

Chapter One

Today is the first day of the wreck of my life.

I'm a seventeen-year-old girl with red hair and freckles, standing on the front lawn of Queen Elizabeth High School at 8:00 am on a Monday morning, looking at hundreds of other students on the lawn, waiting for the bell to ring. So what's the problem?

The problem is that three hundred pairs of eyes are staring straight back at me.

The crowd parts as a beautiful blonde my age makes her way over. She's the school's alpha female and she slaps me right across the face. Hard. My skin tingles where her palm struck me and I feel water form behind my eyes. The blow knocks me to my knees in the dew-covered grass, dampening my jeans.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" she screeches, standing over me. "My boyfriend could go to jail!"

A guy in a football jacket embroidered with the school logo hooks her around the waist and pulls her from me as she swipes again for my head. "Easy, Alex," he says.

"I wish you had never come here, Rebecca," she yells. For a minute I think she's going to spit at me but she's led away before she has the chance.

As I stagger to my feet, I agree with her. I should never have come here. I should never have left Toronto.

I look at the hundreds of faces and wonder what they're thinking. Half of them are staring at me. Half are staring at their cell phones, tapping "*omfg, did u hear about rebecca lockhart? sux 2 b her.*"

In the corner of the lawn are the Green Day t-shirt-wearing geeks with leather jackets down to their feet and hair to their middle of their backs, standing by themselves waiting for the bell to ring. Their lack of social skills will probably earn one the *Most Likely to Become a Serial Killer* award in the yearbook.

One of the geeks is carrying a guitar. His name is Kyle. He's the only familiar face in the crowd, and my only friend. As he approaches me, a guy holding a basketball and wearing a leather jacket walks towards us. "You're a fucking liar, Rebecca," growls the guy. He doesn't even break stride, he just keeps walking across the lawn to meet his friends.

"Fuck you," says Kyle, and shoves him from behind, his guitar case askew. He spins around and they glare at each other, fists clenched. I run between them.

"Stop it. Kyle, let's get out of here." I could hide the tears which threaten to spill down my face among the fresh drops of rain them but blink them away. I pull on Kyle's arm and lead him towards the edge of the lawn. The other guy grabs him, but Kyle shakes free.

"Fucking lying *bitch*, that's what you are, Rebecca," shouts the guy in the denim jacket.

One lie. Just one little lie. But then I had to tell another. And another.

My doctor's given me a bottle of blue pills to help me sleep, and I can't stop thinking it would be easier to just take the whole thing at once. Images of

ropes and nooses float through my mind when I'm trying to concentrate on my schoolwork. I'm failing everything.

I could have come clean but it's too late now. There was a way out, but I didn't take it. It's the single biggest mistake I've ever made. I'm in so deep that I can barely breathe.

What *really* sucks is that telling the truth now would make everything worse. Mom always says that "the truth will set you free," but it's sure not true in this case. Coming clean would just add more dirt.

So, yeah. That's my life. Standing outside my high school, with practically the whole school staring at me. And it's only April. I wouldn't have thought I could fuck up my life so badly in the four months since I moved here to Vancouver, but that's something else I've learned.

Life is never so bad it can't get worse.

Chapter Two

If I had known how bad things were going to get by that day in April, I would never have gotten out of bed this miserable Monday morning for my first day of school in January. But here I am, a salmon valiantly heading upstream, unaware of the awaiting grizzly bear with its gaping jaw.

English class has taught me that writers like Shakespeare use the weather as a metaphor for their characters' lives. You'd think, then, that the weather on the walk to my first day at Queen Elizabeth High School would have told me to turn around and run away, fast. Because I'm joining halfway through the year, it's not a warm September day, it's January third. The skies are dark until 10 am, the humid wind off the ocean burns my skin and a miserable ice rain soaks through the new jacket Mom bought for me. By the time I make it into the warmth of the school hallway, I'm actually happy to be there. That doesn't last long, though.

