

## *Prologue: Prom Night 2000*



The music was pounding inside but Lily was outside, throwing up in the dumpster. She hadn't been able to keep anything down for days. It could just be paranoia, but she was pretty certain her mom was growing suspicious. She either knew she was pregnant or thought her daughter had an eating disorder.

After tonight, she could confess. It would be okay. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she righted herself and straightened her dress, which was too tight over her chest. Not how she had pictured her prom night going.

"There you are!" Brian stepped outside. He looked gorgeous in this light. There was very little light that he didn't look amazing in. Too bad she didn't love him anymore.

"Sorry, I just needed some fresh air." She moved closer to him to avoid the smell coming from the dumpster.

Brian grabbed her waist and moved her against the wall. "I figured you wanted me to follow you out here."

"Oh, Brian, not out here by the dumpsters. That's gross!"

He ignored her protests, kissing her neck. She needed to sleep with Brian tonight for the plan to work. She let him grab her butt while she counted how many days she would need to wait to tell him. She wished she had paid more attention in health class. His mouth came close to

hers and she pushed him away playfully. “Not right now! Later! I want it to be special.”

He grumbled, unable to make words of protest, but then nodded. They returned inside and she excused herself to the restroom. She moved to the sink and rinsed out her mouth, spraying some mint spray to hide the vomit smell.

“Hey! You okay?” Shannon came into the room. Her hair was twice its normal size, and her skin did not go with the puffy-sleeved dark green dress. Her hair only added to the porkiness of her face. Everyone at school wondered why they were friends. They made such an odd pair. But Shannon had a good heart, and they had been friends since day one of kindergarten.

“Yeah. Kind of queasy.”

“Do you think this plan will work?”

“It has to. Besides, we both know that Brian is good-looking but not the brightest.”

“True.” Shannon checked herself in the mirror. Lily lent her friend her lipstick and pulled up the strap that had slipped down her shoulder.

“Better get out there. Don’t want to miss the greatest night of our lives!”

Lily managed not to throw up while they danced. She and Brian were slowly swaying back and forth after the Queen and King had been crowned. Lost in thought, it took a second for her to realize that Brian was talking to her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah! Just thinking.”

“About what?”

Lily smiled and ground her body into Brian’s. “All the things I want to do to you.”

“Baby, you can’t do that and then ask me to wait.” He pulled her tight against him.

“Let’s get out of here, then.”

“Gladly.” He took her hand and dragged her out of the party. Lily flashed a smile at Shannon, who was standing against the wall before ducking out of the gym. She laughed as they raced to his Mustang. Lily knew very little about cars, but she knew looks and the looks other boys gave Brian when he pulled up in this car made her glad she was with him. They didn’t leave the parking lot. She pulled up her dress and straddled him in the front seat.

“Oh, man!” He panted as she slipped back over into her side. Relief washed over her and the weight of one problem left her. “Baby, why did we wait to do that!”

“It needed to be special!” She pulled down the mirror and fixed her hair, her lipstick. When she finished, she looked back at him. He was not smiling at her.

“Did it hurt?”

“What?”

“Did it hurt?”

“Brian, what on earth are you on about?”

“It’s supposed to hurt the first time. For a girl.”

“Who said that?”

“Did it hurt?” He already knew the answer. He threw open his car door. “Together for two years! We break up for a couple months and you sleep with someone else! Then you get back with me and act like it had to be special! Screw you!” He slammed the door behind him.

“Brian!” Lily grabbed her shoes and jumped out after him. Not as dumb as she thought. He was out of sight by the time she got her shoes on.

“Damn it!” she cursed. Crossing her arms over her chest, she walked back to the school. Halfway there, she stopped to throw up, leaning between two cars. She cursed again, stomping her foot in frustration, then cursed again at the pain from the high heel racing up her leg and

spine.

The pain from the blow to the back of her head was worse. It knocked her to the ground and lights danced around her eyes, just like in Looney Tunes. Instinctively, she crawled and went right through her own vomit. The next blow knocked her into the car.

“Please!” she pleaded. Blood blinded her. “Please, stop!”

The next blow silenced her.



## One

### *Chicago Blues-2020*



The table in the room was wobbly. One leg was missing its bottom piece, causing the table to rock anytime someone put weight on it. There was a noticeable scratch down the middle leading to the half hook anchored in the center of the table. The wobbly table with the scratch bothered Misti more than the two-way mirror hiding the eyes that were watching her write. The table wobbled with every stroke of the pen, making her handwriting sloppy. She knew they were in there, discussing her fate. She stopped writing and looked at the mirror, hiding any emotion on her face.

“I’m done.” She dropped the pen and pushed the yellow legal pad away, hiding the scratch the best she could. She crossed her arms and cradled her elbows. The door to the room opened and Detective Sanders and Ms. Webb entered. Detective Sanders took the notepad and scanned what she had written. Misti watched him out of the corner of her eye, focusing on the stupid scratch again. She hoped he didn’t need her to rewrite it. If it was too sloppy, it wasn’t her fault. They needed a better table.

“Misti, do you have any family? Anyone in the city?” Ms. Webb asked, pulling out a stack of forms and dropping them on the table. She pulled out the chair on the other side of the table.

“No.” The table rocked as Ms. Webb waited, clicking a pen and writing in fine print on the first form.

MISTI BOYLE

AGE 17

“Do you know of any family? Anywhere? We really prefer to place children with family.”

“I have an aunt, down south. In Colorado. I haven’t seen her in a while.” Maybe ten years. Maybe less. Misti remembered the town. Remembered her aunt. She was nothing like her sister.

“Do you know her name?”

“Mary McCarthy.”

Ms. Webb wrote down the name carefully. She seemed to be oblivious to the table. Her handwriting was perfect. Misti turned her eyes away from the government forms and focused on the detective. He was on the third page of her statement. Had she really written that much?

“What’s going to happen to my mom?”

Detective Sanders looked up at her, his dark eyes sharp even with his graying hair and deep wrinkles. “She’s going to prison.”

“She needs to go to a mental hospital.” Both adults raised their eyebrows at her. “I’m not making excuses for what she did. But a prison isn’t going to help her.” Misti lost her voice and her eyes fell back on the table.

“That is for the court to decide.” Detective Sanders tucked the notepad under his arm and patted Misti on the shoulder. “The statement is great. I know it must have been hard.”

Misti didn’t look up at him, gripping her elbows harder. The clock above the door was hanging askew. Almost as annoying as the wobbly table. It was just after 4am.

Ms. Webb rose and followed him, saying nothing to Misti. Misti stared at the table, ignoring the sandwich someone had offered her hours earlier and the soda sitting in a pool of condensation. Outside, she kept her face neutral. Inside, she was plotting her escape. She didn't need the state to take care of her. They hadn't been concerned for the last seventeen years. Now didn't seem like the time to be concerned. The clock kept ticking. First ten minutes went by. Then twenty. Finally an hour. Ms. Webb returned and sat down without a word. Misti couldn't decide if she liked the woman. She lacked the empathy that most of the social workers Misti had dealt with had. She didn't fawn over her, hug her, continually touch her. She just asked her an occasional question. Misti wanted to sketch her. Make her look like a witch; a misunderstood one. She kept children locked up in her house, but gave them everything they needed. Not to eat them or anything like that. Just to try to keep them safe.

"I can just stay here." Misti felt the words bubble out of her. "I can just keep working and finish school. I turn eighteen in June."

"Until you are eighteen, you need to be with an adult." Ms. Webb stopped writing, pursing her lips at Misti. Misti knew she looked a mess. The two-way window was a great mirror. Her hair was disheveled and her dark eyeliner smeared.

"I got a hold of your aunt and uncle. They have agreed to take you."

Misti felt like sixty pounds of weights had been taken off her shoulders and now put in her stomach. She did not want to be a burden.

"You called them at 4 in the morning to talk to them?"

Ms. Webb glanced at her watch. She seemed startled by the time. "I guess I did." She sniffed, unconcerned.

Ms. Webb and Detective Sanders escorted Misti back to the apartment. The daylight had drawn a bigger crowd. There were two officers standing guard at the stairs, nodding a hello to the adults and offering



sad smiles to Misti as they climbed the stairs past them. The music from the first floor apartment had been turned off for the first time since Misti had lived there. The stairs were bustling with people. On the second floor, the light had been fixed. Misti had been asking the super to fix that light for three months.

“It might be best to keep your eyes focused on me.” Detective Sanders stopped outside the police tape and accepted the blue shoe covers. He handed a pair to Misti. She put them on while the lab tech called for everyone to take five. Several people streamed past the tape, removing the blue covers before plodding down the stairs, some pulling out cigarettes as they went, talking about the Cubs and the hell of a mess they were stepping away from.

“Ready?”

Misti gave one nod. Detective Sanders stepped in first and Misti followed, doing her best to keep her eyes on his back. He knew where he was going and took her to her little room in the back. Her things had clearly been rifled through. Misti dropped to the floor, dragging out well-used suitcases. Sanders shut the door, blocking out the mess in the living room. She grabbed her clothes from the drawer, and from the pile in the corner. Would she have time to wash them before she left? She usually did laundry on Saturday mornings, before work.

“Ms. Webb said you should be on a bus this afternoon heading for Colorado. Never been there. Heard the mountains are something else.”

Misti didn’t know if that was a question or a statement. She continued to gather her things, hurrying so she didn’t waste any more of the detective’s time.

“This isn’t your fault, you know.”

Misti glanced up from her task. Detective Sanders was focusing hard on her.

“She needed help a long time ago. I could’ve gotten it for her.” Misti dropped the makeup bag into her pack. Would they at least let her

shower before she got on a bus?

“You’re a kid. Should never have been your job to be working as much as you are, taking care of your mom. Should have been the other way around. You should have been out, doing teenage girl stuff. Driving boys crazy, going to dances, seeing movies.”

Misti stared at him, unsure of how to respond. Not her job? Of course it had been her job. Her mother needed her to be there. Without her doing all of this, where would they have been? Misti glanced around the room. “That’s it, I guess.”

Detective Sanders led her out and Misti glanced down once. The blood had ruined the carpet. The lazy building manager would have to replace it.

When they arrived back at the station, Misti asked if she could take a shower somewhere. They escorted her to the women’s locker room. A female officer waited outside while she showered quickly. She scrubbed her skin raw and cleaned up her face. She pulled out her makeup and was starting to apply eyeliner when Ms. Webb barged in.

