

**ALL WE
COULD
HAVE
BEEN**

TE CARTER



Feiwei and Friends

New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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I seek no copy now of life's first half:
Leave here the pages with long musing
 curled,

And write me new my future's epigraph

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning

PART ONE

Chapter One

Three men in unfortunately gray overalls stare at the wooden knight.

It hasn't even been up for twenty-four hours. Yesterday they spent the better part of the afternoon trying to get it to stand up, despite the knight's sword constantly pulling the figure downward to the left. We'd all sat around, watching them swearing and arguing about how best to fix it. A whole audience of people with nothing better to do.

They finished just as it was getting dark, and now here they are again, first thing in the morning, trying to scrub a spray-painted penis off the sign.

It had to be expected. If you call a housing complex for people who can't afford housing Castle Estates, and then you think a wooden knight galloping his way toward the squat brick squalor is going to make people feel good about living there, you kind of deserve to wake up in the morning and find a dick on your sign.

"That lasted long," Marcus Cotero says, sitting beside me on the bench.

I've lived at Castle Estates for all of nine days, but I already know I'm supposed to stay away from Marcus Cotero. My aunt warned me he's often in the middle of local gossip, and whether or not anything people say is true, the last thing I need is to be right there in the middle with him. Still, it's early morning, it's the first day of my senior year, and he has nice eyes.

"Not really surprising, I guess."

"True story. You can't stop the dick. Try as you might, you just can't stop the dick." He shakes his head as if he actually feels bad for either the men in gray overalls or the cartoonish knight. No reason to feel bad for the knight; given the graffiti artist's poor sense of perspective, the knight has received a substantial upgrade.

"That should be the motto," I say. "Right under the knight. 'Welcome to Castle Estates. Where You Can't Stop the Dick.'"

Marcus Cotero laughs and takes out a pack of cigarettes. He offers me one, and although I don't smoke, I take it anyway. He lights his, but I just pull mine apart, investigating the strange brown flakes people are always in such an uproar about. No, it's not healthy, but lots of things aren't. Starting with Castle Estates.

"You're new, right? Alexia Lawlor?" he asks.

The name sounds weird. Too much alliteration. I took my aunt's last name when I came to live with her. It's how I've managed for the last five years. Every year choosing to move in with a different relative during the summer so I can start school in a new town or state each fall. I have one goal: Survive a full school year—180 days—hiding behind a new

name, new home, and new persona. Sure, it hasn't worked for me yet, but this year I only have to last 162 school days. Seniors get the privilege of needing only 90 percent of an education, I suppose.

Maybe this time it will all turn out okay. I'm nothing if not hopeful. Despite everything, I can't seem to give up on the hope that maybe, just once, it won't end up the same. I mean, hey . . . percentages are with me this year, right? Fewer days mean fewer chances to screw it all up. Again.

I shake off the thoughts and turn to Marcus. "Lexi. Call me Lexi. And, yeah, I just moved here a few days ago."

"I'm Marcus."

"I know."

"Already been warned?"

The way he asks bugs me. It's like he's expecting me to confirm it. I have a serious antipathy for taking another person's version of someone else to heart. One of those things I've picked up these past five years.

"No," I lie to Marcus, because I'm determined not to let anyone else define him for me. More so now that I know he expects different. "I just have a good memory, and my aunt gave me a tour when I moved in."

He doesn't seem to believe me, but he nods and looks back at the three men, who are now arguing about the best way to remove spray paint from a wooden sign. I wonder what kind of emergency hotline you have to call to get grown men out of bed on a Monday morning to scrub genitalia from housing-project signs.

"So, *Green Arrow*, huh?" Marcus asks.

I look down at my shirt. I've never seen the show, but the shirt's green, and today's Monday, and Mondays are green days. They've been green days for a while now. I don't

remember anymore when I chose which day went with which color, and I definitely can't recall the rationale I hope I had at the time. All I know is that, in all my iterations of myself, Mondays stay green. Mondays and green never change. No matter where I'm living or what name I use, that's something secure. Constant.

"I've never watched it," I tell Marcus. "I just needed something green."

He looks at my green Chucks, olive-green army pants, green T-shirt, and dark-green hoodie. "You really like green, huh?"

"On Monday."

He pauses, takes a last drag from his cigarette, and stubs it out. "Want to tell me about it?"

"Not really. It's complicated."

"Isn't it always?" he asks, picking up on my cliché refusal to talk about myself.

We don't get to say anything else because the bus pulls up.

It's embarrassing to start a new school and ride up on the crappy old school bus, but I didn't have time to meet anyone in the neighborhood in the past nine days. Besides, the neighborhood seems to consist of Marcus Coterio, a phallus-obsessed graffiti artist, a bunch of old people, and Mr. Simmons, who fell asleep drunk in the community fountain on my first night here. He'd been trying to build a device to make the fountain dance to music, but all he'd done was nearly electrocute himself. Oh, and now we permanently get to hear the opening of Beethoven's Ninth at approximately 3:17 p.m. *and* a.m. So there's that.

When you live in shitty public housing and you take the school bus, you get stuck at the beginning of the morning route and on the end of the afternoon route. I guess no one

cares if you have to get up before five or if it takes you more than an hour to get home. I'm not surprised. I might be new here, but that's the way of it all, isn't it? If you're poor, people just expect you to be irrelevant.

I watch Marcus head to the back of the bus, looking brooding and intense. I almost go with him but decide instead to settle into the front seat. I'm not here to create anything permanent.

I can't say I'm nervous about starting at a new school. I mean, I'm terrified, but not more nervous than I usually am. About life in general. But this . . . this is what happens every year. School starts, and I try to blend in. As well as I can, despite everything about me that just seems to beg for attention. I do my best not to get involved with anyone, to keep my head down, and to just get through one damn school year. Maybe people will look at me with my weird wardrobe, but if I say nothing or give them nothing of myself, there's not a whole lot they can do with that.

Or there shouldn't be, but of course someone always seems to find out. Someone says something to someone else, and then there's a connection, and suddenly I hear Scott's name one day and it's all out there again. Then off I go to find another place to hide.

No, I tell myself. Not this time. Every year you tell yourself you won't get close to anyone, and then you let down the walls a bit at a time, until you can't get back behind them. Not this year.

I sigh and lean back against the seat, taking in the students as they reconnect with friends they didn't see all summer, despite proximity. I watch the freshmen as they get on the bus, and I recognize my anxiety in them. Even if you're not new, the first day can be awful.

Admittedly, most of the first day is a waste. You start out

nervous, but after you sit through multiple classes where teachers hand you a list of rules they then read to you, it starts to blur together. All the teachers have a breakdown of what they expect. How much everything means.

Sometimes I wonder if I could break my life down so easily: 10 percent participation, 20 percent independent thought, 30 percent anxiety, and 10 percent each fear, lies, guilt, and regret.

But amid the blur of rules and textbooks and seating assignments and grading policies, everything stops when you walk into the cafeteria for lunch. That linoleum-floored coliseum. This is the hardest part when you're new, and I know this school won't be any different. The blood leaves its trail behind you as you enter the den, and the tigers are hungriest on the first day. You know they're looking, and they know you're afraid as you stare down the long, wide room, deciding. You have only seconds to make your choice. That one choice—the table you approach and hope will welcome you—will define you for a year. Or longer.

