BRIGID KEMMERER

Call It What You Want



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CHAPTER ONE

Rob

I eat breakfast with my father every morning.

Well, I eat. He sits in his wheelchair and stares in whichever direction Mom has pointed him. If I'm lucky, all his drool stays in his mouth. If he's lucky, the sunlight doesn't fall across his eyes.

Today, neither of us is very lucky.

I'm blasting alternative rock, the volume turned as loud as I can tolerate. He hated this music when he had the cognitive ability to care. I have no idea whether he can hear it now.

I like to imagine he can.

"Rob!" Mom bellows from upstairs, where she's getting ready for work. She never used to bellow.

She never used to have a job before, either.

It's been a great year.

"Rob!" she calls again.

I stare across the table at Robert Lachlan Sr. and shove a spoonful of cereal into my mouth. "You think she's talking to me or to you?"

A drop of saliva forms a circular mark on his shirt.

"What?" I yell back.

"Turn that down, please!"

"Okay."

I don't.

Until last spring, I never knew there was a right way and a wrong way to kill yourself. If you put a gun to your temple and pull the trigger, it's possible to survive.

It's also possible to miss and blow half your face off, but luckily Dad didn't do that. I'm not sure I could sit across the table from him if that had happened.

It's bad enough now. Especially knowing what he did *before* he tried to commit suicide. That's worse than all of it.

The suicide, I can kind of understand.

Mom says it's important for Dad to know I'm here. I'm not sure why. My presence isn't going to magically reconnect the neurons that will let him walk and talk and interact again.

If I could get my hands on a magic wand that would put him back together, I'd do it.

That sounds altruistic. I'm not. I'm selfish.

A year ago, we had everything.

Now we have nothing.

The living, breathing reason is sitting at the other end of the table.

I get up and turn off the music. "I'm leaving!" I call.

"Have a good day at school," Mom calls back.

Like that'll happen.

CHAPTER TWO

Maegan

My sister is throwing up in the bathroom. It's awesome.

I want to offer help, tissues or water or something, but I tried yesterday, and she snapped at me.

Mom says it's the hormones. Maybe she's right, though Samantha has never been someone people would call *nice*. If she's on your side, you're her best friend. If she's not, look out.

When Samantha left for college, half the cops at Dad's precinct threw her a party. It's not often that blue-collar kids go to an Ivy League school—on a full lacrosse scholarship, no less.

It's not often they come back pregnant, either.

There's a small, dark part of me that's glad I'm not the troublemaker, this time.

Another part of me squashes the thought and shoves it away. That's not fair to my sister. Unlike her, I've always been someone people call nice.

Well, until last spring, when people started calling me *cheater*.

The toilet flushes. Water runs. A minute later, Sam's door closes quietly.

Mom appears in my doorway. She's in a bathrobe, a towel wound high on her head. Her voice is soft. "Dad says he can drive you to school, if you're ready now."

"Almost."

"I'll let him know." She hesitates in the doorway. "Maegan . . . about your sister's condition—"

"You mean the baby?" I study my reflection in the mirror, wondering if the ponytail is a mistake. My fair skin looks pale and washed-out already. Besides, the first day of November has brought freezing temperatures, and my homeroom class has a cracked window.

She eases into the room and closes the door. "Yes. The baby."

I wonder if Samantha had hoped to keep the pregnancy a secret, even from our parents. She was already planning to come home this weekend, so her appearance wasn't unexpected. I just don't think she'd planned on walking in the door, hugging Mom, and then throwing up on her feet.

Even that might have been explainable, but then Sam burst into tears.

Mom's not an idiot.

Then again, Mom and Sam have always been close. Sam probably would have told her anyway. Just without the projectile vomiting. I reach for a colorful scarf. "What about it?"

"Your sister doesn't want anyone to know yet." Mom wrings her hands. "She's only ten weeks pregnant, so she's trying . . . she's trying to decide what to do." A pause. I wonder if my mother can't bring herself to say the word *abortion*. "I'm asking you to respect her wishes."

I pull on a denim jacket over my sweater. "I won't tell anyone."

"Maegan, your sister deserves your compassion."

"Mom. No one talks to me. Who would I tell?"

"Rachel?"

My best friend. I hesitate.

Mom's eyes almost fall out of her head. "*Maegan*. Did you tell her already?"

"No! No. Of course not."

"You know your father doesn't want gossip."

