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Locker 572

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-Melanie Conte

(NY State, Suicide Prevention Director)

LT KoDZo

Locker 572

a novel

LT KoDZo

NSB
Next Step Books

Locker 572

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“I read this book as part of my review of appropriate materials for my work in statewide suicide prevention. I asked my colleagues, staff and college-aged children to do the same. We all agreed that this was a riveting, well-written book, presented in the "kids' vernacular" so that youth can easily relate to this book. It was thoroughly researched and used correct, sensitive language that will not be offensive to those of us who have lost loved ones to suicide. ... I plan to use it as a resource in a graduate course I teach on suicide prevention.”

Melanie Puerto Conte
NY State, Suicide Prevention Director

“Great book! This book will capture your attention from the first page and keep it throughout the novel. ... This book is timely and relevant to today's world. It touches on three topics close to my heart; foster care, suicide and bullying.... This book is a must read for all teachers, school administrators, social workers, foster and adoptive parents, preteens, teenagers and anyone else who works with children from preschool through high school age.”

Bruce Sharp
Tenured Foster Care Worker

“... the first week of school (2012) at least 10 (students) identified depression, stress, bullying, and in a couple...thoughts of hurting themselves. After reading *Locker 572* we realized the book could benefit more than the freshman health classes and purchased it for the entire school.”

Laura Rundell
Health Teacher from Elmira Free Academy

“L.T. Kodzo understands the mind and desperation of teens on the brink. Her storytelling skills are impeccable...she writes with stark, but honest authenticity.”

Mary DeMuth
Author of *Thin Places*

Chapter 1

Sheridan shouldered past an anorexic brunette with a ponytail.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?” a mean-faced girl shouted.

“This is none of your business,” another said.

Sheridan ignored them and focused on their victim. “Are you okay?” Her last fight had been with a boy in Yuba County her junior year. Beat the snot out of him. She didn’t like confrontation, but she hated bullies more. “Do you need help?”

Instead of gratitude, fear filled the small girl’s eyes. “Leave me alone.”

“You heard her, skank.”

“Yeah, take your noisy butt back to the crack house you came from.”

Sheridan faced her challengers. The four Barbies created a wall between Sheridan and the thankless girl as if they were now protecting her. The terrorized kid might not be thankful, but she wasn’t stupid. With her

tormentors now focused on Sheridan, the girl slipped away. Purpose accomplished.

Lame as it was to start a new school this way, Sheridan couldn't ignore the harassment. "Ladies." Sheridan dusted her hands. The doors to North Harbor High waited over their thin shoulders. Seven more months to graduation. Despite what just happened, she didn't want any trouble. The drones circled her as the queen bee stepped forward and slapped Sheridan.

"Who do you think you are?"

A second girl spat at her.

Pulling back every defensive urge in her gut, Sheridan silently wiped off the snotty saliva. The swarm hovered. Shoulders pulled back, she focused on the school entrance and stepped forward.

With a couple of shoves they let her pass.

"Courtney, check out those boots."

"The Salvation Army must be having a sale."

Their attempts to humiliate strengthened Sheridan's pace. They'd picked on the one thing she wasn't ashamed of. Her footwear.

"Wait! I've seen those boots before." Her new fans followed her inside.

"Yeah, on a hooker." The two-dimensional twits cackled and fell all over each other with that one.

Inside the school the heels of her knee-length black leathers clicked on the faux marble of the building foyer. She hummed a little of "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'," the original Nancy Sinatra version. Much cooler than any remake.

A cop leaned against the brick wall. The gang elbowed past her with whispered threats of "later," and then disappeared around a corner. Sheridan puffed out a

breath. The rest of her senior year would happen here. The first period bell hadn't even rung yet and she'd broken the first rule on her list: stay out of trouble. Whatever. Better to act than ignore. Nothing to do but move forward. Focus on rule number two: graduate.

A couple doorbell tones sounded from the speakers. This school was huge. Students of all sizes and shapes pushed and shoved in waves. Even the tall ceilings were strangely suffocating. The good air floated up high out of reach. She stopped a boy who looked ten and asked, "Can you tell me where Miss Leslie Jones' office is?"

"Second floor." His deep voice didn't fit his little body.

"Thanks."

Sheridan climbed the wide staircase. The shuffle of feet got louder. Halls cleared. Group noise lowered to random voices and died into silence as she found the door marked *Office*.

Here goes.

She pulled open the door and peeked inside. The room was lyrical. Books lined shelves unevenly yet balanced like notes on a sheet of paper. Further inside the old pane-style windows released from the top and bottom. One open window let in a breeze. A wind chime read the music of the room.

"Can I help you?" a studious girl in a vintage brown cardigan asked from the other side of a small desk.

"Yes. I'm looking for Leslie Jones."

"What's your name?"

"Sheridan Alexander."

"Do you have an appointment?" The girl's expression remained indifferent behind her thick-rimmed glasses.

Would she need ten forms of ID to get in? “Yes. I’m transferring.”

The girl got up and said, “Walk this way.”

Sheridan followed, limping like Igor in the cult classic *Young Frankenstein*. The girl turned around. Sheridan jerked to a stop then smiled without showing her teeth. The aide didn’t smile back. Sheridan shrugged her eyebrows and entered the room at the end of the corridor.

“Have a seat.” The counselor pointed across the messy room without looking up. If the reception area was musical, this office was noisy. Paper cluttered the desk and walls and shelves. Some files attempted to escape a gray metal cabinet like people from a tall building on fire. Others lay limp on the floor. The only clean spot in the room was an oversized armchair. Sheridan eased herself into it.

“Hi, I’m Miss Jones.” The counselor’s curly red hair chaotically framed a freckled face. The clothes she wore looked outdated and yet hip at the same time, while bangles and necklaces littered her body. “Sorry for the mess.” The words hung like a how-are-you-I-am-fine greeting. “My job generates plenty of paperwork.”

Sheridan lifted the corners of her mouth.

“Let me get your file.” With a magician’s skill, the counselor slipped a blue folder from a tall stack without knocking it over. “Sheridan Alexander. Am I right?”

“Yes.” Not profound. How many transfer students could there be in November?

“Looks like this isn’t your first move.” Miss Jones flipped a page without looking up. “Your fifth foster home since kindergarten.” Unlike other people who knew, the counselor stated it as a simple fact. Sheridan liked her

for that. "Now, that's a lot of paperwork."

Sheridan had met her type before. The foster system had more than a handful of dot-the-i-cross-the-t type of adults who used paperwork to control the world. Rules and boundaries were cool, as long as they applied equally to everyone.

"Now, this late in the year, we don't usually have open lockers." The grown-up twisted some of her bracelets. "And the rules say that only freshmen are supposed to share. As a senior, I don't want to squeeze you in with one of them."

The counselor paused. Sheridan didn't rescue her. The system taught her how to sit in an office for hours and be silent.

"There is *one* locker that recently became vacant."

The counselor broke eye contact and tapped her fingers on the file. An ugly gray hummingbird with a blood-red neck hovered near the windowsill. There were no flowers or feeders nearby. He bounced up and down in the air as if trying to get Sheridan's attention. The bird's frantic wings matched Sheridan's heart rate.

"It's not in the best shape, but the janitors will clean it up." Miss Jones stopped again as if she'd run out of words. The bird was gone.

"I'm sure it will be okay." Sheridan donated a comment to shake off the heebies.

"Well, I'd rather you take a look." The counselor passed her a crisp piece of paper. "It's a map of the school. I've written the locker number and combination on top. We can walk you through your schedule when you return. Take this pass with you." She held out a red plastic card attached to a string. Sheridan reluctantly hung it around her neck. The stupid thing might as well

have bells on it. "Come back here after you've checked it out."

"Sure." Sheridan shook out the school map even though it wasn't wrinkled. Next to the locker number was its three digit combination. According to the diagram, 572 was located in the basement. Not a good sign.

In the vacant hall she tiptoed to the stairs because the loud click of her boots ricocheted off the walls. Whatever was sleeping, she didn't want to wake it. The old building had classroom doors with windows. The students sat in their places with bright, shiny faces. Sheridan tried not to compare them to zombies.

The foreboding didn't ease when she reached the lowest level. The overhead lights were not the fluorescent kind from upstairs. Instead, abandoned bulbs littered the ceiling with random empty sockets. Buried one level below ground, she turned left at the end of the hall, wishing she was back upstairs. She'd rather watch students half alive than this dead-end hall of fifty or so lockers. They were different from the thin, modern cabinets upstairs. The metal doors were wide and squatty like tombs. The further she descended, the darker it got. The bulbs at the end of the row were broken or burnt-out.

And what was that smell? Number 572 was more than disgusting. It reeked. Sheridan pulled her shirt over her face and held it there with her hand. The ghosts of obscenities hid beneath a single layer of white paint. The most visible insult carved into the metal was "ring around the toilet." Fresh paint flaked around the words.

"Wow." This locker could actually be contagious. "No wonder it's available." Fifty kids in one hundred

would have given up at that moment, but Sheridan hated being average. The knob felt greasy in her hand. With a tissue from her oversized purse she twisted the combination, pinched the handle, and lifted up. As soon as the door opened, fumes assaulted her from something old and moldy inside.