"Hey, new girl," someone yells. I'm grateful because I don't want to start worrying about lunch. I can get through the rest, but lunch never seems to get easier. It's even worse when you're trying to decide who to trust. Which table of people won't dig into you day after day until they unravel everything you're hiding—and then rip you apart with your secrets.

The boy who yelled out to me is across the aisle and a few seats back. He smiles when I meet his eyes, and his smile isn't cruel. I hate how kindness surprises me.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Alexia," I say, my voice too loud. I can never find the balance between shrieking and whispering.

I have to remember who I am this year. I have to pause so I don't say "Alexia Grimes" or "Lexi Malcolm" or "Suzanne Halston" (that was the year I used my middle name) or "Lexi Driver." I stop to remind myself that I'm Alexia Lawlor now, and all those other places and people are gone. They're just pieces of me, pushed away for a new version. Anything to pretend the real me doesn't exist.

The boy stands and moves to the seat behind me. He's a bit awkward, but he doesn't carry it that way. He seems to embrace the fact that he's probably too thin and too short to be traditionally attractive, but with his thick-framed glasses and messy hair, it works. It's sort of library-sexy, if that's a thing.

"Ryan," he says, and he smiles again. "*Green Arrow's* cool."

"Oh." I look down at my shirt. "I don't watch it. It was just . . . it's just a shirt."

He shrugs. "I don't watch it, either. But the comic is great." He laughs. "Sorry. What a weak introduction. 'Hey, I'm Ryan, and you're new. Want to talk about comic books?'"

"I used to like comics. It's been a while, I guess."

"Yeah? I know the guy who runs Galactic Empire. Come with me sometime. It's amazing."

"What?"

"Galactic Empire. It's a store. But not just any store. It's, like, *the* store if you're into comics."

"Oh."

My brother loved comics. One summer, when I was nine, I was obsessed with feminism because Stacey Kitteredge was obsessed with feminism, and Stacey Kitteredge had a Disney show and a YouTube channel, so I figured she knew what she was talking about. Scott and I would ride our

bikes to Ray's, the local comic shop, and he'd pick things out for me based on whatever I was into that month. I remember stacks of *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* and *Betty and Veronica*, the books my brother figured were feminist-ish and still appropriate for a nine-year-old.

"You didn't hear any of that, did you?" Ryan asks.

I look up, meeting his eyes. Apparently, this town is full of boys with nice eyes. Not just nice, as in attractive, but nice as in kind as well.

"Sorry. What?"

"Don't worry about it. It must be really weird starting a new school."

"I guess."

Ryan has nice eyes and he seems genuinely decent, but I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to go to school, do some homework, and hope people don't take my damn picture and post it online somewhere.

"At least you've been other places," he says. "I can't imagine anything worse than never knowing anywhere but Westbrook. That's like my nightmare. Never leaving this town. Always just . . . this. Forever."

"Hmm," I mutter.

"Anyway, I'm a junior. You?"

"Senior."

"Well, damn. I was going to offer to be your escort through the ever-so-thrilling hallways of Westbrook High, but we probably can't have you being seen with a younger man."

A tall guy slides into the seat next to Ryan. "Dude, don't say 'escort.' You'll stir up images of sketchy bars and bad animal-print leggings."

"Just because that's your typical Saturday night doesn't

mean we all swing that way," Ryan says, adjusting to make room for the tall guy.

"Eric," the tall guy says, reaching out his hand. I go to shake it, although he was apparently waiting for something else, and we end up just sort of awkwardly brushing fingers.

"Lexi. Lexi Ste—" I catch myself. "Lawlor. It's Alexia Lawlor, but you can call me Lexi."

Damn it. One slip. One mistake, and it will only take one Google search before everything's ruined. You'd think after all this time I could at least remember which name I'm using.

"I just got Alexia," Ryan tells Eric. "Maybe animal prints are her thing."

Luckily, they don't notice I don't reply, that I turn away from them. It sucks not being able to talk to Ryan or Eric. Not being able to laugh and tell Ryan I don't care that's he a junior, that it would be better to walk around with him than to try navigating the halls with a map. I don't get to say that, because that's how things are.

They recognize none of this change in me, because they're already talking to each other. Mostly about me. They talk about me as if I'm not here, but it's not mean. It's the way people talk when they know you.

I so want someone to know me. I desperately want to be Lexi Lawlor, the random new girl. I want to say I'll go with Ryan to this Galactic Empire place, and I want to know no one will ask questions. I want to be Lexi Lawlor, because she doesn't have secrets. Lexi Lawlor doesn't have to lie.

"And so it begins," Ryan says as we slowly approach the bus loop behind the school. Students spill across the lawn and line up along the doorways at the back of the building. Summer held them in suspension for a few months, and

now there's so much that's new and so much to tell and they only have twenty-three minutes until the bell rings.

I hate that everyone has somewhere to be, has so much to fill those twenty-three minutes with, and all I have is needing to find the office. Get a locker. The things that frame every September for me.

"Hey, Lexi, what lunch do you have?" Ryan asks.

"Um . . ." I pause. I don't have classes yet or a schedule. "I'm not sure."

"No worries. I have third, but I'll be in guidance second period anyway. Come find me."

"He's their pet," Eric says, pushing his way out into the aisle to get off the bus.

Ryan grabs his bag and stands, squeezing into the aisle as well and leaving a space for me to exit. "Community service. We all have to do it. But I don't have my own car and my parents work and, you know, a bunch of boring backstory you don't care about. But the fact remains, I'll be in guidance second period. Find me and we can look at your schedule."

"Can you move?" someone yells from the back. Marcus is still sitting back there, waiting, and I try to wave, but he isn't looking at me. I hurry out of the bus.

Ryan disappears with Eric into a circle of people, and I weave through reunions, hoping in spite of it all that 162 days can pass differently from all the other years.

Trying not to notice that I'm all alone again.

Chapter Two

I spend first period in the office, meeting with the principal. He uses most of my "orientation" time filling me in on his philosophy of education ("All students are potential wells, and it's on our staff to make sure you leave this school full of water"). After that I go to guidance for my schedule. It's second period by the time I get there, and I find Ryan in the back office, sorting college brochures.

He's on the floor, alphabetizing his peers' ambitions, but he looks up as I pass. "Alexia and/or Lexi Lawlor. That's a lot of *Ls*. Can I just call you *L*?"

"Sure."

He nods. "Done. Don't you have class?"

"I was late leaving the principal's office, so he told me to come here, and they gave me a map and told me to use the time to figure out where things are, rather than show up late to class on my first day." I pick up a stack of brochures.

"Why do you have so many brochures for the University of Tulsa?"

"That's nothing. You should see the Fresno State collection."

I flip through the Tulsa brochure. It's a beautiful campus, although I don't think college is on my radar. Oklahoma would be something new, though.

"Not that it matters," Ryan says, "since no one ever seems to want to leave Westbrook. It's one of the many joys of living in the middle of New England. You're surrounded by higher learning, so you don't have to actually go anywhere. You can live your entire life pretending high school never ended. Which is apparently the life goal of students here."

