

PART I

SOMETHING
TOTALLY NEW

“What’s your name, young man?” asked the white-haired old man at the reception desk in my new dorm at the Oklahoma Academy of Mathematics and Sciences. I instantly deflated. Not this again. My little sister Isabella took my hand in support.

“She’s a young woman,” Mom said to him. “Her name is Nic—Nicole—Summers.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, smiling in a friendly way. “Welcome to OAMS, and welcome to Burnside.”

He started typing in the computer.

His apology for misgendering me caught me off guard. Usually, people weren’t sorry, and they looked annoyed at me for tricking them or something. But we were in a suburb of Oklahoma City, so maybe things were different here compared to my small home town.

The man reached into a box on his desk and pulled out a keycard. He scanned it on a machine and handed it to me.

“Room 201. Second floor, last room on the left, that way.”

He pointed to the nearest stairwell. “Welcome again, Nic. You can head on up, but I need your mom to stay and fill out paperwork.”

“Okay,” I said. Mom smiled at me, and Isabella and I headed for the stairs. We started up, with me dragging my giant blue suitcase up along with me.

When we reached the second floor, the door into the hall was closed. Hand on the doorknob, I held my breath. I could be somebody totally new here. Maybe not everyone would be like the old guy downstairs. And I needed to be somebody new. I couldn’t carry on being the loser everyone thought I was back in Emerson. I was done with the constant harassment.

I pulled open the heavy stairwell door to my floor in my new home for the last two years of high school.

There it was, my first glimpse: ordinary off-white textured walls and industrial blue carpet.

Oh, man. This was a bummer. I’d expected something different, more welcoming. This looked so sterile.

“Let me see,” Isabella, who had just turned eleven, said from behind me. She pulled the door all the way open and squeezed past me and my suitcase.

A sign indicated we should go right for room 201. We headed down the hall, Isabella, in her pink shirt and white skirt, skipping all the way and singing a new Beyoncé song.

A sense of regret mixed with fear flashed across my heart. I wouldn’t see my little sister every day anymore. I’d miss her so much, even if we were polar opposites in almost every way. I was going to be away from everyone and everything. It was scary.

But it was also good. A perfect opportunity to reinvent myself. If I could pull it off.

“Here it is!” Isabella said as she hopped to a stop in front of the last door on the left.

I dragged the suitcase the rest of the way and pulled the keycard out to unlock the door. The thin carpet in the room was an orangey beige, and there were bunk beds against the wall to the right, a desk in the corner behind them, and another desk on the left wall. There was also a small table against the wall across from the beds. I wondered what on earth that was for. The room felt abandoned, a box with no personality at all. Even the air smelled stale.

My roommate—a girl named Sophia who was from some small town in southeast Oklahoma that nobody’d heard of—obviously hadn’t arrived yet. At least she was a junior, too. She wouldn’t know anyone else, either.

Isabella raced in and sat on the bottom bunk, bouncing. “Which bed are you going to take?”

Here we go. Actual anxiety. “Oh, man, I don’t know. It’s impossible to know what Sophia will be like from a few texts. She seems so *normal* on social media. But also she’s so busy on social media, making videos all the time.”

“What’s wrong with normal?” Isabella asked with narrowed eyes.

“Nothing. I just can’t relate to it. You know that.” This was strictly the truth—normal annoyed me on most people, but I accepted it on Isabella because she was the best little sister ever. I dropped my backpack on the floor near the end of the bed. It was a brand new one in this really nice teal color.

“Let’s do a selfie!” She hopped up and we had to take a picture of both of us with the beds in the background.

Seeing the result, I wondered how Isabella still liked me. She was always cute and happy, and I was a grumpy potato.

“Your hair looks good today, and I’m always jealous of your freckles,” Isabella said, which was random.

I looked again at the photo and my hair just looked like normal—long, straight, and light brown. “Freckles aren’t considered attractive, Isabella.”

“Whatever. You should take the top bunk,” she said. “Fun! Which closet are you going to take?”

Another choice. The closets were to the right, on the same wall as the door. They were floor to ceiling doors on either side of a mirror over a chest of drawers. I had no experience with roommates at all, and my substandard social skills weren’t going to help me. This was going to be rough going.

Isabella got up and opened the closet on the left. “Cool!” There were a couple drawers on the bottom, and a rack for hanging clothes and also some storage at the top. “You can take this one. I’m sure Sophia won’t mind.”

“Okay, you’re right.” At least somebody around here could make a decision. Well, it’s not that I couldn’t make decisions, but it was hard unless I felt like I had all the information, and if it required social knowledge, I never felt like I had all the information.

Isabella sat back on the bed and I looked at the two desks. There was one on the right tucked between the window and the bunk beds, and the one across from it, with nothing around it. I honed in on the less exposed one, and dropped my backpack in the chair.