Ten minutes into my first class I'm doing my best to concentrate on my textbook. Not because I'm interested, but because I don't want anything to remind me of how lonely I am. The atmosphere isn't helping. At the front of the room is an ugly green chalkboard with white chalk and erasers that are decades old. There's very little natural sun because the window panes are thick and dirty. Instead rows of ugly fluorescent lights flicker overhead, buzzing as they reach their final hours. My new classmates and I sit in hard wooden desks in rows that are too wide to comfortably whisper to one another but just narrow enough to pass notes. Not that we need to, what with text messaging.

"Today," announces the teacher, "we continue our study of poetry." He's an elderly gentleman with white hair, a beard, and half glasses. Not only is he wearing a suit, he's wearing a *three-piece* suit. A famous black and white picture tugs at my memory. He almost resembles Johannes Brahms, the German composer from the Romantic era whose most famous piece, sadly, is the lullaby parents sing to sleepy children.

Then it hits me. This guy is a reincarnation of Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst who blamed everything on his mother.

I ignore Freud and concentrate on the wall behind him. In my head I draw a stickman and a raft on the green ocean of the chalkboard and sail for home. So long, dreary Vancouver; hello sunny Toronto.

"Yesterday I asked you all to bring a poem to read in today's class. Who would like to go first?" continues the teacher.

Before anyone can answer, the door to the classroom opens abruptly and a guy with dirty blonde hair sticks his head in. "Hey, is this English 30?" he says. "Sorry, I had a scheduling conflict."

"Mister - ?" says Freud, flustered at the interruption.

"Oh, just call me J.J.," he says. "It's all cleared with the office." He walks across the room, combing the bad dye job of his dirty blonde hair with his hand, and takes a seat beside a dark-haired girl. A goatee sprouts from his chin and matches his hair which hangs on either side above a black t-shirt that says "Greenpeace" underneath a white collared shirt that's unbuttoned. And, bizarrely, he's

wearing shorts that expose hairy, half-tanned legs, even though it's the middle of January and Vancouver isn't exactly known for its patio weather this time of year. He leans back in his seat as though he were about to watch a movie and taps fingers on his desk in a steady pulse. There's a faint smell of something sweet on him that I don't recognize, like smoke if a chocolate factory caught on fire. His smile is charming, his teeth are flawless, and he has dimples in both cheeks.

This guy is damned good-looking. Trouble always is.

"Very well," says our teacher.

J.J.'s arrival has caused a distinct ripple. The girls seem to be more animated. The boys nudge one another. I think I hear a guy whisper *the doctor is in*, but that can't be right. Freud gives a slight sigh which seems to say "Why my class?" The dark-haired girl J.J. sits beside is elated, and they actually kiss one another. Figures. The hot guys always date the hot girls.

"May we return to the task at hand, please?" drones Freud from the front of the room. "Who would like to present first?"

I'm not worried about him picking me. That's one of the few good things about moving. You can claim total ignorance for the first entire week. Then you have to get your act together.

But then Freud stands over my desk and I shift uncomfortably. I get the sinking feeling that saying "I'm new" won't work with him.

"Miss Saunders," says Freud, turning to the row next to me. "Please come to the front."

A girl with short black hair highlighted purple, a nose piercing and enough earrings to open her own tackle store looks surprised. "I don't have anything prepared," she says. "My computer crashed last night." Yeah, sure. Like a girl who dresses that way knows how to turn on a monitor.

The teacher's face turns pink, and for a moment he resembles Santa Claus more than Freud. "This was a simple assignment," he says.

Miss Saunders just shrugs. Freud consults his class list and asks two more students, a red-headed guy who looks like that character from *Harry Potter* and an East Indian girl who barely speaks English. Neither are prepared.

"I merely asked you to bring a poem today for discussion," says Freud, frustrated. "And yet none of you are ready. Why is this?"

He consults the class list for another victim, and I pray my name hasn't yet been added because of red tape.

"I'm ready," calls a voice.

Freud looks up. "Miss Lee," he says, relaxing.

The eyes of the class turn to the girl sitting next to J.J. She stands with confidence. Soft black hair runs to her shoulders and settles around a pink sweater. She smiles brilliantly at Freud. There's some strange connection between the two of them that I can't put my finger on.