She held her breath. The hazardous smell attacked her stomach. Egg shells and orange peels and any other food substance that would fit through the vents covered the inside of the locker. Dried milk and soda streaked the back of the door like modern art.

“No way. It would be better to share with a freshman.”

But as she slammed the door closed, a white item in the litter caught her eye. Unless she was wrong, something sweet lay on top of the stinky mess. She hustled into the more open hallway to catch her breath.

What a joke. A school locker was her home away from foster care. The kids in this school were ruthless. No doubt the work of the shakedown crew from this morning. So, who would slip something delicate into a locker everyone else mucked up? She wasn't convinced it would be worth it, but she had to go back and make sure.

With a couple of deep breaths and her mouth double-covered, Sheridan went back to the locker. It took three tries before she got the combination right. The door swung open. The smell wasn't as bad. She kept her nose pinched and breathed through her mouth. Trash men didn't die from inhaling this stuff, did they?

The grossness was worth it because her eyes hadn't lied to her. Delicate and soft, resting on top of the rubble was of all things a daisy. Wild. She rescued the blossom

between pinched fingers. Why would someone put a flower into a trashed locker? Why would anyone trash a locker in the first place?

She slammed the door shut and rushed to the open hallway for more oxygen. The limp petals lay lifeless in her hand. A couple years on the farm taught her growing things have seasons. Flowers grow in the spring not late fall. But San Diego was different from up North. One old song on her playlist claimed "It Never Rains in Southern California." Maybe flowers grew out of season as well.

Either way, this summer symbol didn't fit the school. The flower had been inserted recently. The fragile petals bent in her palm. She hurried back to the metal door, convinced she'd keep the locker. The stem fit into the vent like an expensive vase. Now the daisy was on display. The flower had a story, and she needed to uncover it.

Chapter 2

The lock on the darkroom door jiggled.
Crackers!

Ashley Nobel dropped the photo onto the table and struggled out of her gloves. The sound of metal against metal meant the person on the other side of the door had a key. She ran to the door and pushed her whole weight against it as the bolt began to twist.

“Wait!” she shouted, holding the knobbed lock in place. The rest of her life would be disastrous if the gang discovered Ashley’s work in the old darkroom.

“Who’s in there?”

“Ashley.” Behind her, six photographs of Ribbon Barber dripped from a clothesline. And the seventh lay wet on the table where she dropped it. Of the twenty-four prints, these screamed betrayal. She shouldn’t have said her stupid name.

“Why didn’t you turn on the warning light?” Only ten other kids had a key.

“I forgot.” She flipped the switch. Most of North Harbor ignored the light bulb next to the darkroom

door. Kids wanting the technical drawing class across the hall walked in when the light was on. The lock protected negatives better. "Give me fifteen minutes."

"Fine. Turn off the light when you're done." Students had strict instructions to share the room. And on any other day she would have let him in.

"Yeah, okay." Ashley hugged the door. Her jaw stopped gnawing on the ever-present gum. She listened with her ear pressed against the wood until she was sure the student on the other side had walked away.

The brightest part of Ashley's day happened within these painted black walls. And she wasn't even emo. The acidic odor of the chemical process inspired her. She enjoyed seeing an image in its black-and-white negative. People appeared inside-out, their sinister souls exposed. Her problem now—prints took hours to dry. She'd planned the entire lunch hour to develop these shots. That was reduced to minutes. The teacher warned them a blow dryer could ruin the prints. But so what? The risk of water spots and dust was better than getting caught as a sympathizer. Any connection to Ribbon Barber was a death sentence at North Harbor High.

She scrambled through her gym bag. The cord to her dryer became tangled with her flat iron and a random shoelace. Ashley didn't have time to untangle the mess. She dragged the entire jumble to an outlet in the corner and plugged in the cord for the dryer. If it ruined them, it ruined them. She had no choice. That kid would check out whatever she left behind. He'd blab it around school. In fact, it would be hot gossip to link Ashley to the most hated girl in school, even if Ribbon used to be her friend. Well, especially because Ribbon used to be her friend. That secret must never come out.

Ashley picked up the first photo of the rejected girl and carried it over to the dryer. The whirr of hot air echoed through

the room. Taking Ribbon's picture was dumb. The girl should have fought back. Nobody likes a wimp. The whole thing was stupid.

The water trickled off the print in tears. Each photo dried faster than she imagined. Ashley placed each dried photo between two pages in her folder. The strong drive to protect these prints wasn't purely selfish. Courtney and the gang would turn them into something vulgar. If only Ribbon were around. The film had been in her camera bag for exactly fourteen days. Ashley didn't mean to count, but it was so odd.

The day after the pictures were taken Ribbon just up and disappeared. That was two weeks ago.

Ashley stuffed her things into her gym bag. She'd shove it into her locker before joining the gang for lunch. With a couple minutes to spare, she pulled back the curtain, turned off the warning light, and unlocked the door. It wouldn't matter if anyone saw her leave, now that the evidence was safely buried.

The tech center hallway was empty. She adjusted her camouflage. Not the forest green or desert tan of war, but the popular Old Navy tee and True Religion jeans worn on the high school battlefield. As she headed for the main building, a breeze across the football field whispered to her. Stop thinking of Ribbon. The girl was Courtney's longest running target. The only kid who got assaulted *every* day.

The lunchroom contained its typical subgroups. Courtney and the crew occupied the center table. They gossiped about some new kid. The gang had become a pack of rabid dogs since Ribbon's disappearance. They drooled at the thought of fresh meat. According to the troupe, the girl started school in a pair of knee-high

leather boots and a backpack full of attitude. Whoever this new girl was, she'd better be strong.

Ashley squeezed in between Maddie and another wannabe. Courtney, Ashley, and Helen started the group in junior high. Now there were at least twelve true princesses and an entire school of scared commoners. Last year the whole thing became lame to Ashley. Too vulgar and pubescent. Ashley looked into Courtney's envy-colored eyes. They matched her personality the way her shoes matched her purse.

Nauseated by the cafeteria's idea of spaghetti, Ashley pushed it away.

"I don't want that," Maddie gasped at the tray that now sat in front of her.

"I never said you did." Ashley outranked the girl. Courtney proved this by tilting her head toward the plate drop-off center. Maddie obediently hurried the still full plate to the dishwashers. The group would never think Ashley's loss of appetite had anything to do with guilt. They counted calories the way nerds monitored their GPA.

"Check out Courtney's new ring," Helen bragged for the leader. "Her dad bought it while he was overseas. An actual emerald from Ireland. Can you believe it?"

The grassy stone glowed from a platinum band before it winked at her like a disgusting pervert. "That's great." Ashley twirled the small pearl on her pinkie. It was the only real gem she owned, but now it felt small. Courtney was good at making other people's joy seem trivial. Once Ashley got home she'd pack the junior high school gift in a drawer. It couldn't embarrass her there.

"Did you go by locker 572 today?" Courtney moved from sitting on top of the table to the seat across from

Ashley.

"No, why should I?" If the self-appointed leader of the school found out Ashley was tired of the petty gossip and trash talk, she'd be toast.

"Some idiot put a daisy in the vent of Ribbon's old locker."

"A what?" Ashley swallowed her gum.

"An eff-ing daisy," Helen practically shouted.

"Like a flower?" Ashley tried to keep calm.

"Can you believe it?" Courtney leaned against the table.

That was the last thing Ashley needed. First the photos, now this. She was close to positive she pushed the flower all the way into the locker's vents yesterday. A private message from Ashley to Ribbon. Who moved it? No one else at North Harbor knew the love-me-love-me-not flower was Ribbon's favorite. Nobody even talked to the girl.

"Why would someone do that?" Ashley asked.

"Who cares?" Helen clicked her tongue. The twit had been trying to take Ashley's position for more than a year. The poser copied Courtney's style from her painted toes to the same brand of lip gloss. "Maybe it means 'rest in peace.'" While everyone laughed at Helen's joke, Ashley lifted her lips in a fake smile.

She wanted the food tray back. It would give her something to mess with. Ashley reached into her purse for a fresh piece of gum and changed the dangerous subject. "What were you saying about a new girl?"

"She's so last year," Courtney answered.

Puppet-head Helen agreed. "Her boots are out-of-date knock-offs."

Ashley tried not to gag on the artificial sweetener

coming from both Helen and her gum. It would be so nice to spend one lunch break not tearing people down. There had to be a cafeteria somewhere in the world where people talked about the weather. Before the girls could continue bashing the short blonde with an outdated pixie, Maddie came running back.

"Ribbon's definitely gone." Maddie was out of breath.

"Yeah?" Courtney beamed like her boyfriend had just won a soccer match.

"After I dropped off the tray, I decided to take Ashley's pudding and pour it into Ribbon's locker." She stopped long enough to make eye contact with each girl in the circle. "The janitor is cleaning it out."

"They do that once a month." Courtney shrugged. She'd spent the first year making sure she got a legion of kids involved in terrorizing Ribbon's locker. The custodians couldn't keep up. Since September, locker 572 was cleaned monthly.

"Nope." Maddie's ponytail swatted the air as she shook her head. "They're painting it and everything."

"Maybe she transferred." Ashley crossed imaginary fingers hoping Ribbon's two-week absence meant the girl found the guts to escape. About time.

"Whatever," Helen said. "Ribbon's gone for good."

