

PRAISE FOR  
**THE WAY I USED TO BE**

★“This is a poignant book that realistically looks at the lasting effects of trauma on love, relationships, and life. . . . Teens will be reminded of Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*. VERDICT An important addition for every collection.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

“*The Way I Used to Be* explores the aftermath of sexual assault with a precision and searing honesty that is often terrifying, sometimes eerily beautiful, and always completely true. It is The Hero’s Journey through a distorted circus mirror—one girl’s quest to turn desperation into courage, to become a survivor instead of a victim. Amber Smith gets it exactly right.”

—AMY REED, author of *Beautiful* and *Clean*

“Edy’s exploration of the meaning of sexuality and intimacy will be thought provoking for teen readers of various experience levels, and this title is likely to find space alongside [Laurie Halse] Anderson’s *Speak*.”

—*Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*

“*The Way I Used To Be* is an intensely gripping and raw look at secrets, silence, speaking out, and survival in the aftermath of a sexual assault. A must-have for every collection that serves teens.”

—*School Library Journal/Teen Librarian Toolbox*

“Readers will root for her as she gathers the  
courage, at last, to speak up.”

—*B&N Teen Blog*

“This is far from a feel-good read, but I can’t implore  
how *necessary* it is to read a book like this one. . . . As  
unforgettable and stirring as Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*,  
Smith’s provocative debut is best described as a survival  
story with hope and anger serving as prominent themes so  
fully explored they simmer off the page.”

—TheYoungFolks.com

THE

AMBER SMITH

WAY I

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USED

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TO BE

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To You.  
To every *you* who has ever known the feeling  
of needing new ways to be.



PART

ONE

**Freshman Year**





**I DON'T KNOW A LOT** of things. I don't know why I didn't hear the door click shut. Why I didn't lock the damn door to begin with. Or why it didn't register that something was wrong—so mercilessly wrong—when I felt the mattress shift under his weight. Why I didn't scream when I opened my eyes and saw him crawling between my sheets. Or why I didn't try to fight him when I still stood a chance.

I don't know how long I lay there afterward, telling myself: Squeeze your eyelids shut, try, just try to forget. Try to ignore all the things that didn't feel right, all the things that felt like they would never feel right again. Ignore the taste in your mouth, the sticky dampness of the sheets, the fire radiating through your thighs, the nauseating pain—this bulletlike thing that ripped through you and got lodged in your gut somehow. No, can't cry. Because there's nothing to cry about. Because it was just a dream, a bad dream—a nightmare. Not real. Not real. Not real. That's what I keep thinking: *NotRealNotRealNotReal*. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Like a mantra. Like a prayer.

I don't know that these images flashing through my mind—a movie of someone else, somewhere else—will never really go away, will never ever stop playing, will never stop haunting me. I close my eyes again, but it's all I can see, all I can feel, all I can hear: his skin, his arms, his legs, his hands too strong, his breath on me, muscles stretching, bones cracking, body breaking, me getting weaker, fading. These things—it's all there is.

I don't know how many hours pass before I awake to the usual Sunday morning clamor—pots and pans clanging against the stove. Food smells seeping under my door—bacon, pancakes, Mom's coffee. TV sounds—cold fronts and storm systems moving through the area by midday—Dad's weather channel. Dishwasher-running sounds. Yippy yappy dog across the street yips and yaps at probably nothing, as always. And then there's the almost imperceptible rhythm of a basketball bouncing against the dewy blacktop and the squeaky-sneaker shuffling of feet in the driveway. Our stupid, sleepy suburbia, like every other stupid, sleepy suburbia, awakens groggy, indifferent to its own inconsequence, collectively wishing for one more Saturday and dreading chores and church and to-do lists and Monday morning. Life just goes, just happens, continuing as always. Normal. And I can't shake the knowledge that life will just keep on happening, regardless if I wake up or not. Obscenely normal.

I don't know, as I force my eyes open, that the lies are already in motion. I try to swallow. But my throat's raw. Feels like strep, I tell myself. I must be sick, that's all. Must have a fever. I'm delirious. Not thinking clearly. I touch my lips. They sting. And my tongue tastes blood. But no, it couldn't have been. *Not real*. So as I stare at the

ceiling, I'm thinking: I must have serious issues if I'm dreaming stuff like that. Horrible stuff like that. About Kevin. Kevin. Because Kevin is my brother's best friend, practically my brother. My parents love him like everyone does, even me, and Kevin would never—could never. Not possible. But then I try to move my legs to stand. They're so sore—no, broken feeling. And my jaw aches like a mouthful of cavities.

I close my eyes again. Take a deep breath. Reach down and touch my body. No underwear. I sit up too fast and my bones wail like I'm an old person. I'm scared to look. But there they are: my days-of-the-week underwear in a ball on the floor. They were my Tuesdays, even though it was Saturday, because, well, who would ever know anyway? That's what I was thinking when I put them on yesterday. And now I know, for sure, it happened. It actually happened. And this pain in the center of my body, the depths of my insides, restarts its torture as if on cue. I throw the covers off. Kneecap-shaped bruises line my arms, my hips, my thighs. And the blood—on the sheets, the comforter, my legs.

But this was supposed to be an ordinary Sunday.