"What poem have you selected, Miss Lee?"

"Shakespeare," she says. "Sonnet Eighteen."

There is mumbling from the class.

"Delightful," says Freud. "Please begin."

Miss Lee – I don’t know her first name – takes a sip from her Evian, walks to the front of the room, takes a deep breath, collects herself, and, in a sparkling voice, begins.

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day

Thou art more lovely and more temperate

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May

I forget about the poem and study the lovely Miss Lee. Her hair shines like it’s in a shampoo commercial and her complexion is so flawless she’s practically airbrushed. She’s one of those girls that won the genetic lottery when she was conceived. That’s not to say she’s not smart – I wouldn’t risk quoting Shakespeare – but her looks sure won’t hurt her when she applies for a job. Or has a flat tire on the side of the road.

Freud stares at her as though she were his reason to return from the First World War. She finishes reciting.

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

“Wonderful, Miss Lee,” says Freud. She practically curtseys as she goes to sit down. The eyes of every guy in the class follow her, and I realize that she’s bewitched more than just Freud. I look at Miss Lee and want to be like her. But instead I have my ample butt, my thick thighs, my tiny boobs, and my unsightly red hair.

Still, there’s something not quite right about this Miss Lee. It’s not that there’s a piece of the puzzle missing, because she’s got it all. It’s like the picture is out of focus. I squint, but I can’t figure out what it is.

“Who can tell me what this poem is about?” announces Freud.

I’m dangerously inattentive and don’t have the faintest idea what her poem is about. I studied Shakespeare’s plays in Toronto, of course, like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*, but I don’t understand all the fuss. They’re the sort of thing my mother would appreciate, not me. Like antique furniture, but made out of language instead of wood.

Freud scans the room for someone to explain the poem, but no one volunteers. I sit in my desk and concentrate on becoming invisible as Miss Lee explains the sonnet’s themes of love, beauty and the immortality of poetry. I wish she would add boredom.

“A most concise explanation,” says Freud. “Who would like to go next?”

The entire class stares at their desks in complete silence. Vancouver and Toronto are thousands of kilometers apart, but it’s good to know some things don’t change and this is one of them: never make eye contact.

Freud consults his list again. “Mister Foster,” he says. Heads turn to a baby-faced guy with rows of curly black locks sitting in the back row. A soft nylon guitar case leans against the wall behind him.

Mister Foster looks as though he’d rather be anywhere else in the world. He scratches at unshaved whiskers on his face with a wrist that has a bandana wrapped around it. He’s wearing stone-wash jeans that belong in the eighties and are too small for his slightly chubby frame. A red tongue sticks out between a pair

of giant lips on his black t-shirt. I can't place the image and decide it's an ad for chewing gum. He's got a half-empty bottle of Diet Coke on his desk, as if drinking Diet Coke will burn off his extra weight. He's the kind of guy that doesn't care about his appearance, but then wonders why girls don't go for him. I have to admit I like his black Doc Martens, though. I have a thing for shoes.

Mister Foster is a poor imitation of J.J. He's the type that couldn't get a girlfriend in a million years, and so he just went into music to get laid. He's one of those hack musicians that think that girls will throw themselves at him just because he carries a guitar. Well, let me tell you something, buddy, I wouldn't go for you if you played like Andrés Segovia.

Then I realize where I've seen the tongue and giant red lips. They're the logo of The Rolling Stones, that British rock band. *People Magazine* runs pictures of Mick Jagger running around the globe with women half his age. He's worshipped all over the world but I don't understand why. It's not like he's adding anything to society.

"I don't have anything, sir," says Mister Foster. His voice is soft.

"I'm sorry?" says Freud. "Speak up."

Mister Foster looks like he's embarrassed just being alive. He raises his voice a touch, but it's still deathly quiet. "I don't have anything ready. I was practicing last night and couldn't get around to it."

"You couldn't get around to it?" repeats Freud.

"Not really, no," says Mister Foster. He scratches at the surface of his desk with a fingernail.

