

Prologue

When Ashley's eyes snapped open, she had no idea how she had come to be in a forest. The moonlight that filtered through the shadowy leaves of the giant oak trees seemed as white as bone. She sat up, dusting herself free of twigs and leaves that were stuck in her hair. Her head pounded, and she lifted a hand to her forehead to steady herself.

She took out her phone to call 911, but she was so deep in the woods that she couldn't get service. Her stomach clenched and threatened to spill its contents on the damp ground.

Just get to a road, she thought. Just start walking.

She knew if she stayed still, she might become paralyzed by the fear that was threatening to claw its way up her throat.

When she stood up, she was immediately overcome by a wave of dizziness. She took a few, shaky steps and tried to not look too long into the deep shadows and dark crevices of the forest. If she did, she knew that she would see a pair of bright, yellow eyes watching her every move.

She asked herself if she had gotten drunk, but then she remembered that today was Monday.

At least, she thought it was.

When was it, exactly? How long had she been out? And why the hell was she out in the middle of nowhere?

Just keep moving, she told herself.

Her breathing became shallow, as she heard the sounds of the forest grow louder around her. Each snap of a twig made her heart beat just a little harder; each scurry of a critter into the underbrush made her walk just a little faster.

She glanced up, noticed how the black branches seemed to scrape the sky.

"Hello?" she yelled. "Can anyone hear me?"

Nothing.

Only the wind hissing and the moan of creaking wood replied.

"Hello?" she yelled again, trying to ignore how her heart was pounding now, how the thought that she was completely lost was digging itself into her skull. What if she was lost forever? What if no one found her? What if—

She slapped a mosquito on her neck, and the shock seemed to bring her out of her spiral of bleak thoughts.

Suddenly, she heard the snap of a branch on the ground. Something heavy enough to break the thick wood.

Ashley glanced wildly around, but she couldn't see anything, even in the vivid light of the full moon.

She began to walk faster.

She didn't know where she was going, but she knew that she needed to put space between her and whatever what was in the forest.

Out of the corner of her eye, Ashley saw something gray and hairy flash by. Then, a low growl penetrated her swirling thoughts, and before her mind could register, her body began sprinting.

All she would think of was the whoosh of blood through her ears. She tried to run as fast as she could, but the fallen limbs and thick piles of leaves slowed her down. It was like one of those horrible dreams where the faster she tried to run, the slower she went.

Suddenly, a splitting howl rent the air. Ashley shrieked. She tried to draw breath, but the air was jagged. It felt like knives stabbing her chest. Her lungs burned as she ran faster, not daring to look behind her. She could feel the stare of the large, hairy creature on her.

She imagined its huge claws and blade sharp teeth sinking into her throat.

Looking wildly around, she tried to find a tree she could climb, but the branches were too high.

Faster, faster!

Then, through the awful panic, she could have sworn she heard someone chuckle. More than the creature, that sound froze her blood, turned her feet into lead.

She whipped around, trying to identify the source of the sound.

When she turned back, she did not have time to scream as the creature attacked.

Chapter ? [Riding into town scene?]

Chapter 1

"Shut up, Vinnie," I hissed, trying to push my older brother back. "I can't hear what they're saying."

"You could hear if you quit talking," he replied. "Move over."

"You move over."

We fought for space, straining to lean as far as we could over the stairway. The hard wood of the floorboards was rough on my knees, and even more so as Vinnie and I jostled each other for space. Voices from the living room drifted up from the house we had just moved into.

"I have to admit, Sheriff, we weren't expecting to see you until Monday," said Bill, our foster father. He had a soft way of speaking, the kind of voice used to quiet spaces of libraries and research facilities.

"And not right before a thunderstorm, either," added Helen, our foster mother. Helen's voice had a pleasant, almost-musical quality to it, but when she got angry, it could turn as sharp as a blade.

"I normally wouldn't disturb y'all, but...there was another attack, Bill. A girl from the other side of town," replied the Sheriff. "Worst one yet."

"Dude sounds like a cross between Clint Eastwood and somebody's uncle," whispered Vinnie.

I loved my brother, but sometimes, I wanted to throttle him.

"Would you *shut up* and listen?" I said. "The problem is worse than they told us."

We turned back to the conversation in the living room. The thick scent of rain and electricity hung in the air, making my foster father's next words seem heavier.

"How bad?" Bill's voice was low, full of concern.

"Bad." The sheriff inhaled sharply. "Girl looked like she'd been mauled by a pack of rottweilers."

A wave of queasiness hit my stomach. Vinnie and I looked at each other, eyebrows raised.

"How many does that make?"

"This one makes three in the past week, but this time it's worse, Bill...the girl was found dead."

Dead?

"Damn it," said Bill.

I heard the squeak of the couch as Bill leaned back. He probably was pinching the bridge of his nose, the way he always did when he was angry.

"That's the last thing we need," Bill continued. "What does that bring the total of fatalities up to now?"

Wait, people have been dying? They told us it was just weird animal behavior.

I shot a look to Vinnie. He mouthed, "A girl died?"

"That's six now since this whole mess began. Another thing too, Bill. Forensics says she'd been dead for a few days. Parents say she'd gone missin' about a week ago."

"A week ago....but that's..." Bill trailed off.

"Yeeup," said the Sheriff, drawing the word out into three syllables. "I checked it for you...last week was just about when the last person got killed the month before."

"So do you think that this is a pattern?" asked Helen. I knew she would clutch the little gold necklace she always wore, rubbing the half-moon between her two fingers. She always did that when she was worried.

"Hard to say," replied the Sheriff. "That's why we got you involved, Dr. Celester: to figure out why this is happening before more people get killed."

A sudden shock of thunder shook the house and nearly made me jump out of my skin. The staircase squeaked where we were, and Vinnie made the shushing motion with his finger.

The adults remained quiet for a few moments, and Vinnie and I held our breaths, not even moving a single eyelash.