I was supposed to get up, get dressed, and sit down to breakfast with my family. Then after breakfast, I would promptly go to my bedroom and finish any homework I hadn't finished Friday night, sure to pay special attention to geometry. I would practice that new song we learned in band, call my best friend, Mara, maybe go to her house later, and do dozens of other stupid, meaningless tasks.

But that's not what's going to happen today, I know, as I sit in my bed, staring at my stained skin in disbelief, my hand shaking as I press it against my mouth.

Two knocks on my bedroom door. I jump.

“Edy, you up?” My mother’s voice shouts. I open my mouth, but it feels like someone poured hydrochloric acid down my throat and I might never be able to speak again. Knock, knock, knock: “Eden, breakfast!” I quickly pull my nightgown down as far as it will go, but there’s blood smeared on that, too.

“Mom?” I finally call back, my voice scratchy and horrible.

She cracks the door open. As she peers in her eyes immediately go to the blood. “Oh God,” she gasps, as she slips inside and quickly shuts the door behind her.

“Mom, I—” But how am I supposed say the words, the worst words, the ones I know have to be spoken?

“Oh, Edy.” She sighs, turning her head at me with a sad smile. “It’s okay.”

“Wh—” I start to say. How can it be okay, in what world is this okay?

“This happens sometimes when you’re not expecting it.” She flits around my room, tidying up, barely looking at me while she explains about periods and calendars and counting the days. “It happens to everyone. That’s why I told you, you need to keep track. That way you won’t have to deal with these . . . surprises. You can be . . . prepared.”

This is what she thinks this is.

Now, I’ve seen enough TV movies to know you’re supposed to tell. You’re just supposed to fucking tell. “But—”

“Why don’t you hop in the shower, sweetie?” she interrupts. “I’ll take care of this . . . uh . . .” she begins, gesturing with her arm in a wide circle over my bed, searching for the word, “this mess.”

This mess. Oh God, it's now or never. Now or never. It's now. "Mom—" I try again.

"Don't be embarrassed," she says with a laugh. "It's fine, really, I promise." She stands over me, looking taller than she ever has before, handing me my robe, oblivious of my Tuesday underwear crumpled at her feet.

"Mom, Kevin—" I start, but his name in my mouth makes me want to throw up.

"Don't worry, Edy. He's out back with your brother. They're playing basketball. And your father's glued to the TV, as usual. Nobody'll see you. Go ahead. Put this on."

Looking up at her, I feel so small. And Kevin's voice moves like a tornado through my mind, whispering—his breath on my face—*No one will ever believe you. You know that. No one. Not ever.*

Then my mom shakes the robe at me, offering me a lie I didn't even need to think up. She starts getting that look in her eye—that impatient, it's-the-holidays-and-I-don't-have-time-for-this look. Clearly, it was time for me to get going so she could deal with this mess. And clearly, nobody was going to hear me. Nobody was going to see me—he knew that. He had been around long enough to know how things work here.

I try to stand without looking like everything is broken. I kick the Tuesdays under the bed so she won't find them and wonder. I take my robe. Take the lie. And as I look back at my mother, watching her collect the soiled sheets in her arms—the evidence—I know somehow if it's not now, it has to be never. Because he was right, no one would ever believe me. Of course they wouldn't. Not ever.



In the bathroom, I carefully peel off my nightgown, holding it at arm's length as I ball it up and stuff it in the garbage can under the sink. I adjust my glasses and examine myself more closely. There are a few faint marks on my throat in the shape of his fingers. But they're minor, really, in comparison to the ones on my body. No bruises on my face. Only the two-inch scar above my left eye from my bike accident two summers ago. My hair is slightly more disastrous than usual, but essentially I look the same—I can pass.

By the time I get out of the shower—still dirty, after scrubbing my body raw, thinking I could maybe wash the bruises off—there he is. Sitting at my kitchen table in my dining room with my brother, my father, my mother, sipping my orange juice from my glass—his mouth on a glass I would have to use someday. On a fork that would soon be undifferentiated from all the other forks. His fingerprints not only all over every inch of me, but all over everything: this house, my life, the world—infected with him.

Caelin raises his head and narrows his eyes at me as I cautiously approach the dining room. He can see it. I knew he would see it right away. If anyone was going to notice—if I could count on anyone—it would be my big brother. “Okay, you’re being really weird and intense right now,” he announces. He could tell because he always knew me even better than I knew myself.

So I stand there and wait for him to do something about this. For him to set his fork down, stand up and pull me aside, take me out to the backyard by the arm, and demand to know what’s wrong with me, demand to know what happened. Then I’d tell him what Kevin did to me and he’d give me one of his big brother-isms, like,

*Don't worry, Edy, I'll take care of it.* The way he did whenever anyone was picking on me. And then he'd run back inside the house and stab Kevin to death with his own butter knife.

But that's not what happens.

What happens is he just sits there. Watching me. Then slowly his mouth contorts into one of his smirks—our inside-joke grin—waiting for me to reciprocate, to give him a sign, or just start laughing like maybe I'm trying to secretly make fun of our parents. He's waiting to get it. But he doesn't get it. So he just shrugs, looks back down at his plate, and lops off a big slice of pancake. The bullet lodges itself a little deeper in my stomach as I stand there, frozen in the hallway.

