



EVERYTHING HAPPENS AT NIGHT.

The world changes, the shadows grow, there's secrecy and privacy in dark places. First kiss, at night, by the monkey bars and the old swings that the children and their parents have vacated; second, longer, kiss, by the bike stands, swirl of dust around feet in the dry summer air. Awkward words, like secrets just waiting to be broken, the struggle to find the right ones, the heady fear of exposure—what if, what if—the joy when the words are returned. Love, in the parkette, while the moon waxes and the clouds pass.

Promises, at night. Not first promises—those are so old they can't be remembered—but new promises, sharp and biting; they almost hurt to say, but it's a good hurt. Dreams, at night, before sleep, and dreams during sleep.

Everything, always, happens at night.

Emma unfolds at night. The moment the door closes at her back, she relaxes into the cool breeze, shakes her hair loose, seems to grow three inches. It's not that she hates the day, but it doesn't feel real; there are too many people and too many rules and too many questions. Too many teachers, too many concerns. It's an act, getting through the day;

Emery Collegiate is a stage. She pins up her hair, wears her uniform—on Fridays, on formal days, she wears the stupid plaid skirt and the jacket—goes to her classes. She waves at her friends, listens to them talk, forgets almost instantly what they talk *about*. Sometimes it's band, sometimes it's class, sometimes it's the other friends, but most often it's boys.

She's been there, done all that. It doesn't mean anything anymore.

At night? Just Petal and Emma. At night, you can just be yourself.

Petal barks, his voice segueing into a whine. Emma pulls a Milk-Bone out of her jacket pocket and feeds him. He's overweight, and he doesn't need it—but he wants it, and she wants to give it to him. He's nine, now, and Emma suspects he's half-deaf. He used to run from the steps to the edge of the curb, half-dragging her on the leash—her father used to get so mad at the dog when he did.

He's a rottweiler, not a lapdog, Em.

He's just a puppy.

Not at that size, he isn't. He'll scare people just by standing still; he needs to learn to heel, and he needs to learn that he can hurt you if he drags you along.

He doesn't run now. Doesn't drag her along. True, she's much bigger than she used to be, but it's also true that he's much older. She misses the old days. But at least he's still here. She waits while he sniffs at the green bins. It's his little ritual. She walks him along the curb, while he starts and stops, tail wagging. Emma's not in a hurry now. She'll get there eventually.

Petal knows. He's walked these streets with Emma for all of his life. He'll follow the curb to the end of the street, watch traffic pass as if he'd like to go fetch a moving car, and then cross the street more or less at Emma's heel. He talks. For a rottweiler, he's always been yappy.

But he doesn't expect more of an answer than a Milk-Bone, which makes him different from anyone else. She lets him yap as the street goes by. He quiets when they approach the gates.

The cemetery gates are closed at night. This keeps cars out, but there's no gate to keep out people. There's even a footpath leading to the cement sidewalk that surrounds the cemetery and a small gate without a padlock that opens inward. She pushes it, hears the familiar creak. It doesn't swing in either direction, and she leaves it open for Petal. He brushes against her leg as he slides by.

It's dark here. It's always dark when she comes. She's only seen the cemetery in the day twice, and she never wants to see it in daylight again. It's funny how night can change a place. But night does change this one. There are no other people here. There are flowers in vases and wreaths on stands; there are sometimes letters, written and pinned flat by rocks beneath headstones. Once she found a teddy bear. She didn't take it, and she didn't touch it, but she did stop to read the name on the headstone: *Lauryn Bernstein*. She read the dates and did the math. Eight years old.

She half-expected to see the mother or father or grandmother or sister come back at night, the way she does. But if they do, they come by a different route, or they wait until no one—not even Emma—is watching. Fair enough. She'd do the same.

But she wonders if they come together—mother, father, grandmother, sister—or if they each come alone, without speaking a word to anyone else. She wonders how much of Lauryn's life was private, how much of it was built on moments of two: mother and daughter, alone; father and daughter, alone. She wonders about Lauryn's friends, because her friends' names aren't carved here in stone.

She knows about that. Others will come to see Lauryn's grave, and no matter how important they were to Lauryn, they won't see any evidence of themselves there: no names, no dates, nothing permanent. They'll be outsiders, looking in, and nothing about their memories will matter to passing strangers a hundred years from now.

Emma walks into the heart of the cemetery and comes, at last, to a headstone. There are white flowers here, because Nathan's mother has

visited during the day. The lilies are bound by wire into a wreath, a fragrant, thick circle that perches on an almost invisible frame.

Emma brings nothing to the grave and takes nothing away. If she did, she's certain Nathan's mother would remove it when she comes to clean. Even here, even though he's dead, she's still cleaning up after him.