That makes me pause. I don't want to let Dad down. Well, I don't want to let him down *again*. "I won't say anything."

"Not to *anyone*, Maegan." Her gaze turns steely. "I need to know we can count on you."

I flinch. Dad honks the horn out front.

I grab my backpack. "I need to go."

"Be good!" she calls after me.

She says it every time I leave the house.

I used to say, "I always am," but that's not true anymore.

Instead, I say, "I'll try," and I let the door slam behind me.

CHAPTER THREE

Rob

The front entrance to Eagle Forge High School is packed with students. Bodies everywhere. They crowd the concrete quad out in front of the doors, they shove their way through the narrow foyer, they slam lockers and fill every available space until the last possible minute. Once upon a time, I would stride across the parking lot and those bodies would part like the Red Sea. Everyone knew me. Everyone wanted to be me.

Now? No one wants to be Rob Lachlan Jr.

Not even me.

I don't go in through the front. That's Connor Tunstall's turf now. He'll be leaning against the round concrete platform that holds the flagpole, telling a risqué story about whatever he did over the weekend. A Starbucks cup will be sitting next to him—a tall dirty chai—and it's overcast, so sunglasses will be hanging from a button hole of his vintage bomber jacket. He's got blond hair with a couple of random brown patches, as well as mismatched eyes: one blue, one brown. Around here, quirky looks could throw you to the bottom of the social pile or spit you out on top. His

family's got serious money, so you can guess where Connor ended up. He plays lacrosse—even has a private coach—so he's built like someone you don't want to mess with.

God, I sound obsessed with him. I'm not.

He used to be my best friend.

Connor got the quad in the breakup, I guess. His dad got a legal settlement.

My dad got a subpoena—and later, a self-delivered bullet to the frontal lobe.

And here we are, eight months later.

I park in the side lot and walk halfway around the school with the bitter November wind eating through my parka, then slink in through the back entrance by the library. It's the very definition of "the long way," because my first class is near the front, but I don't mind the walk, and I certainly don't mind the solitude.

I have books to return anyway, so I peek through the windows along the wall. The librarian isn't there, so I slip through the doors. We're supposed to wait for someone to check the books in—some kind of accountability thing, I guess—but I always leave mine. I'd rather pay ten bucks for a paperback that goes missing than deal with Mr. London.

The air pressure seems to change in the library, as if even the books demand a special kind of quiet. I stride silently across the carpet and slide two hardcovers onto the gray Formica counter, then turn to slip away.

"Mr. Lachlan."

Damn.

I stop. Turn. Mr. London is coming out of the storeroom behind the counter. He's wiping his hands on a napkin, clearly still

chewing whatever he was eating. He's lean and wiry and pushing sixty. He's wearing a black polo shirt with tiny colorful stitching along the edge of the sleeves, which doesn't do his sallow skin any favors.

"I'll check those in for you," he says, sliding the books toward his computer as if I weren't halfway to the door.

He doesn't meet my eyes.

I don't try to meet his. I don't actually know if his comment was a request for me to stay and wait while he pushes buttons on his keyboard or more of a dismissal, but in the span of time it takes me to think about it, I've already stood here too long.

Now it's awkward.

He scans the bar codes on the back of each book. They're high fantasy, and they hit the circulation desk with a *thunk* as he sets each one down. "What did you think of these?"

What does he want, a recommendation? *They were life changing. I stayed up all night reading.*

I actually did do that. My social life is nonexistent.

But then I realize his question was automatic. Every time we interact, it's as awkward for him as it is for me. He probably feels some kind of obligation to treat me with practiced courtesy, as if my family wouldn't simply rob him of his life savings; we'd go after his job, too.

I shrug and study a poster about Edgar Allan Poe. "They were fine."

"Just fine? Neal tore through them."

Neal is his husband. He's a retired teacher from somewhere else in the county. Mr. London was supposed to retire last year, too, but they trusted my dad with their retirement accounts.

Every cent was long gone before Dad got caught.

I clear my throat. "I've got to get to first period."

That's crap, and he knows it. The bell won't ring for another twenty minutes.

"Go ahead," he says. "These are in."

I bolt like I'm guilty of a crime. I can feel his eyes on my back as I go.

I wonder if it would be better if I had a reputation for hating my father. If I hadn't spent school holidays interning in his office. If he hadn't shown up for every lacrosse game, throwing his arm across my shoulders to crow about his boy's skills on the field.

