NEEDY LITTLE THINGS

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For my readers.

As strong, resilient, and magical as you are,
may you still receive the love, protection, and
softness you so very much deserve.

CHAPTER 1

I spend an unhealthy amount of time thinking about brains. It's to the point where I've started to empathize with the zombies in horror movies. Not that I have any interest in eating brains—I'm just preoccupied with how they work, how mine is different, and what it'd be like to have a normal one.

People love to be like *There's no such thing as normal*, and for the most part, I agree. I do. But let's be real, knowing what people need before they know they need it? That's some next-level stuff. And trust, I've browsed all the forums: audio hallucinators, mind readers, psychics. There may be a label out there that suits me, but I haven't found it yet.

Paper clip. Crayon. Shoelace. Chewing gum.

Dr. Stone clears her throat and side-eyes me for the third time this period. I stop tapping my pencil on my desk and angle it as if I intend to write, even though she and I both know this notebook is staying blank.

Balloon. Chewing gum. Tennis racket. Chewing gum.

I fidget in my seat. Lean forward until the back legs of my chair lift from the floor.

Chewing gum. Lanyard. Gloves. Chewing gum. Gum. GUM.

The words fill my skull until I think it may crack and spill its contents, like a broken candy machine. I scratch my neck, trying to resist before shoving my hand into my bloated red duffel, dubbed "Santa Bag" by my little brother. It's full of random items meant to save me from moments like this. My fingers grasp the familiar foil wrapper of the stick of spearmint I tossed in last week. I get out of my seat and slam it on Corbin's desk.

"Is there a problem, Sariyah?" Dr. Stone asks, her patience with me about as thin as dental floss.

"No, ma'am. Just a fly."

My bootleg little ability doesn't come with any fancy visions or reasons why people will need the things they do, so while she continues droning on about spinning objects or whatever, I watch Corbin out of the corner of my eye. There's no telling if he'll use my donation this class period, or even this week, but my curiosity quiets the other needs some. Maybe he's about to get paired up with his crush and had a garlicky lunch. Or maybe it'll help him focus. He's the only one in this class doing worse than me.

He looks around before sneaking the gum into his mouth, only to then smack on it like a cow. Little dots of saliva sprinkle his desk. If I hang around after class, no doubt I'll sense a need for disinfectant as whoever sits there next approaches. The girl in front of him leans back and stretches. She flips her ponytail over her shoulder and accidentally knocks Corbin's abstract art project onto the floor where it breaks into two sad pieces. She doesn't notice, or doesn't care, and Corbin doesn't say anything. He quietly picks it up and stares at the remains until suddenly his eyes go wide. His jaw muscles bulge and relax as he chomps the gum. I assume he's trying to work the

last remnants of flavor from it until I see him raise his fingers to his lips and pull away with a sticky, slobbery chunk.

"You cannot be serious," I say, as he uses the gum to repair his ugly little project.

The entire class turns their heads to look at me.

"My bad."

"Nope. Sorry, Sariyah. Two strikes, you're out. Disrupting the learning of others is where I draw the line. I'll be making a call home."

A guy in the front row takes off his hat and ruffles his hair. "Been a minute since you watched a baseball game, huh, Dr. Stone?"

Laughter erupts throughout the room and I wait for Dr. Stone to announce that he'll be getting a call home, too, but the bell rings before she can get everyone settled.

Corbin waves his unhygienic project in my face on his way out. "Hey, thanks for the gum!"

I give him a tight smile and thumbs-up, then take my time gathering my things. My mind is an endless loop of the immediate or future needs of the people around me. Tangible, everyday items . . . usually. Intrusive thoughts that pester me relentlessly until (a) I fulfill the needs, (b) they meld into a crippling migraine, or (c) the person with the need moves out of range of the anomaly that is my brain—a range that I have determined to be twenty-one feet, three inches. Such a distance is, unfortunately, impossible to achieve in the cramped classrooms of East Lake High and 100 percent the reason my grades are a mess. How am I supposed to learn about—I glance at the whiteboard—centripetal force when Nevaeh needs potting soil, Ayo needs a cotton swab, and Dr. Stone needs a stapler?