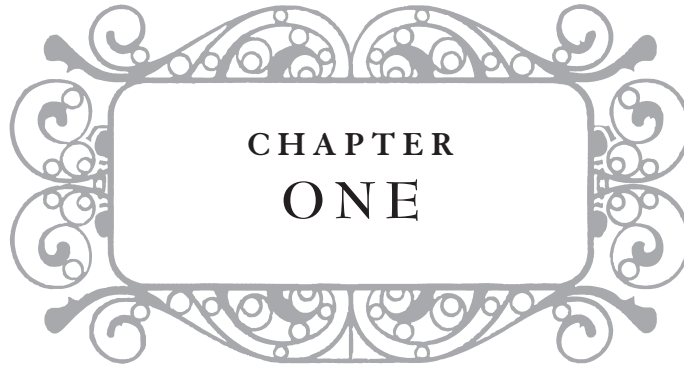
She leaves the flowers alone and finds a place to sit. The graveyard is awfully crowded, and the headstones butt against each other, but only one of them really matters to Emma. She listens to the breeze and the rustle of leaves; there are willows and oaks in the cemetery, so it's never exactly quiet. The sound of passing traffic can be heard, especially the horns of pissed-off drivers, but their lights can't be seen. In the city this is as close to isolated as you get.

She doesn't talk. She doesn't tell Nathan about her day. She doesn't ask him questions. She doesn't swear undying love. She's *done all that*, and it made no difference; he's there, and she's here. Petal sits down beside her. After a few minutes, he rolls over and drops his head in her lap; she scratches behind his big, floppy ears, and sits, and breathes, and stretches.

One of the best things about Nathan was that she could just sit, in silence, without being alone. Sometimes she'd read, and sometimes he'd read; sometimes he'd play video games, and sometimes he'd build things; sometimes they'd just walk aimlessly all over the city, as if footsteps were a kind of writing. It wasn't that she wasn't supposed to talk; when she wanted to talk, she did. But if she didn't, it wasn't awkward. He was like a quiet, private place.

And that's the only thing that's left of him, really.

A quiet, private place.



CHAPTER
ONE

AT 9:30 P.M., CELL TIME, the phone rang. Emma slid it out of her pocket, rearranging Petal's head in the process, flipped it open, saw that it was Allison. Had it been anyone else, she wouldn't have answered.

"Hey."

"Emma?"

No, it's Amy, she almost snapped. Honestly, if you rang her number, who did you *expect* to pick it up? But she didn't, because it was Allison, and she'd only feel guilty about one second after the words left her mouth. "Yeah, it's me," she said instead.

Petal rolled his head back onto her lap and then whined while she tried to pull a Milk-Bone out of her very crumpled jacket pocket. Nine years hadn't made him more patient.

"Where are you?"

"Just walking Petal. Mom's prepping a headache, so I thought I'd get us both out of the house before she killed us." Time to go. She shifted her head slightly, caught the cell phone between her chin and collarbone, and shoved Petal gently off her lap. Then she stood, shaking the wrinkles out of her jacket.

"Did you get the e-mail Amy sent?"

“What e-mail?”

“That would be no. How long have you been walking?”

Emma shrugged. Which Allison couldn’t see. “Not long. What time is it?”

“9:30,” Allison replied, in a tone of voice that clearly said she didn’t believe Emma didn’t know. That was the problem with perceptive friends.

“I’ll look at it the minute I get home—is there anything you want to warn me about before I do?”

“No.”

“Should I just delete it and blame it on the spam filter? No, no, that’s a joke. I’ll look at it when I get home and call you—Petal, come back!” Emma whistled. As whistles went, it was high and piercing, and she could practically hear Allison cringe on the other end of the phone. “Damn it—I have to go, Ally.” She flipped the lid down, shoved the phone into her pocket, and squinted into the darkness. She could just make out the red plastic handle of the retracting leash as it fishtailed along in the grass.

So much for quiet. “*Petal!*”

Running in the graveyard at night was never a smart thing to do. Oh, there were strategic lamps here and there, where people had the money and the desire to spend it, but mostly there was moonlight, and a lot of flat stones; not all the headstones were standing. There were also trees that were so old that Emma wondered whether the roots had eaten through coffins, if they even used coffins in those days. The roots often came to the surface, and if you were unlucky, you could trip on them and land face first in tree bark—in broad daylight. At night, you didn’t need to be unlucky.

No, you just needed to try to catch your half-deaf rottweiler before he scared the crap out of some stranger in the cemetery. The cemetery that should have bloody well been deserted. She got back on her feet.

“Petal, goddammit!” She stopped to listen. She couldn’t see Petal, but he was a black rottweiler and it was dark. She could, on the other hand, hear the leash as it struck stone and standing wreaths, and she headed in that direction, walking as quickly as she could. She stubbed her toes half a dozen times because there was no clear path through the headstones and the markers, and even when she could see them—and the moon was bright enough—she couldn’t see enough of them in time. She never brought a flashlight with her because she didn’t need one normally; she could walk to Nathan’s grave and back blindfolded. Walking to a black dog who was constantly in motion between totally unfamiliar markers, on the other hand, not so much.

She wondered what had caught his attention. The only person he ran toward like this was Emma, and usually only when she was coming up the walk from school or coming into the house. He would bark when Allison or Michael approached the door, and he would growl like a pit bull when salesmen, meter men, or the occasional Mormon or Jehovah’s Witness showed up—but he wasn’t much of a runner. Not these days.

The sounds of the leash hitting things stopped.

Up ahead, which had none of the usual compass directions, Emma could see light. Not streetlight, but a dim, orange glow that flickered too much. She could also, however, see the stubby, wagging tail of what was sometimes the world’s stupidest dog. Relief was momentary. Petal was standing in front of two people, one of whom seemed to be holding the light. And Emma didn’t come to the graveyard to meet people.