"Seriously, what are you staring at?" he mumbles with his mouth full of pancake, in that familiar brotherly, you're-the-stupidest-person-on-the-face-of-the-earth tone he had perfected over the years.

Meanwhile, Kevin barely even glances up. No threatening looks. No gestures of warning, nothing. As if nothing had even happened. The same cool disregard he always used with me. Like I'm still just Caelin's dorky little sister with bad hair and freckles, freshman band-geek nobody, tagging along behind them, clarinet case in tow. But I'm not her anymore. I don't even want to be her anymore. That girl who was so naive and stupid—the kind of girl who could let something like this happen to her.

"Come on, Minnie," Dad says to me, using my pet name. Minnie as in Mouse, because I was so quiet. He gestured at the food on the table. "Sit down. Everything's getting cold."

As I stand in front of them—their Mousegirl—crooked

glasses sliding down the bridge of my nose, stripped before eight scrutinizing eyes waiting for me to play my part, I finally realize what it's all been about. The previous fourteen years had merely been dress rehearsal, preparation for knowing how to properly shut up now. And Kevin had told me, with his lips almost touching mine he whispered the words: *You're gonna keep your mouth shut*. Last night it was an order, a command, but today it's just the truth.

I push my glasses up. And with a sickness in my stomach—something like stage fright—I move slowly, cautiously. Try to act like every part of my body, inside and out, isn't throbbing and pulsing. I sit down in the seat next to Kevin like I had at countless family meals. Because we considered him part of our family, Mom was always saying it, over and over. He was always welcome. Always.



**IT'S TOTALLY SILENT IN** the house after breakfast. Caelin left with Kevin to go play basketball with some of their old teammates from high school. Dad needed some kind of special wrench from the hardware store to install the new showerhead he got Mom for Christmas. And Mom was in her room, busy addressing New Year's cards.

I sit in the living room, staring out the window.

A row of multicolored Christmas lights lining the garage flicker spastically in the gray morning light. The clouds pile one on top of the other endlessly, the sky closing in on us. Next door, a mostly deflated giant Santa rocks back and forth in the center of our neighbors' white lawn with a slow, sick, zombielike shuffle. It feels like that scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when everything changes from black and white to color. Except it's more like the other way around. Like I always thought things were in color, but they were really black and white. I can see that now.

"You feeling all right, Edy?" Mom suddenly appears in the room carrying a stack of envelopes in her hands.

I shrug in response, but I don't think she even notices.

I watch a car roll through the stop sign at the corner, the driver barely glancing up to see if anyone's there. I think about how they say when most people get into car accidents, it's less than one mile from their home. Maybe that's because everything's so familiar, you stop paying attention. You don't notice the one thing that's different or wrong or off or dangerous. And I think about how maybe that's what just happened to me.

"You know what I think?" she asks in that tone she's been using on me ever since Caelin left for school over the summer. "I think you're mad at your brother because he hasn't spent enough time with you while he's been home." She doesn't wait for me to tell her she's wrong before she keeps talking. To tell her that it's really her who's mad that he hasn't been home enough. "I know you want it to be just the two of you. Like it used to be. But he's getting older—you're both getting older—he's in college now, Edy."

"I know that—" I start to say, but she interrupts.

"It's okay that he wants to see his friends while he's home, you know."

The truth is, none of us knows how to act around one another without Caelin here. It's like we've become strangers all of a sudden. Caelin was the glue. He gave us purpose—a reason, a way to be together. Because what are we supposed to do with each other if we're not cheering him on at his basketball games anymore? What are our kitchen table conversations supposed to sound like without him regaling us with his daily activities? I'm certainly no substitute; everyone knows that. What the hell do I have going on that could ever compare to the nonstop larger-than-life excitement that

is Caelin McCrorey? At first I thought we were adjusting. But this is just how we are. Dad's lost without another guy around. Mom doesn't know what to do with herself without Caelin taking up all her time and attention. And me, I just need my best friend back. It's simple, yet so complicated.

"It wouldn't hurt you to branch out a bit either," she continues, shuffling the stack of envelopes in her hands. "Make a couple of new friends. It's officially the new year." She smiles. I don't. "Edy, you know I think Mara's great—she's been a great friend to you—but a person is allowed more than one friend in life is all I'm saying."

I stand and walk past her into the kitchen. I pour myself a glass of water, just so I have something, anything, to focus on other than my mom, the pointlessness of this conversation, and the endless train wreck of thoughts crashing through my mind.

She stands next to me at the kitchen counter. I can feel her staring at the side of my face. It makes me want to crawl out of my skin. She reaches out to tuck my bangs behind my ear, like she always does. But I back away. Not on purpose. Or maybe it is. I'm not sure. I know I've hurt her feelings. I open my mouth to tell her I'm sorry, but what comes out instead is: "It's too hot here. I'm going outside."

"Oh-kay," she says slowly, confused.

My feet quickly move away from her. I grab my coat off the hook near the back door, slide my boots on, and walk out to the backyard. I brush the snow off one of the wooden swing-set seats. I feel the bruises on my body swell against the cold wood and metal chains. I just want to sit still for a second, breathe, and try to figure out how things could have ever gotten to this point. Figure out what I'm supposed to do now.

