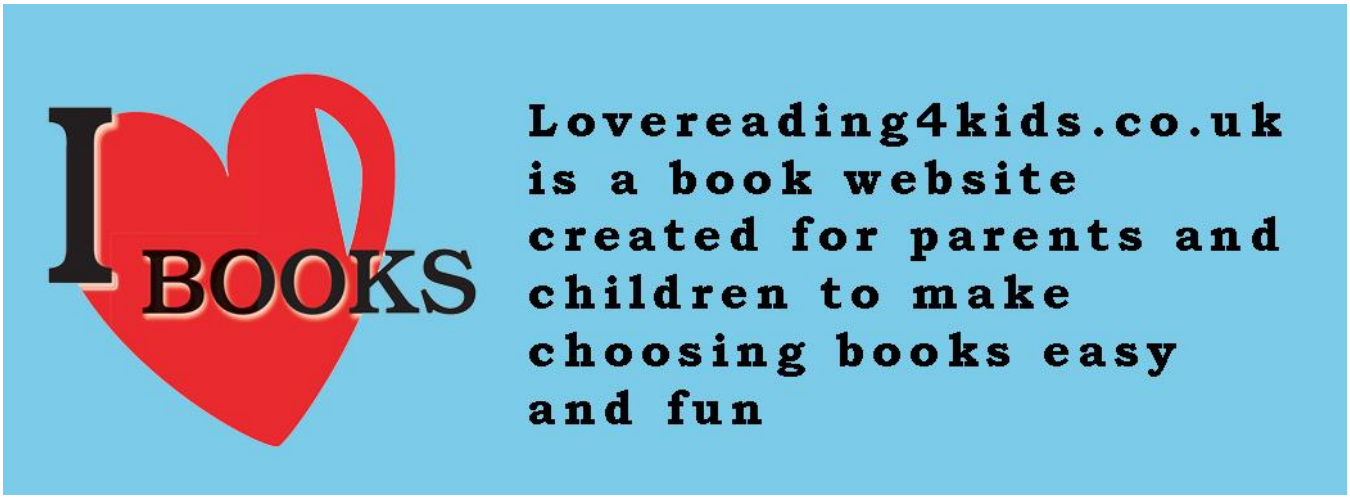


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Jenna Evans Welch

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Prologue

YOU'VE HAD BAD DAYS BEFORE, RIGHT? YOU KNOW, the ones where your alarm doesn't go off, your toast practically catches on fire, and you remember way too late that every article of clothing you own is soaking wet in the bottom of the washer? So then you go hurtling into school fifteen minutes late, *praying* no one will notice that your hair looks like the Bride of Frankenstein's, but just as you slide into your desk your teacher booms, "Running late today, Ms Emerson?" and everyone looks at you and notices?

I'm sure you've had those days. We all have. But what about really bad days? The kind that are so pumped up and awful that they chew up the things you care about just for the fun of spitting them back in your face?

The day my mom told me about Howard fell firmly in the *really bad* category. But at the time, he was the least of my worries.

It was two weeks into my sophomore year of high school and my mom and I were driving home from her appointment. The car was silent except for a radio commercial narrated by two Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonators, and even though it was

a hot day, I had goose bumps up and down my legs. Just that morning I'd placed second at my first-ever cross country meet and I couldn't believe how much that didn't matter anymore.

My mom switched off the radio. "Lina, what are you feeling?" Her voice was calm, and when I looked at her I teared up all over again. She was so pale and tiny. How had I not noticed how *tiny* she'd gotten?

"I don't know," I said, trying to keep my voice even. "I feel like I'm in shock."

She nodded, coming to a stop at a traffic light. The sun was doing its best to blind us, and I stared into it, my eyes scalding. *This is the day that changes everything*, I thought. *From here on out there will only be* before *and* after *today.*

My mom cleared her throat, and when I glanced at her, she straightened up like she had something important to tell me. "Lina, did I ever tell you about the time I was dared to swim in a fountain?"'

I whipped around. "What?"

"Remember how I told you I spent a year studying in Florence? I was out photographing with my classmates, and it was such a hot day I thought I was going to melt. I had this friend – Howard – and he dared me to jump into a fountain."

Now, keep in mind, we'd just gotten the worst news of our lives. The *worst*.

