

CHAPTER 1

IT'S AMAZING HOW FEW words a person can get by with.

I scratch a tally mark into my notebook and grin. Yesterday it was two, and three the day before that. Today it's one. One word all morning: a new record. If Mr. Scroggins hadn't asked me to name the capital of Russia last period, it could have been zero.

When Miss Looping turns from the board, I move my pencil so it looks like I'm taking notes. I almost feel sorry about not paying attention—Miss Looping isn't so bad. She wears dark velvet dresses and is in love with Charles Dickens. Her stuffed raven, Beady, keeps looking at me. I sneak glances at his perch, waiting for him to open his beak and *kraaa*. But he never moves.

Maybe it's Beady's stare or Miss Looping's dresses or her pasty skin that makes people wonder about her. Most students think she's weird. I don't mind her. She doesn't call on me or hold class discussions. Mr. Gankle and Ms. Dively

like that sort of thing, so they never give me A's. Neither does Mrs. Bebeau, who thinks the best way to learn French is to speak it aloud. Miss Looping is the only one who doesn't penalize me for not talking. She puts A's on all my papers and jots comments in the margins—things like “good point” and “nice word choice”—and recommends poets I might like. Sometimes I add a note back to her: Thanks for understanding, Miss L. But she never gets the note because you don't give papers back to teachers after they're graded.

“Aaaa-choo!”

I jump as Arty Pilger sneezes next to me, spraying my arm.

I hate when people sneeze. Not because of the spraying—well, that too—but because they expect me to say “bless you.” Or “God bless you” if they believe in God.

Someone across the room yells “*Gesundheit,*” and I relax. My tally remains one.

But lunch is next, and that will be trickier. People like to talk at lunch. I look back at the tally mark in my notebook. If I want my record to last more than three periods, I need a new tactic for the cafeteria today. A stronger shield, harder armor.

When the bell rings, I hurry past Beady, avoiding his gaze. I wish Miss Looping would turn him to face the wall. In the hallway, I empty my books into my locker, all except

for one this time. Then I make my way to the cafeteria, armed and ready.

I slip into my seat at the end of Mel's table. Mel, Sylvia, Nellie, and Theresa are deep in conversation and don't pause at my arrival. They never do these days. Sometimes their eyes slide sideways, but I don't always see this because I keep my own eyes down.

I pull *The Oxford Book of Sonnets* out of my bag, open it, and eat my sandwich. I get through a whole poem without anyone trying to talk to me. Two poems. Two and a half. Why didn't I think of this before? Read a book—such a simple solution.

"You're reading at lunch?"

Sylvia's voice clangs against my armor. I keep my eyes on the page.

"It must be a good book then."

I force my eyes to move left to right, left to right. If I don't, they'll think I heard. They'll think I'm faking. I can feel them all looking. To these girls, I'm the elephant in the room. And no one can really relax when there's an elephant in the room, least of all the elephant. I've tried sitting at an empty table, but that makes everyone stare more. Like it or not, sitting at Mel's table is better than sitting alone.

“I’m so jealous of your eyebrows.” Sylvia’s voice again. “I feel like they get bigger every day.”

No one responds, so I know her words are meant for me. I try to focus on the typeface in front of me. It blurs. I drag my eyes away in spite of myself and find Sylvia in the seat next to Mel, slowly twirling a french fry between her fingers, a smirk playing on the corner of her lip.

Mel shifts in her seat. “I think they’re pretty.” She must still feel an obligation toward me, considering she’s my neighbor and all—and the closest thing I have to a friend. She’s too late though. I’m already scanning the other girls’ eyebrows, noting the safe, sure spaces between them—and fighting the urge to reach up and feel mine.

Sylvia’s french fry pauses at Mel’s comment, then resumes twirling. Her smirk doesn’t budge. “I could have fixed them for you at Nellie’s sleepover Saturday. Why didn’t you come?”

An open-ended question—Sylvia’s specialty. She sits back and takes a bite of her french fry, waiting, watching me. Everyone watches me. Everyone except Mel, who’s examining her food.

I push my tongue against my teeth. One word, any word, and I can start over. I can wipe the slate clean, and they’ll forget I haven’t spoken at this table in the past ten minutes.

Or the past week.

Or the past seven months.