"What are you doing with the brochures?"

"The college fair is next week, and it's a really big deal. Sure, everyone just stays around here, but they try. Hence . . ." He gestures to the brochures stacked behind him.

"Sounds good."

"It's weird, isn't it?" he asks. "The college fair is huge. College is this totally assumed rite of passage. We all get by on some kind of cinematic idea of our futures, where our lives are full of frat parties and internships in the city and a wacky cast of roommates. But I guess everything's not the movies."

"No, that's true," I say.

"Well, anyway," he says, and I kind of wonder why he's still talking to me, since I know I'm being rude. I don't want to be rude, but I have little say in my choices. "Since you have time, and the brochures are endless . . ." He puts one of the bins labeled VANDERBILT on a metal shelf and stands up. "Want the grand tour of Westbrook High?"

As he goes to grab his stuff in the main room of the

guidance office, I adjust the Vanderbilt brochures because they're not aligned properly. There's an edge in the back that's higher than the others, and if I don't fix it, it's all I'll think about all day.

I hear him say to someone as he returns, "Tell Gauthier I'm showing the new girl around." The faceless female voice tells him to lock up before he leaves. College brochures are kept under intense security, apparently.

"Ready?" he asks, as I turn and pretend I wasn't fixing the brochures.

"Ready."

It's only when we're in the hall that it starts up in my head. We take the corner toward the gym, and I can hear the sounds of shoes squeaking on the floor, that sad earnestness of gym class and forced team spirit.

I don't know these people. I'll never belong here. It's another year where I'll hope and I'll try, but 162 days is too long, and it's not going to last. They'll find out.

They always find out.

"Where do you go?" Ryan asks.

"What?" His face is only a few inches away from mine, but it's not some kind of romantic moment. Instead he's staring at me like . . . well, like I'm me.

"You disappear a lot. You didn't hear me again, I'm guessing?"

"Sorry. I . . . sorry." I should just wear a sticker that says HELLO, MY NAME IS SORRY.

He shakes his head. "Well, anyway, this is the gym. Down there is the cafeteria," he says, pointing. "We can go through the different halls so you can see all the classrooms that look exactly the same . . . or . . ."

"Or?"

Ryan takes my hand, which makes me uneasy. I'm uncomfortable being treated like I'm human. I look down at his hand over mine, worrying that my rot can be transferred through my palm. That I'll infect this guy with what I am, all because he was nice enough to show me around.

"This is top secret," he says as he pushes through a set of double doors. "You're being invited into something only a select group of people know about—and I'm trusting you not to say a word."

"I don't have anyone to tell except you," I reply, and he laughs, but I'm not kidding.

He takes out a Swiss Army knife (*Is that even legal in school?*) and fiddles with another set of double doors about ten feet farther down the hall.

"Welcome to the Shadows," Ryan announces as he pulls the doors open with a dramatic flourish. I guess his voice is supposed to sound like that guy in the horror-movie trailers, but it's a bit . . . not.

We step into darkness, and he takes out his phone to guide us deeper into it.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"The auditorium." He leads me into the black until we both tumble onto something soft. As he illuminates the area by my knees with his phone, I can see tattered and stained flowers.

"Drama club," he explains. "This is one of our many couches. No one seems to know or care that the doors are easily pried open, so we sneak in here when we just can't deal with school or life or basically any of it."

"You sit in the darkness?"

"Life is nothing but darkness," he says, and I feel a moment of gratitude. *After so many years, maybe someone*

gets it, I think, until he laughs again. "I'm just fucking around. But we can't leave the stage lights on, because I'm pretty sure we'd be caught, like, instantly."

"Oh. Yeah," I say, and force a laugh in return. Lexi Lawlor laughs. Lexi Lawlor thinks it's fun and exciting to break into the school auditorium and sneak onto a couch. She trusts people and knows tragedy only as something from Shakespeare.

I hear the bell ring, but Ryan doesn't move.

"I have an idea." He turns his phone so I can see his face. He's a glowing skull against the darkness, distorted by the games the light plays. "You don't really *have* to start today, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let's be honest. The first day is pointless," he says, echoing my earlier thoughts. "No one cares about it, and if you don't show up, it doesn't count against your attendance, since you didn't start the year yet anyway. And I'd like to get to know you. That would be a far better way to spend the first day of school than learning which teachers count homework as 30 percent of my grade."

Maybe only 5 percent is regret and 5 percent is brand-new bad life choices.

"I don't know. I don't want to start the year pissing off my teachers."

It's also that . . . the routine and the sameness protect me. They keep me safe. No one pays much attention to a girl who does what she's supposed to. No one cares when you follow the rules. I don't have to think about everything when someone else does the thinking for me.

"Yeah. Fine. That's okay. Hold on and I'll walk you to your next class."

There's doubt in Ryan's voice. It's the sound of wondering why you bother. It's the sound I hear every time I call home and I'm not better. When I beg my mom to send me my green pants or my yellow socks because I don't have anything else. I hate the sound of it. I hate always being such a disappointment.

"Wait." I put my hand out, brushing his leg accidentally. "You're right. It's a pointless day."

I don't want to make my teachers mad, but then again, my teachers don't know I exist yet. I missed my first two classes because I was getting acclimated, and I can probably get away with that through lunch. It's amazing how much time people think you need to find a locker, but it's the same at every school.

Ryan gets up and uses his phone to throw a path of light across the backstage area. "Come here."

I follow the path. In the phone light, I see only pieces of things; the whole is still obscured by the darkness. I kind of like the symbolism of it.

We walk maybe four feet before he tells me to sit, and I do while he rummages through something.

Lights come on around me. We're inside the facade of a house, a full exterior wall with a door and windows and even a porch swing on the other side of it, but where we sit, it's only plywood and wires.

"It's the set from the spring show," Ryan says. "We'll probably end up scrapping it for parts, but for now it's like our own secret world." He settles against the wall of the house and leans over, taking out a tin of Pringles from somewhere. I consider asking if he'll get in trouble for skipping the first day of school, but I get the impression he's done this before. Especially when he leans over again and takes out a can of Coke.

"You into theater?" he asks, holding out the Pringles.

"No, thanks," I say to his offer of a chip. "Theater's all right, I guess."

"You guess?"

"I saw a play on Broadway once," I reply.

My mom teaches drama. I've spent a lot of time seeing plays. Studying them. When I was younger, we had season tickets to the local theater, and I remember my parents teaching us about the elements of tragedy before we saw *West Side Story*. I used to love the way stories played out onstage in front of me, but that was a different time.

I don't want to talk about all that.

"Yeah? What show?"

"*Wicked*. It was a long time ago."

My dress was green, and Scott teased me during the entire train ride that I was a wicked witch. I was eleven then, and he was fourteen. We were excited to go into New York for a show—our first outside the university where my mom taught or the local theater. The entire day was incredible, and we were all so happy. Until we got back on the train to head home. I barely remember the performance, but I can still see the way my brother pressed his hand against the glass of the train window and watched the city disappear, until the skyscrapers gave way to nothingness. When we pulled into the station back home, Scott looked at me and whispered, "I hate it all so much."