"… I scared a group of German tourists. They were posing for a photo, and when I popped out of the water, one of them lost her balance and almost fell back into the fountain with me. They were furious, so Howard yelled that I was drowning and jumped in after me."

I stared at her, and she turned and gave me a little smile.

"Uh … Mom? That's funny and everything, but why are you telling me this now?"

"I just wanted to tell you about Howard. He was really a lot of fun." The light changed and she hit the gas.

What? I thought. *What, what, what*?

At first I thought the fountain story was a coping mechanism, like maybe she thought a story about an old friend could distract us from the two blocks of granite hanging over our heads. *Inoperable. Incurable.* But then she told me another story. And another. It got to the point where she'd start talking and three words in I'd know she was going to bring up Howard. And then when she finally told me the reason for all the Howard stories, well … let's just say that ignorance is bliss.

"Lina, I want you to go to Italy."

It was mid-November and I was sitting next to her hospital bed with a stack of ancient *Cosmo* magazines I'd swiped from the waiting room. I'd spent the last ten minutes taking a quiz called "On a Scale of One to Sizzle: How Hot Are You?" (7/10).

"Italy?" I was kind of distracted. The person who'd taken the quiz before me had scored a 10/10 and I was trying to figure out how.

"I mean, I want you to go live in Italy. After."

That got my attention. For one thing, I didn't believe in *after*. Yes, her cancer was progressing just the way her doctors said it would, but doctors didn't know everything.

Just that morning I'd bookmarked a story on the Internet about a woman who'd beaten cancer and gone on to climb Mt Kilimanjaro. And for another, *Italy*?

"Why would I do that?" I asked lightly. It was important to humor her. Avoiding stress is a big part of recovery.

"I want you to stay with Howard. The year I spent in Italy meant so much to me, and I want you to have that same experience."

I shot my eyes at the nurse's call button. *Stay with Howard in Italy?* Did they give her too much morphine?

"Lina, look at me," she said, in her bossiest I Am the Mother voice.

"Howard? You mean that guy you keep talking about?"

"Yes. He's the best man I've ever known. He'll keep you safe."

"Safe from *what*?" I looked into her eyes, and suddenly my breath started coming in short and fast. She was serious. Did hospital rooms stock paper bags?

She shook her head, her eyes shiny. "Things will be … hard. We don't have to talk about it now, but I wanted to make sure you heard my decision from me. You'll need someone. After. And I think he's the best person."

"Mom, that doesn't even make sense. Why would I go live with a stranger?" I jumped up and started rifling through the drawers in her end table. There had to be a paper bag *somewhere*.

"Lina, sit."

"But, Mom—"

"Sit. You're going to be fine. You're going to make it. Your life will go on, and it's going to be great."

"No," I said. "*You're* going to make it. Sometimes people recover."

"Lina, Howard's a wonderful friend. You'll really love him."

"I doubt it. And if he's that good of a friend, then why haven't I ever met him before?" I gave up on finding a bag, collapsing back into my chair and putting my head between my knees.

She struggled to sit up, then reached out, resting her hand on my back. "Things were a little bit complicated between us, but he wants to get to know you. And he said he'd love to have you stay with him. Promise me you'll give it a try. A few months at least."

There was a knock on the door, and we both looked up to see a nurse dressed in baby blue scrubs. "Just checking in," she sang, either ignoring or not noticing the expression on my face. On a Scale of One to Tense, the room was at about 100/10.

"Morning. I was just telling my daughter she needs to go to Italy."

"Italy," the nurse said, clasping both hands to her chest. "I went there on my honeymoon. Gelato, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, gondolas in Venice… You'll love it."

My mom smiled at me triumphantly.

"Mom, *no*. There's no way I'm going to Italy."

"Oh, but, honey, you have to go," the nurse said. "It will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

The nurse ended up being right about one thing: I did have to go. But no one gave me even the tiniest hint about what I'd find once I got there.

Chapter 1

THE HOUSE LOOMED BRIGHTLY IN THE DISTANCE, like a lighthouse in a sea of headstones. But it couldn't be *his* house, right? We were probably just following some kind of Italian custom. *Always drive newcomers through a cemetery. That way they get a feel for the local culture.* Yeah, that must be it.

