

## CHAPTER 2

The smell of bacon...

Fan blades slowly spin above me as I rub my eyes. For a split second I forget where I am until reality smacks me like a mean sister.

Oh, yeah...I moved.

The smell of bacon doesn't make up for it, but it sure helps.

Mom is definitely trying. It's hard to wake up to the smell of bacon and be mad. I throw on shorts and walk downstairs.

"Good morning, sweetie," Mom announces with a smile. "Happy Saturday! How did you sleep?"

"Mostly with resentment, but I'm glad you're making bacon." I give her a hug from behind as she flips the greasy goodness.

"Where's Dad?" I ask, grabbing my plate.

"He's scouting out the area and driving by your new school. You know, your father...he wants this all to work out."

"If we move back, Mom, I'll love him forever, and I'll spend twice as much time with crazy Grandpa."

She cocks her head, smiling. "The pool is open today, and it's going to be almost 100 degrees. Might be some kids

your age there.”

“Yeah,” is all I can think of to say as I continue stuffing my mouth with cheesy eggs and bacon.

The rest of the morning, I put my room together while talking to Emory. Although we have been talking for hours, it doesn't seem to get us anywhere—just a bunch of feelings and questions but no answers. Our conversation ends, and realizing it is noon already, I put on my trunks and start walking to the pool.

“Man, it's hot.”

All the beige-colored houses make me feel like I'm in *The Truman Show* with Jim Carrey, and everyone is waiting to reveal how this is all set up.

We had lived in the country with all the basic things. We weren't the Wrangler cowboy country type. We weren't farmers. We were, I don't know, normal—normal to me at least.

Now, I live in a cushy neighborhood with a private pool and perfectly green grass.

Walking up, I see about a dozen people in and around the pool: a grandma with her three grandchildren, a family with their kids, and one guy in his forties, reading a book.

Great! Just my kind of crowd! Oh... and a lifeguard! We have a lifeguard? Geez.” Maybe that's normal around here, but where I used to live you only had lifeguards at the public pool. People had backyard pools with a parent occasion-

ally peaking their head out to make sure the pool was still intact.

I walk in and lay my towel and phone on a lounge chair far, far away from everyone. The pool area is pristine with clear water, and I suddenly realize that I'm living in a rich neighborhood. I drop myself slowly into the deep end, because I'd rather not do my normal cannon ball and give off anything that says I'm a fun person to the kids. The water is a little cooler than bath water, which is how I like it. I'm a wimp when it comes to cold water. The end of July, like this, is just when it gets good. I swim around, trying to stay to myself. I can sense eyes glancing at me like, "Who is the new kid?" Maybe not. Maybe they don't even notice me. This is so strange. I've always had friends. Not anymore. I get out and lie down on my chair.

I start texting Emory when I hear someone sit down two chairs away. I look up to see that it's a guy about my age, or at least he seems to be. He is about my height and build, medium size with a slender frame. He looks at me from under his light, scruffy brown hair and has a mole on his right cheek along with oversized ears and pointy nose. I don't know how to say this without being mean, which is a good indicator that I shouldn't say it, but you know how you can look at someone and automatically know they're not cool? I mean, you just know they aren't. I go back to texting.

"Hey, are you new here?"

Oh great, he's trying to be my friend. Why, why, why is this my life?

Looking up from my phone, I stare at him blankly to give the impression that I don't want to talk and then reply, "I've lived here all my life." Why not have a little fun? Besides, I don't even know this guy.

"Really?" he says with excitement, "Me, too! But, I have never seen you before. Where do you live?"

"I live in that house over there," as I quickly point to a random house across the street and go back to texting.

"Mr. Karigan's house?"

"Yup."

"Are you his nephew?"

"Nope."

He looks at me suspiciously. "I know him. He's single, and he doesn't have any kids."

"Well, I live in his basement, and he only lets me out when I'm a good boy."

"What?"

"I'm not allowed to say anymore. My master will get angry."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Shhh..." I slowly put my finger to my lips. "It's not safe to talk here."

He pops out of his chair and moves to the one right next to me.

“Hey, seriously, if you’re in trouble at all, you need to tell someone. I’ve heard about this kind of stuff and—”

I couldn’t keep from laughing. He leans away from me with a half-angry, half-embarrassed smile.

“My name is Lawson, and we just moved into that brown house—I mean, dark brown house, because I see that they’re all... kind of... brown.” I feel a little bad for playing him like that, but I needed a good laugh.

