

# PROLOGUE

## KELLY

My skin looks disgusting. Seriously, it's practically green. I have big gray bags under my eyes, my hair is all thin and frizzy, and I'm erupting all over the place with giant greasy zits. I look like a cross between a zombie, a hair ball, and a pepperoni pizza. Have I always looked like this? Was I just too high to notice?

## OLIVIA

Did I pack my AP Chemistry book? I can't remember if I packed it. I am not ready for this. I am so not ready.

## EVA

This place is a body. The walls are its bones or its skin, or both—an exoskeleton, like a crab has. A crab's shell is meant to keep it safe, to protect it from the world; it is made to keep things out. But this shell is meant to keep us in, to protect the world from us. We are cancerous cells. Quarantined. An epidemic. We are rogue mutations that cannot make contact with the outside world. We're left in here to bump around like science experiments. They watch us pee into cups. They study our movements. One doctor says, "Look, that one's slowing down. There may be hope." Another says, "No. They're all doomed. Let's just watch them burn themselves out."

## CHRISTOPHER

Everyone's looking at me weird. They probably just had a secret meeting where they voted on how lame they think I am, and the verdict was "very lame." Add that to the fact that they can all most likely read my mind, and basically I'm doomed.

## JASON

Fuck you fuck you fuck you FUCK YOU.

EVA

And the halls are like tongues, fingers, toes, like so many appendages. Dislocated. And these rooms are the lungs—identical, swollen, polluted. This one is the stomach, churning its contents into something unrecognizable.

CHRISTOPHER

That's it. They all got together and compared notes and have unanimously decided to look at me weird.

JASON

If I don't get a cigarette soon, I'm going to fucking kill somebody. We can smoke in here, right? They said we could smoke in here.

KELLY

They took everything, including my astringent. Now how the hell am I supposed to clean my face? Do they really think I'm going to *drink* astringent?

EVA

All these rooms—body parts with mysterious names and functions.

OLIVIA

When was the last time they cleaned this place?

JASON

Fuck this place.

# KELLY

I can't sleep, as usual.

My third night in this strange bed and I'm still not used to it. I'm just lying here in these scratchy sheets, listening to this place's weird version of night, where the lights are never fully turned off, where the doors are never fully closed, where there is always at least one person awake and on guard.

Lilana is the assistant counselor with hall duty tonight. I can hear her knitting that hideous thing she calls a sweater, the *click, click, click* of those plastic needles. I can hear the deep, watery wheezes of a fat woman with health problems and a history of smoking whatever she could find. She's what you think of when you think of a drug addict. Not me. Not a middle-class white girl with a nice house and still-married parents.

It's been ten minutes since Lilana checked on me. It'll be five minutes until she checks on me again. All this fuss because the stupid doctor at my intake asked, "Do you ever have thoughts of hurting yourself?" Could any seventeen-year-old honestly say no?

I wonder if the buzzing of fluorescent lightbulbs has ever given people seizures. Or if the clicking of knitting needles has ever driven someone to psychosis. Total silence would be better. Total silence I could get used to. But tonight is different. Lilana's walkie-talkie crackles something about a late-night admit. I hear her shuffle toward my room to check on me one more time. I close my eyes as she pokes her head through my already open doorway. I can smell her signature smell, the combination of cheap perfume and sweat. Then she walks away. The *beep-boop-beep* of the code-locked door to the lobby, to the outside, the door we all came through. The door crashing closed. Then silence. Even the lights seem to shut up.

It is several minutes before I hear the door open and Lilana return. There is another set of footsteps. "I can't believe you're not letting me have my own room," a new voice says, a girl, with a stuck-up anger that sounds rehearsed.

"Olivia, please keep your voice down. People are sleeping, *dear*," Lilana says slowly. The way she says "dear" makes it sound like a threat.

Another door opens and closes. I know the sound of the door to the nurse's office. We all do. I can't hear their voices, but I know Lilana is asking Olivia questions now, doing "the paperwork," scribbling things down on a yellow form. She is telling her the rules, going through her bags, turning out every pocket of every sweater and pair of pants, confiscating mouthwash, breath spray, Wite-Out, facial astringent. She is watching her pee in a cup.

I pretend to be asleep when they come into my room. I've been without a roommate since I got here, and I knew my solitude wouldn't last long. Lilana turns on the overhead light and talks in that kind of fake theatrical whisper that's probably louder than if she just talked in a normal voice. I turn over so I'm facing away from them, so I won't be tempted to open my eyes, so they won't see that I'm awake and then force me into some awkward introduction, with my stinky breath and pillow-creased face. I just try to breathe slowly so it sounds like I'm sleeping.

I hear zippers unzip, drawers open and close. Lilana says, "That's your sink. Bathroom and showers are down the hall. Wake-up's at seven. Someone'll be in here to get you up. That's Kelly sleeping over there. Your roommate. Pretty girl."