"Can you believe I've never been to Broadway?" Ryan asks like we're old friends, bringing me back from that moment so long ago. "I've never been much past Westbrook, sadly."

"I'm sorry." I can hear the longing in his voice. That longing I know too well.

"You're so lucky. Getting to go somewhere new. Even if it's here."

"It gets old," I tell him.

"Were you in drama at your old school?"

Once—sophomore year—I decided to try to be a part of things. That was the best year. I joined cross-country in the fall, and our team went to the Western Massachusetts finals. I remember running and thinking I liked the foliage and I was glad to be back in New England. The year before, I'd been sent to boarding school in Virginia. There were seasons there, too, but they weren't the same. That fall I fell in love with the cold autumn crispness again.

The way fall surprises you in New England is something that can only be captured here; other states have their seasons and their changes, but Massachusetts wakes you up with autumn, and it holds you until the leaves blow away with the first snow. It's funny, because I kind of hate the fall, but then . . . it's painful to live without it.

After cross-country season ended, my teammates all hugged me. I had friends, and I was invited out with them. They even asked me to run track in the spring. And I would have, too, but winter is boring in Massachusetts, and everyone spends a lot of time indoors and online. By April I was in my grandparents' attic, finishing classes through a distance-learning app.

"No, I've never acted," I answer Ryan. It isn't what he asked, but we're not talking about the same things anyway.

He's leaning against the house, against where walls would be if it was real. Where we'd hang wallpaper and paintings and light fixtures and all the things we spend so much time thinking about and choosing.

My bedroom at home was dusty rose. Before my parents

moved into the condo and I left. I wonder what happened to that room.

"Well, there's a bunch of other stuff you could do," he says, "like sets and stuff, but if you want to act, you should totally try out. Auditions are next week. And, really, there are only a few of us, and we're always looking for new people."

"Busy. College fair. Auditions. Lots of things going on here," I say.

I notice I'm holding my arms around my knees. Standoffish. I remember me as a kid. I used to like things. I used to laugh and smile, and everything didn't scare me. I used to love stories about tragic heroines and complicated families because they were nothing like my life.

I guess it's true when people say you should be careful what you wish for. I never should have thought any of that was beautiful.

"Hey, are you okay?" Ryan asks. "I probably should've asked if you have questions or whatever. I'm sorry. I don't really know what it's like to start over. Everything has always been the same for me."

"I'm jealous," I admit.

He smiles and takes out a bag of Skittles from the vortex of endless snacks. "We've got that in common. Really, though. Have some Skittles and tell me the story of L."

"Once upon a time there was a girl," I say. "And they lived happily ever after."

I take a handful of Skittles from him and shove them into my mouth. Fruity excuses not to talk.

"You seem to be missing the middle. The best part. All the conflict and drama."

We sit in quiet, chewing, but not in that annoying way

a lot of people chew. Just in our heads and in our thoughts.
After I swallow, I stand up.

“I’m going to class,” I tell him.

“But what about the rest of your story?”

I shrug and leave him sitting by the hollow house. I wonder what my parents would say about the symbolism of all the facades that surround me.

Chapter Three

don't sit with anyone at lunch. I end up going back to guidance, flipping through the same college brochures and imagining a different life.

The rest of the day is just a day. Ryan sits with me on the bus, but Eric sits behind us and they talk for the entire ride. By the end of the route, it's just me and Marcus. We don't talk until we get off the bus and are standing together on the pavement.

"So," he says.

"So."

"Westbrook High. How was it?"

"It was a school."

"Yeah, it's that."

He takes out a cigarette, but neither of us moves toward our apartments. We don't have anything to say, though, so we just stand.

"That looks worse," he says after a few minutes, and nods

toward the Castle Estates sign. The knight now has a dick outline; the scrubbing just cleared the color from the sign behind the spray paint.

"You know what they say. You can't stop the dick."

"No." Marcus shakes his head. "That you can't."

The jingle of an ice-cream truck comes over the sign, and a dark-blue van pulls alongside the entrance. There's a picture of a Spider-Man novelty ice-cream bar and a snow cone on the side I can see.

"They're early," I say.

"Nah. The elementary school kids don't have as long a ride. They'll be here any minute."

As if the universe is simply waiting to prove itself to me, the bus comes around the corner and then drops the kids off on the sidewalk about twenty feet from us. The elementary school kids don't live in our complex; they live in some of the surrounding buildings, but we got lucky enough to have the best sidewalks, I guess.

The kids all run to the van to get ice cream, and I don't know what's more depressing: that we get home at the same time as the elementary school kids or that the shady van serves as our ice-cream truck.

"Want an ice cream?" Marcus asks. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a few singles, looking toward the van and the line of kids before turning back to me. "My treat."

"Yeah, sure." But I don't move. He waits while I try to make it okay. I sigh. "No. I mean, I do, but no. I should probably get all this first-day homework done. And my aunt will be home soon and dinner and stuff."

I don't have that much homework. I have time to sit with Marcus and eat ice cream. It's not like it's a date or a major commitment to have a snow cone for a few minutes, but I'm

already starting to feel my head filling up with thoughts I need to drown out.

You shouldn't be talking to people. Don't pretend this year will be different. You know what happens. Can't you last 162 days without messing this up?

"Yeah, okay," Marcus says. He starts to head toward the van, but I see the look before he turns around fully. He's upset or feeling rejected. Or disappointed. People are always disappointed.

I want to tell him it's not him. I want to tell him everything. I hate how he looks at me, as if he thinks it's something about him that's not good enough. I want to tell him that in a different situation I'd be happy to get to know him, but I can't and I won't.

There's no way to win for me. Someone always gets hurt. My history finds a way to suffocate everyone in its path.

"Hey," I yell after Marcus before I can stop myself. "Friday? Ice-cream date? I won't have to do all my homework right away."

"Yeah," he says, and I catch a flicker of a smile. "Friday. It's a date."

He moves on and I go to my apartment. *It's nothing*, I tell myself. But when I reach my door, I look back. He's kind of cute waiting by the van with a bunch of kids, excited to pay three dollars for ice cream.

You ruin everything, I remind myself. *There's nothing you can keep safe.*

I wish I could avoid hearing my thoughts, but it's too quiet here. Once I get past the entrance and the ice cream and the knight and the fountain, it's just me, some raggedy old lawn chairs, and the silence of sadness. Along with the cacophony of voices in my head.

I drop my bag by the door, grab a bottle of water and some Goldfish, and go to my room. My aunt's apartment is actually a one-bedroom, so my "room" is what's supposed to be a dining room. Before I moved in, she hung tie-dyed sheets across the doorframe to make it feel "young." But it's a room with a cot and some boxes of old dishes my aunt couldn't find another place to store. I haven't decorated yet; I don't know who Lexi Lawlor is, and in the highly unlikely and not recommended scenario where I make friends, I don't know what I want them to think if they come over. I don't know who I can allow Lexi Lawlor to be, beyond an alliterative annoyance.