Sweat collects under my arms. I can feel it happening—my throat closing up. The bubble forming. The cop-out coming. Here it comes: My shoulders move up and down in a quick motion. A shrug.

Sylvia cocks her head. “You’re awfully quiet today.”

Today. As if it’s different from any other day.

“Give her a break.” Mel picks up her soda and stirs the straw. The ice crashes together.

Sylvia’s smirk flickers. She shoots Mel a sidelong look. “Why? Didn’t her parents teach her how to talk?”

“She talks.”

“When?”

Mel concentrates on her food. I try to catch her eye, but I’m losing her. The longer I go without saying something, the more tired she grows of defending me. One of these days, she might stop all together.

Hours pass, or maybe seconds, before someone changes the subject to something about the sleepover last Saturday. They always lose interest in the elephant eventually. I can count on that.

I return to the page where I left off.

But my eyes slide upward. Faces look at me funny—funnier than usual. No one else in the cafeteria is reading. The point of the book was to draw attention away from me, to show that I'm busy, unavailable, otherwise engaged. But it's backfiring. I close the book, pick up my bag, and leave the cafeteria. Mel doesn't call after me.

I go back to Miss Looping's room, still empty except for Beady. I'll have to put up with him staring. At least he won't talk to me. And if Miss Looping comes back early, she won't try to make small talk like the other teachers. She'll let me be.

I sit in the back row near the open window and return to my book. I get through one sonnet. Something moves in the corner of my eye. I look over to Miss Looping's desk, where Beady is watching me. A fly buzzes past. I swat at it and try to keep reading, but the print blurs worse than before. Instead of poetry, I see Sylvia's smirk all over the page.

You're awfully quiet today. You're awfully quiet today.

My teeth grind. I slam the book shut and punch it with the side of my fist. At the same time, a black shape leaps in my periphery and another noise shakes the room—a shattering of ceramic. I jerk my head up to find Beady on the floor near Miss Looping's desk, rocking on his side. Miss Looping's "What the Dickens!" coffee mug lies in pieces next to him.

I grab my book and bolt out the door, my heart thudding.

Relax, I tell myself as I stumble down the hall. He's a stuffed bird. Top-heavy, that's all. Top-heavy things tip over sometimes.

Still, there's something about Beady I've never trusted. His feathers are too feather-like, his talons too talon-like. I walk faster, turning left and right under the glare of fluorescent lights, down more halls with burnt-orange walls. Farther ahead now I see double doors and a sign. A word in block letters:

QUIET

I slow, squinting. The word follows me. Haunts me. It won't leave me alone. I can't remember when people started using it—there must have been a day, a moment—but it's all I've heard since then.

Elise is so quiet.

Elise, you've been quiet. What do you think about such and such?

That's her over there. The quiet one.

Mr. Scroggins writes the same note on all my social studies papers: *Terrific work, Elise. You present a strong, fluid argument. But I wish you'd speak up more in class. You're very quiet.*

I try to ignore the word, but there's something about it. Something that tells me it isn't a compliment.

QUIET

Now it appears as illusions on the walls. What next? Voices in my head? Tightening my fists, I walk toward the sign. I'll break the illusion. I'll stare it down and scare it away.

The rest of the sign comes into focus.

QUIET

IN THE LIBRARY

The words wink at me. I blink and read them again.

The librarian doesn't notice me come in. Her back is turned as she arranges books on a shelf. Bernard Billows snoozes at a table in the corner, wearing the same T-shirt and sweatpants he wears every day. I can smell his spoiled-milk cologne from here. No one else is in the library. It must not be a popular lunch spot. I've been here only once, seven months ago after class on the second day of school, back when I was still curious about everything. I'd never seen a public-school library before. But I left after two minutes—there were too many people here then, the Jigsaw Puzzle Club or something.

Green Pasture Middle School loves that club stuff. They have this initiative where every student has to join at least one club or team by the end of the year. The principal keeps reminding us in his intercom announcements. Mel and Sylvia

and all of them are in the choir and the drama club. I still haven't joined anything.

I sit at a table in the farthest corner of the library, near the poetry section, and open my book. It takes me a minute to find my place. Before long, I actually turn a page. And another. No eyes stare at me this time. No one tries to talk to me. I decide to come back for lunch the next day. And maybe even the next.