“The bus leaves in an hour.” Ms Webb glanced at herself in the mirror, smoothing her bobbed hair. She turned her eye to Misti’s thick eyeliner. “Before you go, Misti, I want you to think of this as a new, fresh start.” Misti kept applying her makeup. “You could reinvent yourself. Be someone you have always wanted to be but couldn’t.”

Misti finished her makeup. There was no way to hide the dark circles under her eyes. Sleep would be the only thing that fixed that.

“Did you hear what I said?”

Misti nodded that she had. But really, did she need to take advice from Ms. Webb, the robot woman?

They stepped out into the hall together. Detective Sanders was talking on his phone. He ended the conversation and approached them.

“Do you want to see your mom? Say goodbye?” he asked her.

Misti shifted the messenger bag on her shoulder and looked from adult to adult. “No. I have a bus to catch.”

## Two

### *The Arrival*



The bus was running late. The bus always ran late and the McGraths knew this. They had only been waiting a few minutes when it came rumbling down the road, hissing as it came to a stop in the quiet, eerily lit terminal. It was just after 9 in the morning. Mr. McGrath rose as the bus doors opened. He waited as a figure moved down the aisle and stepped onto the platform.

Misti wore plain jeans, an oversized zippered hoodie that had tattered sleeves and the remnants of a logo, and black lace boots rolled down a little; she could have been in a 1990s grunge band. Her denim messenger bag was slung over her shoulder and her arms were crossed over her chest. Mrs. McGrath took in a short breath. The girl looked so much like her mother.

“Aunt Mary?” Her voice was flat and toneless.

“Yes, dear! Oh, Misti!” Mrs. McGrath flung her arms around the girl, hugging her. She loomed over her niece by a full half a foot, and had broad shoulders and wide hips that swayed when she walked. The older woman’s temples were graying and laugh lines created shallow canyons

around her mouth and forehead. “Here we are.”

“I’m sorry the bus ran late,” Misti pulled away from the hug without returning it. “I didn’t want to keep you waiting.”

“Oh my dear, that’s okay!” Mrs. McGrath patted her arm, looking at her husband for his response.

“No problem at all,” he said. He moved to the driver, who had pulled out two bags and dropped them at his feet. The driver tipped his hat at the girl before jumping back into the empty bus and driving away.

“This everything?”

“Yes. I didn’t want to bring too much,” Misti heard herself lie.

“Oh, you couldn’t have brought too much!” Mrs. McGrath touched her again as if to confirm her existence. Anxiety flooded Misti’s face. She took a step back, gripping her elbows in opposite hands. Mrs. McGrath pulled her hand back, blushing.

“Let’s get you home.” Mr. McGrath personified the former football star: well built, with strong-looking arms beginning to sag and a middle to match. He lifted the bags with a huff before leading the way out of the terminal. The girl stood in place, her eyes going towards the bus moving out of sight.

“Come along, dear.” Mrs. McGrath put her arm around the girl. She did not pull away this time. She allowed her aunt to lead her out of the building and to the waiting SUV. They loaded her into the back seat, much like a person who might be in witness protection.

“Are you hungry? We can stop and get something if you’d like?” Mrs. McGrath asked, examining her as she buckled her seat belt.

“I’m okay.”

Mr. McGrath finished loading the bags and got into the car. They rolled out of the parking lot, heading through main street.

It was the most American main street Misti had ever seen—brick shops and American flags flying at every doorway. Misti noted an antique store, a bookstore, a music store, a coffee shop, another antique

store, an ice cream shop, and a bistro. It looked as if it belonged in a Disney movie. She watched people walking down the street, stopping and talking to others. Misti noticed an old man reading a paper at the coffee shop, and a little girl in a red dress skipping down the road clinging to a teddy bear ahead of her parents who held hands. She studied a group of teenagers heading into the music store.

Welcome to Blackwood, Colorado! Home of the Fighting Tigers!

No wonder her mother had left this town and never looked back.

“Kids from school like to hang out down here on weekends. Penny, your cousin, can’t wait to take you on a tour and introduce you!” Mrs. McGrath shifted in the front seat. She seemed nervous. “Penny went to school today. She wanted to come with us today, but she had a particularly important test in her AP government class. But she’ll come right after school. We took the day off.” Guilt filled Misti’s chest. “I work at the bank as a teller and your Uncle Bill here works as an electrician. He’s going back to work this afternoon, but I’ll be home all day with you so you don’t have to be alone. I thought we could get your room all set up and then take you to the school to get registered.” She stopped for air, eyeing a group of women wearing walking clothes—tight, calf-length black pants and tighter bright-colored tank tops—all looking exceedingly serious as they swung their arms and wiggled their hips to keep pace with the long-legged and lean leader. Mrs. McGrath smoothed her clothes absentmindedly, touching her hair.

“That’s nice of you,” Misti said, bringing her aunt back into the car. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You are most certainly not a bother!” she said, too firmly for Misti to believe. Mr. McGrath had said nothing since starting the drive. Misti wondered if he ever got a word in edgewise. Mrs. McGrath must have caught her tone because she changed the subject. “We couldn’t be happier to have you. Our home is your home.”

The tone shifted. Misti could still sense a hint of tension. Perhaps if

Uncle Bill would say something— agree with her—Misti would believe it. But he kept his eyes on the road, a blank face, hands at 2 and 10. Silence fell upon the car and Misti focused on the houses they glided past. Each one occupied two stories with perfect green yards and trimmed hedges. Some houses were white, some blue, some green. Each had been decorated for the fall, with cute pumpkins stacked together with hay and a few miniature scarecrows. Each home had “Welcome” signs instead of broken-down cars.

The house they pulled into fit right in with the rest of the neighborhood: two stories and an immaculate front lawn. The grass had begun to fade around the edges. Orange and white and yellow pumpkins littered the front porch. The door held a wreath of pinecones and leaves and burlap. A large sign leaning against the side of the house said “Welcome!” in a pretty font. It looked like it belonged in a magazine.

“I decorated it myself,” Mrs. McGrath said. The pride in her voice forced Misti to give a small nod of approval. It looked just like all the others they had passed.

Mr. McGrath carried the suitcases in as Mrs. McGrath led the way through the wooden door. Inside, the house smelled clean, with a hint of cinnamon. The floors sparkled, and family pictures hung along the wall. There were four empty hooks on the wall. Mrs. McGrath removed her coat and hung it up. She also slipped off her shoes and put them away. She looked at Misti, who slipped out of her shoes, took off her black jacket and hung it up. Mr. McGrath came in behind them, huffing again. He dropped the cases and let out a loud sigh.

“I can take them now.” Misti moved to the little bag, but Mr. McGrath waved her off.

“It’s okay; she’ll want to give you a tour.”

Mrs. McGrath smiled and then escorted Misti through the hall past the stairs. They entered a large room that served as both the family room and the kitchen. The kitchen sparkled, and the counters contained

no clutter. A cream-colored sectional pointed at a large TV, while a fireplace completed the cozy family living space. Misti hated how comfortable this entire place felt. “This is nice,” she said.

Mrs. McGrath beamed with pride. “We spend most of our time in this room. We have all our meals as a family. Most nights, we eat at the island, but for important meals we eat in the dining room.”

The dining room looked over the backyard. Its large table with eight chairs looked brand new. Misti wondered what constituted an important meal.

Misti repeated her words from earlier. Although she knew this was important to her hostess, Misti wanted to go lie down. She had been on a bus for two days, and she had gotten little sleep. She knew she wouldn’t be able to control her emotions on little sleep, and she needed to control her emotions. She couldn’t risk making a bad impression. This would be home for the next eight months until she turned 18.

They continued with the tour, looking over the plain backyard with a little lawn and a shed. It looked unused. They traveled back to the front and Misti noticed a side room set up as an office.

“You and Penny can use that to do your homework. Although the schools give their students computers now, so it just sits empty. Except during fantasy football—then you can’t get Bill out of there.” Mrs. McGrath had relaxed, helping Misti to relax too. They moved upstairs, and she toured the bathroom she would share with Penny. A hair straightener and curler had been left on the counter, along with eyeliner. Mrs. McGrath pursed her lips in annoyance.

“Teenagers! Always sleeping as long as they can; they don’t give themselves time to get ready.” Mrs. McGrath lingered and Misti watched the debate of her wanting to put the items away or just continue with the tour. Mrs. McGrath moved down the hall, opening a door. Penny’s room. Not as organized as the rest of the house, but it held a made-up bed and clean floor. She then moved across the hallway and



opened another door. "This is your room."

The room contained only a bed and a dresser. Nothing hung from the wall. A blank canvas.

"We can paint it any color you want. Hang curtains you like, get a headboard. Whatever you want or need."

Misti's bags sat next to the bed. A wave of fear crashed over her. "Okay," she said, almost choking on the word.

"Mary," Mr. McGrath emerged from the other end of the hall. The master bedroom, Misti assumed. He had dressed in different clothes. He was on his way to work. "Why don't you let her have a few minutes to herself? Let her take a nap? I haven't been on a bus in a long time, but I'm sure they're about as restful now as they were then."

"Oh, of course!" Mrs. McGrath looked startled and a little embarrassed that she hadn't thought about that. "You take as long as you need. I'll be downstairs."

Misti managed a smile before stepping into the room and closing the door. She listened on the other side as they moved down the stairs in their socks. She heard murmuring, but could not understand it. Misti took off her sweater and let it plop to the floor. Her mother had not insisted on a clean floor. Instead, she was the one who had picked things up. She touched the bedding and stroked the soft fabric for a moment, forgetting where she was for a second. She lifted the covers and slid into the bed and felt as if she were on a cloud. The sleep that had eluded her for the past several weeks found her now.

## Three

### *New Chance*



Misti sat up with a jolt. The afternoon sunlight hit the window, casting a tranquil autumn glow. It took a moment for her to recall where she was and steady her mind. She drew a couple deep breaths and let go of the blankets in her grasp. Her hair was sticky and her clothes clung to her. She studied the clock on the bedside stand. 3:52. Oops. She had slept away most of the day.

And she was ravenous. Misti swung her feet to the floor, noting the lush carpet. She laid the blankets back over, attempting to recreate the hotel-like folds. It didn't look half bad. Didn't matter. She would be crawling back into bed in a few hours. It would just get messy again. The reason her mother said they never made the beds. She gave the same excuse for not doing dishes. Or laundry.