*Pretty girl.* My life's great accomplishment. I wait for Lilana to say more, but that's all there is: pretty girl.

There's silence against a background of fluorescent crackling like some kind of horror movie sound effect. I imagine them staring each other down: Lilana with her always-frown and hand on her hip; this Olivia girl with her snobby attitude, probably another skinny white girl like me who Lilana could crush with her hand.

"Do you need anything?" Lilana says, with a tone that says, *You better say no.*

I hear the swish of long hair across shoulders, a head shaking no.

"All right, then. I'm down the hall if you need me. Try to sleep off whatever you're on. Tomorrow's going to be the longest day of your life."

"I'm not *on* anything," Olivia says.

"Yeah," Lilana says. "And I'm Miss-fucking-America."

"Aren't you going to close the door?" Olivia says.

"Not until your roommate's off suicide watch," Lilana tells her.

I hear her steps diminish as she walks to her perch by the med window, right in the middle of the building where the boys' and girls' halls meet, where, during the evening, when the patients sleep and no doctors or real counselors are around, Lilana is queen of this place.

I lie still, listening for something that will tell me



about my new roommate. I hear clothes rustling. I hear her moving things around, faster than anyone should move at this time of night. She walks over to the permanently locked window by my bed, and I open my eyes just a little to see her profile, shadowed, with only a thin outline of nose and lips illuminated by moonlight. I cannot tell if she is pretty or ugly, if she is sad or scared or angry. Darkness makes everyone look the same.

She turns around, and I shut my eyes tight. She gets into the twin bed between the door and mine. Neither of us moves. I try to time my breath with hers, but she is too erratic—fast, then slow, then holding her breath, like she is testing me. Lilana comes by again, looks in to make sure I haven't killed myself. She walks away, and the new girl and I sigh at the same time. Then our breaths fall into a kind of rhythm. They seem to get louder, gaining in volume with every echo off the white walls and linoleum floor. Everything else is silence. The room is empty except for us, two strangers, close enough to touch, pretending to be sleeping.

# CHRISTOPHER

Someone's out in the hall yelling that it's time for breakfast and if we don't come out now we'll lose our activity privileges. I'm like, "Are they serious?" to my roommate, and he just looks at me like, *How dare you talk to me?* and walks out the door without saying anything. So I follow him into the hall, and almost everyone's still in their pajamas, and I feel totally overdressed in my slacks and sweater vest. I want to go back and change, but the big black lady counselor is standing in the middle of the hall with her arms crossed like she's ready to beat up anyone who tries to get by her. So I keep walking with everyone else, and I swear they're all looking at me funny, and I just want to crawl under a rock and die.

I get to the lunchroom, and everyone from Group is already there, sitting together like the strangest assortment of people you've ever seen. "Look," Eva says, pointing at a new skinny girl leaving the food line.

"Go get her," Jason says, so I walk over and ask her to sit with us, and she looks at me like I'm crazy, which I'm used to, so I just grab her arm that's literally as thin as a stick and drag her over to our table.

There are four of us already, and the new girl makes five. We've been waiting for our fifth since Jesse got kicked out on Tuesday for stealing Kelly's underwear. I'm the nerdy guy, Kelly's the pretty girl, Jason's the tough guy, and Eva's the emo/goth girl, like we're some drug addict version of that movie *The Breakfast Club* from the eighties, all sitting together like it's the most natural thing in the world even though anyone who saw us would be thoroughly confused. What happens next I guess you could call a conversation, but it's more like a firing squad, and the new girl is our victim. It goes something like this:

Jason: "How old are you?"

New Girl: "Seventeen."

Jason: "What's your drug of choice?"

New Girl: "What?"

That's when I break in and say, "Your drug of choice. You

know, your favorite. The one that got you in here.” And Jason says, “Yeah. Like, mine’s alcohol. And Eva’s are painkillers and weed. And Christopher’s is meth.” Then she says, “Really? *This* Christopher?” like she doesn’t even know how rude that sounds.

Jason says, “Yeah, this kid’s full of surprises,” and I say, “Thanks,” but of course I don’t really mean thanks. I’m just trying to be agreeable. Then he simultaneously slaps me on the back and looks at her like he wants to take her clothes off, and I’m just waiting for Kelly’s fangs to come out the way girls do when their turf gets threatened, but instead she tries to be fake nice and just change the subject.

She goes, “Like, mine are cocaine and alcohol. Pretty much anything, really, as long as it gets me high. But vodka and coke got me into the most trouble.”

Then Eva says, “Rich-girl drugs,” and tears a bite out of her limp piece of bacon.

I say, “Be nice, Eva,” even though I know by now it is highly unlikely. That’s just the way she is. She’s either being quiet and mysterious or she’s saying something mean and sharp.

