

MONDAY



SOURCEBOOKS

 sourcebooks

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If you want to get noticed fast, try starting high school three weeks late as the girl who almost died.

Unfortunately, attention is the last thing I crave. Give me anonymity anytime. Every time.

I just want to be a normal girl. No one special.

Saw a movie once, don't remember what channel, but it was in the dark hours of the night when it was just me and the TV. My favorite time of day.

It starred John Travolta back when he was young. The kid was so sick he lived in this plastic bubble and he was so excited when he got to leave it.

Me? When I saw the boy leave his bubble, I wanted it for myself. Coveted it.

God, how I'd die for a cozy little bubble to live my life in, safe from the outside world.

Only I'd paint my bubble black so no one could see me inside.

There are two metal detectors inside the main doors of Smithfield High and 337 students plus one trying to crowd through them. I'm the plus one. Not sure which line to stand in or if there's even a real line at all hidden somewhere in this mass of humanity. It's the largest crowd I've ever been in.

The school lobby echoes with voices and the stamping of feet. We're herded like a bunch of cows headed for slaughter. All that's missing are the cowboys and the branding irons.

No one else is nervous about this. They don't care about the metal detectors or what's in their bags or even the two guards manning the operation. They're not worried about being trampled or that there isn't enough oxygen or how many billions—no, trillions—of bacteria and viruses are wafting through the air, microscopic time bombs searching for a new home.

All they care about is me. The stranger in their midst. They shuffle around me uneasily, quickly sniffing out that I don't belong.

A girl with a pierced nose and heavy eyeliner looks at me like I'm a tacky rhinestone necklace on display at a pawnshop counter. She hides her mouth behind her hand as she whispers something to her friend with the purple streak in her hair.

A guy wearing a white and orange Smithfield Wildcats letterman

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jacket trips over the backpack I wheel behind me, almost smashing into a wall before he catches himself. “Out of my way, loser.”

His snarl is accompanied by a sneer. He stares down at me—he’s huge, at least six feet tall with shoulders that block my view. “I said, move it.” I try to steer my backpack, but his feet get tangled as he zigs the same direction I’m zagging. “You don’t want to piss me off. Understand?”

The crowd pushes him even closer so all I can hear is his voice. My heart booms in response, sending up its own distress call. His name is on his letterman jacket, embroidered above the wildcat with the long, sharp fangs. *Mitch Kowlaski. Football.* I shrink against the wall, making myself even smaller than my usual five-foot-two, and pull my backpack between my legs, giving him room to cut in front of me.

He joins a cluster of football players and continues to stare at me. His look is easy to read: what kind of loser brings a wheeled backpack to high school?

Not cool. Neither are my virgin-white, just-out-of-the-box-this-morning sneakers that a guy in a pair of work boots stomps on. And why didn’t I think to put on at least a little lip gloss this morning?

I scan the crowd, searching for the normal kids—and fail. Seems like being normal is out of style this season. You have to be “someone,” create an alter ego: a jock, a church girl, a rebel, a loser.

Even I understand the danger of that last label.

I’m too skinny, too pale, my hair’s all wrong, I should’ve tried to figure out makeup (as if Mom would ever let me!), shouldn’t

have worn this jacket (but I love my faded, soft, frayed denim jacket; my dad gave it to me). It's out of style and doesn't go with the new-blue of my jeans that everyone can tell are a last minute buy from K-Mart, because who needs clothes when you live in a hospital and—

An elbow nudges my back. My turn at the metal detector.

I roll my backpack—heavier than any other student's—over to the guard. He hefts it onto his examination table and zips it open. “What's this?”

“My AED.” I try to sound hip and casual, like doesn't every kid carry their own advanced life support resuscitation equipment?

The guard snatches his hand away from my bag. “An IED?”

Now everyone is staring. At me.

“New kid has a bomb in there,” Mitch, the guy I accidentally tripped earlier, shouts in mock dismay. His voice booms through the crowded space louder than a real IED going off.

Not everyone thinks it's a joke. A gasp goes up behind me, traveling down the line of waiting students faster than a roller coaster. I'm imagining that last part—I've never been on a roller coaster. Their stares push me forward.

