

**LIKE
NEVER
AND
ALWAYS**

Ann Aguirre



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
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That time was like never, and like always.

—Pablo Neruda, from “You Will Remember”

I'm in the front with Nathan, and the radio's on. We're arguing about the name of the band like the fate of the world hangs in the balance. There's only silence from the back, but Clay and Morgan don't talk much when they're together. I may be an asshole for thinking so, but Clay's primary attraction probably isn't his beautiful mind. Though I don't completely support their hook-up, I admit it's fun—best friends dating brothers.

The wind whips my hair like angry fingers, but it feels good with the top down. Normally Clay wouldn't let Nathan drive his baby, a Corvair convertible that he's restoring, but he gave up his keys before we left Emma's party. Maybe two beers aren't enough to matter. Whatever. I'm enjoying the chance to ride shotgun. If I squint, the stars blur into lines of light. It's so quiet, no other cars for miles. Nathan flashes me a grin and steps on the gas. The Corvair leaps forward, more wind, more freedom.

"You're beautiful," he says.

For this moment, I feel like I am.

This moment, it's a shimmer, a heartbeat, his smile imprinting on my heart. The sweetness tightens my chest. If only time could stop.

But it doesn't.

The world crumples inward, spins sideways. Pain explodes in petal fragments, blood bright, hot, and vicious. Pinpricks of light

fill me, spreading in my head into a white field. I can't see for the dark and the bright. Hurts to breathe. *I won't die like this. I won't.*

I can't speak. I'm falling. Flying? The agony flowers, becomes unbearable. I cut loose.

"Morgan!" Clay shouts.

This sucks. His voice can't be the last one I hear.

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Something is beeping, and there's a Darth Vader sound, too.

Everything hurts. This is encouraging since I thought I was dead. My eyelids are too heavy and they won't open, but I flex my fingers to reassure myself they still work. Nothing. I try again, though my body feels like lead. This time, I manage a flicker of movement and it prompts an intake of breath from whoever else is in the room.

"Are you in there? Can you hear me?" That's Clay, sounding hoarse.

Why is he in my room? Where's Nathan? Morgan? Anyone would make more sense than Clay. We were never close, though we silently agreed to a mutual armistice once I started going out with Nathan. Terror slithers in me like a coiled, tentacle-thing, twisting until I have only this thought: *What if they didn't make it? What if it's just Clay and me?* That would explain why he's sitting with me, a sort of grisly survivor's solidarity.

No, that can't be true.

Clay sighs, and then he takes my hand. His fingers are hard and callused, completely unlike his brother's. "Your dad will be back soon. I made him go to the cafeteria. He's been here non-stop, not eating or sleeping."

Where's my mom? But there's something in my throat and I can't ask. Then it hits me; I'm on a breathing machine, probably

waking up from a coma. Well, trying anyway. My body hasn't caught up to my mind yet. What if I have . . . what's it called? Locked-in syndrome.

It's too much. I'd rather go back into the dark, so I let go and fall.

Clay's voice recedes.

The next time I wake, my eyes snap open. It takes me a while to focus. The room is dim, apart from the low beam near the door and the illumination from the medical equipment. I'm alone, but the call button is within reach, provided my arms work. It takes me three tries, but I smack the device successfully.

The nurse comes quickly, a round-faced older woman in a scrub top covered in pink hearts, and cheerful fuchsia pants. "You must be scared, huh?"

I nod. There are so many questions, but I can't ask them. My throat hurts and I feel like throwing up. This tube needs to come out ASAP.

"I'll call the doctor and the respiratory therapist first thing. We'll check you out and if you're ready, we'll wean you from the ventilator. Want me to notify your family?"

I nod again. That's when I realize she's only asking me yes or no questions. That makes things easier, but I guess I should expect her to be a pro at this. I raise trembling hands to my face and am surprised to find it bandaged. Why that startles me, I'm not sure, but my body awareness isn't great at the moment. Certain aspects are muffled while other parts blaze with raw agony. I don't feel right, like my skin is too big or something.

"You're loopy," the nurse guesses. "Try not to worry. You've had a rough few days, but you came out of surgery strong and your dad says you're a fighter."

Where are my friends? I ask in my head. *What happened to everyone else?* I know Clay made it, at least I *think* I know. A pervasive memory separates from the murk of my foggy mind.

He's beside me, and it's dark. Clay is crying, his head resting on the bed beside my fingers. The IV stings my wrist, but I can still feel the hot plip of his tears on the back of my hand, like the inexorable drip keeping me alive.

