

WRONG IN ALL THE RIGHT WAYS



wrong

in all

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ways

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BROWNLEE**

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To my mom, Benfordnetti; my siblings: Kenny, Brittny, Tyler, Kennedy & Colston; and my love, Will. Thanks for never getting annoyed when I would constantly ask you to listen to my stories. And also to bacon cheeseburgers and french fries, for being the greatest food combo to eat while writing.



chapter 1

LET ME BE clear: I am not the biggest fan of small children. Now, I don't dislike all of them—the cute ones are hard to hate, and my seven-year-old brother is sort of awesome, too—but most of them I actually do loathe. They're obnoxious, they're messy, and they have not yet acquired the level of self-discipline I think is necessary to function in this world. Like I said, I hate them. So when my parents told me they were thinking of fostering a young kid, I wasn't exactly overflowing with joy.

And rightfully so. I mean, they already have two beautiful and highly intelligent children. Do they really need another one? No, they don't. But it's not my place to tell them that.

Why not? Well, because I'm a people pleaser. I believe that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who live to make others happy, and those who live to make themselves happy. You can't be both; you have to choose one. Because let's face it: you can't please

everyone and yourself at the same time. It's impossible. If that *was* in the realm of possibilities, we would all be living in a problem-free world, and God knows that's never going to happen.

I, myself, fall into the first category, which brings me back to square one: I'm a people pleaser. Actually, let me correct that: I'm a *parent* pleaser. I like to make my parents happy, and acquiescing, the act of being compliant, makes them happy. So even though my insides completely object to their decision to foster some wrong-side-of-the-tracks kid, I wear a smile as if everything is okay, because it's what I'm supposed to do. It's what they expect me to do.

"Time to wake up, Emma," my mom says on the intercom system that is hooked up in my room. When my parents first told me that they were fostering some kid, I volunteered to give up my room for him or her. I didn't want anyone else to have to sacrifice one of their rooms. My dad would die if he had to give up his man cave, and my mom and I didn't want Matthew to have to give up his playroom. According to my mom, "a playroom is essential to the growth of cognitive and motor skills in a child, and *blah blah blah . . .*" So I—along with my vintage furniture and floral wallpaper—relocated to the pool house. I told them that it would free up a room so they could keep an eye on my new sibling, and that because I'd be moving out of the house for college soon, this arrangement would make the transition easier on them, and on me. That's what I told them, anyway. Truth is, I don't want to be anywhere near the kid who is replacing me in their hearts, and twenty feet of distance is going to achieve just that.

"I'm getting up now," I lie as I pull the covers back over my head to block out the sunlight. This is the point in my day that I love the most, and I'm not going to let her wake-up call ruin it.

According to Folgers, the best part of waking up is having their

coffee in your cup, but I beg to differ. It's actually the stage right before we wake up, or the Middle, as I like to call it. To me, it's as if my mind has registered that I've lived to see another day but it's not ready to pull away from its dreamland yet. It's the overlapping of waking and dream states, and every day, I take a few minutes to relish this moment.

I use this time to do my deepest thinking. It's usually something nonsensical or philosophical, like how many stars are in the sky, or why glue doesn't stick to the inside of the bottle. I never really answer these questions, but they wake my mind up just enough to get my day started.

Today's Middle topic is death. People die every day, and we all will die one day. It's an inevitable truth that we have to overlook if we want to live a happy life. I mean, think about it: the world would be a morbid place to live in if all we ever thought about was death and when it was coming and how it would happen. I'm not really scared of dying, but I'm kind of afraid of what happens after that; it's the only unknown that humans will never be able to figure out. I believe that death will come when it's supposed to, but I just want it to come after I've experienced a few life-changing moments—well, one in particular.

I want to fall in love. Who doesn't? In movies, it's made out to be a defining moment in our lives. Girl meets boy, and they share a season of love. He does something stupid to lose her, then wins her back with a grand gesture at the end so they can live happily ever after. Now, I'm not so naïve as to think this actually happens in real life. I know it doesn't. Somewhere between the first kiss and falling in love, life happens. Messy entanglements ensue, summer flings end, hearts break, et cetera, et cetera. That's just the way it is. Falling in love sounds agonizing, but if it means I find the other half of my heart in the end, I think it's worth it.

I roll over and look at the calendar on my wall. It's Monday, September 3. This day marks not only my last first day of high school, but also the day that I'll get to meet my possible new foster brother or sister. My parents are going to bring them to live with us for a while, and if all goes well, the courts will make them an official member of our family . . . well, eventually. Apparently, getting parents to sign over their rights can be a long process.

It will be nice for Matthew to have someone to keep him company, but having another sibling—technically—around is only going to force my parents to divide their attention even more. I don't want to come off as selfish, but aside from my brother, my parents are all I have, and I don't want some ungrateful brat coming in here to take them away from me. Especially not when I only have this year left with them before I leave for college.

I drag myself out of bed and saunter over to my closet. "What to wear?" I ask myself as I place my hands on my waist. I was supposed to figure this out last night, but I got distracted by the book I'm reading. A love story, if it's compelling enough, has the ability to make you forget that you have a life outside its fictitious world. And that's exactly what happened to me last night. I got lost between the pages of a story with a messy love triangle. So much so that I forgot all about today being the first day of school.

Figuring out what to wear is an impossible decision today. What you wear on the first day of school can make or break your year. At least, that's what most teen magazines preach to their readers. You are what you wear, they say. Wear too much black and you're a gothic freak. Show too much skin and you're a slut. To be popular, you have to find the perfect blend of casual and cool—with a hint of sexy and sassy—and I've gotten it wrong every year.

Now, I'm not drop-dead gorgeous, but I'm not completely unfortunate-looking either (thank you, Mom and Dad). I'm stuck in the plain-Jane middle of the spectrum, and most of the time I'm okay with that, except when it comes to one aspect of my life: boys.

Even though I'm decent-looking, I still haven't been able to land a boyfriend. I want that to be because I'm brilliant and my intelligence intimidates the boys at school—I skipped two grades in middle school (which just screams *socially well-adjusted*)—but I know it's not. It's more likely because I'm the “freaky genius girl” who cares more about my grades than how many points the football team scored in their last game. It's the things I care about, like intelligence and individuality, that make me invisible to them. All of them.

“I'm ready,” I say as I enter the kitchen through the back door. My mom is waiting with a Polaroid camera in her hand, just as I expect her to. We've done first-day-of-school photos for as long as I can remember. When she spots me, she pulls the camera away from her eye, and I see her thin lips press into a tight, straight line.

“Jeans and a vintage T-shirt?” she asks. Her eyebrows are raised so high that they disappear behind her low-cut blond bangs. “I thought you were gonna wear that dress you bought last weekend. You know, the one that brings out your eyes?” As she says that, I pull my glasses out of my bag and slip them onto my face. “No contacts today either, huh?”

Well, it's not like I have anyone to impress. “Nope.” I don't mean it, but it comes out in a moodier tone than I intended. “Sorry,” I say as her eyes drop to the floor. “The first day of school always stresses me out.” I grab an apple and swing my bag over my shoulder. It has only a notebook, a pen, and my wallet inside it, but it feels heavier than usual, because I'm not looking forward to going to school today. Not

because I don't like school—I actually love learning and filling my brain with knowledge—but because I don't really have any friends right now. Most of the girl cliques at school have already been established, and I don't think they're looking to add anyone else to their unwritten roster, which means I have to sit at the loner table at lunch. Yay me.

“Well, it's nice to know the hundreds of dollars your father and I spent on your corrective contact lenses are getting put to good use.” I fold my arms across my chest and sigh. I've heard this speech so many times that I can probably recite it verbatim. “I don't get it. You beg us for contacts, and then you never wear them.”

I didn't beg you for them. *You* decided to buy them all on your own. “They itch my eyes, so I'm going for recreational use only.”

But that was a lie. My contacts don't bother my eyes at all. I just feel more comfortable wearing my glasses at school. They give me something to hide behind.

“Well, excuse me,” she says, pointing the camera at me once again to take my picture. The flash temporarily blinds me, and it isn't until I see her fanning herself with the photo that my vision returns to normal. “Are you happy with this?” she says, showing me the photograph.

I don't have to look at the photo to know that I don't look good enough for the first day of school. I never have and never will. That's just the way it is. I take another look at my mom's camera in her hands and sigh. This is our last first day together; I can't disappoint her.

“On second thought, I'll go change.” I come back ten minutes later in a white button-down blouse and pair of black shorts. I almost never wear shorts in public—they are so revealing!—and putting them on to appease my mother kills me. “Better?” I ask upon returning. After receiving a nod of approval from my mom, I reach for my keys on the

wall. As I do, I spot an old picture of my dad hoisting me in the air at the end of one of my softball games. I used to be really into softball, but that was only because my dad wanted me to be. “Did Dad leave for his morning run already?”

