between their knees, across their stomachs, pressed tightly against their chests. I know why they do it. And they think I’m their cure. The fucking messiah. By holding them the way no one else ever has, the way they think no one else ever can or will, they put a meaning to my every move. I’m going to save them when I touch their skin, hold them into me, rest my fingers into the curves of their hipbones, slide my tongue across their clavicles. My breath is such a savior, they’ll swear the frequencies are humming a lullaby, each note written for them as it scales their figures and lands straight between their legs. Pink, perfect folds.

The girls with little rituals are the best. Elyse, she alphabetized cold cuts in her fridge. First by type, “H” for ham, and then by subdivisions: black forest, then honey glazed. Brooke, she swallowed her pills in the morning with water from a shot glass, a different one for each med. Bridget, she spelled out notes about me by circling letters in the book she was reading, the pages so deeply dog-eared, the corners looked like they’d tear with one false move. She always used green pen. Wet ink she smeared with her left hand.

To most people, these little quirks are nothing. But for girls this insecure, just my mention of them makes each girl feel even more imperfect. Trying to repress their
idiosyncrasies, they create their own new rituals trying to be more normal. Less screwy. Less clinical. Whatever that means. Like I’m in a position to judge what normal is.

Casey, when I made her nuts about the fact that she always blinked in threes, she dug her nails into her knees trying to control it. By the end of the second day, those milk-white legs looked like they were blown to bits by a land mine, as if I had needed to spend the entire night pulling shrapnel from her skin.

It’d seem by now, in these tight Brooklyn and Manhattan circles that make the city feel like a big town, girls would know my face. My distinctive features: the mustard seed eyes with the top quarter of the right iris strangely flecked a rich brown, like a pie chart. Slim shoulders and tall. Six foot one, if we’re talking details. Easy enough to spot in a crowd. It’d seem they’d tell their friends to stay away. Or that they’d have names for me. The worst imaginable. I’m sure I’ve been called an asshole more times than I blink in a single day, or more times than Casey blinks in a single day.

But I’m not completely the villain, and I know they come to realize that down the road. They build me up in their stories of epic heartbreak. They want so badly to communicate that they were wanted, needed, even if it was only for a couple of weeks. And the poor, pathetic girls that are listening, they’re all starving for that kind of affection, too. And those poor, pathetic girls — one of them will end up panting next to me in less than a week. It’s visceral in the most baffling way possible.

No one should be able to get away with this. But I can week after week, month after month in the same neighborhoods, on the same city blocks. It’s so easy to make them feel like I’m moving on since everything is their faults. They all feel so insecure, so inadequate, all I have to do is make them feel like they single-handedly wrecked “the best thing that ever happened to them.” Sonja, right before I cut her loose, I planted the seed by telling her I couldn’t take the way she wouldn’t hold eye contact with me for more than a few seconds without looking down and smoothing the pad of her thumb over her pinky nail. I told her it made me feel like she didn’t trust me and could never really love me, baby. She got so self-conscious, her shoulders tensed up, and the color vanished from her face like it was seeping down a shower drain. A couple of days later I listed all of the “reasons” I knew she’d never be in this all the way. How bad it hurt to know that. Go in for the kill to satisfy the need.

