
Chapter One

Three men in unfortunately gray overalls stare at the wooden knight.

It hasn't even been up for twenty-four hours. Yesterday they spent the better part of the afternoon trying to get it to stand up, despite the knight's sword constantly pulling the figure downward to the left. We'd all sat around, watching them swearing and arguing about how best to fix it. A whole audience of people with nothing better to do.

They finished just as it was getting dark, and now here they are again, first thing in the morning, trying to scrub a spray-painted penis off the sign.

It had to be expected. If you call a housing complex for people who can't afford housing Castle Estates, and then you think a wooden knight galloping his way toward the squat brick squalor is going to make people feel good about living there, you kind of deserve to wake up in the morning and find a dick on your sign.

"That lasted long," Marcus Cotero says, sitting beside me on the bench.

I've lived at Castle Estates for all of nine days, but I already know I'm supposed to stay away from Marcus Cotero. My aunt warned me he's often in the middle of local gossip, and whether or not anything people say is true, the last thing I need is to be right there in the middle with him. Still, it's early morning, it's the first day of my senior year, and he has nice eyes.

"Not really surprising, I guess."

"True story. You can't stop the dick. Try as you might, you just can't stop the dick." He shakes his head as if he actually feels bad for either the men in gray overalls or the cartoonish knight. No reason to feel bad for the knight; given the graffiti artist's poor sense of perspective, the knight has received a substantial upgrade.

"That should be the motto," I say. "Right under the knight. 'Welcome to Castle Estates. Where You Can't Stop the Dick.'"

Marcus Cotero laughs and takes out a pack of cigarettes. He offers me one, and although I don't smoke, I take it anyway. He lights his, but I just pull mine apart, investigating the strange brown flakes people are always in such an uproar about. No, it's not healthy, but lots of things aren't. Starting with Castle Estates.

"You're new, right? Alexia Lawlor?" he asks.

The name sounds weird. Too much alliteration. I took my aunt's last name when I came to live with her. It's how I've managed for the last five years. Every year choosing to move in with a different relative during the summer so I can start school in a new town or state each fall. I have one goal: Survive a full school year—180 days—hiding behind a new

name, new home, and new persona. Sure, it hasn't worked for me yet, but this year I only have to last 162 school days. Seniors get the privilege of needing only 90 percent of an education, I suppose.

Maybe this time it will all turn out okay. I'm nothing if not hopeful. Despite everything, I can't seem to give up on the hope that maybe, just once, it won't end up the same. I mean, hey . . . percentages are with me this year, right? Fewer days mean fewer chances to screw it all up. Again.

I shake off the thoughts and turn to Marcus. "Lexi. Call me Lexi. And, yeah, I just moved here a few days ago."

"I'm Marcus."

"I know."

"Already been warned?"

The way he asks bugs me. It's like he's expecting me to confirm it. I have a serious antipathy for taking another person's version of someone else to heart. One of those things I've picked up these past five years.

"No," I lie to Marcus, because I'm determined not to let anyone else define him for me. More so now that I know he expects different. "I just have a good memory, and my aunt gave me a tour when I moved in."

He doesn't seem to believe me, but he nods and looks back at the three men, who are now arguing about the best way to remove spray paint from a wooden sign. I wonder what kind of emergency hotline you have to call to get grown men out of bed on a Monday morning to scrub genitalia from housing-project signs.

"So, *Green Arrow*, huh?" Marcus asks.

I look down at my shirt. I've never seen the show, but the shirt's green, and today's Monday, and Mondays are green days. They've been green days for a while now. I don't

remember anymore when I chose which day went with which color, and I definitely can't recall the rationale I hope I had at the time. All I know is that, in all my iterations of myself, Mondays stay green. Mondays and green never change. No matter where I'm living or what name I use, that's something secure. Constant.

"I've never watched it," I tell Marcus. "I just needed something green."

He looks at my green Chucks, olive-green army pants, green T-shirt, and dark-green hoodie. "You really like green, huh?"

"On Monday."

He pauses, takes a last drag from his cigarette, and stubs it out. "Want to tell me about it?"

"Not really. It's complicated."

"Isn't it always?" he asks, picking up on my cliché refusal to talk about myself.

We don't get to say anything else because the bus pulls up.