Unfortunately, I didn't hate him. And afterward, I heard every whisper.

Did Rob know? He had to know.

I didn't know.

CHAPTER FOUR

Maegan

Dad drops me off in his police cruiser, as usual. I wish he'd do it around back, where kids won't see me climb out of the black-and-white sedan, but he thinks people won't mess with his little girl if they know her dad's a cop.

He's right. No one messes with me. No one really *talks* to me.

It has nothing to do with the fact that he's a cop.

It has everything to do with the fact that I got caught cheating on the SAT last year—and a hundred kids' scores were invalidated.

Dad reaches over to give my shoulder a squeeze. "Have a good day now, sweetheart." His voice is deep and rumbly. A good cop voice. "Text me if you need someone to pick you up, okay?"

"Okay." I lean over to kiss his cheek as his radio starts squawking codes. He smells like soap and menthol. "Love you, Daddy." But he's already reaching for his radio.

Then I'm out in the cold, and his cruiser is pulling away.

The first bell doesn't ring for another fifteen minutes, and it's cold as crap on the quad, but the concrete is still crowded with

students who have no desire to start their school day early. Most of them are debasing themselves to Connor Tunstall, who's leaning against the flag stand, talking about some party over the weekend.

"Seriously," he's saying. "They couldn't even get the keg down the stairs between the two of them. I ended up carrying it myself."

"All by yourself?" his groupies chorus, fluttering around him. "Can you pick me up? I bet you can't pick me and Sarah up at the same time."

He grins at them. "Come here. Let's see."

Ugh. I would have no time for a guy like that. He and Rob Lachlan used to run the school, until Rob's dad got caught embezzling from his clients and tried to blow his head off. Now Connor's the only one sitting on the throne. I have no idea what happened to Rob. He's like a ghost now, flickering from class to class. We have AP Calculus together or I wouldn't know he went to school at all.

My best friend, Rachel, peels herself away from the fringe of the crowd and attaches herself to my side. She waits for me every morning, even though I've told her she doesn't have to. Most of the drama died down before school let out last year.

Back then, I could barely walk across the quad without getting spit on. You don't invalidate a hundred kids' SAT scores without a few repercussions.

Rachel is one of the few people who stuck by me after I got in trouble. It's hard to be part of the brainiac crowd when everyone thinks you cheated your way in. Rachel and I have been friends practically since birth, so I know she'll always have my back.

She links her arm through mine, though she's really too tall

for it to be comfortable. Her dad's this hulking, blond, Nordic-looking cop, while her mom is a tiny, round, second-generation Mexican. So Rachel has light brown skin and curly dark hair, combined with a stocky build and broad shoulders, and a height that tops five foot eleven. She's taller than most of the guys in the junior class and prettier than most of the girls.

"Do you think Connor Tunstall stands in front of a mirror flexing every morning?" she says.

"Are you kidding? He probably takes a daily selfie."

She giggles and pulls at the front door. "How's Sam feeling?"

My heart freezes in my chest. Mom's warning is an echo in my head. "What?"

"You said she was sick Friday night."

Right. I did say that. Rachel and I were supposed to go to the movies, but then Sam walked in the door and threw up. "Oh. Yeah. She's fine. Food poisoning."

It sounds like I'm lying. I don't know if it's from being a cop's daughter or what, but I'm a terrible liar. That's why I folded when they accused me of cheating last April. Rachel's going to call me on it, and I'm going to dump the truth on her feet.

But she doesn't call me on it. She doesn't even give me a funny look, just accepts it at face value and tows me toward her locker.

Somehow that's worse.

Her boyfriend, Drew, is waiting when we get there. He's tall, with deep brown skin and eyes, and he's built like a linebacker, which makes sense since he plays football. His parents own an upscale restaurant at the edge of town, and they expect Drew to work most evenings, so between that and football, his grades sometimes pay the price.

I've known Drew since grade school, but he and Rachel have only been going out since midsummer, when he drunk dialed her to profess his love. I can think of more romantic overtures, but she didn't seem to mind. I personally think he's a little abrasive, but he's good to Rachel. She's been such a good friend to me that I want to be able to return the favor.

He grabs Rachel by the waist and gives her a sloppy kiss.

I sigh. Rachel giggles.

