

LOVE ME,
LOVE ME NOT

SM KOZ

LOVE ME,
LOVE ME NOT

Swoon
READS

SWOON READS NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

An imprint of Feiwel and Friends and Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC

LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT. Copyright © 2018 by Shannon Kozlowicz.
All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information,
address Swoon Reads, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational,
or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan
Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442
or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 978-1-250-13783-8 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-13782-1 (ebook)

Book design by Brad Mead

First edition, 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

swoonreads.com

*To all the foster kids I've met along the way—
each of you has taught me more than you can imagine,
inspired me to be a better person, and impressed
me with your unending strength to accept your past,
live your present, and create an awesome future.*

CHAPTER 1

"YOU NEED TO BE QUIET," I WHISPER, STEADYING CHASE'S ELBOW while he clears the windowsill with his leg.

"Dammit, Hales, you're pinching me!"

"Sorry," I murmur, loosening my grip and helping him land his other leg on the worn carpet that still looks a hundred times better than the carpet I'm used to. The fact that I actually have my own room is another bonus. Of course, the biggest bonus of all is that unfamiliar tightness in my stomach, telling me I can't eat another bite, despite desperately wanting to.

"Not bad," Chase says, casing my new bedroom. "The TV's kind of old, but I could get a few bucks for it."

"You're not stealing from my new foster mom," I say. "I've been here less than three hours, and I already kind of like her."

"You liked the last one, too."

"And you ruined that for me."

"I didn't ruin nothing," he says, pulling a plastic bag out of his pocket. "I got us a half zip."

I frown at what the bag contains. It's not for us—it's for him.
"You're not smoking that here."

"Shit, Hales, what's up your ass tonight?"

"I've spent the last three nights in three different houses!"
First was my mom's, then Mr. and Mrs. Garner's, and now Ms. Jacobson's.

He rolls his eyes and then plops himself on the bed. Before I can join him, his shirt is off and his pants are unzipped, making it clear what we'll be doing if I don't let him get blazed. My eyes drift up from the plaid boxers peeking out between his fly to his long, bony arms, and then to his face. He's got a sharp brow and jawline and sunken cheeks. It's from not eating enough, and I know I'd look the same if I glanced in a mirror. I suddenly feel guilty for not sneaking anything from dinner for him.

"Come on," he says, shimmying out of his jeans.

I sit on the edge of the bed and allow him to wrap his arms around me. I'm exhausted, but it feels nice to be close to him. Sighing, I lay my head on his chest like usual, clinging to something familiar when everything else has been turned upside down.

After not even a minute, he lifts my skirt and slides down my underwear. Stifling a yawn, I slip my fingers under the waistband of his boxers and ease them over his hips. When they're only at his knees, he flips himself on top of me. I focus on the strip of light under my door. Ms. Jacobson made it clear I could not have boys in my room. I waited to call Chase on her phone until I was pretty sure she had fallen asleep, though. As long as we're quiet, I doubt she'll ever find out.

"I need this right now," Chase says, his eyes closed, his hands roaming under my shirt and up my body.

"Hmmm . . .," I murmur, as I continue to focus on the light in the hallway.

Without warning, he rocks into me hard and the headboard slams against the wall. "Chase!" I yell in a whisper, ignoring the pain.

"Baby . . .," he moans.

I mimic his moaning and try to move things along quickly, but he becomes unusually slow and gentle. I grip his rear end harder and urge him to speed things up.

"You want it rough?" he asks, pinning my arms to the mattress.

Without waiting for an answer, he picks up his intensity. Moments later, the headboard bangs again, and I know I need to end this immediately. "Now," I say.

"Almost . . ."

"Come on, baby. Now," I urge.

Just then, I hear a click and the strip of light becomes a flood. Chase, naked, is still on top of me with my skirt around my waist. Ms. Jacobson is in the doorway holding her hand to her mouth.

For a brief moment, no one moves. Then Ms. Jacobson turns around. I push Chase off me, throw him a blanket, and yank down my skirt.

"I'm sorry," I yell to her back. "I didn't mean to! I promise I won't do it again!"

"I'm calling DSS," she replies, causing my shoulders to slump. The Department of Social Services. Sherry's going to kill me. "When I get back, he needs to be gone."

Chase is already dressed and halfway out the window. "Call

me when you get settled at your new place,” he says with a wink and a gleam in his eyes. For him, this was an exciting night.

For me, it was another mistake.

A huge mistake.

Moments later, I hear the roar of his recently borrowed motorcycle grow loud and then fade away as he leaves me alone to deal with the mess.

* * * *

“Hailey Marie Brown, what am I going to do with you?” Sherry asks, shaking her head. She’s my social worker and was not at all happy about being woken up in the middle of the night to remove me from another foster home.

I stare at the dotted yellow lines in the road so I don’t have to see any more disappointment on her face as we travel through rural North Carolina. I’ve known Sherry for a couple years but haven’t had to deal with this look from her until the past two days. She gave me what I wanted—a place to stay far away from my mom—but it seems all I can do is mess things up.

“Chase is a negative relationship. You need to start building positive relationships,” she says.

“He’s all I have,” I mumble.

“You have me.”

“It’s not the same.” Chase made me feel loved when no one else did. He came into my life when I needed him the most. I mean, when the options are a screaming, drunk mom threatening to lock you out of her house or a guy who welcomes you into his home and can’t get enough of you, the choice is pretty easy. Sure, he’s not perfect, but who is?

We're quiet the rest of the way to DSS. In fact, she doesn't say anything until she's given me one of their prefilled hygiene packs, I've washed my face and brushed my teeth, and I've settled onto a sofa in the children's playroom. She's lying on another sofa in the same room with her eyes closed. I think she's asleep until she asks, "Are you still taking your birth control?"

"No," I reply, wishing I had remembered to grab it from the trailer when I left. It was just so hectic with Sherry there and my mom screaming at her and me trying to throw a few things into a backpack.

"Did he use a condom?"

"No," I say again, readying myself for a lecture. Instead, I'm met by more silence.

"You should go home," I say. "I'll be fine here by myself."

"That's not how it works."

"Won't Jared miss you?" Jared is her boyfriend. I've only met him once but liked him immediately. He's a second-grade teacher and adores Sherry. I could tell by the way he constantly touched her arm or guided her through a door with his hand at her back. I can't imagine Chase ever treating me like that. The closest I've ever gotten is when he put his arm around my shoulders during a pep rally at school. Of course, that could have been to keep himself steady since he was also trashed that day.