I lie down and take my cell phone out of my dresser. No one has my number except my aunt and my parents, and I don't take the phone out of the apartment. I stopped giving people my number a few years ago, when I realized that it's better not to give them a way to invade even the quiet spaces. You can't really trust people not to use that access to hurt you.

Of course, being the weird girl at school without a phone is what Heath, the therapist my parents hired for me, calls a "red flag of ostracism." He always says pretentious shit like that. Given that I also avoid social media and wear clothes that scream "Something is wrong with me," I think it's more than one red flag; it's like the goddamn UN around me.

I look at my phone. My mom has texted four times already.

"How was it?" she asks when I call home.

"It was fine."

"What have I told you? I don't like when you say something's 'fine.' It's important for you to express yourself," she

reminds me. This is the teen version of being told as a toddler to “use your words.”

“It was scrumdiddlyumptious,” I say, turning on my TV. I need the low buzz of the Game Show Network to keep me company. It’s way too quiet here. There aren’t even birds. Just falling acorns from the one tree near my window, sporadic Beethoven, and all the things I think.

“You’re being difficult,” my mom replies. “Heath told you that you have to differentiate when it’s appropriate to keep up walls and when you’re just pushing away the people who care.”

“Heath’s a douchebag.”

“Alexia,” she says, sighing. “What did you wear today?”

“Clothes.”

“What colors?”

I don’t feel like going through this. I know she’ll take everything I say to her colleagues at the university’s psych department, and they’ll brainstorm new strategies to engage me. They’ll probably even make a spreadsheet. Or a packet. Packets are the worst.

“Green, Mom.”

There’s a rustle as she covers the phone and mumbles behind her hand. She’s probably telling my dad I’m at it again. All summer she tried to weed through my clothes to make it harder for me to obsess over my color patterns. She meant well. She thought she was helping, because her friends told her I’d only get over it if she made me face things. But she’d throw things out and I’d go to Goodwill, stashing clothes in random places around the house. At one point I mailed a box of clothes to Aunt Susie. I figured if she has to deal with me for a year, she might as well be prepared.

"How's Susie?" my mom asks when she returns. I can picture my dad, stoic at the kitchen table, warning her not to draw attention to it. To let it go. That's become his mantra. *Just pretend we're all okay.* If we lived in the Middle Ages, that could be on my family's crest.

"She's fine."

"Alexia," she warns.

I flip over and look out the window. I can see Marcus heading down the street toward his apartment, the Spider-Man pop melting down his hands. I should've gotten ice cream with him.

"I don't know. She seems exhausted."

More hand covering and rumbling. "Tell her I'll call her later," my mom says. Aunt Susie will probably be getting a lecture about maintaining balance in my life and remaining a "calm and peaceful presence." That's Heath's thing, too.

"It's fine, Mom. Really. Before you start in on me or ask for something more than 'fine,' I promise, it's fine. I'm fine. Aunt Susie's fine. This year will be fine. I swear."

"You know we worry about you. We may have agreed to this arrangement, but your part is to keep us involved and informed. We've gone over this."

My parents blame themselves. They probably lie awake at night trying to figure out why they're such bad parents and how everything went wrong. It's not their fault, of course. Not that it changes anything.

I miss what we were, but we aren't that anymore, and it's better to get away from the memories of all we could have been.

"I love you," I tell my mom, which causes more hand covering. She's likely telling my dad I'm getting worse, because what high school senior says "I love you" to her

mother without provocation? "Stop whispering. I'm not finished."

"I wasn't whispering," she lies. "It must be the connection. I'll have your dad go to the store tomorrow. Maybe it's time for a new phone."

"Don't try to placate me with fancy electronics. I mean it. I love you. And Dad. Tell him I love him, okay? Tell him I don't need a new phone. Tell him everything is okay. And do me a favor. Try to believe it."

"Alexia—"

"Mom, you need to chill. It's going to be fine. I'll be fine. It's a hundred and sixty-two days. That's it. A hundred and sixty-two days and it's over and I can come home and we can try to figure it all out for real this time, okay?"

One hundred and sixty-two, I repeat in my head. *Actually, one hundred and sixty-one and a few hours.*

"It's just . . ."

My mom doesn't want to say it. She doesn't want to remind me that my record is 134 days. She doesn't want to talk about how bad it's gotten in the past. How she worries that the next time will push me over the edge. I don't want to think about those things, either. I know as well as she does how close I am to being deemed forever unfixable.

Still, it's only twenty-eight days—a February—more. I've got to be strong enough to survive a February. Right?

"I've got this, Mom. I promise."

I know I'm lying to her. Lying to myself. The trouble is . . . it's really easy to believe yourself if you try hard enough.

Chapter Four

Tuesdays are blue, which means my color-coding is less obvious to everyone, because jeans are blue. I like Tuesdays; they're when I feel most like a real person.

It turns out I have third lunch with Ryan, which makes this Tuesday even better. He invites me to sit with his friends, and one of the hardest parts of each year passes just like that. *Only 161 days to go.*

"I am so *pissed* at Hawthorne," a girl says as soon as she sits down at the lunch table. Dark hair, somewhat tall and thin, but still mostly average. Yet there's something about her that draws my attention. Something about how sure she is of herself.

Two girls follow right behind her, flanking her across the table from where Ryan and I are sitting, and they wait for her to speak. The first girl drops her tray and stabs a straw into her orange-juice carton.

"Seriously? Fucking *Romeo and Juliet*? How ridiculously cliché can we get?" she asks.

"Shakespeare's good for your portfolio," Ryan says.

She rolls her eyes. "I have plenty of Shakespeare in my portfolio. What do you even think I do all summer? God."

"Rory, Lexi," Ryan says, flicking a hand between me and the angry girl. "Lexi's new."

"Hi," Rory says. She drinks her whole carton of orange juice and crushes it. "Ryan, seriously. This sucks so bad."

One of the other girls opens a bag of chips, but she pauses, waiting to see what Rory does. The greasy spud hovers in front of her open mouth. It's not exactly fear. I can't explain it, but it's the kind of suspended animation that occurs when you can't decide if your friend's freak-out warrants putting your own basic needs, like hunger, on hold.

"It's not always like this," the other girl—the one sitting on Rory's right—tells me. She's prettier than Rory, but for some reason she fades beside her. "Drama's just a big deal."

"Oh yeah. Got it," I say, pretending to understand.

"Sorry," Rory mutters as she spears a french fry on her plastic fork. Chip Girl waits, and as soon as Rory puts the fry in her mouth, Chip Girl breathes a sigh of relief. Her stomach growls as if to confirm that hunger is, in fact, a bigger situation at the moment. The chip makes its final parabolic arc down her gullet.

"Look at it this way: You're probably guaranteed Juliet," Ryan says.

Rory shakes her head. "It's not that, and you know it. She's always going on and on about how 'theater makes a difference.'" I imagine that Rory's mocking lilt is nothing like how this Hawthorne person actually sounds, but everyone

in our vicinity seems to be on board with it. "This was an opportunity. You know she's just capitulating."

"You need to lay off the SAT vocab," Chip Girl says.

