



*Come  
As You  
Are*

A NOVEL

*Dahlia Adler*



WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,  
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

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Printed in the United States of America. For information, address  
St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

[www.wednesdaybooks.com](http://www.wednesdaybooks.com)

Designed by Devan Norman

Ivy art © Tanrach/Shutterstock

Case stamp art © Kalinin Ilya/Shutterstock

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-87169-5 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-87167-1 (ebook)

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First Edition: 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Chapter One



**T**HERE SHOULD BE A RULE that if your parents name you something like Everett Owen Riley, they should have to double—nay, *triple*—check things like, say, whether your new boarding school has put you in the correct dorm.

Right about now is where mine would be hearing from my lawyer.

“But you’re a *girl*,” Archibald Buchanan says for the millionth time since I showed up with a duffel of extremely scary bras.

“Well, I’m glad to see Camden’s education is as stellar as promised.”

He blinks at me. And I blink back. And it’s a good old-fashioned standoff, except that I’m on the wrong side of the door, and he’s on the side where I’m supposed to be, and somehow not one person has come to address this situation.

I try again. “Look, Archie.”

He winces.

“Do you not go by Archie?”

“I do, it just sounds so . . . ugh coming from you.”

“Now I see why they paired us up. They must’ve known that we were soulmates.”

Looks *can’t* kill, right? I know “If looks could kill” has been a saying for a long time, and the implication is that they can’t, but Archie looks like he has a whole lot of money, and I don’t know if quirky little sayings apply to people like him.

The ability to pinpoint the exact moment when the light goes out of his cold green eyes and he gives up entirely is what makes me an excellent poker player, and it’s because I see this happen that I manage to wedge my foot in the door before he can close it in my face completely. “Look. I obviously don’t want to be sharing a room with you either, and given they don’t have coed dorms in this place, I’m not really worried about that happening. But I *would* like to put my stuff down while we wait for someone to come fix this mess. So can you please let me in, and then you can call the cops or whatever rich people do when they catch a glimpse of the poors?”

I’m definitely getting “Let’s be friends” vibes from his scowl. Or, at least, it’s enough to get him to let me all the way inside.

Once I’m in, though, he’s out. “I’m going to find the dorm head,” he barks, as if I have intentionally put us in this position because I was just *dying* to be surrounded by boys, when in fact most of the drive for coming to Camden was to get a fresh start away from the *last* boy and everything wrapped up

in him. “If he can’t straighten this out right now, my parents are going to have a *word* with the administration when they get back from the parents’ breakfast.”

Of course his parents are here. Of course they’ll fight for him. Of course he didn’t have to drag his duffel bag on a bus and then a cab to get here because his dad couldn’t take off work and his mom had fifty excuses, all of which sucked.

The thing is, I *know* I didn’t screw this up; I reread every single page of my transfer application to Camden Academy so many times I started seeing it on the insides of my eyelids while I slept. I meticulously researched the dorms, making sure I wasn’t accidentally checking off anything for freshmen, seniors, boys, or millionaires (seriously, *why* does Hillman House have suites with fireplaces and claw-foot tubs?) when I put down Lockwood Hall as my first choice and Ewing Hall as my backup. As pissed as my parents were about my begging to go to boarding school when I was already at a perfectly fine public school, I wasn’t taking a single chance on mistakes.

So how the hell did I end up in Rumson?

It doesn’t matter; Lockwood is so close by, the two dorms literally share a patio, and I already see Archie returning with a ginger-goateed gym teacher type with a smooth white head and a navy-blue Camden polo straining around his biceps. I’m sure this will be resolved in minutes.

“You there,” Ginger says to me in a thick Boston accent, motioning for me to come back into the hallway. “You’re in the wrong place.”

"I'm aware," I say as nicely as I can, "but no one's been able to tell me yet where the *right* place is."

"What're you talking about?"

"This is my room." I hold up my assignment. "This is also clearly *not* meant to be my room, and so I need a new room. And a new dorm. And a new dorm head."

He squints. "That assignment says Everett Owen Riley."

