

CHAPTER 1

Birds of a Feather

Matthew

A cracked sidewalk stretches ahead of me, lit by the early morning sun and the mocking glow of the waxing gibbous moon; I grimace and focus on the upcoming intersection.

Walking languidly on my left, Mark yawns, baring razor-sharp teeth and a split tongue he passes as major body modifications to the world at large; after four long seconds, his teeth clamp together into a wicked grin that means he's thought of something stupid to talk about on the short walk to school. "Hey, Matthew."

"What?" I adjust my baseball cap as we walk out of the shade.

Mark steps up to the traffic signal at the corner and presses the crosswalk button; under the bright morning sun, his deep-red hair matches the shade of a cherry. He turns around, all smiles, but the scar etched across the left side of his face steals my attention; his chin-length hair fails to hide the five pale lines running from his upper lip, over his eye, and into his hairline.

I stare instead at the purple frames hanging from the collar of his shirt. Last year, his astigmatism got bad enough that his mom bought him some reading glasses, though he rarely uses them. I know he inherited it from his dad, but I often worry the injury made it worse.

Mark notices my sour mood and returns to my left side. "Okay, so, I was staying up late again last night, thinking about

stuff, you know how it is, and I gotta ask, if you could marry any monster girl, what kind would you pick?”

“Hm . . .” I let my mind wander until someone special comes to mind; before I can run off fantasizing, a robotic voice notifies us that we can “safely” cross the road—the reckless drivers around north Raleigh beg to differ. As we walk across the faded crosswalk, I say, “I’d honestly marry a human.”

“*Boring~*” Mark draws it out as long as humanly possible, and as soon as we hit the sidewalk, he says, “C’mon, bro! Give a real answer!”

I roll my eyes but try to give the question some serious thought; I’m not picky, but there has to be something that suits her best. “*Fine*. I’d marry a dog girl.”

“Just a dog? Not a wolf?”

“Mm hm. Wolves are too intense.”

Mark glances up, holding his hands behind his head, and another grin splits his lips; he looks at me out of the corner of his yellow eyes, his vertical-slit pupils mere lines in the intense sunlight. “Got a breed in mind? A lab, maybe?”

I scowl; he definitely knows who I was thinking about. After he grins forever, I sigh and ask, “What about you?”

“Oh, I thought you’d never ask~” He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “You know, I’ve been thinking about bunny girls lately.”

“Bunny girls? Really?” We turn the corner onto the shaded street of our school, easing the sun out of our eyes.

“Mm hm~” Mark sighs dreamily, cupping his cheeks in his hands. “They have adorable ears . . . a cute little tail . . . and their fur would be so fluffy . . .” Suddenly, he frowns. “The only hard negative is no paw pads.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course you’d miss the paw pads.”

Mark drops his arms. “Can you blame me?!”

“I think you have an obsession.”

“I do not!”

I lift an eyebrow.

Mark huffs. “You wouldn’t get it, bro.”

“I think I get it on a personal level. Uncomfortably so.”

Mark opens his big mouth to retort, but shuts up when he notices we’ve reached the end of the street; along the curb, a long carpool line parades into the packed parking lot of our school. Many of the cars are decorated with washable paints on their rear windshields and side windows celebrating the start of their senior’s final year. Mark sighs as we join the leagues of students on their way to the front entrance.

I remove my baseball cap. “Is my hair okay?” I tilt my head in Mark’s direction.

Mark gazes at the top of my head and gives me a thumbs-up with an absolutely unnecessary wink. “You’re good, bro.” Then he slings an arm around my shoulders. “Excited for your first day of sophomore year? I’m sure you can’t wait for first-period gym class.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you.” I shuffle toward the staircase, dragging Mark along with me. Unlike him, I decided to wait the only year I could to take the one required gym course in our high school curriculum.

Mark lets go of me as we walk up the steps that curve up to the front entrance of Gibson High School; we walk inside, and all it takes is a left turn down the first hall for us to part. Before he goes up to the second floor, Mark turns around and pats my shoulder. “Don’t worry too much about the locker room; most guys are too busy talking about their own dicks to pay any attention to you.”