I knit my fingers in my lap, my stomach dropping as the house got closer and closer. It was like watching Jaws emerge from the depths of the ocean. *Duuun dun.* Only it wasn't a movie. It was real. And there was only one turn left. *Don't panic. This can't be it. Mom wouldn't have sent you to live in a cemetery. She would have warned you. She would have—*

He flipped on the turn signal, and all the air came rushing out of my lungs. *She just didn't tell me.*

"Are you OK?"

Howard – my dad, I guess I should call him – was looking at me with a concerned expression. Probably because I'd just made a wheezing noise.

"Is that your… ?" Words failed me, so I had to point.

"Well, yes." He hesitated for a moment and then gestured out the window. "Lina, didn't you know? About all this?"

"All this" didn't even come close to describing the massive moonlit cemetery. "My grandma told me I'd be staying on American-owned land. She said you're the caretaker of a World War II memorial. I didn't think…" Panic was pouring over me like hot syrup. Also, I couldn't seem to finish a single sentence. *Breathe, Lina. You've already survived the worst. You can survive this, too.*

He pointed to the far end of the property. "The memorial is that building right up there. But the rest of the grounds are for the graves of American soldiers who were killed in Italy during the war."

"But this isn't your *house* house, right? It's just where you work?"

He didn't answer. Instead we pulled into the driveway, and I felt the last of my hope fade along with the car's headlights. This wasn't just a house. It was a *home*. Red geraniums lined the walkway, and there was a porch swing creaking back and forth, like someone had just gotten up. Subtract the crosses lining the surrounding lawns and it was any normal house in any normal neighborhood. But it wasn't a normal neighborhood. And those crosses didn't look like they were going anywhere. Ever.

"They like to have a caretaker on-site at all times, so they built this house back in the sixties." Howard took the keys out of the ignition, then drummed his fingers nervously on the steering wheel. "I'm really sorry, Lina. I thought you knew. I can't imagine what you're thinking right now."

"It's a cemetery." My voice was like weak tea.

He turned and looked at me, not quite making eye contact. "I know. And the last thing you need is a reminder of

everything you've been through this year. But I think you'll find that this place grows on you. It's really peaceful and it has a lot of interesting history. Your mother loved it. And after being here almost seventeen years, I can't imagine living anywhere else."

His voice was hopeful, but I slumped back in my seat, a swarm of questions taking flight in my mind. *If she loved it so much, then why didn't she ever tell me about it? Why didn't she ever talk about you until she got sick? And for the love of all that's holy, what made her leave out the teeny-tiny detail that you're my* father*?*

Howard absorbed my silence for a moment, then opened his car door. "Let's head inside. I'll get your suitcase."

All six foot five of him walked around to the back of the car, and I leaned over to watch him in the side mirror. My grandma had been the one to fill in the blanks. *He's your father; that's why she wanted you to live with him.* I probably should have seen it coming. It's just that good old buddy Howard's true identity seemed like the sort of thing my mother would have at least *mentioned*.

Howard closed the trunk, and I straightened up and started rifling through my backpack, buying myself another few seconds. *Lina, think. You're alone in a foreign country, a certifiable giant has just stepped forward as your father, and your new home could be the setting for a zombie apocalypse movie. Do something.*

But what? Short of wrestling the car keys from Howard, I couldn't think of a single way to get out of going into that house. Finally I unbuckled my seat belt and followed him to the front door.

* * *

Inside, the house was aggressively normal – like maybe it thought it could make up for its location if it just tried hard enough. Howard set my suitcase down in the front entryway, and then we walked into a living room with two overstuffed chairs and a leather sofa. There were a bunch of vintage travel posters on the walls, and the whole place smelled like it had been soaking in garlic and onions. But in a good way. Obviously.

"Welcome home," Howard said, switching on the main light. Fresh panic smacked me in the face, and he winced when he saw my expression. "I mean, welcome to Italy. I'm so glad you're here."

"Howard?"

"Hi, Sonia."

A tall, gazelle-like woman stepped into the room. She was maybe a few years older than Howard, with coffee-colored skin and rows of gold bracelets on each arm. Gorgeous. And also a surprise.

"Lina," she said, enunciating my name carefully. "You made it. How were your flights?"

I shifted from one foot to the other. Was someone going to introduce us? "They were OK. The last one was really long."

"We're so glad you're here." She beamed at me, and there was a thick moment of silence.

Finally I stepped forward. "So … you're Howard's wife?"

Howard and Sonia looked at each other and then practically started howling with laughter.

