

Chapter 1

THE NEW GIRL

You're going to die today is sprawled over the mirror in KMIY hot pink lipstick.

With smeared lip marks over the glass.

Classy.

I huff, throwing my makeup bag onto the porcelain bowl and gathering paper towels to clean the words away.

What a waste of good lipstick, I think bitterly when the letters refuse to wipe off.

One of the junior girls leaves the bathroom stall, shooting me a bemused look without even stopping to wash her hands.

I sneer at her retreating figure, collecting more paper towels and soap.

It takes five minutes, but the words someone wrote as a Halloween prank the night before are finally gone, allowing me to stare at my frazzled reflection.

I like to call my skin off-brown, on account of my dark father and pale mother. My coarse, raven feather hair falls in uneven, brittle wisps between my shoulder and mid-back. I'm not in crop top or booty short jammies—like the girl from earlier. I look like I'm about to fly away with Peter Pan in my white nightgown, complete with an embarrassing pink ribbon along the collar.

I stare hatefully at the image reflected before me.

Admit it. You don't belong here.

Anyone with half a brain could tell that, I argue, glancing at the blond slipping into the shower behind me.

“Hey, you don’t belong here,” the girl says, pausing and squinting at me through the steamy haze filling the locker room.

“Excuse me?” I huff, flushing self-consciously, wondering if she can read my mind.

There’s no such thing as mind readers.

Just like the only people who see things are crazy, right?

“You’re the new kid?” The girl clarified. Highlighter pink framed the front of her snow-blond hair.

New kid. That was an understatement. My big sister, Audrey, dropped me in the middle of Nowhere, Oregon, last night. I’ve barely spent eight hours in the second-rate Henrietta G. Hilton Preparatory Academy and Boarding School.

I haven’t even had a meal, yet.

“That’s me,” I say, forcing something akin to cheerfulness into my voice.

“Oh, right on. I heard your dad knows Taylor Swift. Do you get, like, free tickets?”

My dad. Joshua G. He was a member of the early two-thousands country band, *Texas Toast*. Back in his heyday, he was lucky enough to open for Swift when she started out. Right before he had kids and his music career turned downhill.

Until this summer, he produced jingles for commercial ads in the beautiful Carmel-by-the-Sea, California.

A place that I desperately ache to return to.

But I’m trapped, because just after school began, dad decided to go on tour and revive his country career.

My mom is a seasoned veteran on an eleven-season drama filming in Canada, and Audrey's in her second year at the San Fran Academy of Arts. All the adults in my life agreed I couldn't be trusted alone for weeks at a time, so off I went to the cheapest boarding school they could find.

In Nowhere, Oregon. At least, that's what I call it. I'm not even sure where I am, other than close to Mount Hood.

"No," I say, noting the girl's conservative banana pajamas and fuzzy bunny slippers. Good. I'm not the only one dressed like a dork.

"That's cool. I'm more of a *Hearts' Blood Flow* kinda gal. My heart belongs to Zade Havenly."

The girl sighs dramatically, falling against the shower curtain.

The only thing I know about the band is that they're *My Chemical Romance* meets *Panic! At the Disco* for Gen Z. At least, that's what Audrey says.

"Good luck with that," I state, returning to my reflection and working up the nerve to do something with my rat's nest hair.

The blond cocks her head to the side in the mirror behind me.

"Your aura is all over the place. What ruined your day so early in the morning?"

I stiffen, tightening my grip on the makeup bag.

"Oh!" The blond continues with an understanding bob of her head. "They saddled you with Avril Bennett, didn't they? She's kind of used to having the room to herself."

That was an understatement. My roommate burst into the room at five a.m. after a night partying in someone's dorm, turned on the light, and made plenty of noise as she puked into *my* trash can.

I wasn't getting any sleep after that.

"Why are you up so early?" I counter, turning again to face the stranger.

"Breakfast duty," the girl chimes, hugging the shower wall for support as she's half-in, half-out. "Last day, thank Odin. The duty schedule changes tomorrow. See ya in the lunch line!"

She dramatically swings the curtain shut, peeling her pajamas off and over the curtain as if she's the skinned banana featured on her pajamas combo.

The blond has the nerve to sing—off key—as she showers.

I hurry through brushing my teeth and dragging my locks into a ponytail before the weird girl can finish up and talk to me again.

