

this



of

mine

a novel

c.c. hunter

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

this



of

mine

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MAY 13TH

“It’s over, Eric. Accept it. Let it go, would you?” The words echo from a cell phone into the dark night.

Eric Kenner sits at the patio table in his backyard, listening over and over again to Cassie’s voicemail. Listening to the pool’s pump vibrate. Listening to the pain vibrate in his chest.

“I can’t let it go.” Pain tumbles out of him. It is so damn wrong. He can’t accept it.

Glancing back, he sees the light in his mom’s bedroom go off. It’s barely eight. She probably took another Xanax. His mom can’t accept things either.

Why did life have to be so damn hard? Was he cursed?

He hits replay on his phone. Hoping to hear a crack in

Cassie's voice, something that tells him she doesn't mean it. There's no crack in her voice, just the one in his heart.

He bolts up, sending the patio chair crashing into the concrete. Snatching the piece of furniture, he hurls it into the pool. The chair floats on top of the water. While he feels as if he's sinking, drowning.

He swings around and shoots inside. Moving through the kitchen, then the living room, he stops in front of the forgotten space that was his father's study.

His dad would have known what to do.

Eric walks in. The door clicking shut shatters the silence. The room smells dusty, musty, like old books. The streetlight from the front yard spills silver light through the window. The beige walls look aged. The space feels lonely and abandoned.

The huge clock on the wall no longer moves. In here, time has stopped—just like his dad's life.

Eric's gaze lands on the flag, the one the military handed him at his father's funeral. The thing sits on the worn leather sofa, still folded, as if waiting for someone to put it away.

They called his dad a hero—as if remembering him that way would make his death easier. It hasn't.

It would have been his dad's last mission. The day he left, he'd doled out promises—camping trips, redoing the engine of the old Mustang in the garage. Promises that died with him.

Moving behind the mahogany desk, Eric drops into his dad's chair. It creaks as if complaining he isn't the man his dad was. Leaning forward, Eric opens the top drawer.

Swallowing a lump that feels like a piece of his broken heart, his eyes zoom in on one item. He reaches in and pulls it out. It's heavy and cold against his palm.

He stares at the gun. Maybe he does know how to fix this.

If he can find the courage.



ONE MONTH EARLIER
APRIL 13TH

“You lucky bitch!” I drop back down on my pink bedspread, phone to ear, knowing Brandy is dancing on cloud nine and I’m dancing with her. I glance at the door to make sure Mom isn’t hovering and about to freak over my language. Again.

She isn’t there.

Lately, I can’t seem to control what comes out of my mouth. Mom blames it on too much daytime who’s-the-baby-daddy television. She could be right. But hey, a girl’s gotta have some fun.

“Where he’s taking you?” I ask.

“Pablo’s Pizza.” Brandy’s tone lost the oh-God shriek quality. “Why . . . why don’t you come with us?”

“On your date? Are you freaking nuts?”

“You go to the doctor’s office, you could—”

“No. That’s *hell* no!” I even hate going to the doctor’s office. If people stare long enough they see the tube. But this isn’t even about me. “I’d die before I get between you—”

“Don’t say that!” Brandy’s emotional reprimand rings too loud. Too painful.

“It’s just a figure of speech,” I say, but in so many ways it’s not. I’m dying. I’ve accepted that. The people in my life haven’t. So, for them, I pretend. Or try to.

“But if you—”

“Stop. I’m not going.”

There’s a gulp of silence. That’s when I realize my “lucky bitch” comment brought on the pity invite. Brandy’s worried I’m jealous. And okay, maybe I am, a little. But my grandmother used to say it was okay to see someone in a beautiful red dress and think, I want a dress like hers. But it wasn’t okay to think, I want a dress like hers and I want her to have a wart on her nose.

I don’t wish Brandy warts. She’s had the hots for Brian for years. She deserves Brian.

Do I deserve something besides the lousy card fate dealt to me? Hell yeah. But what am I going to do? Cry? I tried that. I’ve moved on.

Now I’ve got my bucket list. And my books.

The books are part of my bucket list. I want to read a hundred. At least a hundred. I started counting after I got out of the hospital the first time I survived an infection from my artificial heart. I’m at book twenty-eight now. I won’t mention how many of them were romance novels.

“Leah,” Brandy starts in again.

The chime of the doorbell has me glancing at the pink clock on my bedside table.