I close my eyes tight, weave my fingers together—and though I know I don't do it nearly as much as I probably should—I pray, pray harder than I've ever prayed in my life. To somehow undo this. To just wake up, and have it be this morning again, except this time nothing would have happened last night.

I remember sitting down at the table with him. We played Monopoly. It was nothing, though. Nothing seemed wrong. He was actually being nice to me. Acting like . . . he liked me. Acting like I was more than just Caelin's little sister. Like I was a real person. A girl, not just a kid. I went to bed happy. I went to bed thinking of him. But the next thing I remember is waking up to him climbing on top of me, putting his hand over my mouth, whispering *shutup-shutupshutup*. And everything happening so fast. If it could all be a dream, just a dream that I could wake up from, then I would still be safe in my bed. That would make so much more sense. And nothing will be wrong. Nothing will be different. I'll just be in my bed and nothing bad will ever have to happen there.

"Wake up," I think I whisper out loud. God, just wake up. Wake up, Edy!

"Eden!" a voice calls.

My eyes snap open. My heart sinks into the pit of my stomach as I look around. Because I'm not in my bed. I'm in the backyard sitting on the swing, my bare fingers numb, curled tightly around the metal chains.

"What are you doing, splitting atoms over there?" my brother shouts from the back door. "I've been standing here calling your name a hundred times."

He walks toward me, his steps are wide and swift and sure,

the fresh snow crushing easily under his feet. I sit up straighter, put my hands in my lap, and try not to give away anything that would let him know how wrong my body feels to me right now.

“So, Edy,” Caelin begins, sitting down on the swing next to mine. “I hear you’re mad at me.”

I try to smile, try to do my best impression of myself. “Let me guess who told you that.”

“She said it’s because I’m not spending enough time with you?” His half grin tells me he half believes her.

“No, that’s not it.”

“Okay, well, you’re acting way weird.” He elbows me in the arm and adds with a smile, “Even for you.”

Maybe this is my chance. Would Kevin really kill me if I told—could he really kill me? He could. He made sure I knew he could if he wanted to. But he’s not here right now. Caelin is here. To protect me, to be on my side.

“Caelin, please don’t leave tomorrow,” I blurt out, feeling a sudden urgency take hold of me. “Don’t go back to school. Just don’t leave me, okay? Please,” I beg him, tears almost ready to spill over.

“What?” he asks, almost a laugh in his voice. “Where is this coming from? I have to go back, Edy—I don’t have a choice. You know that.”

“Yes, you do, you have a choice. You could go to school here—you had that scholarship to go here, remember?”

“But I didn’t take it.” He pauses, looking at me, uncertain. “Look, I don’t know what you want me to say here. Are you serious?”

“I just don’t want you to go.”

“All right, just for fun let’s say I stay. Okay? But think about it,

what am I supposed to do about school? I'm right in the middle of the year. All my stuff is there. My girlfriend is there. My life is there now, Edy. I can't just drop everything and move back home so we can hang out, or whatever."

"That's not what I mean. Don't talk to me like I'm a kid," I tell him quietly.

"Hate to break it to you, but you are a kid, Edy." He smiles, clapping my shoulder. "Besides, what's Kevin supposed to do? We're roommates. We share a car. We share bills—everything. We're kind of depending on each other right now, Edy. Grown-up stuff. You know?"

"I depend on you too—I need you."

"Since when?" he says with a laugh.

"It's not funny. You're *my* brother, not Kevin's," I almost shout, my voice trembling.

"All right, all right." He rolls his eyes. "Apparently you gave up having a sense of humor for your New Year's resolution," he says, standing up like the conversation is over just because he's said what he wanted to say. "Come on, let's go inside." He holds out his hand to me. I feel my feet plant themselves firmly in the snow. My legs begin to follow him instinctually, as they always have. My hand rises toward his. But then just as my fingers are about to touch his palm, something snaps inside of me. Physically snaps. If my body were a machine, it's like the gears inside of me just grind to a halt, my muscles short-circuit and forbid my body to move.

"No." I say firmly, my voice someone else's.

He just stands there looking down at me. Confused because I've never said no to him before in my entire life. He shifts from

one foot to the other and turns his head ever so slightly, like a dog. He exhales a puff of air through his smiling lips and opens his mouth. But I can't let him say whatever smart-ass remark his mind is churning out.

"You don't get it!" I would have yelled the words if my teeth weren't clenched.

"Get what?" he asks, his voice an octave too high, looking around us like there's someone else here who's supposed to be filling him in.

"You're my brother." I feel the words collapsing in my throat like an avalanche. "Not Kevin's!"

"What's your problem? I know that!"

I stand up, can't let him try to get away before he knows the truth. Before I tell him what happened. "If you know that, then why is he always here? Why do you keep bringing him with you? He has his own family!" My voice falters, and I can't stop the tears from falling.

"You've never had a problem with him being around before. In fact, it's almost like the opposite." The sentence hangs in the air like an echo. I look up at him. Even blurry through my tears I can tell he's mad.

"What do you mean"—I shudder—"the opposite?"

