

# THE SIMILARS

I DON'T ACTIVELY want to die. Not all the time.

If it weren't for my father, then sure, I'd consider it. He may not be my favorite person in the world, and I am definitely not his, but I don't relish the thought of him standing at my gravesite, hunched over my coffin, racked with sobs. I only think about dying sometimes—like now.

We're almost at Hades Point. In approximately two minutes and thirty seconds, the black Lorax I'm riding in will carry me past the infamous cliff's edge where, historically, twelve students at my school have plummeted to their deaths. I'm not afraid of the point, but maybe I should be. It's deep—Grand-Canyon deep. A gaping mouth in the ground that swallows kids who can't

handle Darkwood Academy. That's the boarding school I go to in Vermont, where I'm starting my junior year. It's where I spent my first year and sophomore year, too, before *the thing that happened*. But more on that...never.

"Approaching Hades Point!" trills a merry voice, invading my thoughts. You'd think a driverless vehicle would guarantee a person some peace and quiet, but no. When the Lorax picked me up at the Burlington airport two hours ago, the operating system forced me to select a name for its virtual driver. I'd rejected the suggested monikers and typed in one of my own choosing: *Misery*.

"This is *Misery*, your friendly chauffeur!" the voice immediately chirped at me. She hasn't stopped to take a metaphorical breath since.

*Misery* continues her assault on my ears. "If you look to your left, Miss Chance, you'll see we're passing Hades Point, one of the most scenic spots on campus!"

*Sure, Misery*. I take in the precipitous drop as we round the bend. *If by scenic, you mean "deadly."*

I stare at Hades Point laid out in the distance like a casket. I picture them, all twelve students who tumbled over. I've thought about jumping. I've dreamed of flying through the air and knowing my life would soon end. After what happened, who could blame me? Within hours of my best friend's death this summer, I faced an onslaught of emotions so intolerable, I felt like a foreigner in my own mind. Grasping for some semblance of order, I began naming my different moods. Example: "A Zombie Just Ate My Body," which is like being frostbitten and stun-gunned

and about 94 percent dead inside. At least that one is bearable, unlike “Get That Serrated Knife Out of My Chest,” which is as painful as it sounds. I spend entire days walking around with the sensation that somebody stabbed me in the chest and the knife is still inside. Conveniently, there are pills I can take for these afflictions, pharma hybrids that make my life more tolerable. I slinked out of my father’s psychiatrist’s office last month, a prescription tube clutched in my fist.

I slide a pill out of my pocket and swallow it dry, then press my cheek to the cool glass window. Sometimes *feeling things makes you remember you’re alive*. And sometimes that is too much to handle.

As we leave the point behind and embark on the last leg of our journey to Darkwood, I imagine it: *Stopping the car. Stepping out. Walking toward the edge of the point. Closing my eyes as the wind whips me, and then, without any fanfare, letting go. Ending it. Just like Oliver did back home in California. In his room. Where I found him—*

“Approaching Darkwood campus!” Misery’s voice jars me out of the memory. “Established in 1927 by Cornelius Seymour, Darkwood Academy has remained a bastion of intellectual integrity for more than a century—”

“Thank you,” I interrupt, pressing my mother’s ancient tortoise-framed glasses to the bridge of my nose. “I got it.”

“Sorry, Miss Chance. I—!”

“Emmaline,” I interrupt. “But you can call me Emma.”

“Big day, isn’t it, Emma? Back to school! Seeing friends and starting classes. And, of course—the Similar!”

“Sorry.” I shrug. “I’m just not worked up about a couple of DNA copies of some teenage prepsters.”

“But, Miss Chance!” Misery sputters. “Have you been watching the feeds? People haven’t been this excited since astronauts landed on Mars!”

“Dash,” I whisper into my plum, the “everything” device I keep strapped around my wrist so I won’t lose it. “Can we turn her off?”

The voice of my genial virtual assistant rings out from the tiny screen on my wrist. “Your simulated chauffeur cannot be muted,” says Dash. “But if you would like, Emma, I’ll happily report her as spam.”

“That won’t be necessary. But thanks.” I sigh, settling back into my seat and trying to ignore Misery’s never-ending monologue. It’s not like Misery’s wrong. The Similar are *major* news. They’ve been making headlines for weeks, ever since they arrived in the US this summer and it was announced they’d be attending Darkwood Academy, right alongside the kids they were originally cloned from. It’s no wonder the whole country is transfixed. Six students at Darkwood Academy are about to sit in class next to their clones, who share their exact DNA, but who they only recently met for the first time. The old me would have shown more interest in the Similar, would have been buzzing Oliver about it nonstop, eager to hear him dissect each new piece of information about their curious upbringing and unlikely existence. But these days, I only care about one thing: keeping the feeling of the serrated knife at bay.

