

prologue

The day it happened, Jenna warned me it would end in disaster. “Seriously, Autumn,” she said, sitting down at my kitchen island and helping herself to an apple. “I think this is going to be a tragedy.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said, reaching for the glass mixing bowls on the top cabinet shelf. “I appreciate it.” But it wasn’t like she was crazy for saying it. Because first of all, I didn’t know how to cook. Second of all, I was attempting one of my grandmother Eddy’s trickiest Cuban recipes, *boniatillo*. And finally, I needed the outcome to be absolutely perfect so my father would understand that I was sorry. I hadn’t seen him in a month. He has his own business, and he travels a lot. The company has something to do with computers, and I’m vague about it not because he hasn’t explained it to me, but because the explanation involves him speaking in technobabble, which is a language I don’t understand. Big picture, he makes secure storage systems for companies with huge amounts of massively important data that can’t be lost or stolen without the world pretty much coming to an end.

Usually when he’s away we have great nightly conversations. But during this trip I’d spent our phone convos accusing him of ruining my life and not caring about anybody but himself. And he wasn’t away for work; he was in Florida, where his mom had had a stroke. He’d flown there the minute we heard the news, and stayed with her in the hospital for a full week on deathwatch. Eddy made it, but she couldn’t live by herself anymore, so Dad put her in assisted living. That should have been the end of it. Instead, he and Mom had a family meeting and decided we’d move from our suburb outside Baltimore to Aventura to be closer to Eddy and keep an eye on her. Let the record show that this meeting included neither Erick nor me, even though together we make up half the family.

I didn’t want to move. I’d lived in Stillwater all my life. Everyone I’d ever known and every memory I’d ever made was here. Stillwater was where I’d gone to elementary and middle school. Where I spent weekends hanging out with my friends at their houses and ordering pizza and Snapchatting silly photos of each other. It was where my best friend, Jenna, was— the one person who had seen me make a fool of myself during volleyball in sixth- grade gym class and risked her own popularity to sit with me at the lunch table. And shared her bag of homemade chocolate chip cookies. If Eddy needed help, why couldn’t *she* move near *us*?

Of course Dad had a list of reasons. Eddy couldn’t handle the cold winters, she needed familiarity, the cost of living was cheaper in Aventura, my parents had always talked about moving south one day, blah blah blah. It all meant the same thing: ripping me away from everything I loved in the middle of sophomore year without giving me any say. So every time Dad called and tried to get me excited about the beaches and the food and our beautiful new house with a pool, I’d scream, beg him to change his mind, or go silent so he would really know how heartbroken and betrayed I felt. “If you loved me,” I’d told him for the zillionth time the day before, “you wouldn’t do this to me.”

“I do love you, Autumn,” he’d said, “which is why I made a decision.”

“We’re not moving?” I asked hopefully.

“We’re still moving, but I’m stepping down as CEO. I’ll consult, but I hired somebody to oversee the day-to-day stuff, including most of the traveling.”

“You mean you’ll stay home with us?” The words had sounded unreal coming from my mouth.

My whole life I'd been dying for Dad to do just that. To be there to high-five me when I got an A on a quiz, or drive me and Jenna to Target. To laugh at one of my jokes, or make me and Erick his famous banana-nut pancakes. To participate in my life instead of just being a bystander. "But you always said no one else could handle things as well as you."

"Maybe I'm not as indispensable as I like to think," he said wryly. "I love you guys. I want this move to be a new beginning for us." And suddenly I'd regretted all the grief I'd been giving him. I wasn't happy, but I could at least stop torturing him like a brat. I wanted to welcome him home with a grand gesture to show him how sorry I was. Hence the *boniatillo*.

"Okay," I said, checking out my staged tableau in the kitchen. "Three hours before we have to leave to get Dad at the airport. I've got the sweet potatoes, sugar, lime, cinnamon, and eggs. What else?" Jenna tucked a strand of her dark hair behind her ear and looked down at my grandmother Eddy's long-ago-crawled recipe. "A bottle of Manz . . . I have no idea what this means."

"*Manzanilla*." I pronounced it with a perfect Spanish accent. "It's a kind of wine." I opened the pantry door and clanked through the zillion dust-covered bottles.

"Party?" Jenna asked, waggling her perfectly plucked eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes. Jenna would never in a million years taste a drop of alcohol. It has nothing to do with the fact that we're only fifteen. Jenna's a runner. It's her Thing. That's why she never wears more makeup than a little eyeliner and lip gloss, why her dark hair's always in a ponytail, and why she owns twenty pairs of sneakers. Sorry, *running shoes*. She doesn't eat and drink, she fuels and hydrates. Tainting her body with alcohol would be as great a sin as spilling a tanker full of oil into the ocean. Me? I don't drink because my dad would kill me.