“Oh, okay,” he says, trying to sound okay with the joke. “My name is Connor, and I live right next to the pool in that tan house with the green shutters.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Connor.” I wonder to myself how I can wrap up this little sweet conversation.

I look back at my phone.

“What grade are you in?” Connor asks.

This guy... You see, some people lack something called emotional intelligence, and they have trouble picking up on social cues.

“Um, freshman.” I reply quickly, still looking at my phone.

“Me too! At Mill Valley High, right?”

“Yup.”

“Oh, wow! Cool!” he says, starting to lose his composure from the thought of probably getting his first friend.

“Do you play sports?” he continues, not skipping a beat.

“Football and basketball.”

“Neat, man! That’s awesome! I don’t play sports.”

What a shocker. How can I end this?

“Hey, Connor, I’m sorry, but I just realized that I’m supposed to help my mom unpack some more things and set up the, uh, the kitchen plates and things.”

“Oh, okay. Cool, man. I’ll be here tomorrow. I’m here most days.”

...And there goes my neighborhood pool.

“Okay. Well, see ya!” I pick up my things and start walking toward the pool gate. Once outside, I look back to see Connor reclining in a lounge chair with a book.

I dial Emory. The phone rings and rings and rings... She doesn’t pick up.

Approaching our house, I see Dad pulling into the driveway in his gray Chevy Silverado. It’s an older model, because we can’t afford a new one. Well, maybe we can now. I don’t know. Back where we used to live, Dad worked at the 7-Up plant and finally got promoted to a plant manager position.

Dad steps out of his truck wearing khaki shorts, a green polo, and black sunglasses.

“Lawson! Hanging out at the pool, huh? Meet any friends?”

“Nope,” I reply, which isn’t technically a lie.

“Listen. There is a lot of things around here. There’s a Walmart about 10 minutes away and a little strip mall with

some restaurants and shops. Oh, there are some parks. Your school! Dude, your school is so cool!”

Whenever he is trying to be fun with me, he starts saying, ‘Dude.’

“Beautiful football field. Big school. Remember, you will have about 300 students in your class...” he rattles on.

I don’t know how I feel about that. My old school had 300 people total. I was definitely one of the popular kids at my old school, and I never had to try. I was never the new kid.

“That’s cool, Dad,” I say, trying my best to give him some sense of hope for our family.

“Hey, have you thought about how you want to make money this summer?”

“No, I haven’t,” I reply matter-of-factly.

“Okay, well, this week is a good time to figure that out.” He gives me a thumbs-up. “Come on, let’s go see how we can make this house more of a home.”

*Why do parents talk so weird?*

Inside, Mom is unpacking her knickknacks and putting them in her display case. I know it’s weird, but they actually make me happy, because I used to play with them when I was a kid until I broke one, and then they went on ‘lock-down.’ We unpack more things together and hang some pictures. After a couple hours of doing household chores, I figure it’s time to give the pool another try.

I grab my towel and once again head out. As I approach the pool, I don't see Connor anywhere in sight. I flop down on the same lounge chair from earlier. A forty-something-year-old woman splashes in the pool with her ten-year-old daughter. Looking at the lifeguard, the same one that had been there earlier, I guess she is probably in college. I suddenly think of the possibility of having a different girlfriend. The thought alone feels like I am already cheating, but maybe I should start thinking more realistically. I never cheated on Emory, but I've been told that I can be a flirt. Someone told me that I'm nice, good looking, and always willing to talk to any girl. So, somehow, that makes me flirty. I was told that the other guys won't talk to girls unless they like them.

Emory was, I mean is, my first serious girlfriend. I kind of had a girlfriend who was in eighth grade when I was in seventh grade, which made me feel basically awesome, but it only lasted like one month before she broke up with me in a text. Yeah. It's not that girls don't like me, they do. I'm just... picky. I don't want just any girl. I want a girl that I can respect. She can't just be some ditsy thing, but she does need to be nice. I don't want a push-over, but I also don't want a girl who is always trying to outdo me like a sister does. I want... maybe I want too much. Emory has some of those qualities, but... I don't know.

The sound of a toilet flushing breaks my daydream.



“Lawson, you’re back!” Connor steps out of the bathroom.

Nightmare.

He literally skips over and flops in the chair next to me.

“You’re still here?” I ask, trying to look and sound pleasantly surprised.

“Yeah, I was just getting ready to leave, but I can stay a bit,” he replies chipperly.