Before venturing into the hall, I toss a mini pack of Lysol

wipes on Corbin's seat, jab my squishy orange earplugs into my ears, and put my ear defenders over those. They won't drown out the needs, but at least I won't have to process them and the latest school gossip at the same time.

Toothpick. Mirror. Paper. Condom. EpiPen. Dryer sheet. Deodorant.

Funny how EpiPen tried to sneak its way in one ear and out the other while Corbin's chewing gum wanted to holler like a toddler who dropped their lollipop in the sandbox. It's no use trying to pinpoint who's walking around with some ticking time bomb allergy. Not with so many people around. And it's not like I have an EpiPen anyway. I'm pretty good at getting my hands on strange or hard-to-come-by things, but prescription meds are a territory I have no plans to trespass through.

I barge through the door of Nurse Rincon's office, panting. "Do you have EpiPens?"

He jumps and places his hand over his heart, mouth moving without words.

I yank off my headphones and dislodge the earplugs. "Do you have EpiPens?"

"I heard you the first time, Sariyah." He unlocks a cabinet and waves a little red emergency case at me.

"Sorry."

He sits on the edge of his desk, eyes sparkling. "La vidente, is there something I should know?"

I grab a juice box from the mini fridge and drink it in one long slurp. "I'm not clairvoyant."

He clicks his tongue. "Debatable, my friend. You come to me talking about EpiPen, inhaler, insulin"—he taps his temple—"I listen."

With as much time as I spend down here and all the little crystals on his bookshelves, I'm not surprised he thinks

there's something mystical about me. "It was just a question," I say, raiding his candy bowl.

The bell rings and Rincon raises his eyebrows when I pretend not to hear it. "You're late."

"Let me stay. It's quiet here."

"Sariyah"—he opens his desk drawer and pulls out a hall pass—"graduation will be here before you know it. Progress reports came out last week, didn't they? How'd yours look?"

"Ugly. But your grades would look like that, too, if your existence was one continuous headache."

"Do you need your medication? That's what it's here for."

The syrupy concern in his voice actually makes me want to go to class. "No, thanks. I'm good." I grab the pass and take the long way to English.

Thirty-two minutes later, an ambulance siren wails.

Fifteen minutes after that, Nurse Rincon's face appears in the doorway. He winks at me, EpiPen case wedged under his armpit.

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After school, I catch sight of Deja and Malcolm in the bus lane. Her with fresh, butt-length honey-brown box braids, him sporting his signature grandpa sweater and high-waters that somehow look fashionable. Malcolm and I don't have any classes together this semester, so our reunions at the end of each day have become a whole event. I cup my hands around my mouth and shout, "Mal-col-me, my homie!"

A head taller than everyone else, he spots me easily and dances his way over, singing, "Sariyah, she fıya!"

We close the distance between us and do our eight-step greeting—one move for every year we've known each other.

Deja rolls her eyes and stifles a laugh. "All of that is so unnecessary."

"You think so?" Malcolm asks, before grinning at me and going in for a dramatic round two that makes her shield her face and act like she doesn't know us.

Deja turned our duo into a trio at the end of last summer. She fit right in and we get along great, but there's no denying we're both better friends with Malcolm than we are with each other. That I can hear her needs, and not his, is proof. I stopped hearing Malcolm's only a few months after we met and don't recall ever hearing a single need from my mom, dad, or little brother. It's like the most unique part of me refuses to share itself with the people I care about most, and I hate that. So I do my best to love them a little harder. But you don't have to have a deep soul connection with someone to enjoy their company. I throw my arm around Deja's neck and lead her back to the buses. "You need to hurry up. You know Ms. Irma will see you in the rearview chasing down the bus and press harder on the gas pedal."

She whines. "I'm not trying to go home. My mom's been on my last nerve, for real."

I laugh. "Mine, too. That's half the reason I got a job." That and restocking Santa Bag every few weeks ain't cheap.

"I shouldn't have signed up for so many AP classes." She adjusts her ginormous backpack. "I'd probably never graduate if I worked during the semester. I don't know how you do it."

"I don't take AP, and who said I'm graduating?" It's a joke that really isn't a joke, but she doesn't know that, so she laughs.

"Bye, girl." She hugs me, then shouts over her shoulder, "Call me later, Colmy!"

I frown a little. That nickname was once strictly used by me.

