

# Chapter One

The small gust of wind hit Freya Drayke's face as the black SUV rolled through the iron gates of Blackthorn University, nestled just outside the quiet town of Ravenwood. The late afternoon sunlight painted everything in a warm golden hue, casting long shadows across the redbrick buildings and dew-slicked sidewalks. The campus looked like something from a catalog, charming, old, and slightly imposing. Towering oaks lined the main path, their leaves already turning with the early signs of fall.

Freya sat in the passenger seat, her hands resting tightly on her backpack. The sun flashed through the windshield, momentarily blinding her. She squinted, reaching up to brush a few loose strands of dark, wavy hair from her face. The wind had picked up again, teasing the strands against the headrest.

"You ready?" Lisa asked from the driver's seat, her voice soft but bright. She glanced over with that familiar, knowing smile that had comforted Freya for over a decade.

Freya let out a slow breath. Her fingers curled around the strap of her bag like it was a lifeline. "Yes, Mama."

Lisa gave a small nod and turned the wheel, pulling the SUV into a spot in front of a tall dormitory building covered in ivy. Students and parents bustled

around them, hauling boxes, hugging goodbyes, snapping photos. There was laughter, the occasional car horn, the sharp bark of a dog someone had snuck into campus. It was chaos with a smile on it.

The rain from earlier that morning had stopped just in time. The pavement still shimmered with moisture, reflecting patches of sun as Freya stepped out of the car. She stood there for a moment, stretching her legs, inhaling the crisp air. A hint of petrichor clung to everything, the earthy scent grounding her more than she expected.

Lisa was already moving, opening the trunk and reaching for bags. “You sure you didn’t forget anything? Toothbrush, charger, your notebooks?”

“I’m sure,” Freya replied, managing a small smile as she took her duffel bag.

“You said that last time we went on a trip and forgot your headphones.”

“That was one time.”

Daniel, her adoptive father, walked around from the other side of the car, arms crossed, scanning the crowd like a bodyguard. He wore that unreadable expression he always defaulted to when emotions threatened to bubble too close to the surface.

“It’s a big step,” he said, voice even. “You call us if you need anything. Doesn’t matter if it’s midnight or 4 AM.”

Freya nodded, the lump forming again in her throat.

Lisa shut the trunk and stepped forward, her eyes already glossy. She wrapped her arms around Freya and didn't let go.

"I know you want to be independent," she murmured, her voice muffled against Freya's hair. "But you'll always have a home with us, okay? Always."

Freya closed her eyes for a second, just breathing it in. "I know," she whispered, hugging her back just as tight. "Thank you... for everything."

Lisa sniffled and stepped back, pretending to busy herself with fixing Freya's collar. "Okay. You're gonna be amazing. Just don't hide in your room all the time. And eat real food."

Daniel stepped forward next, offering no hug, just a strong hand on her shoulder and a look that said more than words ever could.

"Be smart. Be safe. Don't do anything stupid."

Freya cracked a smile. "Define stupid."

He narrowed his eyes. "You'll know it when you're about to do it. And then don't."

She laughed under her breath and nodded.

Behind them, a tall boy dropped a box of something loud, plates maybe, and cursed under his breath. Two girls walked past in matching hoodies, deep in conversation about a TA they hoped was "hot and also, like, chill." Freya looked around at all of it:

the faces, the voices, the sprawling unknown ahead of her.

Lisa reached into her purse and pulled out a small white envelope. “Almost forgot. It’s nothing big, just a little note. Read it when you’re settled in.”

Freya took it, running her thumb over her name written in Lisa’s looping handwriting. She tucked it carefully into her hoodie pocket.

“Thanks, Mama.”

Lisa nodded, eyes misty again. Daniel checked his watch like he was trying to find something else to focus on.

“We should let you go,” he said.

“Yeah.” Freya adjusted her bag again. “I’ll text you tonight.”

“We’ll be waiting,” Lisa said, her voice trembling just a bit.

She watched them get back into the SUV, the engine purring to life. Lisa waved through the window, and Freya lifted her hand, waving back slowly, holding it there until the car turned the corner and was gone.

And just like that, she was alone.

Freya stood still for a beat, letting the silence settle around her. The campus suddenly felt bigger, louder, more real. She reached into her pocket and brushed her fingers against the envelope again. Then she adjusted the strap on her shoulder, squared her stance, and turned toward the dorm.

Freya slung her bag over her shoulder and started walking. The campus was alive with students hauling suitcases, chatting excitedly, and parents giving last-minute advice. The scent of fresh rain mixed with the aroma of coffee from a nearby café, and the hum of laughter and chatter filled the air.

As she neared the entrance, she adjusted the weight of her bags, taking in her new surroundings. The large brick dormitory loomed ahead, its ivycovered walls giving it an old, almost timeless feel. A few students were already sitting on the steps, laughing and scrolling through their phones.

Freya had never stayed in one place for too long before Lisa and Daniel adopted her. Before them, it had been a cycle of different foster homes, different faces, different rules. It wasn't until she turned eight that she found stability, a place where she belonged. And yet, even now, there was always that small voice inside her, wondering where she really came from.

She climbed the steps, adjusting her duffel bag on her shoulder, pushing those thoughts aside. This was a new beginning. A chance to figure out who she was beyond her past.

Reaching for the door handle, she took one final deep breath and stepped inside.