Lina Emerson. Comic genius.

Finally Howard got himself under control. "Lina, this is

Sonia. She's the assistant superintendent of the cemetery. She's been working here even longer than I have."

"Just by a few months," Sonia said, wiping her eyes. "Howard always makes me sound like a dinosaur. My house is on the property too, a little closer to the memorial."

"How many people live here?"

"Just us two. Now three," Howard said.

"And about four thousand soldiers," Sonia added, grinning. She squinted at Howard, and I glanced back just in time to see him frantically running one finger across his throat. Nonverbal communication. Great.

Sonia's smile vanished. "Lina, are you hungry? I made a lasagna."

That's what that smell was. "I'm pretty hungry," I admitted. Understatement.

"Good. I made my specialty. Lasagna with extra-garlicky garlic bread."

"Yes!" Howard said, pumping his arm like a contestant on *The Price Is Right*. "You decided to spoil us."

"It's a special night, so I thought I'd go all out. Lina, you probably want to wash your hands. I'll dish up and you can meet us in the dining room."

Howard pointed across the living room. "Bathroom's over there."

I nodded, then set my backpack on the nearest chair before practically fleeing the room. The bathroom was miniature, barely big enough for a toilet and a sink, and I ran the water as hot as I could stand it, scrubbing the airport off my hands with a chip of soap from the edge of the sink.

While I scrubbed, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and groaned. I looked like I'd been dragged through three different time zones. Which, to be fair, I had. My normally tan skin was pale and yellowish-looking, and I had dark circles under my eyes. And my *hair*. It had finally figured out a way to defy the laws of physics. I wet both my hands and tried to smash down my curls, but it seemed to only encourage them. Finally I gave up. So what if I looked like a hedgehog who'd discovered Red Bull? Fathers are supposed to accept you as you are, right?

Music started up outside the bathroom and my nervousness kindled from a flame to a bonfire. Did I really need to eat dinner? Maybe I could go hide out in a room somewhere while I processed this whole cemetery thing. Or didn't process it. But then my stomach roared in protest and *ugh*. I did have to eat.

"There she is," Howard said, getting to his feet as I walked into the dining room. The table was set with a red-checkered cloth, and an old rock song I sort of recognized was playing from an iPod next to the entryway. I slid into the chair opposite them, and Howard sat down too.

"I hope you're hungry. Sonia's such a great cook, I think she missed her calling in life." Now that it wasn't just the two of us, he sounded way more relaxed.

Sonia beamed. "No way. I was destined for life at the memorial."

"It does look good." And by "good," I meant *amazing*. A steaming pan of lasagna sat next to a basket of thickly sliced garlic bread, and there was a salad bowl piled high with tomatoes and crisp-looking lettuce. It took every ounce of

willpower I had not to dive right onto the table.

Sonia cut into the lasagna, placing a big gooey square right in the center of my plate. "Help yourself to bread and salad. *Buon appetito*."

"*Buon appetito*," Howard echoed.

"*Buon appe* … something," I mumbled.

The second everyone was served, I picked up my fork and attacked my lasagna. I knew I probably looked like a wild mastodon, but after a full day of nothing but airline food, I couldn't help myself. Those portions were *miniature*. When I finally came up for air, Sonia and Howard were both staring at me, Howard looking mildly horrified.

"So, Lina, what kinds of things do you like to do?" Sonia asked.

I grabbed my napkin. "Besides scare people with my table manners?"

Howard chuckled. "Your grandmother told me you love running. She said you average about forty miles a week, and you're hoping to run in college."

"Well, that explains the appetite." Sonia scooped up another piece, and I gratefully held out my plate. "Do you run at school?"

"I used to. I was on the varsity cross-country team, but I forfeited my spot after we found out."

They both just looked at me.

"… When we found out about the cancer? Practice took up a lot of time, and I didn't want to leave town for all the meets and stuff."

Howard nodded. "I think the cemetery is a great place for a runner. Lots of space, and nice smooth roads. I used to run

here all the time. Before I got fat and lazy."

Sonia rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. You couldn't get fat if you tried." She nudged the basket of garlic bread toward me. "Did you know that your mother and I were friends? She was lovely. So talented and lively."

Nope, didn't tell me that, either. Was it possible I was falling prey to some elaborate kidnapping scheme? Would kidnappers feed you two pieces of the best lasagna you'd ever had? And if pressed, would they give you the recipe?