I look straight ahead, trying not to turn into a gorilla who throws chairs in front of the ten-year-old girl.

“Oh, I know what I was going to ask you,” Connor announces, not missing a beat. “I was thinking. Well, I cut Mr. Karigan’s yard. You know, the house you said that y—”

“Yeah, I know. What about him?” I ask, cutting him off to save time.

“Well, I cut his grass every Sunday, but I’m going to church camp for the next week, and I was wondering if you would want to cut it. I get paid \$40. He even lets me use his mower to—”

“I’ll do it!” I cut him off again thinking how perfect this timing is after talking to Dad.

“Oh, wow, awesome! Okay, well then, why don’t we go over to his house now, so I can show you his mower and introduce you?”

“Wait,” I say, realizing something. “He’s not actually weird and crazy like I made up, is he?”

“Ha! No! Mr. Karigan is, like, the coolest guy in this neighborhood, in my opinion at least. He’s like my best friend even though he’s in his thirties.”

Oh no, not another Connor. What if he wants to make friends with my parents, and Connor is part of the package, and we start having game night devoid of any sarcasm?

Then again, I need the money.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Looking at Mr. Karigan’s house, it doesn’t seem to be quite as big as ours, but still...

“Why does he live here by himself?” I ask as we cross the street. “I mean, his house seems to be pretty big for only one person.

“Oh, umm...” Connor lowers his voice. “His, um, his wife and daughter died like five years ago in a car accident.”

“What? Oh, my gosh!” I stop dead in my tracks, right in the middle of the street. “Is he like a hermit and super depressed?”

“Well, after it happened, we didn’t see much of him for about a year, but then when we did, he seemed to be okay. Well... maybe not exactly the same, but... I don’t know. He’s a nice guy.”

Connor starts walking again.

Wow! How can he still be okay after losing his wife and child? I slowly trail behind Connor, shaking my head.

A dark blue Durango sits in the driveway, and I see a

light on in the upstairs window.

Connor rings the doorbell, and within a few seconds, the door swings open, revealing a man wearing red basketball shorts, black tank top, and earbuds in his ears.

“Mr. Karigan!” Connor exclaims like they are related or something.

“Connor!” Mr. Karigan shouts with a big smile on his face. “Oh, sorry guys. I was listening to a podcast about serial killers.”

I flash Connor a horrified look, suspecting that they are both insane and using this dorky act as a cover up.

Mr. Karigan must have seen the look on my face, because he turns his attention to me. “It’s a psychology podcast that studies and explains the behaviors of various mental disorders.”

Okay, good, just a dork.

“Hey, Mr. Karigan!” Connor chirps like a boy band fan.

“It’s Brad. Come on, you know I don’t like formalities like that. Come on in, come on in.” He motions us in while stepping aside.

Connor goes first, and I follow. His house is relatively normal like his wife had decorated it and he left it that way. We follow him around the corner and into his office.

“Whoa!” I exclaim. Mr. Karigan turns, smiling.

His office is like something from one of those movies where bookshelves line entire walls from floor to ceiling,

with a tall ladder attached. Almost every space is taken by books, new and old. An old music machine sits on one side, aligned with albums produced by people I've never heard of. Two fancy looking leather chairs rest side by side in front of a massive antique desk covered with Victorian carvings. A tall, studded wingback chair is pulled up to the desk. Pictures of Albert Einstein and Abraham Lincoln frame each side of the room. An easel nestled in the corner is all marked up with handwritten notes. My eye catches the corner of the flip chart paper where red handwriting had been scrawled: 'Face the enemy!' I can't help but wonder who his enemy is. Strolling over to his desk chair, he plops down and motions for us to sit in the tall leather chairs. Sitting down, I notice all the candles around the room. These aren't the candles Mom burns that declare 'apple pie,' but instead majestic ones, as if they came from *Phantom of the Opera* or someplace like that.

Mr. Karigan walks over and lifts the lid of his music machine to place a large disc on top.

"What is that?" I ask.

He sets a long arm with a needle down on the disc and old-time music starts playing. "A record player. Ha! I guess I really am getting old. Actually, these were around long before my time, but I love old things," he says, smiling and adjusting the knobs. Once he is content with the sound of the record player, he turns to Connor. "Who is this?"

“Beethoven, right?”

Mr. Karigan raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“Hate to break it to you, but Beethoven died nearly 200 years ago.” Mr. Karigan looks at me and then back at Connor.