“No. It's an AED.” Sweat trickling down the back of my neck, I rush to explain before I'm branded a terrorist or worse, a freak. Too late. Mitch and his group of football players are snickering and pointing at me. “Automated External Defibrillator. I need it for my heart.”

Actually, I hope I never need it, but even though the school has an AED in the gym, Mom convinced the insurance company

that I should have my own, smaller model to carry with me at all times. Just in case.

Story of my life in three words: Just In Case.

Just in case my heart does a back flip at the sight of a cute guy and lands on its ass, unable to spring back on its own.

Just in case the fire alarm goes off and startles me, releasing adrenalin, shocking my heart into quivering, cowardly surrender.

Just in case I'm too hot or too cold or eat the wrong thing or forget to take my meds and my heart decides today is the day to go galloping out of control, leaving me lying there on the floor for guys like Mitch Kowlaski to walk over while everyone else points and laughs at the girl who finally died...

Mom has a thousand and one Just In Cases. Like she keeps reminding me, if I was a cat, I'd already have used up more than nine lives.

Swallowing my pride and the chance that I'll ever be accepted here—who am I kidding, I never had a chance, only a hope—I pull my Philips HeartStart AED free from its case and show it to the guard.

He stares from the AED to me, taking in my way-too-skinny frame, paler-than-vampire complexion, sunken eyes, and brittle hair and nods wordlessly. “Humor the girl-freak before she does something crazy” kind of nodding.

“See? Here's how you use it, it talks you through everything,” I prattle on, trying desperately to sound nonchalant. Normal. I call the defibrillator Phil for short. The perfect accessory for any fifteen-year-old girl, right? The bright blue plastic case matches my eyes, can't you see?

“Aw, look. Freakazoid has a broken heart,” Mitch says. “Waiting for Dr. Frankenstein to shock some life into you, sweetheart? I got everything you need right here.”

“Shut it, Kowlaski,” the other guard yells at him. He turns to me. “You must be Scarlet Killian.”

I now realize that the second line has also stopped to witness the end of my short career as a normal high school sophomore. Everyone now knows my name. Knows my heart is broken. Knows I’m a freak.

“Your mom told us to be on the lookout for you. Go ahead through.”

Our hands collide as we both reach to return Phil to my pack. He jerks away. Reluctant to touch the complicated machine—or the girl whose life it’s meant to save?

Why does everyone assume dying is contagious?

I shove Phil back in, zip the pack shut, slip through the metal detector without anything exploding, and bolt.

The football players including Mitch are crowded together on the other side, forcing me to push past them. “Must be tough having a heart ready to go tick, tick, boom!” Mitch laughs. His friends must think it’s funny because they join in.

Totally embarrassed and certain everyone is staring, I keep my head down and walk away, hauling Phil behind me. My heart is beating so fast spots appear before my vision. Not a Near Miss, just plain, old-fashioned, let-me-crawl-in-a-hole-and-die mortification.

Time spent in high school: three minutes, forty-two seconds.

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Time spent as a normal sophomore girl before being outed as the freak with the bum heart: fifty-five seconds.

Time remaining in my high school career as a freak: 5,183,718 seconds.

Maybe less if the doctors' predictions are right and I get lucky and drop dead.

So this is high school. I stroll down the hall, pulling Phil behind me, taking in everything. Feeling a bit like a kid at the zoo—only I’m the specimen on display.

There are large banners plastered onto the walls above the rows of lockers, exhorting us to “Chew up the Raiders!” We have a home football game on Friday against the Bellefonte Red Raiders. The Wildcats lost the first two games of the season—I actually listened to them, one from my hospital bed and one from home. It was so cool to have a team of my own to cheer for. Especially since, around here, people live and die for high school football. There’s just not much else to do in a small Pennsylvania town like Smithfield, not since the steel mill shut down.

The other students, even the freshmen, already know where they’re going; they’ve had three weeks to practice. They walk down the corridor in pairs or triads, the occasional singleton or clump of four or five. I’ve studied online maps of the school and try to look like I know where I’m going as I translate my mental image into reality. But it’s hard not to be distracted. The vast majority of my social interactions have been me and Mom facing a doctor or nurse, with the occasional intern or med student thrown in.