"There's somethin' else too, Bill." The sheriff's voice went low, as if he could sense us listening.

"What is it, Joe?"

"Well, like I said, the girl was torn up pretty nasty," the Sheriff continued. "So bad we actually couldn't ID her. We've sent samples to get a positive match on who it is, but we're almost positive it's the missing girl. Her homemade shoes matched the descriptions the parents included." The sheriff hesitated. "If not for her parents reporting her missin' ...you couldn't have told who it was by looking at her. God, it was so bad a few of my rookies lost their lunch in the bushes. For the first time in my career, I thought I might get sick, too."

The roast chicken and mashed potatoes we had eaten for dinner threatened to come back up. Even the lingering scent of rosemary and thyme seemed to trigger something in my gorge. My heart hurt for the parents of the girl, whoever they were.

The sheriff took a breath before continuing.

"This ain't like when those hunters or that old couple got killed...a girl Bill! No more than fifteen years old! This kinda thing is going to cause a helluva uproar if not handled right."

"Yes, I can see what you mean," said Helen.

"That's why I came today. I need your advice," said the Sheriff. "The town is already uneasy, and people are starting to get angry and looking for action. I'm doing all I can to keep people from mobbing up with guns."

We managed to peak from the top of the staircase, and I saw a slightly older man with gray in his beard run a hand through his hair. "I'm facing a lot of pressure here. What can we do to stop the attacks until we figure this out?"

Bill went quiet for a moment, and even though I couldn't see where he sat, I knew he had the look of fierce concentration on his face.

"You could set a curfew in place," he finally responded. "No one goes out after ten pm. That might not stop the attacks, but hopefully it'll mean less people out and about."

"Well that sucks," whispered Vinnie.

Another thrash of thunder shook the old house down to its foundation. My heart leaped to my mouth unbidden. Wind began screaming and rattling the windowpanes.

"Better get going before the storm breaks," said the Sheriff. "Yes, a curfew. That'll keep the department off my back for a little while, but Bill..." he sniffed. "You and Helen figure out what's going on. Please."

It was the last word that held my attention. I hadn't thought a voice so gruff could sound so...plaintive. Begging. Here was a man desperate to find a solution to whatever was killing folks in his town.

"We'll work as hard on this as anything we have in our lives," responded Bill.

"Thank you," said the Sheriff. The sofas squeaked as everyone stood up. Their steps tapped on the floor as they walked toward the front door. "Your boys settling in all right?"

"Yes, they should be unpacking right now," Helen responded.

"Be sure to keep a close eye on them," responded the Sheriff. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to them."

"Of course," she replied. "Actually, I'm going to go check on them."

Vinnie and I scrambled up, to race back to our rooms. Vinnie jumped into his computer seat and wiggled the mouse to wake up the monitor. I grabbed a comic book and flopped on the bed.

When Helen knocked on the door, Vinnie and I were the picture of adolescent chilling, even though my heart was pounding from the thrill of nearly being discovered.

"Come in," called Vinnie, and Helen stuck her head in the doorway. Her hazel eyes glanced over the stacks of cardboard boxes, piles of dirty clothes, and bits and pieces of trash covering the floor.

"How's unpacking going?" she asked.

"I'm already done," I responded, not trusting myself to look Helen in the eye. I pretended to flip through the Wolverine comic in my hands, the glossy pages slightly damp from the humidity in the air. "Vinnie's the one with the chronic inability to get organized. Or have a visible floor."

Vinnie flung a sock at me. "That's because you're two years younger than I am, and therefore have two years less stuff to unpack."

A flash of lightning lit up the window, followed closely by a crack of thunder. Rain began pouring down, drumming on the old roof.

Helen's light brown hair swished as she turned her face toward the window. "Good thing we got all the furniture inside," she muttered. Then, gesturing with her chin, she asked, "What are you up to?"

"Just filling out a job application or two," responded Vinnie. "Can't take out hot babes if I don't have cold, hard cash."

"Well, don't stay up too late," responded Helen. "You two have got school tomorrow."

"What! We just got here," I said. "Can't we rest a day or two? Do some more unpacking? You know, that kitchen still has a lot of work to be done."

Helen smiled, the hallway light illuminating the faint gray hairs in her head. "As much as I appreciate the selfless sacrifice of giving up a few days of school —"

"We'll take a whole week if necessary," I added.

"— you two start tomorrow. Education is more important than a little mess."

I heaved a sigh. I wasn't thrilled to start school, getting thrown into a new environment, like a kid with nothing but arm floaties getting tossed into the deep end. A new school meant a huge amount of energy trying to interact, making meaningless small talk, getting lost a few dozen times, as I made my way around a new campus, and worst of all, re-learning every single teacher's individual quirks. I had faded quite nicely into the background at my old school, but if I was the new kid, I'd have to go through all the work of making connections, again.

"By the way," began Helen, and Vinnie and I groaned.

"That's the 'by the way,' where you know something bad is coming," I said.

"I know Bill and I normally set your curfew at midnight," she said. "But with all the strange animal behavior going on, we suggested to the sheriff that the town have a curfew at ten pm."

"Aw, come on!" I said.

"Yeah," added Vinnie, as we pretended to react to the news for the first time. "Why can't people do the American thing and buy a bunch of guns to protect themselves?"

"You really want a bunch of small-town folks toting guns and firing off at the first squirrel they see?" asked Helen.

"Guess not," muttered Vinnie. He really should try out for the Theater Club or something, the way he acted surprised and sulky.

For all my protesting, I actually agreed with the idea of the curfew, if it helped keep people safe.

But, as a teenager, it was my sworn and sacred duty to complain about everything.

"Besides, there's not like there's anything to do out here in the middle of Nowhere, USA," I said over the top of my comic. "Did you see the town coming in? One general store, one feed store, where they probably sell stuff like twine, and a playground with some rusty equipment. Bet they don't even have a movie theater."