My father used to play professional baseball back when I was younger, but he had to retire early after he hurt his back sliding into home plate during a World Series game. So now he’s the coach of an unstoppable junior baseball team in the neighborhood, and when he’s not focused on that, he’s trying his best to be a father to my brother and me.

“No, he skipped it. He’s upstairs getting ready for our meeting with the group home.” I see my mother tighten her ponytail, which can mean only one thing: she’s worried that the kid won’t like her. Why that would be, I have no clue. To me, she’s pretty awesome—aside from the unspoken-pressure-to-please-her thing. “We don’t get to choose, but we told them that we’re looking for a child between the ages of eight and sixteen, so hopefully he or she is on the younger side of that spectrum.”

“That’ll be good for Matthew,” I say. “He’ll have someone to play with when I leave for college.” I look over at my little brother. He’s at the table eating a bowl of oatmeal. I imagine he’s devising an elaborate plan to get out of having to go to school today. He says he hates it there, but the Fulton Academy of Advanced Math and Science is the only school in our area that will challenge him. Last year, when we were informed that he was gifted in mathematics, we were advised to send him there. I know this is what’s best for him, but I can’t help wondering if he misses being a normal kid sometimes. I know that I missed being normal when I skipped two grades four years ago.

“You sure you’re okay with this?” my mom asks, tucking a couple

of strands of my hair behind my ear. I get almost all of my physical features from her: hair color, eye color, and height, just to name a few. From my father I get my intelligence, and that's about it. "I know the idea of having another sibling probably has you feeling unwanted, but I need you to know that that's not the case at all. Your dad and I will still love you just as much as we do right now."

"I'm fine, Mom, really. This is a good thing." It's not exactly a lie, but it's not exactly the truth, either. I'm happy that they're going to give a kid with a troubled past a second chance at what their life should have been. But at the same time, I don't want this new family member to replace me. After all, I *was* here first. "I'm gonna be late. Give Dad a hug for me."

I don't breathe until I escape out the front door. The only reason they're fostering this kid is because of my early graduation, and that kind of makes me ineligible for righteous birth-child indignation. I refuse to lose it in front of her. I'm the one who's leaving the nest two years ahead of schedule, prompting them to refill it as quickly as possible. This is basically my fault, but we're in too deep with the fostering process for me to beg her not to go through with it now. We're in too deep for me to break her heart with a confession.

After fighting for a good parking space at school, I get out to see tons of other students smiling and laughing with their friends. There are girls running across the courtyard, flinging their arms around each other, and guys fist-bumping buddies that they haven't seen all summer. The sight of their giddy reunions unfolding before me puts a bitter taste in my mouth; I've never been able to do any of those things on the first day of school.

Instead of reuniting with the friends I wish I had, I head to the counselor's office. From down the hall, I can see the white pieces of

paper taped to the inside of the glass window on the door. Two big, bold words typed across the top of it come into view as I creep closer to the window: CLASS RANKINGS. I don't have to search for too long before I find my name. It's sitting at the top of the list, next to the number one. *Top in my class. That should make Dad happy.* He hates it when I let others beat me out. The warning bell rings, signaling that I should begin to make my way to class, and as I do, a proud smile creeps its way across my face. *I'm number one. Valedictorian, here I come.*

The school day is very uneventful. It's the same as every other first day in high school: the teacher introduces him- or herself, goes over the syllabus with us, distributes the class books, and then opens up the floor so that we can say a few things about who we are. Name, favorite pastime, and something interesting about ourselves. After third period, I'm so sick of this monotonous routine that I instinctively cringe when it starts all over again.

"I'm Emma Ellenburg," I mumble when it's my turn, adjusting my glasses. "I like writing and going to school." I get crickets from my classmates, but a nod of approval from my teacher. "Anyways, um, an interesting fact about me is that I'm the daughter of the youngest record-holding retired baseball player in America, Daniel Ellenburg."

There are times when I wish I had a different factoid to share about myself—something that is actually about me—but this is all I have.

My statement usually sparks a conversation about baseball, which I have no interest in anymore, and ends with a sports-obsessed boy jumping in to tell the class about an upcoming football or basketball game and why everyone in the entire school should attend. The jocks here are always looking for an opportunity to promote their sports teams, but I don't blame them. I would probably do the same thing if I were in their position.

The day drags on in this boring and repetitive cycle. But things change at lunch when a girl I have never spoken to, or really seen before, sets her lunch tray down beside me. She doesn't have any food on her tray, but she does have a rather large stack of papers.

"Hey." She smiles at me, her dark green eyes glowing. She's too peppy for my liking, and before she speaks again, I almost leave the table to finish reading my book in peace. But I don't. That would be rude, and my parents taught me better than that.

"Hi." I don't mean for it to come out as flat as it does, but I can't help it.

"Karmin Ortega," she says, extending her perfectly manicured hand toward me. She flips her silky dark brown—almost black—hair over her shoulder, and that's when it hits me. She's the captain of the dance team, vice president of the Hispanic Heritage Club, and possibly the best dancer in our entire school.

The longer I stare at her, the more I recognize where I've seen her before. She's the girl that I used to see making out with some surfer guy in between classes last year. I always used to think that their PDA was gross and intrusive. I mean, they never came out and said it, but the way their hands roamed over each other's bodies screamed that they were having sex on a regular basis.

"You performed at the dance benefit concert last year, right?" she says, pulling me out of my mental rant. "The one that helped raise money to save the Cedar Pointe Dance studio?"

"Yeah." *Finally, someone notices me. Maybe I'm not so invisible after all.* "I'm Emma Ellenb—"

"I know who you are. I wanted to invite you to try out for the dance team in two weeks. That lyrical routine you did last year was mind-blowing. We could really use your skills."

Her compliment catches me off guard. Before the dance benefit, my feet hadn't touched center stage in years, but when my parents signed me up to perform in it—"You need to pay your respects to CPD. They taught you everything you know!"—I had to throw something together last minute. "Really? You . . . you think I'm good?"

"Definitely." She lifts her phone, which is acting as a makeshift paperweight, off the stack of papers and slides one of them to me. The highlighter-yellow color of the flyer makes me squint as I read the information about the tryouts. "I hope to see you there."



"DANCE TEAM? I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO GIVE TENNIS ANOTHER shot this year?" my mother says when I call her at the end of the school day. She lowers her voice, and I expect she's trying to hide it from my dad, who is probably close by. "You know your dad's not going to be too happy with you switching it up again." The disappointment in her voice almost tears me up inside. My mom and dad like to think they know what's best for me, and my divergence from their plan isn't going to sit well with them.

"I know." I can see my dad now: stretching out his tie and unbuttoning the top button on the collar of his shirt as he turns red with anger.

"I'm not going to tell your father. I'm leaving that up to you. But if I were you, I'd do it sooner rather than later."

"How about this: *if* I make the team, I'll tell him."

She goes silent on the line for a moment, and I imagine her weighing the options in her head. "Fine. But again, you have to tell him. I'm not getting in the middle of this. You know how he is."

I feel my stomach knot and twist as I think about telling him. He's

not exactly going to be delighted when I do, and so I'm going to have to make sure he's in a semi-good mood when I fess up.

"And I still expect you to stay on top of your grades. I expect nothing less than what you're giving right now."

Of course you do. "I will. I promise."

"I didn't think you liked school enough to want to join a spirit team of any kind. But if it's something you really want to do, I'm behind you all the way."

I love how empowering my mom is. Whenever I want to pursue something, she always hears me out. Once, when I was ten and wanted to learn how to play the guitar, she bought me one of the most expensive ones *and* paid for a year's worth of lessons. I quit after two classes, but that's beside the point. The point is, she has always been willing to invest in my dreams, no matter how pipe-dreamy or irrational they may seem.

But my dad is the complete opposite. He hates that I switch activities so much, and he has no problem showing it. I've started and quit too many things—softball, guitar, gymnastics, soccer, tap and jazz dancing, ballet, and now tennis—for him to just sit back and accept it. The way I see it, he should be happy that I'm actually getting out to do something, instead of sitting on my ass all day, watching Netflix. But of course, he doesn't take that into account.

"I'm on my way to pick up Matthew from school, but I just wanted to call and run that by you."

"Okay, honey." I can hear a muffled sound in the background; it's someone talking, but I can't tell if it's a woman or a man, an adult or a kid. *Is that my new brother or sister? Or is that just Dad?* "That's the social worker," she says, answering the question before I can ask it. "We're going to be here for maybe another hour or so. There's a ton of

paperwork that we have to read through and sign, but we should be nearing the end of it all pretty soon.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask as I pull up to Matthew’s school.