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Nothing in my life has prepared me for this. The hallway becomes claustrophobic, crowded by the frenzied movements of the students, studied glances and postures, scented hair products that tickle my nose...and the noise. Voices high and low, loud and gruff, shrill and dour—everyone seems to have something to say, but I'm not sure if anyone is actually listening. They just keep talking, like a machine-gunner hoping the more bullets he fires the more chance of hitting something sooner or later—whether or not it's his target.

The first bell rings and the hall is flooded with a sudden influx through the front doors. I'm shoved and jostled by kids long gone by the time I look around. People swear as they trip over Phil and I try to keep him closer to me, but it doesn't help.

They've given me an upper locker in the main corridor. No way am I going to be able to ditch Phil in there. I twist the combination open and peer inside. Not that there's any room. Whoever I'm sharing it with already has made himself at home.

I'm guessing "him" since it's crammed full with a gym bag that reeks of Axe and sweaty socks, a very large pair of soccer cleats, plus a teetering stack of notebooks and ragged paperbacks, mostly way-old science fiction with covers of busty blonds and lusty monsters, all guarded by a picture pasted to the inside of the door: something ripped out of a *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit edition. Minus the swimsuit. The girl is naked from the waist up, hands strategically spread over her breasts, mouth half-open in a sultry pout.

Narrowly avoiding an avalanche of books and papers, I shove

my jacket in. By the end of the day, it'll stink of Axe and testosterone. The smell makes my head swim, but isn't as bad as I first thought. Kinda nice, warm and spicy like a guy's arms wrapped around you. I glance at the picture again, a surge of jealousy filling me. Which is silly. How can I be jealous of a model?

Even more irrational is the sudden fantasy of wanting a guy I've never met to put his arms around me—based solely on his scent. Hormones, pheromones, frontal lobe excitation. That's all it is. No guy would ever want me, the half-dead girl.

But I'm only fifteen and never been kissed and have no defense against hormones. Or hope.

Angry at myself, I slam the door so hard the metal rings out like a call to prayer. Or maybe a prayer answered.

Because there *he* is. Very real, very solid, very GUY.

He slouches against the wall of lockers, his gaze directed at my feet. His eyes, the color of the burnt coffee that somehow makes hospital cafeterias smell like home, roam slowly up my legs, taking in the “skinny jeans” that hang loosely on my bony-thin hipless frame.

A blink and the jeans are whisked away, leaving a red-hot trail behind as his gaze continues ravaging my body. Another blink and the vintage Nirvana tee I'd hidden from my Mom under my denim jacket and Bongo cardi vanish as well. But somehow I'm not wearing my cotton sports bra and panties anymore. Instead I feel as naked as his swimsuit model, and my mouth opens and closes as I try to figure out how to pout like she does.

And end up burbling like a fish snared on a hook. At least

that's what I imagine as his eyes finally make it to my mouth and sunken cheeks and barren, naked eyes. My ears pop as my fantasy bursts.

Suddenly he's just a guy, shoulders and neck hunched as if he isn't sure how tall he's meant to be, navy T-shirt with a frayed collar revealing chiseled arms, single zit marring the perfect line of his jaw, dark eyes staring at me with the same morbid curiosity everyone else has—judging me a freak.

“That's my locker,” he says, not moving anything but his lips.

It must take a lot of energy to stand that still, look that nonchalant. Then I realize: the word has spread. Everyone's heard about me and my broken heart. He's afraid to get too close. I might be contagious.

“Mine too, I guess,” I stammer, hormones fanning warm embers in my stomach. “They assigned it to me. I'm Scarlet Killian.”

Infinitesimal nod. The movement releases a lock of his hair and it falls into his eyes. He doesn't shake it free or even blink as strands curl across his impossibly long eyelashes. I can't stop staring. My fingers itch with a desire to reach across the space separating us and brush it back.

“Jordan. Summers.” He adds the last like I should already know his name. As if his reputation had preceded him.