"Jared knows this comes with the territory," Sherry says, and then rolls over to face the back of the sofa. I take the hint and close my eyes, praying tomorrow will be a better day.

CHAPTER 2

WAY EARLIER THAN I WANT TO GET UP, I FEEL THE CUSHION beneath my butt dip, followed by the sound of papers shuffling. “The good news is I’ve found you a new home,” Sherry says.

“Great,” I reply without opening my eyes. If this is anything like the other two foster homes, I’ll be out before the day is over thanks to Chase.

“The bad news is it’s not in your current school district. You’ll be living in Pinehurst.”

“Wait. What?” I ask, bolting upright. I can’t go to a different school. I’m a senior. I’m almost done. I know all my teachers. I even have a few friends. And Chase is nearby.

“Sorry, but there were no more options in your district. You know it’s hard to find placements for older teens.”

“I can’t go to a different school.”

“You have no choice.”

“There has to be another option.”

“No, there’s not. And, to be honest, I’m happy you’ll be starting

off fresh somewhere new. I think you'll like the family, and the best part is it's far from Chase."

I narrow my eyes at her. She's happy about the one thing that scares me the most. What if the placement turns out to be awful and I need him?

Holding up her hand, she says, "You can glare at me all you want, but he's ruined two placements for you already, has left you to take the blame for stolen property, and may have impregnated you or given you an STD. Putting on a condom is not rocket science, you know."

I flop back on the couch and cover my eyes with my hand.

"Oh, no, you don't. It's time to get up," Sherry says, pulling on my arms until I'm on my feet. "We'll make a stop at the health department, and then I'll take you to school. You'll meet the Campbells this afternoon."

"You just took me to the health department a couple days ago," I complain. That was the first thing she did after rescuing me from my mom.

"And you had unprotected sex last night," she says before turning around and heading back out the door, making it clear I have no choice but to follow.

The morning turns out to be as awful as expected. In addition to making me pee on a stick, the doctor at the health department made me get another full exam. There has to be a better way of getting checked out than being prodded with cold metal tools like I'm a beat-up old truck and the doctor's my mechanic. At least my tune-up turned out fine.

After that, we headed to school, where I'm currently sitting in

the office biting my nails as Sherry talks to the young, bored-looking woman behind the desk.

This school is bigger and nicer than what I'm used to, which only makes me more nervous. More kids to make fun of me.

"Thanks for all your help," Sherry says to the woman before turning around to face me. "You're all set. I'll pick you up after school right out front."

"Great," I mumble, still chewing on my thumbnail.

The woman approaches me from behind the desk. "I'll take you to your classes today to make sure you learn your way around here."

With a final wave, Sherry leaves, and I feel like I've been abandoned in a foreign country.

It's already the middle of third period, so thankfully, the pristine halls are empty. We pass a few display cases overflowing with trophies, which is also different from my school. We had a few trophies in the office but not enough to fill multiple cases, each one dedicated to its own sport. I don't like sports at all, but football and wrestling seem to be big here.

As we walk, the office assistant points out a few things, but I barely hear her. I'm trying to peek through the small windows of the classroom doors to get a glimpse of my new classmates. Pinecrest has the reputation of having a lot of rich kids, which means I'll stick out even more than usual.

"Here we are," the woman says, stopping at door 216. "Geometry with Mr. Picciano."

Of course I would have to start with geometry. My least favorite subject. At my old school, I had As or Bs in all subjects except math. With math, I was lucky to pass each semester.

She opens the door, and I take a deep breath as my eyes tingle with the threat of tears. I cannot cry. Not here, not now.

She walks toward the teacher, and I immediately head to the back of the room, staring at the floor and praying I can hold back the tears for just a while longer.

Even though I'm looking down, I can tell all the other students are watching me in the hand-me-down and two-sizes-too-big jeans and wrinkled T-shirt Sherry found for me at DSS this morning. It's going to be just as bad as I expected here. At my old school, everyone knew my story starting in the first grade, so I was able to blend into the background as we got older. Here, being the new kid, I'll stick out like a sore thumb. Everyone will stare and talk.

I finally make it to an empty desk and slide in. They're still staring. I've never had dreams of being head cheerleader or president of my class. My dream has always been to go unnoticed. I realize it's not much of a dream, but it works for me. At least it did at my old school.

"Everyone, please welcome Hailey. She's new," the teacher says.

I feel my cheeks heating up. Why couldn't he ignore me and go back to the problem on the board?

Although I can't see who's saying it because my eyes are plastered to the top of my desk, I hear a number of different voices murmuring hi. Then there's some shuffling noises, and the teacher starts talking about isosceles triangles.

The tingling behind my eyes is even worse now. I shift my eyes up to the ceiling, trying to stop the tears, but it's no use. A couple roll down my cheeks, and my hand darts up to wipe them away. Luckily, everyone seems to be focused back on the teacher.

I try to follow the lesson, but it's useless. On a good day, I'd have trouble with math. On a day like this, there's no chance.

When the bell rings, I lower my head, letting my long hair provide a curtain between me and everyone else as I slowly gather my belongings and hope no one will remember I'm in the class. It works, and I slip in behind the last student to leave.

"Ready for lunch?" the office assistant from earlier asks as I exit the room.

I can't handle lunch. I'm not about to sit at a table all by myself. I'd rather forget about food and hide in the library. It's not like I'm not used to being hungry anyway. It was rare for my mom to keep anything other than beer in our fridge.

"I'm not hungry," I say. "Where's the library?"

"You have to eat. Plus, I need to make sure your meal-plan information transferred over here correctly."

She tugs on my arm and leads me back down the hallway toward the cafeteria. This time, though, the hallway is packed with students. They're rowdy—yelling, laughing, and a few guys throwing mini footballs—but no one seems to be paying attention to me. Maybe I will eventually be able to blend in here. Maybe it won't be so bad.

"What would you like for lunch?" the office assistant asks when we get to the cafeteria. The line extends out the door and down the hallway, but she just slips through the door and past the entire line of students being handed hamburgers, soup, and grilled cheese.

"I told you I'm not hungry."

"You've got to eat something. How about some fruit and a sweet tea?"

I don't reply, but she reaches between the students anyway to fill a foam cup with tea and then plucks an apple from a bowl. I reluctantly accept them when she hands them to me. She then steers me toward the front of the cafeteria line, which earns a scowl from some of the students. At least it seems more directed at her than me.

"Enter your number," she tells me, pointing to a small machine like the one I'm used to from my old school.

I do, and the machine beeps.

The cafeteria worker standing there swivels the machine around and squints his eyes to read the display. "There's an error. Did your parents say anything about needing to add more money to your plan?"