That done, I opened my suitcase and started loading things into the closet. That was when I realized there were no hangers and I hadn’t brought any. Crap.

“Oh, hi,” a voice said from the door. “You aren’t Nic.”

“No, I’m Isabella.”

I backed up and turned to see a girl of average height,

with long, curly dark brown hair, looking at me with a stiff smile and suspicious eyes, a familiar judgy look. She had a full face of makeup, like almost every girl I knew, and was holding a tripod. Sophia.

“*You* must be Nic,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Little sister?” Sophia asked, cocking her head toward Isabella.

“Yeah.”

Isabella smiled and waved. “Which bed do you want? Nic can’t decide.”

“Oh, I don’t care,” Sophia said as she opened the closet on the right. She moved her light pink suitcase, which was covered in stickers of animals and trees, to an open spot on the floor.

I still didn’t know what to do, and the anxiety was roiling in my stomach. I didn’t really believe her, but that didn’t help me decide. “I guess I’ll take the top?”

Sophia looked up. “Oh. I was hoping you’d pick the bottom.”

Oh, man. This was as bad as I’d worried it would be. “You can have the top. I really don’t care.”

Sophia smiled more genuinely this time and grabbed a bunch of clothes out of her suitcase. “Perfect.” She started loading up the closet. She’d been smart enough to bring hangers.

I finished stacking everything on the bottom of the closet and put the suitcase in there, too. It was weird to see all my clothes in this new place. All I had was jeans, some shorts, three pairs of shoes—all Vans, in purple, red, and black-and-white checkered—a bunch of graphic and plain t-shirts in various colors. The underwear and socks were

packed away in the drawers at the bottom of the closet. This pretty much summed up my fashion sense.

The art supplies I'd brought went on my desk, along with all the fantasy figurines I'd painted. Those would line the shelves in front of the textbooks I'd have and the novels I'd brought from home. I tossed the sheets I'd brought onto the bed—I'd make it later—and closed my closet doors, a magnetic click sounding when they were shut.

My stomach did not feel good about my future in this room with Sophia.

Isabella bounced on the bed some more. "This doesn't feel like a normal mattress. It's hard. I don't know how you're going to sleep on this."

"I'm sure it's fine. Let's go find Mom and Dad. I need some hangers."

Isabella raced to the door. I looked toward Sophia, who was still filling her closet, and said, "See you later."

"Bye." She sounded disinterested.

Yeah, this was going to be rough.



I was kind of zoning out while the senior resident advisor—she said to call her the dorm mom—was going on about the rules for kids who had cars. They weren't allowed to use them except to go home over the weekend. Whatever, didn't apply to me. I was originally supposed to be getting a cheap car on my sixteenth birthday, but my parents got in financial trouble and that never happened.

Mom, Isabella, and I were all gathered for the Parent Info Session in the downstairs lounge area of the dorm, off to the left of the front desk. There were some refrigerators lining a wall, a TV in front of the back windows, and some

boxy mustard-colored couches. Dad was going to Walmart to get hangers. At first I was worried that maybe kids shouldn't be here since it was for parents, but it was standing room only and there were whole families. Some early arrivers had snagged the couch spots. I looked at the family clusters in the room. There were a lot of younger siblings here, so it wasn't just us.

I was glad Isabella was here, but also glad my brother Caleb hadn't come. He was such a jerk now, only a year younger than me and convinced I was ruining his life by being so uncool.

I was staring absentmindedly at the front door when a slim black-haired boy came in with a blue backpack and two duffel bags. He was wearing gray cargo shorts with a wallet chain running into his pocket. He also had on a t-shirt with something printed on the front, though it was way too far away for me to see it. His hair was short and spiky and his skin was darker than mine, like probably more than a tan. I couldn't put my finger on why, but he looked cool. Maybe the chain thing. He went to the front desk for his keycard, but he had to wait for a bit. That was when he turned and caught me staring. Oh, my God. I quickly turned back toward the dorm mom, but not before I saw a smile on his face.

I was a total idiot. But that had been a nice smile.

Isabella caught my eye and mouthed, "I'm bored."

"Me, too," I replied, glad to be distracted from my embarrassment.

The mystery boy was going to have to walk through the lounge area in order to get to the boys' wing, so I needed to not stare at him again. Even if he did have a nice smile.

But after a bit, he still hadn't come by, and I stole another look toward the desk. No sign of him. Where had he gone?

The front door was the only way to get into the building, although there were some other exits he could've used to leave.

Weird.

Isabella was right. This session really was boring. Mom wrote down all the info about Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Spring Break, and how we'd have to leave the dorm for all of them. She had this little notepad she'd put in her purse at the last minute.

Isabella tapped my arm. "I'm glad you are coming home for breaks," she whispered.