“Oh! You mean... Haha! I thought you meant the music. Yes! This is—”

“Lawson Peters,” I reply, cutting Connor off. I don’t know whether to stand and introduce myself or not, because these leather chairs make me feel like I am in the Oval Office. “I’m... new. We moved into the brown—dark brown—house up there.” I point and then quickly change direction, realizing that I have no idea where my house sits from here.

“Ohh, yes, yes,” he pipes in. Living in the subdivision for many years, Mr. Karigan must have known all the people and who had moved in and out. “The Bates used to live there. They had two little kids who were, well, rambunctious. Good people, though.”

“That explains the scuff marks in my room.”

Mr. Karigan laughs. “So, you’re in Connor’s grade?”

“Yeah.”

“Connor is a good kid. He cuts my grass every week. And, no, this is not Beethoven. Close. It’s another German composer, Mendelssohn.”

“Yeah, about the grass,” Connor jumps in. “I’m going

out of town tomorrow morning, so I wanted to see if you're okay with Lawson cutting your grass."

Mr. Karigan studies me as if examining whether or not I'm worthy to cut his grass.

"Can you cut grass?"

"Uh, yeah. I used to cut our yard at our old house."

"Hmm. At what level should one cut the grass this time of year?" he asks with his chin up in the air, like a grass scholar.

"One should cut it... short."

Mr. Karigan looks at Connor.

Connor smiles and corrects me. "One should cut it tall, because it's hot and the tall grass provides more shade for keeping the dirt from getting too dry."

"Geez, you are brilliant, Mr. Brandt!" Mr. Karigan exclaims, pointing a finger at Connor and then making a touchdown sign in the air.

Mr. Karigan settles back into his previous expression and looks at me again.

"Okay, cut it tall," I respond, semi-amused by their little act.

"How much of the grass should you cut at any particular time?"

I stare at Connor.

"Never more than one third of its length," Connor boasts.

I slowly lift my arms like a touchdown but then realize I'm not sure if that's the correct answer, and so I quickly put my arms back down.

Looking at Mr. Karigan and with a little hesitation I say, "Never more than one-third of its length."

Mr. Karigan stands up and reaches his hand out. "You're hired, Mr. Peters."

I shake his extended hand as he looks me straight in the eye. He has a confidence about him that's genuine, but obviously he doesn't take himself too seriously. I'm not used to looking people in the eye like that, but for some reason, he makes it okay.

"Let me now show you my mean-green cutting machine, Lawson."

We walk into his garage, and I expect to see some top-of-the-line mower. Instead, in the corner of the room sits an old, walk-behind mower with grass stains all along the sides.

Noticing the disappointment on my face, he says, "What? You were expecting a John Deer rider?"

"No, it's good," I quickly reply.

"It's old, but you're right. It's good."

He kneels beside the weathered mower. "Usefulness beats appearance," he says. "People judge things and other people by their appearances, as if that determines value, but value is determined by what you get out of some-

thing after what you put into it over a period of time.”

I nod, pretending I knew what any of that meant.

He could tell I didn't.

“What's the purpose of a lawn mower?” he asks us.

“To cut grass!” Connor shouts like a private in the army.

“Connor, seriously, man, let Lawson get the easy ones.”

“To cut grass,” I reply.

“And, to cut grass, what do you need?”

“A lawnmower.” I reply.

“A broken lawnmower?” Mr. Karigan asks.

“No, of course not. One that works.”

“Hmm,” he says. “One that works with a dull blade?”

“With a sharp blade.”

“One that works with a sharp blade, old oil, and a dirty air filter?”

“No. One with clean oil filter,” I correct him confidently.

“One that works with a sharp blade, clean oil, clean filter, and a shiny exterior?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“You don't need a shiny exterior, but a rider would be better because you could cut more.”

“Ahh, Mr. Lawson. You're a man who thinks after all. So, you're talking about efficiency on top of effectiveness,



cutting it faster without sacrificing quality.”

“That’s right, and I prefer Lawson instead of the formalities,” I say, smirking.

He glances over at a grinning Connor and then back at me. “Well, Lawson. I think a walk-behind is better than a rider.”

“Why? Don’t you like efficiency?”

“I love efficiency. But you see, I like to think while I cut grass, and a walk-behind allows me to do that.”

“Can’t you use the time you save with a rider to think inside?”

Mr. Karigan laughs while clapping his hands as if applauding me. “You’re right! But, I like to walk while I think. Plus, I like to get exercise by cutting the grass. So, you see, for me a walk-behind is very efficient. This is what you call a paradox.”

