

BROKEN THINGS / YA Thriller / 70k

[www.emilylowrey.com](http://www.emilylowrey.com)

@emilymaylowrey

BROKEN THINGS

by

Emily Lowrey

## CHAPTER 1

There's this yellow door. Totally out of place down this rich street I walk most mornings. It's always bugged me. I mean, of all the stupid colours, why yellow? Why not choose black or white, like the rest of the middle-class drones?

The blood was new. A thick, rich red smeared down the door in two rough slashes. A fever-addled plague cross: *bring out yer dead!*

My first thought? *Well, that's a much nicer colour. Should have gone with that. Not this warm, yellowy-orange crap. Yellange. Yeah.* I pulled my jacket tighter around myself and carried on walking.

Then my heart caught up.

I stopped. I did a double-take. I found myself staring, drawn to the destruction. It was a fist to the gut, the power it had over me. I looked up and down the deserted street. This place was mine. I took a step closer, some unspoken force hooking into my stomach and tugging. I wondered what the blood would feel like... tacky beneath my fingers? Would it still be warm?

*No.*

I shook my head. This wasn't what a Normal Person would do. That was a rule of mine: hide. I must always be the mask I wear, and no one must see behind it. I needed distance, clarity. I forced myself to carry on walking. My sanity returned, and the throbbing in my head died down. Each lungful of sobering air slowed my heart.

It occurred to me about half a mile down the road – three black, four white and two brown doors later – that I should probably tell someone about the blood. The thought seeped into my brain, calm and cool, like remembering to wear my bag on only one shoulder when I

was at college because it was what all the guys did, and I had to blend in – had to hide in plain sight.

I phoned the police. I did what a Normal Person would do, though I knew it'd mess up my schedule. The person on the phone told me to go back towards the crime scene; the police were on their way, and they'd want to ask me some questions. I turned back around before she'd even finished speaking. Well, if you insist...

I couldn't get that perfect shade of red off my mind.

\*\*

The police came, lights flashing but no sirens. The curtain twitching hadn't started yet. It was before seven on a Tuesday morning. Mid-September, with college two weeks underway.

I've always found you can learn a lot in the early mornings. Mornings are filled with two sorts of people: the honest-to-god grafters of the world who are up providing for their families, and the people with something to hide.

I guess I slot into that latter category pretty well.

I stayed a safe distance away from the door, from the blood. Each little middle-class mansion had a front garden, and a long path to the entrance. Most were in the open, humblebragging, with perfectly trimmed lawns, but the yellange-door house had thick privets obscuring half the front garden from view. My mind tunnelled all that stuff away. I only had eyes for the door. My pulse thudded every time I looked at it. It was a siren calling me to break my number one rule, the thing that matters to me more than anything else: hide and survive.

Hide and survive. That's my life.

Those instincts cut deeper than anything else. It's a throwback in my predator's genes, or something.

A vague thought about not contaminating the crime scene flashed across my brain like a plane dragging banners in the sky. I closed my eyes, but the morning sun made my eyelids glow red, and I caught myself smiling. I couldn't let anyone see me like this.

*Crime scene.*

This secret we shared, the door and I, had now become a crime scene. I wished I'd kept it between us a little longer.

My secret place morphed into a sea of activity: caffeine-spiked suits talking in hushed voices, taut yellow tape blocking me out, unwelcome, forever.

The people were fascinating though, so it wasn't all bad. People-watching was sort of my thing: monkey see, monkey do. It was my early morning hobby. But I couldn't tell the police that. I didn't want to sound like a weirdo. They might use the word *stalker*, or *perv*, if I told them, but it wasn't like that. I wasn't exactly sure *what* it was, but it wasn't like that.

My alibi surfaced long before Detective Jackson thought to ask. He wore a long brown coat, and I wondered for one hysterical moment whether he'd bought it from a fancy dress shop. He just looked *too* much like a cop, you know? All sombre faced and grayscale, like he'd been scribbled into life with a ballpoint pen. He looked down at his notepad, and then back up, rubbing his temples. "Alex, is it? You called this in?"