It’s study time. Algebra. I hate it. But I kind of like hating

it. Because I hated it before I got sick. Hating the same things as before makes me feel more like the old me.

“Gotta go. Ms. Strong is here.” I bounce my heels on the bed. The beaks on my Donald Duck slippers bob up and down. Lately, I’ve been into cartoon-character slippers. They make my feet look happy. Mom’s bought me three pairs: Mickey, Donald, and Dumbo.

“But—” Brandy tries again.

“No. But you’re gonna tell me everything. All the sexy details. How good he kisses. How good he smells. How many times you catch him staring at your boobs.”

Yep, I’m jealous all right. But I’m not a heartless bitch. Well, maybe I am. Heartless, really *heartless*, but not so much a bitch. I carry an artificial heart around in a backpack. It’s keeping me alive.

“I always tell you everything,” Brandy says.

No, but you used to. I stare up at my whirling polka-dot ceiling fan. Even Brandy’s walking on eggshells, scared she’ll say something to remind me that I got a raw deal, something that will make me feel sorry for myself. I’m done doing that. But I hate hearing that crunch as people tiptoe around the truth.

“Leah.” Mom calls me.

“Gotta go.” I hang up, grab my heart, and get ready to face algebra.

I really hate it, but it’s number one on my bucket list—my last hurrah. Well, not algebra, but graduating high school. And I don’t want a diploma handed to me. I want to earn it.

I spot Mom standing in the entrance of the dining room turned study. She’s rubbing her palms over her hips. A nervous habit, though I have no idea what’s got her jittery now. I survived the last infection and the one before that. She hears my footsteps, looks at me. Her brow puckers—another sign of serious mama fret.

I stop. Why's she so nervous? "What?"

"Ms. Strong couldn't make it." She's rushes off faster than her hurried words.

I hear someone shuffling in the dining room. I'm leery. Hesitant. I move in. My Donald Duck slippers skid to a quick stop when I see the dark-haired boy at the table.

"Shit." I suck my lips into my mouth in hopes I didn't say it loud enough for him to hear.

He grins. He heard me. That smile is as good as the ones I read about in romance novels. Smiles described as crooked, mind-stopping, or coming with a melt-me-now quality. I swear my artificial heart skips two beats.

He's one of the Kenner twins, either Eric or Matt, the two hottest boys in school. I used to be able to tell them apart, but now I'm not sure of anything. If I combed my hair today. If I brushed my teeth. If I have on a bra?

I close my mouth, run my tongue over my fuzzy-feeling teeth, trying to quietly suck them clean.

Glancing down, away from his eyes, I rock back and forth on my heels, my Donald Ducks' bills rocking with me. Should I run back to my room? But how pathetic will I look then? And if I do, he'll leave. Lifting my gaze, I realize I'm not sure I want him to go. I kinda like looking at him.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I mimic and realize I'm hiding the backpack behind my leg. I give my bright red tank top a tug down to cover the tube that extends from the backpack and pokes into me under my left ribcage. A hole that kinda looks like a second belly button. Yup, I'm hiding the very thing that's keeping me alive.

"Ms. Strong couldn't make it," he says as if reading my mood and realizing he needs to justify his being here. "She asked me to sub."

"For how many extra credit points?" I wait for him to tell me he did it just out of kindness. And, if true, it would mean

he did it out of pity. I'm not sure I'd enjoy looking at him anymore. I'd rather be someone's means to a better grade. Brandy told me that everyone in school knows about my dead heart.

"Fifteen. I got lazy and didn't turn in some homework. You'll pump me up to a B."

"You should have held out for twenty."

He smiles again. "I don't think it was negotiable."

Moving in, I try to guess which twin he is. I try to figure out how to ask, but everything I think of sounds lame. *Let him be Matt.*

I had a thing for Matt since seventh grade. It might have been wishful thinking, but in tenth grade I thought he liked me too. Not that it ever went anywhere. He was football, I was book club. He was popular, I was . . . not. Then I started dating Trent. A guy in book club. A guy I let off the hook as soon as I found out my heart was dying.

"Your books?" he asks.

I don't understand the question, until I see he's pointing to my backpack.

Crap! I freak a little. I have several pat answers in my head that I came up with when Mom, afraid I was turning into an agoraphobe, insisted I get out of the house. But I can't remember them. The silence reeks of awkwardness.

