

Chapter One

The first thing I see is an empty vodka bottle. The glass is on its side. It sits on the tile floor in the entryway, and the red label is like a warning. My heart drops.

"Mom?" I call.

I don't expect an answer, and I don't get one. I step inside and close the door behind me. I make my way to the living room. My heart drops even more.

In the ten hours since I left for my shift at Ye Olde Pizza, a mess has formed. Food cartons fill the coffee table. An overflowing ashtray sits there too. There's even broken glass on the carpet. How it happened, I don't know.

That's not quite true, I think. I know a little bit.

When my mom drinks, she spreads chaos everywhere.

"Mom?" I say again.

I put my hands on my hips. Another thing that happens when she's drinking is that *I* become the parent. It sucks. Especially because my younger brother, Seth, is a pain in the ass. He's fourteen, and I'm seventeen. He doesn't respect me. Not that he respects anyone. But Seth is a lot like our mom. And unlike in some families, that isn't a compliment. Party now. Say sorry later.

I step over a pile of clothes and a man's work boot, and I shake my head.

"Gross," I say.

But I keep moving. I have no choice. I have to go to my mom's room. On my way out this morning, our landlord stopped me in the hall and told me our rent is overdue. Based on what I see now, I can't imagine my mom followed through. And we *have* to pay.

Mom's last bender almost got us kicked out. The one before that got her locked up for thirty days. Seth and I spent three months in the shittiest foster house in the world. That's where his problems started. I never want to go through that again.

I knock on Mom's door. "Are you in there?"

I hear a noise, so I push the handle a little. Her room is worse than the rest of the apartment.

Her laundry is piling up, and it's starting to smell. The window is open, even though it's been raining and windy. The floor has a big dark spot on it, and I'm not sure if it's water or something worse. There are a lot of other things spread around too, but I don't look closely at any of them. The truth is, I don't want to know.

I step in. Then I wish I hadn't. My mom is lying on the bed. Her too-skinny legs are sticking out from a ratty old blanket. And a big man I've never seen before is butt naked beside her.

"Jesus." I cover my eyes and raise my voice. "Mom!"

The man groans, and I silently beg him not to wake up. The boyfriends Mom picks when she's on a bender are always awful. Low-life scumbags.

"Mom?" I say. "Please wake up."

After a long second she finally speaks. "Hannah? S'that you?"

Her words are slurred. I can tell she's still wasted. I want to get out of the room. Fast. But I need to pay the rent.

"Gary needs the money, Mom," I say. "Did you forget?"

She pauses so long that I think she's passed out again. But right when I'm about to yell her name, she answers me.

"Didn't forget," she says. "Gave the money to Seth."

"Seth?" I repeat.

She laughs like I've said something funny. "Your brother, silly."

I press my teeth together. "Yeah. Thanks. I got that."

I spin on my heel. She says something else as I leave, but I ignore her. I hurry to the room I share with Seth.

"Hey," I say toward the curtain that divides the space down the middle. "Did you give the money to Gary? It's the third month we've been late."

There's no answer. A common theme in my house, I guess.

"Hey!" I'm annoyed now. "Seth."

When he still doesn't answer, I grab the curtain and pull it back. My brother's area is empty. Or at least empty of *him*. It's full of other stuff, though. It reminds me of Mom's room, which is depressing.

For a second I just stare at it. Like I can't help myself.

We have a rule that we don't go into each other's space. Of course, Seth has to walk through my side to get to his. But I can't remember the last time I looked on the other side of the curtain. His area is full. Really, really full.

A desk I've never seen before is squished between the bed and the wall. A stack of old CDs sits on top of it. So does a disc player that was my mom's back in the day. Random bits of paper are everywhere. A pile of porn mags is right in the middle of the tiny bit of floor. I glare at those for a second, grossed out but unable to look away at the same time.

"Really?" I say to my missing brother. "You couldn't even hide them somewhere?"

Then I look around a bit more. Seth has about ten weird-looking plants on a shelf. Beside those are too many collectible action figures to count.

I make a face and turn to the bed. That's where Seth usually hangs out. Attached to his headphones and listening to hip-hop. Probably stoned about 80 percent of the time. Today the sheets are bunched up, and a bong rests on his pillow.

"Really?" I say again.

I roll my eyes, and I step past the curtain. My plan is to move the drug stuff out of sight. But when I get closer to the bed, I see something that makes my blood run cold and fast at the same time.

Under the bong is a torn envelope. The word *RENT* is written across the top. And the envelope is empty. Which is bad. But what's worse is that Seth's cell phone is lying beside it. My brother would never leave his phone behind on purpose. Not in a million years.

Chapter Two

"Shit, shit, shit," I say.

My heart thuds a little too hard in my chest, and I hurry over to grab the phone. Things don't get any better when I pick it up. The screen is a cracked mess.

Okay, I say to myself. The phone is garbage, and that's probably why he didn't take it.

I want it to make me feel better, but it doesn't. Yeah, I'm a little less worried. My pulse drops to a

reasonable level. But now I'm more pissed off too. Not only does Seth have our goddamn rent money, but I have no way to get a hold of him. On top of that, when this is over I'll have to find some way to get him a new phone. God knows our mom won't do it.

I tap the screen, just in case. The only thing that happens is a piece of glass falls off. It plinks onto the ground then disappears under the bed. The phone stays black. I can't even see his ridiculous screen saver, which is his elbow, bent to look like a hairy ass crack. Classy all the way. That's my brother.

"If you aren't already dead, I'll kill you myself," I mutter.

As soon as the words are out, I regret them. They sound bad, and the room is too quiet without Seth in it. He's not dead, though. I feel like I would know if he was. But he's probably in some kind of trouble. Because he's *always* in some kind of trouble.

Uneasily I eye the phone again. Did my brother get mad and break it? He makes some shitty choices, but he's usually chill to the point that it annoys me. Nothing bothers him. I can't picture him getting mad enough to smash his phone. Of the two of us, I'm the one more likely to explode. Right now my fingers are itching to become a fist. Frustration presses down on my shoulders.

Most of the time, I do okay with extra responsibility. Cooking dinner? Sure. Tossing out my mom's beer cans? Fine. I don't even mind forging her signature on school paperwork. But shit like this isn't supposed to be my problem. I'm not even in twelfth grade yet. It's summer. I'm seventeen. I should be worrying about what to wear to the beach and what song to listen to on my way there.

"But no," I say under my breath. "I have to pay the rent and make sure my mom isn't sleeping in her own puke. Good times."

I force my hand open and toss my brother's phone onto his bed.

Okay, Hannah. What would a normal kid do in this situation?

It sounds like a silly question, I know. Obviously I'm not a total freak. But "Normal Kid" is a game Seth and I made up when we were a lot younger. If our mom was doing her thing, and it got messy, we'd pretend to live in some big house somewhere else. A place with a pool and a dishwasher, mostly.

What would a normal kid do? I'd ask my brother.

And he'd say, *I dunno. Eat popcorn, or another little-kid thing like that.*

I get a weird squeeze in my chest thinking about it now. We haven't played the game in a gazillion years. We barely look at each other now. If we're in the same room, it's because he's done something shitty, and I have to fix it.

But what would a normal kid do if her brother took off like this?