"Alexi." Jesus, was it so hard? The guy had known my family all my life, and he'd even interviewed me before, though I'd been much younger then.

"Alexi. Bit early, isn't it? Aren't you lot supposed to sleep until three in the afternoon?"

*Us lot.* As in, teenage boys.

I turned my lips up into something like a smile. "Only coz we go to bed so late." I looked at him in that unspoken way Normal People are so fond of. They exchange

information with the Morse code of body language, the wishy-washy sixth sense of glances. I wish they'd just talk. I tried to tell him my version of the truth with my eyes. I was still getting the hang of it.

Silence. But then, "Hmm. A girlfriend? What, you sneak out the bathroom window or something?"

"Or something." I did my best to hide my grin. I got it right. I had nothing to hide, nothing but my morning walk, but sometimes the simple truth is more damning than a lie. And anyway, it was none of his business.

"Did you know the deceased?"

"Deceased?" The word sent a thrill down my spine. I wondered whether the body was inside the house or outside. It had to be a murder, unless the corpse (in its pre-corpse state, of course) had slit its own wrists and gone trick or treating. They were a month early, if that was the case.

Sweat beaded on the detective's brow, but it wasn't because of the weather. Everything was in the transition between greens and browns this autumn morning, in that fragile sweet spot between living and dying.

He kept looking over his shoulder to the street. His face went pale when a new unmarked car parked up outside the crime scene. He pulled his attention back to me, his Adam's apple bobbing. That could mean only one thing, then. The big guys were in town. Some hotshot DI from the city – Manchester, probably – had come to prise the case from Detective Jackson's amateur hands.

Well. That's how it always happens on TV, anyway.

There weren't many serious crimes in Brownwell. There hadn't been a death since I was little – you know, aside from old people and stuff. The thought made me sort of giddy. It was about time something interesting happened here. I thought about the blood, stark against

the yellange door like a warning sign, and my stomach fizzled. I kept my face blank. I could feel the detective's eyes on me. He was perceptive, for a Normal Person.

“Did you know the girl, Alexi?”

Was this a trap, or procedure? “The girl? No. No idea who it is.” I cleared my throat. “Was. I just saw... you know.” I pointed to the door, but he didn't look. “Who was it?”

“Sarah Holt. She goes to your college, doesn't she?”

So the red stain had a name. Huh. I knew her – well, I didn't know her personally, but that was telling enough in our small town. She was the new girl: six months into her sentence at Brownwell. There wasn't much new blood here. Just blood, now.

“I must have seen her around. I sort of keep myself to myself. I don't know.”

He raised his eyebrow in a way that I couldn't figure out. “So tell me what you *do* know. Did you see anything suspicious?”

“Just the blood.” My gaze was pulled over his shoulder. The door was ajar now, but I could still see it: a splash of sense on that stupid door. A splash of death.

They were taping off a smaller area inside the garden. The body – the girl – was outside then, aching close but I couldn't see it. Her.

Damn.

“Nobody around? No noises?”

“No, sir.”

His eyebrows shot up, and he cocked his head. Oh, crap. It took me a moment to get it: Normal teenage boys didn't say *sir*. They grunted, or coughed *pig* under their breath. The silence pressed on until it was hard for me to keep looking at his boring face, instead of the crime scene.

He let it go. “All right. I'll take your details, then you can get going. Still living up on Marian Road?”

I nodded. So he did remember me.

He passed me his notebook, folded to a fresh page. "Name, address, phone numbers." I felt his eyes on me as I wrote, felt him searching for the remains of the kid I once was. I could tell, as I gave him his notebook back, he'd come up empty. "OK. You can go. Keep your phone on you in case we need you for anything."

"Sure." I shrugged, yawned into my fist, rolled my eyes. Gave the guy a Greatest Hits of what *us lot* do. I'm a fast learner.