I was half-joking with Helen but only barely. As we had driven into the town, my heart and slowly lowered more and more looking around at everything. The place looked like the set of a forgotten western: low buildings with peeling paint, a handful of traffic lights, and a half dozen churches. There was even a horse farm next to one of the churches.

They didn't even have Wal-Mart.

Helen paused. "Well, you're right about the movie theater —"

Vinnie groaned deeply.

"— but there's one not twenty minutes away, in the next town. Besides, didn't you see the beautiful forests coming into town? How green and fresh everything is? I feel like I can actually breathe some fresh air for once, instead of gas fumes and pollution."

"I'm allergic to fresh air," Vinnie responded. "My delicate nasal cavities are used to the volatile chemical composition of cities, where there is fun and things to do."

Vinnie wasn't any happier about our move than I was. He had had an on-again-off-again girlfriend that he finally decided to break it off with because of the move, but he missed the diversion. Plus, he was entering his final year of high school.

At least I have a couple of years to make friends, I thought. Vinnie has it even worse than I do.

"Don't forget to lay out your clothes tonight," said Helen, as she began to close the door. "And pack up your backpacks."

"You know, we can take care of ourselves," said Vinnie. "We know how to prepare." The humor in his voice almost disguised the faint, hard edge of truth in his voice. Vinnie was nearly eighteen, but he had thought of himself as an adult for much longer. When we were tossed like hackysacks from one rotten foster home to the next, he had basically taken care of me, which meant he had to grow up much faster than other kids.

"I know you do take care of yourselves," said Helen, as she took a couple of steps toward Vinnie. "And I know you can." She laid a hand on his shoulder and kissed the top of his head in a quick peck. "But I want to help you, just a little while longer."

She smiled at us both and turned to walk down the stairs, the squeak of the top stair signaling her descent. The rain continued to beat down on the house in a steady drumbeat.

Vinnie swiveled in his chair back to me.

"What *is* this town?" he said, clicking save on the job apps. "Nothing more than a main street with people in overalls, animals attacking people, and the Sheriff asking our parents for advice?"

"Yeah, we're definitely going to get killed by a demon scarecrow, crazy children, or redneck inbreeds," I said.

"Or worse."

[finish]

Chapter 2

As Vinnie and I stepped off the bus, we blinked into bright morning sunlight. It was as if the thunderstorm hadn't happened last night, except for the fresh, clean scent that rain always brings. We fell in line in between jocks in their football jerseys, acne-ridden nerds hovering over their PSPs, and freshmen practically bent in two carrying their backpacks.

We took a look at the place where we would spend the majority of the next two years of our lives. The multistory, red brick building seemed pretty generic, and I took solace in at least this wasn't some sleazy part of town. The name stood in big white letter along front, with the image of school's mascot.

"Moonlight High," I said. "Sounds like a drug."

"Asshole," Vinnie replied, laughing. "Come on, we gotta go to the guidance counselor to get our orientation crap."

"I don't see why we had to move after the year already started," I grumbled. We had just moved about two months after the school year had already started. After being yanked around most of my life, from foster home to foster home, I had loved finally staying in one place with Bill and Helen. I had managed to make friends during the six years they had officially adopted us, but now I had to start all over again. My old friends and I promised to stay in touch, but there was only so much bonding that could happen over headsets and microphones when we all played video games.

I already felt the long-forgotten pressure build in my chest. Sure, I could talk to strangers; I wasn't a complete dweeb, but it was hard to form a connection with anybody. I had learned that the less I talked to anyone, the less it would hurt when we inevitably moved.

"Didn't you hear anything they said last night?" said Vinnie, as we stepped inside the building. The familiar sounds of sneakers squeaking against tile, lockers slamming shut, and a thousand conversations assaulted our ears. The tangy scent of Pine-sol meant the floor had been freshly mopped. "It's even worse than Bill thought. If they're trying to find a pattern, then that means we have to stay here for a long time."

"Great," I said, eyeing the school banners, homemade locker decorations, and reminders to "Be the Best you can be!!!" on every square inch of wall space.

"Come on, John, it's not so bad, here," said Vinnie, eyeing a couple of girls gossiping as they walked by. "It looks like there's tons of opportunities to make new...friends."

"Ha, friends. Right. I'm not a chick magnet, like you," I replied, adjusting my backpack. Helen had stayed up late checking and double-checking we had everything

on our school supply lists and had even thrown in a few things that I was sure weren't needed but I appreciated anyway, like extra colored pencils and a scientific calculator.

As we walked up to the counselor's office, a harsh bell clanged above us. Students began walking faster toward their homerooms, scrambling to get there before the second tardy bell. John laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Look, I know this is kind of a pain in the ass —"

"Kind of?"

"— but you'll be able to make friends. I promise."

Easy for Vinnie to say. He seemed to have been inherently blessed with the Outgoing Gene, but I hung back. It had taken me at least two years at my last school to say anything more meaningful than, "Hey, can you move your head? I can't see the whiteboard."

"If you say so," I replied, not believing a word.

Vinnie chose not to notice my deep sarcasm. He clapped me on the shoulder much harder than necessary and said, "That's the spirit! Now, I'll go get our stuff." He turned and walked into the office.

I turned and set my backpack on the ground, leaning against the rough, brick wall. The high school opened up into a wide, main area, with a staircase on the left that led to the upper floors, but just inside the entrance was a long, narrow hallway with classrooms and lockers. To my right, another long hallway branched off, leading to deeper parts of the high school. The ceiling was high over our heads with two large lights hanging down, and I couldn't but think of those lights they put in incubators for chicks. School was supposed to be nurturing, but when was the last time we had had anyone nurture us, besides Bill and Helen? In front of us there was a large glass trophy case with achievements and awards from school events inside it.

My thoughts swirled around last night's conversation between Bill and Helen and the Sheriff. When we drove into the town, Bill and Helen had explained that there had been strange animal behavior going on. Animals wandering into town, birds slamming themselves into buildings, and there was even a bobcat that had slunk into the library and had nearly given the librarian a heart attack.