I glance aside with a small smile. “Thanks, Mark. See you at lunch?”

He grins again. “You know it!” Then he dashes up the stairs.

I turn away from the staircase and head down two long hallways until I reach a wider hall with two gyms on the left and a small courtyard on the right; between the gyms is a double door that leads down to the locker rooms. I adjust my book bag’s straps over my shoulders, take a deep breath, and walk down the long flight of stairs to the basement floor; at the bottom, I turn left, pass the outdoor exits, and lean against the wall next to the boys’

locker room. A couple of guys chat about football in front of the door, while another guy, tall with long, wavy black hair, stands about two yards off to the side. Not knowing how long we'll have to wait, I take my book bag off and lay it at my feet.

Within a minute, a PE teacher comes by and unlocks the door for us, effectively wasting my effort to relieve my back. I sigh internally and heft my book bag back onto my shoulder.

The tall guy slips in behind the other guys, followed shortly by me; the tall guy disappears behind the rows of lockers, while the other three stay to change in the front. I follow in the tall guy's footsteps and find a blessed corner where I can quickly change into my gym clothes without any peering eyes on my back. With the locker room as empty as it is, I avoid giving myself a heart attack, but that'll change at the end of the period.

Unnerved, I wait in front of a rusty locker as more and more boys file into the room; fortunately, no one comes to change within sight. The din of the boys' locker room increases in volume with every passing moment, and I take a few minutes to look over my schedule for the day again. Once I've stared at the paper long enough, I put it away and stuff my book bag into the long-neglected locker; our teacher calls us out of the room, and I slam the locker door shut.



I stand with my class in an uncoordinated row in front of our teacher; another cluster of students stands on the other side of the gym with a different teacher, whom we'll have to share the limited space with. Like a lot of schools in the area, there are far too many students and not enough seats to accommodate them, so they've had to squeeze as many kids as they can into one block of time. Our teacher, a surprisingly muscular man, though not particularly tall, calls out roll. I make a poor attempt to pay some amount of attention, but my mind drifts as soon as he reaches C.

“Matthew Stroud?”

I raise my hand up to my chest. “Here.”

“Rebecca Turnpike?”

A girl with fluffy auburn hair raises her hand.

“Andrew Vance?”

A blond boy wearing expensive athletic clothes says, “Here.”

“John Woodcock?”

The tall guy that disappeared into the locker room earlier raises his hand with a suave “Here.” Despite the unfortunate last name, John looks like the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. Standing around six feet, he has a chiseled face, dark-brown eyes, a tan complexion, and that long black hair pooling just past his shoulders; if not for his grumpy expression, I imagine girls would fawn all over him.

Rollcall ends and both teachers lead us through a set of warm-ups, which I perform easily enough without being spectacular; my stamina is better than Mark’s, but my personal exercising activities start and end with walking to and from school. After completing the warm-ups, the teachers inform us that we’ll be running the mile.

Everyone in the room groans; sapped of what meager energy we had, both classes file outside and walk together down a stretch of sidewalk to the track.

I carefully drag behind to the back of the pack of students until I’m near John; he shuffles along, squinting against the sun, but there’s something rigid about his gait. Before I can get a better read on him, the teachers open the rusty gate at the end of the path; they line us up and tell us how many laps we need to run and the expected time we’re supposed to take. There are always a few guys who can run the whole thing in as little as five minutes—and those who walk it all and take more like twenty. I’ll be going for a time between the extremes: fast enough to get it over with but not so slow I embarrass myself.

Our teacher blows his whistle, and we start running. I settle into the second most inner track and pace myself for the jog ahead, only to finish my first lap so fast I get a cramp in my side; I slow down and catch my breath for the next. A light breeze cooling my face, I round the bend in the track for the third time.

Not too far ahead, John bounds down the straight, his loose gray shirt flapping in tandem with his footfalls; when he makes an abrupt sidestep around a group of three walking girls, the hem catches on something black and fuzzy.