"Yes."

He looks at me, and I can see it's not computing.

"My name is Everett Owen Riley. This is my assignment. It is wrong. See right here where it says Rumson Hall? Clearly, I should not be in Rumson Hall."

"It also says your roommate is Archibald Buchanan," Archie adds with a scowl. "You didn't notice that?"

"Obviously not." And it's true, I didn't, because I barely glanced at my assignment before now; I didn't even know it listed a roommate. Given I didn't know anyone here, I didn't really care *where* I ended up. I'd picked Lockwood over Ewing with a rousing game of eenie meeny miney mo, not because it mattered where I slept, or whether my roommate's name was Chloe or Padma or Talia.

Even Camden Academy itself was a relatively meaningless choice within all the in-state options. I mean, yes, I researched to make sure it had decent academics and extracurriculars, but there was only one criterion I really cared about: it wasn't Greentree High, which meant I was nowhere near any of the people who'd broken my heart and sent me running for a fresh start where no one knew me and vice versa.

My parents also cared about exactly one criterion—

financial aid, which the school kindly provided me—and so Camden it was.

“You’re in the wrong place,” Ginger repeats unhelpfully.

“Yes, we have established that. I was assigned to this room by someone who clearly thought from my name that I was a boy, and they were wrong, and now I need a new room in a girls’ dorm. Are we all caught up?”

Ginger eyes me like I’ve said something extremely shady, but he does it while picking up his super cool walkie-talkie and repeating the scenario to whatever unlucky bastard is on the other side, having to deal with logistical screwups like this in the middle of an already hectic orientation day. Ten minutes of silent standoff later, during which Ginger has to keep darting out to shake parents’ hands and help kids find where they’re going, someone with an even bigger beard—and so I assume more authority—shows up.

“This is a problem,” says Beardy. “Your name is Everett?”

“Evie.”

“What?”

“Evie. I know, the long *E* isn’t intuitive with Everett’s short *E*, but it’s what I prefer to be called. Possibly because Everett has a way of landing me in situations like this.”

There’s a gruff acknowledgment, a squint like maybe all the blond from my frizzy cloud of hair has seeped into my brain, and then, “Okay, Evie. Are your parents at the breakfast?”

“They couldn’t make it today. It’s just me.”

He frowns. “And you’re a sophomore transfer?”

“Yes, sir.” I have no idea where the “sir” comes from. It

feels like something Archie would say. It might be because in contrast to Ginger's Bostonian accent, Beardy's is crisp and bordering on posh, and it demands some propriety. Which is not my strong suit.

It also occurs to me that no one wears name tags in this place. They should really wear name tags at orientation.

"Lockwood, Ewing, Hillman, and Baker are the options for sophomore girls," he says, as if he's talking to someone who didn't do her research before uprooting her entire life and throwing herself into a school she hadn't even heard of three months earlier.

"I know. I put down Lockwood and Ewing."

"Well, Lockwood and Ewing are both full to capacity."

"Okaaay," I say slowly, "so put me in Baker or Hillman."

"Those are also full to capacity. It's a great year for Camden Academy," he says proudly, as if I'm gonna cheer on the very fact that's screwing me over.

"Maybe Mercer?" Ginger suggests, and I can't remember off the top of my head whether that's a freshman dorm or a senior one, but I really and truly do not want either one.

"Lemme save you the trouble here," Beardy says to him, a note of irritation entering his voice. "Every single room—girls' and boys'—is full this year."

"That can't be," Archie says coldly.

Now the men are exchanging glances and then looking at me like I'm some kind of problem child, like I caused this, like I wanted to have to practically run away from home and deal with *this* on top of a thrice-broken heart. Because of

course, Evie is always the problem. My sister, Sierra, could set my house on fire and convince the rest of the town I did it to keep myself warm.

I came here to escape that, to escape *her*. And if being myself isn't helping me achieve that sufficiently, then maybe I need to take a page from her book.