"Got it." I'd had to crawl into the pantry to dig out the bottle, and by the time I backed out, Erick had come downstairs and was filming while Jenna made goofy faces for the camera.

"Perv, cut it out," I said, pushing past him.

"What? I'm filming Jenna."

"And if I watched that, you're telling me I'd see her face and not her boobs?"

Erick gaped at me. "Well—"

"Seriously?" Jenna grabbed the camera. "Deleted," she announced as she erased it, then turned to me and added, "That I won't miss."

She wouldn't, but Erick would. He's four years younger than me, and Jenna and I have been friends since sixth grade, so he's known her for years and had a crush on her just as long. It used to be cute. Then he turned hideously prepubescent and became obsessed with . . . ugh.

"You have to stop, Icks," Jenna said as she handed him his camera. "I'm like your sister."

"You're *nothing* like my sister," Erick gushed.

“Gross. Hormone Boy, camera over here.” I waited until he had the lens aimed at me. “You want to catch this, because I, Autumn Falls, am about to cook.”

“You want to get the fire extinguisher or should I?” Jenna asked Erick, causing him to crack up a lot longer than was really necessary.

“Laugh all you want,” I said, ignoring them. “This could be a life- changing moment for me. Cooking could be my Thing.”

I desperately needed a Thing. I was the only one in my house without one. Oh, sure, I had my Kyler Leeds obsession, but Jenna and I had a clear rule: people cannot be Things. Even if they could, it would take an actual boyfriend to qualify, not a rock star with whom I’d been hopelessly in love for two years. Jenna and the rest of my family, meanwhile, were chock- full of Things. Mom has Catches Falls, her rescue organization for homeless dogs; Erick is all about his cameras; Dad has computers. Even my grandmother has a Thing. She was a potter back in Cuba. She gave it up when Dad was a baby and the family emigrated to the U.S. but took it up again after my grandfather died a couple of years later. She apparently supported the family selling her clay pots, which I find shocking. She gave Erick and me pots every year when we visited her in Florida, and honestly, they didn’t seem so great. Not like something you could support a family on. I wiped my hands on my jeans. I was covered in sweet-potato spatter and coated in sweat, and I’d shaved off the bulk of my finger skin with the vegetable peeler. Cooking was not my Thing.

“Is this stuff supposed to look like old Play- Doh?” Erick asked, poking at the contents of a bowl.

“The recipe says it’s supposed to be a smooth puree,” Jenna said, wrinkling her nose. She and Erick exchanged glances.

“Shut up!” I snapped. I was bent over a saucepan filled with sugar, water, lime, and cinnamon. “How long do I have to stir this?”

“‘Until the syrup reaches the soft- thread stage,’ ” Jenna read.

“It’s supposed to turn into yarn?” Erick asked.

“Jenna, please remove Erick from the area before I kill him.”

“You’re the one who wanted me to film this for Dad,” he complained. Our lazy basset hound, Schmidt, woke from a sound sleep and started barking, which meant Mom was home.

“Mmmm, what’s that smell?” she asked, walking in and dropping her yoga mat next to Jenna’s tote bag. Anytime Dad came back from a long trip, Mom got so excited that only insanely exhausting exercise could keep her calm enough to function. They’ve been married twenty years and she’s still so in love that she jumps out of her skin for him. “Are you making the *boniatillo*?”

Erick snorted. “Sort of.”

“Do you need help?” Mom asked.

“I’ve got it,” I insisted, feeling annoyed.

She came over anyway. “It gets a little complicated.” She looked over my shoulder into the saucepan, then scooped up some syrup and let it drip back in. “You went a little long with the heat, but it’s okay. I’d pour in the batter and keep stirring until it gets smooth. It’ll be fantastic.”

She kissed the top of my head before heading upstairs. I did what she said, but it didn’t get smooth at all. It was like stirring concrete. “He’s going to think I’m poisoning him,” I said through gritted teeth.

“It’ll be okay,” Jenna said in that reassuring way she has that made me feel grateful to have her and overwhelmingly sad that soon I wouldn’t.

“Hey, look at that!” Erick shouted. “It’s smoothing out. You really did it, Autumn.”

It didn’t happen often, but sometimes Erick completely forgot to be a pain. He zoomed his camera in for beauty shots while Jenna read off more directions and I took the pot off the heat, waited a bit, then added two beaten egg yolks, stirred the whole thing over the burner some more, put in the Manzanilla, then poured it all into a soufflé dish.

“By the time Dad’s here,” I announced to the camera in my best celebrity- chef voice, “it’ll be chilled and ready to enjoy with a dollop of fresh whipped cream.” Jenna applauded as I bowed.