"The school smells better already." Courtney stood and led the crew out of the cafeteria. Maddie giggled. Ashley gnawed on her gum. Her allegiance had changed. She hadn't just avoided the group and changed her schedule—two weeks ago she supported the enemy.

Five steps out of the lunchroom, Courtney pointed out the new kid. The girl looked like Tinkerbell without the cocktail dress. Helen was wrong. The boots were

actually nice. A little over-dressed for high school, but honestly, why should that matter? Who gets to decide? It wasn't the first time Ashley wondered who crowned Courtney queen of North Harbor High. If college was anything like high school, Ashley would rather serve burgers at McDonald's. In two years when she graduated, Ashley would erase her past and start over.

"Let's give her a nice welcome at the end of the day," Helen suggested.

"Yeah." Courtney laughed. "A little orientation."

Ashley passed. "I've got to get home and catch up on homework."

"You haven't been around lately." Courtney folded her arms.

"I'm grounded," Ashley lied.

"For what?" Helen butted in.

"An F in Civics." Ashley hated to respond to Helen, but she'd rather do that than participate in whatever hazing they had planned.

"I'll text you later." Courtney made it sound more like a threat than a comment.

Chapter 3

The image of the daisy tugged at Sheridan all day. She didn't want to remember her last foster home or what caused the state to release her and the five other kids. But the injustice done to locker 572 yanked her back to events on the farm.

The grown-ups pulled the disgusting dad from the system. Big deal, he wouldn't foster any more children. But what if he decided to steal them? Nobody listened to her when she asked that question. He deserved nothing short of an operation. They neutered dogs, didn't they? Due to the controversy, the authorities divided up the litter and spread the kids out across the state of California like motherless mutts.

Adults were pointless in a crisis. Today, the teachers conspired against her. She'd planned to watch the janitor transform her new locker, but no.

"Miss Alexander, come to my desk after class to get some consent forms."

"Sheridan, before you leave I need to talk to you."

"Here's the homework you missed."

“Visit the counselor’s office at lunch.”

Were they kidding? By the time she finished her last class, she had a backpack full of books and papers. Typical. What did it matter now? School was over. She shouldered her load and said “*Au revoir*” to her French teacher.

The laughter in the hall irritated her. Sheridan pushed through the crowd. No one could stop her from going to locker 572 now. In the throng of North Harbor students, she hadn’t made one friend. Not that she tried. She preferred eclectics over fakers, like the former owner of her new locker or at least the daisy-dropper. Sheridan searched the current of students streaming through the hallway; each drip looked like the next.

The phone in her backpack danced to Tex’s achy-breaky ringtone. She dropped her fifty-pound school luggage to the floor.

“What?”

“Whoa.” Her former foster-brother’s drawl was thick. It wasn’t real, which made it sometimes comedic. The black city boy with a silver-dollar belt buckle and matching cowboy hat wasn’t Southern. He’d spent his entire life in California. All foster kids coped. Sheridan collected shoes and Tex used a cartoon accent. “Whatcha biting me fer?”

“I’m tired of people today, Tex.”

“Then later, ‘gator.”

“No, wait.” Sheridan heaved her pack onto her shoulder. Tex was the best brother she’d ever had. They both arrived at the farm their first year of high school. Her cowboy buddy was a wiz on the computer. Before they left Yuba County, he printed flyers of the old man and the crimes he’d done. Together they stapled them on every wooden pole on Marysville Road. It wouldn’t erase

the memories little Elsie would have her whole life. But it was more than the grown-ups did.

"So, what're they like?"

"Total jerks." Students ruled this hate-fest. Teachers didn't seem any better.

"Your new Ma and Pa?"

"Nina and Joe?" She shook her head to shuffle her brain.

"Yeah. You say they're jerks?"

"No. I was talking about the kids at school. The new foster parents are fine. A couple do-gooders."

"Ain't all foster folks?"

"Very funny." Sheridan switched the phone to her other ear. "This couple believes they are going to save my life with charts and graphs."

"Shoot. Is that all?"

"Why? What are yours like?" Sheridan weaved around students who refused to move for her. At the top of the stairs she stopped in a corner and dropped her backpack. For the first time all day, the locker could wait. Tex was her rare sense of belonging. She listened to his voice and let the rush of North Harbor blow past her.

"They actually track me with GPS."

"That sucks. Dude, we need to get out of this system."

The front-step Barbies appeared on the stairs below her. Sheridan straightened her short frame. "Look, can I call you back?"

"You betcha."

"Great." Sheridan flipped her phone closed and tucked it into the side pocket of her backpack. Two steroid-enhanced boys sauntered up the steps. The jocks yanked on their jerseys, gave a smug nod then

climbed the steps two at a time. The ponytail started to follow the boys upstairs until the queen bee shot her an angry glance. Some species eat their young. Apparently, this group was one of them. The cluster of girls giggled and focused on the guys while Sheridan slipped past the clique.

She rounded the last flight and puffed out a heavy breath. Restraint wasn't her best quality. Quite the opposite. As she reached the basement she felt proud of herself. She'd resisted the urge to deck every one of them.

The basement had lost its dark and creepy aura. Missing light bulbs had been replaced. The heels of her boots clicked as the few remaining students slammed doors and scrambled from the building. She loved her shoes. All of them. They'd become home to more than her feet. She could depend on her footwear. The soft leather conformed to her foot like nothing else in life.

The daisy was gone. Number 572 had a fresh coat of paint. The nasty odor had lost its battle against the scent of pine. Sheridan twisted the lock. The disgusting mess from this morning was gone. The paint felt sticky, but almost dry. The garbage inside had been replaced with tree-shaped air fresheners. Three of them hung on the coat hooks. Sheridan had to give props to the poor guy who cleaned this up.

A stack of textbooks remained on the top shelf. Biology, Math and... wait a minute. The locker wasn't scrubbed of all mystery. A journal peeked out from under the books. Interesting. The locker still had secrets. She reached to grab it when she noticed the girls from upstairs. They loitered at the end of the hall, watching her.

For the first time all day, Sheridan wished she'd worn her knee-top Converse. Rubber soles would give her tired legs a better chance at freedom. Her only escape route would be through the hags. But not in these heels.

She faced the locker and slipped the journal off the shelf without removing any of the textbooks. It better be worth the beatdown she was about to get. She couldn't afford a suspension. Before she mapped out her full defense, an object whizzed across the hall. She ducked before it hit her head. A plastic bottle crashed against the wall behind her. Tomato juice splattered against her skin.

"Are you serious?" The plastic V-8 container spun on the floor next to her foot. These fools didn't know she'd spent the end of summer tossing fifty-pound bales of hay with Tex. If they wanted to tangle with her, no problem. She dropped the journal on the floor of the locker and covered it with her coat. She could do some serious damage.

Red fluid dripped from her hair as the group approached her. Sheridan tapped the tip of her boot and waited. There were six of them. She'd start with the leader. Scenarios played out in her mind. No matter how she calculated it, every situation would get her in trouble. Except restraint. Don't blow it on a bunch of juice-tossing idiots. She had to stay cool and get out of here. Tex would tell her these cows weren't worth wrestling. In the end, the grown-ups would blame the foster kid.

The gang surrounded her. Whatever happened, she wanted to make sure of two things. One, keep the journal; and two, don't fight back. Make sure these heifers had nothing to report to a teacher, principal, or parent. Sheridan turned to close the locker when

someone grabbed her hair. Her quick reflexes helped her get a hand to her scalp. It took all the strength she had to not retaliate. She waited for the punches that didn't come. Instead, a quick shove from behind forced her face first inside the locker wall. Almost-dry paint stuck to her fingers as she tried to regain her balance. Unseen hands lifted her legs and tucked her into the locker.

"Welcome to North Harbor High, tramp." The door slammed.

Curled up like a pretzel, Sheridan shouted at them. "Sure, shove the short girl into the locker, very original." Her voice reverberated around her as the lock spun shut. Their laughter died away. They left her alone and in the dark. The antique basement lockers were wider than most, but the space was still tight. Her right hand was trapped between her leg and the wall. Who could she call? Not Nina and Joe. No way. There had to be someone else. Maybe the school office.

It wasn't until she heard Tex's achy-breaky ringtone through painted metal that she realized it would be impossible to call anyone. Her backpack didn't make it inside. At least the idiots that stuffed her into number 572 didn't chuck it into the trash.

Her wedged-in right shoulder ached. A little twist put her at an awkward, but less painful, angle. With her right knee in her face and her left one tucked under her, she managed to unzip one of her boots. She peeled the boot down her calf. With her foot free, she had three inches to maneuver her left leg into a full tucked position. She released the other boot and hung them on a hook over her head.

The corner of the journal poked into her butt. She wiggled her toes and twisted the book along the locker

wall until she could prop it up on her knees. The vents at the top of the locker didn't provide enough light to read, but the penlight on her keys would.

Regular kids would be worried about how long they might be imprisoned in a locker. But they didn't live in foster care. This was nothing. Sheridan lifted her elbow up high enough to get two fingers into the pocket under her foot. She dug until she could pinch the rubber smiley face between them. Her entire brain focused on the movement. She squished her face against the locker wall and pulled the keys up. The easiest way to investigate the journal was to put the key-holder into her mouth. She had more room when she sat at a diagonal. With her thumb on the end of the small light, Sheridan opened the pages.