Malcolm and I wave goodbye and watch the buses roll out before starting off down the sidewalk.

"I got in trouble in class today," I say, relishing the quiet in my mind as we walk farther from the school. "My physics teacher is probably going to be calling your burner." Malcolm bought a secret extra phone last year when he kept getting his main one taken away for texting during class, but it has come in handy for me more times than it has for him.

"I'm about to start charging you for my services."

"Love you forever." I lock on to his arm. "How was your day? Hit me with the recap."

"First block was ass. No way I'm going the rest of the semester without popping *well-actually* Harold in the mouth." He scrunches up his face like something smells bad. "But second was good. Me and Deja finally figured out what to do for our social studies project. We're going to get a head start next week. I usually wouldn't condone doing school work over spring break, but your boy is trying to get an A."

"I don't share your enthusiasm for social studies, but more power to you."

"Anyway. What are you about to do? Come watch a movie with me." His eyes drift to the top of my head. "I'll help you take your twists out."

I'd be offended by the offer if I hadn't been needing to redo my hair for the past week. "I have to work, but it's only a half shift. Come with. You can knock out your homework, then we can go back to your place."

"Ew," he says, catching another imaginary whiff of something foul.

"Malcolm, come on. It's been like three months."

"It can be three damn decades. I'm not going back to that janky little ice cream shop, even though that woman knows she owes her recent uptick in business to me. I heard about some of those new flavors. She think she woke now, I see. Needs to take ol' Chex Your Privilege and go on somewhere."

Malcolm quit his job as associate scooper at Sweet Pea's Ice Creams when he finally confronted the owner, Ms. Jess, about her sometimes problematic, puntastic flavor names. All Flavors Matter was Malcolm's breaking point. A customer got the whole ordeal on video, which promptly went viral. I even caught a few memes of my own slack-jawed face in the background. I'm not the biggest fan of Ms. Jess myself, but Malcolm's family is well-off. He wants to work—he doesn't have to. Best I could do was leave her a list of recommended reading, which she gladly accepted. But that also led to her current cringe-worthy wave of socially aware flavors.

We come to the place in the road where we have to part ways. I give him one last pleading look.

"Girl, bye." He waves me off. "Love you."

• • •

Sweet Pea's is a small, free-standing shop with pale yellow walls and a green roof. Seasonal decor and ugly window art give the place a daycare kind of vibe. It's only disrupted by the faded Casey Sullivan flyers still hanging up, thanks to Ms. Jess's impossible-to-remove adhesive. Casey went to our rival high school and disappeared about four months ago. It made national news within a day. Her body was found two days after that. Malcolm was angry about Ms. Jess's stupid ice cream flavors, but mostly, I think he was sick of seeing Casey's face on the door. I know I was. And it's not because I'm cold and

heartless. It's because I can't look at Casey without thinking of Tessa. And thinking of Tessa hurts. She's Malcolm's twin and my first best friend. And just like Casey, Tessa vanished one day after school. But unlike Casey, the country didn't rally for her. #FindTessa wasn't a trending topic. Unlike Casey, Tessa isn't white. Unlike Casey, Tessa hasn't been found. And sure, that leaves room for hope, but Tessa taught me how painful hope can be. It's a pain I've had almost five years to learn to live with. It's a pain neither Malcolm nor I could have managed without each other. So he can be mad at Ms. Jess. There are more important things to worry over.

I enter through the back of the shop where Ms. Jess is talking with someone my age.

"Oh, Sariyah! Perfect timing!"

Nail file. Nail file. Nail file.

Her need shouts so loudly, the person's next to her is impossible to make out.

"This is Jude Abrams." She tucks her blond bobbed hair behind her ears and beams. "He'll be joining our team! I've just finished showing him the ropes."

Jude extends his hand, light brown and calloused. I shake it without making eye contact.

Ms. Jess clasps her hands together, bangles clanging. "All righty! Introductions are done and I've gotta run. Wednesday evenings are slow, but give me a buzz if you need anything." She disappears into the break room to grab her things.

I sift through Santa Bag and pull out a metal nail file. When Ms. Jess comes back out, I hand it off to her quickly, ready to be relieved of the aching in my skull. "You dropped this."

She takes it and squints. "Huh. Thanks, sweetie." She tosses it into her purse and waves as she walks out the door. "Y'all take care!"