I shake my head, keeping my eyes down.

"I was worried about that," the assistant says in a lowered voice, but still loud enough for the crowd of students to hear. I feel their stares at my back and want to crawl into a hole. So much for being able to blend in.

"She gets free state-subsidized lunches. We'll work with DSS to get that straightened out. Until then, let her get whatever she wants."

"All right," he says, nodding. "Does she get breakfast, too?"

Now everyone within earshot knows exactly how poor I am.

The assistant looks back at me. "Breakfast?" she asks.

"I—I don't know," I whisper. Will my foster family feed me breakfast before school? Will I get to school in time for breakfast? How will I even get to school?

"Well, it's yours if you want it."

I nod, and then the assistant disappears, leaving me alone in the

middle of the crowd. I stand at the junction of the food line and the tables, looking back and forth. Most of the tables are packed with a mixture of guys and girls, laughing. There are a few tables in the back that are empty, so I decide to go that way. I hide behind my hair again, so no one can make eye contact with me, and begin the hike, trying to melt into the floor.

About halfway to the table, my eyes land on a pair of Nikes right in front of me. I glance up and find a large frame walking backward as he yells something to his friends and gestures wildly with his hands.

I jump to the right, trying to get out of his way, but I'm not fast enough. His elbow smashes my face. My nose, actually. The jolt causes me to drop my cup. It goes flying in the air, sending sweet tea everywhere—onto the floor, onto the guy's pants, onto my borrowed shirt—as I stumble.

"Oh, shit, I'm so sorry," he says, grabbing my shoulder to steady me. "I didn't see you."

"It's okay," I say quietly, trying to step away from him.

"No, it's not. Let me grab some napkins for you."

"Really, it's fine," I say, pulling back.

He takes the hint and lets go of my shoulder, but doesn't stop talking. "You're bleeding."

I wipe under my nose and sure enough, my fingers are covered in blood. My day is just getting better and better.

"I'll take you to the nurse."

I shake my head. So much for my stealthy walk to the empty table. Everyone in the cafeteria is now staring at me as blood drips from my nose onto the gray tile floor.

“Seriously, you need a nurse. Here,” the guy says, handing me a stack of napkins. “Let’s go.” He steps to the side and holds out his hand like he wants me to lead the way.

I push the napkins under my nose but shake my head again. “I’m sure it’ll stop soon.”

“What if it’s broken? You need to get it looked at.”

Who is this guy? Is he always so pushy? I glance at his face for the first time and find myself staring into the most intense blue eyes I’ve ever seen. And they seem legitimately worried.

“I can make it there on my own,” I mumble, and start to walk toward the exit. Okay, I have no idea where the nurse is, but he doesn’t need to know that.

He follows me to the door like the stray cats I used to feed at home. “What’s your name?” he asks.

I pause, surprised he’d even care. “Hailey,” I say, then quickly lower my gaze and dart out of the cafeteria in search of the nearest bathroom, hoping he’ll finally leave me alone.

CHAPTER 3

THE REST OF THE DAY IS A BIT SMOOTHER. MY NOSE STOPPED bleeding after a few minutes, and I was able to reach my classes early and take a seat in the back. Most of the other students were so busy talking to their friends they didn't even notice the new girl in stained clothes.

Eventually, the final bell of the day rings, and I let out a deep breath, one that it feels like I've been holding for hours. The first day in my new school is over, and it wasn't as bad as it could have been. Yes, there was geometry and the lunch incident, but no one teased me or called me names. I guess I should be thankful for that. It could've been much, much worse.

I'm wondering what the Campbells, my new foster family, will be like when I reach the front of the building where Sherry is supposed to pick me up. Most of the students are either in the student parking lot or sports fields. Only a few of us are waiting for rides, which is a good thing because Sherry pulls up in her standard government-issued white sedan with yellow license plate. I groan.

I might as well have a big, blinking neon sign over my head reading FREAK! FREAK! Even though there are only a few students nearby, I dash to the car, jump in quickly, and yell at Sherry to go.

“What’s the rush?” she asks, looking out my window.

I slink down. “They’re going to think I’m a juvenile delinquent or something.”

“No one will think that.”

“Can we just go? Please?”

“No, I need to pick up someone else first.”

This gets my attention. There’s someone else in foster care at this school?

“Who?” I ask.

“Brittany. And there she is now.”

The back door opens, and a girl about my age slides in. That’s where the similarities end, though. She’s got a nice olive complexion compared with my pale skin. Her eyes are a bright green and narrow, unlike my big brown ones. And her brightly dyed red hair is cut in a sharp line along her jaw and looks nothing like my drab brown strands that hang limp along my forehead and back. Basically, she looks like a rock star while I look like a kid who woke up with no home and no family this morning.

“I’m Brittany,” she says in a much too upbeat tone.

“Hailey,” I murmur, turning around and then staring straight ahead.

“You new to the system?”

I nod.

“I’ve been doing the foster-care thing for ten years, so let me know if you need anything.”

I hear the click of her seat belt, and then Sherry puts the car in drive while Brittany continues her chattering.

“Why isn’t Joelle picking me up?” she asks.

“She was called out on a case and asked me to do it instead. I’ll drop off Hailey first, and then take you to your doctor’s appointment.”

“Can you tell Joelle I have fantastic news?”

“Sure,” Sherry says, pulling away from the curb. “Care to share that fantastic news with us?”

I feel my seat jerk backward as Brittany grabs onto it and shoots her head between the two front seats. “We did it! My band got second place in the countywide competition last weekend! It’s the best we’ve ever done!”

I guess my first impression about her being a rock star was correct.

“That’s wonderful!” Sherry exclaims, adding to the enthusiasm in the car. “Y’all need to perform at one of our foster-care parties. Joelle has been bragging about you forever, and it’s time we all see this talent firsthand.”

“Well, we are an award-winning band now. . . .”

Sherry glances in the mirror again. “Meaning you want to be paid for the gig?”

I turn my head to watch Brittany. She flashes a bright smile. “I’m just saying we’re booking up fast. I’m not sure we’ll be able to fit it in.”

Sherry shakes her head. “We’ll pay you in pizza and soda. All you can eat and drink.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal!” Brittany yells, and sits back in her seat with a satisfied grin.

“You would’ve agreed without the soda,” Sherry says, turning onto a residential street in a swanky neighborhood.

“I would’ve agreed without the pizza, too,” she says with a smirk. “So, Hales, what grade are you in?”