But they hadn't told us that anyone had died. I loved Bill and Helen, but I kind of wished that they had told us about the deaths.

Probably didn't want to scare us, I thought, glancing over to a group of jocks striding down the hallway like they owned the place. They probably didn't want us to worry about them.

And they were probably right. Since Bill and Helen had been our first, real parents, I had this deep dread that someday they would disappear from our lives, not by choice. In my nightmares, they always died in a car crash or someone murdered them in their sleep. Now I had the very real fear that something might happen to them in the field.

Just another reason to not like this town, I thought.

"Whatcha got there, Crazy Caroline?"

A voice that sounded like it belonged to someone who ate way too much protein powder and benched 800 pounds broke up my thoughts.

I jerked my head up to see some jock in a silver and light blue letterman jacket approach a girl with frizzy, light brown hair.

Don't get involved, I thought. Just stay out of it. Not my business anyway.

I wasn't about to make enemies with someone who looked like they followed Swartzenneger's workout plan.

"Oops," said the guy, as he "accidentally" bumped her. Her papers went flying in a white cascade. I heard the clattering of colored pencils as they scattered across the floor.

"Hey!" I heard myself say. I couldn't believe I was walking over to where they were. I didn't know what I was going to say, but I felt my heart pounding in my chest. I hadn't wanted to say anything, but when I saw the bright rainbow of pencils scatter, something in me snapped.

However, when I walked up, all my resolve vanished. "Not cool, dude," I mumbled, bending down to help the girl retrieve her papers. I didn't trust myself to look up.

The guy in the silver and blue letterman was surrounded by a couple of equally-jacketed, equally-ripped cronies. He nudged one of his friends and laughed, his blond, spiky hair seeming extra sharp under the bright hallway lights.

"Ha, can you believe this guy? Wants to be a knight for Crazy. What if you —"

Just then, a teacher stuck his head out the door. His baseball cap probably hid the fact that he was bald, and his paunch drooped over his belt.

"You boys, get to class," he said, motioning with his finger. "Can't start you, if you're in detention."

"Sure Coach Brinks," said Spiky Douche. They hurried off, snickering to each other.

I handed the last of the girl's papers to her. One of them had a very realistic depiction of a wolf, but it was marred by a big, dirty footprint.

"Here you go," I said. "You know...that's pretty good."

The girl said nothing but snatched the paper out of my hands. She stuffed it in with the rest of her things, then ran off. With her doc martins, floral skirt, and black beret, I could kind of see why they had called her crazy. One sock decorated like a giraffe and one with bright polka dots did not exactly scream mentally stable.

The hallway was nearly clear, but when I turned around, my vision was filled dark-haired, hazel-eyed goddess. I wanted to throw myself out of her way, just so I would avoid getting trampled underneath her red-manicured toes that supported beautifully-tanned, perfectly shaven legs.

I didn't know eyelashes could be that thick, I thought, and my mouth went dry immediately.

To both my wonderful surprise and abject horror, the Goddess of the Hallway stopped right in front of me. Immediately, a wave of jasmine body spray swept over me, making me think that angels must use whatever she did.

"Sorry, am I blocking your locker?" I said, stepping out of the way.

"No," replied a voice so musical that Handel would have wanted to bottle it. "I just saw what happened, and I wanted to say that I'm sorry. Ronnie can be kind of a

dick." She gave a sort of half smile, and I felt my heart fall through the floor. "I'm Megan, by the way."

For a moment, and I swear to you this is true, but for the briefest of moments, I forgot my own name.

Then whatever remained of my neurons began firing again.

"John. Dellich. I'm John. John Dellich," I babbled.

She giggled. "Well hello, John Dellich."

She reached her hand out to shake, and I took it, praying that my palm wasn't sweaty, which I highly suspected it was. I couldn't help but notice that her skin was softer than kitten belly fur.

You are the dumbest creature to ever crawl on the face of the earth, I thought. Four point six billion years of evolution to get you here, now say something intelligent.

"I'm new here," I said.

That was the best you could come up with??

"Yeah, I could tell. Even though everyone in school already knows each other, I could have told by the way you talked to Ronnie. No one ever confronts him." She smiled, her teeth perfectly straight, and I thought my retinas might melt from the intensity of their whiteness. "But that was really nice what you did. Standing up for Cr—for Caroline, I mean."

Was this girl, this...this perfect specimen of human genetics actually complimenting me?

My tongue suddenly felt like a brick.

Please God, or whoever is up there, just please let me make it out of this conversation with my dignity intact, and I swear I'll do whatever you want. I'll even stop using Vinnie's toothbrush as a back scratcher.

In the greatest bit of acting of my life, I shrugged nonchalantly. "No big deal," I said. "I hate bullying. I grew up with a lot of it, and it makes me angry to see people pick on others."

The final bell rung, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Well, that was the late bell. I'd love to talk to you more about our shared hatred of bullies. Maybe I'll see you in a class?"

"Sure. Class. That thing we both have."

She laughed again. "You're funny. See you around." And she gave a little wave as she walked away.

I must have walked back to the counselor's office, but I had no recollection of it. When Vinnie gave me my schedule, map of the school, and list of rules, he was talking to me, but I didn't hear a word he said.

That was essentially the first half of my entire day. I must have gone to class, but when the lunch bell rang, I had barely registered anything had happened. My last thought before entering into the river of students in the hallway, flowing toward the cafeteria was, "Maybe moving to this town isn't so bad after all."

Chapter 3

Vinnie and I had agreed to meet at the library and walk together into the cafeteria, so we could easily find each other in the boiling mass that was a high school during lunch hour.

As soon as I walked up, Vinnie said, "What happened?"

"What?" I replied, unable to conceal the huge grin spreading across my face.

"Baby bro, you look like cupid took a shotgun to your heart. You're even walking taller, which I've never seen you do. What happened?"

"Nothing," I said, pretending to survey the crowd.