Rory glares at her but doesn't respond. Instead, she turns back to Ryan, addressing me as well by accident. "All summer I was emailing her and she was totally into *The Laramie Project* or *The Vagina Monologues*. Something edgy. Something with a purpose. She swore she'd choose something that would *matter*. And we're doing fucking *Romeo and Juliet*?"

"I don't know," I offer, which I probably shouldn't. It's not my place, and I don't know the context. My head voice booms its countdown again, but I shush it and barrel on with my opinion, reason be damned. "It could work. I mean, prejudice, hate, judgment, assumptions. *West Side Story* tackles all the same key themes—"

Rory cuts me off. "*West Side Story*?"

"Yeah, I mean . . ." But the glare from the three girls across from me tells me to just keep my mouth shut.

"We don't do musicals," Ryan explains. "It's a whole different kind of theater."

"Sorry," I mumble, and go back to my lunch. The peas are fluorescent. I wonder if they're irradiated. That could be good.

Everyone complains some more about Hawthorne, who I deduce is the teacher-director of the drama club, but I stop listening. Lunch is only twenty-seven minutes. Twenty-seven minutes of 161 days and it's all over. I can survive this. They're so wrapped up in the play that they don't care about me or what I'm carrying. They won't even notice me as long as I don't talk about musicals.

"Hey, I'll walk you to class," Ryan says when the first bell rings to wrap up lunch.

"Lexi," Rory says as I stand. "I'm sorry we were awful. It was just a lot to take in. Maybe it sounds silly, but this play . . . all our plays . . . they're kind of it for me. This is what I've got."

I nod, thinking of all the things that are worse than what play your school performs during the fall of your junior year.

"Well, it's good to care about things."

"What's your thing?" Ryan asks after we drop off our trays and head into the hall. I don't know if his class is near mine or if he's just being nice.

He reminds me of how, when I was a kid, I imagined boys would be when I was older. He's quiet without being too serious. Sweet without it coming across like he expects something in return. Probably the kind of guy the real me thought would be a boyfriend, when I still believed in things like love. He also reminds me a little of my brother—or at least the way I used to picture how Scott would be.

"What?" I ask.

"You said it's good to care about things. What's your thing?"

"Oh, I don't know."

It used to be trips to the comic-book store, and sitting around talking about books with my family, and summer bike rides with Scott. But all those things belong to another version of me. Right now the only thing I care about is not answering these questions.

In eighth grade, when I lived with my cousin Alicia in her apartment in New Jersey, I tried to make painting my thing. I wasn't any good at it, but I had a lot to work through, and Heath had told my parents that Alicia, with her urban garden and handmade hemp clothes and therapeutic painting, would be good for me. She was, too. It wasn't her fault there's such a thing as the internet.

"You must have a thing," Ryan insists.

"What's yours?" I ask, turning the question back on him.

"I can't tell you. You'll laugh."

We stop at my locker and I grab my books. "I won't laugh."

He looks down the hall at the flowing tide of people.

No one notices anyone else. Everyone lives in their own little existence and believe their own version of life. We may flicker in and out of each other's experiences from time to time, but mostly the world only exists as we see it. I often wonder, since everyone's generally so oblivious, why people always get so caught up in my story when they find out. Why can't I be just another nameless face in the crowd?

"I make lawn ornaments," Ryan says.

Despite my promise, I sort of laugh. Not a full laugh, but the beginning of one. "What?"

"You said you wouldn't laugh," he reminds me.

I close my locker and turn around. We're quickly swept back into the mass of students. "Sorry. Just taken aback. A bit . . . random?"

"I know. But see . . . my parents are really into gardening. And I'm not. I'm not only not into it, I downright suck at it. Like, literally kill any plant I touch. So they always tried to get me into this gardening thing they liked when I was a kid. And, yes, I know it's ridiculous that this was what my weekends were. But, I don't know, it was kind of nice having a family thing, you know? Even if I was bad at it."

I used to like family things, too. Even the ones no one else would think were meaningful or important. The way my dad refused to grill corn on the cob because he thought it tasted better boiled, so we'd always have to wait for him to bring out a pot of corn floating in steaming water, while the burgers burned. The way my mom made a big deal about

school picture day and made scrapbooks of all our milestones. If you visited my parents now, it would look like their children disappeared five years ago. They kept nothing of either of us.

"You still here?" Ryan asks as we get to my classroom. I nod, and we duck into the little alcove between the rooms and the blocks of lockers. There are several of these throughout the school, usually where couples go far beyond the rules of appropriate PDA.

"Yeah. Sorry. Lawn ornaments."

"So, well, I started making these gnomes and frogs and silly decorations for my parents' garden, and eventually it became a thing. My mom is really into them. My dad kind of likes them, too, although he also says they're girlie. I think he wishes I played sports or something instead." He pauses. "Not that he's . . . Well, he is, kind of, but he's more worried about me than him, you know? Like, he doesn't really care. I mean, the dude gardens for fun. But I got beat up a lot until . . . well, kind of recently. So he thinks if I acted more . . . not like I do . . . it would fix that somehow. He means well. He's just old."

I nod, and I wonder how Ryan got to be this open. This trusting. I've said what feels like ten complete sentences to him since we met, yet he talks to me like he can count on me somehow. If he only knew . . . But I don't tell him, because I really like how he makes me feel. He makes me feel whole. Worthwhile. Valid.

"Anyway," he continues, "my mom got really into it, and she called all these places, and on Saturdays I go to local craft fairs and sell them. I've been doing it since I was a freshman, but only my parents and, like, five of my friends know. We make sure we don't go anywhere too local, of

course. Rory and Eric and them are cool, but, you know, it's not exactly school newspaper-worthy. And, I don't know . . . I guess I just don't want to have to explain things to people. I just want them to leave me alone as much as possible."

The second bell rings, ending Ryan's story, and he runs off, waving, trying to make it to his class on time. I settle into my physics class, where students finish the conversations they've been having since lunch and I hate myself as soon as it begins to grow quiet.

I have one responsibility. All I need to do is blend in. Act normal, don't draw attention, and survive 161 days at Westbrook High. What I don't need to do is become friendly with nice boys who make lawn ornaments, or encourage them to tell me their secrets.

What I don't need to do is believe that it's ever going to stop hurting.

Chapter Five

make a point of staying quiet the next few days. Ryan doesn't seem to notice that I limit all my responses to one or two words or a head movement in the affirmative or negative when possible.

Lunch has become part of my routine. Rory—full name Rory Winters—dominates most conversations, which is actually ideal. On my way to lunch today, I stop in the bathroom first, and while I'm peeing I hear my name.

"No. Lexi Lawlor," someone says. I lean forward and peer through the door to see who it is. It's Chloe Parker, previously of *Chip Girl* fame, and she's with Rory. Lauren Baruch, their other friend, isn't with them. She's probably already at lunch with Ryan.

"Don't start, Chloe," Rory says.

"Seriously, though. Yellow? What's her deal, anyway?"

Wednesday is black, Thursday is brown, and Friday is

yellow. Saturday is pink and Sunday is gray, but Fridays and Saturdays are the hardest. People notice most on those days.

I wish I knew how to stop it, but it's the only thing I know. It's the only control I have, and I have to tell myself it's okay. I try not to feel ashamed or hurt that people are already talking about it.