Putting on my stone-coldest expression—the very one I wore when I told Sierra to get out of my life for good—I cross my arms in front of my chest and look Ginger squarely in the eye. “Not to agree with him on something, but it really can't. You accepted me here. You took my parents' money. You took me in as a student—as a *boarding* student—and that means you have an obligation to fulfill. So I'm sure you'll figure it out. Quickly.”

My sudden frostiness seems to stun them all into silence, and finally, there's some action. Beardy starts arguing with someone on a walkie-talkie, while Ginger starts pleading with someone else on his. Then a bell rings, and Ginger swears under his breath.

“We've got dorm orientation right now, and I don't have any more time to deal with this. Just come to Rumson orientation and we'll figure it out afterward.”

“You want me to come to orientation for a boys' dorm?”

“Want' is a strong word, but yes, that's what we're doing. Come on.”

“Don't you dare tell anyone you're my roommate,” Archie warns me as Ginger hurries ahead, leaving us to follow in his wake. “This is not lasting past the hour.”

“I promise not to cramp your style around the other guys,”  
I vow with a hand over my heart.

“Oh, shut the fuck up.”

We walk the rest of the way in silence, and you know? It’s  
just really nice to make a friend on your first day.



There are already a bunch of legitimate Rumson residents chilling in the lounge by the time Archie and I arrive on Ginger’s heels, and I’m left alone in the doorway so fast I can actually hear the breeze Archie leaves in his wake. A quick scan of the room shows a few guys who look about as fun as Archie does, a few clusters of dudes reconnecting after a summer apart, and exactly one guy sitting solo who looks like I feel, sporting a Nirvana T-shirt and appropriately looking like he’d much rather be hanging out with Kurt Cobain right now.

Ding ding, we have a winner.

I let myself into the room as quietly and unassumingly as I can, heading right for the empty chair next to my grungy new dormmate. But it’s hard to make a subtle entrance when your hair’s the color of corn and requires its own zip code, especially if you’re the only girl in a room full of guys. The whispers and stares follow me all the way over, and I know it’s only a matter of someone deciding he’s funny enough to be the one to fire the opening line.

Thankfully, the hypothetical comedian doesn’t get a

chance before Ginger declares “Everyone pipe down!” with all the authority of, well, a gym teacher in charge of a bunch of teenage boys. “As you all know by now, I’m your dorm head, Mr. Hoffman. Welcome to Rumson Hall.”

“Yes, welcome to Rumson Hall!” some loser says directly to me with a huge-ass grin on his doofy face. “I see they’ve finally listened to my request to have someone in-house to do our laundry.”

Ugh, there we go—let the assholes begin. “As if I would go within fifty feet of your skid marks.”

“I don’t think she’s here for laundry,” another d-bag says with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows.

The room erupts before I can get a word in, and while Ginger—Mr. Hoffman, which apparently I should’ve known? How?—quickly tries to regain control, I close my eyes and tune everything out.

This part doesn’t count. This isn’t my dorm, this isn’t my dorm head, these aren’t my dormmates, and this isn’t my new beginning. Whatever happens in the next hour before they figure out where I’ll be staying . . . it simply doesn’t count. It’s part of the crappy phase one of my high school life, and phase two begins when my rightful housing does, and not a moment sooner.

The thought is . . . liberating.

“You make friends fast,” Nirvana Boy says, doing some annoying flicking thing with his nails.

“I’ll teach you my secrets if you ask really nicely.”

He emits a choked snort, as if he did not expect me to

amuse him. Not on purpose, anyway. Still, of all the guys I've spoken to so far today, I guess he qualifies as the nicest. "I'm Evie."

I'm spared the barest of glances through the longest set of eyelashes I have ever seen. "Salem."

"Like the Witch Trials?"

"Exactly like the Witch Trials." He stretches mile-long legs out in front of him, crossing one scribbled-on Van over the other. "The witch being my twin sister, Sabrina, who spent most of our childhood using me as a test project."

"I take it you've been the subject of more than one of her dabbles in the craft."

"My sister's never met a 'shut my brother up' spell she didn't like."