The nickname makes me cringe. I hate it. Only Chase calls me *Hales*, and that’s because I don’t have the guts to tell him I don’t like it.

“Twelfth,” I say, staring straight ahead again. “Please don’t call me Hales.”

“Are you against nicknames in general or just that one?” she asks, completely unfazed.

“That one.”

“How about Lee, then?”

“That’s a boy’s name.”

“What’s your last name?”

“Brown.”

“Hmmm . . . I’ve got nothing with that.” She pauses. “Whoa, you’re lucky, Hailey. Looks like you won the foster-kid lottery.”

I ignore her and concentrate on the road names. I need to make sure I get the address of where I’m staying, so I can tell Chase.

After three more turns, we pull into a long circular driveway lined with tall trees. In front of us stands a two-story brick house with four fancy columns. A couple of rocking chairs and miniature trees planted in giant urns sit on the front porch.

“Can I come in?” Brittany asks.

“Why?” Sherry responds as she parks the car in a spot off the gravel driveway.

“This may be my only chance to see a house this nice.”

I glance back at Brittany, who's sitting on the edge of her seat, craning to look at the mansion with eyes as round as full moons.

"We have to be quick," Sherry says.

Brittany flings open the door and sprints toward the front steps.

I wring my hands in my lap.

Sherry rests her fingers over mine, slowing their motion. "Let's meet your new family," she says with a smile, but the wrinkles around her eyes give her away. I'm sure she's worried she'll be making a trip out here later tonight to pick me up after I somehow mess up this placement, too.

"Hi there! Please come in," says a middle-aged woman, opening the front door while we're still on the walkway leading to the porch. She looks like she just came out of a bank. Her dark, silky hair falls to her shoulders, where it meets what must be a super-expensive suit.

"Nice to see you again, Sherry. And . . . which one of you is Hailey?" she asks.

Brittany points to me and then enters the house. She lets out a low whistle. "Whoa, nice digs. Is that a real Monet?"

"You like art?" Mrs. Campbell asks.

"Depends on what it is. That," she says, pointing into the other room, "I like."

"Well, sorry to disappoint you," Mrs. Campbell replies. "It's a Meier. She was inspired by Monet but never made it big. It's still my favorite piece, though. Come on in, and I can show you more."

I stand awkwardly in the foyer as Brittany follows Mrs. Campbell like a puppy. Sherry swipes her phone a couple of times and says, "Brittany, we're going to be late for your appointment."

“Just give me a minute,” she hollers from the other room.

I wrap my arms around my waist and chew on my lip, unsure of what to do. I don’t know anything about art, but maybe I should have followed Brittany. Instead, I’m standing here like an idiot with my thrift-store clothes in their fancy house.

I’m about to go back outside where it might not feel quite so awkward when Mrs. Campbell returns. “Hailey, please come in. I’d love to show you around.”

I take a step forward but don’t say anything.

“This is your home. Gil and I want you to feel comfortable here. Do you have any bags?” she asks, looking around me.

“No.” All I have is my backpack with some school books, the hygiene pack from Sherry, and a month’s worth of birth control.

“That’s fine,” Mrs. Campbell replies with a wave of her hand. “You’re what . . . a size two?”

I nod.

“We have some things you can wear for a few days until we have a chance to go shopping. Would you like to see your room now?”

I nod again.

“Can you find Brittany and tell her it’s time to go? We’re going to be late for an appointment,” Sherry says.

“I bet she’s in my gallery,” Mrs. Campbell replies. “I’ll send her your way. Come on in, Hailey.” She gently touches my shoulder.

We walk along a hallway, passing what looks like an office or library covered in dark wood paneling and furniture straight out of a different century. Next, we pass a dining room with a table that could fit my entire geometry class. Finally, we enter a large

airy space with a vaulted ceiling and an inside balcony for the second story. The furniture here is tan and comfy-looking. At the back of the room is a wall of windows that frame a brick patio and pine trees as far as I can see. This room feels much more casual than other parts of the house. Through the railings of the balcony, I catch Brittany's back as she studies the artwork.

"Your room is upstairs," Mrs. Campbell says, leading me through a huge kitchen with shiny appliances and dark cabinets to a staircase.

When we reach the top, I see Brittany again. She's staring at a painting of a woman's face in bright colors.

"Warhol?" she asks.

"Yes. My grandfather collected art as well. He purchased this just as Warhol was starting to make a name for himself. When Granddad died fifteen years ago, he left it to me."

"Wow," Brittany says with wide eyes as she momentarily looks at Mrs. Campbell before focusing on the next one. I wouldn't call it a painting—it looks more like shiny metal twisted into strange patterns. Kind of like a sculpture, but it's hanging in panels on the wall.

"Who's this?"

"DeRubeis."

"I like it."

"I do, too. He created a new style all his own. He's still early in his career, so I'm excited to see where he goes."

Brittany continues her tour down the landing, stopping at another painting. "You've got, like, your own mini art museum here."

Mrs. Campbell laughs. "Well, I am an art dealer. This is my personal gallery, but I have another gallery in town with pieces for sale."

My stomach drops a little as I take it all in. What if I break something? What if I trip and spill something on her art?

“Do you have any Wylands?” Brittany asks.

“My son does.”

The word *son* makes my head snap to Mrs. Campbell. In the other two foster homes, I was the only kid. It never dawned on me I might have to share the house with another.

“I’d show you, but Sherry is in a hurry.”

“We can be quick. Please,” Brittany begs, clasping her hands together in front of her chest.

“Okay, okay, let’s go. Hailey, your room is the first door over there,” she says, pointing to a hallway on the right. “We’re going this way.”

I look back and forth. I want to go to my room, but I also want to meet her son. How old is he? If he owns artwork, he can’t be too young.

I decide to follow Brittany and Mrs. Campbell. I catch up with them just as Mrs. Campbell knocks on the door. “Brad, honey, can I come in for a second?”

A muffled reply comes from inside. “It’s open.”

When the door swings inward, I find two guys about my age sitting on beanbag chairs with their backs to us, staring at a huge television. They’re frantically pushing buttons on handheld controllers as cars race around buildings in some video game.

“Brad Campbell,” Brittany says matter-of-factly.

He turns his head to her voice and stares. It’s those blue eyes. Those vibrant blue eyes from the cafeteria.

“Hailey.” Apparently he also remembers me and what happened. “And Brittany. What are you doing here?” He doesn’t

sound mean, just confused, as he glances between her and his mom.

“Dropping off your new sister,” Brittany replies. That term causes my face to heat up. I’m not his sister. I’ll only be here until I turn eighteen. Seven more months. Or until they kick me out.

