

Genevieve Davenport, September 7, NXHS

From the parking lot, the exterior of North Xenial High was gleaming like newly-polished teeth. Everywhere she looked, Genevieve saw packs of two and three students, bleating happily as they traipsed through the open doorway, excited to be the first to get to inaugurate a new building.

She tried smiling at herself in the rearview mirror, candy-sweet. *Yuck.*

Genevieve slid out of her RAV-4, keeping her phone handy as she crossed the asphalt, squinting against the sunlight bouncing off the chrome double doors.

She thought about her new schoolmates, the ones who had lucked into having NXHS built in their backyard. Not so for her. It had been work to transfer. But being unusual in high school had been bad enough. Being unusual and *famous* – especially for having a missing sister – was like slogging through a swamp full of shit. People squeezing her arm earnestly and saying how hard this must be and then waiting for her to fumble my way through a response. She'd wanted to ask them, "Why are you talking to me, why are you *touching* me? And why is my own personal tragedy suddenly about *you*?"

Long story short, she transferred from Raion High when the opportunity presented itself. *Everyone should get at least one do-over on who they are, shouldn't they? Sure, there's always a chance everyone was just about to join hands and, you know, embrace outcasts, but the likeliest thing was...not that.*

Plus, she got to move away from her step-dad, because her Aunt Allie was less than a mile from this new STEAM-focused magnet school. She reflected on how Aunt Allie's line about "You're gonna get tired of hanging out with me all the time" turned out to be more like "You're gonna get tired of wondering where I am all the time."

She got nearly fifteen minutes of something bordering on enjoyment, lurking on the periphery of the multi-purpose room, before a smile with shoulder pads crossed the stage to a microphone. Genevieve played with her phone until she heard a crooning, "If you've already made a friend, tell them 'See you *later*, alligator, I'm about to break. Some. Ice!'" as the principal mimed karate chopping invisible sheets of frozen water.

Well. It was fun while it lasted.

A girl in a powder blue tee, eyes twinkling like cracked-out fairies, turned to her and said, "Hi! My name's Madison, what's yours?"

Genevieve pointed to her throat and shook her head -- even though that rarely worked, and usually only with randos on the street or whatever.

Madison's smile got so big Genevieve hoped briefly it might swallow her whole head. Instead, Madison's open palm slapped her chest as she said, "MY. NAME'S. MADISON." She followed up with, "WHAT'S YOURS?" and vigorously pointed to Genevieve.

Bitch, I can speak English, I just don't want to speak it to you.

Genevieve touched the first icon – a large red X – under Frequently Used in the app. "I must go now, for I am needed elsewhere" said a gravelly, vaguely Irish sounding voice from her phone.

She turned her back to Madison, heading to the exit. Genevieve made eye contact with the muscular, goateed teacher lurking there, and touched the toilet icon on her phone. "The bathroom is calling for me, and I...I must answer," her phone said.

The teacher studied her, spending an extra second on the area between her chin and her navel, and then gave a nod.

You stupid child, she thought, her footsteps echoing in the hallway. Nothing's going to change. You're still different, and people are going to hate you as a result.

She was nearly to the bathroom door when an arm grabbed her.

Turning, she saw a girl of about her height, her smiling face framed by two chestnut-brown braids. Genevieve thought that she vaguely recognized her, but had no idea from where.

"Hi," the girl said, her dark eyes glinting. "My name's Sage. Let's talk."