Curious, I pick up my pace until I'm close enough to make it out but far enough he doesn't notice me; my stomach drops the moment I realize what it is.

In a normal world, John would have a tattoo or a large birthmark too embarrassing to reveal, but instead, he has something far worse: peeking out directly above the waistband of his shorts and conveniently holding his shirt up like a hook is a small, furry tail—a bunny tail. And John has no clue that anyone behind him can see it clear as day.

Without a second thought, I charge up, slap him on the back, and shout, "Watch your tail!"

John immediately startles and looks at me with a pale face. He thrusts his hands over his twitching tail, hastily pulls his shirt up and over the appendage, then speeds up, his long legs easily carrying him beyond a pace I could match. As he runs farther and farther away, I study his long hair again: It's let down except for a small ponytail near the nape of his neck, right above where I imagine he's hiding the bulk of his bunny ears; it must be a pain in the ass to keep his hair that long just to hide them.

John stays far away from me for the rest of our gym class, but I don't take any offense; I know better than anyone how scared I'd be if someone knew my secret.

As soon as we're released into the locker rooms at the end of class, I disappear into the little corner that none of the other guys managed to find earlier.

Just as I grab the hem of my shirt, John throws his book bag on the ground in front of me and collapses onto the bench; he grips his knees hard, unable to meet my gaze. "Hey, um . . ." His voice warbles at an impossibly high pitch.

"Matthew."

“Uh, okay, um . . .” He screws his eyes shut and whispers, “Please don’t tell anyone what you saw!” Tears threaten to fall.

I almost smile because I know exactly where he’s coming from. “I’d never tell anyone”—I take off my shirt—“because we’re not so different.”

John looks at my bare upper body and sucks in a breath; the fear leaves him, and he stares at his white-knuckled hands.

I calmly put my casual T-shirt on, covering the cat tail wrapped around my torso.

We sit there silently, the rest of the guys in the room talking and laughing loudly at jokes we can’t make out.

I pull my book bag out of the locker and stuff my gym clothes inside. “Hey, John.”

He turns his head, wide-eyed.

“What lunch do you have?”

John looks away and wipes his hands on his jeans. “Um, A, I think.”

“Do you pack a lunch?”

He shakes his head, inadvertently pulling more hair over his shoulders. “I eat in the cafeteria.”

That makes things complicated, but—

The bell rings, and John jumps to his feet.

Before he can dart away, I yell, “Look for a guy with red hair when you go to lunch; you can’t miss him.”

I catch his eye for a fleeting moment; with a silent acknowledgement, he escapes around the corner.

CHAPTER 2

Getting to Know You

John

A long line stretches out ahead of me, student after student slowly working through the cafeteria line to fill their foam trays and pay before finding an open seat in the overpacked room. As I shuffle forward, I scan the cafeteria for Matthew and his friend, only to come up short; natural redheads are rare enough to begin with, and the few I spot aren't next to a short boy with curly brown hair. I hope I didn't mishear him.

After losing a few minutes to my fruitless search, I finally reach the beginning of the cafeteria line and divert my attention to gathering my subpar lunch for the day. When I get to the cash register, I pay the lunch lady for the food and go back to looking around. Since they weren't in view earlier, I assume that Matthew and his friend must be sitting in the half of the room past the cafeteria line. The moment I turn my head to the right, I spot a skinny guy with dyed red hair next to Matthew in the corner of the room.

I stride as confidently as I can over to their table, though I'm nervous about talking to two people I barely know, especially after one of them saw my tail. Hoping to call as little attention to myself as possible, I sit down across the table from Matthew.

The moment my tray hits the table, Matthew's lively conversation with his friend grinds to a halt. "Hey, you came." He smiles gently.

Matthew's friend evaluates me with a cool gaze. "So this is the one you were telling me about?" He rests his right cheek in his palm, his elbow on the table. "Should've known it was gonna be a guy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Why would this guy think I could be a girl? It's not like my name is unisex, and I don't look nearly as androgynous as I used to.