Even when she is well out of my range, Jude's need still only presents as an annoying whisper. He says something, but I'm too busy trying to decipher the mumbles to catch it. "Sorry?"

"I said she didn't drop that."

I haven't brought myself to look him full in the face yet because he smells like he's cute—it's a thing—and I can't be any more distracted from school and work than I already am. "I know, but her nails were looking rough."

"That's weird because she said she got a manicure earlier today."

"I meant her toenails."

"She had on sneakers. You got X-ray vision?"

I look up just enough to see a small grin playing on his full, two-toned lips. "Something like that."

"Something like that, or you have a knack for predicting things people will need?"

The box of plastic spoons in my hands drops to the ground with a noisy clatter. "You came to that conclusion over a nail file?"

He begins prepping some waffle cone batter. "No. I came to that conclusion because I'm observant and I have two classes with you. Thought it was pretty cool, but after getting the cold shoulder the first few times, I stopped trying to say hello."

"I'm sorry." I gather up the dirty spoons and toss them in the trash. "This is going to sound ridiculous, but I promise I did not hear you . . . or see you."

"Is that supposed to be comforting?" He laughs and pours a ladle of batter onto the hot waffle iron. "It's all good. I may have only transferred to East Lake at the start of the semes-

ter, but that's long enough to process the social hierarchy. Of course someone with your celebrity status would overlook the new guy."

I snort because none of that is what it seems. Someone like me, endlessly distracted, doesn't make a good friend. I got told about myself enough times to stop trying. People know my name. I get invited to parties. I even made homecoming court in ninth and tenth grade. But I don't go to things like that anymore. Music plus everything else going on in my head turns my brain into a worthless mass not dissimilar to what Corbin pulled out of his mouth earlier. And what do I look like wearing noise-canceling headphones to a party? My popularity hasn't been earned from a stellar personality, or amazing academic performance, or innate athletic ability. People like me because I'm convenient to be around.

"I didn't overlook you. I mean, I did, but not because I think I'm something special. I have ADHD—inattentive and distractible." Not a lie, but my prescriptions do little to address the root cause. "School is hard for me." I finally look him dead in his annoyingly attractive face, and there it is. His muffled need breaks through whatever was holding it back. "You can look at my grades. You aren't the only one I haven't been paying attention to." I scrunch up my face apologetically, knowing my explanation still sounds conceited as hell.

"I can help you. With your grades, I mean." He puts two fingers to his glasses, then directs them back at me. "Laser focus." He gestures at Santa Bag, which I keep shoved under the counter by the cash register during my shifts. "So, did you get bitten by a radioactive spider or what?"

I frown. "Spider-Man? Really?"

He snaps and points at me. "You're right. X-Men would make way more sense here."

I snatch up an ice cream scoop and point it at him aggressively, a dollop of Fruity Freedom dropping to the floor.

He holds up his hands and laughs. "Sorry, sorry! But can you blame me for being curious?"

"It's just the way I am." And the way my grandmother was, but I'm not about to get into my family history with some nosy boy I just met. I don't care how cute he is. "Maybe you should target your curiosity at how to properly make waffle cones before you burn the shop down."

Jude whips around and uses the rag draped over his shoulder to fan the smoking waffle iron. While he deals with that, I sneak his need from my bag and tuck it into the pocket of my apron.

"Going to grab some more spoons. Be right back." On my way to the prep room, I slip a brand-new hairbrush into his book bag. It's got Hello Kitty all over it, but needy little things can't be choosers.

Jude and I work, finding an easy groove and getting to know each other. He even starts in on his promise to tutor me, quizzing me on Spanish verb conjugation between customers. I learn he and his mom moved here from Florida. He learns that Spanish might be a lost cause for me.

At closing, I leave him to start cleanup. There's a commotion from out back as I fill the mop bucket with fresh water. I turn off the tap for a better listen. Jude appears in the doorway.

"Did you hear that?" I ask.

We both jump when the dead bolt suddenly turns. The door opens slowly and Miss Jess stands there, white as a sheet.

"Are you okay?" I take a few quick steps toward her but freeze when I glimpse the scene behind her.

A man.

Writhing on the ground.

With a metal nail file lodged in his neck.