I feel the fool once more on my march down to the cafeteria. I'm wearing the school uniform—a knee-length pleated black skirt, a red Peter Pan blouse (one of three acceptable colors), and an ebony blazer with the school's insignia—a sharp red rose—on the breast. Supposedly, the school is famous for its rose gardens. I also had on the stands-issue too-long black socks and gaudy loafers.

Except, apparently, the weekends are dress casual. I'm the only nerd in the dress code.

I debate changing again, but I don't want to face the wrath of Avril again, so I endure the odd looks as I follow the traffic flow.

Until I run into someone. Literally.

He steadies me before either of us can sway from the collision.

"Sorry," I mutter, my eye catching on a tattoo at his wrist. "That's cool," I start, lifting my head up. And up, and...

His height quickly replaces my interest in his tattoo. “*Wow*, you’re tall. Tell me you play basketball.”

He chuckles, his palms lingering on my arms and giving me the happy goosebumps.

I have to bend my head back just to see his face. He’s Hispanic, with inky black bubble eyes that remind me of a fish. His dark hair is cut in a fade with lightning bolts on either side of his temples. He isn’t disgustingly handsome, until he smiles. It’s a genuine, carefree grin that takes up his whole face, and makes mine heat.

“My bad,” he says, his voice just as deep as I expect. The British accent, though, I was *not* prepared for. My heart gives a little swoon at the lilt. “Let me make it up to you. Heading to the caf?”

“Yea,” I say, finally moving back. “But I can find it myself.”

That smile fades a little. “You don’t want me to show you?”

He sounds genuinely befuddled, which is a weird reaction. Who cares if the new kid doesn’t want a tour.

Still, it’s a fair reaction. Who turns down an offer to be shown around by a cute guy?

No one. Yet, I do. And I follow up lamely with, “I’ll just follow the smell of bacon. Thanks for the offer, though.”

I hightail it out of there without even a look back.

What’s wrong with me? I wonder as I move through the double doors at the end of the hall. The ones that everyone else shuffles through.

Of course, I know the answer. But I won’t think about that now. Hilton is a fresh start.

The next time I see him, I’ll be more sociable.

I slow once inside the cafeteria. A mediocre Best Western-style buffet is down the center of the room, with two stations serving hot food along the front wall. Blondie's behind one station, turning her tongs into an air guitar and rocking out to Bon Jovi until the instructor on duty comes over and turns the speaker off.

Someone bumps my elbow as I stand there. The stranger mutters a quick apology before stalking toward the food.

At first, I think it's a girl—on account of the curly shoulder-length sun-bleached hair. But then I catch sight of the telltale manly shoulders, and any further questions about gender go out the window.

He moves with an all-important stride. Straight for Blondie.

“Where's your roommate?” he demands.

Everyone around me seems unfazed by the interaction, as if this is the standard way for one student to address another.

Blondie shrugs as I inch closer.

“I know she's responsible for the disaster in my room this morning,” he snapped.

I shift to the line, trying not to appear nosy, where I catch a look at his face. I'm used to seeing good-looking guys in Carmel. But I didn't expect to see such a hottie in *Nowhere*.

My cheeks warm, and I adjust my glasses.

The only thing off about his looks is the jagged scar cutting from his hairline, across his left temple. I barely glimpse it when he tosses his hair out of his face.

“If she was, I'd have to ask what she was doing in your room? Dorm policy says no co-ed mingling in bedrooms.”

“You can't read Hamlet, but now you're a master in school policy?”

“A bunch of dudes killing each other with swords? Sausage snore fest. But I try to make it my business to know who sneaks into whose room for nightly entanglements. Sadly, my boring old roommate was happily snoring. All. Night. Long.”

The girl’s green eyes glimmer with satisfaction as she leans closer to the protective glass blocking her from the boy.

“Did you try asking Hallie? Maybe she did something on her way out?”

He growls. *Growls*, like a wild animal that belongs running through the forests of Washington instead of in a college prep school.

“Listen up, Douglas, you tell Reema—.”

“Can’t talk!” The blond squeaks, turning to me and smiling. “People to serve and all. Take up any issues you have with the RA, Cody. I’m sure E is *happy* to handle them.”

The boy—Cody—shoots me a dark look before storming away. I watch his brooding shoulders carry him out of the cafeteria.