"Ah, sorry; ignore him." Matthew holds up his hand. "He was fantasizing about bunny girls this morning, so I thought I'd mess with him by omitting that little detail."

His friend sighs. "I'm beginning to think monster girls don't exist at this point. Five years later and we've only met one other guy."

I'm missing a ton of context, but I try not to let my confusion get the best of me. "So you guys already came up with terms for this stuff?"

Matthew's friend raises one red eyebrow. "And you didn't?"

I shake my head, embarrassed I never thought that far over the past two years.

Matthew furrows his brow. "We can catch you up on all that later; anyway, you should introduce yourselves."

"Oh, right!" Matthew's friend grins, revealing a gnarly set of serrated teeth. "My name's Mark. Nice to meet you."

"I'm John," I say, "and likewise."

We stare at each other awkwardly; completely at a loss of where to take the conversation, I scrutinize Mark. He has an awfully boyish face, an asymmetrical bob hairstyle that's cropped on the right and down to his chin on the left, pointed ears, and . . . there's a striking, scratch-like scar on his face, so pale against his lightly tanned skin that it must be years old. The scar runs through his left eyebrow and eye, leaving noticeable gaps where hair no longer grows in the scar tissue—he's even missing a few red eyelashes. It's not unheard of for someone to dye their eyebrows, but the eyelashes are a bit much.

"Mark, right?" I say.

"Yeah?"

“Your hair is natural, isn’t it?”

Mark grins again. “Yep. Pretty cool, huh?”

I smile. “Beats having to redye your hair all the time.” One of my sisters gets hers done every two months without fail.

Mark leans over the table and whispers, “It only sucks when people start wondering why my roots never show.”

“That makes me glad my hair stayed black.”

“Sometimes I wish my hair stayed black. And the eyes are a whole ’nother story.” Mark pulls a grape out of his lunch box and pops it in his mouth. “So are you from around here? I’m surprised we never noticed you before.”

I rub the back of my neck. “We must have gone to different middle schools. Pretty much everyone from mine went to Workbourne High, not Gibson.”

Mark grabs another grape. “The school districts are weird like that. I’m guessing you’re from Workbourne Middle?”

I nod. Given Mark’s inadvertent reminder, I pick up and take a bite out of my unfortunately whole-grain chicken sandwich.

Matthew says, “We went to Barrett. Almost everyone from there gets tracked here.”

“It kinda sucks since my only friend doesn’t go here.” I take another bite. “He’s actually like us, so I hope he’s okay without me.”

Mark gapes. “Whoa, really? What is he?”

“A bear. Funnily enough, everyone calls him Teddy.”

“That *is* pretty funny.” Mark nudges Matthew with his elbow. “Isn’t it, Matthew? Or should I say . . . Tabby~”

Matthew frowns so deep I’m afraid he might growl. “Are you ever going to shut up about that?!” He bares his teeth, his long, sharp canines poking out over his lower lip.

“I’m guessing there’s a story behind that one, huh?” I say.

“Please don’t ask.” Matthew slumps into his seat.

“Please do ask. I love telling people things.” Mark grins.

“I can tell.” I decide to save Matthew the trouble of a likely embarrassing story, especially after he did me such a big favor during gym class, and instead home in on Mark’s scar; frowning

my brow, I think carefully about my next words, but my curiosity trumps my general politeness. “I’m sorry if it’s rude to ask, but how did you get that scar?” I gesture toward the left side of his face, careful not to point at him.

Matthew’s annoyance morphs into unease, but Mark’s languid smile steals my attention; he pulls out two gold hair clips and slides them in his hair, showing off the entirety of his scar. It spans the upper left quarter of his face, trailing down from his temple all the way to his upper lip: the line farthest to my left curves down from the middle of his forehead all the way to the edge of his left nostril; the second line from the left curves down from the edge of his hairline, meeting the end of the farthest left; the middle line passes straight through the center of his snake-like eye; and the two on the farthest right curve down together from his temple and over his cheek. The lines span wide apart on his forehead and grow close together at the region of his cheek directly left of his nose, and all but the farthest to my left curve to the right on his face; it looks like a giant cat scratch, but I doubt he would’ve survived with such a clean scar if he actually got mauled by an animal.