"And I assume your real name is a CIA-level secret."

"Nah, just an expensive one." He rubs his fingertips together, and despite myself, I feel a smile ghost over my lips.

"If it helps, my name's really Everett, which probably answers your next question."

He raises an eyebrow, and I watch with fascination as it disappears beneath his dark, shaggy bangs. "I didn't ask you a first question."

"Well, there are about sixty people in this room and I'm guessing I'm the only one who shaves with a Venus Embrace. Were you really not wondering what I'm doing in an all-boys dorm?"

"I try to mind my own business."

"Well, you're the only one. Anyway, my roommate wasn't terribly happy about my placement." I nod subtly toward

Archie, who's glaring daggers at me from across the room, clearly having figured out that I'm not keeping our little secret. "Who's yours?"

No subtlety for Salem; he just waves a hand in the direction of a cute blond guy with biceps to spare peeking out of the sleeves of his Yankees T-shirt. "They put me with Matt fuckin' Haley, of all people."

The name means absolutely nothing to me. "What's the matter with Matt Haley? Are you a Red Sox fan?"

"No, I'm a fan of not having a roommate who screws a new girl every night, six feet away from me." He pulls one of his Vans up to cross his other knee and picks at the black laces as if they'll leach some of the annoyance out of his body. "At least three different guys have already made sure to tell me that they hope I like 'the Matt Haley soundtrack.'" He sighs. "I don't even understand why a junior who obviously has friends of his own is rooming with a sophomore transfer. I was hoping *he'd* ask for a switch, but—"

"Hey, I'm a sophomore transfer too. Look at that—something in common. We're destined to be best friends."

He glances up at my blond frizzball. "I'm gonna be honest. I have no fuckin' idea how to braid that, so you're gonna have to do mine first."

My laugh-snort gets me a dark glare from Hoffman, who was clearly hoping to forget the problem of Me existed.

"This whole dorm thing is bullshit," Salem mutters.

"I mean. I am very much suffering from exactly the same bullshit."

He laughs, a quick, quiet puff of breath. “Yeah, I guess you are. Thanks for putting things in perspective. Your situation is way shittier.”

Well. That is not really what I was going for, but I guess I’ll take solidarity where I can get it.

# Chapter Two



**T**URNS OUT, THERE WAS ONE free room on campus. After sitting through the rest of orientation and then waiting on the bare mattress in my soon-to-be-former room while Hoffman and Beardy (a.k.a. Mr. Dempsey, a.k.a. the housing director) conferred with everyone possible and Archie glared at me like I was leaving Girl Germs on all of his overpriced stuff, I learned that Lockwood and Rumson are each outfitted with one wheelchair-accessible room. Lockwood's is already taken by an actual wheelchair user, but Rumson's was taken by . . . Mr. Hoffman's bike.

So, Rumson's my official residence after all.

At least I have my own bathroom.

Does this mean phase two of my high school life has started now?

Or does it mean that it never will?

Even with my door closed (but not locked, per Camden

rules for “safety reasons”) and Blackpink blaring through my laptop speakers while I make my bed and put my clothing in the provided dresser and small closet, I swear I can hear the entire school talking about me. I’d envisioned doing the moving-in part with a roommate, then wandering the halls and meeting other girls, checking out the lounge, maybe finding other people who like card games and rom-coms and planning fake trips to places they’ll probably never go. And it isn’t that I’m afraid I’ve made a mistake by coming here, exactly, since there was no way I could’ve stayed at GHS . . . but I’m not exactly sure I’ve traded up, either.

A knock sounds at the door, and I groan under my breath, positive it’s Hoffman and praying that if I don’t answer, he’ll just go away. Of course, he knocks again, so I drag myself over to my computer to turn down the music and swing the door open, only to reveal . . . Matt Haley?

“Hey there.” He flashes me the smile that has apparently dropped a thousand pairs of panties. “You must be Evie.” He holds out a hand, and for a moment, I hear Salem in my head, warning me not to shake it, because I absolutely do know where it’s been.