"Mister Foster," says Freud. "Your attitude is deplorable. You will fail my class if you don't take an interest."

"That's okay," Mister Foster says, staring at the bandanna around his wrist. "I don't mind."

I stare at him, shocked. Freud is also shocked. The class whispers its disbelief. Several students turn around in their chairs to look at him. But he just stares at his bandanna.

I don't know this Mister Foster, but I know the type. I can't stand these guys. They walk through life with their heads in the clouds because they think three chords on a guitar and a voice that sounds like it's been scratched with a pickaxe will earn them million-dollar record contracts and groupies with giant breasts they can snort cocaine off in New York. Meanwhile, those of us who were *properly* trained in music, those of us who can tell the difference between Beethoven and Mozart, languish in obscurity. But the thing is, for some of them, it actually happens. The cards all fall into place and they go on to become music "legends." Hopefully this won't happen to Mister Foster, here, and he'll end up pumping gas at Petro-Canada like he deserves.

I suppose it might seem that I have a lot of bitterness towards the world. I do. So sue me.

"You do not care if you fail my class?" says Freud, flustered.

"Not really, no. I'm going to be a musician. I could quote you song lyrics if you want, like *Dazed and Confused* by Led Zeppelin. Or *Black Country Woman*.

Forget about *Stairway to Heaven*, though. That song is so overplayed. Even Robert Plant hates it, and he wrote it.”

My mouth is agape. So are the mouths of many of my classmates. I can’t believe anyone would be so insolent. That’s the problem with these guitar-playing rock star wannabes. They don’t care about anyone but themselves. They’re total hedonists, into nothing but drugs and booze and sex. I wouldn’t be surprised if this Mister Foster is stoned right now.

“*Literature*, Mister Foster. Not a childish rock and roll tune.”

Mister Foster glares. “Rock is not childish. It’s –”

“So you have nothing prepared, then,” says Freud, angrily. His strident voice cuts through the whispers of the students. “I can only hope that the world appreciates your efforts as much as I. Perhaps you should start saving now for a squeegee and a bucket of soapy water.”

Now I can’t believe *Freud* would be so rude. I mean, I know I was thinking about him pumping gas, but I would never actually say it. And besides, teachers are supposed to inspire their students, not cut them down.

The class looks to Mister Foster for his reaction, but he just continues to scratch at his desk with his fingernail. “Two-fifty for a wax,” he says. He’s trying to look unaffected, but his skin is flushing and anger is in his eyes. I hope he’s not going to go on a shooting rampage.

“Miss Lockhart,” says Freud suddenly, looking at his list. He finds me and fixes me with a gaze above his half-glasses. “Do you have a poem prepared?”

My mind is a whirl. “It’s my first day,” I stammer.

“So you have nothing prepared,” says Freud. I can’t tell if he’s too angry to care or if he needs a hearing aid.

“No. I just got he –”

“The attitude of this class is deplorable,” says Freud, now clearly hostile. “I will give the entire class five minutes to find a poem to recite. Anyone who does not will receive a failing grade. Miss Lockhart, I will start with you.”

The class ripples with outrage and worry. Several students dash for the small row of books near Freud’s desk and empty it of every volume. Others consult their friends or dive into their backpacks for textbooks, flipping pages for a poem that will save them from an F. But I don’t have a textbook or a friend.

Only three are unconcerned: Miss Lee, the model-slash-Shakespeare expert up at the front who is touching up her lipstick; J.J., who’s beating a different rhythm in each hand; and Mister Foster, sitting in his desk, smoldering. He looks my way and his fingernail stops scratching. The frantic terror in my eyes meets the anger in his.

“Give me a sheet of paper,” he whispers, leaning into the aisle.

“What?”

“Quick.”

The last thing I want to do is get into trouble, but I can’t start off school like this. I open my spiral bound notebook and rip out a single sheet as quietly as I can. I make sure Freud isn’t looking – he’s angrily writing in a journal on his desk – and pass it over. The class is so busy flipping through textbooks that no one

notices.