“I was wondering when you’d ask.” Mark flourishes his hand. “It all started a few years ago, when I went on a missionary trip to Africa, and in my childish curiosity, I wandered off into—”

“Don’t bother asking Mark where he got that crazy scar. He tells a different story every time.” A bottom-heavy girl wearing a dirty blonde ponytail drops her hands on Matthew’s shoulders.

He flinches, his pupils blown out into huge circles.

The girl grins, scanning me with light-brown eyes devoid of makeup. “And who’s the new guy, anyway?”

“Emily . . .” Mark pouts, drooping as he removes his hair clips. “You’re no fun.”

Emily rests her forearms over Matthew’s shoulders and presses her small chest against the back of his head. “Somebody has to protect the innocent minds of your victims! You always make those stories of yours needlessly gory.”

“C’mon, you don’t want to hear about my missionary trip to Africa? I was going to fight a lion this time.”

“I think the story about the jaguar in the Amazon rainforest, the puma in the Grand Canyon, and the tiger in India are good enough.”

“I guess I should’ve known better than to ask something so personal.” I rub the back of my neck.

Emily fans the air. “Don’t feel too bad! This idiot actually wants people to ask with how detailed his stories get. You plan them in advance, don’t you, Mark?”

“Nah, nah, nah. It’s all improv, for real.”

Emily puts one hand on her hip. “I seriously doubt that.”

Mark opens his mouth, one finger pointed in the air, and—

“Emily . . .” Matthew taps her hand with his fingertips. “Sorry we forgot to tell you our change of plans before lunch started.”

Emily smiles. “It’s no big deal; we barely started eating together before school ended, anyway.” She rubs Matthew’s shoulder absently, then perks up. “Oh, I should introduce myself! My name’s Emily, and I’ve been friends with these knuckleheads since the beginning of the year. And you are?”

“John.” I’m unsure how to approach this girl; how much does she know? “I met Matthew this morning.”

“Oh, really?” Emily’s eyebrows lift. “Mister doom and gloom is the befriender?”

“C’mon, Emily.” Matthew pouts. “I’m not that bad.”

“You do have some major RBF.” Mark nudges him with his shoulder.

Matthew mutters, “God . . .”

Since I’m basically out of this equation, I try to finish the food I have left on my tray; the taste of whole-grain wheat and overbaked chicken never gets any better.

“Anyway, do you think you’ll be online tonight?” Matthew glances at Emily.

She brings a finger next to her lips in mock thought. “I might be able to figure something out; it *is* only the first day of school. I’ll text you if I decide to get on.”

“Cool.”

Emily lounges against Matthew with a grave expression on her face, like she’s contemplating something difficult.

Each additional second of contact adds a darker shade of pink to Matthew’s pale cheeks.

After the beat of silence lingers too long, Emily says, “I think I’ll leave you three to your guy talk or whatever.” She extracts herself from Matthew’s back and waves. “Bye, guys! Bye, John!”

I’m surprised she bothered to address me. “Bye.”

“Bye, Emily.” Matthew hardly looks over his shoulder.

“Bye!” Mark says.

Emily waltzes off as if she never came.

Matthew sighs heavily.

Mark thrusts his right arm over Matthew’s shoulders. “Emily’s gotten really touchy with you, huh?”

“C’mon, lay off.” The beginnings of a purr drift from Matthew’s direction, but it’s gone as soon as he clears his throat. He puts his face in his hands. “It’s so hard not to mess up around her.”

“So she doesn’t know?” I say.

Matthew drags his fingers over his eyes, exaggerating a groan. “No, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“There, there.” Mark rubs Matthew’s shoulder.

Matthew closes his eyes and huffs out a long, shaky breath, then nudges Mark’s hand off.