The Lorax reaches the bottom of a hill and turns onto a gravel road that winds through brush and woods to the center of Darkwood Academy.

“I wonder if you’ll meet them right away?” Misery muses. “Or later, once everyone has settled in their ro—?”

“Can we turn on the feeds?” I interrupt.

“Of course, Emma! I’d like to hear what they’re saying, too!”

“I was actually thinking music might be nice...”

But Misery’s already tuned to a news station and clearly didn’t hear me. I don’t feel like repeating myself, so I settle back in my seat to listen.

“It’s a pleasure to have you with us today,” says a distinguished woman whose image pops up in my view space. She’s nearly three-dimensional, but not quite. “For those in the audience who aren’t acquainted with his work, our guest today is Jaeger Stanwick, the journalist known for his vocal involvement in the pro-clone movement.”

“Happy to be here,” says a familiar voice. In my view space, Jaeger’s figure materializes, looking characteristically disheveled. I recognize him, and not just because he’s made himself famous, or rather, infamous for his views on cloning. Jaeger’s also the father of one of my closest friends at Darkwood: my roommate, Prudence Stanwick. Everyone calls her Pru.

“Can you put this momentous day into perspective for us?” the reporter presses.

“Momentous doesn’t even cover it,” Jaeger says. “The arrival of these six teenagers at Darkwood Academy—”

“The Similar,” the reporter interrupts. “The teens just

released a written statement to the media sharing their nickname for each other with the broader world. ‘The Similar’s’ is what they began calling each other when they first learned the circumstances of their birth.”

Jaeger nods. “I believe these teens wanted to take control of how the world views them. By giving us—and the press—a name to call them rather than allowing us to craft our own, they are signaling that they’re in charge of their own destiny. And they’re doing it with a commendable sense of humor, I might add. But as I was saying...”

“Go ahead—”

“The arrival of these six teenagers at Darkwood is an enormous opportunity.”

“How so?”

“It’s our chance to welcome them into our lives with open arms. To give them the space and respect they deserve, so they may show the world who they are.”

“And that they harbor no evil agendas?” quips the reporter.

Jaeger frowns. “They are boys and girls, just like our children, Demetria. Like every other teenager in America, they have goals and dreams, fears and ambitions. They can be hurt, deeply. They can feel pain, and love—and joy. It’s time the world acknowledged that.”

“Off!” I shout. “Please.” All this talk about the Similar’s is making my head spin.

“Are you finished listening already?” Misery says. “Do you already know everything there is to know about the Similar’s?”

“No,” I say, trying not to let Misery get to me. She’s only

a bot; she can't help it if she's been programmed to be overly eager. "We're here. At Darkwood. See?"

"You're right! So perceptive, Miss Chance."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes as we pull up in front of the main house, a Queen Anne-style manse that looks unbalanced, like it exists on several overlapping planes all at once. As the Lorax inches behind the other cars idling in front of the school, I feel myself tensing. Classmates line the driveway, hugging and gossiping. That would have been me and Oliver. But no more.

The silver car in front of ours stops, and a girl steps out, teetering in high-heeled boots. I instantly recognize her. Tessa Leroy. We aren't friends, but I know all about her—everyone does. Birdlike and petite, Tessa is one of the Ten. She's a year ahead of me, a senior, and her stratum from last year will guarantee her a spot, once again, in that elite group. In spite of her Ten status, no one envies Tessa anymore. Not since the police came knocking on the door of her family's home on Central Park West and arrested her father, Damian Leroy, for fraud.

The Lorax slowly pulls to the front of the line. It's my turn.

"Have a wonderful school year!" Misery calls out as I retrieve my luggage from the trunk. "I'd be bursting to meet the Similar if I were you! I wonder if you'll get one as a roommate. That would be simply—"

I shut the trunk with a *clang* and wheel my bag straight into the throng of students. I pass a girl sporting gorgeous box braids who hoists her cello onto her shoulders, a tenth-grader signing up new members for the on-campus LGBTQ club, and another girl I don't recognize, probably a first year, who is plugging

her bestselling memoir about growing up on the international space station. We haven't even unpacked our bags yet, and kids all around me are already raring to go, advertising auditions for the fall musical, *Hamilton*, and recruiting players for several on-campus sports teams. I'm not the extracurricular type—sports bore me senseless, and I've never been good with musical instruments. But I'm like a bot when it comes to numbers, and in eighth grade I wrote a short story that won a bunch of awards, so here I am. Enrolled at Darkwood Academy. Sure, I'm a legacy—my father went here when he was a teenager more than twenty years ago—but that's not enough to get admitted without something “extra.” Not that I care about any of that showiness. I didn't before Oliver died, and I definitely don't now.