"I mean, maybe it's time to drop the whole little schoolgirl-crush thing. It was cute for a while, Edy—funny, even—but it's played itself out, don't you think? It's obviously making you, I don't know, mean, or something. You're not acting like yourself." And then he adds, more to himself, "You know, I guess I should've seen this coming. It's so funny because me and Kevin were just talking about this."

“What?” I breathe, barely able to give the word any volume. I can’t believe it. I cannot believe he’s really done it. He’s managed to turn my brother—my true best friend, my ally—against me.

“Forget it,” he snaps, throwing his hands up as he walks away from me. And I can only watch him get smaller, watch him fade from color to black and white, like everything else. I stand there for a while, trying to figure out how to follow, how to move—how to exist in a world where Caelin is no longer on my side.

That night I close my bedroom door gently. I turn the lock ninety degrees to the right and pull on the knob as hard as I can, just to make sure. Then I turn around and look at my bed, the sheets and comforter clean and perfectly made up. I don’t know how I can possibly go even one more minute without telling someone what happened. I take my phone out of my pocket and start to call Mara. But I stop.

I turn on the ceiling light and my desk lamp, and then pull out my sleeping bag from the top shelf of my closet. I roll it out onto the floor, and try to think of anything but the reason why I cannot bring myself to sleep in my bed. I lie down, half falling, half collapsing, onto my bedroom floor. I pull my pillow over my head and I cry so hard I don’t know how I’ll ever stop. I cry for what feels like days. I cry until there are no more tears, like I have used them all up, like maybe I have broken my damn tear ducts. Then I just make the sounds: the gasping and sniffing. I feel like I might just fall asleep and not wake up—in fact, I almost hope I do.



**IF THERE'S A HELL**, it must look a lot like a high school cafeteria. It's the first day back from winter break. And I'm trying so hard to just go back to my life. The way it used to be. The way I used to be.

I exit the lunch line and scan the cafeteria for Mara. Finally I spot her, waving her arm over her head from across the crowded, rumbling cafeteria. She was able to secure us a spot in the drafty corner near the windows. Every step I take is intercepted by someone walking in front of me, someone shouting, trying to be heard over the noise but only adding to the disorder of everything.

"Hey!" Mara calls to me as I approach. "Stephen got here early and saved us this table." She's smiling hugely, which she's been doing all day, ever since she got her braces off last week.

"Cool," I manage. I knew scoring this table was like hitting the jackpot. We would be inconspicuous, not as much of a target as usual. But I can only give Stephen a small smile.

Stephen Reinheiser, aka Fat Kid, is a nice, quiet boy we know from yearbook who occasionally sits with us at lunch. Not really a

friend. An acquaintance. He is a different breed of nerd than me and Mara. We are club-joining, band-type nerds. But he just doesn't fit in, really, anywhere. It doesn't matter though, because there is a silent understanding among us. We have known him since middle school. We know his mother died when we were in seventh grade. We know his experience has been just as tragic as ours, if not more. So we look out for each other. Meaning, if one of us can snag a decent lunch table, it belongs to us all and we don't have to talk about why this is important.

"Edy?" Stephen begins in his usual hesitant manner. "Um, I was wondering if you wanted to work together on the history project for Simmons's class?"

"What project?"

"The one he talked about this morning. You know, he handed out that list of topic ideas," he reminds me. But I have no recollection of this at all. It must show because Stephen opens his binder, smiling as he pulls out a sheet of paper and slides it across the table. "I was thinking 'Columbus: Hero or Villain?'"

I look at the paper for what I'm sure is the first time. "Oh. Okay. Yeah. That sounds good. Columbus."

Mara takes out her compact mirror and examines her new teeth for the millionth time, obsessively running her tongue over their smooth surfaces. "God, is this what everyone's teeth feel like?" she asks absently.

But before either of us can answer, a whole fleet of corn kernel pellets shoot down over our table. Mara screams, "Ew, God!" As she shakes her hair the little yellow balls tumble to the floor one by one. I follow the path of the ammo, leading to this table full of

sophomore guys, each one in his pathetic JV jacket, keeled over in their chairs laughing hysterically at Mara as she frantically combs her long hair with her fingers. I hear her voice, almost like an echo in my brain, “Did I get it all?” I look at her, but it seems like it’s all happening at a distance, in slow motion. Stephen sets his bologna sandwich down on top of its plastic baggie and clears his throat like he’s about to do something. But then he just looks down instead, like he’s concentrating so hard on the damn sandwich, there’s no room to think about anything else.

“Fire in the hole!” I hear someone shout.

My head snaps up just in time to see one of them—the one with the stupid grin and pimply face—line up his sight, the cheap, malleable metal spoon poised to launch a spoonful of pale green peas right at me. His index finger pulls back on the tip of the spoon slightly.

And some kind of hot, white light flashes in front of my eyes, harnessing itself to my heart, making it beat uncontrollably. I’m up from my seat before I even understand how my body moved so quickly without my brain. Zitface narrows his eyes at me, his smile widening as his tablemates cheer him on. His finger releases like a trigger. The spoonful of peas hit me square in the chest and then drop to the floor with these tiny, dull, flat thuds that I swear I can hear over all the other noise.