But Matt’s being friendly, and Salem doesn’t strike me as someone who knows the meaning of the word, so I take it. “I am, Matt, right?”

“I see my reputation has preceded me.” If possible, his smile widens even further. “You need help with anything?” He peeks his head in, and I let him; there’s really nothing to see. “Looks like you’ve still got a ways to go.”

“Actually, I’m just about done.” I’m sure other people have

photographs and posters and all sorts of fun things on their shelves and walls, but I wanted as few reminders of home as possible. All I've got with me are some comfort reads, the deck of cards I never go anywhere without (my Emotional Support Deck, my former best friend Claire used to call it), a backup deck, and the stuffed panda I couldn't make myself leave behind.

His smile falters into an O. "Is this seriously all you brought?"

"Of course not. My driver will be coming around with my queen-size canopy bed within the hour."

He gives me a funny look, I guess unimpressed by my British accent, and then shrugs and asks if he can come inside.

Technically, guys and girls are only allowed in each other's rooms during intervisitation hours in the evenings, but even more technically, that's a dorm-based rather than gender-based rule, so I guess it's okay? Neither Hoffman nor Dempsey had time to get into the finer logistics, especially since Hoffman was busy pouting that his precious bike would have to live in the bike racks with the—ew—students'.

I step aside and let him in.

"You didn't bring any pictures?"

"Who prints pictures these days?" I ask airily, holding up my own phone. "I brought plenty."

It's a lie. I deleted almost all of them and hid the ones I couldn't bear to part with but also couldn't look at ever again.

His mouth twitches like he doesn't quite believe me but he's wisely decided to drop it. Clearly, he's got bigger fish to

fry. “Listen, I wanted to run something by you. Not that I need you to do anything,” he adds quickly. “It’s just . . . you’re not a narc, are you?”

“Me?” I blink. I don’t even know what to say to that very unexpected question.

“I didn’t think so. You seem like a cool girl.” It’s a canned line, but combined with his most charming smile and the biceps peeking out of his sleeves, I’m starting to Get It, even if he and his whole thing are not my type. “So, listen. I’ve kinda got an in at the housing office, and I specifically chose my room for its . . . discreet location. Every now and again, I get after-hours visitors who’d really like to be able to come and go as they please.”

“And you want them to come and go through my room? That’s—”

“No, of course not.” He points at my window. “I have a rope ladder. But it *will* go past your window. I just wanna make sure you’ll be . . . looking the other way.”

A rope ladder. Jesus. Salem was not kidding. “We’re talking fully consensual visitors?”

“Always,” he says firmly.

I shrug. “Then it’s fine with me. It’s your roommate you’re gonna have to work stuff out with.”

“Psh, Salem I can handle. You’re the one who makes me nervous,” he says with a wink. “Glad you’re chill.” He gives me a little punch on the shoulder, and I’m mad that I don’t hate it. “I gotta run, but I’ll catch you later. I owe you one.”

He slips out, and I just shake my head and turn my music back up. I know Matt was just buttering me up to buy my

silence, but I can't pretend I didn't like being called "chill" and "a cool girl." Back in Greentree, next to Sierra, no one would ever think of me as the cool one—not when she was dancing on tables at parties or kicking ass at beer pong or snagging every single guy (and occasional girl) in sight. Certainly not when I was working so hard to be the best girlfriend I could be by making Craig and his stupid friends snack platters while they played video games. Or when I was so committed to helping Claire with her art that I'd spend entire yawning afternoons modeling for portraits. Or all the times I put my own studying and hobbies on hold so I could help them with math (Craig), English papers (Claire), or bio (both).

God forbid I be anything but the perfect girlfriend, perfect best friend. But then, a boyfriend and a best friend were the two things I had in life that my sister didn't, and it was impossible not to want to hold them close.

Of course, she took them anyway.

But here . . . there's no Sierra. I don't have to prove I'm "good enough" to earn my space in her shadow. And now I have something *no* other girl on campus has or will have: a room in an all-boys dorm. So maybe this isn't ruining what's supposed to be the perfect reset of my life.