It's embarrassing to start a new school and ride up on the crappy old school bus, but I didn't have time to meet anyone in the neighborhood in the past nine days. Besides, the neighborhood seems to consist of Marcus Coterio, a phallus-obsessed graffiti artist, a bunch of old people, and Mr. Simmons, who fell asleep drunk in the community fountain on my first night here. He'd been trying to build a device to make the fountain dance to music, but all he'd done was nearly electrocute himself. Oh, and now we permanently get to hear the opening of Beethoven's Ninth at approximately 3:17 p.m. *and* a.m. So there's that.

When you live in shitty public housing and you take the school bus, you get stuck at the beginning of the morning route and on the end of the afternoon route. I guess no one

cares if you have to get up before five or if it takes you more than an hour to get home. I'm not surprised. I might be new here, but that's the way of it all, isn't it? If you're poor, people just expect you to be irrelevant.

I watch Marcus head to the back of the bus, looking brooding and intense. I almost go with him but decide instead to settle into the front seat. I'm not here to create anything permanent.

I can't say I'm nervous about starting at a new school. I mean, I'm terrified, but not more nervous than I usually am. About life in general. But this . . . this is what happens every year. School starts, and I try to blend in. As well as I can, despite everything about me that just seems to beg for attention. I do my best not to get involved with anyone, to keep my head down, and to just get through one damn school year. Maybe people will look at me with my weird wardrobe, but if I say nothing or give them nothing of myself, there's not a whole lot they can do with that.

Or there shouldn't be, but of course someone always seems to find out. Someone says something to someone else, and then there's a connection, and suddenly I hear Scott's name one day and it's all out there again. Then off I go to find another place to hide.

No, I tell myself. Not this time. Every year you tell yourself you won't get close to anyone, and then you let down the walls a bit at a time, until you can't get back behind them. Not this year.

I sigh and lean back against the seat, taking in the students as they reconnect with friends they didn't see all summer, despite proximity. I watch the freshmen as they get on the bus, and I recognize my anxiety in them. Even if you're not new, the first day can be awful.

Admittedly, most of the first day is a waste. You start out

nervous, but after you sit through multiple classes where teachers hand you a list of rules they then read to you, it starts to blur together. All the teachers have a breakdown of what they expect. How much everything means.

Sometimes I wonder if I could break my life down so easily: 10 percent participation, 20 percent independent thought, 30 percent anxiety, and 10 percent each fear, lies, guilt, and regret.

But amid the blur of rules and textbooks and seating assignments and grading policies, everything stops when you walk into the cafeteria for lunch. That linoleum-floored coliseum. This is the hardest part when you're new, and I know this school won't be any different. The blood leaves its trail behind you as you enter the den, and the tigers are hungriest on the first day. You know they're looking, and they know you're afraid as you stare down the long, wide room, deciding. You have only seconds to make your choice. That one choice—the table you approach and hope will welcome you—will define you for a year. Or longer.

"Hey, new girl," someone yells. I'm grateful because I don't want to start worrying about lunch. I can get through the rest, but lunch never seems to get easier. It's even worse when you're trying to decide who to trust. Which table of people won't dig into you day after day until they unravel everything you're hiding—and then rip you apart with your secrets.

The boy who yelled out to me is across the aisle and a few seats back. He smiles when I meet his eyes, and his smile isn't cruel. I hate how kindness surprises me.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Alexia," I say, my voice too loud. I can never find the balance between shrieking and whispering.

I have to remember who I am this year. I have to pause so I don't say "Alexia Grimes" or "Lexi Malcolm" or "Suzanne Halston" (that was the year I used my middle name) or "Lexi Driver." I stop to remind myself that I'm Alexia Lawlor now, and all those other places and people are gone. They're just pieces of me, pushed away for a new version. Anything to pretend the real me doesn't exist.

The boy stands and moves to the seat behind me. He's a bit awkward, but he doesn't carry it that way. He seems to embrace the fact that he's probably too thin and too short to be traditionally attractive, but with his thick-framed glasses and messy hair, it works. It's sort of library-sexy, if that's a thing.

"Ryan," he says, and he smiles again. "*Green Arrow's* cool."

"Oh." I look down at my shirt. "I don't watch it. It was just . . . it's just a shirt."

He shrugs. "I don't watch it, either. But the comic is great." He laughs. "Sorry. What a weak introduction. 'Hey, I'm Ryan, and you're new. Want to talk about comic books?'"

"I used to like comics. It's been a while, I guess."