Misti looked into the mirror on her dresser and grimaced. Her dark makeup and hair were a wreck again. At least the dark circles under her eyes had faded. Turning to the denim bag she had brought with her, she dug out her hairbrush and a smaller patchwork bag. She opened the door and listened. She could pick up the murmur of the TV downstairs.

Missing one sock, she cut across to the bathroom and closed the door. She needed to take a shower, but she chose to wait until before bed.

Misti brushed her thick wavy hair before getting out a makeup wipe. She cleaned off her makeup and hesitated. She had never considered herself an ugly girl. She thought she had a nice nose. But she never saw herself as pretty. At her other schools, she just blended in. She avoided having an issue with others. She enjoyed playing the part of an anonymous background character.

Her mother always encouraged the dark makeup and edgy demeanor. A few months before, her mother tried cutting off all her hair to give her a pixie cut. Misti refused to let her. It was an ugly fight. Misti winced, her dark eyes finding the few chunks of hair that were a little shorter than the rest.

Instead of reapplying the dark makeup, she opted for only a little eyeliner and some mascara. She didn't recognize herself. And she actually liked that. Maybe Ms. Webb had been onto something back in the locker room. Perhaps here she could rediscover herself, reinvent herself. Instead of being the new girl or the quiet girl or the girl with the crazy mom... Misti sighed. Here she would be the poor girl living with her aunt and uncle. Girl with a crazy mom might be better.

Tucking the brush and makeup bag under her arm, she stepped back to the door and opened it to meet a girl her age standing on the other side, hand lifted to knock.

She was taller than Misti, with red-brown hair curled just perfectly at the ends. She was slim, with broad shoulders and well-built thighs. She had her mother's eyes and her father's nose. This must be her cousin, Penny. Misti had a flash of memory. She and Penny playing dress up in the bathroom, pretending to be princesses. They had had so much fun. 17 year old Penny still looked the wide eyed girl in the purple princes dress. Just grown up. Misti wondered how much she had changed?

"Hi! Sorry to bother you, but Mom wanted me to check on you and

see if you were up yet and hungry at all.” She spoke quickly. Nervous. “I’m Penny, by the way, your new roommate!” She giggled at her own joke, flipping her hair.

Misti attempted to smile. She had once read about ways to make people like you. Smiling was important. It hurt her face to try.

“I could eat,” Misti said. “I just need to put these away.”

“Oh, here!” Penny stepped past her into the bathroom and opened a drawer. It was empty. “I made room for you. I needed to clear out a bunch of ancient junk anyway. I still owned butterfly hair clips!” She rolled her eyes at herself, adjusting her hair in the mirror.

A drawer and a bedroom. This might not be the worst place in the world.

“Thanks,” Misti said, depositing her brush and her makeup back into the drawer.

“Mom made some cookies,” Penny said, heading for the stairs. Misti followed, realizing halfway down that she still wore only one sock. She stopped and yanked it off and set it down on her boots. Next to her coat hung a dark jacket and a backpack. Penny’s things. Uncle Bill’s coat was gone.

“Ah! You’re awake! Are you hungry? I made some cookies.” Aunt Mary pointed to an oval plate of cookies, arranged in a perfect pattern with equal sized cookies all around. Penny hopped up on one of the bar stools and picked up two cookies. Misti sat and lifted one cookie. “Milk?” Both girls nodded. The cookie was delicious.

“Are you feeling refreshed? How did you like the bed?”

“It’s the most comfortable I’ve ever slept on!” Misti said after swallowing her cookie with a gulp of milk. The milk wasn’t close to being expired. Aunt Mary beamed. “I’m sorry I slept all afternoon; I know you wanted to get some things done.”

“Don’t be silly. We can get you registered tomorrow. I don’t have to work until 10 on Wednesdays.” Aunt Mary topped off both their milks

and returned the glass bottle to the fridge. Misti looked at Penny, who offered her an encouraging grin.

“Penny also advised me that you’re seventeen and don’t need someone to help decorate your room if you don’t wish it. And that you possibly have your own decorations to hang up.”

Misti worried about her suitcases upstairs. They held all the clothes she owned. Most of those had been tired when she bought them at the thrift store; she would need new ones soon. There was her sketchbook, her pencils, and charcoal. A couple pictures. A few movies and a few books. Nothing to hang on the walls. She had never been in one place long enough to hang items on the wall.

“You could help me if you want. I don’t have much.” Misti looked at her glass and blushed.

Mary seemed to perk up again and smirked at her daughter. “Well, supper is already in the crockpot, so let’s go get you unpacked and see what we’re working with. You coming, Penny?”

“Sure. I can’t help long, I have stupid math homework again.”

“Homework is not stupid!” Mary said, already halfway up the stairs.

“Calculus is,” Penny whispered to Misti before grinning and dashing up the stairs. Misti grabbed one more cookie and her sock before rushing after them. The light was on and Mary had swung the first suitcase up onto the bed. She did not open it. Instead she opened the closet door and a few drawers in the dresser.

Misti opened the suitcase and let it fall back. Although it was a large suitcase, it contained very little. While she pulled out her sketchbook and her pencils, she saw Penny and Mary exchange glances.

“I didn’t bring much,” Misti heard herself lying. She didn’t know how to tell them that this was all that she had in the world and that moving in two suitcases had been a regular thing for her. Nothing new there. Having her own room and eating homemade cookies that she didn’t have to worry about being laced with something a little stronger than

chocolate was different. Her bed was comfortable and the cleanest she had ever slept on. An uncomfortable silence pressed down on the room as they started taking out her clothes. Mary attempted to keep a neutral face but Penny did not. She looked startled, disgusted, and sad. Misti regretted allowing them to help. She took notice of their clothes for the first time and saw that, although they were not designer, her aunt and cousin were the original owners.

“What’s the school like?” Misti asked, attempting to divert attention. It worked on Penny.

“It’s like most high schools, I suppose. We only have one gym but most schools have two now. We just had a homecoming. The teachers are really good for the most part. Except Mr. Hill. He’s worthless.”

“Penny,” Mary scolded, while she refolded Misti’s shirts to inspect them. Misti wanted to snatch her things, throw them all into the suitcase in a messy pile and run for it.

“Well, it’s true! He won’t move on in teaching until everyone agrees with him that the Moon landing is fake!” Misti must have made the right face because Penny continued eagerly. Aunt Mary put the shirts in the drawer. “Like, seriously. I refused to admit it and we wasted three weeks of sophomore year watching stupid YouTube videos about the conspiracy theories surrounding the Moon landing. Dad finally told me to just say that I believed so we would learn a little biology before Christmas.”

Misti only had the pants she had on and one other pair that Aunt Mary set carefully in the drawer. Perhaps she thought they would crumble in her hands.

“Why don’t they fire him?” Misti asked, closing her now empty suitcases.

“They won’t. He’s the basketball coach and our team has almost made it to state for the last three years or something like that.” Mary took the bags from Misti and tucked them up on the top shelf in the closet.

“After dinner, we can go through my yearbooks and I can show you a little. I’m the yearbook editor. I have them all from the last three years!” Penny looked around and sighed. “I guess I’ll go do my homework.”

Misti wanted to smile. The girl sounded defeated.

“You’ll live, Penny,” Mary said. She did not seem to pity her daughter in the least.

“Are you a math genius, Misti?” Penny sounded hopeful.

“No. Math is my worst subject.”

“Mine too!” Penny paused. “Maybe you’ll be in my class and then we can suffer through together!”

Misti nodded, but she would never be able to handle calculus. And she secretly didn’t want classes with her cousin. This first day chit-chat did not mean they would be friends. It would be hard if they got close and Misti left. Because that was the plan. Although this place was nice and comfortable and safe, she was not going to stay here.

Misti went back downstairs with her aunt. Mary turned on the news and pattered around in the kitchen. Misti offered to help twice, but Mary waved her away, telling her to relax.

A long silence occurred between them. Misti felt her aunt watching her, not the news. Misti did not watch the news either; she waited for something, anything, to happen.

“Misti?”

Misti recognized that tone. She was about to be asked serious questions. She suddenly wished she had stayed in her room. She must have tensed because Mary moved and sat next to her. Not touching her, but she could simply reach out a little and there would be contact. “I’m not going to ask anything. The social worker explained most of it over the phone. I just want you to know that if you ever want to talk about what happened, I’m here.”

Misti relaxed and pulled her eyes away from the TV. Her aunt had the same eyes as her mother, only calm and sincere. “Thanks, Aunt Mary,”

Misti said. She was okay. Despite what everyone kept saying. Because what happened was over. And no amount of pondering or talking about it would change that. She had always been waiting for it to happen. It was a release when it did. Not a relief, because it was terrible. But she was glad it did happen. Mary smiled at her, patted her knee a few times and moved back to the kitchen.

Uncle Bill came home just after 5. He greeted his wife with a kiss and nodded a hello to Misti before going upstairs to change. Misti and her aunt watched the news until he came back twenty minutes later, freshly showered. He told them about the mess of the building he was working on that week, replacing the old knob and tube wiring with today's standard. He complained about someone named Andrew.

Just before 6, Penny emerged from her room, looking a little flustered, but she confirmed her homework was complete for the night. She didn't think she had done any good on the problems and would probably be failing the test on Friday.

They sat down just after 6, the TV on mute at the island. They ate roasted chicken, carrots, and mashed potatoes. Misti couldn't help but take a second helping.

Penny filled her in on the school gossip. "Amelia Hopkins supposedly snuck out on Saturday night and didn't come home until Sunday afternoon. She spent the whole time with her boyfriend, Michael Anderson."

Misti perceived that this should be shocking, but teenage girls spending weekends away from home was not something unfamiliar to her.

"Shame on her parents for not going out to find her," Aunt Mary said. "If either of you did that, Bill and I would drive the streets shouting for you until you were so embarrassed you'd never leave the house again."

"Sure, Mother!" Penny rolled her eyes. Misti was not one to sneak out and spend time with her boyfriend. Not that she ever had a boyfriend.



She was too busy taking care of her mother to have time for one. And she never really stayed in one place long enough to form the connection she needed.

Misti helped Penny wash and dry dishes and load the dishwasher while Aunt Mary put leftovers into clear containers with colorful lids.