Maybe it's actually the perfect opportunity to do things differently.

How? I don't know yet. But that's okay. I'm a blank slate with nothing but time to figure it out.



Or not. Because everywhere I go for orientation events today, people seem to know who I am.

On the group tour, a couple of my new dormmates I recognize from orientation suggest with dancing eyebrows that we work out a shower schedule.

At the campus store, a guy I've never seen before suggests I see if they carry boxers so I can better fit in at Rumson.

Another pointedly lets me know that he's heard I have my own private room, emphasis on *private*.

I don't know how news got around so fast, or why all these people have to be so fucking creepy, but the entire morning is filled with pointing and whispering and strangers greeting me with variations on "Hey, aren't you the Rumson Girl?"

That's me: the Rumson Girl. Exactly what I've always dreamed.

"It's Evie, actually," I tell the guy who stops me in Beasley Dining Hall, a.k.a. the Beast, where I'm just trying to get some lunch fuel to get me through the rest of this day.

"Yeah, I heard about you. Heard you're Archie Buchanan's roommate," he says with a shit-eating grin, punctuated by a huge dimple. He's got the same kind of overly styled look Archie does, and the same vibe exuding way too much money.

"You heard wrong," I say, sidestepping him neatly in my quest for the baked-potato bar; there is no way I'm letting this dude get between me and my bacon bits.

"Does that mean you're still in need of a bedmate?" he calls after me, but thankfully, he doesn't follow. I shudder the interaction off me and get in line behind a broad set of shoulders in a striped polo. I'm balancing the tray in one hand

and sneaking a piece of smoky bacon into my mouth with the other when I hear the cutest accent in the entire world, sweeter than maple syrup, saying, “Why thank you, ma’am.”

I look up, having to see the face that belongs to those four words, and I am *not* disappointed. Striped Polo looks like walking, talking sunshine—healthy golden tan, healthy golden hair, and a smile warm enough to ward off the New Hampshire chill I know from experience will be here before we know it.

He looks like he grew up on a farm, or at the very least is definitely not from around here; not one single thing about him reminds me of a certain ex, including the way he catches my eye and gives me a nod and confident smile as he walks past.

What is it they say? The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else? Well, Craig Larson is definitely in my rearview, and Farmboy shows some interesting potential.

Here’s hoping *he* doesn’t know me as the Rumson Girl.

“Your drool is gonna stain the linoleum,” a voice behind me says as I watch Farmboy take a seat at an otherwise full table, squeezing in next to a girl with a neat French braid.

I whirl around to see Salem standing behind me with a green apple in hand, no tray. “So’s your jealousy.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Neither do you.” But I appreciate the wake-up call, noxious as it was, and I finally move again, taking a seat at an empty table. Salem joins me a minute later, having added a tall cup of Coke to his nutritious lunch. “Is that really all you’re eating?”

“My mom says it’s not polite to comment on others’ food,” he informs me, taking a big bite of apple that sprays juice squarely on my cheek.

“Yeah, clearly your mom raises charmers.” I wipe off my face and return my gaze to Farmboy’s table. French Braid is practically in his lap, which I’m *sure* doesn’t mean anything. They’re probably cousins, or even siblings. They kind of look alike, if you squint hard enough until all you can see is that they’re both white.

“You’re pretty superior for someone who gave my roommate the green light to hang a sex ladder from our window.”

“As if you won’t find any way to benefit from that.” I roll my eyes away from Farmboy and dig in to my baked potato. *Mmm*, the ultimate comfort food. “You’re living on a campus full of horny teenagers with minimal supervision. Go wild.”

“Oh yeah? Is that what you plan to do here? Go wild?”

“Oh no, Evie Riley does not go wild,” I tell him, gesturing with my fork. “My sister does that enough for the both of us. I am the one who behaves and then gets treated like shit as a result.” Whoops, maybe a little too much information there. Thankfully, I’m talking to someone who definitely does not care and will not be internalizing any of it. “But I’m not gonna begrudge Matt enjoying himself. Unless I have to listen to squeaky springs through the ceiling. Then I may have to get him expelled.”