“I’m gonna post this, okay?” Erick asked in a non- asking kind of way. Erick had his own YouTube channel, but Dad had made him promise never to post footage of anyone without their permission.

“Bad idea,” Jenna said. I checked out the freeze- frame of me. Clumps of sweet potato goo stuck to my face and clotted my long orange hair. Add in my vegetable- peeler- bloodied fingers and I looked like a farmland horror show.

“Nice try,” I said. “Not a chance.” I looked at the clock. I’d need every second if I was going to look human before we left to pick up Dad. “Jenna— ”

“Go get ready. Text me later and tell me how it went.” She chucked her apple core in the trash and hugged me despite my potatoey grossness, which is the measure of a true friend. Erick was still staring after her out the living room window when I headed upstairs to shower.

“Erick. It’s so not happening,” I said, just loud enough for him to hear.

An hour and a half later, Mom and I were ready. “Erick! Let’s go!” Mom called impatiently. She looked really pretty— she was wearing a skirt and top Dad had gotten her last Christmas, and her hair was shiny and smelled like mangoes. I don’t know how the hair genes missed me, but they totally did. Hers was long, dark, and naturally curly. I’d tortured mine with a hair dryer, a curling iron, and mass quantities of styling product, and it was still a sea of orange limptitude with a faint sweet- potato scent.

“Coming!” Mom tapped her hands against her sides, eager to get on the road. When her phone rang, she rummaged through her bag to find it. Her brows furrowed. “Hello? Yes, this is she. . . . I’m sorry, what?” I’d been petting Schmidt, but when she said that, I froze. There was just something about her voice. Her face was pale, and she held the back of one of the kitchen chairs so tightly her knuckles went white.

“Okay, I’m ready!” Erick ran downstairs, but I met his eyes and shook my head.

“That’s not possible,” Mom said thickly. Erick and I both moved closer to her, but she wasn’t looking at either one of us. “My husband’s on a plane. We’re about to go pick him up.”

My breath caught in my throat. Jenna’s prediction came floating eerily back to me. Erick reached for my hand and I took it.

“Yes,” Mom said, the word barely more than a whisper. “Yes . . . that’s his ring. Yes, on his right ankle. I understand, I . . . Yes.”

She staggered to a drawer and pulled out a pen and paper, scrawling something down.

“Of course,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

She hung up the phone and leaned heavily on the counter, facing away from us, her head bent low.

“Mom?” I said. I sounded like a frightened little girl. “Is Daddy . . . ?”

Mom turned around. Her face was red and splotchy. It took her a long time before she could get out the words.

“There was a car accident near the airport in Miami,” she said, her voice hollow. “Daddy never made it to the plane.”

six weeks later

“Are you *kidding* me?”

I say it out loud because it’s inconceivable anyplace could be this hot and sticky before eight a.m. My pleated-waist shorts are wrinkling in weird places, and I’m rethinking the muscle tee over tank top that looked cute in the mirror but now just looks meh. The air is so thick it feels like the inside of a sweaty sneaker.

At least I don’t have to rush. Aventura High’s only six blocks away. And I’m not exactly in a hurry to get there. It hasn’t been a great morning. Erick was flying his remote control helicopter pre-dawn, and the thing zoomed into my room and smacked into me just as I lifted my head to flip my pillow over. Hard.

“Owwww!” I cried out as the helicopter bounced off my forehead and landed on my comforter, writhing and twisting. I was already feeling pretty down. I feel that way a lot, lately. The worst times are those moments right between sleeping and waking up.

When I’m asleep, he’s alive.

When I’m awake, I pretend he’s alive. I fool myself into thinking he’s not gone, he’s traveling. Just like always.

But when I'm in that thick, swimmy place, my senses just waking to reality, it smacks into me, just like Erick's stupid helicopter: He's gone. Forever. And all I see are the scary accident- scene images I force away every other minute of the day and night.

So not only was I miserable, I was in serious pain— the maximum- dose ibuprofen kind.

"Autumn!" Erick said in this accusing tone as he ran in and picked it up. "That was my sky cam. Thanks a lot."

"Sky cam?" I watched as he detached one of his small camcorders from the bottom of the helicopter.

"Seriously? You were filming me sleep?"

"Mom told me to wake you up! You slept through your alarm." Then he picked up a sock I'd left on the floor and slam- dunked it into my hamper. "Suh- weet! Falls does it again!"

Not true. I didn't *set* my alarm.

I blinked hard to clear my throbbing head. My brother looked like a kid on a cereal commercial, all bright- eyed and carefree, ready to tackle the day with the help of a good, balanced breakfast. It kind of made me nauseous.

"How are you happy?" I blurted out.

"What?"

"Aren't you nervous about the first day of school?"