ALL MY HOPES AND DREAMS was written on the first sheet. Sheridan scanned the fat letters written with a rainbow of neon markers. If the doodled flowers with squiggled stems didn't prove a girl wrote the journal, the next line cinched it: *by Ribbon Barber.*

Chapter 4

Smart as a fifth grader. Hta Hta. I like that because I'm a fifth grader and I don't have to be any smarter than that.

Today I want to tell you about soup, so listen carefully.

Soup should be eaten with a fork. Not stew or chili. That's no big deal. I mean regular chicken noodle soup. It should have so many crackers crunched in that it won't slip through the poky part of a fork.

Now, if you've never done this before, be careful. There are good and bad ways to do it. If the soup is too hot then don't put all the crackers in at once or they get soggy. And your soup will just be gross. The crackers need to keep some of their crunch.

Also to the Dads out there trying to tell other fifth graders that dried croutons or thick bread does the same thing. Don't believe them. You want the crackers that are called "saltines." They're the best. For a full bowl of soup it can take an entire package to get the right thickness.

And always remember to save a few until the end. Just in case.

Chapter 5

Sheridan grinned. Finally, someone who knew the proper way to eat soup. She and Tex had argued over this concept at least a hundred times. This girl, Ribbon, knew the drill. The flowery drawings had worried Sheridan, who would have scribbled a knife on the page before she ever doodled a flower. But this kid was eclectic.

The world needed more people like Ribbon. The reason her locker was targeted became obvious. This girl was a threat to the status quo. Truly awesome people carry the biggest burden in high school. Even her name was neat. Her parents must be hippies or actors.

Sheridan let her thumb slip from the top of the penlight. In the darkness of the locker she tried to imagine what her new friend looked like. She probably had her natural eyebrows and some untamed hair around her face. That kind of beauty always made the predictable paper-doll cutouts nervous.

Wheels rattled on the tile floor.

Someone was in the hall.

The janitor.

"Hey!" She pounded on the locker door. "I'm in here. Number 572."

"¿Qué?"

"Hello. Please can you let me out?"

"What are you doing inside?" The man with the Spanish accent made the question sound like a statement. If he was the regular school janitor, he knew why she was inside. It probably wasn't his first rescue. "*Por favor*. You tell me the numbers for the combination?"

"Okay." Sheridan had to think. She'd only opened the locker a couple of times in her life and memorization wasn't a talent she possessed. "Is my backpack still there?"

"Si."

"There's a zipper at the top. The numbers are on that paper just inside." Her voice bounced off the walls. She probably didn't need to shout, but getting out of there and making it home would be good. She might just escape trouble with her new grown-ups. It wouldn't be good if they found out she'd gotten into it with some girls on the first day. Foster parents had suspicious natures. Kids were guilty until proven innocent.

After seven agonizing attempts, the locker door swung open, and Sheridan performed an awkward twist to free herself. The janitor wasn't shocked as Sheridan stretched stiff muscles. "Took you long enough."

The thirty-something man was about her same height. At four foot nine, she seldom had the chance to look a grown-up in the eye.

"I did not lock you in there." He gripped his mop

and folded his arms across his chest.

"Of course not." Sheridan searched her bag to see if anything was missing.

"I don't steal."

"I never said you did." Sheridan shouldered her bag. She knew what it was like to be falsely accused. "I was checking to see if the idiots that locked me in took something."

"Okay." He relaxed.

"Thanks, Mr." She read the name embroidered on his uniform. "Talmadge."

"*Por nada.*" He reached a small hand toward her. "My name's José. José Talmadge." The man's Mexican features matched his first name, but not his last. There was probably an interesting story connected to that. Sheridan liked stories and therefore liked this man.

"Sheridan. Sheridan Alexander."

"Nice to meet you."

"Thank you."

"School not always easy." He nodded at her. "Be careful."

"I will." She grabbed her boots from the locker hooks. His wet mop splattered onto the spilled V-8 juice. This school had its issues, and the Latino janitor with the English last name had probably seen the worst of it. Over a decade in the foster system had taught her to read ambivalence on the part of grown-ups. This man's eyes showed he cared. Of course, he had as little power to change things as she did. He might have the desire to stop the vandals but lacked the position.

With her boots zipped and her backpack slung over one shoulder, she stepped around Mr. Talmadge's wet floor. One thing those fake-hair, fashion slaves didn't

understand was that their games couldn't hurt Sheridan. Even if all the other less-privileged kids in North Harbor High didn't have the guts to stand up to them, she would. Sheridan wanted to be more than a friend to Ribbon. She wanted to be an advocate. They'd rule these halls together.

Chapter 6

Today I found out I'm a weirdo.

That may sound stupid.

But how was I to know that other people cleaned their teeth with paste in a tube? We've always used baking soda. I asked Mom when I got home and she told me toothpaste wasn't earth friendly. And she should know. She's been teaching environmental science at the university forever. Dad too. Only he teaches geology.

Now I just have to figure out the other weird things we do to help Mother Earth. Mom says a lot of people don't care about the planet. I guess it wouldn't have been so bad if she told me about the toothpaste thing. Instead, I found out at Ashley's house. She's my best friend.

Here's what happened. Me and Ashley were walking home after the sixth-grade science fair. I tripped on a bumpy piece of sidewalk. Mostly because I couldn't see over my homemade model of Mars. I got a red ribbon. Anyway, the scrape on my knee didn't hurt too much, but there was lots of blood. When Ashley's mom saw it, she made me go inside so she could wash it.

Their whole house smelled like pumpkin pie. Even the bathroom smelled sweet. I couldn't believe it. Mrs. Nobel told me to sit on the side of the tub and put my leg on the closed toilet lid.

She used a soft wet rag to clean the top of my knee and squirted something on it that stung a little at first but then made the pain go away. In the drawer by the sink she pulled out a Band-

Aid, with that weird square, yellow cartoon character on it. One kid at school has the sponge guy on his backpack. Well, she left the drawer open and I saw a bright red tube.

When I asked her what it was she looked at me like I was from outer-space.

"Toothpaste. Don't you use toothpaste?"

I didn't say anything else because I didn't like the look on her face. When Mom came home from her afternoon class she told me all about toothpaste and how it contains pesticides and chemicals dangerous to bunnies and stuff.

All of this made sense except for one thing. If this stuff was so bad, shouldn't somebody tell Mrs. Nobel about it?

Maybe another time. I'm not going back today so that she can look at me like I'm an alien or something.

Chapter 7

Ashley left Courtney and the gang standing on the stairs after school. Why did Ribbon have to be such a pain? A little conformity never hurt anyone. It would have been better to leave it alone, but her old friend's absence bothered her. She dropped her backpack on the bed and ran out of the house before Dad could stop her. She searched her pocket. The envelope with one of the black-and-white prints was still there. The gift could be bartered for a conversation with Ribbon. Ashley double-checked the sidewalk behind her. Everyone knew where the Barbers lived. It was the favorite place for every disgusting Halloween prank.

Concrete squares patched a path from Ashley's house to their old hangout. She counted her steps with each chomp on her gum. As kids, Ashley and Ribbon spent most of their time on the swings now occupied by a couple of giggling ten-year-olds. Loves-me-loves-me-not daisy petals used to litter the way to a hollow bush where they shared all their elementary school secrets. Some of those were still in Ashley's vault. Nothing said

to anyone. For what? She was risking her current high school status to go looking for someone who refused to stand up for herself. What a joke.

The park was the halfway point between where Ashley and Ribbon lived. The worn-grass path still led to the shortcut. It was a bit of a struggle to get through the hole in the fence. She'd grown in the last five years. The BFF she'd had in sixth grade was just too *different* for junior high. Ashley glanced over her shoulder one last time. Courtney must never find out. All hell would break loose. But what could Ashley do? Ribbon had pretty much vanished from school. For the first time since becoming friends with Courtney she was drawing outside of the leader's strict lines.

It was impossible to go back to junior high, but she couldn't help wishing for it. Not her entire eighth-grade year. But if she could, she would change the moment in the cafeteria when she decided to join up with Courtney. Dad would have eventually found a job. Instead, they were both slaves to Courtney and her father. And some of the blame goes to Ribbon. She better have a good explanation.

The Barber's house came into sight at the end of the street. Centered in the cul-de-sac, it remained a mystery. Ashley hadn't visited Ribbon in a long time. Not for a legitimate reason anyway. Even back in elementary, when they were friends, the Barbers weren't the sleepover kind of family. The brick structure wasn't a hangout.

In the front yard, the English garden grew wilder than Ashley remembered. Good. The plant invasion could hide her from the street. The front door stood like a wall before her. She scratched her forefinger with her thumbnail as she knocked.

A black-and-white cat batted the air after a bouncing moth. While its actions appeared playful, its intentions were deadly. The moth knew. That's why it flew higher. Why couldn't Ribbon do that? She should do something, anything. Shoot. If the girl decided to talk to her, Ashley would tell her, "Quit letting the gang get to you. It doesn't help."

Maybe Ribbon didn't ask for the harassment, but Ashley always wondered why she stayed for more. Why not fly above it?

Ashley studied the street one more time. Based on the overgrown weeds, the family might have moved. The porch stood in shadows. The sun shone on the other side of the house. The only way someone could see her would be with binoculars.