In Chloe's voice, though, I hear my mom and Heath and everyone else who's had something to say about it. *When you stand out or set yourself apart, people can't ignore you, and that's when they pay attention. If you want to stay off their radar, you have to make an effort to blend in and follow the rules, Alexia.* And I want to, but when I stand in my bedroom and try to mix the colors, I can't breathe. The last time I tried it, I got to the front lawn before lying down on the grass and nearly chewing a hole in my forearm.

Heath's tried to help me get over it. He says it's "attention-seeking behavior," which is sort of the exact opposite of my goal, but his theory is that a part of me wants to be noticed. He thinks there's a part of me looking for someone to see past the other things, and I'm doing everything I can to draw attention away from it by making the clothes "the focal point." I don't know if he's right. I don't know what my brain is doing. I just know the idea of wearing something else makes me feel sick, and even though it means everyone stares at me, I can't seem to stop.

"She's fine," Rory tells Chloe. "You're just jealous because Ryan seems really into her."

"Ryan doesn't even *know* her," Chloe argues.

"And neither do you."

Rory takes out her purse and starts fixing her makeup. I don't think there's much difference between my need for my clothes to match and her need to make sure her eyeliner is perfect between every class. We all have our demons.

"You just feel bad for her because she lives at Castle Estates," Chloe snaps. "You like befriending the poor girl. You think it makes you look good."

Rory drops her eyeliner. She doesn't turn to face Chloe, though, instead holding on to the sink and staring into the mirror. "Shut up, Chloe."

"No, it's ridiculous. It's been, like, four days, and you're defending her. You don't know her, either. She could be a fucking serial killer for all you know."

I don't hear the rest of the conversation. All I can hear is crying and the police and the way they said it like it was inevitable. There was so much blood, and all I could think was that it couldn't be true, because no one had done laundry for days. This made no sense, but I couldn't connect the dots logically and it was just the first place my mind went. We didn't have clean clothes. Everyone should have been where they were supposed to be, or at least at home doing the wash. They wouldn't have any reason to be anywhere else, because we had so many dirty clothes.

NO. Not now, I tell myself.

"Hello?" Rory asks.

Shit. I didn't mean to say it aloud. I didn't want them to know I was here, but now they will, and now they'll know I heard and they'll see I was crying and then they'll start to ask questions. They'll start wondering what kinds of things I'm not saying when I'm quiet.

But you can't just sit inside a bathroom stall and hope people will go away, so I walk out like nothing happened.

"Oh, hey," I say. "I didn't realize anyone was in here."

Chloe gives me a look that says she doesn't believe that for a second, but Rory tries a little harder.

"Oh, Lexi, we were literally just talking about you."

"Yeah?" I say, and Chloe glances down at the floor.

Because, of course, it's all fun and games until someone comes out of the stall after you call them a serial killer.

"Chloe was saying how . . . unique . . . your style is, and I was thinking you'd probably be awesome at costumes. You know, for drama?"

"Right. Having a unique style inherently means I can sew and design Renaissance gowns for your Shakespeare production. Or I'm just really bad at dressing myself. Either one."

Rory laughs. "Stop. You look great. I think it's interesting how you own it. Like no one would usually dare start at a new school and just say fuck it all to the rules, and you don't even care. That's pretty badass."

"Uh, thanks."

"But about the costumes . . . they won't be elaborate at all. The show's a contemporary take on the story."

"Fresh," I say, cursing myself for my snark. But I'm still upset about the whole talking-about-me thing. And the comments about my clothes and the idea that I'm some kind of poor-girl pity party of one. Mostly, though, I'm upset that they were so close to the truth about me.

Rory rolls her eyes. "Oh my God, Lexi. I know." She drags this bit out like she can't even believe it herself. "But we have to do *something*. It's such an overdone play, but we're going to set it in the heart of the upcoming gubernatorial election. Each of the characters is going to represent groups of people being slowly marginalized in our culture. We're going to make people look at the world and talk about injustice. Because we're in the middle of something massive with this election, and I don't think anyone gets it."

"I don't really follow politics," I tell her.

This invites a lecture, but it also sweeps away the awk-

wardness of their talking behind my back and my discovering it. Somehow I end up at lunch with them both, and none of it mattered or happened and everything's just fine. And I let it be, because somewhere in that moment, I remembered, and that's worse.

...

Ryan invites me to Galactic Empire over the weekend, but I claim homework. It's a good thing people don't talk to each other; they'd think I had seventy-five hours of a homework a day.

When I get off the bus, I don't see Marcus, and I figure he forgot about our "date," so I start heading back to my apartment. I'm by the fountain when I hear him.

"Don't tell me you forgot," he yells.

He's across the road, on the other sidewalk. He says something else, but I can't hear him. It's 3:17. Beethoven drowns out whatever Marcus is saying.

"I thought *you* did," I yell back, hoping he can hear me over the fountain, and I cross the street toward him.

He leans against the streetlight, and it's absurdly sexy. Dark hair, dark eyes, brooding look, and a sexy lean. *Stop it*, I tell myself.

"A promise is a promise," he says.

"I didn't see you when I got off the bus."

He shrugs. "I got a ride, but I told you I'd be here."

"We might have missed the ice-cream van. It's too late, right?"

"What kind of date would it be if I showed up only to let you down?"

"I'm accustomed to disappointment," I say.

"Well, yeah. You live here," he says, taking my hand.

Marcus's hands are callused but not rough. They're comfortable. It's odd how some people make holding your hand feel like such a chore and it's always awkward because nothing fits right, but then with other people, it's like your hands know something you've been missing.

The music from the van flickers in the air, coming around the buildings, and when we get there, it's already waiting, with a line of kids in front of it.

While we stand in line, we don't talk. I'm not sure if Marcus is quiet, nervous, or just uninterested, but of course it makes me wish he was talking. There's something about standing near someone when you feel like you should be saying something but you don't know what to say exactly. I open my mouth a few times to speak, but everything I can think of to say feels wrong. Being surrounded by a bunch of little kids doesn't help.

I like Castle Estates; everyone is old, and I don't have to see all the faces of children who look like the ones in my nightmares.

"What do you want?" he asks.

"Um . . ." I'm not sure how to answer, until I realize the kids have all moved on and we're ordering. "Oh. Uh . . ."

It's a pretty sparse collection. Of the maybe twenty things, half have duct tape pasted across them with the word *Out* written in black Sharpie. "Batman?"

"Okay," he says, and he orders a Batman for me and a Spider-Man for himself.

"Big Spider-Man fan?" I ask once we're away from the kids and we're trying to keep the ice creams from melting all over ourselves.

"Nah, it's just the only one that doesn't have some kind

of weird-ass flavor in it. It's just cherry and blue raspberry. That's normal shit."

I look down at my Batman pop and see that it's blue raspberry with banana. I immediately regret my bad choice. "You should've warned me."

"Hey, it's not my responsibility to make your terrible decisions. Besides, maybe you're into banana ice cream."

"Is anyone?" When I reach the banana-flavored bat shape, I swallow it quickly. It's not really that bad; it tastes more like Yellow 40 or whatever than an actual banana.