Classmates block me on all sides, so I'm forced to pause in the driveway, unable to make my way to my dorm. Without meaning to, I've stopped next to Tessa, who's conferring with another campus celebrity, Madison Huxley. The two of them are always together, although Madison—with her silky, blond hair and perfectly symmetrical, heavily made-up face—usually outshines her less-outspoken counterpart. Personally, I find Tessa's less-flashy look far more appealing than Madison's. With long, silky hair like her Taiwanese mother's and a certain elegance to her movements, I'd call Tessa beautiful—except her personality seems lacking. I'm surprised to see Madison's parents standing a few feet away, consulting with Headmaster Ransom, Darkwood's fearless leader. Sporting pleated slacks and an elbow-patched smoking jacket, Headmaster Ransom is a likable figurehead, although I see no sign of his trademark smile today. He's all business.



“Mr. and Mrs. Huxley,” I catch Headmaster Ransom saying, “the last thing I want is to upset any of our most prominent families...”

Bianca Huxley smooths her Chanel jacket. “I have never doubted your commitment to Darkwood—not once in all these years. But this time, I’m putting my foot down.”

Headmaster Ransom presses his fingertips together, his eyebrows knit with tension. “I will simply repeat what I told the news outlets: I trust these boys and girls, and I believe they deserve a chance.”

It’s obvious who *they* are: the Similar. Ransom is referring to his decision to invite them to Darkwood, despite the controversial events surrounding their birth.

“Respectfully, we disagree with you, Ransom,” Bob Huxley says tightly. “And if I may speak frankly...”

“Please.” Headmaster Ransom gestures for him to go ahead.

“My wife and I plan to alert the board that we do not approve of your decision,” Mr. Huxley continues. “And we will be adjusting our donation to the school accordingly. I’m afraid there isn’t much you can do to change our minds short of sending those boys and girls back to where they came from.”

“You know I can’t do that. Historically, Darkwood has always placed a great deal of emphasis on inclusion and representation. Students join us here from every socioeconomic background—every race, religion, and sexual orientation. It’s the reason I believe these new students will thrive here, of all places. I won’t change my mind—”

“Then you leave us no choice. Bianca? It’s time to go.”

Mr. Huxley slides a protective arm around his wife, and they turn to leave, kissing Madison goodbye before stepping into their waiting stretch Tesla. Did I mention the Huxleys aren't regular people? Robert "Bob" Huxley used to be vice president—*of the United States*. His wife is taking advantage of his former veep status to run for senator of Texas. Early polls indicate she will win.

"I met her," Madison tells Tessa. "A few weeks ago."

"Who?" Tessa rummages through her bag, looking bored.

"My Similar. I've got one, of course. She came to our house. My parents paid her off and warned her not to show her face—*my face*—ever again."

"So she's not coming to Darkwood?"

"Of course not. If the public found out I had a Similar, it would end my mother's political career."

"So where's she going to go?" Tessa asks, finally looking up from her leather tote.

"Who cares? As long as we never see her again."

That's when Tessa notices me standing there, eavesdropping. She stares at me. Tessa and Madison both do.

I feel a nauseating lurch in my stomach. The serrated-knife feeling starts to throb in my chest. I hightail it out of there, pushing my way through the crowd of students toward Cypress, my dorm. It's just beyond a cluster of trees north of the main house. Once comprised of servants' quarters, Cypress is as gloomy as the rest of Darkwood's architecture, what with its gray stone exterior and polygonal tower that looks crooked, as if it might fall at any moment, taking the entire dormitory down with it.

I drag my bags to my dorm room, then flash my gold key in front of the sensor. The lock chimes open, and I slump inside. My room hasn't changed since I was last here in May. It's not much to look at, but even with its plain Shaker-style furniture and lone window looking out onto the depths of Dark Lake, it feels more like home than my real one. Of course, a big part of that isn't *what's* inside it, but rather *who*. Pru. Friend to everyone. But mostly to me.

She drops the book she's reading and jumps up when she sees me. "Emma—"

I don't let her finish her thought.

"Ugh," I say, depositing my bags next to my bed. "I completely forgot Madison and Tessa are still on the transplant list."

Pru frowns. "Transplant list? What transplant list?"

"You know." I slouch down on my sagging twin mattress. "To receive actual, beating hearts."

Pru cracks a half smile, her brown eyes lighting up. "What have they done now?"