A bird croaks outside the window, but I refuse to let it break my concentration.

I can already taste the victory of tomorrow's tally: zero.

CHAPTER 2

MY MOTHER CATCHES ME AS I sneak past the kitchen. “How was school?”

“Good,” I say. She has no reason to believe this isn’t true. She never gets calls of concern from Green Pasture. Why would she? I’m passing my classes, and the teachers are all too busy keeping the loud kids quiet to worry about the quiet kid. So I keep feeding her the same answer, and she keeps gobbling it up. And it never affects my tally because there’s no counting at home. There’s no need for it. We hardly talk to each other as it is, and when we do, there’s nothing to lose. She’ll still be my mother no matter what comes out of my mouth.

“What do you think?” She holds up the hat she’s knitting at the kitchen table. “Got an order on my website today.”

“It’s nice.” I never criticize her handiwork. Just like I never ask why she doesn’t have a real job in an office building, like Mel’s parents. For as long as I can remember, she’s been working from home, selling—or trying to sell—her

knitwear, and teaching online college math. And, up until seven months ago, homeschooling me, if that counts as a job—though she never showed any enthusiasm for it.

She returns to her work now, and I continue on my way.

I stop in the bathroom and lean close to the mirror. Fine hairs cascade from my eyebrows, reaching toward the area above my nose. Almost touching. Almost an *M*.

I open the cabinet and fumble through my mother's things: powder, lotion, nail clippers, tweezers. I take out the tweezers, grip a hair, and pull. Nothing happens. I yank harder. A twinge rips through my skin. I shut my eyes. I open them, and my vision is watery. One hair down. It will take forever this way. There must be a quicker method.

I pull back the shower curtain and eye my mother's razor. I never use her things—she doesn't like me touching them—but this is an emergency. I wet the razor in the sink and hold it between my eyebrows, sliding it sideways.

I lower the razor. In the mirror, one eyebrow is shorter than the other. Way shorter. My palms sweat. I have to make them even. I can't go to school like this. I rinse the razor and lift it again.

"What are you... Don't *do* that."

I see my mother in the mirror staring at me. I should

have locked the door. She has a quiet way of entering rooms sometimes.

She comes forward and rips the razor from my hand.

“Why’d you do that?”

“A girl at school said I have a unibrow.”

“That’s ridiculous. You don’t have a unibrow.”

“That’s because I just shaved it.”

“You shouldn’t do that. It’ll grow back thicker and all stubbly.”

“It’s not fair. Your eyebrows are fine.”

“Your father had the Armenian genes. Blame him.”

“Did he have a unibrow too?”

“You don’t have a unibrow.”

“I bet he wouldn’t lie to me.”

My mother’s eyes flash. I’ve seen it before: that glint of loathing. Whether the loathing is for me or my father, or both, I’m not sure. “You think your father never lied? If you’d known him...”

I wait, holding my breath. She never talks about him.

She sets down the razor and grabs an eye pencil from the cabinet. “Here...use this to fill in the shorter one till it grows back. Now can I use the bathroom?”

I stare at the eye pencil. She’s never given me anything

of her own before. My stubbornness tells me not to trust it, to refuse this gesture of pity or charity or whatever it is. But in the mirror I see the unevenness again. It does look pretty bad.

“Fine.” I grab the pencil and march past her to my room.

I don’t bother slamming the door. I plop onto my bed and put the eye pencil on my dresser. It’s the only makeup item in my room. I wonder if Mel owns makeup. I’ve never seen her wear any. Sylvia does. Powdery stuff always cakes her pimples, and clumps of mascara cling to her eyelashes. Would it make a difference if I wore any? Can makeup make up for other things, like being “quiet”?

I listen to my mother’s footfalls as I do my homework. *Creak, creak, creak* to the kitchen. *Creak, creak, creak* to her bedroom. For someone so good at sneaking up on me, she sure can be loud when she wants to be. *Screee*. Door opening. *Thunk*. Closing. She doesn’t call me for dinner, and I don’t check to see if she’s made anything. I work my way through the box of crackers on my desk.

Eventually, the sounds stop for the night, and I know my mother has gone to bed.

I brush my teeth, get under my covers, and turn off the light. Shadows quiver behind the window shade, marking the outlines of leaves and tree branches.

And a perched figure.