"What do you want?" Professor Barber's voice startled Ashley. She hadn't heard the door open. He stared at her from behind a half-closed door.

"Hi." Ashley brought her left ring finger to her mouth and began to nibble on the nail. Of course Ribbon would have told her parents about all the mean things going on at school. "I came by to see Ribbon."

"She's not here."

Ashley's heart pounded in her ears. She couldn't move as Ribbon's father glared at her. What was she doing? She rolled her gum around on her tongue. This was a bad idea.

"Ben." The soft word came from behind him. "Let me talk to her."

The screen swayed a little as Professor Barber turned and stomped away. A door slammed shut in the unseen depths of the house.

"Hi, Ashley." Mrs. Barber looked thin. She stepped out

onto the porch and closed the door behind her. "Sorry my husband's still a little upset."

"No problem. I should have called." The father of the nicest girl in the world was mad at her. She hadn't expected the rejection would turn her inside-out.

"Would you like to sit down?" Ribbon's mother pointed toward a couple wooden chairs on the porch.

"Sure." Ashley didn't search the street for spies. The wind pushed a breeze across the shaded porch. Courtney and the drama squad didn't matter for the moment. The smell of peppermint crossed her as Mrs. Barber passed. Ashley sat down. The sweet scent should have helped Ashley relax, but she couldn't help but think the Barbers knew all her sins. All the ugly words and mean actions. She fumbled into her pocket. It would take years to make it up to Ribbon. The photograph could be one day in the long journey. "I took this picture."

"Why would you take a picture of Ribbon?"

"I'm on the yearbook staff." It was the truth and a lie at the same time. Ashley's hand trembled as she passed the envelope to the woman. Ashley took the photos after school. Ribbon sat on a concrete bench in the churchyard alone. Not that Ribbon would be anything but alone. Ashley understood isolation, but Ribbon did it too much.

"Who told you about Ribbon?" Mrs. Barber fingered the envelope without opening the flap.

"Told me what?"

Silence held the breeze back. Ribbon's mother didn't answer. The dull look in her eyes scared the crackers out of Ashley. She shifted in her seat but couldn't shake the foreboding sensation that floated around her. "Can I talk

to her?"

"She's not here." Mrs. Barber squinted up at the clouds.

"When will she be back?" Ashley didn't want to push, but morbid thoughts began to rise in her mind. Ribbon was probably at her grandmother's. Yeah. Lots of kids moved away to find peace. The Barbers would do what they could to make Ribbon happy, even if they were a little weird. She shouldn't make too much out of this whole thing.

"Ribbon's not coming back." The sound of crinkled paper followed Mrs. Barber's words. The envelope rotated around the woman's fingers. She didn't open it. Over and over the enclosed photo of Ashley's old friend toppled in a mother's hands.

"I don't get it." Goosebumps prickled along Ashley's arms. She gripped the edge of her coat sleeves in her fist. Ashley couldn't remember if Mrs. Barber was always this quiet. The porch and house and setting might as well be new to Ashley. She'd knocked on the door before, but never spent more than a few minutes waiting for Ribbon to come play. Mostly they'd met up at the park. "Has she gone away to another school?"

"No." The older lady looked out at the neglected flowers in the yard. She cleared her throat and said, "Ribbon died."

Ashley's fingers went cold. She wrapped her arms around her body, still clinging tightly to the sleeves. "Of what?" Kids their age didn't die. Well, at least not kids like Ribbon. Right? She didn't have a car she would drive too fast. She didn't do drugs and stuff. How could Ribbon be dead?

Mrs. Barber answered with the calm of a news

reporter. "She killed herself."

Ashley couldn't move. The black-and-white photo crept into her mind. The direct gaze of sad eyes pierced her. The envelope in Mrs. Barber's hand probably contained the last recorded image of a ghost that would haunt Ashley for the rest of her life.

"We'd like to keep it private. Ribbon's life should be honored, not her death." Mrs. Barber stood. She gripped the doorpost, her knuckles white.

Ashley got up. What could she say? "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause any problems. It's just that I hadn't seen Ribbon around school and, well, we just hadn't hung out for so long that I didn't know if she was okay or not." Ashley choked back any other words. She didn't have any right to be here, let alone cry.

Mrs. Barber went to the door. She didn't face Ashley when she said, "You were the best friend Ribbon ever had." The words burned like a slipped curling iron against Ashley's skin. Mrs. Barber went inside and closed the door without a bang.

Chapter 8

I hate junior high and I hate Ashley. Everyone at school is mean to me just because I don't wear the same kind of clothes or cut my hair. And today Ashley just turned on me. I saved her a seat at lunch and when she walked by I called out to her. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I thought she didn't see me.

She did and so did everyone else.

They all started laughing when my former best friend sat with that stuck-up girl, Courtney. One kid started to make fun of me by mocking the way I called Ashley's name. Everyone laughed louder.

What's so funny about being mean? I don't know what I did wrong. Ashley and I used to do everything together. Now she pretends like she doesn't even know me.

I'm so confused and I feel stupid. The saddest thing of all. I know that if Ashley called me today and said she was sorry I'd totally forgive her.

How lame is that?

Chapter 9

“Sorry I’m so late,” Sheridan repeated the lie she told Nina on the phone. “The research at the library took longer than I thought, then I missed the bus. It won’t happen again, promise.” Not the best way to start, but better than mentioning the locker incident. A janitorial rescue on the first day at school wouldn’t make a good impression.

The grown-up’s eyes brimmed with suspicion. “What’s all over your hair?”

Oops, forgot about that. “Tomato juice.” Sheridan had been so thrilled to escape she hadn’t remembered. “V-8 to be exact. Some guy on the bus spilled it as he walked by.”

“Hmm.” Nina leaned against the kitchen counter. “Did you make any friends today?”

“Yeah, two.” That wasn’t a lie. Sheridan stuffed her hands in her pockets and crossed her fingers. She didn’t want to explain that she counted as friends a girl in a journal and José Talmadge, the school’s janitor.

“Good for you.” Nina didn’t ask. “Go get washed up.”

Dinner starts in five minutes.”

“You bet.” She accepted the pass and hurried down the hall.

“Wait a minute.”

Sheridan skidded to a stop. Even from across the room Nina’s stance was crammed full of expectation. “You spent money today, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, for what?”

“Lunch and bus fare.”

“Log it on the chart. Every penny. It’s best to make that a habit as soon as you walk in the door.”

Sheridan nodded and smiled without meaning it.

“Just think, by the end of the week you’ll have a bus pass from the school. That will be a good way to save.”

“Absolutely.”

Ribbon’s journal would have to wait. The best thing about new foster folks was the honeymoon period. The days when they pretended to love you like their own. Sheridan pretended too. That’s what happened when strangers came together and were forced to be families. Everyone smiled, all hopeful and shiny like a new penny. But Sheridan knew copper turned puke green over time.

She entered Nina’s budget-room. One dry-erase board was lined with black plastic tape. It was a refillable calendar. Sheridan picked up the blue marker that Nina had assigned to her and wrote in her daily expenses. Other boards contained pie charts and graphs Sheridan would be forced to understand later.

Nina wasn’t going to let too much slide. Sheridan’s decision to not fight back at school today had been a good one. This grown-up had no chart for trouble. So

Sheridan played the happy-kid through dinner, finished her homework and chores, then excused herself.

Safe in her room, she plopped down on the striped comforter and thought about Ribbon. Besides soup and crackers, the girl also liked the color red and the smell of freshly mowed grass. The similarities didn't end there. They were both born in February. Sheridan had the misfortune of being born the day after Valentine's Day. She missed being loved by a few hours. With Ribbon being born on February 10, the world was full of hearts and hugs and kisses when the girl was four days old. Her doodled flowers made sense.

Sheridan pushed herself up from the bed. The floorboards in the hall creaked under her feet. Nina and Joe watched TV in the living room. Sheridan tiptoed into the kitchen. It wasn't like she searched the cupboards for alcohol or cigarettes. Still, the tension buzzed through her. Noise might rat her out. The odds of home number six being worse than this were extremely high.

The orange box sat in the skinny cupboard next to the stove. She scooped a spoonful of the baking soda onto a small plate. Nina and Joe laughed at their program, and Sheridan hurried back down the hall.

It wasn't necessary, but she locked the bathroom door anyway. The journal and locker and Ribbon were her secret for now. She didn't want a repeat of the farm where adults had told her to ignore what she felt. Not this time.

Ribbon's home life was odd. While her parents weren't hippies or actors, they were strange. Baking soda to brush your teeth. Gross. Sheridan knew foster homes could be strange places. But apparently so could regular families. In one entry, Ribbon explained how

she used a safety pin to release the ingrown hairs from her unshaved legs. The Barbers only allowed one gallon of water each day to bathe with. Crazy.

In her first attempt to use the baking soda, the powder didn't stick to the dry toothbrush. She turned on the water and wet the bristles. The white grains grabbed the water in globs, but not enough to clean her teeth. She tried it again with her brush really wet. As the water dripped from the green plastic spikes, the soda absorbed it like a hungry bird. Sheridan put the plate under the dripping faucet. The particles mixed with water to make a paste. Interesting. Kind of like a third-grade science project, only different.