Reputation for what, I have no idea, but again hope blossoms in me. Maybe he's the kind of guy who doesn't care what a girl looks like or if she's too bony or has to carry her own AED and would probably die if they tried to ever kiss or, god forbid, fool around.

I might not make it that long. Not with the way my heart is banging against its cage, desperate for escape. How sad would that be? Dying before a first kiss?

Not sad in a tragic, melancholy, write a sonnet way. Sad as in desperate. Loser. Freak.

My cheeks heat with a blush. I grab the handle to my backpack, hoping my sweaty palm won't slip. "Guess I'd better go."

But I can't move, too busy reveling in the fact that the toe of Jordan's hiking boot is touching my left foot.

Then, miracle of miracles, Jordan touches my elbow. I dare to glance up, my head rushing in sync with the bass line of my heartbeat.

"Hey," he says. "I think that's your mom."

He nods over my shoulder to the tall blond in the nurse's uniform rushing down the hall as if there was a life-and-death emergency waiting for her, a pill bottle held aloft.

"Scarlet," Mom calls in a rush, her voice loud, so loud everyone looks away, embarrassed for me.

Before she can reach me, so fast I think maybe I'm imagining things, Jordan breathes into my ear, "I like your shirt."

Then he escapes the spotlight of pity, leaving me to burn alone in my hell on earth.

"You forgot to take your pill this morning. Are you okay? You look flushed." Mom's hand expertly feels my forehead, searing me with its coolness. I cringe, search for an escape but there is none, my back to the lockers. "I think you should come to my office, lie down. Let me check you out."

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Her words douse embers of hormonal flames into a soggy, muddy mess, inking my insides with soot that tastes of burnt toast, like what Mom gave me once to make me throw up after I ate Something Bad.

Silly me, letting hormones expose me to hope—I have no immunity. I need John Travolta’s plastic bubble to shield me until I can build a resistance.

In the meantime, I release my backpack and let my mom—well, stepmom actually, but she’s the only mom I’ve ever known—Nurse Killian, drag it and me down to the school nurse’s office.

Accepting the fact that this won’t be the last time, I vow to let my hair grow longer than the shoulder-length bob it’s in now, the better to shield my face as I hang my head. Shame and embarrassment wage a war, both declaring victory while my insides curl up in a fetal position and surrender without even a whimper.



4

When you've spent more time in a hospital bed than at home, and your mom is constantly taking you to new, better, top-flight teaching hospitals, and you have an obscure diagnosis, you get used to med students, residents, and consultants coming in and stripping you naked, their clinical gazes as cold as their hands and stethoscopes.

I'm numb to it, barely notice being touched anymore. By anyone.

Until that one brush of Jordan Summers' hand against my elbow. Staring at my mom's Nurse Mates, following the little red hearts on their heels, I cradle my elbow where he touched me, a smile breaking through. No one can see my smile. Which makes it all the more special.

This was why I fought my parents so hard about coming to high school. All this special and exciting and secret stuff. Things you can't learn from TV or books. Things you have to feel for yourself if you want to know what it means to live.

Really live, not just outlast a doctor's prognostication.

Goose bumps pepper my arms. Being a real girl—okay, *pretending* to be a real girl, a normal girl—is intoxicating. Worth putting up with the humiliation of facing guys like Mitch Kowlaski and his friends this morning.

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I don't want this giddy feeling to end. But, just like Cinderella, I'm on a strict deadline. I only have this week to prove I can be normal, attend school without killing myself.

That's hyperbole—but it's also exactly what my folks are most frightened of. After all these years of shielding me from danger, they think a few days of acting like a normal girl will be the death of me. Or at least trigger another Set Back.

It's up to me to prove them wrong.

Mom leads me into her office and closes the door. She sits me down in the student chair, stretching my arm along the desktop as she takes my pulse. It's fluttering in such disarray I wonder if my heart has learned Morse code. I imagine it tapping out J-O-R-D-A-N over and over again.

I don't look Mom in the eyes—I know exactly what I'll see and I'm not ready for it.

But I can't escape her voice.

“Scarlet, I think we've made a mistake, letting you try school. I'm sending you home.”

Mom sees any deviation from my baseline as a Symptom.
I see it as cause for celebration.