I squint. Stick legs, a shaggy throat, the curve of a beak. Its head shifts and turns, its beak now lost in the silhouette.

I shiver and roll away onto my side. I close my eyes, but my lids sting. The unsleep is like that. It plays opposites. I try to be still, to relax my body, but then I feel an itch on my leg. I scratch it. Then my ear. I scratch it. Then my forehead. My chin, my elbow, my heel, places I didn't know could itch. I notice the taunt of the clock. *Ticka. Ticka. Ticka.* I even think I hear noises outside, but it's probably the pipes. I wonder how long I've been lying here. An hour? Three hours? More? I must doze off some nights. It would be impossible to exist if I didn't sleep now and then. But I have no memory of sleeping or waking up—not since last summer.

Prickles work up my spine. I can sense the figure still there behind the shade, but I don't want to look. I stick my headphones in my ears. Music can at least block out the sounds of the house, the hum of stillness and waiting. But it can't block out the odors, the stench of staleness and stagnancy. Mel used to ask me, in the early days of our friendship, why I never invited her over. "It's not fair," she'd whine. "We're over my house all the time."

But I couldn't explain. I couldn't tell her what it was

like to come from her pinewood-scented halls to the mustiness my own house stews in. To go from her backyard with its patio and mowed lawn to mine with its weedy ruins: The greenhouse, cracking and growing things it shouldn't be. The shed, rotting and rusting with junk left by previous residents. The fence, tilting and holding back the woods that lead to who knows where. I told Mel we were better off at her place, and she eventually stopped asking.

Oh, Mel.

Pretty Mel, patient Mel. Always waiting for me on her front steps, playing string games till I came.

Me on my bike, smiling, freewheeling the quarter mile from my house to hers, away from the dead end and the mustiness and my mother, lessons done for the day...

Mel! Mel!

Mel?

The day Mel wasn't there—the day she wasn't waiting for me...

The day seven balloons, all different colors, clung to her front railing, bumping each other in the wind, and the door stood open a sliver...

I nudged the door forward. Voices floated toward me from the kitchen, low and chanting. I followed them

on tiptoe, halting at the kitchen doorway and peering into darkness. Orange dots flamed and floated at the center of the table. Cheekbones and nostrils flickered in patches of candlelight. Lips moved, intoning words I couldn't make out. Pointy teeth gleamed, and eyes, dozens of them, reflected the flames.

I screamed.

The lights clicked on, forcing me to blink. A dozen children blinked back. Mel sat at the head of the table in a cone-shaped paper hat and a dress with puffed sleeves.

"Shh!" Mrs. Asimakos leered at me, her finger to her mouth. I backed away.

Mr. Asimakos rushed to his daughter's side. "It's okay, cupcake. See? It's just Elise. Blow out the candles. Go on. Make a wish."

Mel pouted and shook her head. "My song's ruined." Her lower lip trembled. She erupted with a wail.

I looked around. The room wasn't so scary with the lights on. The candles weren't hovering like I'd thought, but nestled in a cake. And there were colors all around: Streamers and ribbons. Boxes wrapped in shiny paper. More balloons like the ones out front.

"Didn't your mother read the invitation?" Mrs.

Asimakos ushered me to a chair and strapped a cone hat to my head. “The party started an hour ago.”

Before I could ask what an invitation was, Mel’s wails rose to a painful pitch. Behind her on the wall, a banner glinted with big rainbow words: *Happy 7th Birthday, Melanie!* Mrs. Asimakos cursed and blew out the candles.

When I got home later, I went to my room and took out my dictionary.

birthday | 'bɛrθ, dā | *n.* the annual anniversary of the day on which a person was born, typically treated as an occasion for celebration and present-giving.

I stared at the page until the letters blurred together. “Birthday,” I whispered. In the books my mother let me read, the word had never shown up. She’d mentioned my “date of birth” before—that number she writes on forms sometimes—but never “birthday.” Never this thing everyone else supposedly celebrated.

I closed the dictionary that day and listened to my mother’s footsteps. The shriek of her bedroom door opening. *Screee*. Closing. *Thunk*. I must have done something bad—something unforgiveable—to make her think her only child didn’t deserve balloons or cake or presents. To make her hide Mel’s invitation. To make her keep me from knowing

about birthdays, so she wouldn't have to celebrate mine. I must have done something terrible.