Howard cleared his throat, snapping me back to the conversation. "Sorry. Um, no. She never mentioned you."

Sonia nodded, her face expressionless, and Howard glanced at her, then back at me. "You're probably feeling pretty tired. Is there anyone you want to get in touch with? I messaged your grandmother when your plane arrived, but you're welcome to give her a call. I have an international plan on my cell phone."

"Can I call Addie?"

"Is that the friend you were living with?"

"Yeah. But I have my laptop. I could just use FaceTime instead."

"That might not work tonight. Italy isn't exactly on the cutting edge of technology, and our Internet connection has been pretty slow all day. Someone's coming by to take a look at it tomorrow, but in the meantime you can just use my phone."

"Thanks."

He pushed back from the table. "Would anyone like some wine?"

"Yes, please," Sonia said.

"Lina?"

"Uh … I'm kind of underage."

He smiled. "Italy doesn't have a drinking age, so I guess it's a little different around here. But no pressure either way."

"I'll pass."

"Be right back." He headed for the kitchen.

The room was quiet for about ten seconds, and then Sonia set her fork down. "I'm so happy you're here, Lina. And I want you to know that if you need anything, I'm just a stone's throw away. Literally."

"Thanks." I trained my eyes on a spot just over her left shoulder. Adults were always trying too hard around me. They thought that if they were nice enough they could make up for the fact that I'd lost my mom. It was kind of sweet and horrible at the same time.

Sonia glanced toward the kitchen and then lowered her voice. "I wanted to ask you, would you mind stopping by my place sometime tomorrow? I have something I want to give you."

"What?"

"We can talk about it then. Tonight you just focus on settling in."

I just shook my head. I was going to do as little settling in as possible. I wasn't even going to unpack my bag.

After dinner Howard insisted on carrying my suitcase upstairs. "I hope you like your room. I repainted and redecorated it a couple of weeks ago, and I think it turned out really nice. I keep most of the windows open in summer – it's a lot cooler

that way – but feel free to close yours if you'd prefer." He spoke quickly, like he'd spent all afternoon rehearsing his welcome speech. He set my bag down in front of the first door.

"Bathroom is right across the hall, and I put some new soap and shampoo in there. Let me know what else you need and I'll pick it up tomorrow, OK?"

"OK."

"And like I said, the Internet's been pretty spotty, but if you decide you want to try it out, our network is called 'American Cemetery.'"

Of course it was. "What's the Wi-Fi password?"

"Wall of the Missing. One word."

"'Wall of the Missing,'" I repeated. "What does that mean?"

"It's a part of the memorial. There are a bunch of stone tablets listing the names of soldiers whose bodies were never recovered. I can show you tomorrow if you'd like."

Nooo, thank you. "Well, I'm pretty tired, so…" I edged toward the door.

He took the hint, handing me a cell phone along with a slip of paper. "I wrote down instructions for dialing the States. You have to put in a country code as well as an area code. Let me know if you have any trouble."

"Thanks." I put the paper in my pocket.

"Good night, Lina."

"Good night."

He turned and walked down the hall, and I opened the door and dragged my suitcase into the room, feeling my shoulders sag with the relief of finally being alone. *Well, you're really here*, I thought, *just you and your four thousand new*

friends. There was a lock on the door and I turned it with a satisfying *click*. Then I slowly turned around, steeling myself for whatever Howard had meant by "really nice." But then my heart practically stopped, because *wow*.

The room was perfect. Soft light glowed from this adorable gold lamp on the nightstand, and the bed was antique-looking, with about a thousand decorative pillows. A painted desk and dresser sat on opposite sides of the room, and a large oval mirror hung on the wall next to the door. There were even some picture frames standing empty on the nightstand and dresser, like they were waiting for me to fill them up.

I stood there staring for a minute. It was just so *me.* How was it possible that someone who hadn't even met me had managed to put together my perfect bedroom? Maybe things *weren't* going to be so bad –

And then a gust of wind blew into the room, drawing my attention to the large open window. I'd ignored my own rule: *If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.* I walked over and stuck my head out. The headstones gleamed in the moonlight like rows of teeth, and everything was dark and eerily silent. No amount of pretty could make up for a view like that.

I pulled my head back in, then took the slip of paper out of my pocket. Time to start plotting my escape.