Now that I'm actually at school, instead of lying in a bed imagining what life in high school would be like, I feel great. A little lightheaded—but not the headachy, nauseating vertigo that means I'm getting ready to have a Set Back. Or worse, a Near Miss.

More like light-hearted.

Who ever thought my heart, so broken and damaged, could feel so light?

I don't tell Mom any of this, of course. She'd be on the phone to Dr. Richter or Dr. Frenzatta or Dr. Cho before I could finish my sentence. Convince them to rescind my school privileges, sentence me to more mindless, boring bed rest.

Bed rest. Now there's an oxymoron for you. I can sleep in bed—when I'm not in the hospital being poked and prodded every twenty minutes. But I can't *rest* in one. How can you rest when your body is cramping with pain and all you can taste is rust and your head is pounding and your heart feels like it's ready to explode?

Much less the times in between when you're being steered—on

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your bed—from one test to another or waiting for the next brainiac expert to weigh in with his theory of why your body is trying so very hard to kill you.

If you have to lie there, *resting*, another second, you know you'll go insane...

But I guess it's different for most kids. And most moms.

Mom bustles around the front part of her examination area, grabbing her stethoscope and BP cuff. It's the first time I've been here in her place of work. I think about all the kids parading in and out, asking her for help, trying to ditch classes or maybe seriously sick or injured, and she's there for them.

It's not a very distinguished area to be saving lives in. Same moss-green walls as the hallway, bulletin board with sports physical schedules and immunization info and warnings about teen pregnancy, proclaiming the marvels of abstaining. "You'll feel great if you just wait!" a perky church-girl squeals with glee.

There's an examination bed on the other side of the curtain from me and behind that a second curtain, office desk, chairs, and a built-in double-door cabinet in the far wall. Small dorm fridge in the corner. Outside the door, the nonstop shuffle of students provides background noise, punctuated by the clang of lockers and murmur of voices.

I take a breath from my belly and hold it a few seconds, feeling my heart slow in response. My pulse steadies. By the time Mom gets her blood pressure cuff and the oxygen monitor on me, my vitals are 100% normal, All-American girl.

I say nothing, knowing she really doesn't want me here, that

she's scared Something Bad will happen, that I'm taking a huge Risk.

That's what moms are meant to do: worry. I feel bad because I've made my mom worry a thousand times more than any mom should ever have to.

But I can't help it. This is my one and only chance to be normal, and I'm not giving up. Not yet. They promised me a week to prove myself. Today's only Monday.

Protesting will only make things worse. Better to let her change her own mind than try to change it for her.

"Hmm," she says, frowning at the monitor. "Everything looks good. Still...what's next on your schedule?"

As if she doesn't have my schedule memorized. "Meeting with the counselor, Mr. Thorne, and the peer support group."

"Right. PMS."

I cringe at her use of the acronym. The school has assigned me "peer mentors." Two kids in my grade and a junior to oversee us along with the guidance counselor. They say it's something they do for every student with "special needs" and that it's meant to help me "acclimate to Smithfield High's academic and social life."

Of course, in their infinite wisdom, they named it Peer Mentoring and Support: PMS. Exactly the kind of label any kid with "special needs" who needs extra help to "acclimate" wants. Sometimes I wonder how adults got to be in charge of anything, much less my life.

Mom's mouth does a little wiggle-dance, like that witch on that old TV show. I hold my breath, waiting for the magic. "Okay. I guess you can go. But take an extra vitamin, just in case."

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She hands me one of the wheat-colored horse pills from a bottle in her purse—my mom is always prepared. For anything. That's why she's so good at her job. Nothing surprises her.

As she turns to get me a glass of water, I palm the pill. I hate the damn things; they get caught in my throat and if I take too many of them, I feel flushed and dizzy. I looked up the side effects of the ingredients—multivitamins with extra doses of stress vitamins and anti-oxidants—and figured out that the high niacin content was probably causing it.

Mom doesn't know about my cheating. Refusing to take my vitamins is my one and only act of rebellion. How pathetic.

I pretend to swallow and hop to my feet, grabbing Phil.

"I'm here all day," she calls after me. "Anything goes wrong, I'll be right here waiting."