So I go with the truth. "No. It's my . . . heart."

"Shit." He spills my favorite word.

I laugh.

His eyes meet mine and he smiles again. Yup, it's kinda crooked. My mind's not working. And I'm melting.

"Oh, you're joking," he says. "Right?"

I nod yes then shake my head no as if I don't know the answer.

His smile fades like a light on a dimmer switch. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." I move to the desk in the corner. One-handed,

I pull my math book from a drawer and drop down in the chair across from him. My heart lands in the chair beside me, so he can't see my tube.

When I glance up, he's doing exactly what I expect. Looking at the books so he doesn't have to look at me. People have a hard time facing me, facing my death, maybe even facing their own mortality. I understand, but it still bothers me.

He turns a page. The silence is so loud, I can almost hear the page float down to find its place. "Ms. Strong said we should start on chapter six."

"Yeah." Disappointed, I flip my book open and consider letting him off the hook, telling him I've got this, assuring him I won't mention it to Ms. Strong. But I look up, and I'm suddenly feeling selfish.

Hey, he's getting extra credit.

He glances up, and before I can look away, our eyes meet and lock. And hold. Longer than they should, because it feels . . . too. Too much. Too intimate. As if we've passed some invisible barrier. Like when a stranger stands too close to you in line.

We both look away.

He smacks the book closed. He flinches.

"What happened?" He whispers the question. His tone sad, sweet, and somehow still sexy.

I admire that he asked. Most people don't.

"A virus. It killed my heart." I hate the haunted look I see in his eyes. The sexiness vanishes. "It's highly contagious."

The oh-poor-you look on his face flips right to fear. Joking with him feels right.

I lose it. A laugh bubbles out of me and I feel instantly lighter.

"Real funny." He chuckles.

A crazy thought hits, one that says there's something almost . . . rusty about his laugh. And bam, I remember. I feel like the heartless bitch I swear I'm not for forgetting.

Not quite a year ago, his dad, a soldier, was killed. I'd been in the hospital, right after my condition had been diagnosed. His dad had been on the news, where they showed the pictures of soldiers and asked for a moment of silence.

I feel my smile slip from my eyes, my lips, and fall completely off my face. I know the look he sees in my eyes is probably the same pity-filled expression I saw in his seconds ago.

"I'm sorry," I say. "About your dad. I just remembered."

Ah, hell. Now I made his smile fall off his face. I should've kept my mouth shut.

"Yeah." He looks back at the book. "It sucks."

"Sort of like this." I motion to my backpack.

He glances again at the chair holding my heart. "Was it really a virus?"

"Yeah. The virus caused Myocarditis."

His gaze sticks to my backpack. "How does it work?"

It's a question no one has ever asked. "Just like a heart. It's a pump. Sends my blood through my veins and throughout my body." I summarize the surgery to connect the pump that's in my backpack and the batteries I have to carry.

He makes a face, even rubs his chest as if feeling empathetic pain. "So you have a tube going inside you?"

I touch my shirt, right under my left rib, where the tube goes in. "Gross, huh?"

"Yeah, but it's keeping you alive, so . . . not really."

I agree. The hesitant footsteps easing down the hall pulls my gaze from his.

Mom stops at the door. "Do you guys need something to drink or eat?"

She's rubbing her palms on her jeans again. Her pinched maternal concern locks on me. She's worried I'm mad about his being here. It's odd that I'm not.

The only person from my old life I've allowed to be close to "Dying Leah" is Brandy. And the only reason I allowed it was

because she wouldn't go away. Both Mom and Dad have been pushing me to get out some. Socialize. There was even mention of my going back to school. I nixed that idea really fast. I want to graduate, but facing my peers while carrying my heart . . . Unh, uhh. Not doing it.

I have good reasons too. In seventh grade, Shelly Black had leukemia. She came to school bald, wearing a scarf. Everyone tried not to show her how difficult it was to see her that way. She wasn't even my close friend. But my heart hurt for her. I'd rather be alone than put people through that. Then I look at the dark-haired hottie sitting across from me and wonder if that's what he feels now.

Then again, he chose to come here. He's asking me questions and seems interested in my answers. And it feels good talking to him. Like I'm a normal high school kid talking to a friend. An extremely hot friend.

I'm still not going back to school, but why not take advantage of this?