"Besides contributing to climate change every time they open their mouths and breathe out their toxic fumes of elitism? Everything."

I slip off my shoes and am about to flop back onto my bed when Pru's arms are around me, holding me so tight I can barely breathe. I don't have to ask her why she's squeezing me like a lifeline. I already know. She's thinking of *the thing that happened*, and of the 843 things she wants to say to me but can't. It's okay. She already said them, this summer, in a buzz with the subject: "Re: RE: RE: RE: FWD: Oliver."

“You should have let me come to California,” Pru says, finally letting go of me. “I wanted to be at Ollie’s funeral, Emma. I feel awful that I missed it...”

“You had to take care of your mom. She needed you.” There’s no way I would have let Pru leave her mother’s side, not when she’s been decimated by a cancer so rare, even nanobots can’t reverse its effects. “How is she? I haven’t heard from you in two weeks. I was worried when you went dark...” I trail off, not wanting to say the words out loud. *I thought your mom died.*

Pru sweeps a strand of her curly, black hair out of her eyes. “She’s doing okay. They think this latest treatment is going to work.”

“Good,” I say. I’m grateful to Pru; besides Oliver, she’s the one person I can actually stand to be around. Still, I turn away from her, feeling the tears coming hot and fast. The hug from my friend has lodged the serrated knife deep in my chest, and much as I love Pru, all I want is to be alone.

“So tired,” I say, lying back and shutting my eyes. “Must rest.”

“I’ll see you at assembly,” Pru says, as I drape an arm over my eyes for dramatic effect and wait for her to slip out of our room. “And Emma...” she adds, lingering in the doorway. “I’m sorry.”

When I hear the door click shut behind her, I sit up. Sleep is my own personal brand of hell, but Pru has no way of knowing I do almost anything to avoid being unconscious. I never know what, or whom, I might encounter in my dreams.

I slip on my flip-flops and make a beeline for the door, glancing down the hallway to make sure Pru’s gone before heading outside. I hurry down a shady path toward a modest clearing by

the lake. I picture it in my mind as I walk: the rocks big enough to sit on, and the patch of dirt where Oliver and I always convened after our last class of the day. I would tease him for being a flirt, and he'd tell me my sarcasm was going to render me physically incapable of a real smile. I'd shove him, and he'd fall backward... We'd laugh so hard, never imagining our joy would have an expiration date.

Memories of Oliver flood my heart like a vein opening. *Sunlight, gray eyes, floppy bangs, cocky smile, legs, arms, grass, knees, bodies tumbling, minds daydreaming, fifty years, fifty years—I'll be your best friend for fifty more years. And after that? You have to reapply.*

I stop in my tracks as I arrive at our old spot. I'm not alone.

They're ten, fifteen feet away, at most. Their presence—their existence—sends my heart hammering in my chest. I freeze, watching, observing. I don't think they can see me, not yet—but I can see them.

There are three of them, and one is Tessa. Only, I can tell she isn't Tessa. She has the same long, brown hair. The same elegance and fragile features. But her outfit is plain and old-fashioned. She wears a white button-down shirt and a black skirt, both so...*ordinary*, I could never imagine Tessa in them. And her hair—it's pulled back into a french braid, the kind we used to wear in grade school. There's something girlish about her. Something naive. She's a Similar. I'm sure of it.

They talk in hushed tones, and I'm not close enough to make out their words. But I watch as the Tessa Similar addresses another girl. It takes me a moment to process what I'm seeing.

Because the girl the Tessa Similar is talking to isn't simply *any* girl. It's Pru.

No, it's *not* Pru. She was in our room not ten minutes ago, wearing her signature running pants and hoodie. This girl isn't Pru. This girl is her clone, her copy. The Similar standing ten feet from me is willowy and delicate, while my roommate is athletic and lean. Pru's hair is always wild and untamed, while this girl wears her curly locks pulled back in a tight bun. She talks quietly to the others. She doesn't smile.

I shouldn't be surprised that Pru, the daughter of the man who made a name for himself defending clones to the nation, has an identical copy. But I am. Why didn't she tell me? My stomach flips. *Does she even know?* I'm so anxious to find out, I almost buzz her. But this is too big. It can wait a few minutes till I see her in person.

The third Similar is a clone of another boy in my class, Jake Crowe. He has the same black hair as Jake, the same dark skin and attractive face. The same build—not too thin, not too muscular. But the devilish expression Jake has spent years perfecting is nowhere to be seen. This boy's face is full of burden, sacrifice, and hardship.