“Everything is fine, Emma. We’ll be home with Dylan in about an hour.” I can hear her smiling through the phone. “You’re gonna love him.” *Dylan*, I repeat in my head. *So it’s a boy. I guess I’m okay with that. This means that I’ll still reside as the only princess in the Ellenburg residence.*

A ton of questions that I want to ask her pulse through my mind, but I decide to keep them to myself. I don’t want to ruin the surprise. “I’ll see you soon, Mom.”

Matthew’s school reminds me of some of the best times in my life. In elementary school, I used to have a lot of friends. Back then it was easy. Nobody was competing to be the best athlete or the prettiest or the smartest. All you had to do was be yourself, and people liked you for that. I would give anything to return to that time.

When he sees me enter his classroom, Matthew runs up and gives me the biggest hug that he can. He’s in a room full of parents trying to ask how their kid’s day went, and it must be nice for him to finally see a familiar face. I don’t want a conversation with his teacher like everyone else coming through the door; I just came to grab him and go. I’m tempted to tell him about our new brother, but I’m not sure how much he knows, so I choose to wait until he brings it up first.

“Where’s Mom and Dad?” he asks as I strap him into his booster seat. He was a premature baby and has always been smaller than other kids his age. It wasn’t until I saw his classmates that I realized how much smaller.

“They’re out running errands.”

“Does ‘errands’ mean picking up our new brother or sister?” He must see my eyes widen, because he quickly tacks on a reason for how

he knows what's going on. "I heard you guys talking about that this morning, and Dad told me things would start happening soon. So is today the day?"

"That's not exactly 'errands,' I guess. But yes, they told me that they're going to be home soon, and that's when we'll get to meet him. Or her," I throw in to keep the gender a mystery to him. "So, are you ready to meet the newest member of our family?" He gives me a goofy grin, as if to say, *Hell, yeah*, in kid language, and then spends the entire ride home bombarding me with his thoughts on how our new sibling is going to look and act.

"It's definitely going to be a boy. I can feel it."

I have to choke back my grin as he speaks. He's going to be convinced he's psychic when he finds out that we really are fostering a boy.

"I think he's going to have brown hair and brown eyes, just like me," he says. "And he's going to love playing hide-and-seek with me, too."

His excitement for our new brother is contagious, and before I know it, I'm giddy, too. But even that moment doesn't last. After a while, my resentment resurfaces, as if it never left my heart to begin with.

We head home, but the idea that I'm going to be a big sister again doesn't officially hit me until I hear my dad jingle his keys outside the front door. I set my homework aside and flex my fingers to get the feeling back into them. I don't want this new kid to think we're slobs, so I fluff and karate-chop the top of each pillow that I was sitting on. That's the way Mom likes for me to fix them; she says it makes them look like they belong on a spread in a furniture magazine.

My dad once told me that there's a thin line between love and hate, and sides are chosen when two people meet for the first time. The

crossing of two paths, he called it. “The first interaction is what people will remember most about you, and it will be the basis of your relationship with them,” he said in a serious tone. In about ten seconds, my path and the path of my future foster brother will collide, and all I can think is *I hope he likes me, and I hope I like him.*

When I see the door handle start to turn, I feel time stand still. Like, for a moment, I’m frozen in space and I can choose whether I really want to go through with this, or run and hide under my bed. But that would be cowardly, and I don’t want this kid to feel anything but welcomed.

Matthew and I stand in front of the sofa closest to the door and wait. First, our parents walk in, drawing out the anticipation. There is a sparkle in my mom’s blue eyes and a grin across my dad’s face. “Hey, guys. This is Dylan,” he says as he extends his hand toward the door.

I expect to see a rambunctious eight-or nine-year-old race through the door, grinning from ear to ear, but instead, a teenage boy walks in—a very cute teenage boy, I might add. I fold my arms across my chest and wait for him to speak, but he doesn’t say a word. He just keeps shifting his weight from one foot to the other as he looks us up and down.

Plot twist.



chapter 2

THIS ISN'T REAL. *This can't be real*, I repeat in my head as I pinch myself. There is no way that my parents have brought a teenage boy—again, a very cute teenage boy—to live under the same roof as me. There's just no way.

I squeeze and squeeze until the skin just above my elbow glows a deep shade of pink, but nothing happens. The image of Dylan standing next to my parents doesn't fade into darkness. It stays there. *This is not a dream.*

"This is Emma," my dad begins as he leads him toward me. "You guys are around the same age, and you'll be going to the same school now." He fails to mention that I skipped two years of school and won't be in the same grade as him, but I figure it's so that Dylan doesn't feel insecure.

"Nice to meet you, Emma," he says in a voice that's not too high

and not too low. “I’m Dylan. Dylan McAndrews.” The corners of his mouth twitch upward for a split second, and his dimples flash across his cheeks so fast that I would have missed it if I had blinked. I’m glad I didn’t blink.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Dylan.” I extend my hand to give his hand a shake, but he catches me a little off guard when he pulls me into a hug. Leaning in, I catch a whiff of his soapy scent. It’s so potent as I inhale that I can visualize the manly scented suds on his tan body. As we embrace, I feel my parents’ eyes on us. I was the one who showed the most discomfort with the entire fostering process, and now that he’s here, I’m sure they’re trying to see how I’m taking it. Their facial expressions don’t change, so I’m guessing that they approve of this awkward welcome hug.

“This little guy down here is Matthew. Go ahead, Matt. Say hi.” My dad is trying his hardest not to make this awkward for us, but from the way Dylan keeps fidgeting and cracking his knuckles, I can tell that my dad is failing miserably. Dylan’s hardly meeting any of our gazes, and when he does, it’s so brief that I start to wonder if it’s because we’re not as disarming as I think we are.

“I have one question and one question only,” Matthew says, wagging a finger in Dylan’s direction.

“What’s that?”

“Do you like to play hide-and-seek?”

“I love hide-and-seek. We can play after I’m settled in. Okay, buddy?” He extends his pinky finger toward Matthew, who nods his head feverishly and then looks at me.

“I think I’m gonna like him,” he tries to whisper, though everyone can hear him. “He already knows our secret sign for promises, and

I didn't even have to teach him." When Matthew was four, I taught him how to make a pinky promise. I said that no one else in the world knew about it, or how to do it. I guess he still believes that.

Matthew hooks his tiny pinky finger around Dylan's, and that's when I see it. A full smile emerges across Dylan's face, and in an instant, I can tell that he feels like one of us. Like he belongs.

"Daniel and I are gonna grab your bags out of the car for you. You guys," my mom says, turning to Matthew and me, "should show him around the house."

We speed through a tour, showing him the basics: the garage—which we never use because it's cluttered with dusty family photos, trophies, and other memorabilia—the kitchen, the bathrooms, the bedrooms, the offices, and the living room area. Along the way, Matthew tries to show him where all of the best hiding places are. He points out the nooks and crannies that can drag a game of hide-and-seek on for hours.

"I don't want you to think I'm cheating because I've lived here all my life," he says, giggling.

"Good looking out, Matt."

Matt? Dylan has been here for less than an hour, and he's already using our nickname with Matthew. *Are they that close already?* Out of the corner of my eye, I see them bump fists, and I feel my stomach twist and knot with discomfort. Matthew's only seven, and he already has better social skills than I do.

"I'm going to go pick out my pajamas for bed," Matthew says as we prepare to descend the stairs. "Wait for me."

As I stand along the railing, I try to think of something good to say to Dylan. *So, how are you doing this evening? Do you like everything so far? Do you need me to get you anything?* Everything I come up with

sounds as if we are running a bed-and-breakfast and he's a guest for the weekend rather than my new brother, so I give up on conversation starters and just look up at him and smile.

When I raise my eyes, I see that he's already looking at me. But the second our eyes meet, he looks away. I take it he's embarrassed that I caught him gawking.

"You guys have an amazing house," he says, now staring at the floor.

"Well, it's yours, too. Seeing as you're technically part of this household now."

"I guess you're right." Another awkward silence fills the gap in our conversation, and I feel obligated to keep it going—I don't want him to think that I'm callous or socially inept—but as I open my mouth to speak, so does Dylan. "I hope you don't feel threatened by me. I'm not here to step on your toes." As he says the word *toes*, I see his gaze travel over my feet, and his eyebrows scrunch up in disgust.

"I was betrayed by the beach," I offer as an explanation, curling my toes under. "Last summer, I stepped on some sharp shells, and they cut into my foot. One week later, I found out it was infected, and I guess my feet are still recovering from the trauma of it all."