She pursed her lips to whistle, but her mouth was too dry, and anyway, Petal probably wouldn’t hear her. Defeated, she shoved her hands into her jacket pockets and made her way over to Petal. The first thing she did was pick up his leash; the plastic was cool and slightly damp to the touch, and what had, moments before, been smooth was now scratched and rough. Hopefully, her mother wouldn’t notice.

“Emma?”

When you don’t expect to meet anyone, meeting someone you know

is always a bit of a shock. She saw his face, the height of his cheekbones, and his eyes, which in the dim light looked entirely black. His hair, cut back over his ears and shorn close to forehead, was the same inky color. He was familiar, but it took her a moment to remember why and to find a name.

“Eric?” Even saying the name, her voice was tentative. She looked as the shape in the darkness resolved itself into an Eric she vaguely knew, standing beside someone who appeared a lot older and a lot less distinct.

“Mrs. Bruehl’s my mentor,” he said, helpfully. “Eleventh grade?”

She frowned for a moment, and then the frown cleared. “You’re the new guy.”

“New,” he said with a shrug. “Same old, same old, really. Don’t take this the wrong way,” he added, “but what are you doing here at this time of night?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“You could.”

“Great. What are *you* doing here at this time of night?”

He shrugged again, sliding his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Just walking. It’s a good night for it. You?”

“I’m mostly chasing my *very annoying* dog.”

Eric looked down at Petal, whose stub of a tail had shown no signs whatsoever of slowing down. “Doesn’t seem all that annoying.”

“Yeah? Bend over and let him breathe in your face.”

Eric laughed, bent over, and lowered his palms toward Petal’s big, wet nose. Petal sniffed said hands and then barked. And whined. Sometimes, Emma thought, pulling the last Milk-Bone out of her jacket pocket, that dog was so embarrassing.

“Petal, come here.” Petal looked over his shoulder, saw the Milk-Bone, and whined. Just . . . whined. Then he looked up again, and this time, Emma squared her shoulders and fixed a firm smile on lips that wanted to shift in entirely the opposite direction. “And who’s your friend?”

And Eric, one hand just above Petal's head, seemed to freeze, half-bent. "What friend, Emma?"

But his friend turned slowly to face Emma. As she did, Emma could finally see the source of the flickering, almost orange, light. A lantern. A paper lantern, like the ones you saw in the windows of variety stores in Chinatown. It was an odd lamp, and the paper, over both wire and flame, was a pale blue. Which made no sense, because the light it cast wasn't blue at all. There were words on the shell of the lamp that Emma couldn't read, although she could see them clearly enough. They were composed of black brushstrokes that trailed into squiggles, and the squiggles, in the leap of lamp fire, seemed to grow and move with a life of their own.

She blinked and looked up, past the lamp and the hand that held it.

An old woman was watching her. An *old* woman. Emma was accustomed to thinking of half of her teachers as "old," and probably a handful as "ancient" or "mummified." Not a single one of them wore age the way this woman did. In fact, given the wreath of sagging wrinkles that was her skin, Emma wasn't certain that she *was* a woman. Her cheeks were sunken, and her eyes were set so deep they might as well have just been sockets; her hair, what there was of it, was white tufts, too stringy to suggest down. She had no teeth, or seemed to have no teeth; hell, she didn't have lips, either.

Emma couldn't stop herself from taking a step back.

The old woman took a step forward.

She wore rags. Emma had heard that description before. She had even seen it in a movie or two. Neither experience prepared her for this. There wasn't a single piece of cloth that was bigger than a napkin, although the assembly hung together in the vague shape of a dress. Or a bag. The orange light that the blue lantern emitted caught the edges of different colors, but they were muted, dead things. Like fallen leaves. Like corpses.

"Emma?"

Emma took another step back. “Eric, tell her to stop.” She tried to keep her voice even. She tried to keep it polite. It was hard. If the stranger’s slightly open, sunken mouth had uttered words, she would have been less terrifying. But, in silence, the old woman teetered across graves as if she’d just risen from one and counted it as nothing.

Emma backed up. The old woman kept coming. Everything moved slowly, everything—except for Emma’s breathing—was quiet. The quiet of a graveyard. Emma tried to speak, tried to ask the old woman what she wanted, but her throat was too dry, and all that came out was an alto squeak. She took another step and ran into a headstone; she felt the back of it, cold, against her thighs. Standing against a short, narrow wall, Emma threw her hands out in front of her.

The old woman pressed the lantern into those hands. Emma felt the sides of it collapse slightly as her hands gripped them, changing the shape of the brushstrokes and squiggles. It was *cold* against her palms. Cold like ice, cold like winter days when you inhaled and the air froze your nostrils.

She cried out in shock and opened her hands, but the lantern clung to her palms, and no amount of shaking would free them. She tried hard, but she couldn’t watch what she was doing because old, wrinkled claws shot out like cobras, sudden, skeletal, and gripped Emma’s cheeks and jaw, the way Emma’s hands now gripped the lantern.