Front doors opened as I walked away. A woman with a fifty-year-old face and twenty-year-old hair stared at me. The image didn't work without her make-up. See, people deceive people every day. It's human nature. How is my secret any different? Everyone shows the world a mask, a lie, a better version of themselves. I just take it a step further.

Human emotion is not my Mother tongue. It's a foreign language that no one ever bothered to teach me. You could say I'm a street orphan, watching from the shadows, gleaning phrases here and there. I have to work hard for every answer, study every last sign until my temple throbs with the effort.

The woman was hunched, eyes wide, accusing. And yet she avoided eye contact when I challenged her. She must have thought I was fleeing the scene.

Now wouldn't that be something? To have caused the red stain on that door? My heart skipped at the thought, and I was sure it wasn't a Normal reaction.

Neighbours whispered as I passed, each huddled on their driveways beside their bland, colour-appropriate doors. They were having their own conversations, but they were all the same, all tuned into the same radio station. Normal People have this hive mind, sometimes, this secret elite frequency that I'm not wired up to receive.

"Sarah. Is it Sarah?"

"Just a child . . ."

“It’ll be that lot from the other end of town.”

“Wilmslow Estate. They’re all rough, round there. Did you see that mugging in the paper the other day? I’ll bet they’re involved... Poor Sarah.”

When I was a few streets away, I circled back around, desperate to learn more. As far as people-watching went, this was an Olympic event. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.

## CHAPTER 2

I hopped the fences into the garden of the yellange-door house. There were plenty of places to hide. The garden was a barely tamed wilderness. It was long enough that the two figures outside the patio door looked stunted, but their voices carried well enough. That’s something else I’ve noticed: mornings are quiet, though not in a peaceful way. It’s more like anticipation. Mornings are the silent sighs on the starting blocks before the gun fires.

The parents were probably trying to avoid the curtain twitchers out front. Note to self: Normal People don’t like to suffer in plain sight. And they *were* suffering. The mother was clawing into the side of the father, her standard-issue cream dressing gown wrapped tight around her. Dad was an early riser like me, suit and tie but no shoes yet. It made him look lost. Her bottle-blond hair was all mussed up from bed. Her eyes were red rimmed, but glazed over, like a part of her still didn’t believe this was real. The man was tall, muscular, with a big crooked nose. His face was blank with shock, I guess. He may as well have been a gargoyle. He’d make a mean poker player.

Here’s where the hive mind stops: shock and gossip are as rehearsed as a dance, but grief – real, heart-crushing, life-ruining grief – is as individual as a fingerprint.

The detective pulled himself free of a group of officers in the house and joined the parents outside. He folded his arms tight over his chest. He adjusted his tone accordingly. “I’m sorry, but we have to take the body away now. We need to find out what happened here.”

“The body? The *body*? That’s my baby you’re talking about! My Sarah . . .” The mother was off again, in her misery. I examined my hiding place, waiting for the talking to start again. I was in the thick of a big bush with yellange blossoms, all on the verge of dying.

The whole garden was dying. Brown bushes spilled their dry offerings onto the winding paved path; ivy – the only thing still truly green – weaved its way around an old wooden gazebo. I could have brought a picnic blanket and some supplies, and they still wouldn’t have been able to see me. I made a mental note for later. If they kept their curtains open, I’d be able to see right down the cracks of their broken hearts.

“What have you learned so far?” the father asked, gripping his wife like he might somehow hold her broken pieces together, but she was already shattered.

Detective Jackson looked at his feet. “Sir, I’m not sure—”

“Come on. We have a right to know.”

My legs ached from crouching, but I endured. I was well concealed, but any rogue movements would sound like a wild animal, ripping through the bushes. Everything was dry, brittle as old bones, straining to keep shape. In a few weeks, there’d be nothing left but rotting blossoms and the rusted birdcage of empty branches.