Brad’s eyes move over to me, and he smiles, revealing a dimple in his right cheek. I lower my gaze to the floor.

“I’m Brad,” he says. “And this is my friend Adam.”

“Yo,” the other guy says, continuing to play the video game.

“Hailey,” I say quietly.

“And there’s the Wyland,” Brittany says, moving closer to Brad’s bed. Above his headboard is a simple painting of a whale’s tail. It’s actually kind of pretty—much nicer than what was on the landing.

“I love it,” she replies. “It’s not his usual style. Much more subdued.”

“Okay, let’s not keep Sherry waiting any longer,” Mrs. Campbell says, ushering Brittany back into the hallway. “Brad, can you show Hailey to her room while I say good-bye?”

He answers by stopping the game, which makes Adam complain. “Dude! I was kicking your ass!”

“Because I stopped playing. That’s the only way you can kick my ass.”

I glance to Mrs. Campbell to see how she reacts to the cursing. Based on her appearance and the immaculate house, I expect her to object, but she doesn’t seem to care.

Brittany peeks back around the doorframe. “See you Monday, Hailey. Meet me in the cafeteria before first period.”

My eyebrows inch up a bit at her offer. We barely know each other, yet she's being super nice. I have no idea why she's doing it, but I do appreciate it. Maybe school won't be so bad after all.

Once she's gone, Adam grabs his phone out of his pocket and starts tapping on the screen. "How's your nose feeling?" Brad asks.

"It's fine."

"It's not broken?"

I shake my head.

"I'm really sorry about that."

"It was nothing."

There's an awkward silence, and I pray he'll let it go.

Luckily, he does. "So, what grade are you in?" he asks, standing up. He runs his hand through his hair, causing his bangs to flop back on his forehead and hang over his eyes a bit.

"I'm a senior."

"Us, too. You're new to our school, right?"

I nod. "Started today."

"Where you from?"

"Union Pines."

"We killed you in football last week."

I nod again because I don't know what else to do. When he doesn't say anything, I add, "I don't really keep up with football."

"Well, you'll have to start now that you're part of this family. High school, college, professional—it's all we talk about in the fall. And I'm sure my parents will drag you to my games."

"You're on the team?"

"Yeah."

"He *is* the team," Adam chimes in. "He's the quarterback."

That means nothing to me, so I just nod again.

"Anyway, welcome to your new home," Brad says, holding out his hand.

I stare at it. Does he want me to shake it? Like we're making some kind of business deal?

I reach out and lightly lay my palm in his, letting it hang limply as he uses a strong grasp.

"Thanks," I say, biting my lip.

"Sorry," he says, apparently feeling as awkward as me, as he drops my hand. "I'm not really sure how this is supposed to work."

Adams stifles a laugh as he gathers books and shoves them into a backpack.

"How'd it work for all the other foster kids?" I ask.

"You're the first."

"Really?"

"Yeah, my parents just got licensed last month. I guess we'll figure it out together."

"I'm outta here," Adam says. "Nice to meet you, Hailey. See you around school."

Brad and I head back through Mrs. Campbell's gallery and to my room. It's huge compared with what I'm used to. The walls are painted beige and are empty except for a mirror and a corkboard. The bed has a plain white headboard and a striped white-and-navy-blue comforter. There's a silver floor lamp in the corner, next to a white desk with an alarm clock. It's pretty but seems like something you'd find in a magazine, not somewhere you'd actually live.

The tiny room I shared with my mom had a lot more stuff—walls covered with pictures I tore out of magazines of all the exotic

places I knew I'd never visit, a bookshelf filled with my projects from art classes over the last eleven years, and a closet overflowing with her work clothes. Although I don't miss her, it would be nice if I had something from home with me. Even just one of my pictures would make this place feel more like somewhere I belonged.

"I think there are some clothes in the closet," Brad says. "My mom is a neat freak so they're probably organized by size." He opens the door and then says, "Make that gender and size."

I guess she planned ahead, not knowing who they'd be taking in. That also explains the furniture and bedding—it could easily work for a girl or a guy.

"Well, you probably want to get settled, right?"

I don't have anything to get settled, but it will be nice to have a little alone time after this very long day. "Yeah."

"Dinner's at five tonight since there's a game. Every other night it's seven. Don't be late. It's one of my dad's . . ." He pauses, which draws my eyes back to his face.

"What?" I ask.

"Sorry, he's your dad, too. It's one of Dad's pet peeves."

"It's okay. He's not my dad. She's not my mom. They're your parents." I would never expect random strangers to call me their daughter. And I'm sure they wouldn't want me to call them Mom and Dad.

He shakes his head and waves me off as he steps back into the hallway. "I'm happy to share," he yells over his shoulder.

I lower myself to the bed and take a deep breath. It's been a crazy day. A crazy three days, actually. I should call Chase and tell

him I'm at my new place. I look around the room but don't see a phone. I could go searching for one, but I don't want them to think I'm snooping around. They might assume I'm casing the joint or something and then have a reason to kick me out.

I can't move again.

The last three days have been an exhausting ride. One I'd love to jump off of, but I can't. The doors are locked tight with both Sherry and Chase grinning at me through the window. Of course, Sherry's grin is because she's trying to make things better. Chase . . . not so much.

I sigh as realization sets in. I probably shouldn't call Chase. Not yet. Maybe once I get settled, we can meet someplace away from the Campbells' house so he can't mess anything up.

I nibble on my nail and look out the window at the quiet street below. He's the last tie to my past. Am I really ready to say goodbye to him for a while? I don't feel ready. Of course that gnawing in my gut makes it clear I don't want to be kicked out of another place, either.

Maybe, sometimes, you have no choice but to do things before you're ready.

CHAPTER 4

AT PRECISELY ONE MINUTE TO FIVE, I HEAD DOWNSTAIRS TO the dining room, starving because I skipped lunch. I can't imagine what dinner will be like with four of us around that huge table. Maybe Brad's football skills will come in handy when his mom asks for a roll. He can chuck it from one end to the other.

When I enter the room, I'm surprised to find it empty. Just then, Brad comes tearing around the corner. He slams on the brakes when he sees me in the doorway.

"Dinner's in the kitchen. We only use this room for holidays and parties."

I nod and follow him to a table in a corner of the kitchen. His mom and dad are already sitting down with bowls of different food spread over the tabletop. My mouth starts watering at the sight and smell of everything, and then I start wondering how they could possibly eat this much. It'd take my mom and me a week. Maybe two.