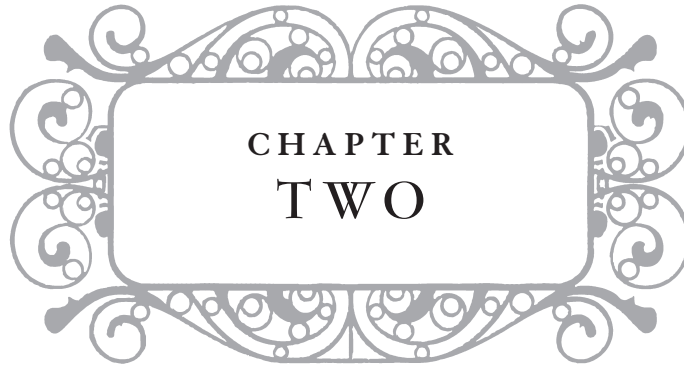
Emma felt her face being pulled down, down toward the old woman’s, and she tried to pull back, tried to straighten her neck. But she couldn’t. All the old stories she’d heard in camp, or in her father’s lap, came to her then, and even though this woman clearly had no teeth, Emma thought of vampires.

But it wasn’t Emma’s neck that the old woman wanted. She pulled Emma’s whole face toward her, and then Emma felt—and smelled—unpleasant, endless breath, dry as dust but somehow rank as dead and rotting flesh, as the old woman opened her mouth. Emma shut her eyes as the face, its nested lines of wrinkles so like a fractal, drew closer and closer.

She felt lips, what might have been lips, press themselves against the thin membranes of her eyelids, and she whimpered. It wasn't the sound she wanted to make; it was just the only sound she *could* make. And then even that was gone as those same lips, with that same breath, pressed firmly and completely against Emma's mouth.

Like a night kiss.

She tried to open her eyes, but the night was all black, and there was no moon, and it was *so damn cold*. And as she felt that cold overwhelm her, she thought it unfair that this would be her *last* kiss, this unwanted horror; that the memory of Nathan's hands and Nathan's lips were not the ones she would carry to the grave.



CHAPTER
TWO

THE ROTTWEILER WAS WHINING in panic and confusion. His big, messy tongue was running all over Emma's face as if it could, by sheer force, pull her to her feet. Eric watched him in silence for a long minute before turning to his left. There, sprigs of lilac moved against the breeze.

He had been waiting in the graveyard since sunset. He'd waited in graveyards before, and often in much worse weather; at least tonight there was no driving rain, no blizzard, and no spring thaw to turn the ground to mud.

But he would have preferred them to this.

He felt the darkness watching. He knew what lived inside of it.

"It can't be her," he said.

She saw me.

"It's a graveyard. People see things in a graveyard." He said it without conviction.

I could touch her.

He had no answer for that. His fingers found the side of Emma's neck, got wet as dog-tongue traveled across them, and stayed put until he felt a pulse. Alive.

“It can’t be her,” he said again, voice flat. “I’ve been doing this for years. I *know* what I’m looking for.”

Silence. He glanced at his left pocket, half-expecting the phone to ring. If the rottweiler couldn’t wake her, nothing would, at this point. She was beyond pain, beyond fear. If he was going to do anything—anything at all—this was the time; it was almost a gift.

But it was a barbed, ugly gift. Funny, how seldom he thought that.

“No,” he said, although there was no spoken question. “I won’t do it. Not now. It’s got to be a mistake.” He glanced up at the moon’s position in the sky. Grimacing, he began to rifle through her pockets. “We can wait it out until dawn.”

But the dog was whining, and Emma wasn’t standing up. He flipped her cell open and glanced at the moon again. He knew he should leave things be; he couldn’t afford to leave the graveyard. Not tonight. Not the night after.

But he had no idea how hard she’d hit the tombstone when she’d toppled, and had no idea whether or not she’d wake without intervention.

Emma opened her eyes, blinked, shook her head, and opened them again. They still felt closed, but she could see; she just couldn’t see well. On the other hand, she didn’t need to see well to notice that her mother was sitting beside her, a wet towel in her hands.

“Em?”

She had to blink again, because the light was harsh and bright in the room. Even harsh and brightly lit, Emma recognized the room: it was hers. She was under her duvet, with its faded flannel covers, and Petal was lying across her feet, his head on his paws. That dog could sleep through anything.

“Mom?”

“Open your eyes and let me look at them.” Her mother picked up, of all things, a flashlight. The on switch appeared to do nothing. Her mother frowned, shook the flashlight up and down, and tried again.

Emma reached out and touched her mother's arm. "I'm fine, Mom." The words came naturally to her, even if they weren't accurate, she'd used them so often.

"You have a goose egg the size of my fist on the back of your head," her mother replied, shaking the flashlight again.

Emma began a silent count to ten; she reached eight before her mother stood. "I'm just going to get batteries," she told her daughter. She set the towel—which was wet—on the duvet and headed for the door.

Mercy Hall was not, in her daughter's opinion, a very organized person. It would take her mother at least ten minutes to find batteries—if there were any in the house. Batteries, like most hardware, had been her father's job.

If her mother were truly panicky, the kitchen—where all the odds and ends a house mystically acquired had been stowed—would be a first-class disaster. It wouldn't be dirty, because Mercy disliked dirt, but it would be messy, which Mercy barely seemed to notice. Emma looked at her clock. At six minutes she sat up, and at six minutes and ten seconds, she lay back, more heavily. Petal shifted. And snored.

She was still dressed, although her jacket hung off the back of her computer chair. Her fingers, hesitantly probing the back of her head, told her that her mother was, in fact, right. Huge bump. It didn't hurt much. But her eyes ached, and her lips felt swollen.