“We meet again,” Blondie says, beckoning me forward. “I got pancakes and hash browns.”

Both sound disgusting, but I opt for the hash browns.

“You want to know what that was all about,” Cat states, humming to herself as she scoops the salty-looking potatoes.

“Umm.”

“Cody and Reema had issues since day one. A real ‘rivals to *not* lovers’ story, ya know? It’s tragic. So much wasted potential.”

At her prompting, I hold out my plate, watching the globule of fried food slide *slowly* onto it. Any appetite I have instantly vanishes.

“He’s always so convinced it’s Reema ruining his life.” Cat rolls those emerald eyes. “Reema doesn’t have the nerve to put him in his place when he’s being a dick. *Moi*, on the other hand...”

She gives a wild laugh. It’s just enough on the side of the cackling old witch for me to take an uncomfortable step back.

“Not that he can prove anything, right?”

Blondie winks, her lips curving like the Cheshire Cat.

“Name’s Cat, by the way,” she adds. Again, it feels like she’s following my every thought. I shift. “Cat Douglas.”

A gloved palm passes under the barrier, where food is supposed to be exchanged. I eye it for a second.

Well, if I’m going to have an ally in this new place, it wouldn’t hurt to have a crazy one. At least it will keep things interesting.

“Ginger Harper.”

Our fingers met. My breath vanishes as my palm grows instantly cold, like I plunged my fingers into an ice bath. A quick glance at the rest of the cafeteria shows slick ice covering every surface. The figures stand frozen, the curling condensation about their lips the only sign they’re still breathing.

Then I blink, and everything’s normal.

Not again.

I jerk my hand back with ferocity, almost toppling my plate in the process.

Cat clucks the roof of her mouth. “I thought as much,” she says absently.

“Thought what?” I demand, fighting the urge to cross my arms over my chest like a defiant child.

Cat cocks her head like she did that morning, contemplating.

“Dog-face, let’s go,” the boy beside me snaps. I glance at his One-Piece tee and baggy shorts, startled to hear anyone refer to Cat as “dog-face.” Despite the blond’s questionable fashion sense and petite size, she could be a model if she wanted to.

“Keep it in your pants, Reeves. I’ll get to you.”

“You wish.”

“The only wish I have involving you requires a nutcracker.”

“How can I keep it in my pants when you so clearly want it out?”

“Oh gross,” Cat gags, shooting me ‘save me’ eyes. She slides pancakes onto his plate and gestures for him to move down the line.

Cat shakes her head. “I thought middle school boys were bad, but the high schoolers are so much worse. There are no boundaries.”

I nod, my thoughts distracted. “Thanks for the food.”

“Sure, anytime. Come see me whenever you find you need someone...like you.”

“Like me?” I wonder, casting her a skeptical eye. There’s no one like me. No other weird-I’d who see things that aren’t there. Things that are going to happen.

Well, not without getting locked up.

Cat doesn’t respond, but her green gaze grows serious as she stares me down. As if she’s trying to communicate something.

I force a nervous laugh, then hightail it down the line before Cat can creep me out anymore.

Cat kicks the bedroom door closed, peels off her sweatshirt, and collapses into her dragon bedsheets with a pathetic moan.

“That bad?” Reema Zerelli wonders, her back hunched over a history book.

“Saturday breakfast is the worst,” Cat mutters through her sheets.

Her roommate gives a light chuckle.

“Cody’s mad at you, BTWs. Thinks you put peanut butter in his sheets last night in retaliation for him stealing your clothes from the dryer on Wednesday.”

“Why would I—?” Reema turns, her feminine profile catching in the light of her desk lamp. Her confusion instantly fades to disappointment. “Cat—.”

“Payback’s a witch, Zerelli,” Cat states, turning over with an excited gasp. “And speaking of witches, there’s another one.”

Reema swivels her chair all the way around to study her friend.

If Cat was daylight, Reema was crowning dusk. Chestnut brown hair spills down her back from its constricting ponytail. She’s bathed in a lightly tanned glow that will pale once winter sets in. Reema’s a tall five-nine, while Cat barely reaches five-four. Cat’s outgoing, while Reema prefers solitude.

They’re an absolute clash of cultures and personalities. But one thing brings them together.

They’re witches. And, if Cat’s to be believed, another is in their midst.