"Damn," is all he says, but I get it. My freak accident story is a little too involved to share on his first day here.

"I know. Poor me."

"Poor you? More like poor me for having to look at them," he jokes. "I think I just lost my appetite." He chokes back a laugh, and before I know it, we are both giggling uncontrollably. "It's okay. I've got plenty of scars, too."

I know I shouldn't, but the words spill out before I can command them to stay put. "Let me see."

He checks over his shoulder—I guess to make sure Matthew isn't around. *Are they that gruesome?*—and then pulls at the collar of his T-shirt to show me the heavily scarred skin just below his collarbone. He casts his eyes down as I run my fingers over the raised lines on his skin, as if he's ashamed of the marks on his body.

“What made you do this to yourself?” I whisper into his dark brown eyes. The room starts to spin as I imagine him taking a razor blade and slicing into his skin, and I have to hold on to the railing to keep my knees from buckling. I can't imagine ever marking my body up with the intent of leaving scars.

“What makes you think I did this to myself?” he spits at me. And just like that, the fire in his eyes dissolves. The guy who was clutching his stomach in a fit of giggles two minutes ago is gone.

“I just thought—”

“That I'm a foster kid, and so I *must* be messed up enough to want to cut myself, right?”

“I didn't mean it like that. I—”

“I get it. You think I'm troubled and traumatized, and so you expect me to do things like this.” He releases the collar of his shirt and takes a step closer to me, making me flinch. Even the aroma of the soap I smelled on him earlier isn't enough to calm the fright in my heart. “I've seen stuff that no person, let alone a kid, should ever have to witness. Horrors that I couldn't unsee even if I tried. You don't know my story, and you don't know me. So I would appreciate it if you didn't jump to conclusions, because your assumptions are only making an ass out of you, not me.”

My heart is beating too loud for me to think of a good comeback, and my mouth has gone dry from the mini panic attack I'm having, but somehow I still manage to whisper, “Got it.”

“It’s my first day. Please, don’t ruin this for me,” he says, backing away from me. The hurt in his eyes is almost tangible, like the scars near his collar bone.

“I’m sorry. For assuming, I mean.”

“Yeah, I know.” It’s only been twenty minutes, and I’ve already gotten him to hate me. *How is that possible?* When Matthew rejoins us at the top of the stairs, I try to keep to myself. If I open my mouth, I’ll only make things worse.

“And that concludes the tour,” I murmur as we make our way back to the kitchen.

“What’s over there?” Dylan asks, pointing outside the back door. There’s no trace of a lingering rage in his voice and no flickers of fury left over from his blood boiling over, either. It’s steady, as if he didn’t just jump down my throat a minute ago.

“Oh, that’s the pool house, where my room is,” I say, my voice cracking beneath my words. He’s acting as if the conversation we had at the top of the stairs didn’t happen, but unlike him, I don’t have the luxury of forgetting that easily. “I volunteered to give up my room when they decided to adopt you, so my parents let me have it.” His thick eyebrows furl when I say the word *adopt*. Surely, he must know that adoption is a possibility. If my parents have anything to do with it, he won’t stay in the system forever, but it’s not my place to tell him this. At least, not after the scolding I just got about jumping to conclusions.

“Foster,” he corrects. “I’m not your brother yet.”

But eventually you will be, I start to say, but I flash back to our conversation on the stairs, and decide not to.

My parents are finishing up with his things when we complete our tour. “I don’t want you to think that I never cook, because I do.” My

mom laughs. “But we figured you’d like something simple for your first day here.” She hands me two boxes of pizza, and I lead the way to the kitchen table.

We pass around plates and then the boxes of pizza, each person taking two slices for themselves. It’s not the usual Ellenburg family dinner that’s filled with random banter about how everyone’s day went. Tonight, all of the attention and interest are on Dylan.

“I’m sorry about your room,” my mom says. “Emma took her queen mattress and wrought iron bedframe to the pool house. We were expecting to bring home a boy around Matthew’s age and thought a smaller bed would be more fitting. Now obviously, that twin bed isn’t going to do you much good, so I’ve ordered you a bigger bed which should be in tomorrow. But for tonight, is it okay if you take the couch?”

“No worries, Mrs. Ellenburg. Believe me, I’ve slept on worse.” He laughs, but no one else joins in with him. Once again, it occurs to me that I know nothing about him or his past. I’m curious to know what horrific thing happened to him that led to him being placed in foster care as well as how many foster families he’s had, but I don’t ask about it now. His deep, dark secrets are hardly appropriate for dinner conversation, especially with Matthew listening. He’s still young and so impressionable that we’re not even allowed to curse in front of him—even though I know for a fact that both of my parents love to use colorful words.

“You can call me Mom, if you want.” Mom’s trying to bridge the gap of awkward silence with something light and fluffy; she doesn’t handle discomfort well. “Or Lauren, if Mom doesn’t feel right. Whatever makes you comfortable.”

“Thanks.” Dylan’s mouth stretches into grin that resembles that of a clown: deceiving and full of secrets. *What’s he hiding?*

As he looks away from Mom, he catches my eyes. I mouth the words *I'm sorry* across the table, and I see him make an arc motion with his hand, as if to say that it's water under the bridge. I lean back in my seat, finally able to relax again.

"What's your favorite color?" Matthew asks, pointing his half-eaten pizza crust at Dylan. We've told him a million times that pointing is rude, but then again, he's only seven. We can't expect him to be as refined as the rest of the family yet.

Blue, I answer for him in my head. I know I'm right just by looking at him. The blue in his T-shirt and shoes is a dead giveaway. People always wear their favorite color the most.

"It's blue."

"Mine is green. What's your favorite book?"

"I'm a big Harry Potter fan." Dylan holds up his pizza crust as if it's a wand and casts a fake spell on Matthew. "That series will always be close to my heart."

"Emma has all of the movies. Maybe we can watch them together sometime," Matthew suggests.

"Maybe." Our eyes meet again, and a flutter jolts through me. But it doesn't last long; Matthew's asking his next question before a full smile can spread across my face.

"What about your favorite—"

"Matthew, let's ease up on the interrogation. We haven't even touched on his hobbies yet. What are you into, son?"

Dylan swallows hard when he hears the word *son* come out of my father's mouth. I know my Dad doesn't mean it *literally*—he calls Matthew's friends *son* as well, but something about it feels alarming now. "I-I'm not the biggest sports fan," he admits after taking a sip from his glass. "I'm more into the arts. Painting, sketching, sculpting. That

kind of stuff. More painting than anything, though.” I watch as my father sets down his piece of pizza and clasps his hands, darting his eyes toward Dylan, who quickly edits himself. “Not saying I *don’t* like to play sports. It’s just that it’s always come second to my art.” He stuffs a piece of pizza crust into his mouth, and I can’t help but snort, trying to hold back a laugh.

“Well, Dad, I guess Matthew is your last hope for a baseball star. Hopefully he has good hand-eye coordination.” I pat my dad’s shoulder, faux apologetically, and sneak a look at Dylan. *He’s smart. He got out early*, I think to myself.

“Did you used to play baseball in high school and college?” Dylan asks, ignoring my interjection and turning the conversation back to my dad.

“Here we go,” I whisper under my breath. “You’ve done it now.”

“Speak up, Emma. I’ve told you about the mumbling. It’s not very ladylike,” my dad snaps.

“Just wondering if you’d like me to start cleaning up, Dad.” Before he can answer, I pick up his plate, which has four pizza crusts on it, and head to the kitchen to avoid his walk down memory lane. I’ve heard my dad’s stories so many times that I know them by heart now.

“I went pro when I was only nineteen years old, played for seventeen years, and became the youngest batter ever to get over two hundred hits in a single season . . .”

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of Dylan. He’s nodding his head and grunting every once in a while, but I know he’s not into it. I mean, he *did* just say that he’s not a sports person. But my dad has no clue that this is happening; he just keeps going on and on about the “good ol’ days” like he usually does when we have a new guest in the house. I don’t blame him, though. He hardly ever gets to talk

baseball with us anymore. Mom and I have outgrown his stories from the big leagues, and Matthew is too young to fully understand them all, so my dad must be ecstatic to have someone new to tell them to.

I shuffle through the kitchen, eavesdropping on their conversation until I can no longer hear what they are saying. I expect they are talking about his adjustment here and going over the rules, so I start to clean up the kitchen. As I fill the sink with dishwater, I let myself get lost in thought. The only thing that keeps passing through my mind is Dylan. He seems like he's gonna be a good fit for our family, and I'm surprised that I'm kind of all right with having him here, since just this morning I was still on the fence about the whole thing. And aside from the confrontation we had at the top of the stairs, he seems to be pretty nice, too. I mean, I haven't seen my dad talk and smile this much in a long time.