I can probably be a good friend without watching an exchange of fluids. "I need to get to math," I say breezily, turning away.

"Eyes on your own paper, okay?" Drew calls behind me. Then he cracks up.

Rachel hushes him, but it's too late.

I already heard.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rob

Time for calculus. Let the learning begin.

I'm actually pretty good at math. I'm good at most of my classes. When Dad was a bigwig—or, really, *pretending* to be a bigwig, if you want to split hairs—he insisted on it. You can't brag about your son being at the top of his class if he isn't actually there. I'm not number one or anything, but I'm in the top twenty-five. I used to be in the top fifty, but that was when I had a social life and money for lacrosse. Now I've got nothing to do, so it's late-night fantasy novels and homework.

There was a time when I would have mocked a kid like me.

What's Nelson doing at this party? Isn't he supposed to be at home waiting on his acceptance letter from Hogwarts?

The joke would have been on me. *Harry Potter* isn't too bad a read.

Sometimes I wish I'd gone to a private school. Not because I'm a snob—though I probably was, if I want to get technical. But no: when Dad got caught and our assets were frozen, I would have

had to quit a private school. I would have been able to switch to a public school where no one knew me.

But also no. It's been public school all the way. Dad wanted people to know we were a part of the *community*. Not too good for public school, no sir.

Everyone can be a millionaire! You just have to invest wisely with good ol' Rob Lachlan Sr.

Seriously. He had commercials. There are fraud parodies all over YouTube.

It's probably a miracle we got to keep our house. That was titled in my mom's name alone, so it wasn't seized when everything else was. I don't know if Dad planned ahead or what, but we weren't out on the street.

Mom had to go back to work, though. They fought about that. Before he pulled the trigger.

I remember the arguments. She screamed that we had a $5,000 painting on the wall, but we didn't have money for groceries. The bank accounts were frozen. Their credit cards were frozen. He kept assuring her it would all blow over.

It's okay, Carolyn. It's fine. It's a misunderstanding. Please, honey. You'll see.

Oh yeah. We saw. In a spray of red all over the den wall.

So. Calculus.

Our teacher's name is Mrs. Quick. She's fine. Nothing special. Khakis and T-shirts, olive skin, straight brown hair, rectangular glasses. She might be thirty, she might be forty, I have no idea. She doesn't take any crap, but she doesn't give any, either. Some teachers have colorful classrooms with lots of flair and

decoration, but hers is sparse, with mostly blank walls, except for a few bulletin boards sporting equations in black and white. Even her desk is neat and orderly, with papers kept in a locked drawer. The only hint of quirk or attitude lies in the clock over the white board: the numbers have been replaced with equations, like the square root of four in place of the two.

I like her class because everyone shuts up and works. I don't need to interact.

And then I realize she's saying, ". . . like you to find a partner for a group project that we'll be working on over the next two weeks. Some work will be done outside the classroom, so you'll need to be able to meet outside of school."

I quickly scan the room. Students are scrambling to change seats and partner up. Outside of my corner, there's a lot of giggling and fist bumping.

Maybe there's an odd number of kids in here, and I'll be able to do this independently.

No. Wait. Maybe Mrs. Quick would make me form a trio. That's worse.

I look out over the class again. Everyone seems to be settling into partners.

My breathing quickens. Like in the library, I've been sitting here too long spinning my wheels. I need to talk to Mrs. Quick. Maybe she'll take pity on me.

Maegan Day is already talking to her. I barely know Maegan, but she's the only other student not scrambling to pair up. She got into trouble for cheating on the SAT last year, but I don't know the details. I was buried too deeply in my own family's mess.

I know her dad, though. He was the first cop to question us when Mom called nine-one-one.

Mrs. Quick looks up. "Does everyone have a partner? Maegan needs a partner."

The room quiets. No one says anything. Including me.

I hear someone mutter, "Cheater's gonna cheat."

"I can do the project independently," Maegan says quickly. She sounds like this is what she's hoping for. We have that in common.

Mrs. Quick turns back to her. "I'd like this to be done in teams. Find a group and join them, please. Three will be fine."

That means she'll assign me to a group, too.

I clear my throat. "I need a partner."

I might as well be saying, *I need a colonoscopy.*

"Thank you, Rob," says Mrs. Quick. "Maegan, go ahead."

Maegan hesitates, then turns. She returns to her desk and sits down.