Smiling fondly, Mark shakes his head and looks at his phone. “Goodness, where has the time gone!” he exclaims in a silly posh accent, then looks at me. “Sorry about that interruption back there. So much for telling you about my scar!” He pretends to be upset about it.

“It’s fine, really,” I say.

Mark waves me off. “You’re so polite, dude. Relax . . . Anyway, you got a phone? We should trade numbers.”

“Oh, sure.” I fumble around in my jeans pocket and pull out my ancient smartphone; I unlock it, create a new contact, and pass it over to Mark.

He types in his information, presumably creates another new contact, and passes it to Matthew.

His pupils contract into wide slits as his eyes adjust to the bright light of the screen; he records his information and promptly returns it to me.

Mark says, "The bell's gonna ring in, like, one second, so—"

A shrill ring echoes around the room, though it's not as sharp with my ears folded down over my head.

"Ah! Just text us and we'll know it's you. We don't have many friends!" He rushes off to his next class.

Matthew lingers, smiling fondly; after he blinks, his pupils dilate back to a round shape. "Sorry. Mark can be a bit much, but he means well."

"That's alright. I think he's interesting," I say.

Matthew chuckles. "That's one way to put it! Anyway . . ." He gets up, knocking his knuckles against the table. "Thanks for coming by. It's not every day we meet other people like us."

"Yeah, no problem."

"See you at gym tomorrow."

"See you."

He slips into the waves of students filing out of the cafeteria.

I get up and put my empty tray where it belongs.



A dull basketball bounces off the rim of the hoop on the far side of the gym. Matthew grumbles as he jogs over to the ball, grabbing it before it can hit the girls playing tetherball in the corner. He turns around and tosses it toward me.

The ball bounces twice before I scoop it into my arms and make another shot; it bounces off the backboard and ricochets off the rim, landing on the shiny gym floor. With a bored huff, I pick the ball up before it rolls against the bleachers.

Matthew and I keep shooting hoops, sighing and grumbling our frustrations, but all I can think about is Mark's scar. It's only been one day, yet I'm positive I know the answer to his poorly

veiled riddle: a cat boy plus a guy who tells tall tales about fighting big cats plus a five-lined scar that looks suspiciously like it was made by a human hand tipped with claws can only equal one truth. The only question remaining is why.

Matthew, huffing from the constant back and forth chasing after the wayward basketball, prepares to throw the ball my way once again. He supports it with his right hand—his dominant hand—and, putting the perfect amount of power behind it, tosses it toward me.

I catch it effortlessly, thinking it's not my business to ask Matthew about Mark's scar, and shoot the ball in one fluid motion; it hits the backboard and lands on the rim, rolls around like a dirty tease, and drops into the hoop. The resounding thump of leather on wood seals my decision.

As soon as I retrieve the ball, our teacher blows his whistle and tells us to gather our things and head to the locker room. I throw the basketball into the overloaded storage box and follow Matthew downstairs to the boys' locker room. Once we get to our little corner, we change as fast as humanly possible, Matthew outpacing me as usual; he can't simply turn his back to the wall like I could if someone walked by.

Dressed in the usual jeans and T-shirt, I sit down next to him and say, "Matthew."

Eyes closed and hunched over, he hums his acknowledgment.

My heart beats a little faster. "Can I . . . ask you something personal?"

He opens his eyes and stares at the book bag at his feet. "Sure. Go ahead."

"Mark's scar . . . Did you . . . ?" I already feel stupid for opening my mouth.

Matthew furrows his brow and parts his lips, staring at his hands lying limp between his legs. He turns his right hand palm up, clenches his fist and unclenches it. He ponders his palm like it's an alien thing infecting his skin. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask."

I swallow. "I'm so—"

“But it must be obvious to you.” He covers his face, and without a sound, wipes his fingers over his eyes and down his cheeks, lifting his chin up toward the locker in front of him. After a deep breath, he steals a glance. “There’s a stone bench right outside the door near Student Services. Meet me there during lunch. I’ll wait.” The bell rings; he grabs his things and disappears around the corner.

Guilt gnawing at my chest, I sling my book bag over my shoulder and leave the room.