With enough goop on the end of her brush, she took a deep breath and stared at herself in the mirror. "There is no way this is going to taste minty," she said aloud, "but here goes."

The first taste wasn't bad. Very salty.

Sheridan continued until she reached the inside of her back teeth. The baking soda touched her tongue a few too many times. Her face twisted into a squint and she spat out the homemade concoction.

It wasn't bitter, but the salty taste and grainy texture were disgusting. She wouldn't want the Barbers to be her foster parents. It took a gallon of water to rinse her mouth free of the stuff. Her teeth were clean—she had to admit that. But what a joke.

Sheridan had to find this girl, if only to let her try toothpaste. She sent a text message to Tex. If anyone could find the previous owner of locker 572 it would be her favorite foster brother. She couldn't fix the system. For her, family meant stress and strangers. Those that didn't prey on the weak ignored them or closed their

eyes. The pervert at the farm never touched her. She sometimes wished he would have tried it. She would have broken more than his nose. Sheridan wanted to blame the wife but couldn't. That blind incrimination would come too close to her and Tex as well.

The obvious wasn't always obvious.

Chapter 10

Ashley didn't look for high school spies on her walk home. She didn't look for daisy petals either. When the rough edge of the fence tore a hole in Ashley's shirt, she didn't care. Ribbon was dead. Stupid girl. STUPID, STUPID, STUPID.

Her lungs tightened as she moved through the shortcut in a daze. Children laughed on the swings and clouds shifted in the sky. And Ashley's feet moved one in front of the other. No one she knew ever died before. People in her life didn't stop thinking or talking or breathing.

The sun shone harsh and angry. Stupid kids laughed and played as if there wasn't a junior high or high school in their future. Great. Most of them actually looked forward to it. If she could shake one of them she would. Don't make friends with people. Don't do it. Ribbon, that was a selfish, selfish, selfish thing to do.

Oh man. Ashley blinked hard then swallowed her anger. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. Each step took her closer to home and further from hope. A block

from her house, the sound of her cell phone startled her. Courtney. Great. The last person on earth Ashley wanted to talk to right now. The continuous ring of a party song from the phone grated against her nerves.

"Hello."

"Hey, Ashley, what's up?"

"Nothing." It was pointless to tell her anything about Ribbon.

"Cool." The relaxed tone of Courtney's voice sounded ridiculous in Ashley's brain. "Have you finished our chemistry homework yet?"

"I'm not home."

"I thought you were grounded."

"Yeah." Ashley stopped and tapped her foot on the sidewalk. Five minutes ago, caring about Courtney's endless demands evaporated with Ribbon's spirit. So did homework and haters.

"Where'd you go?"

"Nowhere." What if Ashley just said it? Ribbon's dead, you control freak. Are you happy now? Forget about it. Might as well ask what would happen if the earth split in two.

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'm just tired, is that okay with you?"

"Hey, don't bite my head off."

Ashley didn't answer. Courtney never tolerated anyone else's bad moods. This so-called friend threatened everyone with her father's big job and school board position. More than a couple of kids were expelled from school or sent to detention on the word of Courtney alone. Well, not really alone. She always had some troll to support her.

"Hello. Are you still there?" Ashley pictured

Courtney's hand on her hip. So what. Ashley was over it. Over Ribbon. Over Courtney. Over every freaking thing in life.

"I asked when the chemistry homework would be done."

Ashley didn't answer. Breaking down the molecules of soda pop held zero importance to her. Let Courtney do her own homework for a change.

"Hello. Are you still there?"

"Look, I've got to go. I'll talk to you later." Ashley's fingers tingled with adrenaline as she pushed the off button. She had never spoken to Courtney like that, let alone hung up on her. All the things that were important yesterday had blown away with Ribbon's daisy petals. Ashley couldn't take away all the mean things she said and did to Ribbon, but maybe she could stop feeding the monster.

The swing on Ashley's front porch rocked back and forth. She sat and let it sway on its own. The impossibility of Ribbon's death weighed on her shoulders and neck. Her former friend killed herself. Gave up on life. What would it have been like to have been Ribbon? No friends. In fact, the only person who was ever nice to her joined the haters in junior high.

A roly-poly crawled across the wooden porch. Its tiny legs moved over the concrete in no clear direction. It wandered and bumped into a small twig and blindly bounced its way around the obstacle until it was free. Ashley resisted the temptation to tap it with the tip of her shoe to make it curl up into the tight ball.

You were the best friend Ribbon ever had. Mrs. Barber's words climbed with piercing claws all over Ashley's nerves. The sad thing. It was true. Nobody liked Ribbon.

If they did, they didn't dare tell anyone. High school science taught survival of the fittest. Kill or be killed. But Ribbon was supposed to fight back, not flee. Never suicide. What would Darwin say about that?

The roly-poly made its way around the post toward the stairs. Somehow the rotation of the earth should have hiccupped. A real, live person was dead. And Ashley was part of the swarm that stung her daily. This wasn't a small thing.

The phone in her hand vibrated with a new text message. She didn't have to look to know it was from Courtney.

Chapter 11

Eighth grade graduation was a week ago. Today I sat in the window of my room and imagined skipping around the tree in my neighbor's backyard. A big palm grew, surrounded by thick grass, unhampered by a vegetable garden. Sometimes I dream while I'm awake. As I watch myself circle the tree, one hand felt the rough uneven slats against my fingertips. My chin and neck were exposed to open sky. I lifted my voice and sang.

"Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

I like that me. The one that swirled in a plaid skirt.

"Sticks and stones."

A red sock slipped down to my blue shoes. I bent to pull it back up to my knee.

"Will break my bones."

I skipped again. My crisp white shirt came untucked from my waist.

"But words will never hurt me."

The image blurred. Rain covered the window winning its battle over the sun that still shown from an unseen corner of the sky.

Chapter 12

Sheridan slapped the journal closed. People are vicious. In fact, all the horrible, awful, tangled mess that made up injustice tore at her. From the open door to her room, the smell of chocolate chips assaulted her. The homey fragrance didn't mix well in her stomach. It was Elsie all over again. Where was her little foster sister from the farm now?

"Hey there." Nina poked her head into the room. Sheridan forced a smile to her face.

"*Survivor* starts in about fifteen minutes." Nina was determined to play Mom. "I made treats."

"I can't wait." Sheridan held back the frustrated scream that wrestled in her throat.

Nina left, wiping her hands on her apron.

Sheridan slid Ribbon's journal into the desk drawer and walked into the bathroom to splash water on her face. Maybe she should write to the producers of Nina's favorite reality show. They could send the next group of castaways into the wilderness called "high school." Let's see how long they could survive in that jungle.

Chapter 13

Ashley kept her bedroom door ajar. According to her father's favorite weatherman, it was sunny and warm in San Diego. Ribbon's ghost stared at Ashley through the water spots on the photo. Of the seven pictures taken, this was the last one Ashley shot before putting her camera down that day. Did Ribbon see her? She'd followed her old friend from school to the church, parked across the street, and held the camera through her car window. Her former friend had looked directly into the camera. In the photo, a haunting look of resolve dulled the girl's eyes.

The late local news broadcasted the state of the world. Ashley heard the television from her bedroom. She paid enough attention to the reports to know that life sucked. Violence and hatred and death ruled the world. Fox News might only shout about it at 6:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M., but it was the truth around the clock.

Mom kicked Dad out when Ashley was in sixth grade. In junior high, Courtney's father gave Dad a job. By the time he got clean and sober, it was too late. Mom

had a new boyfriend. Ashley moved back with her Dad when Mom's new husband found work in Arizona. Mom hadn't fought for custody. That didn't matter. Ashley wanted to stay in the same neighborhood and not disrupt her social life by a big move in the middle of her adolescence. Would it have been better to start over in Phoenix? Hard to say now.

When the voices from the television stopped, the floorboards creaked, and Dad headed to bed. Ashley refreshed her gum. Water gurgled through the pipes. Ashley pushed herself away from her desk and grabbed her coat. She couldn't sleep. The shower in Dad's bathroom would block the click of the deadbolt and the distant start of her car at the curb. Ashley needed to go for a drive. Maybe visit the last place she'd seen Ribbon. She had to confirm whether or not Ribbon saw her from that bench. Her former friend might have decided to do it that day. If she had noticed Ashley in the car outside the church taking her picture, it could have pushed the girl over the edge.

Ashley fought back tears and worked on her gum. The streets were empty this late on a Wednesday night. Ashley parked on the same side of the street she had two weeks ago. Thanks to a lamppost, the bench Ribbon used was highlighted. If Ashley had any guts, she would take a picture of the deserted bench in the churchyard and print the two photos side by side in the yearbook as a memorial. Not a bad idea, except she didn't bring her camera.

The church parking lot was as unpopulated as any cemetery. Ashley left her car on the street and headed for the bench. A cool breeze pricked her cheeks. The sound of another car door slamming down the road made her

jump. Ashley wasn't the type to chase the dead, and the idea of Ribbon being gone caused bumps to prickle up her arm.

The dark suburb was safe. Right? The only person who might approach her would be some dweeb taking out the trash. She really didn't want to deal with anyone, good or bad. If an over-protective adult did ask what she was doing out so late, she'd find a lame excuse. Maybe she'd tell them she was praying. People prayed at churches. Right?