“Are you a buyer of lunch or a taker?” Aunt Mary asked as Misti dried the roasting pan. Misti blinked in confusion. “Do you want to take lunch or buy it there?”

“Take it,” Penny said to her. “Lunch is disgusting at our school. Like, the meat is not meat, and the mashed potatoes—and there are always mashed potatoes—taste like cardboard. Don’t even get me started on the gravy.” She shuttered over dramatically and Misti caught herself smiling again.

“Okay. Pack what you want.” Aunt Mary poured herself a large glass of wine and opened a beer bottle before retiring to the sofa to lean against her husband. Penny gagged herself quietly before opening the cupboard for them both. Inside were the most snacks Misti had ever seen. There was jello, pudding, crackers, chips, pretzels, and Cheez-its. Penny grabbed a bag of chips, a jello, and retrieved an apple from the basket on the counter. Misti grabbed a pudding and a Cheez-its bag. She also got the bread and the peanut butter. Penny made herself a ham sandwich while Misti made a classic peanut butter and jelly.

“You should take something for the afternoon, too,” Penny said. “Most teachers let you eat in their rooms, as long as you clean up after yourself. The only one who’s real...witchy about it is Mrs. Gaillaro. She’s a witch about everything.”

“Penny!” Aunt Mary said in a sing-song warning voice. Misti took an extra bag of chips and added it to her pile. She watched as Penny dumped a large portion of cereal into a sandwich bag.

“Easy to eat during class.”

Misti nodded as if that made perfect sense.

“Is there a paper bag somewhere?”

“Don’t be silly.” Penny opened one of the island cupboards and produced two lunch bags with pretty designs on them. “Everyone has one of these now.”

Misti accepted the bag without hesitation. Heading into a new high school was not something unusual for her, but anything she could do to avoid being a target would be helpful. She just wanted the next eight months to go by quickly with her playing her usual role as an unnamed background character.

“We’re going to watch a new show on Netflix, a baking show. Do you girls want to join us?” Aunt Mary asked after their lunches were safely stored.

“I have spreads to look over,” Penny said.

“I think I’m going to go read for a bit,” Misti said. Penny mouthed “good choice” to her. Uncle Bill looked about ready to fall asleep.

“Okay, just remember, lights out at 10.”

Misti followed her cousin up to their rooms.

“Is it okay if I shower?” Misti asked before Penny closed her door.

“Of course; it’s your shower too. I prefer to shower in the morning. Are you a night showerer? Dad is. He says it helps him relax.”

“I guess,” Misti said. She didn’t want to tell her that in the past she had to shower whenever she could. There was never really a schedule.

“That’s terrific! We don’t have to fight over the bathroom! I have to be honest, I was worried about that. Silly of me but, like, I am not a morning person!” Penny came back out into the hallway and opened a closet in the bathroom, getting out two towels.

“You can use my shampoo and conditioner. They have coconut oil and remind me of the beach! Supposed to be good for waves.” Penny had straight-as-a-board hair. But Misti was intrigued. She had a natural wave that some girls had told her was nice and even envied.

“Thanks.”

Penny grinned.

"I mean, thanks for everything. For being so nice. I realize having me here is an inconvenience. But I promise it is just until after high school." Misti blurted it all out.

Penny stared at her, her eyebrows raised. "You're not an inconvenience, Misti. We absolutely wanted you here once we heard about what had happened. My mom cried, and I overheard her telling my dad that we should have tried to take you years ago." Penny crossed her arms and glanced behind her, checking for the prying ears of her parents. "I don't know if you remember coming here, like, maybe ten years ago?" Misti nodded. The princess party flashed through her mind again. "I remember you and I had so much fun for, like, two weeks. It was summertime, and we had a pool out back and we rode bikes. We stayed up in my room reading scary stories. It was like having a sister!"

Misti felt herself smile genuinely for the first time.

"I woke up one morning and you were gone. I guess your mom just packed up and took you and left in the middle of the night. No goodbyes. It was the first time I saw my mom cry."

Disappearing in the middle of the night was not something unusual to Misti either.

"I'm sorry," Misti apologized. Not that it was her crime. But she had spent her life atoning for her mother.

"It's not your fault," Penny said. "I just know that my mom was worried about you then. And I think she has regretted not trying to find you earlier."

Misti's throat tightened. She had assumed, had been informed by her mother, that they were alone in this world. She did remember leaving that night. She recalled crying in the back of a taxi. And her mother telling her it was better, that her aunt was an evil witch who was going to boil her alive if they stayed. That her aunt was resentful of how pretty Misti was compared to Penny.

“Go shower!” Penny said. “Just unwind. The high school hasn’t had a new student in two years. You’ll be the star of the show tomorrow!”

A different kind of anxiety gripped Misti’s heart.

Misti showered, loving the warm water and taking a deep whiff of the shampoo. It smelled like the beach. Misti thought about the few weeks she and her mom camped on the beach when she was in middle school. It was one of the few good memories she had.

She brushed her hair and dressed in the pjs she had grabbed from her room. When she emerged, Penny’s door was ajar. Misti peeked in and saw her on the computer, her eyebrows scrunched together.

Misti went to her room and discovered a couple shirts and a pair of jeans lying on the bed.

“Thought you might prefer something fresh for your new school,” the note read, signed “Penny.”

The shirts were nothing special. One was a simple T-shirt with stripes. The other was a sweater with a cable knit pattern. The sweater was not long enough for Misti’s comfort so she chose the T-shirt. The jeans were newer, never even worn. They had fashionable tears in them and a slight roll at the ankle.

Misti had just finished pulling on the clothes when there was a gentle tap at the door. Misti opened it and Penny grinned.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I always prefer having a brand new outfit to wear to school on my first day! You know, the first impression is what counts! You look so cute!”

“Thanks!” Misti wanted to appear displeased that her cousin had deemed her clothes not good enough, but she was glad that she had.

“I have just the thing to finish that off!” Penny skipped back to her room and appeared with a cranberry-colored sweater. Misti put it on.

“This will look fantastic with your boots!” Penny said, clapping her hands in approval.

“Thanks again,” Misti whispered.

“Any time!” Penny said. “I already told Dad we’ll need his credit card this weekend. No offense, but you need a new wardrobe.”

“None taken.” Misti had promised herself that she would not become attached. She was an expert at not becoming attached. But now, the first day, she could feel herself breaking that pledge.

After she had switched back to her pjs and Penny had returned to revising her yearbook, Misti propped her pillows against her bed and took out a battered book from her bag. She opened its crisp pages to the next blank one.

She had started keeping a journal during an eighth grade English class. The teacher had forced them to have one during her class, allowing them ten minutes to scribble in it. She vowed to never read it unless they had requested, assuring them that their lives would be better if they got their feelings out on paper. Misti had been uncertain initially, just writing out song lyrics. One day, she opened up with little events and then moved on to bigger moments: her concerns about her mom, her latest living condition. And although she moved after being at that school for only six weeks, she had continued with the journaling.

*Dear J,*

(The teacher had told them they should name their journals, like Anne Frank had. Misti hadn’t been able to think of anything and didn’t like the idea of naming it something you would a pet, so just put “J” instead of “dear journal.”)

*I’ve been thinking about what that social worker said, about taking time to make this a new, fresh start. I think I’m going to do that. Penny isn’t as horrible as I expected. And Aunt Mary and Uncle Bill are nice. But it is the first day. New always seems better on the first day. We will see how it really*

*is after a few weeks. They might get over having a permanent guest.*

Misti stopped writing, biting the inside of her lip, her chest tightening again.

*Penny told me I would be the star of the show tomorrow. I really hope not. At least she gave me some new clothes so I don't look like the slob I usually do. Do you think I should stop wearing eyeliner? I didn't put it back on today and I kind of liked it. That can be part of the new appearance. Mom always said eyeliner was a warning. It scared the right people. But, all things considered, Mom isn't the best person to think about right now. You know I don't like to talk about it. Nervous for tomorrow. But, overall, things aren't as bad as I was expecting.*

## Four

### *First Day*



The morning went smoothly. Penny was not a morning person and took a long time to get ready. Misti had not slept well. Normally, she knew that she would be leaving in a few months and it didn't particularly matter if she made a good first impression. But this situation was different. She was in this school for the rest of the year. And her cousin was going there. She didn't want to be an embarrassment. She had thought about all of this while completing a very minimal makeup look and dressing in her borrowed clothes. Aunt Mary must have known that Penny had given her clothes because she smiled at her daughter with approval before they all headed out. Uncle Bill left in his truck, Penny left in her Camry, and Misti and Mary drove off in the SUV.

"Are you nervous?" Aunt Mary asked after she parked. Kids were streaming into the building, some by themselves, some with a single companion, others in packs. Misti's heart was racing but she shook her head. No need to worry her aunt.

The enrollment process was mostly complete when they entered. Misti's grades had been transferred, and judging by the sad look the counselor

gave her along with a comforting pat on her forearm, Misti knew she had been told about her past. The counselor was an older woman attempting to look ten years younger. Her hair was cut in a long bob and she wore a thick layer of makeup with bright eyeliner. She kept pushing up jangling bracelets only for them to fall back to her wrist and clink like Christmas bells as she typed.

“Okay, Misti, here are your classes. It looks like you have all your credits except English and a couple electives. Now you have your choice of electives: We have Drama, Choir, Band, Art, Creative Writing, Gym, Weight Lifting, and TA.” Bracelets shoved back up her arm. “I’m going to put you in senior English with Ms. Williams for the first hour. After that, you can have your choice.” Bracelets clinked.

Misti selected Art for her first elective. The thought of getting on stage and performing terrified her, and she was not musically inclined. Instead she picked creative writing. She did like writing in her journal. Probably something she could force her way through.

The rest of her schedule was filled with a Statistics and Financial Planning class, and a study hall. Not a horrible schedule.

“Okay, well, I guess that’s all,” Aunt Mary stood with them. “Are you ready for this?”

Misti nodded, afraid the nervousness she was trying to hide would reveal itself if she spoke. Strong and silent. That was her strategy for the next eight months.

“Okay, Penny will bring you home. I’ll be home at about the same time as both of you.” Aunt Mary stared at her for a moment and looked at the wacky counselor before grabbing Misti, hugging her, then bolting away.

Misti was given a map of the school and a code to a locker. Then she was set free.