Modern medicine is amazing.

And invasive.

Mute, I can't protest as a squadron of professionals do all kinds of tests. But I'm pleased with their conclusion by the time the hospital is bustling with shift change; they've decided I'm ready to come off the artificial breathing apparatus. Apparently the one I've been using pushes back into my lungs so I don't lose capacity or something. I don't understand it all, and they talk about waiting for my dad. I'm a minor, and I don't know if they need permission, or if it's more of a courtesy, like he wouldn't want to miss the big un-tubing.

The door opens as the doctor, nurse, and respiratory specialist are confabbing. I recognize the man standing there, but he's *not* my dad. This is Mr. Frost, my best friend's dad. Horror crawls through me. Morgan and me, we don't look anything alike. How bad was the accident? Maybe . . . her face was too beat up for them to tell? And *mine*, too? But that hardly makes sense because she's six inches taller. The grisly thought occurs to me that maybe her body was damaged, dismembered, even, so—

Oh my God, no. I can't let myself think about it.

Even our names put us in different camps: Olivia Burnham and Morgan Frost. Clearly her parents took one look at her and thought, *This kid will be incredibly cool, might as well name her for it.* Any popularity I've enjoyed has come since we made friends when comic book nerd Ed Keller said we should because then we could form the crime-fighting duo of Frost and Burn. To quote an old movie with a sad ending, that was the start of a beautiful friendship. She's the trendsetter, the one who finds the coolest music before anyone else and decides when people

should stop wearing things or adopt a new look, usually something fresh in Tokyo or Paris.

They don't know who I am.

There are no words for the horror washing over me like the sluggish lap of dark water against the lip of the quarry where we aren't supposed to swim. I get a little frantic, but they misinterpret my response and so I get a lecture about exactly what they're going to do to me. That's worse than if they just removed the tube right away. Morgan's dad is hovering, the circles beneath his eyes pronounced. He should know by *my* eyes. I'm looking right at him, trying to tell him with telepathy but he never flickers. Instead he mistakes my stare for fear so he murmurs reassuring nothings as the medical team gets to work.

When they finish, I'm breathing on my own. It feels weird and my throat hurts, but it's not as bad as I expected. From what I remember, strep was like knives whereas this is residual soreness and a dry, rough feeling. I swallow a couple of times experimentally and I show how awesome I am by not throwing up.

"You're doing great," the nurse says.

"What day is it?" Of the hundred questions teeming in my brain, that one pops out first in a voice so rough that it doesn't sound like mine. Or Morgan's, for that matter.

Nobody seems surprised.

Mr. Frost answers. "Thursday."

Almost a week. We were out Friday night, two weeks before school started. Well, for Nathan, Morgan, and me, anyway. Clay already lives like he's grown, doing shit that earned him the notoriety that made people steer clear even before he dropped out. In different ways, the Claymore boys both have reputations; teachers projected remarkable things for Nathan, "explosive success" even, whereas some asshole on the yearbook staff tagged Clay as most likely to be blown up in a meth lab before he's twenty-one.

“What happened?” I whisper.

It’s the least of what I want to know, but the knowledge they possess and I don’t might as well be grenades. If awareness goes off like I’m afraid it will, the impact will leave an imprint of me on the wall, nothing left but nuclear shadow. Cowering in the hospital bed, I’m a ghost at the top of the stairs, waiting to find out I was dead all along.

“There was a car accident,” Mr. Frost says. He reaches out, then hesitates, like he isn’t sure where to touch me. In the end, he pats my hand and I don’t pull away. “A driver got lost and was wandering the back roads, fiddling with his GPS. He hit the passenger side head-on. . . .” He stops and glances at the doctor as if for approval.

To me the medical staff look uncomfortable, like they don’t want to give personal advice. *Can bad news wait?* Mr. Frost wonders quietly. *Well, she just woke up from a coma,* the doc is probably thinking. But the parent is king in these matters, especially if it doesn’t threaten my immediate survival.

Finally, Nurse Pink Pants says, “Why don’t I go get a Popsicle? Your throat must be dry. We can give you five minutes before we do the swallow test.”

That sounds pornographic.

I’m thinking this as everyone else files out, so Mr. Frost can have a Serious Talk with me. I have pterodactyls in my stomach because once he speaks his piece, I have to convince him I’m not his daughter.

“This will be hard to hear,” he says softly. “But I feel like it’s best not to hide the truth. Liv didn’t make it. I’m sorry.”