She gagged and sat bolt upright, and this time Petal woke. "Petal," she whispered, as the rottweiler walked across the duvet. His paws slid off her legs and her stomach, and she shoved him, mostly gently, to one side. He rewarded her by licking her face, and she buried that face in his neck, only partly to avoid his breath.

It was fifteen minutes before her mother came back, looking harassed.

"No batteries?"

"Not a damn one."

“I’ll stop by the hardware store after school.”

“I’m not sure you’re going to school. No, don’t argue with me.” She came and sat down on the chair. “Em—”

“I’m *fine*, Mom.”

“What happened?”

Her mother didn’t ask her what she’d been doing in the cemetery. She never did. She didn’t like the fact that Emma went there, but she knew why. Emma wanted to keep it that way.

“Allison phoned, I dropped Petal’s leash, and he ran off.” Petal perked up at the sound of his name, which made Emma feel slightly guilty. Which was stupid because it was mostly the truth.

“And you ran after him? In the *dark*?”

“I wasn’t carrying scissors.”

“Emma, this is not funny. If your friend hadn’t been with you, you could have been there all night!”

“Friend?”

“Eric.”

“What, he brought me home?”

“No, *he* was smart. He called me from your phone. I brought you home.” She hesitated and then added, “He helped me carry you to the car, and he helped me carry you to your room.”

“He’s still here?”

“He said he was late and his mother would worry.”

“What, at 9:30 at night?”

“10:30, and it’s a school night.” But her mother seemed to relax; she slumped into the chair. “You sound all right.”

“I told you—”

“You’re fine, I know.” Her mother’s expression was odd; she looked slightly past her daughter’s shoulder, out the window. “You’re always fine.”

“Mom—”

Her mother smiled that bright, fake smile that Emma so disliked.

“I’ll help you get changed. Sleep. If you’re feeling ‘fine’ in the morning, you can go to school.”

“If I’m not?”

“I’ll call in sick.”

There was no way that Emma was not going to school. “Deal,” she said.

The only thing in the room that shed light was the computer screen; the only words were voiceless, silent, appearing, letter by letter, as Emma’s fingers tapped the keyboard.

Dear Dad,

It’s been a while. School started last month, and it did not miraculously become interesting over the summer. Mr. Marshall, on the other hand, still has a sense of humor, which is good, because he now has me.

Marti moved when her dad got a job transfer. Sophie moved when her parents got divorced (why she couldn’t just live with her dad, I do not know; she asked). Allison and I are still here, holding it down, because Allison’s parents are still married. Takes all kinds.

Michael is doing better this year. He had a bit of a rough time because he’s always so blunt when anyone asks him anything, and he doesn’t remember to be polite until someone is threatening to break his nose. Oh, and Petal’s going deaf, I swear.

I wish you were here. I must have tripped in the cemetery; Mom’s freaking because she thinks I have a concussion. I think I had the world’s worst dream before I woke up, and I’d be sleeping now, but, frankly, if it’s a choice between sleep and that dream? I’m never sleeping again.

And we have no batteries.

She stopped typing for a moment. Petal snored. He had sprawled across the entire bed the minute Emma had slid out of it, but he always did. Every night was a battle for bed space because technically Petal wasn't allowed to sleep in her bed. He'd start out at the foot of the bed. And then he'd roll over, and then he'd kind of flatten out. Half of the time, Emma would end up sleeping on her side on six inches of bed with her butt hanging just off to one side of the mattress.

She rolled her eyes, winced, and went back to the keyboard.

But I'm fine, Mom's fine. She doesn't say it, but I think she misses you.

I'll write something more exciting later—maybe about drugs, sex, and petty felonies. I don't want to bore you.

— Em

She hit the send button. After a few minutes, she stood and made her way back to the bed, nearly tripping over the cord of the desk lamp that was probably going to be hulking on the footboard of her bed for the next six weeks. Her mother didn't really use it; she did most of her work on a small corner of the dining room table.

She hadn't lied, though; she really, really did not want to sleep.

In the morning, she was fine. She was fine at breakfast. She was fine watering and feeding her dog. She was fine clearing the table and loading the dishwasher. She was even fine pointing out that the dishwasher was still leaking, and the ivory and green linoleum beneath it was stained yellow and brown.

Mercy Hall looked less than fine, but Emma's mother had never, ever been a morning person. She looked at her daughter with a vaguely suspicious air, but she said nothing out of the ordinary. She watched her daughter eat, criticized her lack of appetite—but she always did that—

and asked her if it was entirely necessary to leave the house with her midriff showing.

Since it wasn't cold, and since Emma was in fact wearing a blazer, sleeves rolled up to her elbow, Emma ignored this, filing it under "old."

But she hugged her mother tightly as they both stood up from the table, and she whispered a brief *thanks* to take the edge off her mother's mood. She put her laptop into her school bag, made sure she had her phone in her jacket pocket, and looked at the clock.

At 8:10, at precisely 8:10, the doorbell rang.

"That'll be Michael," her mother said.

You could set clocks by Michael. In the Hall household, they did; if Michael rang the doorbell and the clock didn't say 8:10, someone changed it quickly, and only partly because Michael always looked at clocks and began his quiet fidget if they didn't show the time he expected them to show.