"That's the biggest load of 'nothing' I've ever heard of," said Vinnie, punching me in the shoulder. "Tell me."

"Let's get lunch and sit."

Really, I was bursting to tell Vinnie, but I didn't want to shout with the others in line. In a school like this, I knew that gossip would spread like an Australian wildfire if I screamed, "I met this really hot chick with dark curly hair who smells like an exotic garden!"

No thanks.

So we took our places in the crowded morass of the cafeteria. My stomach rumbled loud enough for me to hear it even over the shouts of the other kids. I hadn't known that having a huge crush on someone could work up such an appetite. Smells of garlic mingled with the strong odor of sweat and the ever-present smell of disinfectant. Students scurried like ants to be first in line for pizza; it stretched nearly around the entire room, while the hot lunch line and the salad bar had barely anyone in it.

Kids took their hard-earned places in the pecking order of lunch tables. I saw groups of pretty girls flinging their ponytails and picking at salads; a group of black-clad, slightly overweight guys playing Magic: the Gathering, the cards spread out like an offering to the Gods of Geekdom; and what must have been theater kids rehearsing their lines, because I kept seeing someone getting fake-stabbed with a plastic knife, and crying out, "A plague on both your houses!"

Normally Vinnie and I would bring our lunches, but Helen had given each of us ten dollars for our first day meal. So, as two teenage guys with the capacity to burn through an entire refrigerator of food (which, Vinnie and I actually did once)...we went a little crazy. We got doubles of everything: double milk, ice-cream, tatter tots, and two slices of pizza each. After we'd gotten our Royal Caribbean cruise-sized buffet we made our way to the less populated area of a table and began to feast on the school-funded nutrition that was 'food.'

"All right," said Vinnie, through a mouthful of pizza. "Spill. Spill like BP in the Gulf of Mexico. Spill like a freshman girl at her first college party. Spill —"

"Ok, ok," I said, laughing. I had already eaten the crusts off my pizza first, something that drove Vinnie crazy. "So I met this girl."

Vinnie made a motion for me to keep talking.

"And she was...pretty cute."

"And?"

"And we talked..."

"And?"

"And we might have even flirted a little bit..."

"And?"

"And that was it. The bell rang, and she had to go to class."

Vinnie flung his pizza onto his plate.

"Good god, man, if you go any slower, you'll never bless Bill and Helen with adopted grandchildren. Did you get her number?"

I coughed. "Not exactly."

Vinnie steepled his fingers and placed them against the bridge of his nose and slowly shook his head back and forth. "Johnny, Johnny," he said. "You mean to tell me you're in love with this girl, and you didn't even get her phone number?"

"I'm not —"

"Don't lie to me; I can see into your soul." Vinnie stabbed his spoon at me, then dug it into his ice cream. "Remember that." He smiled, then took a huge bite of vanilla studded with chocolate chips.

I popped a tater tot into my mouth, savoring the warm, crunchy comfort food. "Easy for you to say. All you have to do is look at a girl, and they give you their number. My tongue felt like someone had tied an anchor around it and heaved it into the Marianas Trench."

"Whose trench do you want to heave your anchor into?" asked Vinnie with a wicked grin.

I threw a tater-tot-grease-stained napkin at him. "It's the lowest point on Earth, you uncultured swine, and exactly where I'd like to be buried when I fumble asking for Megan's number."

"Ah, so her name is *Megan*."

"Yeah, and she's —" I suddenly stopped. Tried to gulp but something was lodged in my throat. Immediately, I felt a heat creep up my neck as though Mephistopheles were breathing down it. "She's coming this way."

Moses himself could not have parted the cafeteria the way that Megan did. It was as if she had an invisible force field around her. She was clutching a few oversized books, but she was walking as graceful as a silk scarf in the breeze. She walked with complete and utter confidence, and she was walking completely and utterly confidently in my direction. And when she locked eyes with me, I knew that she was coming over to say hello.

"Oh my god, she's walking towards us," I said, leaning in toward Vinnie. "What do I do?"

Vinnie looked at me like I had asked what 2+2 equals.

"Open mouth. Talk to girl."

"I can't, she's —"

Right here. Right here, in front of my face.

Another wave of her unimaginably fragrant scent washed over me, and I was instantly and deeply conscious of the fact that I only had a thin layer of deodorant between me and Megan's complete repugnance.

"Hey John," said Megan. "I didn't know we had the same lunch together. Is this your brother?"

I looked at Vinnie, who was trying (and completely failing) to act casual. Then, I smiled.

"Nah, I'm pretty sure he's a changeling who was swapped at birth."

Megan giggled, and I felt my soul lifted up. Pointing to her books, I asked, "So, is that for class or personal?"

"Oh," she said, looking down at the books as if just noticing they were there.

"Personal, I guess. Just a couple of books on fashion design."

"That's cool. Do you like Project Runway?"

I could feel two Vinnie-eyeball-sized holes in my skull, and I made a point of not looking at him.

"Yeah, actually, it's my favorite show. Have you watched it?"

"No, but Helen watches it all the time. 'Designers, make it work.'"

"Ha, that's actually a pretty good imitation," Megan replied, then paused for the length of my heartbeat to skip when I saw her smile. Then: "So, who's Helen?"

"Oh, she's our foster mom."

For some strange reason, I could have sworn that Megan actually looked relieved, but I told myself it was a trick of the fumes from the deep-fryers.

"She and Bill, her husband and our foster dad, are actually the reason why we're here. They're researching the weird animal behavior that's been happening," I continued. I managed to glance over at Vinnie, and he looked like he was going to throttle me.

"Good, it's been in the news a lot lately. Hopefully, they find out —"

"Megan, are you coming? We have to plan the homecoming pep rally before practice, before Coach Hendricks loses it," said a girl in a Malibu Barbie voice with hair to match.

A group of girls who looked like they belonged on Project Runway strode up: tall, painfully thin, and layered in about a inch of makeup.