The "welcome home" festivities don't last much longer, and after Mom and Dad remind us that it's a school night, we take our showers and retire to our bedrooms—well, Matthew and I do. Dylan has to get comfortable on the sofa tonight.

I'm just about to crawl into bed, when I notice that the pool lights are still on. Dad has been on my case about remembering to turn them off, and if I'm going to get (and stay) on his good side, I need to start remembering to do my only chore.

My fingers are a second away from flipping the switch when I see Dylan exit the back door of the house and lie down in the grass near the edge of the pool, his arm hooked over the back of his head. After a minute or two, he closes his eyes.

Confused, I rush outside. "I know Mom messed up your sleeping arrangements, but come on, the sofa isn't *that* bad," I joke as I approach him.

“I’m just admiring the sky. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen the stars. Too much light pollution in Los Angeles.”

“Yeah. They are pretty amazing, aren’t they?” He closes his eyes once again, and I can’t help but wonder how he’s “admiring the sky” if his eyes are closed. Maybe some of his screws really are loose, and he failed to mention that to my parents before they brought him home. “I’m sorry, again,” I say to fill the silence between us. “I know I said it earlier, but I just wanted to reiterate it. I don’t know why I assumed that about you. It was very wrong of me.”

“You haven’t gotten over that yet?” he asks, opening his left eye and patting the ground, inviting me to sit with him for a moment. “I was over that when the conversation ended. I don’t hold grudges. It’s emotionally draining.”

“I agree. It is.” I lie back on the grass and look up into the sky in silenced bewilderment. *Why are we lying in the grass when we’ve both taken showers already? Isn’t this defeating the purpose?*

“I don’t remember much from the actual accident. I blacked out from blood loss before we even made it to the hospital,” Dylan rattles off as if I know what he’s talking about. It takes me a minute to realize that he’s talking about his scar again.

I feel my breath start to shorten as he talks about his old wounds. There’s a reason that I never dreamed of becoming a doctor, and I’m reminded of the impossibility of this career option whenever I hear someone talk about blood and broken bones and other gory things like that.

I’m so busy trying to redirect my thoughts away from the image he’s creating that I don’t catch the end of what he’s saying. Instead, I’m wondering whether I should take another shower when I get back inside.

It's quiet, I observe after a moment. *Should I say something so things don't get too weird?* I pull my hair over my left shoulder and begin to braid it while I think of something to say to fill the void. *I wonder what he's thinking about. Is he thinking about his family? Is he thinking about us? Is he thinking about . . . me?* I'm halfway down my mane when I figure out how to start a conversation with him. "So how does it feel? Has it all sunk in yet?"

In his set of navy blue pajamas, he looks over at me and then shakes his head. His hair is wet from the shower, and a couple drops find their way to me as he answers my question. "Nope. I still feel like I'm gonna wake up tomorrow and have this all be a dream. Like I should still be in LA. It just doesn't feel real yet."

"Well, believe it, bro," I say leaning up on my elbows. *Bro?* That was a weird thing to say; I've never called Matthew bro. "This is your life now, so start enjoying it." He's quiet for a moment, and out of the corner of my eye, I catch him looking at me. When I meet his gaze, he doesn't look away. "What?"

He closes his eyes once more, before answering. "What's our school like?"

"Oh, it's nothing special. Just a place where a bunch of popular, yet dumb, girls and guys convene to cheat off of each other to matriculate into their dream party-central, I mean college. Not too different from any other high school, I'm sure."

"Matriculate," he repeats. "Big word points for you." I smile and wait for him to speak again. "Sounds like fun. So . . . you're not popular, I'm guessing?" I furl my eyebrows and tilt my head to the side as if to ask why he would say such a thing. "I'm only asking because you called them dumb. Nobody would describe themselves as dumb to a total stranger, new foster sibling or not."

He's wittier than I initially gave him credit for, I think to myself.

"No, I'm not. Quite the opposite, actually," I admit with a frown. "But I don't care. Pretty soon, I'm going to graduate and move on to college, while they learn how to shotgun a beer."

"You don't like it? School, I mean."

"The social part of it, no. I'd rather walk slowly across hot coals every hour, on the hour, for the rest of my life than to go to that place every day. It's mostly a hellhole, aside from the learning-new-things part. I like that part very much." I don't feel like venting my feelings anymore, so I turn the conversation back on him. "You're gonna be the center of attention tomorrow, so get ready."

"Why?" he says, opening his eyes once more.

"Because you're new and mysterious, and you kind of look like pre-Miley Liam Hemsworth—so without the beard—and with brown eyes instead of blue."

I imagine him coming home with a notebook full of girls' numbers, and another wave of jealousy washes over my body. *He's going to be popular. I just know it.* He's going to spend one day at my high school and end up doing the one thing that I couldn't for four whole years.

"Yep," I say rolling my eyes, "they're gonna be all over you."

"Who's Liam Hemsworth?"

"Ha, very funny," I say, pushing his shoulder playfully. I'm surprised that I can feel his muscles; for a guy who isn't into sports, he's sure built like an athlete. "You know, the little brother of that actor who plays Thor in all the superhero movies with the perfectly messy brown hair, toned biceps, and dreamy blue eyes."

"Dreamy blue eyes'? You mean like yours?" The hair on my arms rises slowly as the aura of electricity settles around us, and it isn't long before I feel my cheeks and ears grow warm.

“Yeah, sure.” I look away from him, but I can still feel his eyes dancing across my face, as if he’s trying to memorize the precise placement of every freckle on my nose and cheeks. “It’s getting late. I’ll, uh . . . I’ll see you in the morning. Okay?”

“Sounds good.”

Leaving him to lounge on the ground, I set the pool lights to turn off in two hours, just in case he wants to lie out there and gaze—with closed eyes—at the stars a bit longer.

I toss and turn all night, my mind alternating between thinking and dreaming about Dylan and the last seconds of our conversation by the pool. I know that he’s going to be my official brother on paper one day, but a piece of me wants to explore the side of Dylan that I saw before we parted ways tonight. The side that I think was flirting with me.



chapter 3

SURPRISINGLY, I'M OKAY sharing my school with Dylan. Throughout the day, I am so engrossed in my schoolwork that I forget he is even here with me. That is, until lunch.

"I don't know. Sorry," I say to yet another girl who comes up to ask about Dylan's relationship status. If he was on Instagram, I could just redirect them to stalk his account. Alas, he is not. "Why don't you ask him yourself?" I don't mean to sound as harsh as I do, but she is the fifth girl today who has come up to ask me the same question, and my tolerance level is dropping.

"I figured you knew if he was dating anyone. You *are* his sister, anyway." *Sister? Not yet*, as Dylan made clear to me last night.

"I just met him yesterday. So that brings the amount of time of me knowing him to, I don't know, seventeen hours. But wait, subtract the eight hours we spent sleeping last night and the five I've spent at school today, and that leaves me with four. Four hours. Now, do you

think that his romantic involvement with another girl was at the top of my list of things to find out about him?” I don’t know why I’m all of a sudden overcome with rage, but once I start talking, the words spill out uncontrollably. “Well?”

“Sorry I asked.” She grabs her tray and leaves without another word, and I do the same. I’m not going to continue to eat my lunch out in the open and put myself in a position to be showered with questions about Dylan’s love life. I retreat to the only open classroom in the school during lunch hours: the art room.

“You know, you’d probably have more friends if you actually stuck around to talk to people during your free time,” someone says from behind an easel as I set my backpack and calculus book down on the table. I don’t need to see their face to know that it’s Dylan. Though I’ve only known him for about seventeen—or, okay, four—hours I’m able to recognize his voice pretty easily.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know anyone was in here.” I grab my things and start for the door. “I’ll just go. Sorry.”

“Oh, please, stay. I like a little company when I’m working on something.”

I set my things back down and make my way around the easel to take a look at his creation. It’s the image of someone’s eyes. At first glance, it looks like any other picture of blue eyes, but as I stare longer, I see another image emerge: in the center of the eyes, where the pupil should be, is the reflection of a night’s sky. The way he captured the swirls of the clouds and the sparkle of the stars and moon within the blue irises is so detailed that I get lost in it. I knew that he was artsy, but he is much better than I imagined him to be.

“Wow” is all I can get out, and even then, it comes out as a whisper.

“Thanks,” he says, raising his arms above his head to stretch. “This image has been in my mind since yesterday. I couldn’t sleep last night because of it.”