I feel drawn to them. I want to know what they're talking about in hushed, conspiratorial tones. Less than an hour ago, I had little interest in the Similar. Now, I'm more than interested. My mind spins with questions. I want to know everything about them. Where they grew up. What it was like. What they think of Darkwood—

“Are you feeling all right, Emma?” Dash asks.

“Of course,” I answer softly, relieved he has no way of knowing I’ve been spying on the Similar. I feel like an intruder. As if I’m invading a private moment I have no right to see. “I’m fine,” I fib. “Why?”

“Elevated heart rate. I assume you were thinking about Oliver.”

“Always,” I whisper, my eyes still glued to the clones.

“Assembly starts in ten minutes,” Dash reminds me. “You don’t want to be late.”

“Thanks, Dash,” I say, looking down at my plum to swipe away the notification for the assembly and silence my bot.

By the time I look up from my plum, the Similar is gone.

# ASSEMBLY

ON THE WALK to the chapel, I think of them. Tessa's lookalike. Pru's lookalike. Both of them so *unlike* the teens they were cloned from. And Jake's Similar... He, especially, appeared so markedly different in demeanor from his original just now, it's hard to believe they share the same DNA. I wonder if any of my classmates have spotted them yet, and I wonder what the Similarars were talking about with such secrecy. I don't have much time to think about it before I'm surrounded by students, swept into the throng of Darkwoodians convening on the grassy lawn in front of the chapel. We're minutes from learning the identities of the Similarars.

*But I already know about three of them...four, if you count Madison's clone.*



The thing is, the clones enrolling at Darkwood is a big deal. Most of us have never even met a clone. I haven't—at least, not that I know of. The first clones were born in the early part of the century, when scientists started perfecting the technology after that failed Dolly-the-Sheep experiment. Reproductive cloning got really popular among certain wannabe parents who were more excited about copying themselves than using an egg and sperm to have a kid. I guess a lot of people thought cloning was unnatural, because it was eventually outlawed in the United States. But that hasn't stopped people from seeking out reproductive cloning overseas.

The Similar—they aren't supposed to exist. Because of some lab mix-up sixteen years ago, six babies from six high-profile families were cloned without the families' knowledge or permission, using the umbilical cord blood that had been banked after their births. It's fairly standard for modern parents to store their babies' cord blood, saving it for future use if their child should need it. But in this case, the cord blood somehow got into the hands of an “irresponsible” lab technician. Before anyone knew what was happening, the genetic material from the infants was fused with a human egg cell and implanted in surrogate mothers, and voilà—nine months later, six bouncing babies were born. Six “Similar,” as they call themselves.

The details came together when the Similar showed up this summer. They'd lived their whole lives up north on some kind of secluded, man-made island, and for some inexplicable reason, they'd been sent by the man who raised them to meet their DNA parents...and their “originals.” Since the Similar are

minors, their identities haven't been disclosed to the public, so nobody knows their names or who their originals are—except their DNA families.

And if all that seems out of the ordinary, here's the wildest part. All six of the original kids are Darkwood students. Which is why the Similar were invited to attend Darkwood Academy. I guess because it's their birthright. But also because Darkwood is progressive. If there's any place the Similar could feel welcome, it should be here, where the administration has focused on inclusion since the school's inception. But who knows. I'm only a junior. I don't really have all the info.

I'm jolted out of my thoughts when I spot him—the real Jake Crowe. He's surrounded by his clique, which includes Madison, Tessa, and Jake's roommate, Archer de Leon. Archer, with his winning smile, brown skin, and famously photographed dark locks, hails from sunny Los Angeles and is practically Hollywood royalty. He was a child actor on a successful show I never watched, but I hear it was solidly mediocre.

“Emma!” a voice calls out over the din of my classmates. I spot Pru across the way, waving at me. She pushes against the flow of traffic to get to me, and for a moment, I wonder if this is what life will be like from now on. The people who care about me constantly worrying that I need babysitting. Wondering if Oliver's death has broken me beyond repair. They wouldn't exactly be wrong.

Pru arrives at my side, and I can't help but feel a strange sense of *déjà vu*. “I saw her,” I blurt.

“Who?” Pru asks.

“Your Similar, who else? The jig is up, Pru. She was by the lake just now. I saw her. I know.”

“I wanted to tell you, Emma. I swear I did! But the note from the Similar’s guardian asked us not to reveal their identities before—”

“I’m not mad! Well, maybe a tiny bit. But start talking. I’m dying to know all the details.”

Pru smiles. “Thanks for not hating me. It’s the hardest secret I’ve ever kept, especially from you.”

“So what’s her deal? What’s her *name*?” I ask as we inch our way toward the chapel lobby, following the forward motion of the crowd.