"Yeah, I'll be there in a second," said Megan, as the group walked off in a cloud of bouncy curls, upturned noses, and perfectly-manicured nails. Megan turned back to us. "Sorry, I have to go, otherwise we'll all have to run extra laps if we don't get this done by today. I just wanted to stop by and see if you doing alright on your first day."

"Thanks," I said, threatening to blush a revealing shade of scarlet. "What are you going to practice after school?"

"Cheering," replied Megan. "I'm part of the cheer squad."

My heart threatened to give out, be revived by an evil voodoo king, then die all over again.

She gave another little wave of her fingers and turned to walk away. "See you around."

"See you," I barely managed to choke out.

I watched her walk all the way across the cafeteria, then up the stairs. When she was nearly at the top, she turned, looked back, and smiled at me again.

When he was absolutely certain that she was gone, Vinnie turned around and hit me on the head.

"Dude, what was that? That was a perfect time for you to ask for her number!"

"What are you talking about?" I said, rubbing the back of my head. "I'm not about to ask for literally the hottest girl I have ever met in my life's number in the middle of a crowded cafeteria, with everyone looking."

"John, no one is looking. No one cares. Besides, even if they are, who gives a flying flea circus? You gotta start putting yourself out there. Be seen."

As if Vinnie's words were connected to a long-held prophesy, at that exact moment, I felt like I was seen.

Just, not in a good way.

I could feel a set of eyes on me, the kind of stare that makes you walk a little faster at night, or put your hand on your phone on the emergency setting.

Glancing around the cafeteria, I told myself that I was being too self-conscious, until my gaze locked on Spiky Douche from earlier that morning. He was sitting with his buddies, and they were all laughing at something, but he had his eyes locked on me, like I was one of those clay tablets in a shooting contest. If looks could kill, I'm pretty sure that they would already be lowering my coffin into the ground.

It was just a moment, but it felt like an agonizingly long time. I broke my eyes away, wondering what the hell his problem was, and returned my focus to Vinnie.

"So what do I do? How do I ask Megan for her number without seeming like a complete idiot?" I toyed with the detritus of our meal, empty paper boats stained with crimson pizza grease and wadded up napkins.

Vinnie rolled his eyes. "You already are a complete idiot, so you don't have to worry about seeming like one."

"Gee, thanks."

"So you say, 'Hey Megan, can I get your number and call you sometime?' Boom. End of story."

The bell rang above us, signaling the end of lunch.

"Oh, so easy. Why didn't I think of that before?" I said, as we stood and gathered the decimated remains of our meal.

As we took our places in the herd of students, Vinnie said, "Just don't think too much. Couldn't you tell she was into you?"

"What? No way."

"Of course she was," said Vinnie as we approached the library. He held up his fingers as he ticked off reasons. "One, she came up to you. Two, she was totally flirting with you. Three, she looked back and smiled at you! Girls are into you if they look back at you."

The warning bell rang above our heads and the hallways started to empty.

Vinnie laid a hand on my shoulder. "You can do it. I believe in you," he said.

I narrowed my eyes. "You're being nice to me. Why?"

Vinnie laughed. "I just want to see my baby brother spread his wings and fly. Take a leap of faith. Step into the great unknown."

"Ok, so am I flying or leaping or stepping?"

Vinnie started to walk away. "Just... do my laundry for a month when you find out I'm right."

As I began to walk to my next class, I mulled over what Vinnie had said. He and I had always been loners; maybe this school was the place to try and branch out. A new beginning. A fresh start.

When I was nearly at my math class, I suddenly felt my body slam into the lockers.

"Oops," said an increasingly familiar and grating voice. Spiky, blond hair retreated into a nearby class, before I had time to protest.

I didn't even have time to react. I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to make things more difficult for myself. Maybe Spiky Douche was just getting in one more dig before the day was out.

Maybe John was wrong. Maybe I shouldn't get myself noticed, I thought, rubbing my shoulder, where it had pounded into the hard metal.

But when I entered the math classroom, my thoughts did a one-eighty.

Megan was there, and when she looked up, she said, "Hey John! Here, sit next to me," motioning me to sit at the desk beside her.

I thanked whatever gods there were and crossed the class in two strides.

Well, maybe it is time to get myself noticed, I thought, as I looked into Megan's warm, brown eyes.

I didn't know how soon I would wish to regret that thought. As the teacher took his place at the front of the room, I had no idea how much getting noticed by one person would be such a pain. It would lead to approximately three beatings, one chase through the forest, one arrest, and the destruction of half the town.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Chapter 4

Alright, I confess:

I learned absolutely nothing about quadratic equations that day.

But I did learn that Megan's parents were dentists, she was an only child, and that she had a deep and abiding hatred of mustard.

All the important things to know about a person.

As we sat together side by side, I could barely concentrate on the whiteboard. My foot bounced against the cheap, rough carpet of the floor, and my heart was distracting me, beating erratically. My eyes kept sliding to my left, where Megan's brown hair fell like a glossy curtain over her shoulder.

Then, my brain hit on an idea. I took my notebook, and I scribbled a note:

$x^2 - 4x = 0 \dots \text{so } x = 4?$

Megan took the notebook and wrote back, Right...but it can also equal 0.

She then showed me the steps and handed me back my notebook.

I carefully tore the piece of paper and then wrote, You're pretty good at math and slid it onto her desk.

Thanks, but only for this problem. I nearly failed last year.

She discreetly passed back the paper when the teacher's back was turned.

Well, I could help you, whenever you need it.

Thanks, she wrote, with a huge smiley face next to it, and my heart lit up like Christmas lights in a trailer park during July.

So, you and your older brother seem close, she wrote.

I grinned.

Yeah, Vinnie can be a jerk sometimes, but he looks out for me. When we were in foster care, he always made sure that no one messed with me.

To this day, Vinnie didn't take shit from anybody, especially when it involved me. It was one of the many things I respected about him.

I smiled, suddenly remembering something.

