

LUCIUS

My arm rises toward my face and the pincer touch of cold steel rubs against my jaw.

I chose hooks because they were cheaper.

I chose hooks because I wouldn't outgrow them so quickly.

I chose hooks so that everyone would know I was different, so I would scare even myself.



“Lucius!” I hear Mom call from the bottom of the staircase. “If you don't hurry, you'll miss the bus. You'll be late for your first day!”

She sounds so excited.

Like I'm in a hurry to start sophomore year at a brand-new school. Like I'm in a hurry to be the new kid, especially looking like I do, when everyone else in my class will have already established themselves, their friendships and their cliques, back in freshman year. Like this will be something good, like it'll be anything other than the pure awful I know it will be.

Time to get dressed.

My room is like a white-walled cell. Oh, sure, it has the basics — bed, dresser, desk — but none of the frills my old room had. I have no CD player, no DVD player. I'm not allowed to have a computer, and I'm sure not allowed to have any science stuff anymore. Even the walls are bare.

I lost everything in the explosion — my father would say *we* lost everything — so a lot of what I don't have is punishment for that. Also, because we can't afford to replace a lot of things. Also, self-punishment. We could of course afford at least a few posters, but I don't want them. I want to be reminded all the time. I know the world won't let me forget, so I can't let myself forget either.

The dresser at least contains some decent new clothes, but the jeans I pull out are stiff with their newness, the long-sleeved black T-shirt I pull out stiff as well; I always wear long sleeves, even on the hottest days of summer, to cover my synthetic arms, which extend from just above where my elbows should be to my “wrists,” where my hooks begin. When I pull on my socks, I think about how when I was younger I loved the feel of new socks against my skin: not faded or stained, never been washed or worn. But now everything feels *too* new, like I'm being forced into a costume for a play I want no part of. At least my sneakers, which I've been breaking in all summer, have the feel of something I know. It took me two weeks of solid practice to learn how to tie my own laces again, but I refused to get Velcro, and once I mastered those tricky laces, it was like everything else fell into place. In the beginning, I couldn't even pull on my own underwear without scraping my skin with the hooks, but now I can do it all, and do it fast; briefs instead of boxers, just in case anyone's curious. Some minutes, it's possible to forget how much has changed. And in my dreams, I always have real hands.

Down in the kitchen, Dad is in his usual spot (hiding behind the newspaper), Mom is in her usual spot (doing something at the counter), and my younger sister, Misty, is in her usual

spot (being a pain wherever she is). Some days, I think Misty is okay, but mostly it's like she got the memo that kid sisters are supposed to be incredibly annoying and she follows those instructions religiously.

Misty is a smaller version of Mom — tiny, cute, and blond — while everyone has always said I favor Dad. Seeing as Dad is balding and paunchy, I always hope people understand when I say I just don't see it. But maybe they just mean the eyes are the same. Or maybe the nose. It's amazing how people can take just one small part of a person and draw massive conclusions.

"Pancakes, Lucius?" Mom offers, her back to me as she does some stuff in front of the microwave.

"No," I say, taking my seat at the kitchen table, "I'm good."

The cushion of the seat feels funny beneath my butt. It's as though the cushion of the seat at the table in our old kitchen, in our old house, knew my butt perfectly, but this cushion doesn't know my butt at all. It's the same as with the jeans and T-shirt, I guess: I don't know any of it, and none of it knows me.

I suppose it's not surprising.

The old house, we lived in it all our lives, all my life and Misty's, at least. This place? We've only been here a few months.

How long, I wonder, does it take a thing or a place or even a person to feel like home?

Mom puts a glass of orange juice on the table in front of me, fresh from the carton, even though I didn't ask for any. Dad still hasn't said a word. Misty, even though she's only twelve to my fifteen, is spending all her time checking out her own reflection in a handheld mirror. I think girls call them compacts. Or maybe

only moms call them that. Or maybe only my mom. I wonder sometimes: Every time Misty looks in that mirror, is she expecting her reflection to have changed from the last time she looked? Who is it she's hoping to see? I could tell her, if I thought she'd hear me, that the thing about herself she wants to see change the most probably never will. The universe knows that's the case with me. I am an expert on that.

In the beginning, I used to look at myself in the mirror all the time, repulsed at what I saw, trying to surprise my own new image by jumping out at the mirror from the sides. What I saw never changed. Now I know it never will. I look like what I look like and except for getting gray and wrinkled will look like this for the rest of my life. It's not like I'm ever going to be able to do something simple, like diet or pluck my eyebrows — two of Misty's favorite activities — to ever change the way I look. It's not like I'm a starfish, able to generate new limbs.

And yet I accept what I've done, what I've become. I accept who I am, and what my future will undoubtedly be.

Mom must notice that I don't touch my juice, because she says, "You're not even going to drink anything, Lucius? Are you that nervous about your first day?"