"You must be Hailey," Mr. Campbell says, standing. He looks

like an older version of Brad, with the same sharp jaw and mostly the same hair color, but with a little gray peeking through. He's also got a dimple on his right cheek, just like his son. Unlike Brad, he wears black-rimmed glasses. They make him look distinguished, and I wonder what he does for a living.

"Sit down, please," he says, gesturing to the chair across from him.

"It's nice to meet you," Mr. Campbell continues. "Would you like chicken?" he asks, passing a bowl to me. I accept it and take a piece for myself before handing it to Brad, who piles three pieces on his plate.

"So," Mrs. Campbell says, "do you like being called Hailey? Or do you have a nickname you prefer?"

"Hailey, please."

She nods. "And what would you like to call us?" she asks.

"Umm . . . I don't know. What are my options?" Neither of my other foster homes gave me a choice. It was Mr. and Mrs. Garner and Ms. Jacobson.

"Mom and Dad. Mr. and Mrs. Campbell. Ms. Gigi and Mr. Gil. Aunt Gigi and Uncle Gil. Gigi and Gil. Whatever you feel comfortable with."

"Pain-in-the-ass number one and pain-in-the-ass number two?" Brad suggests. At first, I think he's serious, but then he shoots a smile at his parents, who shake their heads in return.

I think about my options. Mom and Dad would be weird. I already have a mom, even if she doesn't deserve the title. And no one, not even my mom, knows who my dad is. I used to dream about a guy showing up on our doorstep, telling me he was my dad, and

sweeping me up and away from everything, but that never happened. It never does in the real world.

Calling them Mr. and Mrs. Campbell seems very stuffy, like I'm in school. It's fancy, like their house. It's going to be hard to feel at home here if we're that formal with one another.

"Maybe Gigi and Gil for now?" I say.

"That's fine."

"Not nearly as much fun as my option," Brad says, spearing a piece of broccoli with his fork.

Ignoring him, Gil says, "Now that that's settled, we have to deal with the . . . uncomfortable part of a new placement—the ground rules."

"Ground rules?"

"Just to make sure we all understand one another. They're the rules we set for Brad, and we'll also expect you to follow them while living with us."

I nod and accept a bowl of mashed potatoes from Brad.

"Rule number one: If you ever have a boy in your bedroom, you need to keep your door open." He pauses for a moment. "Actually, this rule should be modified a bit. Whenever you have a friend in your room, please keep the door open. That goes for both of you from now on."

Brad rolls his eyes. "Yes, because Adam and I are going to go at it with the door closed."

"The rules apply to both our children," Gigi says.

Brad shakes his head and turns to me. "This is their way of covering their bases because they don't know which way you lean romantically."

I cough as chicken gets stuck in my throat. I look at his parents, who wave off his comment. "We don't care either way," Gil says.

"We just want to keep you safe," Gigi adds. "That means no sex."

"Got it," I mutter, staring at my plate. Their rule is no different than in my other foster homes, but hearing them say it makes my stomach drop anyway. Even if I decide to stay away from Chase, that doesn't mean he'll decide to stay away from me.

"So, which way do you lean?" Brad asks.

"Bradley Nolan!" Gigi exclaims.

"Dude, she's my sister now. I should know these things."

"I have a boyfriend," I mutter.

"That's wonderful," Gigi says.

"Let me know if I ever need to kick his ass." Brad shovels seconds onto his plate. I can't believe he stays so fit with how much he's eating. It's easily three times the size of my meal, which explains why they make so much food for dinner.

"Rule number two: No drugs or alcohol," Gil says. "But if you ever are intoxicated, please call us to pick you up. Never get into a car with someone under the influence. We'll pick you up, no questions asked."

"It's true," Brad adds. "But then you'll feel like a complete failure the next day because you screwed up big-time and they won't even yell at you. They'll just look at you with disappointment as though you aren't disappointed enough in yourself. It sucks. Just don't do it."

"Sounds like you have personal experience with this," I point out, starting to enjoy his commentary.

“A little.”

Gigi ignores our side conversation and says, “Rule number three: No stealing. If you need money for something, let us know. We’re happy to work out a chore and allowance schedule or help you get a job, if you’d like to do that. We’ll cover all your food, toiletries, and school expenses, including any clubs or sports you’d like to join. DSS will give you a small stipend for clothes twice a year, and we’ll supplement that as needed. Other things like music or entertainment are on you.”

I look to Brad, expecting his expert advice, but he’s silent as he chugs a glass of milk, which makes me think this might be a rule that only applies to me. I can’t blame them really; they don’t know me. I obviously have no money. Of course they’d assume I’d steal from them.

I nod and slump against my chair, having lost my appetite. They’ve seemed like such great people, and I honestly thought they saw me differently, but it’s clear that’s not true.

“You okay?” Gil asks.

I nod again.

“Last rule,” Gigi says. “We know we won’t always see eye to eye on things, but we want you to feel comfortable coming to us when something’s bothering you. We won’t judge you. We want to help.”

Won’t judge me? It seems like they already did with rule number three. I don’t want to get into that with them, so I just say, “Okay.”

“Dinnertime’s not an official rule?” Brad asks, looking at his dad.

"You're right! Rule number five: Dinner at five on game nights and at seven all other days. It's my favorite time of day. Don't be late."

"If you are, you'll face the wrath of Dad," Brad says.

I smile politely.

"You don't want to know what the wrath of Dad entails?" he asks. "I'll tell you anyway. If you're late, he'll force you to watch his god-awful Westerns from the fifties. It's so painful. They are horrible, horrible movies."

"Those are high-quality films!" Gil says, sounding hurt. "Much better than the CGI crap you call movies these days."

"High quality? They're in black and white and have no special effects!"

"Because the point of the movie is the plot. You don't need explosions if you have an actual plot."

"Sometimes I don't understand how I could be your son," Brad says, shaking his head and pushing his empty plate away from himself. "May I be excused? I need to finish some homework before the game."

"Yes, dear," Gigi says. "Are you finished, Hailey?"

I nod, and then Gigi takes my plate from me.

"I can wash the dishes," I quietly offer.

"Are you sure?"

I nod and clear the rest of the table.

"Okay, would you like this to be your chore?" Gigi asks.

"Um, sure. I usually did this at home."

"Perfect. How does forty dollars a week allowance sound?"

"For washing dishes?"

“And putting them away.”

Forty dollars might as well be a thousand. I’ve never had an income, since I never had a car to get me to a job. And, despite doing all the housework, my mom never once gave me an allowance. Why would she want to waste her precious few dollars on her daughter when there was crack to buy?