But I couldn't recall what I'd done.



Tap-tap-tap.

My eyes blink open. It's dark. I'm twelve again, lying in bed. By some miracle, I must have nodded off long enough for the music in my headphones to end—and now there's a *tap-tap-tapping* on glass behind me.

I turn over. My eyes adjust to the dark until they can make out my window shade. No silhouette.

I wait for more tapping.

Of course, now that I'm wide awake again, the sound has stopped. I sit up and glare at the shade. Sleep is hard enough to come by. Just when it had finally paid me a visit... just when I had finally drifted off...

A fuse blows inside me. I thrust off my covers and yank up the shade, searching for the mischief maker. The moon casts a glow on the tree by my window, but I see nothing perched there. Just spindly branches against the backyard shapes beyond—the fence, the greenhouse, the shed.

A shadow moving by the shed door.

I squint. It moves again: something taller than what I'm looking for. *Someone* taller? I strain my eyes, but the moonlight shifts, I blink, and then I can't tell shadow from shadow.

I step back from the window, shivering. If I had any hope of falling back asleep, it's history now.

CHAPTER 3

THERE'S NOTHING GREEN-PASTUREY ABOUT Green Pasture Middle School: no grass, no horses, no cows. Just pavement and a parking lot and a squat brick building.

In a way it's nice—the same every morning. The brown doors, the burnt-orange walls, the faces in the halls. No surprises. Once people form an impression of you, that's who you are. Bernard Billows is always going to smell like spoiled milk, and his hair is always going to be long and greasy. The same goes for teachers. If Miss Looping ever stopped wearing those dark velvet dresses or straightened her quivering curls, the whole school would cry doomsday. That's why it's so easy to get by without talking here. At this point, people expect it of me.

I pull my bangs over my penciled eyebrow and take my seat in English class. I glance at Miss Looping's desk, steeling myself for Beady's usual stare.

He isn't there.

I scan the classroom to see if Miss Looping moved him somewhere else, but there's no sign of him. I try not to think anything of it. Maybe she put him in a drawer or took him home. In fact, I hope she did. Good riddance.

I open my notebook, greeted by the torn book page I pasted to the inside cover—the illustration of swans with arching necks and sweeping wings and black knobs on orange bills, and the font wisping across it all:

“Silence is the means of avoiding misfortune. The talkative parrot is shut up in a cage. Other birds, without speech, fly freely about.”—Sakya Pandita

I know nothing about Sakya Pandita, except that he was some ancient Buddhist scholar. I just like the quote. And the swans. I flip to a blank page and write:

Things could be worse. You could be..

- Shut up in a cage
- Cinderella (before the ball)
- Stranded on a desert island

I gnaw on my pencil and then cross out the last one. On second thought, I wouldn't mind having an island to myself.

There'd be no one expecting me to talk, and I could read all day. As long as I had my book of sonnets. And basic survival skills. Later in the library, I'll have to look up how to build a fire. I should be taking notes—Miss Looping is putting a lot of zest into her Dickens lecture, even drawing a plot diagram of *Oliver Twist* on the board—but I prefer poetry, and I'm on a roll with my list. I add:

- Allergic to chocolate
- On death row
- A fruit fly

“Any questions so far?” Miss Looping gestures at her diagram.

Arty Pilger raises his hand in that way of his that looks like he's screwing in a light bulb.

“Yes, Arty?”

“Your minion's gone.” He also has a knack for asking questions that aren't questions.

Miss Looping wipes chalk off her hands. “I meant about Dickens. But yes, Beady went missing yesterday, if that's what you mean. And I was going to announce at the end of class that whoever stole him, and whoever broke my mug,

has twenty-four hours to come forward. After that, I'm taking the case to the principal."

The other students look at one another and shrug.

Beady's missing? I slide down in my chair.

"I may have bought him on a whim at a thrift shop," Miss Looping says, "but he's been more to me than a decoration. I expect to see him returned safely."

There's no way this could get traced to me. No one else was in the room at the time. And I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't break the mug, and I didn't steal Beady. I don't know what happened to him. All I know is that I slammed my book shut, and he moved, and I ran, and...

A breeze tickles my neck. I turn to the window Miss Looping always leaves open for "fresh air." An object sits on the windowsill: a feather, jet-black, bluish at an angle.