There is an empty desk beside me—because I sit in the farthest back corner of the room. My preferred spot unless a teacher assigns seats. Maegan could have grabbed her things and moved back here.

But there's an empty desk beside her, too, because the front row is rarely a favorite.

I don't want to move.

She doesn't want to move.

Mrs. Quick doesn't suffer fools. "Rob, please move beside Maegan so you can start the assignment together."

I shove my book into my backpack and shuffle to the front row.

CHAPTER SIX

Maegan

We've been sitting here for twenty minutes, listening to Mrs. Quick spell out the details of our assignment, and Rob Lachlan hasn't even looked at me. It's bad enough that teachers give me the side-eye. I don't need it from him, too.

Cheater's gonna cheat. I don't know who said it, but I wonder if it was him. He sure doesn't look happy to be my partner. His hair is kind of longish on top, and unkempt, hanging into his eyes like his mother needs to remind him to get a haircut. He won't make eye contact, and we've never been friends, so I have no idea what color his eyes are. A few freckles dust his pale cheeks, like the remnants of a summer tan that just won't let go. He's wearing a black, long-sleeved Under Armour shirt that clings to his frame.

His life might suck, and he might have been ejected from his social circles, but he's still a back-of-the-class jock.

And I'm still me.

Mrs. Quick is outlining our project, which actually sounds interesting—choosing objects to drop from different heights and

trying to calculate their bounce and trajectory—but I keep covertly studying the boy next to me.

He's taking sparse notes. Keeping his eyes on his paper. Looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

When the bell rings, he jams his things into his backpack. Still no acknowledgment that I'm his partner.

When I got caught cheating, people made this kind of broad assumption that I was going to turn into a total slacker. I didn't, but I wonder if that's the problem here.

"Hey," I say to him.

He jerks at the zipper. His head lifts a fraction of an inch. "Hey, what?"

"I really care about my grades. You can't slack off on this."

His hands go still. His voice turns lethally quiet, and I expect a dig, but instead, he says, "I have an A in this class. Figure out what you want me to do and I'll do it."

I follow him out. "Why didn't you answer Mrs. Quick when she asked about a partner?"

"What?"

I can barely hear him over the cacophony of students in the hallway, but I can't let this go. I need to head the other direction, toward Honors English, but I dog him through the pack of students. "When she asked if anyone still needed a partner, you didn't say anything."

"So what?"

I want to hear him say it. I want him to admit it. "You *knew* she was asking for me. If you don't want to be my partner, just say so."

"I don't want to be your partner."

I stop short in the hallway. He says it so . . . *evenly*. Without emotion. Without looking at me. Without even stopping. It's worse than a dismissive glance. This is a statement of fact.

I don't want to be your partner.

I feel like he's slugged me in the chest. I can't move. The worst part is that I asked for it. Literally.

While I'm standing there trying to recover, he slips between students and vanishes like a ghost.



At lunch, Rachel and I split a salad in the cafeteria. She and I don't have any morning classes together, so it's my first chance to whine about Rob Lachlan.

"Skip the project," she says to me. "Refuse to do it."

"Yeah, okay." I stab at the lettuce. "I *need* this grade. We don't all have a college fund waiting for us."

She jabs at a cherry tomato. "How is that my fault?"

"Nothing is your fault." I sigh, irritated, though I can't really parse out *why*. Maybe it's Drew's comments this morning; maybe it's Rob's. I probably shouldn't be taking it out on her, though.

"What are we talking about?" Drew swings a leg over the bench on Rachel's side of the table and drops down beside her. His tray is loaded with two burgers, a bowl of broccoli, a cup of yogurt, and two bags of chips.

She scoots closer to him until she can rest her head on his shoulder. Drew drops a kiss on the top of her head, then peels the lid off a yogurt and licks the bottom of it.

They're adorable. And disgusting.

Now that she's snuggled up against him, Rachel's sobered. "Maegan's been assigned to work with the class felon."

Drew shovels yogurt into his mouth and follows her gaze. "Rob Lachlan?"

"Yeah." She's staring into the far corner of the cafeteria, where Rob is sitting alone at a round table. He's eating a sandwich from a brown paper bag, a thick paperback cracked open on the table in front of him. He didn't strike me as a reader, but he didn't strike me as a guy who'd be carrying an A in AP Calculus, either. I actually always thought he was the kind of kid whose grades were boosted thanks to his parents' donations to the school—or maybe his prowess on the lacrosse field.