Suddenly the planet stops orbiting, pauses, and goes silent for just a moment while all the eyes in the world focus on me standing there with mushy pea splat on the front of my shirt. Then time rushes forward again, the moment over. And cacophony erupts in the cafeteria. The Earth resumes its rotation around the sun. The sounds of

the entire cafeteria's oooohhhhs and shouting and laughter flood my body. My brain overheats. And I run, I just go.

I'm aware of Mara watching me storm out of the cafeteria, her palms facing up toward the mind-numbing fluorescent lights, mouthing, *What are you doing?* Aware of Stephen looking back and forth between me, Mara, and his bologna sandwich, his mouth hanging open. But I can't stop. Can't turn around. Can't go back there. Ever. Without a hall pass, without permission, without a coherent thought in my head except *Get the hell out*, I get the hell out.

In the hall I walk fast. I can barely breathe, something strangling me from the inside out. On autopilot, my feet race down the hall and up the stairs, looking for a place—any place—to just be. I shove through the double doors of the library and it's like I've just walked outside. Things are somehow lighter here, and everything moves at a more normal pace, slowing my heart down along with them as I stand in the entryway. There are only a few kids scattered throughout the entire library. No one even looks up at me.

The door behind the circulation desk opens and Miss Sullivan walks through cradling a stack of books in her arms. She smiles at me so warmly. "Hello. What can I do for you?" she asks, setting the books down on the counter.

*Hide me*, I want to tell her. Just hide me from the world. And never make me go back out through those doors again. But I don't. I don't say anything. I can't.

"Come on in," she gestures me forward. "Here's the sign-in sheet," she tells me, centering a clipboard in front of me.

I take the pen tied to a string tied to the top of the clipboard. It feels like a chopstick between my fingers, my hand shaking as I

press the pen against the paper. You're supposed to fill in the date, your name, the time, and where you're coming from. We have to do this every time we come or go anywhere.

Miss Sullivan looks at the scribble that's supposed to be my name. "And what's your name again?" she asks gently.

"Eden," I answer, my voice low.

"Eden, okay. And where are you coming from?" I've left that box blank.

I open my mouth but nothing comes out at first. She looks up at me with another smile.

"Lunch. I don't have a pass to be here," I admit, feeling like some kind of fugitive. I can feel my eyes well up with tears as I look across the desk at her.

"That's okay, Eden," she says softly.

I dab at my eyes with my sleeve.

"You know, I think I have something for that." She nods toward the green stains on the front of my shirt. "Why don't you come in my office?"

She pushes open the half door at the side of the counter and leads me inside. "Have a seat," she tells me as she closes the door behind us.

She rifles through one of her desk drawers, pulling out handfuls of pens and pencils and highlighters. Her office is bright and warm. There's a whole table in the corner just filled with different plants. She has all these posters pinned to the wall about books and librarians, and one of those big READ posters with the president smiling and holding a book in his hands. One of them says: A ROOM WITHOUT BOOKS IS LIKE A BODY WITHOUT A SOUL—CICERO.

“Ah-hah. Here it is!” She hands me one of those stain removal pens. “I always keep one of these nearby—I’m pretty klutzy, so I’m always spilling things on myself.” She smiles as she watches me pressing the spongy marker tip into the stains on my shirt.

“Please don’t make me go back there,” I plead, too desperate and exhausted to even attempt to make it seem like I’m not desperate and exhausted. “Do you think maybe I could volunteer during lunch from now on? Or something?”

“I wish I could tell you yes, Eden.” She pauses with a frown. “But unfortunately we already have the maximum number of volunteers for this period. However, I think you would be a great fit here, I really do. Is there another time you would be interested in, maybe during a study hall?”

“Are you really sure there isn’t any room because I really, really can’t be in lunch anymore.” I feel my eyes getting hot and watery again.

“May I ask why?”

“It’s . . . personal, I guess.” But the truth is that it’s humiliating. It’s too humiliating to be in lunch anymore, to have to hide and still get food thrown at you anyway, and not be able to do anything about it, and your friends are too afraid to stand up for you, or themselves. Especially when you just got attacked in your own house—in your own bed—and you can’t even stand up for yourself there, either, the one place you’re supposed to be safe. For all these reasons, it’s personal. And questions like “why” can’t truly be answered, not when this woman is looking at me so sweetly, expecting a response that leaves her with something she can do about any of it. But since there’s not, I clear my throat and repeat, “Just personal.”

“I understand.” She looks down at her fingernails and smiles sadly. I wonder if she really does understand or if that’s only something she says.

Just as I’m about to stand up and leave, something in her face changes. She looks at me like she’s considering letting me do it anyway, like she’s going to take pity on me.

“Well,” she begins. “I do have this idea I’ve been toying with, something you might be interested in?”

I inch closer, literally pushing myself to the edge of my seat.

“I’ve been thinking about trying to put together a student group, a book club that would meet during lunch. It would be open to anyone who’s interested in doing a little extracurricular reading. It would be like an informal discussion group, more or less. Does that sound like something you’d want to do?”

“Yes! Definitely, yes, yes. I love books!” Then, more calmly, I add, “I mean, I love to read, so I just think a book club, um, would be great.” I have to force my mouth to stop talking.

“Okay, well, that’s excellent. Now, according to school policy, any club must have at least six members to be official. So, first things first—do you know anyone else who you think might be interested?”