No one stopped her. At the bench, the light broke up the shadows. Ashley sat down. The cold concrete drew shivers to her bottom. It would have been warmer when Ribbon was here. Ashley looked toward the car. She couldn't see anything beyond the circle of lamplight. The obvious problem presented itself. The view would be different at night. Ribbon had sat here during the daytime. The neighborhood would have been visible during the day. She'd have to come back tomorrow with her camera.

Regardless of what Ribbon might have thought, Ashley never planned to do anything mean with the pictures. But Ribbon wouldn't know that. The girl would have every right to think the prints would be decapitated and reattached in the print shop in some Frankenstein way. Courtney would have plastered them around the school with some vulgar saying on them. That wasn't the goal. The gang might have changed Ashley's original reason. Survival of the fittest. Of course, that wouldn't be necessary now. None of the kids from school knew about the pictures. In fact, they didn't even miss Ribbon. They'd turned their attention to the new girl, Tinkerbelle.

A twig cracked behind her and she whipped her head around. The gate on the opposite side of the church was swallowed in darkness. She heard a giggle to her left and started to get up when Courtney plopped down on the bench to her right.

“Whatcha doing?”

“Oh crackers!” Ashley sank back down onto the bench. “You scared me.”

“Did I?” Leaves quivered on the tree above the light post to Ashley’s left. Ten other girls surrounded the bench. Helen was the first to speak.

“Maybe she’s doing her chemistry homework.”

The other girls laughed.

Ashley took a deep breath and studied the ground.

It wasn’t coincidence that brought them all together. Ashley knew the script. Courtney had assigned a couple of low-on-the-food-chain girls to watch her twenty-four hours a day. A group text message would have done the rest. The princess had to remind the group she ruled this kingdom. It would have happened today or next week or eventually. Who cares? Ribbon’s dead. Ashley looked straight ahead. None of them were as guilty as she was. Ribbon had been her friend, not theirs. Let them beat her up. It didn’t matter.

The gang didn’t move. The best way to get it over with was to try to leave. Ashley stood. She’d been here before. Not in this position, but here, next to Courtney, when she reined in a situation that got out of hand. It was Ashley’s turn to submit.

“So, what happened today?” Courtney stood.

“I just had a bad day.” The glow around the bench ended in two steps. Ashley took the first one.

“And that gives you a right to take it out on me?”

Courtney matched the step.

“No.” Ashley’s second step carried her into the darkness. The first slap burned across her cheek. Ashley didn’t turn back toward the attacker. This wasn’t a time to be proud. She flinched as a smack stung the back of her head. Strong hands pushed her into another person.

Before she could block the next blow, one of her friends grabbed her shoulders and pulled their knee hard against her ribs. Ashley folded in half. She tried to catch her breath while a storm of fists pelted her on every side. The sharp pain from every angle couldn’t be shielded. She rolled onto the ground and curled up.

Instinct pulled her hands over her head. It was all she could do. The least amount of damage to her face the better. Feet kicked and stomped on her legs and arms. Hands and fists smacked hard against her head. The beat-fest lasted probably less than a minute before Courtney told them to stop.

“Eat dirt, you slimy whore.” Ashley recognized Helen’s voice and heard her hock a loogie. The snot-covered spitball slid down Ashley’s uncovered neck.

“That’s enough.”

Feet shuffled backward. The sound of heavy breathing mixed with the breeze. Ashley flinched as someone touched her on the back and leaned close to her face. Courtney’s calm voice came close to her ear. “Sorry we had to do this. It’s only a warning. To get back on my good side, show me what you can do to the new girl.”

Ashley didn’t answer.

“It would be horrible if my father had to find out about this.” Courtney’s whisper echoed through Ashley’s brain.

The cool lawn held her body as the laughter and

insults faded from the churchyard. The smell of grass and dirt pulled at a strange memory—the only time Ashley had seen Courtney vulnerable. The summer between eighth and ninth grade a group of kids got together to play a combination of tag and hide-and-go-seek. Ashley had found a spot next to a fence where the grass sloped. She pressed her face against the grass and waited for the “ollie ollie oxen free” call.

When she got back to the group, it was already disbanding. The slow summer sun had finally dropped low enough to cause the streetlight to flicker on. The universal signal had kids heading home. Ashley walked over to Courtney’s yard and grabbed her bike. It was a mile or so home, and Dad always freaked out when it got dark.

Courtney sat on the curb.

“Aren’t you going inside?”

“No.” Courtney pushed a stick into the gap between the concrete gutter and the tar road. “I don’t have a curfew.”

“Wow, you’re lucky.” Ashley spun the pedals of her ten-speed before planting her weight on one to balance.

“My folks don’t care when I come home.”

Ashley thought that would be sad as she pedaled home. Since Mom left, Dad cared to the point of obsession. But what would it be like if he didn’t care at all?

Chapter 14

Sheridan was up by six-o'clock in the morning. Three years on the farm had trained her. Other kids might hit the snooze and dread the day, but not her. She refused to start her day limp. It worked out good in this house. Joe would drive her to school instead of her having to take the city bus. Another "win" for Nina's save chart.

With her teeth clean, the new North Harbor High senior dropped her toothbrush into the glass by the sink and checked her face for pimples. Before she could discover anything, Nina stepped into the doorframe.

"Do you know what time it is?" Nina's hair was tussled and sleep still weighed on her eyelids. "Six-thirty." She extended the cordless phone in Sheridan's direction. "Too early for people to be calling." The grown-up raised two tired eyebrows. "Especially a boy."

"Right." Probably Tex. Why would he call the house instead of her cell?

"Tell him no calls before school."

"Absolutely." Sheridan kept her hand over the

receiver until she entered her room. "What the heck are you doing?"

"I tried yer cell phone three times." Tex's fake drawl was agitated.

"I was in the bathroom."

"Makes no never mind. Lookie here. Ya need ta be careful at that school."

"No duh!"

"Seriously, the kids there are more dangerous than a stallion on steroids."

"Did you think I was exaggerating about the locker?"

"That's nothing."

"Nothing? You try folding your lanky butt into a metal box."

"Are ya on yer computer?" Tex sounded impatient. He wasn't usually like that.

"I told you I just got out of the bathroom."

"Well, now that yer out, mind moseying over to your machine?"

"Fine." Sheridan went to the desk and followed Tex's instructions to a website.

"Now, these rascals archive their chat logs every couple a days or so. But I found a way to hack into old conversations."

Sheridan scrolled down. "Whew!" The words that polluted the site were worse than those scratched into locker 572. Her soul ached. Ribbon needed more help than ever. She scrolled to the last date where Tex had found Ribbon's name.

Princess17: ring around the toilet, you are a loser. Jeremy never liked you. it was all a joke and you were the punch line, you're so weak, what makes

you think that anyone would want to study with a hacked up face like yours? only plastic surgery can help you. go slit yourself no guy will ever want you. forget that, no girl would want you. you're life is a waste.

Sept 28 at 10:02 P.M.

12 people *like* this.

RibbonB: Fine. I'll go ahead and kill myself to make you happy.

Sept 28 at 10:25 P.M.

Hottie-girl: Ribbon... what's the b stand for? (lol) go wet yourself

Sept 28 at 10:26 P.M.

got2begood: you always say you'll kill yourself. Waaaa. you big baby. lame, you're not bad enough to do it. piece of garbage.

Sept 28 at 10:28 P.M.

Princess17: i say hurry up and die, you skank. Do it yourself before we do it for you.

Sept 28 at 10:30 P.M.

"This is messed up," Sheridan complained into the receiver. The messaging continued with f-bombs and at least four more death threats. Sheridan pushed herself away from the computer. How could people do this? Her stomach felt queasy reading it.

"And this ain't the R-rated stuff," Tex said.

"Did you find out where Ribbon went?"

"No. Her folks teach at the university." Tex gave Sheridan the address and phone number of the Barbers.

“Look. Ya need ta be careful. There’s no telling what them kids are capable of. And I live too far away ta help.”

The thought made Sheridan want to laugh. Tex might be taller than her but he weighed the same. She could out-fight him on her worse day.

“Listen, hero, you’ve got to help me find out the names behind ‘got2begood,’ ‘Hottie-girl,’ and ‘princess17.’ RibbonB must be for Ribbon, but why would they call her ‘ring around the toilet’?”

“I’m not some puppy ya get to boss around.”

“Whatever.”

“Besides, I already did it. The central characters on the site are Helen Robinson, Courtney Manchester, and Ashley Nobel. Although, the Ashley gal hasn’t been as active since July.”

“There’s an Ashley in Ribbon’s journal.”

“It’s a common name.”

“Maybe. Can you help me get onto the site without being tracked?”

“Can I go to school first?”

“I guess. But Tex, I’m worried about this Ribbon girl.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll text ya some untraceable log-on names. That’ll give ya a chance to fight undercover.”

“Perfect.” Sheridan hung up and shut down the computer. From the open door to her room, the smell of coffee floated down the hall. She studied the shoes in her closet and decided on a pair of red ballet flats. Never knew what adventure awaited her at North Harbor. As Nina and Joe drank jolts of caffeine, Sheridan opened Ribbon’s journal. There had to be more clues.

Chapter 15

This is the worst day of my life.