“What are you doing?” I say. Mister Foster clicks the end of his pen and starts scrawling rapidly.

“Four minutes,” calls Freud, consulting a brass pocket watch on the end of a chain.

My heart is in my throat. I’m completely at the mercy of Mister Foster, the wannabe rock star. I have no poem, no friends, and what very much looks to be an F on my first day of school. Mom will kill me.

“Time,” calls Freud, scraping his chair against the floor as he stands. Mister Foster waits until Freud puts his watch back into his pocket, then tosses the page on to my desk.

“Miss Lockhart,” says Freud. He towers over me and I smell Old Spice. “Are you prepared?”

My mouth is dry, but Mister Foster nods. The paper is covered with scrawlings, legible, but only just, and an S in the second line is backwards. Freud escorts me to the front of the room. I stare at the sea of the faces and their prying eyes. My stomach is in knots. Freud stands to my side, impatient.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I mumble.

The class is silent. Most of the girls are sympathetic to the new student, but a few guys in the back lean forward over their desks and leer. Jerks.

“Very well, Miss Lockhart,” says Freud. “What’s the poet’s name?”

The paper in my hands trembles, but I read the name off the page: “James Hetfield.”

“I haven’t heard of him,” says Freud.

That makes two of us. This is great.

“And the name of the poem?”

“*Enter Sandman*,” I read, hoping to God that Mister Foster’s intentions are good, and he’s not out to get a laugh at my expense.

“Nor have I heard of his work,” says Freud. “What is the poet’s nationality?”

Mister Foster has cautiously turned both of his hands into guns and is pulling the triggers of his thumbs.

“Uh, I think he’s American.”

“Very well,” says Freud. “Proceed.”

I nervously clear my throat and begin, trying to sound as regal and dignified as possible as I read about a parent tucking a boy into bed, trying to protect him from the evils of the world.

The class’s reaction is mixed: Mister Foster’s expression is a mixture of anger and satisfaction. Miss Lee’s face shows disbelief. J.J. gazes at me with an expression of shock. Daydreaming students yawn and draw graffiti on their desks, but the ones who are paying attention gape in horror.

“Pray continue,” says Freud, leaning back in his chair, steepling his fingers.

I do my best to keep a straight face as I recite the next verse and its lyrics about Snow White, war, and flaming dragon’s breath. Muffled titters escape my classmates. Several of the guys are trying not to laugh. Is the joke on me or Freud?

I set my jaw and finish.

Dead silence.

A clock ticks. Mister Foster grins from ear to ear and looks vindicated. I jam the piece of paper into the pocket of my jeans. J.J. winks at me as I dash past him for my seat. What have I done?

“What would you say is the poem’s theme?” says Freud, leaning forward in his chair.

Theme? I have no idea. I was so nervous I barely recognized the words.

“Uh, well – ”

“Autonomy,” interrupts Mister Foster. “Self-sufficiency, independence. It’s from a father to his son, telling him that he can’t protect him any longer, and that he has to grow up.”

“Exactly,” chimes in J.J. The class turns to him. It’s the first thing he’s said since his arrival. “The father wants to warn his son about the evils in the world. It’s a rite of passage, like Hyllus and Heracles in Sophocles’s *Trachiniae*. ”

An awkward silence fills the room. Miss Lee turns to J.J. with an expression that reads *Say What?*

“Right,” I say, lost. “That’s what I was going to say.” I look at Freud, anticipating the worst. But instead he smiles.

“Miss Lockhart, well done. Mister James, splendid analysis. Mister Foster, perhaps I judged you too quickly.” I steal a glance at Mister Foster. His anger has dissolved and he is sitting contentedly. “Who would like to go next?”

My pulse drops below a hundred. Several students are called to the front of the room, and they fumble their way through works by Wordsworth, Keats and Tennyson, but all I hear are people whispering about me. Then the bell rings and we’re dismissed. I make my way into the hall. I stand as people throng around me like fish, trying to remember which direction my next class is in when J.J. taps me on the shoulder.

“Hey, Miss Lockhart,” he says. “What’s your name?”