Once, there was this one kid, Grady. He had pants'ed me, in front of all the other kids in the home, and everyone laughed. The next day, Grady found himself being plunged face first into a toilet with a big 'leftover' still in it.

Eewww!!!

Megan suddenly started laughing, but she tried to cover it up, so it ended coming out more like a series of snorts.

That is so gross!! She added.

Yeah, it was. Vinnie got in so much trouble for...pulling that crap.

Megan shot me a look and made the "ba-dum, tiss" motion with her hands.

My thoughts briefly turned to Vinnie. He always looked out for me regardless of the consequences; he was the one person in the whole world I could fully trust, because he basically raised me. He was the one who was always there, who had always been there, and who would always be there.

Megan turned to me and smiled, but then bit her lip. She tilted the pen to rest on her lips.

I envied that pen.

So...she wrote. You were adopted?

She turned to me and arched an eyebrow, as I read what she wrote. She then quickly scribbled, *It's ok if you don't want to ~~talk~~ write about it.*

I took the pen and paper from her.

No, it's OK. My parents died when Vinnie and I were really young. We don't exactly know what happened. They went hiking, and some sort of bear or predator got to them. We bounced from terrible foster home to terrible foster home, until Bill and Helen found us. They were never able to have children of their own, so they took us in. Honestly... they're the best parents we could have asked for.

As I passed the paper to Megan, I realized how true that was. Bill and Helen had taken us in, when even our extended relatives didn't want us. After our parents had died, and Social Services had managed to track down our extended family, they said they couldn't be bothered to take in more mouths to feed. Vinnie and I had overheard this one night, as Bill and Helen had been talking to the social worker. I could remember how cold and lonely I had felt, hearing how my blood relatives didn't want me. I had prayed that the nice man and woman take us out of the crappy foster home, where things smelled like spoiled milk and no one paid attention to us, unless we were actively vomiting or bleeding.

So when we finally found a home with Bill and Helen, Vinnie and I had realized that family didn't necessarily mean blood. It had taken us a long time to trust Bill and Helen, but through the years, they had showered us with love and attention, as though to make up for whatever the foster system had lacked.

Wow, she wrote. I'm really sorry.

Megan looked up, and I saw genuine concern in her eyes. Not pity or that awful stare of relief I sometimes saw when people realized that something shitty had happened to someone else and not them. I shrugged my shoulders, not wanting to make her feel guilty for asking.

Don't be, I wrote. I can't believe I'm spilling my guts in the middle of math class to a stranger.

And that was true. I didn't mind talking about my past, but it wasn't something I usually brought up.

Yeah, you like playing Call of Duty, too? And by the way, I'm adopted.

Kind of a conversation killer.

But with Megan, something about her warm gaze and the way that she patiently waited for me to write made me want to tell her. Talking to Megan felt...easy. Something that almost never happened with me. She had a way of making me feel at ease, without saying anything. Plus, somehow getting my life down on paper was easier than having to say it out loud.

She took the pen back and wrote, *Stranger? I kind of thought we were friends ☺*

In that moment, I really hoped that she could not hear how loudly my heart was beating. I smiled back and asked about her family.

For the next thirty-seven minutes, we passed the paper back and forth, until we had used both sides, the margins, and had started writing in tiny letters at the bottom.

It was probably the first time in history that anyone did not want a math class to end, but when the bell rang, I couldn't help but feel disappointed. Time had flown by, and I would have stayed the rest of the day, just passing notes to Megan.

However, the bell had tolled for us, (thanks Hemmingway) and we walked to our lockers to change out books.

"So, your parents are dentists?" I asked. Then, I braved a compliment: "Is that way your smile is so bright?"

Megan blushed a little. "Thanks," she said. "But it's not always great. I was in braces for five years, and I always get dental floss in my stocking for Christmas." She paused, as I swapped my math textbook for chemistry. "Besides, they kind of put a lot of pressure on me."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well...my parents want me to be a dentist, but that's not what I want to do."

"Well, what *do* you want to do?"

"I want..." Then shook her head, as if saying it would reveal state secrets.

"It's alright, you can tell me," I said, giving my best attempt at a reassuring smile.

As I shut my locker door, she didn't look at me. She fiddled with the lock, twisting the knob back and forth a few times before answering.

"I want to design clothes and travel. I blame that stupid *Friends* episode where Rachel gets a job offer to go to Paris and work in fashion. That's exactly what I want to do," she said softly. But not just Paris...I want to go anywhere and everywhere. Milan. Rome. New York. Beijing. Tokyo."

"Sounds like an awesome dream," I said. I understood what it felt like to want to escape, to want something more than what life had offered.

"Yeah, Ashley and I always talk about getting out of here," she said. Then, she bit her lip.

"Who's Ashley?" I asked.

Megan had gone suddenly quiet.

"She's my best friend," she replied. "Or at least...I thought she was. She hasn't called or texted me in over a week. She hasn't even come to school."

A sliver of dread feathered its way down my spine. However, I was too distracted by the specific cocktail of hormones rushing through my bloodstream to notice it.

Megan shook her head.

"Anyway, mostly I just want to get out of this place. Not be stuck here like everyone else."

"Everyone else?"

"Well remember how I said we don't get a lot of new people here in Moonlight Valley? I meant that literally. Nobody *ever* leaves!"

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"It means that people just stay in this town! Nobody goes off to find other careers or starts a new life somewhere else. It's like everyone is just happy to wake up, go to work, go to the grocery store, and sit in front of the TV all their lives. Some teachers here taught *my* parents. Everybody just lives and dies in this town."

"Wow, that's kind of creepy," I said.

"I know and pathetic. It's like most people are just don't care enough to do anything different or new. They don't care that their whole life they're stuck in this tiny shell and separated from a vast ocean that is the rest of the world." Megan flung out an arm to emphasize her words.

"And it makes me really sick. Whenever I start to think that the same thing could happen to me, I get this sort of tight feeling in my chest, like I can't breathe. That's why I want to get out; I don't want to be stuck in this town's eternal rut," she finished. She was breathing harder and twin spots of pink colored her cheeks.