“I couldn’t sleep last night, either.” I’m a little embarrassed now that I’ve seen his painting. He wasn’t trying to flirt last night when he was staring into my eyes, but rather to study the image in them long enough so that he could artistically regurgitate it onto his canvas. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but shouldn’t you be out mixing and mingling with your future friends and girlfriends?”

“There will be plenty of time for that. But right now, this has my attention.” He starts to mix some colors together, and as he does, his tongue pokes out between his lips. The concentration on his face is intense, yet inspiring. “So what about you? Why aren’t you chatting it up with your clique, or posse, or whatever you girls call yourselves these days?”

“I would be with my *crew* . . . if I had one.” I can feel his eyes on me as I start to pick at the dark purple polish on my nails. “It makes no sense to start making any friends now. I mean, I’m graduating soon. I’ll hang out with them this year and then forget all about them once I leave this place. Seems like a waste of time and emotion.”

“I guess that makes sense.” He must have finished mixing, because he picks up his brush again and starts adding more stars and constellations to the reflection of the sky with the newly created color. “So is that why you’ve elected to come here? To avoid making friends?”

“Well, actually, I’m hiding. Girls have been harassing me all day trying to get me to spill the juicy details of your love life. I guess they’re too intimidated to ask you themselves.”

He lets out a laugh and picks up a smaller brush to add some detail to the shape of the moon. “So, your ideal way to spend lunch

on the run is doing homework?" I follow his eyes to the book on the desk.

A flash of burning red flushes across my cheeks and up to my ears. "You probably think I'm a huge nerd—"

"Your words, not mine." He chuckles, turning back to his canvas. "Is it not going to get done at home?"

"No, it will. I never don't do homework." I blink hard at my last comment; nothing coming out of my mouth is helping to refute this nerd status I've established.

"Then I'm sure you won't mind breaking away for an art lesson. That is, unless you have other nerdy obligations to tend to." I purse my lips as he tosses a smock in my direction, which I catch with one hand. "Looks like you *have* inherited your dad's hand-eye coordination. Matt isn't his last hope after all."

"Whatever," I say, rolling my eyes playfully. "Just hand me a brush."

He takes me through the basics of mixing colors and then teaches me a couple brushstrokes. It isn't until he's guiding my hand over the canvas that I really take notice of how he looks. He has a square jaw, which he clenches and unclenches when he's concentrating on a stroke. And his eyes are a lighter shade of brown than I originally thought they were. Last night, they looked dark and full of secrets, but today, they are honey-colored and relaxed, almost carefree. I zero in on a scar just above his left eyebrow. *He wasn't lying; he does have a lot of scars. Where could he have possibly gotten them all?*

"You're supposed to be watching my hands, not my face," he says as his eyes pierce through the lenses of my glasses and into mine. The pink in my cheeks returns, and I avert my eyes, killing the curiosity, but it's too late. He's already seen me staring. "Go ahead. Say what's on your mind. I can see those wheels turning."

I pause. *Should I ask him about his past home life?* He looks so happy right now, and I don't want to be responsible for shattering that feeling. "What happened to your family?" I say, looking directly into his eyes. I see his broad shoulders droop, and instantly I regret asking. Setting down his paintbrush, he starts to clench his jaw again, as if he's fighting the urge to tell me the truth.

"My mom—" he starts, but gets cut off by the PA system.

Ding. Ding. Ding. "Please excuse the following announcement," a woman's voice booms through the intercom in the art room.

"I guess we'll have to finish this conversation another time." He frowns.

"All students currently taking Ms. Harper's fifth- and sixth-period English II classes need to report to room 306 for class today. I repeat, all students currently taking Ms. Harper's fifth- and sixth-period English II class need to report to room 306 for class today."

I can't help but wonder how anyone sitting out by the lunch tables can hear this announcement. Lunchtime can get pretty loud and wild; sometimes it's hard to hear the intercom even on a tame day.

A look of concern passes over Dylan's eyebrows, and I can't tell whether it's directed at his painting or the announcement, but when he drops his brushes in the sink and charges toward his backpack to pull out the cream-colored sheet of paper with his schedule on it, I figure it's the latter. "Everything okay?"

I watch in silence as he gnaws at his lower lip while his eyes graze the front of the sheet of paper. "I guess I'll head to room 306 after lunch today. I wonder what's going on."

"There's always something going on in this school. It's probably just a schedule mix-up or misprint. Wait, what room did they say to meet in?"

“306.”

“Hold on,” I say, pulling my folded-up schedule from my back pocket. “I could have sworn that that’s where my AP English class was meeting next period. Well, where are we supposed to go, then?”

“AP English, huh?” He smirks, ignoring my question. “Classic over-achiever.” The way he says the word *overachiever* makes it sound as if it’s a disease that he doesn’t want to catch.

“Yeah.” I hand him my schedule so he can see how full my plate will be this semester.

“Are you aware that three out of your six classes are AP courses?” he asks, his voice caked with disbelief. “Chemistry, English, *and* calculus. *And* you’re taking honors civics, too?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. It just sounds like a lot of work.”

I have to laugh. “I’m number one in my class right now, so if graduation was tomorrow, I’d be walking across that stage with the valedictorian title.” I see his eyebrows rise in surprise as I speak. “Valedictorians get early admissions and free rides to college, and if AP and honors classes are going to earn me that, then I’m just gonna have to suck it up and power through them, no matter how much work I have to do.”

He heads back to the sink and smiles, shaking his head. “Well, aren’t you something.”

I’m not sure if it’s a compliment, but I blush at his words anyway. Before I can think of a sassy comeback, the bell rings, commanding us to make our way across campus to the 300 building, where all English and foreign language classes are held.

“It’s been a helluva day—let me just start with that,” Mr. Lawrence, my AP English teacher, says, taking a deep breath as if he’d just run a

mile before starting class. He rounds the front of his desk and plops down on top of it, crossing his ankles like someone waiting to be checked out by a general practitioner. “I began today thinking that I was going to be teaching five AP students after lunch each day, but, as evidenced by the number of students in here with me right now, that isn’t going to be the case this semester.”

Dylan must be a lot more vocal in his classes than I am because while I sit back and wait to hear the reason for the combining of two classes, his hand is the first to shoot into the air with a question. “Your backstory is nice and all, Mr. Lawrence, but can’t you just tell us what happened to Ms. Harper?” It’s not the way I would have worded it, but still, it’s the question everyone in this room wants answered.

“She quit.” A few students start to chatter at his announcement, and it isn’t until he raises his hairy hands, as if surrendering, that we quiet down. “I know. I know. You were all looking forward to an easy breezy semester with the young and fun Ms. Harper, but unfortunately for you—and me, I guess—she checked her lottery tickets during third period. Apparently, she won, and immediately after, she decided that she didn’t need, and I quote, ‘this headache anymore.’ Unquote. Now—”

“How much did she win?” It’s Dylan again.

“Enough to never have to work again a day in her life.” Mr. Lawrence loosens his tie a bit before continuing, obviously bothered at Dylan’s incessant interruptions. “Now, as luck would have it, it just so happens that the first book you all were going to read in her class was going to be *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. The same book that my AP students were going to dive into later this semester.” He raises a medium-sized, fragile-looking softcover book above his head for everyone to see. “Administration was in a bit of a

tizzy over her sudden departure, so to buy them some time, I said I'd take on you guys. You will spend the first half of this semester with me, and finish it out with the new teacher they hire."

A few boys in the back—football players, judging by the patches on their letterman jackets—start a slow clap, and I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes. This was the madness I tried to get away from by taking an AP class.

"Yes, I know, I'm like Superman coming to save the day, but we have no time to waste. You two," he says, pointing to the slow-clapping boys, "pass around these books, and please, people, be careful with these. They're a little worn."

The first thing Mr. Lawrence tells us to do is pull out a notebook and put the date on the top of the page. "Now, obviously, the AP students can't do the same assignments as you English II folks. My AP angels will have to do a little more work than you guys, but there is one exercise I would like both classes to do as we read this book together: journaling. In order to elevate your thinking with this novel, I want each of you to compile a first-person journal relating to this text."

The feeling of *déjà vu* clouds my mind as I think back to freshman year. We had to do a journaling activity in English I, too, but obviously, with our teacher reading them at the end of each week, we couldn't be very truthful in what we wrote. Fearing that history is about to repeat itself, I raise my hand, hesitantly. "Mr. Lawrence, are you going to read these?"

"Not exactly. At the end of each week, you will submit your journals to me, and I'll check to make sure you are indeed using the ten minutes I allot at the beginning of each class to write. But no, I will not read them. If you're that worried about it, change the names, but

I can assure you, Ms. Ellenburg, there's nothing that's going on with you that I haven't seen before.