"I have sodas and chips." Mom's voice drags me back to reality.

I wait for him to answer. He declines with a thank-you.

Mom leaves, and we dive into algebra. We spend the next twenty minutes reading examples; then I do problems for him to check and see if I understand. It's not really awkward, but it's tougher than it is with Ms. Strong. I can't concentrate on math, because I'm concentrating on him. About which twin he is. Matt? Eric? Eric? Matt?

I recheck my answers before I push him the notebook. While he's reviewing my problems, I'm studying him. The shape of his lips. The cut of his jaw. The slight five o'clock shadow that tells me he's shaving.

I rub my index fingers against my thumbs and peer up at him through my lashes.

"You got it." Pride sounds in his voice. His smile reflects the

same emotion. He pushes the notebook back. "You want to do some more?"

I want to say no, but I'm afraid he'll leave. And I'm feeling greedier than ever. I want my forty-five minutes. "Sure."

Then without thinking, I blurt out, "Instead, can I just ask you something?"

We stare across at each other again. "If I can ask you something," he counters.

"Okay." I rub the soles of my slippers on the wood floor under the table. "Me first." How to ask it? "I . . . I used to be able to tell you and your brother apart. But now . . ."

He grins, but almost looks disappointed. "Now you can't? You don't know who I am?"

"Guilty." Frowning, I flatten my palms, now slick from nerves, on the table. "So which one are you?"

He shoulders back in the chair. His posture's crooked. One shoulder is higher than the other. Didn't Matt used to sit like that? "How did you tell us apart before?"

"You mean physically or your personality?" Now I'm thinking I should have kept my mouth shut.

"Both." Anticipation brightens his eyes.

It's as if my answer matters. As if I need to be careful what I say.

"Uh, Eric wore his hair a little longer. Matt's hair was a little curlier." Unable to stop myself, I look at his hair, remembering sitting behind Matt in English, studying how it would curl up, and wondering if it was as soft as it looked. A lot of girls, bolder than I, would play with his curls. I always wished I had the guts to do it. But I was gutless. The bravest thing I ever did in school was start a book club.

My gaze shifts away from his hair. "And one of you is a little broader in the shoulders."

"Which one?" He sits straighter, his chest lifts, his shoulders stretch out.

I'm scared to answer, but that would be awkward.

"Eric?" I try to read his expression, but he seems to purposely keep it blank. "Not that both of you aren't . . . buff," I say for a lack of another word and feel myself blushing, because buff sounds . . . sexy or something.

He grins. "And?"

"Personality wise, Matt's quieter, more of a thinker. Eric's more outspoken."

He picks up his pencil and rolls it between his two palms leaving me to think he's rolling my answers around in his head.

The pencil slows down. I swear my heart speeds up like my old one would have.

"So which one am I? Buff and outspoken or thin and quiet."

"I didn't say thin or quiet. I said less buff and quieter." The desire to say I preferred Matt over Eric tap dances on my tongue, but if he's Eric?

He laughs and that sound is like magic, less rusty, more melting.

I'm sure he's Matt. Eric didn't have the same effect on me. Maybe I imagined it, but I could swear that Matt actually . . . noticed me. I don't think I hit Eric's radar. He had too many cheerleaders falling all over him. Not that Matt didn't have the girls flashing him smiles and playing with his curls. He just didn't seem like it went to his head as much. Sometimes, it even looked like it embarrassed him.

My backpack beeps, shattering that comfortable silence that we'd finally found. The dreaded chirp lets me know that I have less than thirty minutes of battery life left. Panic flashes in Matt eyes. Or is he Eric?

"It's normal," I say, but because of that noise, of that damn tube, of my own dead heart, I feel anything but normal.

"So is this like forever?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No, it's supposed to be until I get a transplant."

“Supposed to be?” His gaze sweeps over me.

I look toward the hall to make sure Mom isn't around. So far, the truth has worked with him, and I decide not to waver from my approach. “I have a kind of rare blood type. AB. The odds aren't great.”

“AB?” His brow wrinkles. “It's not that rare. I have it. If it was a kidney, I'd give you one.”

I laugh, but this one's forced. I hate thinking about a transplant. Not just because I don't think it'll happen, but because someone having to die to give me life is all kinds of wrong. And that's what my parents and even Brandy are doing. Sitting around hoping someone will die.