“You don’t have to pay me,” I say, piling dishes in the sink. “I’m happy to do it since you’re letting me stay here.”

“Don’t be silly. Brad gets an allowance for doing our landscaping; you should get one for whatever chore you choose. Dishes work for me, if that’s what you want.”

“Brad does chores?”

“Of course.”

“And gets an allowance?”

“Yes, why?”

“I thought rule number three only applied to me.”

Gigi steps next to me and wraps her arm around my shoulders. “Oh, honey, no. Like I said, the rules are for both of you. I’m sorry we weren’t clear.”

“It’s okay,” I say quietly as that heavy rock in the pit of my stomach disappears into thin air. It’s a relief to know my initial impression of them being wonderful hasn’t been ruined just yet.

I glance around the sink, eager to tackle the dishes now that I’m feeling better about the Campbells. I look for what I need, but there’s nothing here. “Um . . . how do you want me to do this?” I ask. You’d think washing dishes would be the same no matter where you are, but I always kept the dish soap on the back right corner of the sink and the sponge on the left. I can’t find either here.

Gigi opens a cabinet under the sink, revealing a bunch of things, including a green-and-yellow sponge. She points to a lever next to the faucet and says, "Soap." Stepping behind me, she points next to my legs and adds, "Dishwasher."

"Okay, great," I reply. I open the door of the dishwasher and stare inside. I've never used one of these. Am I going to look like a complete idiot if I admit that? I close the door and search for a button to turn it on, but can't find one. I pull the door back down and scan inside again, but it's not there, either.

"Um . . . can you show me how to work this?" I ask. They're going to think I'm from the backwoods.

"Oh, sure. Just load it up however you want. We each have our own way, and everyone thinks their way is best," she says with a grin. "You do what works for you." She then goes on to show me how to add the soap and turn it on.

"Do I need to wash stuff before I put it in?"

"Just give them a rinse. The dishwasher can take care of the rest."

I follow her instructions and start lining plates in the bottom right, bowls on the bottom left, and glasses on the top. I have no idea what I'm doing, but hopefully it doesn't show.

"Hailey, are you coming to the game with us?" Gil asks, looking up from his phone.

"Um . . .," I say, buying myself a little time. I've never seen a football game. I don't even know how the game works. The bigger issue, though, is being around all those students and parents at the game. I glance down at my droopy outfit and stained shirt.

"Come on, it'll be fun," Gigi says, spooning leftovers into a plastic container. "You saw the clothes in your closet, right?"

I nod.

"I think there's a Pinecrest Patriots T-shirt in there you can wear. And some jeans. You'll fit right in."

How did she know what I was thinking?

"You load it like Brad," Gil says, nodding toward the dishwasher. "I've got to have the bowls up top so I can turn them completely over. I hate when they still have water in them afterward."

"Oh, I can move them," I tell him, starting to rearrange.

"Leave her alone," Gigi says, swatting him with a towel. "The way you're doing it is fine. You can fit more dishes in this way."

"So," Gil says, "are you coming to the game?"

"Um . . . I guess so," I answer, when all I want to do is go to bed early and sleep for twelve hours. I don't feel like that's an option, though. They're all going, and I can't really stay here alone on my first night. Besides, I'd be a little freaked out in this huge house by myself.

"Great! We'll leave in about twenty minutes," Gil responds.

I nod.

At least if I'm not here, Chase can't get me kicked out. Maybe I'll finally spend an entire night in a foster home.

CHAPTER 5

I'M SITTING IN THE STANDS, WATCHING THE TEAM RUN UP AND down the field. I can't really follow the game or the rules, but I do know we want a touchdown. Or, another touchdown, that is. It's twenty-one to seven with the Patriots in the lead. Luckily, it's easy to know when to cheer or groan with hundreds of eager fans around you.

I shove my hands into my pockets and try to ignore the smell of popcorn coming from the guy in front of me, but it's nearly impossible. My mouth waters every time the wind blows and sends another buttery whiff my way.

"Do you want something to eat or drink?" Gigi asks, nudging my shoulder. She must have noticed me staring.

"No, thanks," I say, focusing back on the game. I'd love some popcorn, but I don't have any money and it doesn't feel right to use theirs, especially when I barely know them.

"Are you sure?"

"Here's twenty bucks," Gil says, reaching into his pocket. "Go raid the snack bar."

"I can't take your money," I reply, pushing his hand back as my stomach growls and makes me question my decision.

"It's for food. We told you we'd cover all your food expenses." He hands the bill back to me.

"That's for meals. Not snacks at a football game."

"Food is food in my book, but if it makes you feel better, you can grab me a Coke while you're down there. Then anything you get for yourself is payment for doing me a favor."

Just then, something happens on the field and everyone starts cheering. Gil shoves the bill into my hand and then jumps up, pumping his fists overhead and cheering. Gigi joins him as I stare at the money. I guess I could at least get him a Coke.

"Do you want anything?" I yell at Gigi to be heard over the roar of the crowd.

"I'll take a water. And do you want to share a popcorn? I'd like one, but I can't eat an entire box."

"Oh, um, sure. I guess so," I reply, drawing my eyebrows together. They totally just tricked me into spending their money on snacks at a football game.

"Get yourself a drink, too!" she yells as I start to make my way down the stands.

With everyone excited about the current play, it's difficult to move as fans jump around and constantly bump into me. Finally, I'm at ground level and have an open path with everyone crowded around the fence.

The bright lights and smells coming from the snack bar summon me, and I'm glad I agreed to share with Gigi.

"Hales?"

I turn toward the voice and find the last person on earth I want to see tonight.

"It *is* you. I've been waiting all day for your call. Where the hell you been? What are you wearing?"

"Chase." All the good things that have happened today suddenly seem like a dream. That's not my life. Chase, with all his drama, is my life. Somehow, he'll make the Campbells kick me out before the night is over, and I'll be right back where I belong.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, moving forward to keep my place in the line.

"My brother's dating a girl from Northern Moore. Told me we could score some Molly here."

Drugs. Of course.

"You a Pinecrest girl now?"

I tug on my T-shirt, wishing I could hide the logo plastered to the front of it. "It was the only placement Sherry could find for me."

"We gotta change that. Come with me tonight," he says, grabbing my hand and trying to tug me out of line. "No one will find you."

"Sherry knows where you live," I reply, holding my spot.

"We'll stay with Axel."

Axel is his best friend and supplier. There's no way I'd ever stay at his house.

"I can't, Chase. I'm sorry."

"What you mean, you can't?"