Salem eyes me like he’s not sure I’m kidding, and I just shrug and take another bite. Farmboy is a nice fantasy, but when it comes down to it, what am I really gonna do—make an excuse to talk to him, maybe exchange names, and then

what? I was with Craig for six months, and most of that time was spent holding hands at school and hanging out with his friends in his basement while they played video games. I wouldn't know how to "go wild" even if I wanted to.

People would probably be so disappointed in the Rumson Girl if they knew.



I spend the rest of the afternoon buying my books and meeting with my academic advisor, and after, I have just enough time before our individual grade activities start to let myself into Lockwood to catch a glimpse of where I was supposed to be, and hopefully meet some of the girls I was supposed to be living with.

It's a twin building to Rumson, so the blueprint is the same in mirror image, but it's easy to see little differences right off the bat—a vase of fresh flowers in the entryway where Rumson has nothing, cute signs on the doors as opposed to hastily scrawled names on whiteboards, the smells of scented candles and hair products rather than sweat and cheap cologne . . . This is definitely where I was supposed to be.

I try to ignore the slowly building ache in my heart that feels like envy and nostalgia had a really ugly baby.

Scanning the door signs, I murmur the names of the girls who'll be my classmates (and hopefully eventually dormmates, if I have my way) for the next three years—Cassie and Emmy and Mika and—

A yelp, followed by "What *is* that?"

Well, sounds like someone might be having a worse first day than I am. I don't wanna be nosy, but, well, I could stand to feel a little better about myself right now, so I shuffle back through the hall until I find the room I'm looking for ("Heather" and "Sabrina"), which is pretty easy to do since one girl looks like she's gonna pass out and the other one is holding something furry and black and almost definitely not dorm-sanctioned.

But is it alive? That much I can't tell, although the goth girl is holding it like a precious baby.

"It's my familiar," she says in a hurt voice, petting the Thing, and it hits me in a rush of coal-black hair and milk-white skin that this absolutely has to be Salem's twin. "His name is Checkers. And he's only the stuffed-animal version of the real Checkers, who's home with my parents, so chill out."

Heather breathes a sigh of relief, and I guess I do too, because she turns to me suddenly, her neat French braid swinging against her shoulder. Which is when I realize that it's the same girl from the Beast—the one who was sitting with Farmboy. She immediately breaks into a warm, welcoming smile, a glaring contrast to Sabrina's resting witch face.

"Hi! I'm Heather. This is Sabrina. Are you on the first floor too?"

"Yes, but different dorm." Might as well test the waters for how this is gonna go over. "There was a whole screwup with my name—I go by Evie, but my name is Everett—and now I'm in Rumson. I have my own room and bathroom, so at least I don't have to deal with pee all over the seat and whatever other grossness I'm about to learn boys do."

“Oh, the limit does not exist,” Sabrina says dryly, and as she rolls her eyes, I see they’re exactly the same stormy gray as Salem’s.

“You’re Salem’s twin, right?”

If I hadn’t been sure before, the identical way her eyebrow rises a thousand feet in the air answers my question before the words “How the hell do you know my brother?” can even leave her mouth.

Oh, how to even begin answering that . . . “We met at dorm orientation. He seems like a nice guy. Sort of.” Nice enough, anyway. “We just had lunch together, too. Also sort of.”

She snorts. “If he was nice to you, he must think you’ve got decent weed.”

Ah, someday I think Sabrina and I are gonna have a lot of lovely talks about siblings who suck.

“So they put you in a boys’ dorm?” Heather furrows her neat brows. “That’s a pretty nerve-racking first day, isn’t it?” Then I guess she realizes I’m still standing in the doorway, looking like a creeper. “Come in, come in.”

I do, and immediately take in the way their room looks as if each half is in a different universe. There’s no confusion over whose half is whose, either, unless Heather is way more into pentagrams than she lets on. “It was not a great start!” I concede, grabbing Heather’s desk chair for myself.