“Her name’s Pippa,” Pru tells me. “And she spent the last two weeks with us on the farm.”

“Two *weeks*?”

“Sorry,” Pru says sheepishly. “It was torture not buzzing you. I had to stash my plum in the freezer so I wouldn’t call you.”

“So *that’s* why I haven’t heard from you in forever!”

Pru looks sheepish. “I know! I’m sorry!” She pauses. “Pippa’s great, Emma. I really like her, and I think you will too.”

“You have the same DNA.” I shrug. “She’s like, *literally* you. Of course I’ll love her. It would practically be sacrilege if I didn’t.” A couple of teachers begin directing us into a sloppy line. They hold pen-sized scanners that they pass over the plums of the girls in front of us.

“Ms. Chance? Ms. Stanwick? Your devices?” asks Mr. Park, our genial, stubbly-faced American history teacher. I hold out my wrist so he can pass his scanner over my plum, rendering it useless

for anything but buzzing across the campus system and sending messages to my father, and a few other preapproved contacts. No social media, no live streaming. No one in the country knows names of the Similar, and we've been told the administration plans to keep it that way. Even the press has been forced to stay silent when it comes to the Similar's identities, due to strict laws protecting minors' privacy. They're just kids, after all. They didn't *ask* to be cloned from someone else's DNA. They didn't ask to be thrust into the public eye. It's only fair to respect their privacy.

"Say goodbye to the cloud for the next nine months," a voice quips behind us. I turn to see Tessa. She's with Madison. They're directly behind us.

"It's like they're stalking us," I mumble to Pru.

Thankfully Madison hasn't heard me, or if she has, she's ignoring me. "They can't do this," she whines. "My channel has a million fans. Who's going to entertain them while I'm gone?"

Pru whips around to face Madison and crosses her arms over her chest. "I, for one, am more than happy to relinquish my live buzzing abilities if it means a little privacy for our new classmates."

Tessa stares at Pru. "You're taking their side already?"

"She's not taking sides," I interrupt. "She's *complying* with the request of our *headmaster*—"

"Ms. Huxley? Ms. Leroy? Your plums?" Mr. Park prods.

Madison scowls, tugging her plum off her wrist and hurling it at Mr. Park's feet. I don't even bother to respond, and neither does Pru. She links her arm through mine and steers us into the chapel.

“I know it’s weird,” Pru says as we find seats. “She looks exactly like me. I get it. I was freaked out when I first met her. But really, she’s a regular person, just like us.”

“Define ‘regular,’” I mumble, watching as more and more students stream in, the ninth graders all convening in the front rows. Two years ago, I sat next to Oliver in one of those pews on my first day at Darkwood. He’d been my best friend since the third grade when we’d become inseparable within a few weeks of meeting each other. Oliver and I had applied to Darkwood at the same time, had both been accepted, and made the trek from Northern California to start our first year year together. Back then, I’d been certain that my life was finally beginning. I had no idea that it was the beginning—of the end.

“She wasn’t alone,” I whisper to Pru. “I saw two of the others. A clone of Tessa and one of Jake. What about the other three? Do you know who they are?” I don’t bring up Madison’s clone. Who knows if it’s even true. She may have made the whole thing up to impress Tessa.

Pru shakes her head. “We got a letter two months ago telling us about Pippa. My parents couldn’t believe it, really. We’d heard all the news stories about the Similar—the reports about the lab mix-up, the whole deal. Except we never imagined one of them was a clone of *me*. When we found out, my parents invited her to the farm. Then Pippa showed up at our house two weeks ago. Alone.”

“She didn’t tell you who the other Similar are? She grew up with them, didn’t she?” I press, as Headmaster Ransom makes his way to the podium.

Pru shrugs. “She was so nervous meeting us, I didn’t want to pry.”

“Welcome back, Darkwoodians,” Headmaster Ransom’s voice bellows from behind the podium. “I’m thrilled you’re all here.” He smiles out at us, looking like he’s in a far better mood than when I saw him talking to the Huxleys. I wonder how trying this day has been for him. After all, he personally endorsed the Similar, inviting them to Darkwood despite the controversy surrounding their birth.

Headmaster Ransom continues his speech. “Whether you’re a returning student or beginning your Darkwood career: Welcome. You are all here because you are exceedingly intelligent. And you are talented in many ways. Our student body includes world-class athletes, classical musicians, published novelists, and even a successful Hollywood actor.”

As if on cue, Archer stands up and gives a little bow. “Happy to represent the school, sir,” he says, before popping back into his seat. The student body breaks into applause and chuckles, amused by Archer’s bravado. Then the hush settles over us again.