Megan spoke with such determination that I couldn't help but be astonished by her.

"Wow," I said.

"Wow what?"

"It's just you're so passionate about what you believe in and want to do with your life. It's really something. I think you should go for it. I bet there's a ton of colleges you could apply to, to study fashion design."

"Really?" she said, as we started walking down the hall together. "You don't think it's a stupid idea and that I should get my head out of the clouds?"

"No," I replied.

"You know, you're a rare find in this town. Most people tell me to just focus on earning a 'real' degree or to think about a 'real' job: my parents, my friends, my ex-boyfriend."

"You're ex-boyfriend?" I asked, as my stomach dropped.

Ex-boyfriend? Is she still in love with him? Does she still care about him?

"Yeah, very, *very* ex-boyfriend."

Oh thank god.

"He would always say that I needed to think about something that could actually pay bills. Something practical. He flat-out told me once that I had zero chance of ever being a serious fashion designer. He wants to go into law enforcement like his father, even though he's captain of the football team and could go to college on a dozen sports scholarships. He just chooses to stay here, like everyone else in town."

"That's terrible."

"I know he could do so much more with his life. Everyone could, if they just put in the tiniest effort to see more than outside this town."

"No, I meant terrible that he told you that," I said. "Nobody should give up on their dreams, especially a dream like yours. Dreams give us hope for the future and help us to keep moving forward with our lives." We had stopped walking and for a moment, just stood and stared at one another.

"Exactly," Megan whispered.

It was as if in that moment, we spoke a secret language, only with our eyes. In that moment, we knew what we were trying to say and the beauty of it was, we didn't need words. Everything went still around us, and I thought that there was so much to hope for, so much to live for.

Maybe I could text you about dreams tonight? You know, if you gave me your number.

I opened my mouth, determine to speak the words into existence. I would follow John's advice. I would take a leap of faith.

"Hey Megan, get over here!" yelled a now-all-too-familiar voice.

My mouth snapped shut. *Nope. Too late.*

The moment broke like a shattered mirror, and Megan rolled her eyes and whipped her head around. When she turned back to me, I could see her barely-concealed irritation.

"I'm sorry, that's Ronnie, my ex. He's always hovering around my locker. I'll be right back," she said, laying a hand on my arm. "Wait here for me?"

My arm sizzled where she had touched it. Hell, and all its demons, could not move my feet from where I stood.

"Sure," I said, glancing over to where Spiky Douche – now known as Ronnie – was slouching, with one arm against the wall, leaning on one leg.

That's her ex-boyfriend? I thought.

That tall, hunky carved block of muscle and protein powder that could probably fold me in two?

Great.

I took out the school map and pretended to be deeply interested in its contents, as though the meaning to all life were waiting for me to decrypt it. I tried not to appear too interested in their conversation, but I couldn't help but wonder how Megan felt about Ronnie.

Glancing up, I saw Ronnie shoot me the same look that he had at lunch, with all the power of a sawed-off shotgun.

Megan opened her locker but didn't look at Ronnie as he talked to her. When she did say anything, she kept her eyes firmly on her books. I fiddled with the edge of the school map, until its end had frayed, coming apart at the seams, much like my hope with Megan.

When she had finished, she slammed her locker shut and walked away.

Leaving me standing alone.

Chapter 5

After the final bell had rung, I thought about going immediately to the bus. It was painfully obvious that Megan had other, more important things to think about (her missing friend, cheer practice, her tall, All-Star American jock ex-boyfriend, who she was probably secretly still in love with and maybe they even still texted and had she even un-friended him on Instagram, probably not, and--)

Ahem. Anyway. I began to make my way to the bus yard, looking out for Vinnie all the while. I couldn't help it if my path took me right by Megan's locker, could I?

I tried to ignore the disappointment when I didn't see her. I began to walk faster, away from the shining embarrassment of having been left by the hottest girl in school.

Until I heard someone interrupt me mid-stride.

"John!"

My wounded pride did not give a damn as I turned around, Pavlovian-ly tied to the sound of Megan's voice.

She was slicing through the crowd, dragging a stack of books along with her.

"Hey, I'm really sorry about earlier," she said. "It's just...Ronnie makes me so angry sometimes that I just have to get away."

"No problem," I said, lying through my non-orthodontur-ed teeth. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, the only reason I even said one word to him was to see if he knew anything about Ashley." She exhaled sharply. "Apparently, he can't be bothered to know why his cousin hasn't shown up to school for a week."

I shook my head. "Men," I sighed.

Megan giggled. "No, it's just...he can't let things go."

We stood outside the gym, where she was going to have cheer practice. Some people were playing three-on-three, their sneakers squeaking on the floor.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," Megan began, and she took a deep breath. "I broke up with him, but it's like he doesn't know how to take 'no,' as an answer. He thinks that if he just says 'sorry,' enough, I'll magically fall into his lap."

"Remind me to never make you angry," I said.

"Well, don't cheat on me, and I won't," she said with a sardonic smile.

"Oh..."

"Yeah. I caught him making out with some sophomore, JV basketball girl." She rolled her eyes. "Plus, he's super territorial. He has his football buddies keeping tabs on me, like I'm some sort of escapee from Alcatraz."

I snorted. "Sounds like a real catch."

"I know. I'm actually kind of embarrassed I ever went out with him," she said, as the group of cheerleaders I recognized at lunch went into the gym.

I feigned a casual lean against the wall. "So, if you don't mind me asking, why did you?"

Megan pursed her lips in thought. "I guess, it felt like something I had to do, you know? Freshman year, he was the captain of the team, and I had just made cheerleader. Plus, he's Ashley's cousin, and she's my best friend, so it felt like...everyone was pressuring me to do it."

Megan's co-cheerleaders were now sending icy daggers through the gym doors.

"Pretty lame, huh?" she said.