“What’s the deal with your hair?” Sabrina asks, eyeing me like an exhibit at the clown museum. “It’s fascinating.”

“Sabrina!”

“No, no, it’s fine,” I assure Heather, tugging on a springy

blond curl. “No one’s ever that direct about it. I mostly get a lot of staring and an occasional ‘Is that real?’ It is, for the record—not just me going wild with a curling iron.”

“Well, it’s pretty epic,” says Sabrina, and I can’t tell if it’s a compliment.

I offer a “Thanks?” anyway, and she nods, so I guess it was.

“So what’s it like living there?” Heather asks as she pulls a bunch of random stuff from her bag, including a stuffed unicorn, a stack of picture frames, and an extremely well-loved fantasy novel I recognize as being one of Claire’s favorites. For a brief moment, I miss my former best friend, and the way she’d drag me to the bookstore every single time a new sci-fi novel with a Black main character released, how she’d call them her “supreme autobuys” and hug them to her chest.

Then I push her out of my head so I can answer Heather. “It’s still new, but I have a feeling it’s going to be very . . . loud. And that I should really stock up on scented candles, or at least air freshener. I’ve never been so grateful not to have to share a bathroom in my entire life.”

“I’ve never actually had my own bathroom,” says Heather, arranging the frames on her shelves so I can see an array of photographs of her with a pair of girls who must be her little sisters and a woman who looks like Heather with a “You in Twenty Years” filter on. It’s an entire family of French-braided doppelgängers. “Our apartment only has one bathroom for the four of us, which was another point in favor of boarding school. At least here, when we share, there’s more than one shower.”

“Yeah, I definitely don’t miss sharing with my sister,” I mutter, watching Heather arrange the stuffed unicorn on her pillow.

“And I will not miss Salem being obnoxious about my hair being everywhere.” Sabrina grips her wild mass of black waves in one hand and swings it over her shoulder. “I guess boarding school does have its perks.”

“Salem mentioned being a transfer,” I say to Sabrina, “so I guess you are too?” She nods, and I look to Heather.

“Not me,” she says, pulling the last few items from her suitcase and closing it up. “I was here last year too, and I loved it. Don’t worry, I wasn’t sure about it either, at first. My mom was having such a tough time being there for all three of us, and my grandma suggested it might be easier on everyone if there were one fewer kid to shuttle around everywhere. My sisters both cried at the thought, but I like trying new things, so, I said I’d give it a shot, and here I am again the next year. You’ll both love it as much as I do, I’m sure of it.”

“I like your confidence,” I tell Heather, both of us ignoring the way Sabrina rolls her eyes. “I did choose to come here, so I definitely hope to like it, but I, uh, did not choose the whole boys’ dorm thing, or to have random assholes on campus cracking jokes at me like I begged to live there so I could catch glimpses of bare boy ass in the showers.”

She seems to think on that for a second before offering a hopeful shrug and a “This too shall pass?”

“Here’s hoping. But now you’re both required by law to be my friends, so that I don’t become completely warped and maladjusted. I’ve already spent way too many hours of my life

watching boys play video games in dank basements, thank you very much.”

“Deal,” says Heather sweetly, and I take Sabrina’s grunt to mean the same.

I help them finish unpacking and get their luggage into storage, and by the time we’re done, the big orientation ice-breaker dinner is nearly upon us. I’m feeling grungy and dusty from the combo of the bus ride this morning and the whole rest of the day, so I say goodbye to Heather, Sabrina, and The Dorm That Should Be Mine and head back across the patio to Rumson so I can rinse myself off and change into something that’ll hopefully make a better first impression.

The whole time, I try not to feel bitter that if I just lived where I was supposed to, the three of us could get ready together, help one another pick outfits, do one another’s makeup . . . it’s exactly the kind of thing I pictured when I applied to boarding school.

Instead, I’m gonna have to walk through clouds of Axe body spray and guys loudly calling one another “Asswipe” on the way to my room, where I’ll change while double-checking about twelve times to make sure the door is locked.

New start, yaaaaay.