The first bell had not yet rung, but Misti thought it would be wise to find her first class and get her bearings. On her way down the wide hall,



she noticed people stopping and turning from their lockers, looking at her with gaping mouths and popping gum. A few boys pushed each other and a couple girls looked her up and down. She was pleased to see that she was dressed a lot like them today. It would be easy to blend in.

“Misti!” Penny appeared beside her. “Let me see your schedule.” She snatched the schedule from her hands and they kept walking. “Misti, this is my best friend Chloe.” Penny was carrying a coffee, something she did not have before she left that morning.

“Nice to meet you!” Chloe said. She was a short girl with black hair and small eyes that seemed to dart. Misti did not like her. Her eyes held no trust.

“We don’t have any classes together but you have a sweet schedule. All of your teachers are actually decent at their jobs.” Penny handed back her schedule. “Your English teacher is the best one in the building. She’s older but definitely understanding.” Penny was leading the way, pretending to ignore but actually loving the eyes on her as she escorted the new girl.

“She’s just down the hall from my class.” She pointed at a door that had a sign leaning against it. “Your second and third hours are close to mine too; I can come get you. After the third hour, we’ll find your locker and then go to lunch.” Misti was relieved that Penny was taking charge of the situation. She would not have to interact with anyone new. “See you in a bit!”

Misti walked to the room alone and found the sign read: “I don’t have bad handwriting, I’m just using my own font!” Misti liked Ms. Williams immediately.

“Hello! You must be my new student!” The teacher rose from her desk. She was wearing a full-length skirt and boots with a loose peasant blouse. She reminded Misti of the hippie woman who had read to her after school when she was little when her mom was working, back when

her mom could manage a full-time job.

"I am. I just wanted to find the class before being late," Misti explained.

"Responsible, I like it!" The teacher moved to the front of the room and took a book from the shelf. "We're reading this in class. We just started a few days ago. Today is a writing prompt over the first ten chapters. You can just get caught up."

Misti nodded and looked at the book. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She had actually already read it, but she chose not to say anything. It had been a few years and she would like the chance to read it again before making a fool of herself.

"I have no seating chart, but my students kind of assign themselves seats. There are a few open in the middle of that row. Yes, right there is good." Misti settled into the desk and opened the book. She was halfway through chapter one when the bell rang and other students started coming in.

Most students just stared at her. She heard a few whispers but did not look up to acknowledge them.

"We do have a new student, and yes, she is pretty, boys, and yes, girls, she is smart. Just leave her alone and get out some paper. You have a writing prompt." There was a groan but everyone listened and soon the class had pulled their attention away from Misti and to their assignment.

The next two classes went about the same. Her math teacher gave her a packet, asking her to complete it by Friday, and she took notes over the day's lesson. The creative writing class was sharing stories and her teacher told her she would jump in on the next assignment. Misti listened to some pretty horribly written stories about teenage girl troubles. By the end of the third hour, Misti was ready to go home. The lack of sleep the night before and the nerves had caught up to her. She was feeling overwhelmed and behind.

"Locker time!" Penny said in her mother's sing-song voice. Misti held out her locker card and Penny paused, frowning.

“What?” Misti asked.

“Nothing, just...there are some weird stories about that locker. They don’t usually let kids have it.”

Great. Now she had the weird locker.

“What stories?”

“Uh, just weird ones. I guess a girl who had this locker, like, twenty years ago died or something and people say it’s haunted.”

A ghost locker. That seemed highly unlikely. And something Misti would be stuck with.

“I know, I know. But we’re a small town; people are silly!”

They found the locker. It was in between one locker that was covered in bumper stickers about saving the planet and another that looked as if it had been punched a couple too many times. Misti did the twirls of the code and the locker popped open. It was dusty inside. It was clear no one had used it in quite a while. Misti deposited her bag, taking with her only her lunch and the copy of her code. Penny assured her they would have time to come back before the fourth hour.

Lunch provided Misti with a little recovery. She half listened to Penny and Chloe discuss yearbook issues—everything from what to put on something they kept referring to as the ‘fun spread’ to how so and so was not doing her share again and that Mr. Miller was doing literally nothing about it and it was so freaking annoying. While she listened, Misti ate her sandwich and people-watched. She was still being looked at and whispered about. The school was a lot smaller than any she had attended before. She was able to recognize kids from her classes. There was a slender kid with baggy pants and a shirt for a heavy metal band who was in her English and her math class. There was the girl who was in her creative writing class with red curly hair, a baggy sweater, and a large book she had her nose buried in.

There were the typical tables that all schools held. There was the loud, needing-to-make-themselves-noticed-and-heard sports boys

table. Close by was the cheerleading table, not really eating much and taking lots of selfies. There was a quiet table with kids eating their lunch in an attempt to be invisible. Book girl was there. There was a table with the band kids. Heavy metal was there.

Misti placed herself at the in-between table. They were not as socially outcast as the quiet table and not as in the center of it as the sports and cheerleaders. She was okay with her positioning. Normally, she had eaten lunch in the library or outside away from the noise. When she could afford lunch, that is. Most of the time, she just sat and did the homework she had gotten in her morning classes, away from the danger of the cafeteria.

“Hey, Penny.” A tall boy in an Under Armour hoodie and jeans stopped by their table. He held an apple and looked like a cliché jock wanna be. He wasn’t particularly attractive. He wasn’t out of shape but you could tell he wasn’t really in shape either. His hair had too much gel in it and his smile looked painted on. He did have nice, straight, white teeth that seemed to gleam at them.

“Hi, Tony!” Penny instantly perked up, tossing her hair.

“How’s it going?” His eyes traveled over the three girls, lingering on Misti for a moment. Misti took a bite of her sandwich, uninterested in his attention.

“Just talking yearbook shop!” Penny said, glancing at Misti. “This is my cousin, Misti. She just moved here. She’s staying with me, actually.” Penny had changed. She was no longer the take-charge, in-control girl who had firmly led Misti from class to class today. Instead she was this high-pitched voice, nervous creature. Misti stared at her, confused for a moment.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Tony. I’m on the football team and basketball team. Backup quarterback.” He puffed his chest in pride. All Misti heard was “not good enough to be the original quarterback.”

“Cool,” Misti said, deciding it would be better to be nice. She was,

after all, trying to create a fresh new start.

“You guys coming to the game Friday night?”

Sports? Misti had never attended a sports event in her life. The closest was when she watched people play football or soccer in the park. And she didn’t really understand the point in those slow-motion versions.

“You know it!” Penny said before giggling. Chloe joined in but Misti did not.

“Cool. I’ll look for you guys.” He winked at Penny and walked away. “Oh, my God!” Penny’s voice hit a new decibel and she and Chloe squealed at each other a little. “I can’t even believe I just acted like that! I mean, I must have sounded like an idiot!”

“At least he finally asked you to the game!” Chloe said. Did he, though? Misti wanted to know how him asking if they were going meant he was asking Penny.

“I know! I’ve only been dropping hints all year!”

Misti was lost now. She herself had never been interested in a boy, so maybe this was normal behavior. She turned her attention to the tables of the sports boys and the cheerleaders. Lunch had been eaten and the boys and girls were now mingling. She saw many girls giggling while most of the boys appeared to be acting foolishly, hitting each other and using trays as bats for empty milk cartons. Misti had never paid attention to high school behavior before. Maybe she was the weird one.

“We should go to our lockers.” Confident Penny returned, taking control and speaking at a pleasant level. Misti zipped her lunch bag up and the three girls walked to their lockers. Misti opened hers and placed her lunch inside, grabbing her bag. She would have to bring something to wipe it out with tomorrow. The dust was all over her bag now.

Misti’s last class of the day was Art. This was her favorite class. The teacher was a quiet, short man with glasses and no hair. He gave Misti

a tour of the studio before giving her paper and charcoal.

“We are experimenting with this medium currently. You are required to draw something, anything, with the charcoal before you can move onto what you like.” Misti nodded and took a seat at an empty table. The class was not full. Music was playing in the background. Misti recognized most of the kids from her other classes. The stares of shock at the new student had passed and a few of the kids actually smiled at her.

Misti stared at the paper for a long time, wondering what she should draw. Soon, she just let her mind go and began to doodle.

“Not bad!” Mr. Wilson said. “You’re talented!”

The picture was a cluster of trees, all dead, in a bunched pattern. She had added a moon and was considering a lake in the right bottom corner, possibly with a monster emerging from it.

At the end of the class Mr. Wilson said, “You can keep this with you, or we have cubbies over there. The artists here are all very respectful of each other’s pieces.”

Misti found an empty cubbie and put the paper in upside down.

She found her way back to her locker and opened it. She was surprised to find it was no longer dirty. In fact, it looked brand new. Penny had probably alerted a custodian and asked for it to be cleaned while she was in class.

Misti retrieved her lunch pail, the book for English, and her math packet. No other class had given homework tonight.

“You ready?” Penny appeared next to her.

Penny was not a horrible driver, but Misti found herself gripping the sides of her seats a few times as they rolled through some stop signs in front of cars that were going a lot faster than they should have been.

“What do you mean, you don’t know how to drive?” Penny asked.

She had to shout to be heard over the music that she had blasting. The car was an older model but Penny had made it her own. It smelled like strawberries and she had put on seat covers with a red pattern. The car was just as clean as her room, with the exception of their bags tumbling around the back seat.

“Didn’t really have to know in the city. Besides, we never had a car.”

“Oh, right! That makes sense. I’m sorry. That was probably insensitive of me.”

Misti forgave her. In fact, Misti had always wanted to learn to drive. Most of her classmates knew how to. But they didn’t have a car when she turned sixteen, and her mother had not driven in years herself.

They arrived home in one piece and found themselves alone in the house. Misti followed Penny up the steps of the drive. They hung their jackets and bags on the hooks, removed their shoes, and walked to the kitchen. Penny had begun explaining yearbook terms to Misti.

“When I say ‘spread’ I actually mean two pages, but yearbook calls it ‘the spread’. We also have the mugshots, which are just everyone’s picture. But it’s hilarious because we call them that. Right now we’re finishing up the fall spreads and then we’ll be moving on to the mugs. Those are always the easiest.” Penny pulled down a snack from the pantry and began eating and continued talking. Misti let her. She knew what it was like to be lonely and want to speak.