"No," I say. "I'm not nervous at all." And I'm not — nervous, that is. It's pointless to be nervous when you know what the outcome of a thing will be. Nervous is only for when you *don't* know. "If I pull this switch, what will happen?" "Will the doctor tell me I won't make it?" "What will adding this one little chemical do to the potion?" "Does the pilot really know how to fly this plane?" No, I'm not nervous. I'm just not exactly looking forward

to any of this. “I’m just not hungry,” I tell my mom. “Or thirsty. That’s all.”

“Well,” Misty says, “isn’t anyone going to ask *me* if I’m nervous?”

“Of course,” Mom says. “Are you?”

“No,” Misty says, with even more arrogance than I had at her age. Then her expression changes, as if she can’t stop herself from feeling whatever she’s feeling. “Well, maybe.”

“You’ll be fine,” Mom soothes. “Just be yourself, and I’m sure everyone will like you.”

It’s such a Mom thing to say. If everyone in the world would just be themselves, then everyone else in the world would like them. As if it’s ever that easy. If this were a year ago and Misty was angsty about starting something new, I’d tease her. I’d say, “Of course no one will like you, *especially* if you ‘just be yourself.’” I’d say it because just like Misty got the memo that she’s supposed to be a brat to me, I got the memo saying that as the big brother I am to make her life miserable. But I can’t do that to Misty today. I know how much I’ve cost her already.

Of which she wastes no time reminding me, as she leans across the table after Mom pokes her head into the fridge, and his-whispers, “This is all *your* fault. If it weren’t for you, we’d never have had to move in the first place.”

Mom’s head is still in the fridge and Dad’s head is still behind his newspaper, so I don’t think for more than a split second before raising one of my hooks and holding it over Misty’s head. It’s a menacing way to hold the hook. I know this. I’ve had too much practice this past summer.

I watch as Misty recoils from me, her brother, in horror, as I knew she would. It's its own brand of scary, seeing someone you're related to look at you with such fear in her eyes. It's a look I've seen before.

But I don't care, in the moment. In the moment, I just want to stop being reminded, if only just for a second. I want to take a break from being told that everything in our lives, all the millions of little changes, is my fault. It's all because of me me me.

Before Mom gets her head back out of the fridge, before Dad peeks over the top of the newspaper, I take my menacing hook and place it back on the table.

I try to smile at Misty, really smile — *It was all just a joke*, my smile says, begs her to believe, *you know?* — but she's not having any.

She doesn't trust me, and I can't really say that I blame her. Misty may be an annoying little sister, but she's not stupid.

So I try to pretend nothing out of the ordinary just happened. I reach for my juice glass with both hooks, but instead of using the hooks I use the plastic wrists of my prosthetics to grasp the glass and raise it to my lips. This is how I drink sometimes. I'm adept with the hooks for fine motor stuff — meaning grabbing or holding on to small objects — but for something like a glass I sometimes resort to this. The doctors told me that later I'd get used to holding on to bigger objects, but that in the beginning mastering the pincer grip would be enough, and that it would all come in time. But first, baby steps. And sometimes I regress. Better to regress than digress, I always tell myself.

I go to put the glass back down on the table, but something goes wrong. I make a misjudgment in spatial relations. Maybe it's

because the glasses in this house are different from the ones in our old house. Maybe it's because the table is different. Maybe it's because I really am, no matter what I say, nervous; nervous about starting over in a new place. Whatever the cause, I misjudge, put the glass down too abruptly or too harshly, and can only watch as it totters, in that excruciating slow-motion way of forthcoming disaster, and then tumbles, sprawling a tiny sea of orange in the direction of Dad's beloved sports pages.

That finally gets his attention.

Gee, if I'd known spilling my orange juice was this effective, I'd have spilled it in Dad's direction every day when I was younger. Then maybe he'd have made time to do things with me like, I don't know, play catch in the yard. Not that I'm complaining or playing the neglected child card. I'll never do that. I know what I've done. I know who's responsible for everything in my life, past, present, and future. Still, a little catch would have been fun, when I still had hands.

Dad does a little jump in his seat, but maybe the cushions of these chairs still don't feel right to his butt either, because his reaction time and reflexes are off, and he can't save the Mets' scores from being drenched.

This can't be good. He always reads the paper in a particular order: front page first, because he says it's irresponsible not to; followed by sports; followed by whatever else he has time for. He won't like reading a soggy sports section.

You'd think a guy who likes reading the sports pages so much would have found time to play ball with his own kid.

But now I really do digress, and with good reason.

I'm sure he's going to yell.

All I wanted was a moment, just a second in which I could take a break from being reminded.

But Dad doesn't yell.

There have been times, many times before today, when I've wished he would.

He folds the sports section up in a ball and tosses it to the middle of the table, away from him. It's a good toss; there's something athletic about it. Then he snaps the front section as if he's opening it for the first time that day, as if nothing has happened.

I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding.

That's when Dad peers at me over the top of his newspaper and issues one of his trademarked glares.

"Whatever you do today," he says, "don't louse it up. This is your last chance."