"Me too." I side-hugged her.

I looked around. Sophia was on the other side of the room, next to a tall guy in cowboy boots and a cowboy hat. There were four other such dads in hats in the room, though everyone else was holding theirs rather than wearing them.

I was nervous thinking about how these cowboy kids would react to me. In my experience, cowboy people were even more offended by my unfeminine appearance than others. Apparently the only kinds of t-shirts girls were supposed to wear had those weirdly short sleeves and were close-fitting. Good old toxic masculinity.

I hoped Sophia wasn't going to make my life too difficult this year. I really needed to try to be friendly. I could start OSIN back up again. Operation Social Interaction for Nic was something my best and only friend Sam and I had started to help me make more friends before she moved to Scotland last year.

Thinking of OSIN and Sam being gone made me sad. I still couldn't believe she'd been gone so long. Over eight months. I'd visited her in Scotland in March, but it still felt

unreal to me that someone so important to me could be so far away.

Making friends was something I sucked at. I did end up becoming friends with a girl from my art class last spring, but we didn't have much in common besides art, and it wasn't like we were going to stay in touch now that I'd left Emerson. Being friends with her wasn't like being friends with Sam.

I needed to really try this year. I didn't have a reputation here for being the shy, meek wimp everyone back home thought I was. I should try to be braver, not so shy.

This meant I had to talk to people. I had to convince myself that not everyone judged me instantaneously, even if some people, like Sophia, still did. I needed to give people the benefit of the doubt.

This made me queasy. I thought of the boy with the smile. Maybe he'd be my friend. I smiled, imagining it. I should run my own OSIN here. I might have to work on that. For once I felt hopeful. I could really change who I was here.

The meeting finally broke up and people began scattering.

Mom smiled at me. She'd had her blonde hair recently cut, I think for this occasion. "So much to remember! But this is exciting, Nic. You impress me so much, being brave enough to do this at only sixteen."

Me, brave? I shrugged. At least *some* people in the world believed in me. So maybe there was some truth to it, and I could draw on that bravery in my social life, too.

"Let's take a picture," Mom said.

I flinched. "Do we have to?"

"Yes!" Isabella said.

We all got in the frame of Isabella's camera and she snapped it. When we looked at it, it was so obvious that Mom and Isabella belonged in the same picture, and I didn't. I still didn't have everything figured out, but I'd decided last year I was gender nonconforming. But I hadn't decided what to do about that. Changing my pronouns would have been horrible in Emerson. It could be different here. I didn't know.

"Let's go see your room," Mom said. She gave me a side hug.

"Mom, I need to pee," Isabella said.

We walked toward the girls' stairwell and Mom asked at the desk if there was a restroom nearby.

While I was waiting, the dark-haired boy from earlier emerged from the hallway behind the girls' stairwell. He was only a few feet in front of me, and my heart jolted. We made eye contact that felt weirdly intense and he stared for a second before continuing out the front door. Where was he coming from? The only thing back in that direction was the girls' lounge.

Even though he didn't smile this time, he had really friendly eyes. I couldn't help but think about that.

It turned out there was a bathroom around the corner, so I left Mom and Isabella and headed on up to the room. When I got there, I noticed Sophia had made her bed up. She had a fluffy pink-and-white plaid comforter and a white satin pillow case.

I should have made my bed earlier, too. Pulse still racing from the near-collision with that weirdly cool boy, I unfolded the sheets and started putting them on the mattress. Isabella wasn't wrong—it was stiff foam. This would take some getting used to.

I'd left the door open, and I could hear Mom and Isabella talking in the hall, so I sat on the bed and watched

them come in.

“This is nice,” Mom said, looking around the room.

I laughed. “Really, Mom?”

She smiled. “Okay, it’s a little bland. You can put some of your art up.”

Isabella pointed to a stained part of the wall. “Put something here. You can cover this smudge.”

“We’ll see,” I said. I doubted Sophia would appreciate my work. I could hang something on the wall next to my bed, though.

“Hello?” Dad called from the hall.

“In here, Dad,” I said.

“I come bearing hangers.” He handed me a stack and I set them on the bed.

“This is nice,” Dad said, which made the rest of us laugh.

“What?” he said.

“Is it, really?” Mom asked.

“Okay, I see your point.” He looked around bit more. “Should we go get dinner?”

“Sure,” I said, sort of wanting my family out of the room. It felt weird with all of us in there. We headed out and I locked the door before starting down the hall.

Would I see that boy again soon? And would I be brave enough to talk to him? Time would tell.



Later that evening, after my parents were gone, I was sitting at my desk, staring at my art supplies, while Sophia sat at her desk doing who knows what. Mom had given me a journal with art paper and a really nice teal leather cover.

I was flipping through the blank pages when there was a knock at the door. Sophia said, “Yeah?”