

CHAPTER ONE

If my hair gets any frizzier, I'll shave it to the scalp.

Or light it on fire.

Whichever is easier.

I stare at my reflection in the pond and run my hands through the bane of my existence. For a moment, I seem victorious, my chestnut curls wrangled into submission. But when I drop my arms, the curls spring out, worse for the wear. I point an unmanicured finger at the water. "I hate your face."

"Tella," my mother yells from behind me, "what are you looking at?"

I spin around and grab a handful of my hair. Exhibit A.

"It's beautiful," she says.

"You did this to me," I tell her.

"No, your father gave you curly hair."

"But you dragged me to Middle of Nowhere, Montana, as a sick experiment to see just how hideous I could become."

Mom leans against the door frame of our craptastic house and nearly grins. "We've been here almost a year. When are you going to accept that this is our home?"

I walk toward her and punch a closed fist into the air. "I'll fight to the death."

A shadow crosses the deep lines of her face, and I instantly regret bringing up The Subject. "Sorry," I tell her. "You know I didn't mean —"

"I know," she says.

I rise up on tiptoes and kiss her cheek, then brush past her to go inside. My dad sits in the front room, rocking in a wooden chair like he's two hundred and fifty-six years old. In actuality, I think he's a couple of years shy.

"Hey, Pa," I say.

“Hey, Daugh,” he says.

Ever since my mom insisted we move out of Boston and into no-man’s-land, I’ve insisted on calling my dad Pa. It reminds me of those old black-and-white movies in which the daughters wear horrendous dresses and braid one another’s hair. He wasn’t a fan of my new name for him, but he accepted his fate over time. Guess he thought I could’ve rebelled a lot more following our relocation to purgatory, all things considered.

“What are we doing tonight?” I ask, dropping down onto the floor. “Dinner at a glam restaurant? Theater in the city?”

Dad’s mouth pulls down at the corner. He’s disappointed.

That makes two of us.

“Humor me and pretend you’re happy,” he answers. “That’d be entertaining as hell.”

“Language,” I tsk.

He waves me off, pretending he’s the man of this house and can say whatever he damn well pleases. I laugh when seconds later he glances over to see if Mom heard.

“I’m going to my room,” I announce.

Dad continues to stare outside like he’s comatose. I know that’s exactly what I’ll do when I get to my room, but at least I can do it in private.

The floorboards creak as I head down the narrow hallway toward my personal dungeon. A few feet from my room, I pause outside an open bedroom door that isn’t mine. I can’t help moving closer to the bed inside. Leaning over his sleeping frame, I check to see if he’s still breathing. It’s my twisted ritual.

“I’m not dead.”

I jump back, startled by my big brother’s voice.

“Shame,” I say. “I was hoping you’d kick off so I could have the bigger bedroom. You take up way more than your fair share of space, you know.”

He rolls to face me and grins. “I weigh, like, a hundred pounds.”
“Exactly.”

It kills me to see Cody sick. And it doesn't feel great ripping on him when what I want to do is ugly cry and beg him not to die. But he likes our back-and-forth. Says it makes him feel normal. So that's what we do.

“You look old,” Cody tells me.

“I'm sixteen.”

“Going on eighty.” He points to my face. “You have wrinkles.”

I dash toward the mirror over his dresser and look. From the bed, I hear Cody laughing, then coughing. “You're so vain,” he says into his fist, his chest convulsing.

“Jerk face.” I move to his side and pull the heavy blanket to his chin. “Mom wants to know how you feel today,” I lie.

“Better,” he says, returning the favor.

I nod and turn to leave.

“Tell her to stop worrying,” he finishes.

“I doubt she seriously cares.”

I can still hear him laughing when I get to my bedroom, shut the door, and sink to my knees. My breath whooshes out. He's getting worse. I can hear it in the way his words quiver. Like speaking takes everything he has. In the beginning, it was just the weight loss. Then it was night sweats and shaking hands. Then the fun really started. Seizures. Thinning hair. Slurred speech that started one Wednesday and ended with a coma on Friday. He came around three days later. Mom said it was because he didn't want to miss a football game. Not that he played anymore. That died a long time ago.

Now he's down to this: pretending. Pretending to be the brother who swung a right hook in my honor. Pretending to be the son who danced a jig in the end zone that his dad taught him. He's still the guy who isn't afraid to write more than his name in a greeting

card. Still the guy who loves redbrick buildings and cars that growl and Cheez Whiz sprayed straight from the can into his open mouth.

He is still my brother.

He is not my brother at all.

I don't know why Mom thought this place would help. A dozen doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with him, yet she thinks Montana's "fresh air" will do the trick. The look in her eyes while we packed the moving truck still haunts me. Like she was waiting for something.

Or running from something.

I pull myself up and walk to the window. Outside, I can hear yellow-headed blackbirds calling. I rarely noticed stuff like birds in Boston. In Boston, we lived in a brownstone that wasn't brown, and I had friends two doors down. Our family owned three floors of sparkling space, and we could walk to restaurants.

Here there are rocks. And a stream that runs near our home that's free of fish. The sky is empty of rooflines and overstuffed with cotton-ball clouds. There are no neighbors. No girls my age to discuss the joys of colored tights with. A single, lonely road leads from our house into town. When I look at it, I want to strap a bag to a stick and limp down it hobo style.

Tall pine trees surround our house, like their job is to hide us from the world. I imagine running toward them wearing a hockey mask, swinging a chain saw over my head. They'd probably uproot themselves and squash me like a bug. Bury me beneath their twisted roots.

That's how I want to go when it's my time.

With a bang.

I slide the window open and stick my head outside. What I wouldn't do to see my friends again. To get a mani-pedi or a blow-out. Or a Greek salad. Oh my friggin' God, Feta cheese and

kalamata olives. I wallow in self-pity for another moment before remembering my brother. Then I spend exactly three minutes feeling like the World's Biggest Ass.

We're here for him. And I'd give anything to see my brother get out of bed and dance in the street like he did on Halloween two years ago. Or even just sit up for a few minutes without coughing.

I motorboat my lips and spin in a circle like a ballerina. I spin and spin until everything becomes a blur. When I stop, my room continues to rush past me, and I lunatic laugh that this is what I do for fun now.

My vision finally returns to normal, and my eyes land on the bed. Sitting on my white comforter is a small blue box.