Emma opened the door, and Petal pushed his way past her, nudging Michael's hand. Michael's hand, of course, held a Milk-Bone. No wonder they had the world's fattest dog. He fed Petal, and Petal sat, slobbering and chewing, just to one side of the doorframe. "Be right there," Emma told Michael. "Petal, don't slobber."

Michael looked at Emma. He had *that* look on his face. "What?" she asked him. "What's wrong?"

"Is it Friday?"

"No. It's Wednesday."

He seemed to relax, but he still looked hesitant. Michael and hesitant in combination was not a good thing. "Why are you asking?"

"Your eyelids," he replied promptly.

She lifted a hand to her eyelids. "What about them?"

"You're wearing eye shadow."

She started to tell him that she was wearing no such thing but stopped the words before they fell out of her mouth. Michael was many

things—most of them strange—but he was almost never wrong. “Give me a sec.”

She stepped back into the house and walked over to the hall mirror.

In the morning light her reflection looked back at her, and she automatically reached up to rearrange her hair. But she stopped and looked at her eyes instead. At her eyelids. Michael was right—they were blue, the blue that looks almost like bruising. Her lips were . . . dark. Reaching up with her thumb, she tried to smear whatever it was on her eyes.

Nothing happened.

She grimaced. Okay, it looked like she was wearing makeup. It did not, however, look like *bad* makeup, and she didn’t have time to deal with it now; Michael had a mortal terror of being late. She picked up her backpack again and headed out the door.

They picked up Allison on the way to Emery. Allison was waiting because Allison, like Emma, had known Michael for almost all of her school life. Ally could be late for almost anything else, but she was out the door and on time in the morning. Mrs. Simner stood in the doorway and beamed at the sight of Michael. Most parents found him off-putting, or worrying. Mrs. Simner never had, and Emma loved her for it.

There was something about Mrs. Simner that screamed *mother*. It was a primal scream. She was short, sort of dumpy, often seen in polyester, and she *always* thought that anyone who walked anywhere near her house must be, you know, starving to death. She could listen sympathetically for hours on end, and she could also offer advice for hours on end—but somehow she knew when to listen and when to talk.

She never tried to be your friend. She never tried to be one of the guys. But in her own way, she was, and it was to the Simner house that Emma had gone in the months following Nathan’s death.

Allison was sort of like her mother. Except for the polyester and Allison’s glasses. When you were with Allison, you were, in some way, in the Simner household. It wasn’t the only reason they were friends, but

it helped. She carried the same blue pack that Emma did, with a slightly different model of laptop (for which official permission had been required). They fell into step behind Michael, who often forgot that he was tall enough to outpace them.

“Did you get a chance to read Amy’s e-mail?”

Damn. Emma grimaced. “Guilty,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you back last night—I kind of fell asleep.”

“I guessed. She’s having a party next Friday.”

“Why?”

“I think her parents are going out of town.”

“The last time she tried that—”

“To New York City. Without her.”

“Oh. Well, that would do it.” Amy was famed for her love of shopping. She was in particular famed for her love of shopping in NYC, because almost everything she was willing to admit she owned—where admit meant something only a little less overt than a P.A. announcement between every class—came from NYC. “How big a party?”

“She invited me,” Allison replied.

Emma glanced at Allison’s profile. She thought about saying a bunch of pleasant and pointless things but settled for, “It’s not the only time she’s invited you.”

“No. She invited me to the last big party as well.” Allison shrugged. “I don’t mind, Em.”

Emma shrugged, because sometimes Emma minded. And she knew she shouldn’t. Allison and Amy had nothing in common except a vowel and a gender; Amy was the golden girl: the star athlete, the student council representative, and the second highest overall GPA in the grade. She was also stunningly beautiful, and if she knew it, the knowledge could be overlooked. When people are tripping over their own feet at the sight of you, you can only *not* notice it by being disingenuous.

Amy also never suffered from false modesty. In Amy’s case, *any* modesty was going to be false. “Are you going to go?”

“Are you?”

Emma, unlike Allison, had managed to find a place for herself in Amy’s inner circle of friends. Emma could, with relative ease, hit a volleyball, hit a softball, or run a fast fifty-yard dash. She had decent grades, as well, but it wasn’t about grades. It had never been about grades. If people didn’t cause car accidents when they saw Emma in the street, they still noticed her. She had no trouble talking to boys, and no trouble not talking when it was convenient; she had no trouble shopping for clothes, and when she did, she bought things that matched and that looked good.

Allison, not so much.

Allison was plain. In and of itself, that wasn’t a complete disaster; Deb was plain as well. But Deb could do all the other things; she knew how to work a crowd. She had the sharpest tongue in the school. Allison didn’t. Allison also hated to shop for anything that wasn’t a book, so after-school mall excursions weren’t social time for Allison; she would simply vanish from the tail end of the pack when the pack passed a bookstore en route to something more interesting, and frequently fail to emerge.

But Allison, like Nathan, was a quiet space. She didn’t natter and she didn’t gossip. She could be beside you for half an afternoon without saying two words, but if you needed to talk, she could listen. She could also ask questions that proved that she was, in fact, listening—not that Emma ever tested her. They’d been friends since the first grade. Emma knew there was a time when they hadn’t been, but she couldn’t honestly remember it.

Emma didn’t always understand what Allison saw in her, because Emma was none of those things, even when she tried. “Do you want me to go?”

“Not if you don’t want.” Which wasn’t a no.