After they had each had a snack, they headed up to their rooms. Misti sat on her bed and worked on the packet. It seemed to be pretty basic algebra. She was about halfway through when there was a tap on her door. Misti waited for it to open before realizing the person was waiting for her response.

“Come in!” She had never had that control before. It was pretty exciting.

Aunt Mary entered. She was dressed in slacks and a silky blouse with flowers all over it. Her hair was done up and she wore stockings.

“How was your first day?” she asked, coming to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Good. Pretty easy. Penny really helped me, made sure I got to all of my classes.”

Aunt Mary smiled. “I see you have homework.”

“Yeah, not much,” Misti said, showing her the packet. “Personal finance.”

“Well, lucky for you, I deal with these sorts of things all day, everyday. So if you need any help, you let me know. Lord knows I can’t do what Penny is taking.” Aunt Mary stood. “Better get dinner started. Spaghetti tonight!”

Aunt Mary shut the door behind her. Privacy. Again. Misti didn’t know how to handle that.

Dinner followed the same routine as the night before. Uncle Bill also asked about their days and Penny complained about Mr. Miller and told them about almost being done with yearbook. Misti just said she had a good day and that her teachers seemed okay.

After dinner, the girls did the dishes and made their lunches. Misti went upstairs after dinner and took another shower. Penny did not leave another outfit for her this time but Misti had paid attention to what the girls were wearing and managed to put together what she thought would be acceptable. She got into bed and read more of the book for English.

“Lights out, girls!” Aunt Mary called up the stairs right at 10.

Misti could get used to this life.



## Five

### *The Game*



The week flew by. Misti was able to participate more fully in her classes. By Friday, she could find her classes without having to ask or circle back. She got her first creative writing assignment and finished her monster in the lake charcoal drawing, which Mr. Wilson described as inspired and hung up with other student work.

She was drawing random circles in her book when she felt as if she was being watched. She looked up and found a boy staring at her from across the Art room. When she looked at him, he looked away. He was still working on his charcoal piece. He wore dark jeans and a plain T-shirt. Misti would classify him as cute. When the bell rang, she hurried out the door to avoid meeting him.

Misti opened her locker and froze. Everything in it had been moved from where she had set it. Her lunch pail, which she always set on the bottom, was hanging from the hook, slightly open. Her books that she kept in a stack in order of her classes were all piled on the bottom of the locker on top of her jacket, which usually hung where the lunch pail was now. Misti's eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. She must not have

shut her locker and now some jerk was messing with the new girl. As she rearranged her things, she remembered what Penny had said on the first day: that she had the haunted locker.

Someone was trying to convince her that the locker was haunted. Trying to scare her. She looked around, but the halls were relatively empty. No one was obviously watching her, hoping for a reaction. Tears? Fear? She wouldn't give them the satisfaction. And after what she had been through, it would take more than a few moved items to give her the creeps.

"See you next week!" She closed the door firmly and twisted the lock a few times, ensuring it was shut. She picked up her bag full of her weekend assignments and went to meet Penny at the car, looking back only once to scan the hall for a suspect. No one was left.

Misti was sitting at the island, searching the internet and eating a snack, when Penny came thundering down the stairs.

"Here!" Penny slid a blue shirt across the island to her and went to the counter. "You'll need a school shirt tonight. You have to wear school colors to show your support." She picked up an apple.

"Uh," Misti said, holding up the shirt. It had a tiger on it and in yellow font said 'Blackwood High'. "I don't know if football games are really my thing."

"Oh, come on! You told me you've never even been to one. How can you know if they're your thing or not?"

That was one of the more solid arguments that Penny had given over the past few days. And Misti reminded herself that she was trying to be a new person.

The game was packed. There were parents and students and small children running around. The air was cold; Misti was glad Aunt Mary had tossed her a pair of gloves and headband for her ears. Penny had

redone her hair and applied a bit more makeup than usual. They had picked up Chloe and they both had cameras. They were covering the game; a girl named Angela was supposed to, but she backed out last minute and this was the third most important game of the season so it needed to be covered.

Misti trailed behind the two girls and regretted coming. The mountain air had a bite to it and the crowd made her uncomfortable. The three made their way down the old wooden bleachers to sit with a growing crowd of teenagers. In the front of the group were eight skinny boys. They had no shirts on but they were painted in blue and yellow, the school colors. They each had a letter on their chests and stomachs; when they stood in the correct order they spelled out "GO TIGERS." Most of the time, they could not find the "O" and the "T" kept sitting down. The cheerleaders down below were yelling and waving up at the stands.

The energy in the stands was different from anything Misti had ever experienced. It buzzed inside her, as if there was a bumble bee rumbling around her chest. The hairs on her arms rose in excitement and she actually joined in the cheering when the football team ran through the banner the cheerleaders held out for them. Misti clapped, but everyone around her thundered. A senior girl sang the national anthem that sent the crowd into a frenzy. She held the last note long but no one seemed to be bothered. The band beat their drums feverishly in support and Misti saw the girl rejoined them to her own cheers. She picked up a saxophone blushing as they all gushed about how well she had done.

Misti asked Penny about Tony and learned that he was number 12. They found him standing away from everyone else, his hands around his collar, swaying from side to side. He looked smaller than the other players.

The game began and the cheering rose again to an almost deafening

level. Misti wondered if it would be bad form to cover her ears. Penny and Chloe were jumping around with the crowd, pausing to snap pictures of the band, the kick-off, and the crowd. Every ten minutes or so, the cheerleaders would lead the crowd in a cheer. Misti discovered that everyone around her knew exactly how to respond to the questions the cheerleaders asked. At one point, she was forced to link arms with Penny and a girl next to her and they hopped left and right, simply shouting the colors of their school.

None of it helped their team. The other team scored, then scored again.

Throughout the game, Penny and Chloe whispered about Tony. Misti didn't ask why Penny was obsessed with the one guy who never played, who was always standing just outside the huddle, who didn't seem to be talking to anyone on the team. Misti almost felt bad for Tony.

"I'm going to go get some hot chocolate," Misti said to Penny, who was busy snapping pictures of the crowd. Uncle Bill had slipped Misti a ten before they headed out the door. "Do you want anything?"

"No, I'm good." Penny didn't look up. She was examining the pictures on her camera.

Misti clambered out of the stands and made her way up to the top of the bleachers and over to a little shack. There was a small group around it but no one was in line. Misti came to the front and recognized the girl behind the counter from her Art class.

"Misti, right?" the girl asked. Her name was Amber, Misti thought, giving her a nod. "Cool! Glad you're joining in the school spirit already! What can I get you?" Maybe coming to the game wasn't the worst idea after all.

"Hot chocolate?"

"Coming right up!" Amber turned and pulled out the coffee cups. "How are you liking it here?"

"It's pretty nice. A lot different than where I was before. A lot smaller."

“Man, I wish I had lived in a big city. There’s, like, nothing to do here but come to the games and then go to the stupid drive-in after. Can’t wait to get out of here!”

Misti nodded. She had heard that sentiment a lot over the last four days. She wanted to tell her classmates that they should enjoy it here because the big city was not as glamorous as the TV shows made it sound. But she doubted they would listen to the new girl. And although she had spent most of her life in different cities, she always spent them in the slums, not the nice parts. Maybe the nice parts of cities were better. “That will be a dollar!”

Misti handed over the ten and got a five and five ones back. She thought about telling the girl, but she didn’t know if that would embarrass her. She thanked her for the (free) hot chocolate and headed back down. She stopped at the top of the bleachers, taking a sip and immediately regretting it. The liquid was lava hot, burning her tongue. She winced, knowing now every sip would have little to no flavor. At least it was free.

“They should warn you not to drink those for at least ten minutes after getting them; they always burn your mouth.” Misti turned and found the boy she saw in art class today staring back at her. He was just as attractive up close. He was tall, a lot taller than she had thought, with a lean but not skinny body. He was wearing a hoodie and a beanie with a fuzzy ball on top. He had his hands shoved in his pocket and a slight smile on his lips. His eyes were green and his hair black.

“Yeah.” Misti could not think of anything else to say.

“I’m Alex. We have art together.”

She nodded, looking at her cup of hot chocolate. They stood together in awkward silence, watching the events of the game with little interest. The crowd in the stand began to chant. One last rally for their team.

“They’re down 24 to 0. I really don’t think chanting is going to help,” Alex said, breaking the ever-growing silence.

“I’ve never actually been to a game before. It’s odd the amount of support they have for a team that’s not doing what they’re supposed to do,” Misti said. She sounded dumb and pretentious.

Alex nodded. He must be one of the ones who liked to cheer. “I saw your charcoal drawing in Art. You’re really talented.”

“Thanks.” Misti would have blushed if her cheeks weren’t already red from cold. No one ever noticed what she did.

“I’m not much of an artist. I just took the class to fill my schedule and my friend said that anyone can learn to do it. I’m not sure.”

“Maybe I can help you,” Misti heard herself say before she could check in with herself. What was she thinking? Helping this guy? Why?

“That would be great!” Alex grinned at her and Misti’s stomach did a little backflip. That was new and different. She now understood why her cousin had been acting like such an idiot every time Tony spoke to her. It was involuntary.

“There you are!” A voice interrupted their conversation. A short girl with a pixie cut appeared next to them. Her blue eyes were covered in dark eyeliner, similar to what Misti used to wear, and she had several piercings, including her eyebrows, nose, and ears. Misti’s stomach mislanded and she felt a pang. This was why she had never let herself be interested in boys. Because they always had an angle, always had other interests, other girls. She had seen it with her mother’s slew of boyfriends. And this cute boy, the one who noticed her, already had a girl.

“I should get back to my cousin. See you in Art.” She turned and hurried back to Penny and Chloe before he could introduce her, explain her away as a cousin. She was relieved, actually. If he already had a girl, then she had nothing to worry about. His intentions might really just be about learning art.

“Where have you been?” Penny asked. She looked concerned.

“Some guy from Art class was talking to me.”

“Ohh!” Chloe said.

“He just wants help with his stuff,” Misti said, shaking her head. “Pretty sure he had a girlfriend.”

“Who is it?”

“Some kid named Alex. Don’t know his last name.”

Penny shrugged, looking around for him. Misti glanced to where they had been standing but he was gone. Off to make out with his edgy girlfriend.