She can't see my smile stretching so wide it hurts. Now that we're past Mom's opening-day jitters, I'm certain nothing will stop me from lasting to the end of the week and proving to my folks that I'm healthy enough to stay in school.

The bell rings. I join the crush of kids in the hallway, letting the tide carry me to the library where I'm meeting with Mr. Thorne and my peer support group. My new friends. Truth be told, my first friends outside a hospital.

Phil rolls over someone's foot. "Watch it, Freak."

Mitch Kowlaski. Just my luck that we seem to be on the same trajectory as we follow our schedule. I press back against a row of lockers, hoping he'll keep walking.

"Sorry," I mumble.

His foot looks fine; there's not even a mark on his white and orange Nikes. But he doesn't care. He's obviously figured out I'm an easy target: no friends to defend me, no defenses of my own. He smiles and leans in, caging me between his arms. "You talking to me? That's not how it works around here, little girl. Freaks don't talk. They just get the hell out of my way."

One of his football buddies stops, watches us for a beat. He's taller and skinner than Mitch but still muscular. He grins at me and I'm waiting for him to join in on the torture-the-new-kid fun. Then he surprises me by punching Mitch in the arm. "Ditch the bitch, Mitch. We're gonna be late."

Mitch's scowl packs almost as much force as his bad breath. Stale coffee and garlic. He spins on his heel and turns away. Just as I dare to step back out into the corridor, this time keeping Phil close by my feet, he jumps back at me, raising his arms fast like he's going to hit me or grab me, and shouts, "Boo!"

His buddy laughs as I startle. I trip over Phil and bounce off the lockers before skittering away, hiding in the crowd.

That plastic bubble ball is looking better and better.

6

One thing living in a hospital has taught me is that you can survive anything, even the worst news imaginable. Once you know what you're up against, you can start to fight.

It's uncertainty that will kill you.

The not knowing.

Is this a symptom or not? Am I imagining that twinge or is it a harbinger of worse to come?

Is this real or am I crazy?

That's why I—we, Mom and Dad and I—embraced my broken heart.

Long QT Syndrome is the real name. The calcium pumps in my heart are genetically faulty, letting my heart hop, skip, and run headlong off a cliff like Wile E. Coyote, legs still pumping hard even as he plummets into the abyss.

These abnormal rhythms will kill me. Twenty percent chance of dying at any moment in any day. Just like that, dropping dead.

Nothing I can do about it—except fight to have a normal life. At least until my crazy, broken heart decides to spaz out on me.

I'd much rather fight against the Long QT than put up with frustrated doctors ordering yet another test or pill or surgery like they did before we found it. They'd look at me like I was playing

some kind of game, making things up just to annoy them or get attention or because I'm nuts.

Finally getting my death sentence freed me from those labels. I'm no longer the crazy sick girl, looking for attention. Now I'm the dying girl, certain—unlike almost everyone else—of exactly how I'll go. I might not know when, but I know how.

And I know how I want to live until the end. I'm not letting the odds or jerks like Mitch Kowlaski stand in my way.

Wrestling with fog, that's what it felt like all those years of not knowing.

Now I've got something to push back against. And it feels good.

Kids fill the hall from wall to wall. Despite the unfamiliar press of bodies, I don't panic. Instead, I let them steer me, like running in the midst of a herd of wild, untamed horses. At the end of the corridor, the herd separates into two, leaving me alone in front of a high glass wall.

The library.

Footsteps and lockers banging and voices colliding barrage me. Then I open the door, cross over, and step inside. I'm greeted not by silence, but instead by a hushed burble, relaxing, like the sound of a water fountain. I stand, enjoying the sensations, and take a breath.

School smells so much better than the hospital. And the library smells the best of all. To me, a good book is hot cocoa on a stormy winter day, sleet battering the window while you sit inside, nestled in a quilt.

A room filled with books?

I inhale deeply, a junkie taking her first hit. Sweet, musty paper. Ebony ink so crisp it threatens to rise off the pages and singe my nostrils. Glue and leather and cloth all mixed together in a *ménage à trois* of decadence.