“I’ll go. Friday when?”

“I don’t think it matters.”

Emma laughed.

* * *

There was a substitute teacher alert, which passed by Emma while she was pulling textbooks from her locker. Why they had to have textbooks, instead of e-texts, Emma didn't know.

She dropped one an inch to the left of her foot but managed to catch the messenger, Philipa, by the shoulder. "Substitute teacher? Which class?"

"Twelve math."

"Ugh. Did you tell Michael?"

"I couldn't find him. You want to check on him on the way to English?"

Emma nodded. "Who's the teacher, did you catch the name?"

"Ms. Hampton, I think. Or Hampstead. Something like that." Philipa cringed at the look on Emma's face. "Sorry, I tried, but it wasn't clearer."

"Never mind; good enough." It wasn't, but it would have to do. Emma scooped up the offending book and headed down the hall and to the left, where the lockers disappeared from walls in favor of the usual corkboards and glass cabinets. She narrowly avoided dropping the books again when she ran into another student.

Eric.

"Hey," he said, as she stepped to one side of him and started to walk again.

"Can't talk now," she replied, without looking back. Had she had the time, she would have admitted that she didn't particularly *want* to talk to him, because he reminded her of the graveyard, and she didn't want to think about that right now. Or ever.

He fell in beside her. "Where are you headed?"

"Mr. Burke's math class."

"That's a twelve, isn't it?"

She nodded. "But Michael's in that one. I need to reach him before the teacher does, or at least as soon as possible."

“Why?”

“Because,” she said, cursing silently, “Mr. Burke is not actually teaching the class today.”

“Who is?”

“A substitute teacher. Ms. Hampton or Ms. Hampstead.” She reached the math twelve door and peered through the glass. Michael was standing beside a desk that already contained another student. It was, unfortunately, the desk that Michael always sat at, and Emma could tell the student—Nick something-or-other—knew this and had no intention of moving. Grinding her teeth, Emma pushed the door open.

Michael was not—yet—upset.

Emma reached his side, handed him her pack, and then dropped a book on Nick’s head.

“What the fuck—”

“Get your butt out of the chair or I’ll upend the desk on you,” Emma said tersely. She would have asked politely if she’d had more time. Or if she felt like it, and honestly? At this moment she *so* did not feel polite.

He opened his mouth to say something and then stopped. Eric had joined Emma. He hadn’t said a word, and from a brief glance at his face, he didn’t look particularly threatening, but Nick shoved the chair back from the desk and rose. He added a few single and double syllable words as he did.

“Michael,” Emma said, ignoring Nick as she pushed the chair back in a bit, “Mr. Burke’s not here today. He’s ill. Ms. Hampton or Ms. Hampstead—I didn’t hear her name clearly, but it’s only one person—will be teaching the class today. I don’t know if she has Mr. Burke’s notes, so she might not be covering the same material.”

“What type of illness?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t ask.”

Michael nodded. Emma was very afraid that he was going to ask her what Ms. Hampton or Ms. Hampstead actually looked like. “You shouldn’t have dropped the book on Nick’s head,” he said instead.

Emma said, "If it were up to me, I wouldn't have." She did not add, *I would have slugged him across his big, smug face*, because when Michael gave a lecture, it generally lasted a while, and it was hard to interrupt him. "I was in a hurry, and the book slipped. I've dropped it once today already."

Michael nodded, because he could parse the words and they made sense. As a general rule, Emma did not go around the school dropping books on people's heads.

"I'll see you at lunch?"

He nodded, and she said, "The substitute teacher probably doesn't understand everything about you."

"No one understands everything about anyone, Emma."

"No, but she probably understands much less than Mr. Burke. If she does the wrong things, remember that. She doesn't know any better. She hasn't had time to learn."

He nodded again and sat down, putting his own textbook on the table and arranging his laptop with care so it was in the exact center of the desk. She left him to it, because it could take him ten minutes.

Eric followed her out. He hadn't said a word.

"What was all that about?"

"Michael's a high-functioning autistic," she replied. She had slowed down slightly, and while she didn't have the time to have this conversation unless she wanted to add to her late-slip collection, she felt that she owed it to him. "I've known him since kindergarten. He does really, really well here," she added, half defensively, "and he hasn't needed a permanent Ed. Aide since junior high. But he's very particular about his routine, and he doesn't react well to unexpected changes."

"And the person you dropped the book on?"

"He's an asshole."

"You go around dropping books on every asshole in the school, you're not going to make many classes."

In spite of herself, Emma smiled. “Michael always sits at the same desk in any class he’s taking. Everyone who’s in his classes knows this. All the teachers too,” she added. “But substitute teachers might not know. If Nick had stayed in that chair, Michael would have probably blown a fuse before the teacher showed up, and a strange teacher on top of that interruption—” she shook her head. “It would have been bad. And Nick knew it.”

“And you really would have upended the desk on him?”

“I would have tried. Which, to be fair, would probably have upset Michael just as much. He’s not a big fan of violence.” She added, “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For coming in. I’m not sure Nick would have moved if you hadn’t been there.”

It was Eric’s turn to shrug. “I didn’t do anything.”

“No. You didn’t have to.” She smiled ruefully. “I’m not always this . . . aggressive. Michael doesn’t sit in on all of the normal classes. He has trouble with the less academic subjects, but he also hates English.”