“Some of you come from families who have populated our halls for generations. Your great-great-grandfathers and great-great-grandmothers may have walked these corridors with pride, and now you have that same honor and privilege. You have the opportunity to live up to their expectations. Or, should I say, exceed them. Goodness knows that the bulk of you will try.”

The smile disappears from Ransom’s lips. “Returning students, you know that in order to thrive at Darkwood, you must not let your talents lie dormant. You must achieve. You must

succeed. You must transcend.” I nod along, anticipation stirring inside me, in spite of myself. I can’t deny Ransom’s hit the core of what matters to him, and to all of us.

“I’m aware that today is important, and that you are all anxious for me to continue with the rest of our program. But before I do, it would be unwise of me to gloss over the implications of this tremendous day in both our school’s and our nation’s history.”

Ransom pauses, and I can feel everyone around me sitting up a tad bit straighter. We aren’t eager to hear what he has to say; we are hungry.

“The six upperclassman joining our junior class today are highly intelligent, talented individuals like you. Do not doubt that they have met Darkwood’s standards for admission with flying colors. The fact that these students have come from a different background than your own and that their existence is a scientific phenomenon of sorts has no bearing on how they are to be treated at this school. They deserve every consideration and respect when it comes to their safety and privacy. The media has agreed to keep their identities confidential until they are eighteen, unless they choose to speak out before then. If anyone at Darkwood reveals the identities of these students in any public way, it will be grounds for immediate expulsion. Additionally, there will be serious legal ramifications.”

A collective breath is taken. Ransom is asking us to protect the Similar against the outside world.

“We will now begin the key ceremony,” Ransom says. “Mr. Park?”

Mr. Park skitters up to the podium, holding a cigar box.

The box is closed, its shiny chrome lock tightly fastened, but I know what's inside: six keys, gold in color and old-fashioned, like the ones that used to unlock the doors in Darkwood's rooms centuries ago. My hand flies to my own neck, where a cord is looped around a key like the ones in the box. Programmed to open Cypress's front door and my dorm room, my key is read by a sensor embedded in the doorknob, verifying my identity through contact with my skin. Keys are presented to each new Darkwood student on the first day of school, along with an ominous warning. They aren't replaceable.

"In this box are six keys to the school," Ransom explains. "Each one belongs to a new member of the Darkwood junior class. You're all undoubtedly aware that transfer students to Darkwood, while uncommon, are not unheard of. However, six new eleventh graders in one year is quite a record, one that's required some creativity on the part of our housing committee. But don't worry, none of you have been assigned to bunk in the outhouses," Headmaster Ransom adds, eliciting light laughter from the student body. Mr. Park opens the box, revealing the six keys. "First years, you will receive your keys immediately following this assembly, so kindly stay in your seats. When you do receive your key, place it around your neck and do not remove it for the first twelve hours, giving the software time to initialize. And now, the first key."

Pru reaches out and grabs my hand, pressing her nails into my palm as she squeezes. I can't tell if she's excited or nervous for Pippa, or simply acknowledging how significant the moment is.

"Welcome to Darkwood, Jago Gravelle. Please come forward



to accept your key.” Three hundred and fifty-seven necks crane to watch as the first Similar steps out from the very front pew in the chapel. That must be where the clones are sitting.

The boy approaches Headmaster Ransom. It’s Jake’s Similar who I saw by the lake—the boy with the black hair and the burdened expression. I hear stifled laughter coming from the pew where the original Jake sits. His friends nudge him, elbowing him in the side, no doubt. I can’t see Jake’s face. I wonder if he’s wearing his usual smile, and if so, how forced that smile is.

Jago shakes Ransom’s hand, then bends down so Mr. Park can loop the cord with his key around his neck. I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. *You knew about the Jake Similar. You were expecting this Jago boy.*

“Jago Gravelle,” Ransom continues. “Repeat after me. ‘I pledge my allegiance to Darkwood Academy. I vow to uphold the school’s four founding tenets: Loyalty. Excellence. Inclusion. Identity.’”

Jago repeats the pledge with confidence. As soon as he’s done, the student body erupts in applause and chatter.

“He has a British accent?” I murmur.

Pru nods. “So does Pippa. I guess they all do. Hers is charming, but Jago’s is kind of hot, right?”

I definitely wasn’t expecting the accent. *But of course, he wasn’t raised in America. He grew up on some secluded island out in the middle of the ocean.* It makes sense that he doesn’t sound like the rest of us.