The scent of fresh paint and floor polish filled her nostrils as she entered the dormitory. The wide hallway stretched before her, lined with numbered doors and bustling with students greeting their new roommates. Posters announcing upcoming campus events were pinned to a corkboard on the far wall, and

a faint hum of music and chatter echoed through the halls.

Freya pulled out her phone, unlocking the screen to check the dorm instructions she had received via email. Room 217. She glanced up, spotting the directory sign near the entrance, her room was on the second floor. Tightening her grip on her bag, she maneuvered through the hallway, dodging students carrying boxes and duffel bags.

As Freya climbed the narrow dormitory stairs, the low hum of conversation echoed around her, doors opening and closing, voices bouncing off the concrete walls, laughter spilling from somewhere down the hall. The scent of old paint, fresh carpet, and someone's microwaved noodles clung to the air. She took each step slowly, trying not to let her nerves get ahead of her feet.

She'd done this before. The arrival, the unknown. Moving from one foster home to another, years of bags packed and unpacked in unfamiliar bedrooms. But this was different. No one was telling her where to go this time. No caseworker, no warnings about temporary stays. This was hers. Her room, her path, her new beginning.

She reached the second floor, the metal stairs groaning behind her. A long hallway stretched out ahead, fluorescent lights buzzing faintly overhead. She glanced at the numbers on the doors as she passed. 213. 215. Her fingers tightened around the strap of her duffel bag as she stopped in front of 217.

Her heart picked up. Not fear exactly, but something close to it. That feeling before the first page of a new book, when anything could happen. She hesitated for just a second before wrapping her hand around the handle and pushing the door open.

The dorm room was larger than she expected, basic but clean, with white cinderblock walls and polished floors that still smelled faintly of disinfectant. Two twin beds sat opposite each other, each with its own desk and chair, and a shared closet tucked into the back corner.

One side was already claimed.

Fairy lights were strung carefully along the bed frame, casting a soft, cozy glow. A collage of printed Polaroids had been tacked onto the wall in a perfect grid, smiling faces and sunny vacations, sunhats and Starbucks cups. A neatly folded pink comforter, monogrammed throw pillows, and a designer tote bag completed the look.

Freya barely had time to register the scene when a girl spun around in her desk chair, curls bouncing like springs.

“Oh my God, you must be Freya!” she squealed, leaping to her feet with the energy of a puppy let off leash. She crossed the room in two excited steps and threw her arms around Freya before she could react.

Freya tensed automatically, overwhelmed by the sudden contact and the blast of vanilla perfume that hit her like a soft punch.

“I’m Margaret, your roommate!” the girl said as she stepped back, beaming. Her blue eyes sparkled. “I was seriously freaking out about who I’d get paired with, but you look totally cool. This is going to be epic.” Freya let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. “Uh, thanks. Nice to meet you too.”

Margaret waved her off and turned toward her side of the room like a talk show host showing off a set. “So, I claimed this side, hope that’s okay! My dad helped me move in this morning. He’s, like, super intense, so we basically brought everything. Snacks, meds, cleaning stuff, extension cords... even a mini fridge. He thinks I’ll forget how to function without adult supervision.”

Freya blinked, setting her bag down on the unclaimed bed. “That’s... prepared,” she said, trying to sound neutral but not unfriendly.

Margaret flopped onto her mattress, legs crisscrossed, already pulling her phone from her back pocket. “He even asked the RA if I could have a fire extinguisher. I mean, who does that? But whatever. He means well. Do you want a granola bar?”

“I’m good, thanks,” Freya said, sitting down on her bed and slowly taking in her half of the room. It felt bare, hollow, like a shell waiting to be filled. She rubbed her palms on her jeans.

Margaret scrolled for a second, then looked up with a grin. “So... some of us are going to check out the guys’ dorms later. It’s kind of like a casual mixer, nothing wild. You should totally come!”

Freya hesitated. Her first instinct was to decline. Keep to herself, read her syllabus, organize her space. Something safe. Something solitary. That was always the default. But the weight of silence loomed just past the threshold of this new place. She didn't want to start college alone.

"I think I'm just going to settle in tonight," she said, though her voice lacked conviction.

Margaret pouted dramatically. "Boring! But fair. If you change your mind, I'll be leaving around eight."

Freya nodded and watched as Margaret dug through her tote and re-applied lip gloss in the mirror above her desk. Her energy filled the room, overflowing, making it hard to think. And yet, it wasn't a bad kind of overwhelming, it was almost comforting in a weird way. Like background music in a quiet house.

Once Margaret slipped out the door with a breezy "Catch you later, roomie!" the silence Freya thought she wanted fell over the room like a heavy coat. She sat for a while, skimming her syllabus, her eyes scanning words she wasn't really reading. The course titles all felt distant. Psychology 101. Intro to Cultural Anthropology. Foundations of Creative Writing. Things that sounded important, but nothing that told her what to do next, or who to be.

She heard laughter echo down the hallway, muffled voices, a thud against a wall, someone yelling "Shotgun!" in the distance.

She looked toward the door. Then back at her syllabus. Then at the door again.

New place. New choices.

“Wait up,” she called out suddenly, grabbing her jacket and slinging it over her arm. She opened the door and peeked into the hallway, spotting Margaret just before she turned the corner.

Margaret spun around, face lighting up. “Yes! I knew you’d cave!”

Freya jogged to catch up, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Figured I should at least meet the people I’ll probably be avoiding in class.”

Margaret laughed, linking her arm with Freya’s. “Atta girl. Let’s make a first impression.”