That's even worse than wishing warts on someone.

“But . . .” The pause seems to mean something. “You . . . you just stay on this until a heart's available.”

Okay. The truth didn't work. “Yeah,” I say what he wants to hear. What everyone wants to hear. Never mind I've had two infections due to the artificial heart and each one nearly killed me. Never mind that no one has lived more than four years with an artificial heart. Never mind that hundreds of AB-blood-type people are waiting for a new heart, a new life, a miracle.

He frowns. “The way you say it sounds as if you don't believe . . .”

I need to work on that. “I'm sure it'll happen,” I lie, and then suddenly I don't want to. I don't have to. Not with him. I sit up taller. “Look, it takes a lot more energy to hope than to accept. I'd rather spend my energy enjoying what I've got now.”

“That really sucks.” His frown deepens.

“Yeah, it does. But I'm okay with it.” And for the most part, I really am. At first I kept telling myself that I had to hope, that a heart would come. But the more I read about statistics, the more I came to realize that the odds of getting a heart were slim to none. And rather than fooling myself or sitting around being

miserable, I decided to make the most of the time I have left. Hence the bucket list. And I'm happier now. Really.

He looks up at the clock. "I guess I should be going."

I want to tell him he doesn't have to rush off. How sad is it that this is the most fun and the most alive I've felt all year?

He stands up. I do the same, then slip on the backpack, always hiding the tube.

He moves down the hall. I follow. I'm staring at his hair, the way it flips up. Again hoping he's Matt. I'm so into his hair, I don't notice him swing around.

We run smack-dab into each other.

"Shit." He grabs me by my shoulders and pulls me against him. "Are you okay?"

His hands are on my upper arms. My breasts are against his chest.

Then bam! I feel something I haven't felt in a long time. Excitement. My very own I'm-a-girl-and-you're-a-boy excitement. Not the borrowed thrill I get from reading romances.

I can smell him. Like men's soap, or deodorant; a little spicy, a lot masculine. The desire to lean in and bury my nose in his shoulder is so strong I have to fist my hands.

"I'm fine," I say. *Don't pull away. Don't pull away. Please don't pull away.*

He doesn't pull away. He gazes down at me. This close I can see he has gold and green flecks in his brown eyes. A voice inside of me says I should step back, but you couldn't pay me to move. I'm dying. Is it wrong of me to want this?

"I . . . I forgot my books." The words fall from his lips in an uncertain tone. The pads of his thumbs rubs the insides of my arm. Just the tiniest, softest friction that feels so damn good.

I run my tongue over my bottom lip. "Oh, I . . . I thought you were going to kiss me." I hear my own words and wonder where I got the balls to say that.

His eyes widen. Not in an oh-crap way, but in a surprised kind of way. “Do you want me to kiss you?”

I grin. “If you’re Matt, I’ve wanted you to kiss me since seventh grade.”

His gaze slides lowers to my mouth and lingers. “Is your heart strong enough?”

I burst out laughing. “Are you that good of a kisser?”

“Maybe.” A smile crinkles the corners of his eyes. He leans down. His lips are against mine, soft and sweet. I slip into sensory overload. I lean in and open my mouth and ease my tongue between his lips. Yeah, it’s bold, but it’s not like I’ll live long enough to regret it.

His tongue brushes against mine. One hand moves to my waist, the other slides back behind my neck. He gently angles my face to deepen the kiss. I feel it, every contact that is his skin against mine. I feel awesome. So freaking alive.

I get even ballsier and reach up and run my fingers through his hair. It’s even softer than I thought it’d be.

When he pulls back, we’re breathing hard, and we stare at each other. The dazed look in his eyes tells me that this wasn’t a pity kiss. We start inching closer. His lips are almost on mine again when the sound of the front door opening shatters the moment.

We jerk apart and walk back down the hall to the dining room. He picks up his books.

My dad calls out to my mom.

I ignore it.

All of my attention is on the guy standing in front of me, his lips still wet from our kiss. I grab a pen off the table, scribble my number on a notebook paper, rip it out, and hand it to him.

“If you ever want to talk. About everything that sucks,” I add. Then I worry that sounded stupid.

He takes the paper. Our fingers meet and I feel that magic

spark and I don't care if it sounded stupid. I vow not to regret this. If he calls. If he doesn't. This was too good to ever regret.

