

CHAPTER 1

Seth's plan

'Number 038-29-65,' Ryan thought as he looked at the paper in his hand. 'That's all I am now – a number. I haven't got a family – Dad and Trey are in prison and Mom's disappeared. And I can't stay with the Cohens. What's going to happen to me?'

Ryan was in the kitchen with Sandy, Kirsten and Seth. He didn't want to sign the paper.

'Look, it just says that you don't have a parent or guardian,' Sandy explained. 'That's all.'

Ryan signed.

'Tomorrow we'll go to the group home*,' Sandy continued. 'I've got you a room with only two other kids. Sometimes they can be crowded ...'

Ryan looked at him. Sandy was trying to make him feel better, but it wasn't helping. A group home sounded horrible.

Sandy knew Ryan wasn't happy. 'Look,' he said, 'they could find you a home with a family.'

'Yeah, right,' Seth said, 'because *everyone* wants a sixteen-year-old guy.'

'Seth!' his parents said. But Seth didn't care – he was upset. Ryan was his first real friend and now his parents wanted Ryan to leave. He'd never see him again. 'We have all this space *and* a pool house, and you want him to go to a group home?' Seth stopped. 'Am I the only one who thinks that's crazy?'

Ryan was stunned. Seth was a real friend. 'It's OK, Seth,' he said. 'Really.'

* A group home is a place where children with no parents or guardians live together.

Ryan looked at the model home* which Kirsten had brought home from work. Kirsten worked for her father. His company built most of the big houses in Newport. The model was beautiful. Ryan tried to imagine living in a house like that – with a family and parents who loved him.

‘Good luck with it. It looks perfect,’ he said to Kirsten. Then he went out to the pool house.



Seth was almost at the pool house when the door suddenly opened.

‘Hey, I saw your light and ...’ Seth saw Ryan’s bag. ‘You’re running away? What about the group home?’

‘I don’t want to live in a group home,’ Ryan said angrily. ‘I’ll come with you.’

‘No,’ said Ryan. He had to do this by himself.

‘But what are you going to do?’ asked Seth.

Ryan looked away. ‘I don’t know. Leave town. Get a job somewhere ...’

‘Great plan, dude. I can see you’ve really thought about it.’

‘Have you got a better idea?’ asked Ryan.

* A small copy of a building.

'Yeah,' said Seth, 'I have.'

Ryan looked at him and thought for a moment. 'OK ... I'll wait for you down by the road, but be quick!'

Ten minutes later, Ryan was still waiting. Where *was* Seth? Suddenly Marissa walked out of her house and saw Ryan. She looked surprised.

'I ... thought you'd left,' she said finally. She wanted to say more, but instead she just stood there.

'I had to come back ...'

Just then, Seth came up carrying his skateboard and a bag. He saw Marissa and stopped.

Marissa looked at Seth and his bag, and Ryan and his bag.

'What are you guys planning?' she asked.

'Nothing,' Seth said.

'You should go,' Ryan said. But Marissa wasn't leaving. She wanted to be part of the plan – and she had a car.

'So ... what music do you like?' They were in the car and Marissa was trying to find out more about Ryan.

'Everything ... I don't know ... I don't really listen to music,' Ryan said.

Ryan realised Marissa and Seth were looking at him in surprise.

'What do you listen to?' he asked Marissa.

'Punk. I love *The Clash*, *Sex Pistols*, *The Cramps* ...'

'No!' cried Seth from the back of the car. 'I like the same music as Marissa Cooper. I may have to kill myself!'

'Why punk?' Ryan asked Marissa.

'I'm angry,' she replied.

Ryan liked that.

‘So what do you think?’ Seth asked. They were standing in front of an unfinished house.

Suddenly Ryan realised where they were. ‘It’s your mom’s model home!’ he said as they went inside.

‘You can stay as long as you want – until we have a real plan. And *that* ...’ Seth pointed outside, ‘is the best bit.’

‘Seth, it’s an empty pool,’ Ryan said.

‘Some people might think so,’ said Seth. And he disappeared.

Ryan and Marissa went outside and sat by the empty pool.

‘So ...’ Ryan started.

‘So ...’ Marissa replied. They fell silent.

‘Why *did* you come back?’ Marissa asked suddenly.

‘I went back to Chino, but the house was empty. My mom had left,’ Ryan said.

Marissa felt bad. They were silent again.

Seth came back on his skateboard. ‘Did you miss me?’

Ryan and Marissa smiled. Seth started skateboarding round the pool.

‘But your mom ... she’s coming back, right?’ Marissa asked.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, what about your dad? Can you call him?’ she said.

‘My dad’s in prison,’ Ryan said.

Marissa didn’t know what to say. ‘My dad works for a company, but I think he’s in trouble,’ she said finally. ‘He’s stopped going to the office and these guys came to the house. They were police, I think. I ... I haven’t told anyone.’

‘Maybe that’s why she gets drunk,’ Ryan thought. ‘I can keep a secret,’ he said.

Marissa's phone rang. It was Luke. He was waiting for her at a party at Holly's house.

Ryan thought about Holly's last party. Marissa had got very drunk and Luke had disappeared with another girl. He wanted to tell her, but he couldn't.

Marissa finished talking to Luke and turned to Ryan and Seth.

'Hey, guys – I have to go soon.'

They all went back into the house.



'How long have you and Luke been together?' Ryan asked.

'Those two?' said Seth. 'They've been together for years and years.'

'What's your problem, Cohen? What did I ever do to you?' Marissa said.

'Nothing,' Seth smiled. 'I've lived next door to you all my life and you've never done or said anything to me.'

'But *you* never talk to *me*,' Marissa cried. 'You think you're so much better than everyone else.'

Seth was stunned. Marissa thought *he* didn't want to talk to *her*? For years he'd thought the other kids didn't want to talk to *him*.

Ryan looked around him. 'Maybe it's not a good idea for me to stay,' he said.

Marissa smiled at him. 'You should stay,' she said. Her phone rang again.

'Was that Summer?' asked Seth excitedly when Marissa finished talking.

'Yeah ... I've got to meet my friends,' Marissa said. She smiled at them both. 'My *other* friends ...'

The three of them stood silent for a moment. In just one night they had become friends.

Seth's parents were asleep when he got home. He walked through the house as quietly as he could. His plan was a success. He had hidden Ryan and they didn't know. He got into bed and smiled. 'It was worth it,' he thought.

Marissa was at Holly's party, but she wasn't enjoying it. She looked around the room. She realised that she only had fun with these people when she was drinking. They always did the same thing, talked about the same people. Every night. And she was bored. She didn't even want to talk to Luke. She decided to leave.

Back home, she started thinking about Ryan. 'How would it feel to kiss him?' she wondered. She put on some music but it didn't stop her thinking about him. 'I'll make a CD for Ryan,' she thought. 'And call it 'The Model Home Mix'.'

Lying on the hard floor in the model home, Ryan couldn't sleep. Thoughts raced around his head. Marissa. His mom. 'Will I ever have a home and a family again?' he wondered.