"No," he said.

"You should be," I told him, my eyes narrowing. "It's all new kids. What if nobody likes you?"

"People will like me." He said it with conviction, but there was doubt in his eyes. I felt a flicker of triumph.

"Maybe they won't." I fixed him with a cold stare. "It's the middle of the year. Everyone already has their friends. Maybe they'll think you're some strange intruder who does freaky things like record people in their sleep, and no one will want to hang out with you at all."

Erick's mouth dropped open and the confidence drained out of his eyes. It felt satisfying . . . until he turned around and left, his shoulders hunched.

Then knew I was the most horrible human being in the universe.

Because what I told him was really how I'm feeling about myself. My brother will be fine. I'm the one no one will want to hang out with. The one who won't fit in.

"Erick, wait!" I called, guilt filling me. "You left your sky cam!"

“I don’t want it.”

“Erick!” I’d make it up to him later. It’s not that I wanted to be mean to Erick; he’s just handling everything so much better than I am. I plucked my phone from my night table and texted Jenna two words: I SUCK. Then I dragged myself to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. I had a giant red lump in the center of my forehead. One of the sky cam’s propellers had sliced a cleft right in the middle of the bump, so the end result looked almost exactly like a monkey’s swollen butt.

After a shower that only made the lump even larger and more horrifying, I went back to my room to find my mom on my bed.

“I know,” I said when I saw her reproachful look. “I’m a terrible sister.”

She just patted my pillows, so I sat down next to her. I’m a little taller than she is, which is still kind of weird. Like I’m supposed to be the one taking care of her because I’m bigger. She put her arm around me and I leaned my head down on hers.

“Do I have to go to school?”

“Ever?”

“Is never an option?”

“Do you remember why Daddy named you Autumn?” she asked.

“Because he secretly hated me?” Think about it— *Autumn Falls*. It’s a full declarative sentence that calls me out as a complete klutz *and* seasonally challenged. Here’s Autumn. What does she do? She falls. Then there’s the other problem. Summer is hot and beachy and outdoorsy and alive; winter is cozy and snowy and tucked in and sleepy. Autumn goes back and forth, not sure what it wants to be. It’s a messy season, scattered and uncertain. And *that’s* the season I’m named after. Twice. Is it any wonder I’ve never found my Thing? No, it is not.

“He named you twice for what he thought was the most outstanding season of the year,” Mom said.

“That’s what he thought?” I asked. I know the story, but I wanted to hear her tell it.

“I had a whole list of other girl names, but he only wanted Autumn. He said he’d spent a lot of time getting to know you, and you were definitely Autumn Falls.”

“Getting to know me . . . before I was born.”

“That’s what he said. And he said you were meant to be Autumn because autumn is complex. It’s hot and it’s cold, it’s a wild mix of colors, and even when its leaves dry out and wither, it’s still beautiful. ‘Autumn is strong and intricate,’ he told me, ‘and our daughter will be too.’”

“So you’re saying I have to go to school?” I asked, sighing heavily.

“I’m saying you’re tougher than you think. Whether you go to school or not is up to you. I’ve got to drive Erick now. I love you, Autumn.”

I flopped back on my bed, fully intending to go back to sleep . . . only I couldn’t close my eyes. Stupid story. I wanted to be strong for my dad. The bump was still a problem, but a little makeup and a strategic shifting of my bangs helped.

When I got downstairs, my mom and Erick were gone. For a second I gazed at the couch, the dog, and the TV. The three of us could have had a spectacular day together.

Then I picked up a framed photo on the end table. It’s my dad, from our vacation in Bermuda just last August. He’s standing on the pink sand in a superhero pose, pulled up tall with his hands on his hips. He’d lost his sunglasses the day before, so he was wearing a pair of mine that were round and bedazzled, and board shorts covered with Tikifaced caricatures of U.S. presidents. He’s unbelievably goofy, but he’s happy. You can tell. You hold the picture and it’s like you can’t help but want to jump in and hang out with him because you know you’ll have the best time ever.

“I love you, Daddy,” I said.

Then I walked out the door.

As I pass a steady stream of single- story houses with pink roofs and huge picture windows, Jenna finally texts me back:

There is no U in Suck!

I miss her like crazy. I still can’t believe I’m living in Florida. I was positive that after what happened we’d cancel everything, but Mom decided Dad would want us to stick with our plans, move into the house he’d already set up for us, and keep an eye on Eddy. I argued that moving meant we’d lose our home and friends and everything familiar, which was one thing before, but now everything had changed. As a good mother, shouldn’t Mom want us to hold on to what little stability we had left?

That made her cry. I’ve been a real rock for my family lately.