“Yeah, I think so, two people maybe—one for sure.”

“That’s a start—a good start. If you really want to do this, I’ll need you to do a little bit of the legwork, okay? Because basically my only role is to be a faculty adviser, a facilitator—the group itself is essentially student run, student organized—it’s your group, not mine. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, yeah. So what would I need to do then, to make it happen?”

“You can start by making flyers, putting them up around school. Start by seeing if we can get enough people interested.”

“I can do that. I can do that right now!”

She laughs a little. “You don’t have to do it right now—although I do appreciate the enthusiasm. In fact, you don’t have to do it at all. You can take some time to think about it if you want.”

“I’m sure. I want to, really.”

“Okay. All right then. I’ll take care of the paperwork this afternoon, how does that sound?”

“Great!” I shout, my voice all high and trembling as I fight the urge to jump over the desk and throw my arms around her neck. “That sounds really great!”

I make the flyer right then and there and have the walls plastered by the end of the day.



**SATURDAY MORNING, PROMPTLY AT TEN**, the doorbell rings. I call from my bedroom, “I’ll get it,” but Mom beats me. I get to the living room just as she’s swinging the door open.

“Good morning, you must be Stephen! Come on in, please, out of the rain.”

“Thanks, Mrs. McCrorey,” Stephen says, walking through our front door cautiously, dripping puddles of water all over the floor, which I know is making Mom secretly hyperventilate.

I stand there and watch as Stephen Reinheiser hands my mom his raincoat and umbrella. Watch as this person who knows me in one very distinct way crosses this unspoken boundary and begins to know me in this way that’s entirely different.

“You can just leave your sneakers on the mat there,” Mom tells him, wanting to ensure he does indeed take his wet shoes off before daring to step onto the carpet. This is a no-shoes house he’s entering. Watching him stand in my living room in his socks, looking uncomfortable, I realize that he has boundaries too.

“Hey, Stephen,” I finally say, making sure I smile. He smiles back, looking relieved to see me. “So, um, come in. I thought we could work at the table.”

“Sure,” he mumbles, following behind me as I lead him to the dining room.

We sit down and Stephen pulls a notebook out of his backpack. I readjust the stack of Columbus books I’ve checked out from the library.

“So what are we working on, Minnie?” Dad says too loudly, suddenly appearing in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, holding a steaming cup of coffee. Stephen jumps before turning around in his seat to look up at my dad.

“Dad, this is Stephen. Stephen, my dad. We’re doing a history project on Columbus.”

I try to silently plead with him to just keep this brief. Both my dad and my mom were making such a huge deal of me having a boy over. I told them before he got here that it’s not like that. I don’t even think of Stephen in that way. I don’t think I’ll ever think of anyone in that way.

Stephen adds, “Hero or Villain.”

“Ah. Hmm. Okay,” Dad says, grinning at me before walking back into the living room.

“Who’s Minnie?” Stephen whispers.

“Don’t ask,” I tell him, rolling my eyes.

“So, you stopped coming to lunch this week?” he says, like a question. “Sorry.”

“What for?”

“What happened Monday. In the cafeteria. I wish I would have

said something. I should've said something. I hate those guys—they're morons."

I shrug. "Did Mara ask you about the book club thing?"

He nods.

"Will you do it? We need people to come. At least six people. Miss Sullivan's really nice. She's been letting me stay in the library all week." I try to make this seem cooler than it probably is. "I think she gets it, you know?"

"She gets what?"

"You know, just, the way things are. How there are all these stupid cliques, and rules you're supposed to follow that don't make any sense. Just all of it, you know?" I stop myself, because sometimes I forget we aren't really supposed to talk about this. We're supposed to accept it. Supposed to feel like it's all of us who have the problem. And we're supposed to deal with it like it's our problem even though it's not.

Still, he just stares at me in this strange way.

"I mean, you get it, right?" I ask him. How could he not get it, I think to myself. I mean, look at him. Total geek. Overweight. No friends.

"Yeah," he says slowly. "Yeah, I get it. No one's ever really said it like that, I guess." He looks at me in this way he's never looked at me before, like I've told him some big secret he never knew about himself.

"Well, consider it, anyway—the book club." I pause and take a breath. "So, Columbus?"

"Right," he says absently.

"So, what do you think?" I try to steer our conversation to

our project and away from all this dangerous honesty. “Hero or villain?”

“I don’t know,” Stephen says, still preoccupied. “I was reading online that there were all kinds of people that got here before Columbus. I mean, Native Americans, obviously, were already always here. But also the Vikings. And then there were people from Africa and even China who got here first.”

“Yeah, I read that too.”

“It’s more like Columbus was the last to discover America, not the first,” Stephen says with a laugh.

“Yeah,” I agree. “And I’ve been reading all these books from the library.” I open up one and slide it across the table to him. “Did you know he kidnapped all these people and he would cut off their ears or nose or something and send them back to their village as an example?” I point to one of the illustrations. “They basically just took anything they wanted.”