It was hard to concentrate over the discomfort. Maybe that was the answer: just stick the weeping woman in an uncomfortable position, and she’d forget about the pain of losing her daughter soon enough. The theory was sound. I mean, there was a part of me that wanted to give up eavesdropping just to stop the pain in my legs.

Detective Jackson replied. “Nothing is set in stone here, sir, but . . . it appears your daughter was the victim of some sort of attack.”

“We can see that! What else?”

“It appears her tongue has been, ah, removed, and her hands broken. The, ah . . .” He glanced at his fancy-dress notepad just to avoid their eyes, “. . . the blood loss was primarily from what looks like a stab wound to her abdomen.”

The mother let out a wordless cry. I used the noise to conceal my descent and sat down on the ground. Just a few crisp snaps beneath me, and it was done. I sighed with relief.

“Why would anyone do this? She’s only sixteen years old for Christ’s sake!” The mother now, her voice laced with mania.

“That’s why we need to take the bod— your daughter with us.”

“Are the rest of the girls OK? Sarah was supposed to be at Tori’s house, but a neighbour saw her going into the park. St. Jude’s. Maybe they were all out together?” The mother was breathless with her talking. She sobbed again.

The girls. Hmm. Tori, Lorna, Cam and Jess. I knew they were Sarah’s friends. This was my first lead.

“She could have been with anyone,” Sarah’s dad said. “It isn’t the first time she’s lied to us. Maybe she went to Wilmslow Estate.”

Mum gasped. The idea was appalling to her.

I zoned out. I ripped off a yellange blossom and pulled at the petals. This hadn’t been done by some Jobseeking loser. I’d been here five minutes, and I could tell them that for free. The hands? The tongue? Someone didn’t want her to communicate. More than that, they wanted to leave a message, make a statement. Otherwise, why deliver her back to her parents at all? That sort of crime took brains, for starters. And a breed of twisted that I found irresistible.

“The blood then, on the door,” Dad said. “She was alive, when she came here. She wanted to get inside. She banged on the door, and we didn’t wake up . . .” He shook his head over and over, his eyes dead.

“It looks like she was dropped off somewhere close by, and she managed to get home,” Detective Jackson said quietly. “She tried the door, but couldn’t get in on account of . . .”

*Her broken fingers.* Jesus, why was that so hard to say?

“Then she turned back into the garden and collapsed.”

So Sarah hadn’t wanted to suffer in plain sight either. Instead of – I don’t know – screaming, or banging on another door, she’d crawled under a bush and suffered alone. Just like a Normal Person.

Normal People are weird.

The mother cried into the father’s shoulder. His mouth curled into a snarl when he looked through the patio doors. “No cameras! Why are there people with cameras outside our house?” Anger shook through him like a convulsion, making him taller. For a second he looked like he would rage through the house and attack, but he held his wife closer instead, moving them away from the glass doors.

The layers were peeling away, down past the suit and tie, past his social masks, past the secrets he held. Grief had stripped him to the bone, leaving only his baser instincts behind.

It was so cool to see.

Detective Jackson put one foot into the house, leaning in. “Hey! Get the paps off the doorstep! This is a crime scene, in case you hadn’t noticed.” He turned back to the parents. “Sorry about that, really I am. We weren’t prepared for something like— Honestly, nothing stays secret in this town.” He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Just keep them away from us,” the father said. His anger was gone. He’d shrugged one tattered layer back on and was back to his blank stare.

“So,” the detective cleared his throat, “Sarah said she was with friends, but was last seen alone at St. Jude’s Park?”

“Yes. That’s what our neighbour told us,” the mother said.

They discussed times and dates and names and I memorised it all. But then the conversation halted. Detective Jackson was struggling to say something. It was all wadded up behind his teeth like he was about to choke on it. He eyed up the dad warily.

*Come on, dude!* It was so like him. Detective Jackson had been just as hesitant back when he’d arrived on my doorstep so long ago. It was like he’d felt responsible, somehow. Like his badge meant he should prevent anything bad from ever happening. Like he was Spiderman or something. He was just the messenger, and yet the parents resented him. I didn’t get it. It was as futile as hating the paper the headline was printed on.