A block into the walk, a guy my age with a backpack slung over his shoulder turns onto the sidewalk from another street. I’m maybe four feet behind him, and I’m guessing he’s also going to school because he looks the right age and has a backpack slung over one shoulder, and we make the exact same turns two blocks in a row.

I don’t mean to stare at him, but he’s right there in front of me, so I kind of do. He’s wearing cargo shorts that reach to just above his knees, and a red T- shirt. I have an excellent view of the back of his head, which features close cropped brown hair, but I’m particularly mesmerized by his neck. It’s almost as red as his shirt. He must have forgotten to put sun block there, because it’s the only swath of burn I see, and this is a guy who’d burn easily. His arms and legs are as pale as mine, and I have to put on SPF 100+ if I even think about stepping outside around here.

Am I actually as pale as him? He’s pretty translucent. I hold up my arm and try to judge it against his legs. It’s a tough call with the distance between us. Maybe if I get a little closer.

I'm about to speed up when he wheels around.

"Either you're a private investigator on my tail, in which case I'll go ahead and tell you whatever you need to know, or you're also walking to Aventura High, in which case it's impossibly rude and maybe a little bit sexist to stay three steps ahead of you all the way to school."

I like him right away. Partly because he's funny and confident, partly because he's a fellow pale in a land of golden tans.

"I'm walking to Aventura High," I say. "Autumn Falls."

He looks like he's thinking about it so I clarify. "My *name* is Autumn Falls. That's not just a statement I'm telling you."

"A Lustful Man," he says.

"Excuse me?"

"Anagram of your name. I'm J.J. Austin, which tragically has no good anagrams. One more 'A' and one more 'N' and I could be Just A Ninja, but as it is I've got nothing."

"This is what you do?" I ask as we start walking again.

"You make anagrams?"

He nods. "I like word stuff. Anagrams, crosswords, acrostics, the jumble . . ."

"The *jumble*? Is that even a thing if you're under eighty?" "It is if you're a member of my family. It's what we do together. Weird, I know, but it's kind of our thing."

"A full- family Thing?" I ask, impressed. "I didn't know that was possible."

I explain my theory and how the Family Thing will be a welcome addition to the treatise. I've spent all of five minutes with J.J. and I'm already acting like a goofball around him. I hope we have some classes together.

My new high school is a low, sprawling building in a truly bizarre shade of purple with Aventura High painted in giant turquoise letters along the largest wall. It's shaped like a U, with a wide, flat lawn in the middle. The lawn is packed with people playing Frisbee, tossing footballs, and hanging out.

Maybe J.J.'s a good omen. Maybe I'll click this easily with everyone here. Maybe by next week— maybe by tomorrow morning— I'll have my own little spot on the lawn where my new amazing friends will meet me and hang out until class.

"Can you show me where the principal's office is?" I ask when we enter the building. Thankfully, it's air conditioned, although it's too late now; I know without looking that my hair is a lost cause.

“I’m supposed to check in with her.”

“Sure. It’s down this way. Did you just move here?”

I really preferred where the conversation was before. This road leads to my dad, which leads to wide, sympathetic eyes and a horrible you- poor- thing- I- can’t- possibly-relate void that swallows everything it sees.

“Yeah. A couple weeks ago.” I’m afraid he’s going to start asking me questions, so I throw him off by asking for anagrams of Stillwater (Little Wars), Aventura (Rave Tuna), and Way Too Humid (Audio Myth Ow). By that time we’re at the principal’s office. It has a giant window that opens on the hall, but the blinds are shut tight.

“Want me to wait?” he asks. “I can walk you to your class.”

“Oh,” I say, not expecting that. “I’m good.” I pull my tank top back and forth, trying to cool off.

“Got it.” I’d actually love it if he hung out and walked with me to class, but I don’t want him to hear whatever the principal has to say. If she brings up my dad, it would just be awkward.

“So, I’ll, um . . . see you around?” I offer.

“Right. See you around.” He turns and walks away, then wheels back to call over his shoulder, “No Arduous Eye!” which I figure out is an anagram for “See you around.”

As he walks off, I rummage in my tote bag for my phone and send Erick a text: sorry about this morning, the kids at school will love you.

He texts back immediately: I know they will. I’m awesome.

Sometimes I totally want to be my brother.

2

Mrs. Dorio barely glances up, just peers over her glasses when I walk into her office after the secretary motions me in.

“Yes?”

“I’m Autumn Falls. I’m supposed to see you before I go to class?”

“Right.” She rises and looks me over. Mrs. Dorio is young and could even be pretty if she weren’t so intimidating. She doesn’t crack a smile, possibly because she’s roasting inside her gray pantsuit. “Did you get into a fight?” Her words are clipped and almost monotone, as if she doesn’t want to waste time or emotion on them. She walks around her desk so she can peer down at my forehead.