"Yeah? I know the guy who runs Galactic Empire. Come with me sometime. It's amazing."

"What?"

"Galactic Empire. It's a store. But not just any store. It's, like, *the* store if you're into comics."

"Oh."

My brother loved comics. One summer, when I was nine, I was obsessed with feminism because Stacey Kitteredge was obsessed with feminism, and Stacey Kitteredge had a Disney show and a YouTube channel, so I figured she knew what she was talking about. Scott and I would ride our

bikes to Ray's, the local comic shop, and he'd pick things out for me based on whatever I was into that month. I remember stacks of *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* and *Betty and Veronica*, the books my brother figured were feminist-ish and still appropriate for a nine-year-old.

"You didn't hear any of that, did you?" Ryan asks.

I look up, meeting his eyes. Apparently, this town is full of boys with nice eyes. Not just nice, as in attractive, but nice as in kind as well.

"Sorry. What?"

"Don't worry about it. It must be really weird starting a new school."

"I guess."

Ryan has nice eyes and he seems genuinely decent, but I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to go to school, do some homework, and hope people don't take my damn picture and post it online somewhere.

"At least you've been other places," he says. "I can't imagine anything worse than never knowing anywhere but Westbrook. That's like my nightmare. Never leaving this town. Always just . . . this. Forever."

"Hmm," I mutter.

"Anyway, I'm a junior. You?"

"Senior."

"Well, damn. I was going to offer to be your escort through the ever-so-thrilling hallways of Westbrook High, but we probably can't have you being seen with a younger man."

A tall guy slides into the seat next to Ryan. "Dude, don't say 'escort.' You'll stir up images of sketchy bars and bad animal-print leggings."

"Just because that's your typical Saturday night doesn't

mean we all swing that way," Ryan says, adjusting to make room for the tall guy.

"Eric," the tall guy says, reaching out his hand. I go to shake it, although he was apparently waiting for something else, and we end up just sort of awkwardly brushing fingers.

"Lexi. Lexi Ste—" I catch myself. "Lawlor. It's Alexia Lawlor, but you can call me Lexi."

Damn it. One slip. One mistake, and it will only take one Google search before everything's ruined. You'd think after all this time I could at least remember which name I'm using.

"I just got Alexia," Ryan tells Eric. "Maybe animal prints are her thing."

Luckily, they don't notice I don't reply, that I turn away from them. It sucks not being able to talk to Ryan or Eric. Not being able to laugh and tell Ryan I don't care that's he a junior, that it would be better to walk around with him than to try navigating the halls with a map. I don't get to say that, because that's how things are.

They recognize none of this change in me, because they're already talking to each other. Mostly about me. They talk about me as if I'm not here, but it's not mean. It's the way people talk when they know you.

I so want someone to know me. I desperately want to be Lexi Lawlor, the random new girl. I want to say I'll go with Ryan to this Galactic Empire place, and I want to know no one will ask questions. I want to be Lexi Lawlor, because she doesn't have secrets. Lexi Lawlor doesn't have to lie.

"And so it begins," Ryan says as we slowly approach the bus loop behind the school. Students spill across the lawn and line up along the doorways at the back of the building. Summer held them in suspension for a few months, and

now there's so much that's new and so much to tell and they only have twenty-three minutes until the bell rings.

I hate that everyone has somewhere to be, has so much to fill those twenty-three minutes with, and all I have is needing to find the office. Get a locker. The things that frame every September for me.

"Hey, Lexi, what lunch do you have?" Ryan asks.

"Um . . ." I pause. I don't have classes yet or a schedule. "I'm not sure."

"No worries. I have third, but I'll be in guidance second period anyway. Come find me."

"He's their pet," Eric says, pushing his way out into the aisle to get off the bus.

Ryan grabs his bag and stands, squeezing into the aisle as well and leaving a space for me to exit. "Community service. We all have to do it. But I don't have my own car and my parents work and, you know, a bunch of boring backstory you don't care about. But the fact remains, I'll be in guidance second period. Find me and we can look at your schedule."

"Can you move?" someone yells from the back. Marcus is still sitting back there, waiting, and I try to wave, but he isn't looking at me. I hurry out of the bus.

Ryan disappears with Eric into a circle of people, and I weave through reunions, hoping in spite of it all that 162 days can pass differently from all the other years.

Trying not to notice that I'm all alone again.