Jason says, “I’ve known a lot of girls who get freaky when they’re on coke.” And Kelly says, “Oh, yeah?” And I’m like, “Get a room,” and Eva’s like, “Jesus, Jason. You’re such a fuck-

ing pig,” and Jason says, “And you’re a fucking goth dyke. Why don’t you and your fag boyfriend Christopher go run off and write poetry and cut yourselves?”

Ouch.

Eva says, “Fuck you,” and Jason says, “You wish,” and I say, “What about you, Olivia? What’s your drug of choice?” because I want everyone to stop fighting.

Olivia says, “I guess I’m here for diet pills, but I don’t have a problem with drugs.”

“Yeah, none of us has a problem either,” Eva says. “This place is really a health spa for kids who like drugs but don’t have problems.” I pinch her leg because she’s being mean, but she doesn’t seem to mind. For some reason, she’s never mean to me.

“Aren’t you going to eat anything?” I ask Olivia, because all she has is a cup of decaffeinated tea, which is all they let us have because they think caffeine’s a drug, even though they let everyone smoke like chimneys.

“I’m not hungry,” she says.

“Don’t you eat?” Jason says. Then Eva says, “I thought jock meatheads like you were supposed to like skinny girls.” Then Jason says, “No, we just don’t like fat bitches like you, Eva. I like girls with meat in all the right places, like Kelly here.” And he puts his arm around her like he’s claimed her,

and she looks at him like she's proud to be his. Eva goes back to eating her bacon, and Olivia looks at us like she expects one of us to kill her at any moment. This is only her first day and already she thinks we're animals.

# KELLY

This place has its own mini version of a cafeteria, complete with a couple of old ladies in hairnets dishing out tasteless gruel from behind a counter. The food looks like it's been sitting out for days, and there's always a weird smell like floor wax and soggy vegetables. At the end of the line is a lady with a giant head and close-together eyes whose only job seems to be to stand there holding a tray of mini cartons of 2 percent, saying "Milk, milk, milk" every time one of us passes by. But she says it like "meeelk" and she never looks anyone in the eye. She just says "meeelk" and stares off into space like a zombie.

Then there's the nurse with the tray of little white paper cups with our names on them, full of our daily legal chemicals

and a couple of horse vitamins that smell like crap. The Gas-Huffer gets antipsychotics. The Pregnant Girl gets prenataals. Eva and the Heroin Addict get something called Suboxone for opiate withdrawal. But basically, all the girls get antidepressants and all the boys get glorified speed for ADHD. The nurse watches us swallow with our Dixie cups of apple juice, and she checks our cheeks and under our tongues to make sure we don't trade later with anyone who has opposite brain chemistry. I've learned a lot about prescription medications since I've been here.

We eat and we bullshit and pick on the skinny new girl. Jason's an asshole and tries to hit on her right in front of me, but she just acts like none of us are good enough for her. Christopher acts like his usual choirboy self, and Eva just eats her greasy three-thousand-calorie breakfast and acts like her usual bitchy self. Sometimes we talk to kids from the other Groups, but we always end up back with each other for some reason, even though in the real world we would probably never acknowledge one another's existence. Except for me and Jason, I guess. We'd be the same on the outside as we are in here.

After breakfast it's one of the day's many smoke breaks and more bullshitting. Gas Man tells some story about how he passed out in a ditch in Alaska in January and almost froze to death. The Compulsive Liar with the expensive baggy pants



makes up something about being in a gang, but we all know he comes from a small town by the Snoqualmie ski slopes. Then it's time for community meeting, where we sit in a circle and clap for the new people and introduce ourselves by name, city of origin, and drug of choice.

Kelly.

Seattle.

Cocaine and alcohol.

The Compulsive Liar lists off every drug he's ever heard of. Today he adds ketamine because he heard the Scary Heroin Addict say it yesterday.

Then it's time for the first Group of the day. Fucking Group. It's not even ten in the morning and we're supposed to go into tiny rooms with no windows and get deep with total strangers. We have to look at the cartoon faces on the wall and pick one that describes how we're feeling: angry, bashful, confused, anxious. Then we all take turns pretending to bare our souls.

It's bad enough that all thirty or so of us in this place have been assigned to one of six random counselors whose job it is to fix us, and that we're stuck with four other random kids we don't even know and we're expected to talk to each other like we're the best friends we ever had. But it's worse for us, the unlucky few—me, Olivia, Christopher, Jason, and Eva.

We do not have one of those sad-eyed counselors who did too many mushrooms in the sixties and are always talking about “honoring you” and “empowering you.” We do not have one of those wisecracking ex-junkies who has a joke to disarm everyone. We do not have one of those sweet old mothers who beat her addiction to chardonnay, found Jesus, and got her master’s in social work when her kids went off to college. No. It’s worse.

We have Shirley.