“Hates?”

“There’s too much that’s based on opinion, and he has to make too many choices. Nothing is concrete enough, and choice always causes him stress. You should have seen him in art classes. On the other hand,” she added, as she stopped in front of a door, “I’m expected to attend all the regular classes.”

“So am I,” he told her, and he opened the door to the English class.

“Emma, are you okay?”

Emma blinked. Half of English had just passed her by. Normally, anything that made English go by faster was a good thing. But she’d missed the good thing—whatever it was—and was left looking at a clock that was twenty minutes ahead of where it was supposed to be.

“Emma?”

She turned to look at Allison, who was watching her with those slightly narrowed brown eyes, which her glasses made look enormous. “I’m fine.”

Allison glanced at the computer on Emma’s desk. The screen on which notes were in theory being typed was a lovely, blank white. “I’ll e-mail you what you missed.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can read up on it.” She put her fingers on the home row of her keyboard and listened to Ms. Evan’s voice. It was, as always, strong, but some of the syllables and some of the words seemed to be running together in a blur of noise that was not entirely unlike buzzing. This, Emma thought, was why the word droning had been invented.

She tried to concentrate on the words, to separate them, to make enough sense of them that she could type something.

“Em?” Allison went from expressing minor concern to the depths of worry by losing a single syllable—but that was Allison; she never wasted words in a pinch.

Emma looked at her friend and saw that Allison was not, in fact, looking at her. She was looking at Emma’s laptop screen. Drawn there by Ally’s gaze, Emma looked at it as well. She lifted her hands off the keyboard as if it had burned her.

She had typed: **Oh my god Drew help me help me Drew fire god no**

Reaching out, she pushed the laptop screen down. “E-mail me your notes.”

“Emma?” Allison was worried enough that she almost walked into the edge of a bank of lockers in the crowded between-classes hall.

Emma shook her head. “I’m—I’m fine.” Nothing had happened in art, and nothing had happened in math; her computer hadn’t suddenly sprouted new words that had nothing to do with either her class or her. But she felt cold.

“Emma?” Great. Stereo. She glanced up as Eric approached. “You okay?”

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, made sure she had her laptop, and made double sure it was closed. “Yeah. Allison,” Emma said, “this is Eric. He helped me out when Nick was being a jerk in Michael’s math class this morning. Eric, my best friend, Allison.”

Allison smiled at Eric, but she would—he was new, and he’d helped Michael. Which, Emma had to admit, was part of the reason she found him less scary. She started to walk more quickly. “We’ve got to hurry,” she told him. “We meet Michael for lunch.”

The cafeteria, with its noise and its constant press of people, wasn’t Michael’s favorite room. It was also not a room in which a table could easily be marked out as his. The first day he’d come to Emery, Emma had found him loitering near the doors. He hadn’t been waiting for her. He’d been walking in tight little circles.

Shouting in his ear when he was like that did nothing. Touching him, on the other hand, always got his attention; she’d put a hand very firmly on his shoulder, and when he said, “Oh, hi, Emma,” she had steered him into the cafeteria. Philipa and Allison had pulled up the rear, and Amy had gone on ahead, clearing a path by simply, well, telling everyone to get out of the way. They had found a table with enough space, deposited Michael at one end, and had taken turns braving the lunch line.

The big advantage to having Amy as the unofficial spokesperson on that first day? It made clear that she, too, was watching out for Michael, and anyone who chose to pick on his strangeness was going to have social difficulties that lasted pretty much until they died, which would probably not be that far in the future. And it worked reasonably well, at least where the grade nines had been concerned.

It was harder to control the other grades, though, and they had made Michael’s life a little less smooth.

After the first day, Allison and Emma explained that if Michael found a space at a table and sat there, they would get lunch and join

him. He did that, although he always chose the empty table closest to the door.

Michael brought a bagged lunch from home. Given the food in the cafeteria, this was probably for the best. He would sometimes eat other food if it was offered to him, but he was—no surprise—enormously picky. He would also join in a conversation if the topic interested him. Given that it was the cafeteria that was seldom. But he had made a few more friends since ninth grade, and one of the things that fascinated him was *Dungeons and Dragons*. He also liked computers, computer games, and web comics, and by tenth grade, Oliver and Connell frequently took up spots beside or facing Michael.

This had continued into the eleventh grade, and a long and tortuous discussion—to those who were not interested in *D&D*—was well under way by the time Emma reached their table. She frowned because there was someone sitting beside Michael, and she didn't recognize the student. He wasn't in their year, but she knew most of the grade twelves on sight. Maybe he was new?

But he was sitting beside *Michael*, he was a total stranger, and Michael didn't even seem to be concerned. One glance at the table made clear he hadn't braved the cafeteria lines for what passed for food, either.

"Emma?" Allison asked. Emma stood holding her tray, and Allison shrugged and sat down.

She sat down on top of the stranger—and passed right through him.

For a moment the strange student and her best friend were superimposed over each other. Emma blinked rapidly as the lines of the stranger's face blended with Allison's, the cafeteria tray listing forward in her hands. Eric caught it before she lost her grip completely.

"Emma?"

She shook her head as the stranger stood. Allison's expression slowly untangled from his as he moved. His eyes widened as he met Emma's, and then he smiled and waved. She opened her mouth; he shook his head, and as she watched, he faded from sight.