"Quite frankly," he says, running his fingers through his head of receding brown hair, "your lives are filled with way too much drama for me . . . who's going out with whom, who broke up with whom, and all of the other hormone-induced nonsense that prevents you guys from focusing on your studies. I'd lose my mind if I chose to read every one of your journal entries. God, you couldn't pay me to go through high school again." He pauses for a second, probably to recall the good and bad that happened during his high school years. After a minute, he rolls up his sleeves, claps his hands twice, and says, "All right, let's write."

Mr. Lawrence allots us only ten minutes to write in class, which I spend coming up with a recipient name. I can't just journal without a purpose; I need someone to write to. At the end of my ten minutes, I scrawl two words across the top of my page: *Dear Catherine*. Catherine Earnshaw is the protagonist in *Wuthering Heights*, so it only seems fitting to share my private thoughts with her, a complete and total fictional character.

When time is called, I close my notebook with the promise of picking this back up later at home, and I look over at Dylan's journal. With a full page of barely legible handwriting sitting before him, he flips through his copy of *Wuthering Heights*. I can't help but wonder what he chose to write about. He could have written about his life before us, but he also has many other topics to choose from: his fostering situation . . . my family . . . his first day at Cedar Pointe High . . . me.

What could he possibly have to say about you? I ask myself as I twirl

a few strands of hair around my index finger. *Well, he did kinda flirt with you last night*, the voice in my mind responds. *Very true. Very true, indeed.*

I go back and forth a few more times, but when my curiosity overpowers my better judgment, I decide to sneak a peek. I lean over a little more and squint my eyes to see if I can recognize my name in his microscopic writing, but Mr. Lawrence begins teaching before I can scan my way down his page. *Maybe I'm not meant to know* is the idea I settle on.

“This novel may be a classic, but I promise you’ll be surprised at just how much this book will relate to your own lives.”

“Doubt it,” Dylan disputes under his breath.

After reading the back cover of my copy and getting a peek at the messy love-hate relationship between Catherine and her adopted brother, Heathcliff, I have an answer of my own, too: *I hope not.*



chapter 4

WHEN THE FINAL bell rings, I rush from the gym to my car and wait for Dylan. Most of the students have already left by the time I see him exit the building with two girls in tow. I want to gag as I watch them follow behind him like a couple of puppies. They've rolled their PE shorts up so far that if they bend over, everyone within fifty feet of them will get a peep show. *Tasteful.*

After he waves good-bye and thanks them for walking him to my car, he gets in. The first thing he does is dig his hands into his pockets and pull out two handfuls of tiny slips of paper.

"You weren't kidding," he says, letting the slips fall through his fingers and into my lap. "The girls here love fresh meat."

I scoff and let out a laugh at the sexual undertones. Once I compose myself, I turn to Dylan and say, "I don't want to hear about your sexual escapades, especially on your first day here."

"As if," he wheezes, stuffing the numbers back into his pockets.

“They’re pretty hot, don’t get me wrong, but most are dumb as door-knobs.”

“I told you,” I say, cranking the engine. “So no one caught your eye?”

“One girl did, briefly, but she’s off-limits.”

“She’s got a boyfriend, huh?” My question goes unanswered as he stares out the window. I imagine that he’s daydreaming about the girl he can’t have. “Yeah, most of the good ones are either taken or don’t care to mess around in high school because they know it’s not going to last. I, myself, fall into the second category.”

“So you’ve never dated . . . anyone?”

“Nope.” I see his thick eyebrows rise up. “Boys are not part of the plan.”

“‘The plan’?”

“If I’m going to be a big-time novelist by the time I’m twenty-five, there is no room for dating. It’ll mess everything up. And plus, no one here is worth a second glance. At least not at our school, anyway.” We ride in silence the rest of the way home until he mentions our journaling assignment in English class.

“Saw you trying to poke around in my journal during class today. Did you find what you were looking for?”

Flustered, I stutter around, trying to string a good excuse together, but his laughter cuts me off.

“I get it. I haven’t exactly told you much about myself.”

My thoughts exactly.

“One day, though,” he says, unbuckling his seat belt after I pull into our driveway. “One day.”

“Deal,” is what I end up saying, but what I’m really thinking is, *What’s wrong with today? Why not now?* We hop out of the car and as

we walk up to the house, my dad appears at the edge of the driveway. He waves at us with a grin so large that it looks like his face is going to break if it stretches any wider.

“Hey, how was school?” At first, I think he’s talking to me, but when he slaps his arm around Dylan’s shoulder and walks him up the driveway, I fall back. “Come inside the garage. I have a surprise for you.” *Am I being replaced already?*

I’ve been jealous of plenty of people before, but never at home. At school, there are hot popular kids to envy everywhere. That’s normal. But not here. Our house is my safe place.

I would never resent Matthew for stealing the spotlight, mainly because it’s never been something that could be stolen. We share it; that light shines on both of us all the time. Over the years, the love and praise we receive from our parents has always been split evenly between the two of us. But now that Dylan is here, I’m starting to feel that pressure behind my eyes grow as the amount of attention I get from them diminishes.

“Your very own art studio,” my dad says as he opens the door. There are two easels in the center of what used to be our garage, and around that, tons of art supplies. “We haven’t parked our cars in here in years due to all of the clutter. Someone might as well make use of the space, right?”

I run my fingers over the soft paintbrush bristles and smile, remembering the way Dylan’s hand guided mine over the canvas at school today. The memory overtakes me for a moment, and I almost forget why I was mad a second ago.

“I got a little bit of everything. Over there, on that back wall, are your paints—acrylic, oil, *and* watercolor—and in that bin are some bags of charcoal in case you like to sketch with them. In this,” he says,

patting his hands on top of a blue and gold chest, “is pastels. I’ve hung some of your paintbrushes on the wall, and you have backups in those drawers over there.” He crosses his hands over his chest and sighs, proud of his hard work. “You like it? The guy at the store said these were the best artsy items they had.”

“Like it? This is amazing!” He wraps his arms around my father to give him a manly hug, and then circles the room to gape at the art supplies that he’s been gifted.

I personally feel like my dad overdid it on the art studio, but Dylan doesn’t seem to think so. The crater-like dimples in his cheeks cannot contain the warmth radiating through his body, and neither can the caramel-colored gleam in his eyes. I watch as he forces his trembling fingers into his pockets, and bites his bottom lip to hold back tears of happiness.

“Well, I’m gonna go get cleaned up now. Your mom should be here with Matthew soon, so be on the lookout.”

“Thanks again, Daniel.”

“Oh . . .,” my dad says as his lips press together into a slight grimace. He never lets Matthew and me call him by his first name; he finds it disrespectful. “Oh, it’s nothing. I’ll see you both later.”

“This is crazy, right?” Dylan breathes when Dad leaves.

“Yeah. It’s really cool,” I say, trying to match his enthusiasm. “Complete with your own stereo system and everything.”

“I know, I can’t believe it.”

“So, what kind of music are you going to blast to channel your artistic abilities? For some reason, I’m getting this electronic techno vibe from you. Am I right?”

“Not even close.” He side-smiles. “I like classic and urban rock and roll.”

“That was my second guess.”

“But I probably won’t be listening to much music down here. I think I paint better with conversation than with music. And speaking of painting, now we can continue your art lessons here.” He grabs the two stools from the corner and then pulls on a smock before handing one to me. “You want to join me?”

His amber eyes are hard to say no to, so I give in. He walks me through the strokes that he taught me earlier and then lets me loose to try it on my own, freeing him up to get started on his own piece.

“That’s perfect, but ease up on the pressure. You don’t want the paint to bleed through.” Turning away from his canvas, he places his hand over mine to show me the amount of pressure I should be using, and when he does, I flinch.

“No need to be scared. I don’t bite.” He’s so close that I can smell the soap on his skin. *He smells good*, I think to myself. But then he reclaims his seat beside me and takes his scent with him, leaving only traces for me to inhale into my memory. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as he picks up his brush to continue working on a painting of a woman with a young boy sitting on her lap. I still haven’t been able to figure out how he is able to paint so fast and have his paintings turn out as beautiful as they do. At this rate, his studio will be filled with at least a hundred paintings by the time Christmas rolls around.

“Who are they?” I ask, overstepping my boundaries again.

“My mom and me.”

“She’s gorgeous.”

“Of course she is. I mean, have you seen me? Runs in the family.”

I can’t stop the chuckle in my throat from escaping. “I don’t think I’ve ever met someone who is as cognitively aware of their good looks as you are, Dylan.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” His witty responses make it hard to fault him for being so vain.