"His dad stole seven million dollars," I say. "Not him."

"That we know of," says Rachel.

She sounds callous, but about six tables over from Rob sits Owen Goettler, a kid whose single mom never had very much money at all, then lost what little she had left to Rob's father. He's got smooth, cream-colored skin that's blemish-free, which might be enviable if not for the lank brown hair that hangs to his collar. Owen is eating a plain cheese sandwich—what they give to the kids who can't afford lunch. His entire house could probably fit in Rob's living room.

Rob doesn't have a plate of delicacies in front of him, but he has more than a slice of cheese between two pieces of bread. I feel like they should be forced to switch. Not just food. All of it.

"Just because they couldn't prove it doesn't mean he wasn't in on it," agrees Drew.

Her voice drops. "His dad tried to kill himself."

Drew grunts. "To stay out of prison."

"Didn't your dad interrogate him about the suicide? Or his mom?" Rachel screws up her face. "Or . . . something?"

I go still. I'd forgotten that. Dad doesn't bring a lot of work to the family dinner table, but he does unload on Mom. They're not quiet. Sometimes I eavesdrop.

He did question Rob about the suicide.

That poor kid, he said that night. *He didn't deserve to find that.*

My family is a wasp's nest of tension right now, but finding out your sister is pregnant isn't anywhere close to finding your father after he tried to shoot himself.

I pull a notebook from my backpack and tear a sheet free. Then I write down my name and number and fold it up.

"What are you doing?" says Rachel.

"I'm giving him my number so we can work out a time to do the project." I sigh. "It doesn't matter what he did or what his dad did. I feel like half the teachers in this school are waiting for me to screw up again. It'll be fine. It's math."

Rob doesn't look up when I approach. His eyes stay locked on his book, though there's no way he can't see me standing in front of the table.

I'm tempted to fling the piece of paper at him.

I don't. I slide it next to his book. "Here's my number," I say. "Text me when you want to meet. We can go to your house if you want—"

"I don't." He starts crumpling up his trash and shoving it in the brown paper bag. "We can go to yours."

My house features a surly sister who pukes 24-7. No, thank you. "I don't want to go to my house, either."

"Fine. Whatever." He finally looks at me, his eyes full of

censure, as if I'm the one being difficult. He stuffs the paper with my number on it into his backpack. "We can go to Wegmans and drop stuff from the second floor. I don't care."

He's so hostile. I hesitate, replaying our entire interaction as if I'm somehow missing something. "Look—I know—I know I got into some trouble last spring, but I'm not a cheater. I really do want a good grade. If you have an issue with me, ask Mrs. Quick if you can trade." I pause. "Or I will."

He stands and slings his backpack over his shoulder. His voice is low and rough. "I don't have an issue with you. If you want to trade partners, go ahead."

I'm either losing my mind or this is the slickest gaslighting ever. "After class, you literally said you don't want to be my partner."

He hesitates. His eyes flick upward. He's replaying his words. Then he shakes his head. "I didn't mean you."

"You—what—"

"I didn't mean *you*. I meant I don't want to be partners with anyone."

I'm not sure what to say to that.

Rob must decide I'm done talking. He steps away from the table and tosses his trash into the wastebasket. "So, if you want a new partner, go for it."

I open my mouth. Close it.

And once again, he disappears before I have a clue what I want to say.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rob

A year ago, I'd buy whatever I wanted for lunch. I didn't even have to carry cash: I had an automatically reloading account, so I could buy anything the cafeteria offered without even thinking about it.

Today, I'm debating whether I want to waste a dollar twenty-five on a bottle of water, or if I should risk the germ-infested water fountain for the rest of the day. There's a five-dollar bill in my wallet, but those don't grow on trees anymore, and I hate taking money from Mom. I hate spending money where anyone can see me. Whether I earn it myself or get it from my mother, I always wonder if people are thinking I'm spending stolen cash.

I mean, I *was.* Once. For so long. I didn't know it, but I was doing it.

But today, I forgot to pack a drink with my lunch, and I'm thirsty.

I grab a bottle from the case by the registers and shuffle into the line. I pull my phone out of my backpack and play a brainless game so I don't need to make eye contact with anyone.

We move in tiny increments, shifting forward with each beep of the register.

"Oh, hey, Rob. Want me to get that for you?"

I know the voice. I snap my head up.