"In all my travels, I didn't really develop a list of the flavors of ice cream people like."

"Well, you should have," I tell him, and he smiles, revealing blue teeth and a purple tongue. I laugh, which makes him start laughing.

"My tongue is purple, isn't it?"

I nod. "Me too?"

"Yup. It's one of the risks you take."

We head toward what was once a playground in the complex, though now it's a metal bar and some chains where swings used to be. Marcus sits in the dirt carved by children's feet ages ago, when kids still lived here, and I join him, taking his Popsicle stick and wrapper and tying them up with mine. Once they're smoothed down and placed perfectly even on the ground, I sit back.

"I haven't seen you around school," I say.

He grabs a stick and starts to draw in the dirt. "You wouldn't."

"Why not?"

I watch as he makes shapes in the ground. It's like watching art happen in real time. First there was nothing, and slowly lines and shapes become something. I don't

know what it'll be, but I find the process fascinating. Almost more interesting than the eventual result, because the pieces could have all fallen together in so many different patterns. But this is the one they chose.

"I have 'behavioral problems,' they tell me. So they keep me and people like me in a room in the back of the building. Away from all the normal people."

"What behavioral problems?" I ask. "Like, anger or something?"

He pauses, stares at the half-complete image, and wipes it away. I feel sad for all the things that could have been created.

"I don't know. They tell me I do, so I guess I do, you know?"

"They told us my brother—" I stop.

I want to tell him that people say a lot of things they don't really know. How they said Scott was sick. That he had emotional issues. Everyone said my parents weren't good enough. But all those things don't hold up. I don't have those problems, and we had the same parents.

"You have a brother?" Marcus asks.

"I did."

"I'm sorry. Past tense . . . yeah. It sucks, right?"

I look away from him, out across the complex. So many stories. So many people who don't have the right way of doing things, forgotten because they're somehow the wrong people.

"I guess. A lot of things suck."

"Where'd you come from, Alexia? I mean, before two weeks ago?" He starts to play with the trash from our ice creams, taking the wrappers and drawing them tighter around the sticks, trying to see how small a space they

can fill. That's how I feel most days—I want to become as small as I can and fill nothing, so no one even notices I'm there.

"All over, I guess. I've lived in a lot of places."

"And this is where you ended up? That's too bad."

I sigh. It's really not a terrible place. Definitely better than the perfection of boarding school or the cold dullness of Maine last year. Better even than my cousin's apartment in New Jersey. But it's not where I should be, and that's the worst part. It's not home, and it's lonely.

Not that there's anywhere to call home anymore. My parents' new condo isn't our house. It's just a generic reproduction of the other hundred or so exactly like it. And the room where I sleep when I visit is an off-white, empty square. My mom tried to get me to decorate it, but why bother? No one goes in that room except me and my parents.

"It's just a place," I tell Marcus. "I don't know. It's just a lot to talk about or explain. Forget it, all right?"

"You can tell me," he replies. "Anytime. But it's okay if you don't want to. I get it." He pauses, about to say something else, and then shakes his head. "Let's get out of the dirt." He shoves the ice-cream wrappers and sticks into his pocket, then takes my hand again, helping me stand.

I follow him back to his apartment. There's a pile of broken planters out front, some still with dirt and rotten stems of flowers in them. The little patch of grass is too long, but not long enough for anyone to complain yet. It's just long enough to be sad.

Inside, all the curtains are drawn. A woman sits on the couch, watching TV. She looks toward us, and her eyes meet mine. She's not old, but she looks like she is. Realistically, she's probably only about thirty-five, but her clothes are all

wrinkled and too big. She's wearing a wig, except it's uncomfortable to look at. The color doesn't match the tone of her skin, and it's too thin to look natural.

"Hey, Mom. This is Alexia. She's Susie Lawlor's niece," Marcus says.

His mom smiles. The effort is almost palpable. She wants to be friendly, but I get the impression she's tried too hard for too long to fake it, and she doesn't remember how to mean it anymore.

"Your aunt's a nice woman," she says. "There aren't a lot of nice people."

"There really aren't," I reply, and I look away from her, into the room with its dust and its darkness. I wonder if this is what happens to people when they give up.

"We're going to my room," Marcus says. His mom nods and turns back to the TV, exhausted from the effort.

"She's sick," he explains as we cut through the kitchen to grab two cans of soda and a bag of pretzels. "I'm sorry. This was probably a bad idea."

"You don't need to apologize to me. I'm sorry she's sick."

"Yeah. Thanks."

His room mirrors mine, since the apartments at Castle Estates are pretty much all the same. This one is a two-bedroom, though, so our dining room (where I sleep) is their second bedroom. If I peer through Marcus's blinds, I can see the edge of my window behind one of the few trees in the complex.

Marcus has lived here awhile—maybe his whole life?—and his room looks like it. He's got a bunch of movie posters on the walls, but they're all starting to fade, and the tape has been covered over several times. One—*Taxi Driver*—is falling down, the multiple layers of tape not enough to keep it in place.

"You can sit on the bed," he says. "I'll sit here."

He leans against his window, hovering a bit but not really sitting. I settle onto the bed, which is made, but in that way where you simply throw a blanket over the bed. Not really making it, but it'll do.

"We can share," I tell him.

"I don't want you to—"

I scoot a bit to the side of the bed and put my hand down on the blanket. "Really."

He shakes his head and stays by the window, sipping his soda. I'm not sure if I should be flattered or offended.

"You like old movies?" I ask.

"I do. My dad and I used to watch them together all the time. He was really into *On the Waterfront* and *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*. You know. Stuff like that."

"I've never seen any of those."

"Really? You can't be serious."

I stare at the poster falling off his wall. "I was twelve when . . ."

I don't know what to say. What parts of it I can tell him.

When I was a freshman, I had a friend. My roommate. I told her things because I thought I could trust her, and it turned out I was wrong. I don't know if I'm wrong about Marcus, too.

"The first time I moved, I was twelve," I continue. "I never had time to catch up on movies."

"I have most of them. We should watch one sometime."

I almost tell him I have time now. There's a definite invitation in his voice. He watches me, and I can feel his eyes on me, but I don't look at him.

I want to stay. I want to ask him to go make some popcorn, and I want to curl up beside him and spend the afternoon here. It doesn't even have to be romantic. I'm not sure

that's what this is. Sure, he's cute and I could see myself being interested in him, but it's just the way that being here feels like possibility. I simply want to be *here*. Present. I don't want to go home and be lonely for another night. But that's not his problem.

Besides, wanting things doesn't turn out well for me. For anyone. I should go back to my blank space of a room and decide who Lexi Lawlor is. Maybe call my parents and do some homework. Because Marcus doesn't need all the things I carry.

"I should get home, actually," I say. "But yeah. Sometime would be great."

"I'll walk you home," he offers.

"That's okay. It's not that far."

I leave him leaning against his window. It isn't far to my apartment, but it's far enough that I have to think about the acorns under my feet. About the sign with the knight. About Chloe and the things she said in the bathroom.

I think about everything except Marcus and his old movies. About the way he leans.

The opportunity brushes past me as I walk, disappearing into the early evening.

Someday, I tell myself.