We stare at each other again. I want to kiss him again so badly, I'm shaking. The sound of my parents talking in the kitchen echoes and invades this magical moment. I wish we were somewhere different. I wish . . . I wish . . . But before I stumble down that dangerous path of wishing for the impossible, I push it away.

He starts down the hall and I follow him to the door. He reaches for the knob then turns. We don't say anything, but we exchange smiles. In his eyes, I see a whisper of embarrassment, a touch of uncertainty, and a hint of something raw. I hope desire. He glances over my shoulder, as if making sure we're alone, then brushes a finger over my lips. Soft. Slow. Sensual.

I tell myself to memorize how it feels. This is the good stuff.

He turns and leaves, way before I'm ready for him to go.

I bolt to the side window, not too close in case he looks back, but close enough so I can watch him walking down my sidewalk. I watch him get in his car. I watch him drive off. I watch his car disappear down the road.

I lick my lips, still tasting his kiss. If I died right now, I'd go happy.

Mom and Dad's footsteps echo behind me. They say something, but I ignore them. I'm in that moment, reliving it. How his kiss felt. How his kiss tasted. How his hair felt. How sweet life is. It doesn't even matter that I'm dying.

I move in and press my forehead to the glass. It's cool, the April weather still holds a hint of chill in the air. Then I frown when I realize he never told me if he was Eric or Matt. I remember what I said about wanting Matt to kiss me since seventh grade. If he hadn't been Matt, he'd have told me, right?

My heart says it was Matt, but my heart isn't real. Can I believe it? Damn, I don't know who I kissed.

"Leah?"

I turn. Dad and Mom are staring at me, all happy like.

“That seemed to go well.” Mom offers up a real smile. The kind that wrinkles the sides of her nose. It hits me then that I can’t remember the last time her nose wrinkled like that. I put that on my bucket list. Give mom more nose wrinkles.

They look at me all goofy like. Part of me wonders if Mom saw us kissing. I don’t care. If it makes her happy, I’d kiss him again. It wouldn’t be a hardship.

“Yeah. It went well.” Moving in, I hug her, then dad. It becomes one of those group hugs. I hear my mom’s breath shake, but it’s not the bad kind of shake.

“I love you both.” Emotion laces my words. Happy emotion. Then I break free and me and my Donald Ducks bounce back to my bedroom to plug in my heart.

While it’s not supposed to work like that, I’m sure that kiss ate up a lot of battery life.

Once I plug in, I pick up the phone to call Brandy to tell her my boy news. Then I stop. Knowing Brandy, she’d feel obligated to find out whom I’d kissed, and even try to push him to come back. Maybe I’ll just keep this to myself. My secret. The one I’ll take with me to the grave.

also by c.c.hunter

Midnight Hour

Almost Midnight

Unspoken

Eternal

Reborn

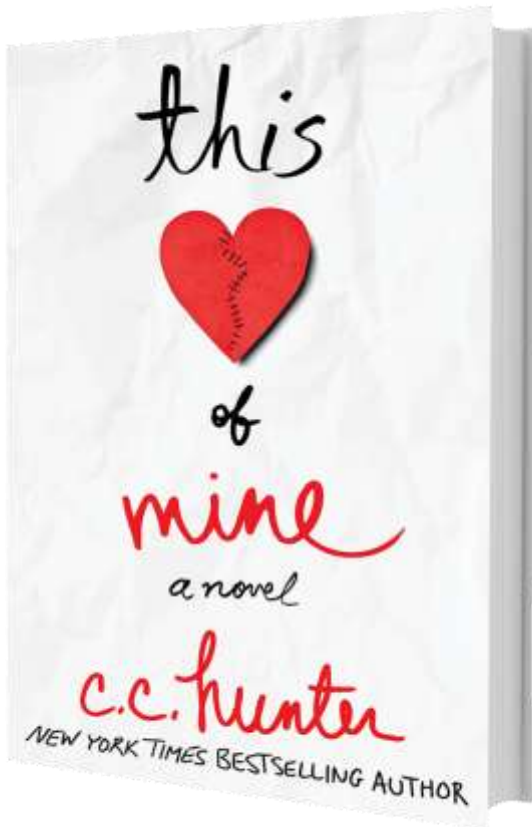
Chosen at Nightfall

Whispers at Moonrise

Taken at Dusk

Awake at Dawn

Born at Midnight



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