I forgot to flush the toilet at school, and the meanest girl at North Harbor High used the stall right after me. Then to make matters worse, she ran around the school telling everyone I peed my pants. That's a total lie. I thought it would be better once I got out of junior high. Fat chance. High school's worse. Why *do* I have to be the only kid in the world with parents who are environmental nutcases?

Dad says there's nothing wrong with waiting to flush until you have a bowel movement. Well, Dad, tell that to Courtney Manchester and every other earth-hating jerk at school. Tell them all about water conservation if you can. I tried but they only laughed.

Mom's no better. She told me our toilets are cleaner than anyone else in the neighborhood. I guess most people only clean their bathrooms once per week. But we put in baking soda and scrub it every time we flush. She says I should be proud of myself for standing up for the next generation.

Right. Proud of people calling me "Ring around the toilet." Yeah, that's my new nickname, you like it? Saving water doesn't make up for the kids who throw things at me during lunch or torment me online. I'm definitely not going to school tomorrow. I just can't.

I even tried to talk to my counselor, Miss

Jones. She wanted names and places and promised to contact their parents. As if that would make it better. That doesn't work. Every seventh grader in the world knows that, and I'm a freshman in high school. She went with the fallback propaganda — "they're jealous."

Is the entire adult population blind? These rich, beautiful, popular kids are NOT jealous of me. I'm so ready to get out of here I could die. I'd like to move away from home and live a normal life. I'm just afraid I won't survive my freshman year.

I feel so alone. The only friend I've ever had hates my guts and I have NO clue why. I don't understand. She hits me in the hall and calls me horrible names. Everyone swears at me. It hurts so bad the only thing I think that will ever make it go away is death. But thinking of that makes me a disgusting person.

Chapter 16

Funny thing about thoughts, if they wander too far away from home they get lost. Ashley couldn't be like Mary and her little lamb, waiting for them to come home. She locked the darkroom door and flipped on the outside light. Courtney's demands had to be followed. Ashley couldn't care less about her social life anymore, but Dad worked for Mr. Manchester and that bridge was too dangerous to destroy.

Ribbon was gone and nothing would change that. Ashley had a choice between protecting Tinkerbell or her dad. The new girl meant nothing to her. It was a no-brainer. The new girl was going down. Life was hard.

Ashley flattened her chewed Trident against her teeth then made small popping sounds with it. With two years left in this hole, the next dozen months required putting up with both Courtney's *and* Helen's demands. At least until something else came up for Ashley and her dad.

The fifth period math class she shared with Tinkerbell started in five minutes. In the masked

solitude of the darkroom, she opened the bottle of blushing berry fingernail polish and poured it in globs over the absorbent cotton of a Maxi pad.

What did she care about the new girl? Ashley had a right to survive. Maybe she could sign up for work-study next year. She leaned against the counter and pressed her hand on her troubled stomach. The bruises on her legs and arms ached.

The group had never jumped Ribbon. They wouldn't risk it. Courtney preferred harder-to-trace verbal assaults. For more than one week last year, everyone got a point for each time they smacked Ribbon in the back of the head. Those kinds of attacks never provided enough evidence to get anyone suspended.

Ribbon didn't complain. It was pointless. Courtney never got in trouble. The girl was Teflon. Ashley had no idea how Mr. Manchester made his millions. But she knew his position with the school board worked well for Courtney. Ashley had seen a ton of kids get kicked out of school because of the queen bee. Some were even in juvie.

The bell sounded the one-minute warning for class to start. Ashley scooped up the painted pad and put it in a paper bag. She held the sack in her hand like a third grader's lunch and left the darkroom.

In the classroom, she found a seat in the back corner. The first forty-nine minutes might as well have been forty-nine hours. Ashley must have wiped the sweat from her palms a hundred times. She had to time this just right for it to work. There was a chance it would flop. But if it worked, she'd be back in Courtney's graces. In fact, her so-called friend would love the new spin on the old trick they played in junior high. Pat a kid on the back

while you taped on a piece of paper that says “Kick me, I’m a dork.”

When the clock indicated one minute to the bell, Ashley got ready. With her hands under her desk, she opened the bag and slipped out the stained napkin. The bag crinkled. She slowed down. No one looked in her direction. Good.

Forty-five seconds left. She peeled back the tabs to the adhesive and tucked them into her back pocket. With the pad still hidden, she reached into her other pocket and took out the five-dollar bill she’d saved for this moment.

Thirty seconds. She had to lay the pad in her lap in order to put away her notebook. The girl next to her gasped. Ashley pressed her index finger against her lips then burned a glare into the girl, until the dweeb remembered to mind her own business.

Fifteen seconds. Other kids had been watching the clock, and the noise of chairs against tile masked the sound made when Ashley folded the empty paper sack and put it in her textbook.

The clock in the corner ticked away the remaining seconds before the bell. The second hand jerked from fifty-eight to fifty-nine to the top of the hour. The speakers chimed three times, and the noise level in the class exploded.

Tinkerbelle pulled her backpack out from under her desk at the front of the room. With all of her stuff ready, Ashley joined the throng of students at the door, slipping behind her victim. She was about to tag the girl when she noticed the teacher watching. It would be better to get her in the hall. She only hoped the adhesive wouldn’t stop working.

In the wider traffic of the hallway, Ashley palmed the red-painted section of the pad and pressed her hand against Sheridan's lower back, just below her backpack. "Hey."

"What?" The new girl took on a defensive pose.

"This was on the floor by your desk." Ashley held out the five-dollar bill toward her victim. "I wondered if you dropped it."

"I don't think so." Sheridan patted her pockets.

"Whatever." Ashley crinkled the bill into her fist then made a loud pop with her gum before she walked away.

Chapter 17

Sheridan preferred stomping to skipping. But a couple of times through the day she fought back the urge to do a happy cartwheel. The anticipation at meeting Ribbon had bubbled in her like a 7-Up commercial. By the last class however, the twits at school turned her good mood warm and flat.

Laughter attacked her through the halls.

The finger pointing made it obvious the joke was on her.

Usually, high school hallways have history, but the people around her were total strangers. In a couple of days, Sheridan had become an outcast. As a foster child she never struggled to find someone to hang out with. Grown-ups had always been her enemy. Now, the whole school seemed pitted against her.

She entered French class and looked forward to getting to the library so she could strike back—anonymously of course. Graduation was still important to her. More than important. It meant freedom from the clutches of the state of California. In half a dozen months she'd never

have to "*Parlez vous*" with these people again. And today she had an appointment with an Internet site. She'd say plenty then.

"*Pardonne moi.*" Her teacher pulled her aside as if it were a secret. "You've got something stuck to your *derrière.*"

Sheridan reached back and removed the disgusting joke.

The entire class exploded in laughter. One boy swooned and went pale. Sheridan pretended to throw it at him, and he screamed like a second-grade girl. The idiots turned on him. The only person who did absolutely nothing was the teacher. Sheridan glared at the woman, who became very interested in the notes on her desk.

The disgusting pad landed in the trash can with a thud. A stupid prank like that would crush someone with a tender nature like Ribbon. But these punks were messing with the wrong girl. Shoot. If a lifetime in foster care didn't harden you, what did? Sheridan wanted to shout, "Bring it."

She dusted her hands and headed to her desk more angry than embarrassed. They wouldn't know what hit them. Good thing Tex was ten steps ahead of them. In her seat she pulled out her cell phone. "I found one of them. Or I should say..." Sheridan struggled to find the letters on her keypad. She'd never had a phone of her own, and she couldn't text as fast as most kids her age. The cryptic codes were not part of her vocabulary. "...she found me." Sheridan clicked send.

"What happened?" Tex replied before the bell for class rang.

Sheridan typed, "Too juvenile to spell out. Class is

starting. Later.”

Her phone vibrated Tex’s single letter “k” response.

She forced herself to conjugate verbs. She was more hacked off at the teacher than she was the stupid kids. The imbecile at the front of the room started class without one word about the bad joke, or even saying a word to the hecklers. Sheridan pushed her irregular French verbs to the side and pulled out Ribbon’s journal.

Adults were cowards. Not one of them had the strength, let alone the desire, to do what was necessary to control the rich bullies. Time to tell those fakers the game was on. Maybe every other underprivileged kid in North Harbor High could be controlled by them. But not Sheridan. And now, not Ribbon. Wherever the girl was, she had a friend in Sheridan.

Chapter 18

It's a horrible habit, like smoking. I know it's killing me but I just can't stop going to see what they write about me on the Internet. I no longer try to defend myself. It only makes things worse. I just cover myself in a thick haze and decide they are probably right.

I know I never wet myself, but the other stuff seems true.

The words just follow me around like a cloud. Stupidity creeps up on me. Ugly and worthless cover me. I don't want to be that way, but what else can I think? If everyone in the world agrees, then it must be true.

To be honest, my parents are wackos. Really. Who lives in the city and grows their own food and makes their own soap and recycles every single solitary thing? Mom makes paper out of dryer lint. For crying out loud, we don't even have a clothes dryer. She goes door to door to collect lint from neighbors.

Mom, your homemade plaques don't mean anything. Neither do the expressions from a bunch of dead people. Who cares that Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people?" Blah, blah, blah, blah. Maybe that was true a million years ago. But NOT NOW!