"I can't. I need to go to school and graduate. I can't hide away in Axel's apartment."

He narrows his eyes at me. "What kind of lies these people been feeding you?"

I ignore him, so he continues, "You think you gonna go to college? Get some ritzy job? Ain't never gonna happen. You'll end up just like your momma."

I feel the sting of tears and have to look away from him.

He tries to pull me out of line again, but I yank my arm away. "Please, leave me alone."

"Never gonna happen," he repeats, but I don't know if he's talking about my future or leaving me alone.

The person in front of me steps aside, and it's time to place my order. When I pull out the twenty, Chase's eyes grow wide. "Add a pretzel and a Three Musketeers to that."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "This isn't my money, Chase."

"Who cares?"

The price of a pretzel is about the same as the Coke I ordered for myself, so I ask the cashier to swap that out. When she hands me the drinks and food, I pass Chase his pretzel. The cashier tries to give me my change, but Chase grabs the money for himself.

"Chase, I really need that."

"Doesn't look like it. You've got nice clothes and plenty of food."

"Please," I beg. Gigi and Gil are going to think I stole from them and kick me out. The tears finally begin rolling down my cheeks. "Don't ruin this for me. I need that money back. It's not mine. I have to return it."

"Is there a problem here?"

The deep voice sounds familiar. I turn to find Brad's friend Adam coming toward us.

“No, no problem,” I reply, wiping away the tears.

“Are you sure?”

“She said there ain’t a problem,” Chase says, puffing out his chest.

Adam nods and then licks his lips, as if he’s thinking about his next move. Without warning, he says, “Hailey, I want you to meet my sister. Come on.” He puts his hand around my back and turns me away from Chase. I start to move, but then worry about the money again. I can’t show up empty-handed.

I stop and look into Adam’s eyes. “He took Gil and Gigi’s money,” I say. “I have to get it back.”

“How much?”

“Ten bucks.”

He reaches into his pocket and then hands me a ten.

“I can’t take your money.”

“Think of it as a loan. Pay me back whenever you can.”

I glance over my shoulder at Chase, whose eyes are shooting daggers at us. There’s no way I’m getting the money from him, so this is my only option. “Thank you,” I whisper.

He shrugs off my comment. “If you’re Brad’s sister, then you’re practically my sister. I’ll look out for you when he can’t.”

That one little sentence is like a lightning bolt, striking the ground and forming a big old chasm that separates my past from my present. People I met only hours ago are looking out for me, while my boyfriend of a couple years and someone I’ve known practically my whole life is trying to get me into trouble. Again. My shoulders slump with that realization. I’m glad Adam did what he did, but it sucks that Chase was . . . being Chase.

I sigh and steal one last look at him. The face I used to find welcoming is downright hostile, and I'm torn. I'd be furious if he walked away with another girl, but this is different. This is about my placement. Shouldn't he know that? Shouldn't he want to help me? Isn't that what a boyfriend is supposed to do?

Yes, yes, and yes.

I clench my jaw as the disappointment turns to anger. I want to kick something—Chase, myself—but I know it won't do any good.

"My sister is over this way," Adam says, pointing to the right.

"Actually," I say, shaking my head to clear thoughts of Chase, "I should probably get Gil and Gigi their snacks."

"Sure thing. How about we find you after the game?"

"Oh, okay. Thanks again for helping me out."

"No problem."

I make my way back to Gil and Gigi and then hand them their snacks and Gil his money. He pockets it without even looking.

"Didn't you get anything for yourself?" he asks.

"Gigi and I are sharing the popcorn," I say.

"Good," he replies, and then focuses back on the game.

I try to pay attention, but I can't stop thinking about Chase and how angry I am with him. He almost ruined my third placement in three days. If Adam hadn't shown up, he would've.

It's almost like he's doing it on purpose.

Crap.

I sigh when I realize the problem. He saved me from my mom a million times, and now he's trying to save me from DSS and my foster homes. It's sweet in a Chase sort of way.

The only problem is I kind of want to see what a normal family is like. Once I explain that to Chase, he'll back off, especially if I promise him we can meet up somewhere after I get settled.

Feeling like I have a plan, I'm able to enjoy the rest of the game. The Patriots end up winning thirty to seven. True to his word, Adam joins us with a girl who looks a lot like him with dark skin and hair, although hers is pulled into twists with a tie low on her neck. He's also got a pretty blond girl with him.

"This is my sister, Abbie, and her best friend, Michelle," Adam says.

"Nice to meet you," I reply. "I'm Hailey."

"You're in my geometry class," Abbie says. "God, I hate that subject."

"Me, too," I agree, smiling.

"You're a senior?" Michelle asks.

I nod.

"And in geometry?"

I nod again, but more slowly this time. I don't like where she's going with her comment.

Confirming my thoughts, she says, "That class is usually for freshmen, like Abbie."

"That's not true," Adam replies. "There are plenty of upper-classmen in there."

"But it doesn't look good on your college applications," Michelle says, tipping her head as though she's letting me in on a big secret.

I remain silent as her words tear open the earlier wound from Chase. As much as I'd love to go to college, I'm sure Chase was

right. There's very little chance of that ever happening, so it really doesn't matter what my nonexistent application looks like.

"Anyway," Abbie says, breaking the tension, "Adam mentioned you're living with the Campbells now."

I nod again.

"Looks like I'm your new next-door neighbor, then," Michelle says with a fake smile. I'm sure the smile I give her in return looks just as fake.

"We all live in the same neighborhood," Abbie says, "but the Campbells' house is the nicest, so we spend a lot of time there. It will be fun having someone new around. It's kind of boring with just the four of us."

"Great," I say to be polite. Adam and Abbie seem nice, but I'd prefer to spend as little time as possible with Michelle.

"We've got to get going if you want ice cream before your curfew," Adam says to Abbie.

"Want to come with us?" Abbie asks me. "My brother can drop you off afterward."

"Sorry, I can't," I reply. In addition to having no money, I don't want to deal with Michelle's evil glare, which has been on me non-stop since we met.

"Okay, next time, then. Tomorrow is movie night at Brad's house. We'll see you then!"

"Ready?" Gil asks after they leave.

"What about Brad?"

"Coach is very long-winded. By the time Brad showers and the team has their postgame review, we'll all be home and in bed."

I'm glad we don't have to wait. I'm exhausted and ready to fall into a coma so I can forget about everything for a little while.

I follow Gigi and Gil out but stop suddenly at the gate when my eyes land on a familiar figure lurking in the shadows under the bleachers.

Chase.