Stephen reads along in the book. “Exactly: food, gold . . . slavery . . . rape. . . .” I flinch at the word, but Stephen keeps reading. “Crap, it says that they would make them bring back a certain amount of gold—which would have been impossible for anyone—so when they failed, they would cut their hands off so they would bleed to death! And when they ran away, they sent dogs to hunt them down and then they would burn them alive! Sick,” Stephen says, finally looking up at me.

“So, I think we have our position—villain, right?”

“Yeah, villain,” he agrees. “Why did we ever start celebrating Columbus Day?” He grins. “We should discontinue the holiday.”

“It’s true. Just because someone has always been seen as this

incredible person—this hero—it doesn't mean that's the truth. Or that's who they really are," I say.

Stephen nods his head. "Yeah, totally."

"Maybe they're actually a horrible person. And it's just that no one wants to see him for who he truly is. Everyone would rather just believe the lies and not see all the damage he's done. And it's not fair that people can just get away with doing these awful things and never have to pay the consequences. They just go along with everyone believing—" I stop because I can barely catch my breath. As I look over at the confused expression on Stephen's face, I realize I'm probably not just talking about Columbus.

"Yeah," Stephen repeats, "I—I know, I totally agree."

"Okay. Okay, good."

"Hey, you know what we should do?" Stephen asks, his eyes brightening. "We should do, like, Most Wanted posters for Columbus and all those guys. And, like, list their crimes and stuff on the posters." He smiles. "What do you think?"

I smile back. "I like that."

**LUNCH-BREAK BOOK CLUB.** I named it. The next week we have our first meeting. We bring our brown bags to the table in the back of the library by the out-of-date reference materials nobody ever uses. It is me, Mara, Stephen, plus these two freshmen girls. The one girl looks to be about ten years old and transferred from a Catholic school at the beginning of the year. She dresses like she's still there, always wearing these starchy button-down shirts under scratchy sweaters, and embarrassingly long skirts. The other girl chews on her hair. She looks so out of it, I'm not sure if she even knows why we're here.

“We're one short,” I announce, hoping this doesn't spoil everything.

Miss Sullivan looks at me like she knows just as well as I do that this is basically bottom of the barrel here. Then she looks up at the clock. The minute hand clicks on the one. “There's still time,” she says, reading my mind. “Besides, it's all right if we don't have all six people the first day.”

Just then this guy I've never seen walks toward the table—this severe-looking guy—skinny, with pale skin and deep black hair with blue streaks that match his bright blue eyes. He wears these funky, thick-rimmed glasses, and two silver rings encircle his lower lip.

“Wow,” Mara whispers to me, grinning ear to ear.

“What?” I whisper back.

“Just . . . wow,” she repeats, not taking her eyes off him.

“Cameron!” Miss Sullivan greets him. “I'm so glad you decided to come.”

“Oh,” he says, pulling out the chair beside Stephen. “I mean, yeah. Hi.”

“All right,” Miss Sullivan begins, clearly encouraged by our new addition. “Why don't we get started? I thought maybe we could just go around the table and introduce ourselves, tell everyone a little bit about your interests and why you're here. I'll start. Obviously, I'm Miss Sullivan.” She laughs. “I'm your librarian. But when I'm not here, I'm actually a real person, believe it or not. I spend a lot of time volunteering for the animal shelter and I foster rescue dogs while they're waiting to be adopted. As far as this book club is concerned, as I mentioned to Eden, this is your club, so I want each of you to shape it. I think this will be a great way to do some reading for fun, outside the usual classroom setting, where we can have discussions and debates, talk about issues we don't normally get to address in your forty-minute classes.”

She waves her hand in my direction, as if to say *you're up*. I sink into my skin a little deeper. “I'm Eden—Edy, I mean. Or Eden. Um, I guess, I just like reading.” I shrug. “And I thought this book

club sounded like a good idea,” I mumble. Miss Sullivan nods her head encouragingly. I hate myself. I look to Mara, silently begging her to just please interrupt me, just start talking—say anything.

“My name is Mara,” she says sweetly, flashing her new smile at all of us. “I’m a freshman. I’m interested in music—I’m in band. I like animals,” she adds, so naturally. Why couldn’t I have thought to say something like that? I’m in band too. I like animals—I love animals. “What else? I really think this will be a great way to spend our lunches—it’s a lot nicer, and quieter, than the cafeteria.” She adds a little giggle onto the end of her sentence, and everyone smiles back at her. Especially this new guy. Mara kicks my foot under the table, like, *Are you seeing this?*

“That’s great, Mara—we could always use more volunteers at the animal shelter, you know,” Miss Sullivan says with a smile. And I really wonder how people get to be normal like this. How they just seem to know what to say and do, automatically.

“I’m Cameron,” the new guy says, skipping over the two other girls. “I’m new here this year. I’m interested in art. And music,” he adds, smiling at Mara. “I like reading too.” He breaks his gaze away from Mara to make eye contact with me. “And dogs,” he smiles, looking at Miss Sullivan.

Miss Sullivan smiles back at him like she means it.

“I’m Stephen,” Stephen mumbles. “When Edy told me about this, I thought it sounded like a good alternative to having lunch in the cafeteria. Oh, and I like art too,” he adds, looking at Cameron. “Photography, I mean. I’m on yearbook.”

“Awesome, man,” Cameron says, flashing Stephen one of those smiles. This New Guy stepping all over my territory—first with