

25 | Pop

The photo above will make so much more sense during this chapter...

Spiritstrong97, rees4jam, oreocamclub, omgthatishrandom, Undiscovered-Author, HopeGoodrich, SASAIKAMALCOLM and fandomlover71324, you the best!

Chapter 25: Pop

What are the signs of a bad day?

Is the wind particularly loud or do the birds chirp differently?

If I could tell the signs, I'd never get out of bed. Like today, for example. I should have stayed under the covers all day.

Unfortunately, it was also the first day of school.

I slept through my alarm clock and woke up to the sound of Flora hijacking my car. Hers had broken down and she didn't bother waiting for me. She stole my car and went to school without me. I was stranded.

And late.

I texted Julia and she messaged back: I'm biking to school. If you want to join, I'll pick you up in 10.

10 minutes. I bounced out of bed faster than a rubber ball and picked up a pair of jeans and blue T-shirt that were lying on the floor. I tied my hair in a messy knot, brushed my teeth and splashed water on my face.

I turned the coffee machine on in the kitchen and ran to the garage, digging around for my bike. I found it behind a broken ice cream maker. Bike, I said? More like a tricycle, with pink ribbons flowing out of the sides of the bar handles.

I ran back to the kitchen to pour the coffee into a thermos, add caramel macchiato creamer and screw the lid on-

"MILLIE!" Julia's voice echoed through the garage.

"Coming!" I screamed, running back through the house with my coffee and backpack.

"AHHHH!" she screamed when she saw me in my no-make-up-just-woke-up-wild-hair look, "Frankenstein!"

"That's exactly what I was going for."

Julia rode ahead, shifting gears on her professional bike and calmly greeting our neighbors along the way. I was pedaling as fast as I could, humming and pushing while the pink mini-bike was squeaking under me. The tires were deflating by the minute. I started to sweat.

My face turned pink. School was still far away.

I'm coming in hot.

Literally.

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Preston Oakes High School

There was an excited buzz in the air at school. The hallway was jam packed with students greeting each other after a long summer.

People had new haircuts, new outfits, new personalities... the usual optimism. New year, new you.

I didn't bother locking my bike because, let's be real, who's going to steal it?

As we walked on campus, Julia updated me on her summer, "You'll never guess what happened to me. I spent most of summer hanging out with Cearra. She even said she'd introduce me to the crew," she boasted, excited to be getting close to one of the tightest girl groups in our year.

LUCKY they're called. Short for Lexi, Unity, Cearra, Khloe and Yoona. And yes, Khloe is the same counselor from camp.

"There they are!" Julia pointed.

They were standing under the welcome back banner, swapping schedules with each other. Khloe (the K in LUCKY), was amongst them. I wondered if she would remember me now, after this summer.

"Cearra!" Julia waved her hand in the air, standing on her tip toes to be noticed.

The girls didn't even look up. The bell rang while Julia waded through the crowd, trying to reach them. The commotion picked up and she had to move more aggressively. LUCKY started to walk to their first class.

"Cearra!" Julia called out again, this time a bit more desperately.

Cearra finally looked up. She had a fierce purple lip and gold, leopard print outfit (photo above). "Nice seeing you, J. We'll catch up later, ok? Sit with us at lunch."

The golden ticket. Julia and I usually sat alone on the bleachers at lunchtime. But it looks like I'll be flying solo today. I was happy for Julia. She shouldn't have had to lose her friends when my ex broke up with me.

Speaking of my social life, everyone stayed away from me. My hair was frizzy from the wind, my face red from the exhaustion. I had sweat patches on my shirt and I had rolled into school on a kid's bike. Epitome of uncool.

I couldn't help but think of the boy who dominated the opposite end of the spectrum. Luke Dawson was a senior now - and his every move was worshiped. The way people talked about him, it was like he ruled the school.

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The lunch line was long. I stood there behind two girls gossiping about boys.

"Did you see what Austin Taylor posted last week?"

"Obvi I did. He and Luke looked so hot. Where were they though? It looked like a cottage from Hansel and Gretel."

"Summer camp, apparently. There's a rumor going around that Luke was a counselor there."

"What?! How did we not know this?! I was hanging out by the basketball courts all summer hoping to see him."

"Khloe worked there and she said she hung out with him all the time."

"No way, are they like friends now? That's so unfair," she said jealously, "It's probably a lie. He only talks to models."

A girl standing behind me interrupted the conversation in front of me, "It's true. She posted a picture from the same cabin. She's so lucky. This year is Khloe's year."

I stared at the girl behind me. Who just joins a conversation like that?

The girl pushed me behind her, "Excuse you. We're talking about stuff that has nothing to do with you."

I argued, "I wasn't-"

"What'll you be having ladies?" a bored cafeteria lady stood there, ladle in hand, "Mac 'n' cheese or BBQ pizza?"

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In case anyone cares, I went with the BBQ pizza. The mac 'n' cheese looked too cheesy. I used to think there was no such thing as too much cheese, but the macaroni was floating in orange goo.

Anyway.

I walked through the cafeteria, knowing there was no table I could sit at. You need to know someone to be able to sit. People who had nowhere to go, usually sat on the bleachers outside. I wasn't in the mood for that. I was looking for somewhere quiet.

I opened one of the classroom doors. I thought it was empty but just as I stepped inside I heard a loud pop.

Champagne sprayed out of a bottle and a girl clapped. Another guy brought solo cups to fill up with alcohol. Food was laid out like a buffet on the teacher's desk.

I was so not meant to be here.

An invite-only lunch party... all seniors... the most attractive people in the school...

Back up.

I tried to reverse out of there before they noticed, but it was impossible. I obviously stuck out. Conversation died down and they all stared at me. I stepped back into a wall.

Except that it wasn't a wall. It was a boy with a muscular body. I didn't need to turn around to recognize who.

I've bumped into that body a couple times before.

A confident, sexy drawl dripped into my ear. "I haven't forgotten about my laptop."

He spoke over my pounding heart, and his voice lowered so that only he and I could hear, "You owe me."

A/N: Anyone else take a pink tricycle to school? I'm guessing it's just Millie but I ship anyone else who does.

So, Luke is back.

He's sorta sticking around from now on. OK, I don't know why I was about to dive into a monologue when you're not, let me know on Instagram @NatalieInACorner