The new one, Carrie, I’ve been seeing her since last week. A Saturday, late afternoon, in some atrociously hip Williamsburg bookstore. She was leafing through a collection of Paris photographs, a poetry book tangled in some white headphones that popped out of the top of her canvas tote. She was wearing a blue slip dress – the kind that’s as easy on the imagination as it is to take off when imagination’s no longer necessary – plastered to her curves with summer sweat. Her posture made me spot her, a slightly hunched torso that eventually melted into thin legs with shy ankles. We needed each other. I walked to the other side of the table where she had picked up the book. Like clockwork, the wavy strand of dark hair behind her ear, the blue eyes peeking out over the top of the book, only to dart back down. I smiled, picking up a Nabokov novel, fingers running the pages. I never stopped to look down at the words. Lolita. Right. I don’t even know what I said. Something banal about photography, some compliment on one of her features. Part of the process is finding a way to tickle their insides without seeming like I’m just prowling for sex. But really, when it comes down to it, they’re staring at me so intently that I could say anything, speak Polish or Pig Latin. Mindless
dribble, alphabet soup. Doesn’t matter. With me, she’s lost right at the moment that I make her my world for those five minutes and promise her our future on the sixth. Carrie dropped the book, letting it slide off her fingers like it was waterproofed and fall with a stereo thud. She followed me out to a café next door, and two hours later, we were against her sheets as she whispered into my neck. I’ve seen her every night since then — it’s been five or six — and those blood red fingernails keep digging deeper into my back and under my skin while my touch teaches her what love is supposed to feel like. She keeps back issues of foreign lifestyle magazines, snipping clips she finds compelling and putting them into a pink plastic three-ring binder she hides under her bed. She scrawls anything and everything on the back of old ATM receipts, then stuffs them in her day planner until it’s bursting at the seams. She’s the only person in New York who still carries a day planner. During the day, she’s an advertising assistant for a fashion magazine in Midtown. As a kid, her mother always told her she was fat, father left for some Brazilian waitress. She thinks I was raised by a single parent, too, abused by the men that walked in and out of my mother’s life. She thinks that’s why I know how to treat a woman, really know how important love is, value only the good stuff. She knows, after four or five days of instant monogamy, that I’m the solution to her future.

Carrie’s in bed right now, lying on her side like a fetus, clutching the extra pillow against the bare little nubs she has for breasts. She’s wrapped tightly into the blanket. She’ll wake up to see my eyes first thing, eyes that make her come on cue. I’ll make her a cup of coffee, bring her the Times, and watch goosebumps transform her skin. She’ll want me again. And again. And the whole time, while she’s getting off, I know that she thinks she commanded my fingers inside of her, that, for the first time ever, she’s controlling something, when really I’ve set the whole chain of events into careful action.

Here’s the thing. I’m not addicted to sex. Sex is merely a part of the bigger picture. Sex is about control. The passing of power. Lighting a torch between bodies, lips flint and friction, and sending the spark back and forth until she’s got the sensations she’s always wanted, whether that means delivering a soul-shattering orgasm that strokes every single internal organ, or letting her ride me to the bone, telling me exactly what she wants. Whatever it is, I give her exactly that. If it’s to hear me talking about a house in the suburbs and a golden retriever while I’m up in her, I give her the most perfect tactile picture of a meticulous green lawn and a swing set for the kids in the backyard. Whatever it is, I give her the feeling that she’s calling the shots. That my desires align exactly with hers. That I want it slow and gentle just like she does. Just give it to her.

Next, I get my face between her legs like it’s the first time I’ve ever explored, like her taste is the first one I’ve ever wanted to carry on the tip of my tongue all twelve hours of the day when I’m not with her. I grab one of her wrists, put my finger on her pulse, and start breathing into her, making her limbs tickle, making her swell. From there, she’s mine. Whenever Carrie is about to come and her breath gets heavy, she’ll start meshing the morphemes of my name into her breathing, emphasis on the second syllable. Chris-TIAN, Chris-TIAN. Stays with me for hours.

Carrie flinches as if she’s going to wake up, but pulls the pillow tighter into her chest. I watch it rise and fall as she breathes, and then she settles back against her white sheets, becoming more naive with each second fatigue keeps her eyelids drawn. Carrie is no different from the others — she won’t be around long. It all depends on how restless I get, how deep in she falls. At the first sign that they’re starting to get in over their heads,
it’s time to let them go. I’ll break Carrie down by convincing her that she doesn’t care about herself, harping on her little flaws, probably just like her mother did. I’m not trying to make these girls kill themselves. They’re not going to do that. Really, I’m just reeducating them, making them feel wanted, feel loved, feel connected like they never have before. Like they have the ability to be in control, and I’m making them realize they have to assert that control if they ever want to really live like a human being. After they’ve met me, they’re metamorphosed.

All lessons come with some sort of price: pain, rejection, guilt, shame — something that stings up and down. But ultimately when the dust settles, they must be so thankful that they’ve got the scars on their bodies. I can’t forget the lacerations on my own, and sometimes, when I think about my own past, I almost regret my actions with these girls. When I think of the source of my needs and compulsions, I almost feel remorse for my interruption of their lives. I almost open up and identify with them. But feeling is part of the problem, so I just do. Breathe, focus, and continue.

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