“Rebecca,” I say, relieved that one of them is talking to me. The fact that it’s the goldfish in a tank of guppies doesn’t hurt, either. As he speaks, the odd smell of burned chocolate wafts into the air.

“Way to stick it to Penderton, Rebecca. That took some real guts. I’m J.J. and this is Alex, my girlfriend.” He grins at me and gestures to Miss Lee who is consulting her cell phone for text messages. Apparently there’s a message on her phone that’s not to her liking, because her face hardens. She types out a reply with her thumb and gives me forced smile when she finishes.

“That was quite the stunt you pulled in class, Miss Lockhart,” says Alex, her voice completely neutral. She’s even more beautiful up close. Her ebony hair looks soft enough to stuff a pillow. She has long, articulated eyelashes – she’s not even wearing mascara – a pair of dimples in each cheek, sky-blue irises and lips that belong on the cover of *Vogue*. Her waist is slim and her hips arch gently into a pair of long legs that belong on the body of a Las Vegas showgirl. She must have heard me say my first name to J.J., so I’m not sure why she’s calling me “Miss Lockhart.”

Then I realize what was bothering me earlier. Alex's sweater is too big for her and it's pilling from age. The hems of her jeans are frayed and torn, there's a tiny stain on her left knee, and her shoes are scuffed. It's odd that a girl this attractive would wear clothes in this condition. Maybe I'm overanalyzing. Or maybe I should just mind my own business.

"I couldn't really help it," I say. "But I guess I should thank, uh, Mister Foster."

"His name is Kyle," says Alex. Her smile is thin and forced.

"Right, Kyle," I say.

"See you tomorrow, Miss Lockhart," she says, sweetly, but I can tell she doesn't mean it. She pulls on J.J.'s arm. The two of them walk down the hall together, holding hands, their fingers intertwined.

Why is she being so cold?

"Rebecca?" says another voice. I turn around to see Mister Foster, standing in front of me, his guitar case slung over his shoulder. "Hey, I'm Kyle."

"Hi, Kyle," I say. "Thanks for bailing me out back there."

"No problem," he says. "Some of the teachers wish this was a private school and take it out on the new students."

"What was that you wrote for me?" I say. "Did you make it up?"

He grins. "Nope. There's no way Penderton listens to rock. I wrote out a song by Metallica."

"Metallica? You're kidding." I stare at him in disbelief. I've heard of Metallica, of course, but I don't know any of their music. They're just a bunch of long-haired, drugged-out rock stars who scream into microphones and call it music. A friend played me some of their stuff back in Toronto, but I couldn't make out the lyrics over the rest of the garbage. I hear songs like that in the mall and on the radio. Tuning them out is a skill I've developed over the years.

"They're one of the best bands in the world," says Kyle. "Lars Ulrich is a god."

"Uh, I guess." I want to fit in, so I try to hide my rock ignorance. "I think the only rock song I know by heart is that 'dick with a glove' one," I say. It's a catchy piece that's bored its way into my head like musical cocaine. You hear it once and it's with you for life.

Kyle gives me a strange look. "Which one?"

"Uh, you know." I hate my voice, but I try to sing it for him anyway. "You're a dick with a glove."

Kyle bursts out laughing. "That's 'you're *addicted to love*.' It's by Robert Palmer!"

I flush all the way to the tips of my ears. I need to stop talking about things I know nothing about. "Sorry," I mumble. "I thought it was about Michael Jackson."

Kyle clutches at his stomach and laughs so hard that he slides down the side of a locker. I'm glad to be so funny.

"That's hilarious," he says.

"Thanks," I grumble. Before I can say anything further, the intercom crack-

les and a voice says, “Rebecca Lockhart, please report to the office.”

As word of what happened in English spreads through the corridor, grinning students point me out to their friends. A blonde girl approaches me. As I brace myself for a second Miss Lee, she says, “Hey, that was fantastic. Penderton’s had that coming for years. See you tomorrow.” Then she walks off. Kyle looks up at her from the floor and tries to quell his laughter, but tears roll down the sides of his face.

And this is just my first day.