Talking to J.J., I’d forgotten all about the clefted lump of doom, but under her scrutiny it starts throbbing all over again.

“No. I, um—”

“Battery’s an expellable offense. As are drugs, weapons on campus, sexual assault, and arson. Other offenses go through discipline council and result in anything from detention to expulsion depending on the severity and frequency of the crime. You received all this in our emails, yes?”

I have no idea what to say. Arson? Is that seriously a problem here?

Mrs. Dorio raises an eyebrow. I worry she’s getting suspicious because I haven’t responded. Maybe she thinks she struck a chord with the arson thing. “Yes,” I say. “I got the emails.”

“Good. Then you know where to go?”

“I do.”

She stares at me again, waiting for more, so I pull out the schedule I printed.

“First Period, Room Three. Ms. Skloan.”

Mrs. Dorio frowns and takes the paper.

“Ms. *Knowles*,” she corrects me. “Room *Eight*.”

I would have gotten it right if she hadn’t been looming over me. Still, she goes down the rows of classes and locations, pointing to the words as she reads them. It’s mortifying, but I have to admit it helps. Now I won’t have to worry about the letters and numbers playing tricks on me when I look at them later.

“Thanks.” She nods. “Welcome to Aventura High, Autumn. If you need anything, my door is always open.”

As she says it, she pulls open her very *closed* door without a hint of irony, then shuts it again behind me.

The halls are empty. Class has already started. Great. I have my locker information, but there’s no time to drop off my stuff; I’ll just bring my whole bag. I walk as fast as I can, trying to strike a balance between speed and making sure my shoes don’t echo too loudly on the linoleum floors. The walls are white, but with giant random swaths of turquoise and hot pink. I wonder if whoever painted the school was color-blind.

There’s a window in the door of Room 8, and I can see there’s one open seat. It’s across the room, but toward the back, so maybe I can slide in without the entire world coming to a screeching halt. It helps that I can hear the muffled voice of Ms. Knowles calling roll, so I know I’m not that late. It’s possible they’ll barely notice me.

When I open the door, a hundred pairs of eyes turn and stare.

Okay, maybe not a hundred. Maybe only twenty- five or so. It just *feels* like a hundred. I smile casually and walk toward the empty seat. I’m almost there when Ms. Knowles picks her head out of her attendance book. “Autumn Falls?”

I jerk my head up, which means I don't see the outstretched legs in front of me. Big surprise: I trip and sprawl to the ground and my bag spills open, stuff flying everywhere.

A few people laugh, including the guy with the hazardous legs. Then he gets inspired. "Check it out," he says. *"Autumn. . . Falls!"*

It's an oldie, but not to this crowd. Now they're all laughing. Even Ms. Knowles puts a hand over her mouth so I won't see her joining in.

I peek over my shoulder at the genius wit who made the comment. He's so enormous his desk/chair combo looks like a toy. I bet if he flexed, the whole setup would explode into shrapnel.

"You okay?" I'm so busy looking at the Hulk I don't even notice the guy next to him slide out of his chair, but here he is next to me on the floor, and . . .

Oh.

He is easily the most beautiful human being I have ever seen in my life.

No, really. He could give Kyler Leeds a run for his money. Kind blue eyes, creamy dark skin, sculpted arms. He's picking up my pens and keys and lip gloss, and as he does, his flexed bicep curves out from his short-sleeved T-shirt. I wonder if he'd think it was weird if I traced it with my finger.

Oh no. I'm actually reaching out to trace it with my finger. Bad finger. I pull it back and hope he didn't notice.

"Don't you want them?" he asks.

His biceps? Yes, very much. Then I realize he means my books. I take them and slide them back into my bag. "Thanks."

"No problem. I'm Sean."

"Autumn. Nice to meet you."

"Are you done making introductions on all fours like dogs," asks Ms. Knowles, "or do you still need to sniff each other's rear ends?"

More laughter. I quickly slip into my chair and slouch down. I feel bad for Sean. But he's laughing right along with everyone else. He even catches my eye and flashes a smile so bright I have to smile back. As a rule I don't like to pigeonhole people, but Sean's pretty easy to peg: Confident, gorgeous, fearless in the face of embarrassment . . . he's popular. Probably has been since birth. Good for him. And good for me. He was nice to the new girl; maybe that'll start a trend.

I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn to face a girl who's obviously just slumming here between takes for her swimsuit-issue cover shoot.

"Hi," she whispers, flashing a smile.

"Hi."

“I just wanted to let you know”— she leans over her desk and whispers a little louder— “you have a *growth* on the front of your head.”