Somehow I've ended up behind Connor. So much for trying to keep my head down.

You'd think his offer was genuine. Warm, even.

It's not. He's being an asshole.

"No," I say flatly. I have no problem meeting his eyes. His father is the one who turned mine in. Hard to have good memories of your best friend's dad when you know he's part of the reason your own dad needs to be fed through a tube.

Connor pulls a twenty out of his wallet. His expression is even, and his voice gives away nothing. "You sure? I've got plenty."

He wants to goad me into a fight. It's tempting, especially because adrenaline is pumping through me. I could put my hands against his chest and give him a good shove. Send him to the ground. Grapple it out. Draw some blood. It would be nice to put all this anger *somewhere*. Especially since Connor has been begging for it.

But there's another part of me that doesn't want to hurt him. There's a part of me that wants his words to be real.

No. It's worse than that. There's a part of me that *misses* him.

I hate that part of me.

When we were fourteen, we had these dirt bikes, and we'd go tearing through the back woods of Herald Harbor. The area gets a lot of rain, and it was always muddy. Once we misjudged a stream crossing, and Connor's wheels got stuck in the mud. He went flying. Sprained his ankle and broke his arm. Compound

fracture. The bone came right through the skin. It was the most horrifying thing I've ever seen.

Well. Until last February.

But *then*, it was. He threw up all over himself. Couldn't stop crying and puking.

My cell phone wouldn't find a signal. I remember Connor digging his fingers into my forearm until his nails broke the skin. He was pale and shaking. "Please don't leave me here, Rob. Please don't leave me."

I didn't leave him. I dragged him half a mile until we got a signal.

I thought about that moment a lot after I found my father. After the cops and paramedics were gone, and my house smelled like blood and vomit. How I called Connor, knowing his family hated my family but having no one else to talk to.

He didn't answer the phone.

I left a sobbing message on his voice mail.

He never called me back.

Now he's standing in front of me, giving me a hard time about a stupid bottle of water, while his tray is packed with food.

Maybe I don't miss him at all.

I make my eyes hard. "I've got it."

"Okay, if you're sure." He smirks and turns away, shoving his wallet into his back pocket.

He must not have tucked the cash in all the way, because a ten-dollar bill catches on the edge of his pocket and flutters to the ground, landing right in front of the toe of my sneaker.

I stare at the cash. I wonder if this is a trap. A trick. I don't want to pick it up. If I pick it up, I'm going to have to give it back

to him, because I don't want someone to see me snatch it from the ground and shove it in my pocket.

Did you see Rob Lachlan steal ten bucks in the cafeteria? So typical.

Yeah, that's all I need. I've already got Maegan Day on my case because I didn't throw confetti about our assigned partnership.

I grab the money from the ground and twist it between my fingers, then pay for my bottle of water with my own money. Once I have change, I go after Connor.

"Hey," I call. "Connor."

He's made it to the table with our old crowd, but I don't look at any of them. He sets his tray down and turns to look at me, his expression slightly wary, as if he's worried he pushed too far, and I might throw a punch.

A small, dark part of me likes that.

"What?" he says.

"You dropped this." I hold out the money.

He glances at it, then back at my face. The table behind him is quiet. Watching this interaction.

The symbolism isn't lost on me, either.

The moment breaks. His eyes darken. "Keep it," he says flippantly. "Use it to pay your legal bills."

Then he turns away and drops onto the bench at his table. I'm dismissed. None of them are looking at me now.

My fist closes around the money. Hell if I'm going to stand here and demand the chance to return it to him. I wish I hadn't bought the water. I wish I hadn't gotten in line. I wish I didn't have three dollars and seventy-five cents left to get through the week.

I wish I didn't want so desperately to keep this money.

I wish for a lot of things.

None of them come true.

My face burns as I turn away. I head for the far side of the cafeteria. Maegan and her friends are gone. The double doors over here don't lead anywhere I need to be, but I'm not likely to run into anyone I know.

Owen Goettler is still sitting at a table by himself. His mother is one of the dozens of people suing my family. He's pulling his cheese sandwich into minuscule pieces. Trying to make it last, I guess. He's never said a word to me. I've never said a word to him.

I drop the ten dollars in front of him. "Here," I say. "Buy some real food."

Then, before I can hear his response, and before I can change my mind, I blow through the doors of the cafeteria into the empty corridor beyond.