Next, Headmaster Ransom introduces Tessa’s Similar, and

I make a mental note of the fact that while all the Similar are juniors, the originals, so far, are a mix between seniors and one junior—Pru. Must be because of the way their birthdays fall and the fact that all the Similar are at least nine months younger than their originals. Pru’s birthday is in October, so that explains how her clone is a junior and not a sophomore. I bet the clone’s birthday is around July. “Welcome to Darkwood, Theodora Gravelle,” Ransom says. The girl she walks forward, hesitant, like she isn’t comfortable in her own skin. On instinct, I seek out Tessa. I locate her three rows in front of me. Madison sits next to her, whispering in her ear. I wonder if Madison’s angry that Tessa didn’t mention her Similar this morning when they met in the driveway of the school.

Theodora Gravelle repeats the pledge and accepts her key, returning to her pew as unceremoniously as she came. The chapel is no longer hushed. Students can’t help whispering. A Jake Similar. A Tessa. *Who else?*

“Their names start with the same first letter,” Pru whispers. “Did you notice? Tessa and Theodora. Jake and Jago. Prudence and Pippa. I thought ours was a coincidence, but now...it’s like somebody planned it that way.”

I hadn’t noticed, but she’s right. The person who named the Similar—whoever that was—must have wanted them to have another tie to who they came from. Who they were *copied* from. Even their names are a reminder that they share DNA with another person.

Speaking of Pippa, Headmaster Ransom introduces Pru’s Similar—Pippa Gravelle.

“I know she’s your clone, but I’m still amazed by how much she looks like you,” I say, a little awed.

“If I bothered to wear makeup or brush my hair,” jokes Pru. She offers her Similar a thumbs-up and a wave.

Next up is Similar number four, a replica of Archer de Leon. As Archer’s Similar inches his way up to the podium, I catch sight of Archer’s friends clapping him on the back, which strikes me as odd. Archer didn’t *do* anything to become the DNA sample for another person, but that’s nothing new. Archer gets accolades in life for simply existing.

Archer’s Similar is named Ansel, and though he has his original’s good looks, that’s where the resemblance stops. Ansel shuffles awkwardly to stand next to Mr. Park. He turns his back to us as he recites the Darkwood pledge, which he mumbles so softly we can’t hear a word of it. He’s clearly shy, or at least suffering from stage fright. Either way, it doesn’t help that most of the girls in the chapel are giggling at the sight of him. I’m not surprised. Even America’s brightest female students get weak-kneed in Archer’s presence. Why would it be any different with Ansel, who’s equally handsome, albeit slightly awkward?

Headmaster Ransom introduces the next Similar, and I squint to get a better look. Blond hair. A familiar, symmetrical face... It’s Madison, only not. So Madison was telling the truth. She has a clone. But didn’t Madison say her Similar wasn’t coming to Darkwood? That her family had paid the Similar to stay away, because if she attended this school and the public found out about it, it would be political suicide for Mrs. Huxley? Then again, Ransom said he’d be introducing six Similar to the

school, not five. From the looks of things, Madison's clone has matriculated at Darkwood after all.

I turn to stare at Madison the original and catch the betrayed look on her face. Madison jumps to her feet. Tessa grabs her by the arm, pulling her back down to their pew. My gaze returns to Madison the clone. Headmaster Ransom introduces her as Maude, and although she wears Madison's same tight-lipped expression, her eyes—they're different. Hollow. Almost wounded. Yet she has a fierce and determined stance. When Maude takes her oath, she's confident. She doesn't smile, not even a little.

Pru whistles through her teeth. "I feel bad for her. Maude probably had no idea that her original is, well, kind of a bitch."

Maude leans down to accept her key, and I wonder what it must be like to be her. What must it be like to be any of these clones, their very existence an experiment, only to be deposited here at Darkwood for what can only be described as a strange social experiment in itself?

"And now," Headmaster Ransom continues, "our final new student. Welcome to Darkwood Academy, Levi Gravelle. Please come forward to accept your key."

"Where is he?" Pru murmurs. We crane our necks to get a better view of the figure moving toward the podium. I can't make out much from this angle. Nothing about his size or stature jumps out as being remarkable. He's about average height and has longish hair, which covers what I can see of his face. I squint to get a glimpse of his features when Pru tenses beside me. She grabs my arm and squeezes hard—too hard.

“Ow,” I whisper, turning to look at her. “Why are you...?”

She looks shocked. Stunned. Like she’s seen a ghost. I turn back to the front, confused.

The boy leans down, accepting the key that Mr. Park is placing around his neck. I can’t make out which student he’s a copy of. Brown hair, medium build—he could be a clone of any number of boys in the junior or senior class. It isn’t until he straightens that I see his face.

And it’s Oliver’s.