Everyone in earshot turns to stare, and it’s like their eyes push down on the giant clefted lump, making it hurt worse than ever. I don’t have to reach up to check. I know my bangs have shifted and it’s out for all to see.

There’s a terrible moment of silence; then a few people start to laugh.

And it’s official: I’ve definitely been noticed. Just not in the way I hoped.

3

Stupid lump. Stupid sky cam. Stupid Erick. I feel like walking right back out of this place, but it’s not in my DNA to do something like that. I have Good Girl on autopilot. So I stay in school. I keep my head down and my mouth shut, and reach up every two seconds to tug on my bangs and make sure they cover my forehead deformity.

In other words, I look like a mental patient. The one time I do open my mouth, it’s to practice *r* trills in French, and I end up trilling a piece of gum out of my mouth and onto my neighbor’s desk.

Lunch offers a welcome relief. At least I expect that to suck. After I finally drop my stuff in my locker, I walk through “the Tube,” the long cafeteria building where every one buys their food. I take my time snagging the least toxic- looking options. Eventually, though, I have to come out to the big grassy courtyard and the giant sea of strangers gathered in well- established groups at picnic tables or spots on the lawn.

Better to sit alone than stand around looking lost. I head for an empty spot on the grass, off to the side where I won’t be noticed. It’s Jenna’s lunch period back in Stillwater too. Maybe she’ll have her phone on.

“Autumn! *Autumn!*”

I wheel around and see J.J. waving to me, a big smile on his face.

He’s with two other people: a scrawny, sandy- blond guy bent over his cell phone, and a short, curvy girl in a clingy tangerine- colored dress. She’s sprawled sideways on the lawn, propped up on one elbow.

“Hey, J.J.”

“Hey. Autumn, this is Jack Rivers and Amalita Leibowitz, alternatively known as Vicar’s Jerk and Await A Zombie Lilt. In keeping with your theory, Amalita’s Thing is cosmetics, while Jack’s is comic books. In other words, Ames is dedicated to inspiring attraction between men and women, while Jack is dedicated to poisoning it.”

“Dude, you’re crazy,” Jack retorts. “Girls love superheroes.”

“Girls love guys who play superheroes in movies,” Amalita counters, “not pasty boys who read about them.”

“Watch with the pasty,” J.J. says. “I prefer vampire chic.”

Jack looks up at me for the first time. “Oh, hey— you spit gum on Carrie Amernick’s desk in French class. Well done. She’s evil.”

“Not every girl who rejects you is evil,” Amalita says. Then she turns to me and adds, “*Esta como una cabra* because she wouldn’t go out with him but she went out with J.J.”

“You speak Spanish?” I ask.

“Fine, so she’s not evil,” Jack says. “She just has crap taste.”

“*Or* she likes talking about things other than villainous plans to take over Megalopolis,” J.J. says.

“*Metropolis*, dude.” Jack turns to me, but gestures to

J.J. “He’s a— ”

“Yeah?” J.J. cuts him off. “Well, you’re a— ”

Amalita holds up a hand to ward them off and turns back to me. “*Sí. Y tu?*”

“*Solo un poco*,” I say. “I’m half Cuban.”

“Me too!” Amalita says. “I’m a Puerto-Mecuadorbano Jew. My mom’s side is *Puerto Rican, Mexican, Ecuadorian, and Cubano* . . . and my dad won’t mix milk and meat.”

“With me, it’s my dad,” I say. “He’s— ” *Was. He was.* I blink back tears and hope they don’t notice.

“Give me your face,” Amalita says. That’s a bad idea. All she’ll do is give me crap about my forehead and I swear I can’t handle any more of it. I also can’t handle fighting back right this second, and there’s no room in her eyes for a no. I lean forward, and Amalita’s earrings and all her bracelets jangle as she sits up and takes my chin in her hands.

“Here’s what I’d say,” she offers after several long minutes.

“You need to stay natural. Swap the lipstick for gloss. Peachy. Kill the eye shadow. Brown liner. Smudge it on top. On the bottom you need powder, the tiniest bit. Right now it’s running down your face. Just a little, don’t freak out, but it won’t do that with the powder. Tiny bit of bronzer right here, on the apples of your cheeks. I see you wearing more, I smack you and take it away. We’ll go to the mall after school and get everything you need, fifty dollars tops. Plus a little arnica gel. Put that on your head, ice it up tonight, the lump is gone by morning.”

This time I don’t even feel the tears coming. I just start to cry.

It’s ridiculous. All she did was give me a beauty regimen. Now she probably thinks I’m crazy.

I clench my fists and take a deep shaky breath. Two more and I'm back to normal. I blot my eyes with a napkin and laugh it off. "Sorry," I say. "That was weird."