They only stayed ten more minutes before Penny decided they needed to beat the crowd and get to the drive-in before everyone else. As Chloe and Penny discussed the game and how horrible the refs were, a complaint that the game could not possibly be the team’s fault, Misti thought about her last few days and the ‘new’ version of herself. She was clearly liked; people she had not spoken to before were chatting with her at the game. But the new version of herself had let emotions come in and that was not okay. She could see herself coming to care for her aunt and uncle and Penny. But they were family, and they had already done more than they needed to. As for the rest of these kids, she had no desire to get involved or emotionally invested in any of them. Especially any boys. Because boys will derail your plans and make life messy.

Within ten minutes of their arrival and ordering of ice cream shakes, the rest of the drive-in was full of cars. One car rolled up and began to play loud music. Everyone else moved from car to car, again, discussing the unfairness of the refs. Misti watched and listened, slowly consuming her chocolate shake. After about thirty minutes, the football team arrived. They acted as if they had just won the Superbowl. For about an hour, the poor workers ran from building to car, wiggling in between teenagers who stood in the way, looking annoyed when they were told to get back into their cars by management.

“Is it always like this?” Misti asked Chloe and Penny.

“Always. At least there hasn’t been a fight yet,” Chloe replied.

“If this night didn’t pay all of their bills, I’m sure they wouldn’t let us come here,” Penny said, pressing her lips together as two girls ran by giggling fiercely as a couple football players gave chase, throwing ice cubes at them.

Misti was ready for bed, but she said nothing. Penny was on edge, looking around, scanning frantically for Tony. They waited for another thirty minutes before he arrived. Misti had missed part of the game during her hot chocolate adventure. From what she did watch, Tony had not played at all during this game. But the way he was acting he alone played every single minute.

“Hey girls!” he said, his smile oozing across his face. “Did you enjoy the game?”

Misti’s feeling of empathy was gone the second he opened his mouth.

“Oh, sure! Would have been better if we’d had some fair refs!”

“For sure, for sure. We’ll do better next week.”

Misti doubted that and must have rolled her eyes out loud because Tony looked at her. “What did you think of the game, gorgeous?” he asked her.

Misti saw those words punch Penny in the stomach. She needed to save this situation. And she was just cranky enough to do that. “Your team sucks.”

Chloe looked at her, mouth hanging open in awe. Penny looked over her shoulder at her, her eyes afire. Tony was clearly annoyed. “Do you know anything about football?”

“Nope. But I know that if you lose with no points, it can’t be all the refs’ fault.”

There was nothing but the laughter from the other cars and the music breaking the silence. Misti might have gone too far, but she just wanted Penny to know she had no interest in this guy. She also wanted Penny



to stop throwing herself at him. He was a douche.

“Do you want to see some of the shots we got for the yearbook?” Chloe asked.

“Sure!” Tony turned his little eyes away from Misti. The three ignored Misti for the next thirty minutes. Penny had returned to her usual high-pitched voice and giggle that she assumed whenever she spoke with Tony. To her surprise, Chloe also seemed to be flirting with Tony. Penny didn’t seem to notice—or maybe this was some plan they had. Maybe this is what best friends did: Flirt with your crush to get them to like you more? Maybe Misti should have giggled and looked away when he called her gorgeous. Maybe that would have helped Penny.

Misti looked at her phone, another gift from her aunt and uncle. It was close to midnight now. Her uncle had been pretty clear about being home no later than then. Plus the lights were starting to go out and other cars were leaving.

“There’s a party happening at Joey’s place,” Tony said. “You two want to come?” Misti was not included in that invitation. Maybe she should look hurt.

“Sure!” Chloe said as Penny said “I can’t.” The two friends looked at each other.

“I have a curfew,” Penny said. “Maybe next time.”

Tony nodded and said goodnight before heading back to his car.

“We could go just once!” Chloe was saying.

“There’s drinking at those parties! And I’ve heard they are starting to do drugs now too,” Penny said. “I’m not interested in doing that.”

“We have to live a little while we’re in school! Before we get too old and start having kids!”

Penny laughed and shook her head. “How soon are you having those?”

Chloe shrugged and pouted all the way home. They dropped her off and Misti climbed into the front seat. The drive was silent other than the road singing to them.

“You didn’t have to be so mean to Tony,” Penny said as they turned down their road. “He’s not the star of the team, but he’s a really good guy. He’s just lost between being a football guy and being a good guy.” Misti didn’t think you could be lost between those. And she was angry with her cousin for defending him. Penny must realize that Tony was not a good guy. She just really wanted him to be one. And Misti knew from watching her mother that guys don’t change.

Uncle Bill was waiting for them. The TV was on ESPN.

“11:58!” he said, standing from the couch. “Cutting it close, ladies.”

“Oh, Dad!” Penny rolled her eyes. “Some people would let their daughter who is almost eighteen be out as late as they want.”

“Those people are raising their own grandchildren,” Uncle Bill said so drily back that Misti actually laughed. Uncle Bill perked up. Misti had not laughed since living with them.

Penny rolled her eyes again. “Good night, Daddy,” she said, heading up the stairs. Misti pulled out the ten dollars from her pocket and tried giving it back to her uncle.

“You keep it. Payment for laughing at my joke. No one ever does! Also, I understand you’re going on a shopping adventure tomorrow.”

Misti had forgotten about that. Hopefully, Penny would not be mad at her by then.

## Six

### *The Shift*



The next morning, Misti woke later than she meant. She came down the stairs just after 10, expecting to find the household in a bustle, but it was calm. She could hear her feet padding on the carpet as she walked into the living room. She found Aunt Mary watching TV, savoring a mug of coffee.

“Morning! How was the game?”

“Okay. They lost.” Misti sat on the sectional.

“They ordinarily do. We need a different coach. But we can’t get one until this old fart retires. He’s been around so long, no one wants to get rid of him.”

Misti found it fascinating that everyone said “we,” regardless of their status of being on the team or even attending the school.

“Seems silly if he isn’t good at his job anymore.”

“Small town politics.” Aunt Mary shrugged. “Penny will sleep in until noon, no doubt. I’m sure she was up late chatting to Chloe on her phone about whatever boy interests they have right now.” There was a pause. Misti knew she had already upset her cousin once last night. She didn’t

desire to add to that by informing her aunt about Tony. “Anyhow, after she wakes up, we could take a girls’ day and run up to the city—get you some new clothes if you like.”

Misti had never had the privilege of going to the city to get new clothes. Her wardrobe comprised either used or very used clothes. But she didn’t want to receive handouts. As if reading the conflict on her face, Aunt Mary smiled.

“Think of it like all the missed Christmas and birthday presents for the previous seventeen years.”

Misti blushed and looked down. “I would like that.”

“Perfect! Better eat breakfast. Try not to make too much noise. Your uncle gets to sleep in on the weekends and he does so.” Mary rolled her eyes.

Misti filled her cereal bowl and was munching quietly at the bar when the phone rang.

“Damn!” Mary rushed up and snatched the phone. “Hello...oh, yes, hello.” Mary glanced over at Misti and turned her back, hunching her shoulders. It was about her. Probably the social worker. It had been just over five days since Misti arrived. Checking in. “Yes, yes, doing just lovely. We’re going shopping today. Hm? Oh. Well, yes. I haven’t told her yet. I will. I’ll get the appointment set up for next week.” Appointment. Misti swirled her spoon around in her cereal, suddenly not starving but too poor to know it was bad form to waste food.

“Thank you, goodbye.” Mary hung up the phone and took a moment to swing around.

“What did she need?”

The social worker was a young up-and-comer. She was by the book and Misti had found her to be overbearing and lacking the empathy that a social worker should have. She liked to talk down to people. She did it to everybody, her aunt included.

“You’re supposed to start therapy. You were expected to start this week. But I felt you would prefer to be in school first, get settled and then start.”

“I would. I’m glad I got to do that.” Misti wanted her aunt to know that she didn’t think she had done anything wrong.

“Well, we’ll try to get you scheduled so you don’t have to miss school. Is there a day you would prefer?”

Misti shook her head. Talking to someone about her feelings was not something she loved to do. And she did not want to talk about that day. It was awful enough that it happened. No amount of talking would change that. But if it meant Social Worker Sally left her aunt alone, she could go suffer through an hour every once in a while.

“All right. I’ll take care of it on Monday.”

“I’m sorry.” Misti apologized mostly out of nature, but she didn’t know what to say.

“Oh, dear. There’s nothing to be sorry for!” Aunt Mary reached over and patted her hand. “That woman just has a way of making anyone she speaks to feel like a moron and a child all at the same time. Here I thought I was doing a satisfactory job of getting you adjusted.”

“You are!” Misti said. “I had never been to a football game before last night.” Misti stopped herself from revealing all the new things she had never had before, like eating three meals in one day. Or coming back to a tidy home where no one was lying passed out on the sofa. But she guessed if she couldn’t handle social workers, she couldn’t deal with hearing about that. Aunt Mary looked horrified enough that that had been her first football game.

Misti forced herself to finish breakfast and fled upstairs to get ready for shopping. She took a long shower, reflecting on the last week. She recognized she had been so busy working to get caught up in all of her classes (her math teacher had looked stunned when she turned the

packet back into him, done on Friday) that she was exhausted. After her shower, she let her hair air dry, and she sat down to write an update to J.

*Dear J,*

*Things are going pretty well so far. The school is not bad. I've definitely been in worse. I really like my art class. The instructor seems to know what he is doing. I don't mind any of my teachers, really. Penny is cool. It is pretty nifty having someone my own age to relate to. She is probably mad at me still. I thought I could do better, but this guy Tony is just no good. He seems like he wants to be more than he is and Penny deserves someone who is already more. If that makes sense. I hope she gets over him soon before he hurts her.*

*Aunt Mary and Penny are taking me shopping today. I was torn, but getting to buy new clothes will be a real treat. I'll be sure to keep it under control.*

*I'm thinking about seeing if Uncle Bill and Aunt Mary will let me get a job.*

*I have to start therapy next week. Like I will tell anyone outside of these pages what really happened that day. It isn't like it will change anything. What is done is done. Did I miss something that could have prevented it? Probably. But will talking about it really help? Doubtful.*

Misti went back downstairs and found Uncle Bill watching football.

She sat down with him, offering him a "morning." He grunted back at her. Penny woke thirty minutes later. Misti heard the shower turn on. When she arrived downstairs, her hair was done and she was dressed as if she was going to school.