“To your knowledge . . .” he began, all stutters and subdued eyes, “. . . did Sarah ever take drugs? Or associate with that crowd?”

Dad’s blank stare bowed under the strain. “What on earth makes you think that?”

“There was another incident at the other end of town last night. On the Wilmslow Estate. Another death. A young man was murdered. This young man was known for being part of a local gang. Can you think of anything, any new friends she’d started hanging around with, or any odd behaviour . . .”

Dad’s face turned a deep red. “So I was right? The Wilmslow Estate is responsible for this? And instead of investigating over there, you’re actually asking me if my daughter was a part of that crowd? She was the victim here! Can’t you see that?”

Detective Jackson took an involuntary step back, even as his eyes hardened. Old, buried instincts were kicking in. Maybe a buzzing in his ears, or some other primitive signal. Whatever the signal, the message was loud and clear: *danger*.

Of course, he was mostly ignoring it, like Normal People usually do. It was fascinating.

I wished I had some intermission snacks.

Dad shook his head, squeezing his wife closer. The blood in his face went back to work elsewhere. "I'm sorry."

"It's OK. I understand."

"Just... take a look at that side of town. They're in the news all the time. Sarah wasn't a part of that. She was better than that. Whatever happened, she was a victim. If you tell the press anything otherwise . . ."

Detective Jackson frowned. His Normal Person Spidey-sense had picked up on something I hadn't. I wondered what it was. "I understand you want to keep the memory of your daughter safe, but if you can think of anything that might help us catch the person responsible, you need to tell me."

Dad's jaw clenched in resolute silence. He cocked his head, delivering one last blow. "If you and yours were capable of keeping on top of things, this might never have happened."

Detective Jackson remained still, but he couldn't stop the red flush from rising up his neck. He'd been in Brownwell for as long as I could remember, and took some kind of pride in things plodding along without major incident. The odd shoplifter, a few drunken fights, sure. There was even this one time someone had been crushed under a car in their garage. But never murder.

He composed himself before continuing. "Did Sarah have a boyfriend?"

The mother moved to answer, but Dad got in there first. "No."

"No," Mum agreed. "She would have told us."

Detective Jackson nodded, making notes. "We've checked her phone, and she hasn't updated her Facebook, or Twitter, or any of that since Sunday evening. Is that out of the ordinary?"

The parents looked at one another in confusion.

“Not particularly,” Dad said, eventually.

Detective Jackson nodded, making a little note. The silence pressed on. Mum’s sniffs carried far on the still air.

“You’ll check the council estates out?” Dad asked. His voice had lost its spirit now. His energy was gone. He looked about ready to collapse.

“And the girls? God, I hope they’re OK,” Mum added.

“Of course. And any other leads we find. Sir, Ma’am, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

She wailed again. Dad rested his head on top of hers. He stared out, eyes seeing nothing.

I looked at them and fought the urge to laugh. I know, I know, not the best time – the parents were *right there* – but seriously? A sixteen-year-old girl, out where she shouldn’t be, not bragging about it online at least once? Not even a selfie, or a cryptic tweet? I mean, pics or it didn’t happen. Everyone knows that. Everyone except these guys, at any rate.

Let’s call it a bet. It was a foregone conclusion the second I saw the blood that this mystery would be mine. People are my playground: the most addictive puzzle I can never complete and never put down.

I held my hand out to Detective Jackson, even though he couldn’t see me. *I bet I’ll solve this before you do*, I thought, grinning. I shook on it, cool thin air where another human hand should be.

Oh, it was ON.

I watched the confusion play across his face as he stared at his notes, but it was simple, really. There were only two reasons a teenage girl wouldn’t share her every waking moment with the online world: either her adventure had got out of control – like *illegal* out of control – or she was dead.

Or both, in Sarah’s case.