“So, how long has it been since you’ve seen her?” I ask, trying to ease back into the conversation that I’m dying to have with him. I don’t want to seem too pushy, though. His breathing already seems to be deeper and heavier than it was ten seconds ago. Nothing but silence echoes throughout the reorganized garage, and I try my best to act like it doesn’t bother me. “Where is she now? Do you know?”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” he says, slapping his paintbrush down. I see his jaw clench and unclench again. “Just drop it. Please.”

I see the hurt in his watering eyes and do as he requests. Is it wrong of me to want to know a *little* bit about him? If I were in his position, I would want to let my new family know a little about me. But he’s not me.

The silence is almost too much for me to take, and I start to look for ways that I can end our painting lesson without offending him. Just then, my mom’s car pulls into the driveway and I no longer need to search for an excuse. “My mom probably wants help with dinner, so I’m gonna go wash up to help her.”

As I get up to hang my smock on the wall, he grabs my wrist. At first, his grip is tight, but I feel it loosen as he pulls me toward him. There’s a fretful look in his eyes, like he doesn’t want me to leave his side, but I know that’s not the reason behind it. “I didn’t mean to lash out at you. I . . . I just miss her.”

I suppress the urge to ask him why he doesn’t live with his mom now and secure my hands around his waist to pull him into a hug. “Whenever, if ever, you want to talk, I’m here.” As his muscles wrap around my body, I feel an adrenaline rush. *Whoa! What is that?*

“I appreciate that, Emma.” As I pull away from him, he tries

to put on a smile, but it comes out more like a scowl. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

As I cross the grassy backyard, heading for my room to wash up, I can’t help but wonder what that feeling in my stomach was all about when I hugged Dylan. I’m not hungry, I’m not on my period, and I don’t feel sick, so I know it’s not related to any of those. No, it’s something else. I don’t know what it was, but I’ve never felt something like that before and my insides are longing to feel it again.



I AM USUALLY NOT ONE TO BRING ADULTS INTO MY PROBLEMS, SIMPLY FOR the fact that I think it’s a cop-out. I like to learn my own lessons, even if it means making the same mistakes over and over before I master them, so when I find myself alone with my mom after dinner, I know that this is serious.

“Mom, can I ask you something?”

“Anything.” She’s adjusting the temperature to make a lukewarm soap water for the dirty dishes to soak in. I expect her to think that I’m coming to her with a boy problem, because I never have before, and I know she is excited for the day that I do.

“It’s about Dylan.”

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay?” Her eyebrows draw together with worry, and I start to question if she reacts the same way when she thinks something is wrong with me.

“He’s fine. I just want to know how you guys came to fostering him.” She breaks eye contact with me, and I see her swallow hard before turning her attention back to the dishwasher. “Not that I don’t like that he’s here, but we were all expecting a little kid, right? So how did we end up with him?”

She stops in the middle of testing the water and looks at me, letting the suds run down the sides of her arms and drip onto the floor. “You want to know what happened to him before we took him in, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah. I feel like we’re owed that much. I mean, we *did* bring him in to stay with us. It’s only fair that we know his backstory.”

“Did you ask him?”

“Yeah. Kind of. But bringing it up only makes him upset. And I want to help him adjust, but it feels like he takes three steps back every time we come close to talking about his past.”

“Have you stopped to ask yourself why it’s so important to you? You’ve always told me that someone’s past doesn’t define them.”

“Very true.”

“So why does it mean so much to you to hear every little detail about his?”

I have no answer to this. His past shouldn’t matter because his future with us is what’s important now. “I don’t know. Like I said, I guess I feel like he owes this to me. To us, I mean.” Our eyes meet, and I know what she’s going to say before her lips form the words. No.

“No. I’m not going to tell you his story just yet. It’s dark, and I want him to be a little more comfortable in this house before we divulge his demons to you and Matthew.”

“Oh,” I say, the lightbulb going off in my head. “You don’t want his past to influence how we feel about him while we’re getting to know him.”

“Exactly. And if I were you, I’d quit prodding. It might cause him to slip into a depressive state. He was a mess when he first entered the system, and I don’t want him to relapse into that. You might want to reconsider having that conversation altogether.”

“So you’re saying just forget about it?”

“For now, yes. And for God’s sake, Emma, it’s his second day in the house. Let him get adjusted before you start digging for secrets.” I see Dylan zoom around the corner, carrying Matthew on his back. They have already created a bond based on fun and laughter, and I’m still sitting here trying to playing Nancy Drew with his backstory. “Start thinking of him as your brother, not some random stranger that you need to run a background check on.”

After taking another look at Matthew and Dylan, I beam. “Maybe you’re right.”

I pocket her advice, and, after grabbing *Wuthering Heights* from my backpack, head to the pool to lounge. The California heat has cooled to a more bearable temperature, and the reflection of the sunset-colored sky on the surface of the pool has created the perfect, romantic atmosphere to read. I’ve read through three chapters of *Wuthering Heights* when Dylan appears by my side, wearing swimming trunks and a T-shirt.

“The writing’s a bit pretentious,” he says, pulling his shirt over his head in an I’m-a-sexy-lifeguard kind of way. “I mean, the story’s okay, but Emily Brontë probably could have written it without using words like *vexatious* and *lachrymose*.”

“Y-yeah,” I manage to get out, averting my eyes as he reveals his upper body to me. The scar beneath his collarbone reminds me of our conversation on the stairs last night, and I swallow hard when I feel an uneasy warmth travel up my neck. I’m thankful for the orange glow that the sunset is casting on me; it makes the flushed color in my face harder to detect. I close my book, making sure to use my finger as a bookmark, and try to clear my throat. “You’ve got a point there.”

“I’m just going for a swim, but don’t stop reading on my account.”

I reopen my book and peek over the top of it to see his muscular figure, which demands attention, standing on the edge of the diving board. “And you might want to go sit over there. This could get messy, and I don’t want to hear anything about you or your precious book getting wet.”

“I’m fine,” I say, settling even deeper into my seat. “I’ve cannonballed into that pool enough times to know that I’m nowhere near the splash zone. You won’t damage my ‘precious book.’”

“Suit yourself. But believe me when I say that I’m an expert.” Balancing on the edge of the board, he gives me a smirk as if challenging me. “CANNONBALL!” he screams, and a second later jumps into the pool, sending a rush of waves crashing down toward the feet of my lawn chair. He must know that he has failed to send the chlorine water far enough to get me wet, because when his tan, muscular frame resurfaces in the center of the sunset’s reflection, he starts slapping at the water.

“I told you so,” I shout over his splashing. “I should have had you put money on it.”

I’m almost positive that he didn’t have a pool in his last group home or foster home—or wherever he was living before he came into our lives—because it’s as if he’s regressed to the age of four and has discovered the fun of playing in the pool for the first time. He splashes and flops around theatrically. I turn my attention back to *Wuthering Heights* and tune him out. That is, until I hear him speak again.

“Emma,” he gurgles with a mouthful of water as his head bobs up and down on the surface. “Emma!” I hear him scream once more as he disappears under the water.

I don’t have enough time to form a coherent thought about what’s going on. My mind is set on only one thing: saving him.

I underestimate how much he weighs, and it takes me almost five minutes to drag him to the shallow end and out of the water. *He could be dead by now*, I think as I lay him on his back in the grass and place my head on his chest, hoping to still hear a heartbeat.

“Please don’t die, Dylan. Please don’t die,” I repeat as I pump his chest three times, then lift his chin and pinch the bridge of his nose.

My lips are an inch away from his when I hear him snicker and say, “God, I wish I could have gotten that on camera.”

“What. The hell. Is wrong. With you?” I say, slapping his defined abs. “I thought you were drowning! I almost had a heart attack!”

“You should have seen your face. ‘Please don’t die, Dylan! Please don’t die,’” he imitates as he clutches his stomach with laughter.

“Something is wrong with you.” Standing over the edge of the pool, I wring the water out of my hair and imagine that it’s Dylan’s neck. “Like, seriously wrong if you think that’s funny.”

“Oh, come on, Em. Can’t you take a little joke?” he says, brushing the grass off of his back as he gets up. “I was only trying to get you to laugh. You’ve been distant since our painting lesson earlier.”

“And with good reason. Oh, and would you look at this?” I race to the lawn chair I was just at and pick up my copy of *Wuthering Heights* from the edge of the pool, the pages dripping from the water that splashed up as I dove in to save him. “Mr. Lawrence is going to kill me.”

I return to my room, plug in my hair dryer, and turn it on its highest setting before pointing it at the pages of the book. I can see the blue-inked, cursive-lettered margin notes expand into unreadable blots as the moisture settles in. The words on the delicate pages begin to dissolve next, and before long, they disappear altogether, almost as if they were never there to begin with.