"All right, girls, we leave in twenty minutes!" Aunt Mary had joined the football party, wearing a college team jersey and jeans, her hair pulled into a pony and wearing comfy tennis shoes.

"I actually can't go." Penny said, moving to the fridge. "A bunch of spreads need to be edited, and a bunch didn't even get done. I was going

to go over to Chloe's so we could get those finished."

There was a pause. Aunt Mary glanced at Misti and then Penny, pursing her lips.

"What?" Penny said, teenage attitude signing through. Uncle Bill sat up and glowered at his daughter and she turned away, averting his frown.

"It's okay," Misti said. "She told me last night that she might not go. Angela didn't do what she was supposed to, I guess?"

Penny stared at Misti. For a moment, she looked as if she might change her mind. The ice was thawing.

"Yeah."

Aunt Mary relaxed.

"You do what you have to, dear. We'll miss you."

Penny nodded, leaving the room. They heard the door open and shut a few minutes later.

So, she was mad. Great. So much for making things better here.

Shopping was more entertaining than Misti was expecting. She had grown up seeing people wander around with their bags. Her mother told her that people who went shopping were just seeking to fill empty parts in their souls. Once again, her mother had been incorrect. She had set a budget for herself, but she and her aunt walked into a clearance sale. Misti ended up coming home with several bags of clothes containing new shirts, pants, dresses, and shoes. And the prices were what Aunt Mary said was a steal. Aunt Mary had become more comfortable as the day went on, gossiping with Misti about her work and her uncertainties about Penny. She even told her some scandal about a coworker they ran into at lunch.

Penny glanced at them from the couch when they returned and looked put out. Aunt Mary announced their achievement, holding up their bags as if they were trophies. Uncle Bill rolled his eyes, demanding proof. Aunt Mary handed over the receipts and Uncle Bill looked amazed and

approving.

“We’ll wash this all tomorrow. Take the bags up to your room for now!” Aunt Mary said.

Misti hurried up the stairs, carefully taking everything out and laying it gently on her bed, admiring her new wardrobe.

“You didn’t have to cover for me this morning.” Penny was leaning against her door, watching her.

“I know. But I get that I upset you.”

Misti didn’t look at her, just opened her closet and put away her three new sets of shoes. Penny said nothing for a while, looking at the new clothes. She finally turned and walked away. Misti wanted to feel bad for her, but she didn’t know how to. She wasn’t the one who told her not to go. Penny was being silly. Misti only said those things so Tony would know she was not interested and keep his focus on her cousin, who was so into him it was painful.

The rest of the weekend went by in a blur. Misti watched a college football game with her uncle before her aunt made him turn on a movie. They ordered pizza for dinner and watched another movie after dinner, microwaving popcorn. Penny joined them, but she and Misti did not speak. Misti wondered if her aunt and uncle noticed, but she knew there was no way that they couldn’t. Misti would tell them the truth if they asked, but Sunday chore day came and they said nothing.

Misti was in charge of her laundry and vacuuming. She did her chores before returning upstairs to work on her homework, which was almost all done. She wrote a note in her journal, letting him know that her first weekend was a success, other than Penny still being upset with her. She picked out an outfit for the next day as she folded her laundry and returned downstairs, requesting to help in the kitchen. Aunt Mary taught her how to prepare a roast, with carrots and potatoes. It was simple.



Penny drove Misti to school the next morning and said nothing to her. When they arrived, Penny left her in the dust, joining hips with Chloe as they moved up the steps to the school. The safety Misti had felt her first week in that school was dissolving. Penny had been an instant friend, something she had never had before. And now she was alone again. Not like that was super new. Misti sighed.

She went to her locker and prepared for her first few classes. As she approached the locker, Misti had to stop. The combination was spinning. Was it? Maybe? She stepped forward. Yes, it was. Slowly rolling to the right. She looked around to see if there was someone, anyone, to confirm this. No one was around. When she looked back, the lock was still. Misti shook her head and stepped up to the locker, quickly doing the combination and depositing her lunch pail and her afternoon class supplies before slamming the locker and walking away. She was just seeing things. But her stomach was in knots.

Classes went slowly, but more students were talking to her. In English, they paired up to do an activity for the novel and a girl who Misti had determined was fairly smart was her partner. They divided the work and went at it, slowly chatting about things. Her name was Sarah and she, like everyone else she had met, had been born and raised here. She was not in a hurry to go anywhere, except college.

“I’ll take over my parents’ veterinary shop. So I have to get into a decent school and then vet school.” Sarah wrinkled her nose at her perfectly looped handwriting before erasing and rewriting it. “I work there now, part-time. After school and on weekends. I just mostly sit with animals and take phone calls. Do you have a job yet?” Sarah was average height and was a little broad across the shoulders. Her hair was pulled back into a high, tight ponytail and her brown eyes were wide and makeup-free. Her sweater had no logo, and she wore jeans that had no tears and sneakers that looked well-worn but comfortable.

When she was with her mother, Misti had worked at two places for a while. One job was as a clerk at the local corner store and the other involved clearing off tables at the Chinese place they lived above for a few months. She had enjoyed working but never saw much of her money. She had to make sure they paid rent and got some food. It was never enough because she still went to school.

“I haven’t looked. My aunt and uncle, they want me to kind of get used to things here first.”

“Like there is much to get used to. Just a bunch of old traditions and bad ghost stories.”

Misti thought about her locker and the spinning lock.

“What?” Sarah stopped writing and looked at her. “Sorry, I love ghosts and anything paranormal. Weird, I know. But, it is so interesting!”

Maybe this girl would believe her. Misti looked down at her paper.

“Everyone keeps telling me my locker is haunted.”

“You got locker 31?”

Misti nodded.

Sarah shook her head. “You haven’t heard the story?”

“What’s the story?”

“I guess this girl was killed, like, 20 or 30 years ago. It happened around prom time. Her killer was never caught and anyone who’s ever had that locker—her locker—has had issues.”

“What issues?”

“Mental! One girl had a mental breakdown, like, ten years ago, screaming that there was a girl in the mirror who told her to hurt herself.” Sarah shifted, wrinkling her eyes again. “They haven’t let anyone else have it in a while.” She tilted her head. “Seen anything yet?”

Misti forced a smile. “No, but if I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

The rest of her classes went smoothly. Sarah invited her to join her at lunch when she saw Misti sitting alone. Amber, the girl from the snack stand at the football game and who she had Art with sat at the table,

looking over notes while eating at salad. She smiled at Misti when she sat down but was absorbed in her work. From her new vantage point, Misti could see a few tables over and spotted Alex, the boy from the football game and art class, watching her.

“Hey, Sarah, who is that guy? Alex?”

“Oh, yeah, Alex. Alex Turner. He’s just a guy. Why?”

“He was talking to me at the football game on Friday. Was just curious.”

“He’s a nice guy.” Sarah looked to Amber for comfortation. She just shrugged.

After lunch Misti returned to her locker, leaving her lunch companion who had a locker in a different hall. She stared hard at the lock, willing it to move, to show her she was not crazy. But it did not budge.

“Give yourself some credit; you were probably tired and upset because of the way things are going with Penny,” she told herself. She grabbed her things for her afternoon classes.

In Art, Amber joined Misti at her empty table and produced the same notes from lunch.

“I have a huge exam in Anatomy tomorrow.” She said when Misti finally asked what she was reading. “I have to be able to name all the muscles in the body.” She sighed, placing her sketchpad out in front of her notes. Misti let her new companion study her notes and quietly doodled on her forest. Alex dropped his stuff on the table next to her, startling both girls.

“You said you’d help me!” he reminded her. Misti had said that. How unlike her. She didn’t know if she really was enjoying some new things about her life. “Wow, that’s really good!”

Misti covered her work, glancing at Amber who rolled her eyes at her notes.

“Thanks.” She closed the cover. “How can I help you?”

Alex set his charcoal piece up on the counter. Misti offered the best

advice she could and Alex listened intently, fetching more paper and doing as he was told. He was making a lot of little strokes and Misti encouraged him to do a solid line, going steady, pressing harder when he wanted a thicker, bolder line and pulling back when he didn't. Others were listening and soon trying what Misti suggested.

"Didn't Mr. Wilson tell you guys any of this?" Misti asked, looking around for their art teacher. She saw him sitting in the corner, one leg crossed over the other, his computer balanced on his knee.

"He just sits on his computer, playing poker online," Alex said.

"Oh." Misti felt disappointed. She was hoping to learn something.

"Yeah, this class is guaranteed A." Amber said. "That's why most of these people are here. Some of us actually want to try to learn. But we just have to teach ourselves." She had put her notes away and watched them intently.

"But now we have you!" Alex said. He sat up and grinned at her. "Better, right?"

It was better. Misti smiled back.

"I don't know much," she said to them, trying not to get their hopes up.

"Yeah, right," Amber rolled her eyes.

The bell rang and Misti packed up. She had spent the rest of the hour trying to help Amber. She was walking to her locker when Alex fell in pace beside her.

"Thanks for your help today. I really appreciate it. Art isn't really my thing, but it was this or Advanced Calculus. Guess which one my parents wanted me to take!"

"You're welcome."

"Maybe I can make it up to you?"

"Well, I'm not in Advanced Calculus but if I ever need help in Finance, I'll let you know."

“Cool! See you tomorrow!”

Misti thought she would come off as sarcastic, but Alex seemed oblivious to her tone. She shook her head and headed to her locker.

Nothing else odd happened, and she quickly grabbed her English things and creative writing notebook before heading out to the parking lot.

When she got there, Penny’s car was gone. Maybe she got the area wrong. Misti walked slowly, looking around. The parking lot was not huge, and it did not take her long to realize that they had left her behind.

How freaking petty.

Sighing, she started down the sidewalk. She had gone about half a mile when there was a honk. Misti turned to see someone stopping next to her on a motorcycle.

“Hey!” The helmet came off and Alex’s green eyes found hers. “You need a ride?”

“Uh,” Misti did not know if riding on a motorcycle was something they allowed her to do. Her aunt and uncle were more concerned about little things than her mother. Then again, it was at least a three-mile walk to their house and she was tired. “Sure.”

“Here, take my helmet,” he said, shoving the black plastic into her hands. She pulled it over her hair and he started the bike again. She hesitated a moment before climbing on back, gently grabbing on. He gunned the bike, and she grabbed him tighter. She wondered if that had been his intention.