I jump when the room phone rings.

"Who?" Miss Looping is saying into the phone. "Okay. Right now? Okay." She hangs up. "Elise? You're wanted in the guidance office."

Guidance? I can feel Beady's eyes cackling silently at me, even in his absence. All my classmates' eyes too. I gather my things and shuffle out of the room. I was worried about the principal's office, but guidance sounds ten times worse.

Did Mrs. Bebeau say something to the guidance counselor about me not talking? Or was it Ms. Dively? Miss Looping would never do that to me. I bet it was Mr. Gankle. Or maybe it wasn't a teacher. Maybe it was Sylvia. Or Mel. No, Mel wouldn't do something so mean.

Did they call my mother? What will they make me do? Public-speaking classes? Social activities? But this is a free school—a free country, anyway—and they can't make me do anything. No one calls Bernard Billows to the guidance office to make him take a shower. I won't go. I'll walk straight out the front doors.

But that would be worse. They'll notice I didn't show up, and it will draw even more attention.

They know how to put me in a lose-lose situation.

The door to the office stands open, and the guidance counselor, Ms. Standish, sits at her desk talking. I crane my neck. She's wearing a turtleneck and saying words like *policies* and *assemblies*. I can't see who she's talking to.

She looks up. "Elise. Come on in."

I step in against my own wishes. A boy and a girl with reddish-brown hair and identical noses sit across from Ms. Standish. Students I've never seen before—here at Green Pasture? Is it possible?

“This is Elise Pileski.” Ms. Standish waves at me, and then at the boy and girl. “Elise, meet Conn and Finola Karney.”

“It’s Fin.” The girl nods at me. “Hey.”

The boy nods too and puts his hands in his pockets. Binoculars hang from his neck. Maybe they’re a fashion accessory.

I wait for someone to explain why I’m here.

“I was just going to tell them about you,” Ms. Standish says. “Conn and Finola are new to Green Pasture. Finola will be joining the seventh grade—”

“It’s Fin,” the girl repeats.

“—and Conn the eighth grade, like you. They come from a homeschool background, and since you recently made the transition, I thought you could introduce yourself, give advice, answer any questions they might have.”

This is the part where I should say something to get myself out of this. Instead I exhale. No one turned me in.

Ms. Standish hands Fin a pamphlet. “That’s for you two to share.” I glance at the cover: *Transitioning from Homeschool to Public School*. She gave me the same one on my first day. I recognize the picture: kids clutching books and leaning against lockers, mouths open in mid-laugh. No one actually stands like that. It’s funny now to think of the

images I saw in movies and magazines at Mel's house. Lunch ladies in hairnets. Teachers with apples. White chalk against clean blackboards. Students in rows at graffiti-free desks, hands raised in eagerness.

I should probably warn Fin and Conn so they won't be disappointed. But that would require speaking, and they'll see the reality soon enough.

Ms. Standish glances at her watch. "I have to run to a meeting. Shall I leave you to it?" She stands and frowns. "May I ask why you're wearing those?" She points at Conn's binoculars.

"Oh." Fin waves a hand. "He always wears them."

Ms. Standish presses the tips of her fingers together. "Well, you'll need to take them off while you're in the building. Other students might find them distracting."

"Distracting?" Conn snorts. "Why would they be—"

"Just do it." Fin nudges him.

He rolls his eyes and shoves the binoculars in his backpack. "*How unnecessary,*" he mutters, drawing out the *how*. Ms. Standish doesn't seem to hear. Fin grins and presses her lips together. Conn shakes his head and looks at the ceiling. After a second, he grins too.

I've always been curious about siblings. I used to study Mel and her sister, the way they fought over every little thing,

but then her sister moved away to college. These two interest me even more. Not just their matching hair and noses, but the way they interact. The way they exchange glances and elbow each other and snicker at nothing, communicating in their brother-sister language. A language I'll never speak.

Conn notices me staring and coughs. "So, any advice?"

I look around and realize Ms. Standish has left. Should I bolt now or try to stick it out for a minute? Bolting now would be wisest.

But Fin and Conn are waiting for me to answer. And as I stand here, I see that I'm at an advantage. They don't know about me yet. They have no expectations. To them, I could be anyone. I could be the most talkative person in the school, in the world. I could be—what's the word?—*outgoing* like Sylvia. I haven't proven otherwise yet. I'm a blank slate.