Amalita, J.J., and Jack exchange a look, no doubt silently figuring out how to slip away and enjoy the rest of their lunch period without the insane new girl. Then Amalita puts her hand on mine. "We're sorry about your dad," she says softly. Tears well up again and I have to swallow hard to stop them.

"How did you know?"

"I Googled you," Jack says sheepishly. "Beginning of lunch. J.J. wouldn't keep his mouth shut about you, so—"

He stops talking when J.J. punches his arm. J.J.'s face is the color of his sunburned neck. "There was an article in the paper about your mom's dog rescue," he explains. "It mentioned what happened. I'm really sorry."

I don't know if he means he's sorry about my dad or looking me up, but I guess it doesn't matter. I know the article Jack found. Mom had worked hard to set up the Aventura branch of Catches Falls before we even left Maryland, and she'd been happy to do an interview about it. She just didn't expect them to go with the tragic angle.

It actually feels good that someone here knows, but I can't say that out loud without crying again so I just nod.

"Oh, hell . . ." J.J. says it under his breath and at first I think it's about me. Then I realize he's looking at Amalita, who's getting to her feet.

"Taylor!" she cries, waving her arm. "Tee! Hey, it's me! Don't you want to come hang out?"

"She's going to get us killed," Jack mutters.

I follow Amalita's gaze and my stomach turns. She's waving across the lawn to Miss Supermodel from first period. She walks in a pack with a tall blonde, the beast from class, and a couple of his equally beefy friends.

"What's the matter, Tee?" Amalita cries. "Did you lose your hearing and vision along with your memory? I'm right here!"

People everywhere are staring. The blonde looks furious. She and the supermodel have some kind of a conversation, but they're too far away to tell what it is. The guys stand around with their arms folded, like angry bodyguards. Then the blonde shakes her head and walks our way.

"At least she's alone," Jack says.

"Ames, let it go," J.J. advises. "No good will come of this."

If Amalita hears him, she doesn't show it. She waits for the girl with a huge smile on her face.

“What’s going on?” I ask J.J.

“That’s Taylor Danport,” he says, nodding at the blonde. “She and Ames were best friends until exactly three months ago, when Taylor ditched her to start hanging out with Reenzie.”

“Reenzie?”

“Marina Tresca. The brunette.”

“She’s evil,” Jack says.

“For real this time,” J.J. says. “It’s true.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Taylor hisses when she gets close to Amalita. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“I’m not embarrassed at all,” Amalita says way too loudly. “Maybe you’re the one who’s embarrassed because you know what you did.”

“Let it go,” Taylor says, dropping her voice even lower.

“Let *what* go?” Amalita asks innocently. “The fact that you’re a complete fake? That before this year your new *cuate* didn’t even care that you were alive?”

“Hey there!” Reenzie chirps. I hadn’t even noticed her walking this way, but now she’s at Taylor’s side. She’s a couple inches shorter than Taylor, but it’s pretty obvious she’s the one in charge. She smiles down at J.J. and Jack. “Guys, I don’t know if you’re aware, but there’s still a ban on pit bulls in Miami-Dade County. I’d recommend you get yours to stop barking, or it’ll have to be destroyed.”

“Hi, Reenzie,” Amalita says. “How was your break? Did you talk to Kaitlin? You know, the friend you ditched before you stole away Tee? Or how about Evelyn, the one before her? It’s funny, you’d kind of have to be brain-dead to think you’d actually be loyal to anyone.”

“Ames. Do you seriously think this makes me want to hang out with you again?” Taylor doesn’t wait for an answer. She stalks off.

“Lighter fabrics,” Reenzie says to Amalita. “They won’t bunch and wrinkle so much in unsightly places.” Then she turns to me. “Glad to see you’ve found your people. Pro tip,” she adds, gesturing to my forehead, “you want to take care of that out here. Heat can make breakouts even worse.”

As Reenzie joins Taylor, Amalita calls after them, “Hey, Tee! Don’t forget I have pictures of you dressed as Super Grover! From *last year!*” She plops back on the grass and turns on the guys. “What is wrong with you? You didn’t stick up for me. What are you, afraid of her?”

“You started it,” Jack points out.

“And no, we’re not afraid of Marina Tresca,” J.J. adds. “But yes, if possible, we’d rather avoid her steroid mafia.”

“Ignore them,” Amalita tells me as I self- consciously touch my golf ball- sized lump. “Nothing she says matters.”

But I can tell by her defiant yet sad expression that it does.

“Hey . . . did you mean it about hitting the mall after school?” I ask. “Cause the stuff you were talking about . . . it sounds really good.”

Amalita breaks out a smile. “Meet me at the front door right after eighth period,” she says, her eyes smiling. “You will love what happens when you put yourself in my hands.”

I kind of already do.