Another breath and I'm drunk with possibilities. Words and

stories and people and places so far from here that Planet Earth is a mere dust mote dancing in my rearview mirror.

Hugging myself, containing my glee, I pivot, taking in books stacked two stories high, couches and chairs strategically positioned to catch the light from tall windows lining both sides of the corner, like the bridge of a battle cruiser, broad, high, supremely confident and comforting. In here, I dare to imagine that I might just survive high school after all.

“Can I help you?” the student manning the desk asks.

“I’m supposed to meet Mr. Thorne here?”

“Upstairs, first room on the left.”

“Thanks.” I follow her finger to where she points to two flights of lovely wooden steps, Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired. Not too steep—but that meant there were more of them. “Can I leave my bag down here for you to watch?”

She pushes her glasses up with an ink-smearred thumb. “No. I’m not allowed. But there’s a handicap elevator behind the stacks.”

“Thanks, I’m fine.” I haul my bag to the base of the steps, eager to meet my peers who also have “special needs.” I’ve never mentored anyone before. I hope I’m good at it, can help them.

Tugging my bag up the first step, there’s a loud thump as the wheels hit the riser. So much for doing things the easy way. Collapsing the handle, I grab on tight and haul it up. I barely clear each step, but my gasping is quieter than the thumping.

C’mon, I try to psych myself out. This is what you’ve been training for, sneaking into the kitchen and lifting those water jugs when Mom wasn’t looking.

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Mom doesn't approve of physical therapy—in the hospital she always refused PT, worried they'd push me too far and give me one of my dreaded Set Backs. But I knew the more I lay around, the weaker I'd feel and I'd never make it through a school day, so I started doing stuff on my own. Push-ups, sit-ups, hauling gallon jugs, going up and down the steps even though I'm not supposed to.

It paid off, because before I know it, I'm standing in the doorway of a small conference room, winded but alive.

Three kids sitting at the table look up when I arrive. A black girl with the figure of a fashion model and clothes to match. The girl beside her is kind of plump, with long, dark hair caught in a simple braid curled up in the hood of her gray sweatshirt like a cat napping. And Jordan Summers.

I'm surprised to see him. Guess it must've shown, either that or I was more out of breath than I thought, because next thing I know, Jordan is guiding me into a chair, while the plump girl is taking Phil from me, and the black girl jumps up and skitters back and forth, watching but not really doing anything to help.

"Hey, are you okay?" Jordan asks. My heart is tap-dancing his name again.

"I'm fine." I manage a smile. At least I hope it's a smile. Maybe not, because he looks panicked.

"I'll grab you some water." He rushes out of the room.

The second girl hauls my backpack over to me. "What's in this?" she asks as she takes the chair beside me. "You on the bowling team?"

Up close, I see that, if you look past the layers of gray clothing, she's actually beautiful. Exotic-looking. Hers is a true tropical golden complexion, unlike my sun-neglected sallow one. High cheekbones, gorgeous deep brown eyes.

She catches my stare and turns her face away, dropping Phil between our chairs, hunching her shoulders like a turtle pulling into its shell. "Sorry, shouldn't be touching your stuff."

"No," I protest. "It's fine. Thank you." Didn't I just say that? A blush singes my face. Hoards of doctors and nurses I can deal with. But I am totally unprepared for small-group dynamics or, even worse, small talk. I try again. "Hi. I'm Scarlet. Scarlet Killian."

"We know." The black girl bounces into her chair. "You're late. Like weeks late. Gonna upset our balance of power."

I have no idea what she's talking about. Jordan returns with water in a paper cup and presses it into my palm. Reveling in his touch, I gulp it down, just to fill the silence as everyone stares at me.

"This is Nessa Woodring," he introduces the black girl who waggles her fingers at me. Each fingernail is a good half-inch long and adorned with a different color, jewel, or picture. Watching her wave them is like watching a Pixar animation. "And Celina Price. They're sophomores, like you."

Celina just nods, still not making eye contact.

"Hi," I say again, totally lame, but I have no idea what else to say.

Nessa flounces the top half of her body across the narrow table as if prostrating herself on an altar. "So, Scarlet." She draws out my name into three syllables. "What's it like to die?"