I don't know if it's this thought or the way they're staring that makes my mouth open. "Are you twins?"

I cringe at my words. They don't even answer Conn's question. And now today's tally is shot. So much for zero.

"Us?" Fin laughs. "Nah, we're a year apart. I just turned twelve, and he's thirteen. People always say we look alike though."

“But I’m the better-looking one, right?” Conn peers sidelong at me.

I feign interest in my shoelaces. He’s right, but I’m not about to tell him that.

Fin waves a hand. “Ignore Mister Big Head over here. What about you? Any obnoxious siblings?”

I shake my head.

“You’re an only child?” Her eyes widen. “What’s it like? Do your parents buy you everything you want?” She leans forward, her freckles bold.

Conn elbows her.

“What?” She elbows him back. “I’ve always wanted to be an only child. Be spoiled, get all the attention. It must be nice.”

I twist the strings on my sweatshirt. I decide not to tell Fin that I’m a stranger to being spoiled. That she just confirmed my mother’s indifference.

“So, why’d you make the switch to public school?” Conn is looking at me again.

Open-ended questions should be against the law.

“Sorry.” Conn clears his throat. “I know it’s a personal question. You don’t have to—”

“I wanted a change,” I say, surprising myself again.

Four more words. I'm getting farther from zero when I ought to be getting closer. I need to get out of here.

"That's cool. Sounds like us." Fin leans back in her chair. "And your folks were okay with it?"

At least this answer is yes or no. I nod, because nodding won't add to my tally. And nodding is easier than forming words, easier than trying to explain what I still don't understand myself. How I'd been asking for months if I could enroll in public school, how I'd reached a sort of boiling point, sick of longing to be part of Mel's school stories, and even sicker of my mother's halfhearted lessons. But each time I asked, my mother made some remark about how she didn't approve of public schools.

Then that day in July, when she said she was "disappointed" in my latest exam score—88%—my anger flared up. And I made that comment. *You should have had more kids then. Maybe they wouldn't have disappointed you.* It wasn't a fair comeback, I know—my father had obviously died before they could have more kids—but I was seething. She didn't reply. There was that flash in her eyes though. And the next morning, I found her waiting at the kitchen table. *I called Green Pasture,* she said, smoothing out the already-smooth tablecloth. *You'll start September 1st. And I'll finally have more time for other*

things. I stood there in disbelief. I'd gotten what I wanted. But somehow it felt more like a punishment than a conquest.

"You're lucky." Conn shakes his head. "Our folks weren't so easily convinced."

Fin grunts. "They're *still* not convinced. I mean, they only caved because we kept threatening them."

I lift my eyebrows in spite of myself. Conn sits up. "Oh, she just means we threatened to run away. It was part of our protest. And it exploded into this nasty fight."

"A fight we should have had sooner." Fin huffs. "Now it's late in the year, probably too late to join a team. I really wanted to do softball." She turns to me. "Do you think I missed the boat?"

I shake my head. She'll hear about the principal's everybody-has-to-join-one-thing initiative on the intercom. No need for me to tell them too. I eye the door as the itch grows itchier. I'm in risky territory. The longer I stay here, the higher my chances are of being asked more questions, of adding too much to my tally, of saying something regrettable.

"Gotta pee." The lie escapes me. I turn and leave without waiting for a response.

I slip out the door that cuts through the courtyard—if you can even call it a courtyard. It's more like a square of

cracked pavement in the center of the school, with a birch tree and a couple of benches. Whoever named Green Pasture Middle School didn't name it after the courtyard. I don't know *what* they named it after. I walk across the empty square toward the other door. Fin and Conn will probably tell Ms. Standish I ditched them, but that's a price I'll have to pay.

Something whooshes by my neck. I duck and look up. The sky gapes gray. I rub my neck and keep walking.

As I approach the door, leaves on the birch tree rustle. My eyes swivel toward the tree, squinting. It takes me a minute to distinguish leaves from feathers. Then I see it: a bird posted on the highest branch, watching me. It's entirely black, from its bowie knife of a beak down to its stick legs. I blink. More rustling. Then I see only leaves again.

I rub the goose bumps on my arms and hurry inside.