“A paradox?”

“Yeah, a paradox is something that seems to contradict itself but reveals a deeper truth through its contradiction. For example, less is more. So, in this case, by cutting grass I can work out, think, and get my grass cut all at the same time; rather than doing all those things separately. I actually save time not using a riding mower.”

I stand in silence for a few seconds, trying to keep up with his logic.

“Besides,” he exclaims, “there’s a big hill in the back

that a rider can't go on... so... yeah."

"So, we talked about all of that for no reason?" I ask.

"Not very efficient, are we?" Mr. Karigan laughs heartily while opening the garage door.

"You can cut anytime tomorrow morning, Lawson. Just come by and ring the doorbell."

"Okay! I will." Stepping back into the blinding sun, I realize that I had forgotten to thank him. "Oh, and Mr. Karig—" I catch myself after remembering he likes to be called by his first name, but I couldn't think of it. "Mr.—"

"Brad," he corrects me while checking the oil in the mower.

"Yeah, Brad. Thanks for the opportunity," I say quickly, feeling that Brad just might be my silver lining in this neighborhood.

"There will be more to come," he replies before turning back into his house.

Connor and I start walking back toward the pool. Thinking about what Mr. Karigan said, 'more to come,' I nudge Connor. "What did he mean by 'more to come?'"

Connor is messing with the tag on his t-shirt. "Oh, Brad is always having me think about stuff that usually ends in assignments."

"Assignments?"

"Yeah, like, well... I don't know."

Connor got quiet as if he decided midsentence that he

didn't want to tell me.

"Like what?"

"Well, I told him that I struggle with, with being shy, so he wants me to talk to more people." Connor looks down at the ground and then at the pool.

"Ohh, that's why you're at the pool so much! That's why you talked to me!" I finally piece everything together.

He smiles, feeling relieved, knowing that I am still okay with him. "Yeah, that's why."

Suddenly, I find myself feeling differently about Connor, almost guilty, like I had been judging him. Yeah, exactly like I was judging him.

"Well, I'm glad you did," I say, smiling and hardly believing the words that came out of my mouth.

Connor lights up like a Christmas tree, and I could tell that he wants to say something, but he keeps it in.

We approach the intersection at his house before the road turns toward my house.

"Okay, Lawson, well, nice meeting you, and, I guess, I'll see you when I get back."

His awkward facial expression reminds me of a little boy talking to Santa Claus. "Nice meeting you, Connor. Have a good trip, and I'll see you when you get back." My heart warms toward Connor like a little pet turtle I'm taking care of. For a moment I wonder if maybe I can work on him and make him cool... nah.

Walking back to my house, I think about Brad. He seems like a cool guy but not the cool I am used to; smart but not too dorky. He is nice but also confident. He is thirty-something, but he doesn't seem like a weird adult.

Walking through the front door, I am enveloped with paint fumes. I look up to see Mom painting the spindles.

"Hey, sweetie. Did you have a good time at the pool? Oh, shoot!" she says, grabbing a rag to wipe a drop of paint off the carpet.

"Yeah, I did, believe it or not. I met two new friends." Walking into the kitchen, I hear her footsteps coming down the stairs. I turn around to see her brush still in her hand with her eyebrows arched in a 'tell me more' look.

I grab a glass from the cabinet. "Yeah, a kid my age named Connor and a neighbor guy named Brad."

"Well, this is super, sweetie!" Mom grins happily, probably thinking that our family isn't falling apart after all.

"Brad wants me to cut his grass tomorrow for \$40," I say, grabbing the O.J. from the fridge.

I thought Mom was literally going to pull out a Champagne bottle. "Doug! Are you hearing this?"

"What?" Dad yells from upstairs.

"Lawson is cutting a neighbor's yard tomorrow for \$40!" she yells back up.

Dad runs down the stairs, wearing his old paint shirt and shorts. "Dude! Lawson! That's my boy being ambi-

tious!" He comes over with his hand in the air for a high-five. I don't leave him hanging.

My parents hover over me like I just got accepted into Harvard.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. You guys can go back to painting or whatever now."

Mom does a little dance up the stairs with her brush high in the air, and Dad trails behind, talking the entire time as he follows. "See, I told you, Linda. Everything is going to work out fine. And once we get these spindles done, then I..."

I chuckle to myself as I down the last of my juice.

Maybe this will all work out after all.

Maybe.