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Dedication

In loving memory of Semon Emil Knudsen II

Peter:

Thank you for giving me some of my greatest hits.

I miss you.

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PROLOGUE

They say that just before you die your whole life flashes before your eyes, but that's not how it happened for me.

To be honest, I'd always thought the whole final-moment, mental life-scan thing sounded pretty awful. Some things are better left buried and forgotten, as my mom would say. I'd be happy to forgive all of fifth grade, for example (the glasses-and-pink-braces period), and does anybody want to relive the first day of middle school? Add in all of the boring family vacations, pointless algebra classes, period cramps, and bad kisses I barely lived through the first time around . . .

The truth is, though, I wouldn't have minded reliving my greatest hits: when Rob Cokran and I first hooked up in the middle of the dance floor at homecoming, so everyone saw and knew we were together; when Lindsay, Elody, Ally, and I got drunk and tried to make snow angels in May, leaving person-sized imprints in Ally's lawn; my sweet-sixteen party, when we set out a hundred tea lights and danced on the table in the backyard; the time Lindsay and I pranked Clara Seuse on Halloween, got chased by the cops, and laughed so hard we almost threw up—the things I wanted to remember; the things I wanted to be remembered for.

But before I died I didn't think of Rob, or any other guy. I didn't think of all the outrageous things I'd done with my friends. I didn't even think of my family, or the way the morning light turns the wall in my bedroom the color of cream, or the way the azaleas outside my window smell in July, a mixture of honey and cinnamon.

Instead, I thought of Vicky Hallinan.

Specifically, I thought of the time in fourth grade when Lindsay announced in front of the whole gym class that she wouldn't have Vicky on her dodgeball team. "She's too fat," Lindsay blurted out. "You could hit her with your eyes closed." I wasn't friends with Lindsay yet, but even then she had this way of saying things that made them hilarious, and I laughed along with everyone else while Vicky's face turned as purple as the underside of a storm cloud.

That's what I remembered in that before-death instant, when I was supposed to be having some big revelation about my past: the smell of varnish and the squeak of our sneakers on the polished floor, the tightness of my polyester shorts; the laughter echoing around the big, empty space like there were way more than twenty-five people in the gym.

And Vicky's face.

The weird thing is that I hadn't thought about that in forever. It was one of those memories I didn't even know I remembered, if you know what I mean. It's not like Vicky was traumatized or anything. That's just the kind of thing that kids do to each other. It's no big deal. There's always going to be one person laughing and somebody getting laughed at. It happens every day, in every school, in every town in America—probably in the world, for all I know. The whole point of growing up is learning to stand on the laughing side.

Vicky wasn't very fat to begin with—she just had some baby weight on her face and stomach—and before high school she'd lost that and grown three inches. She even became friends with Lindsay. They played field hockey together and said hi in the halls. One time, our freshman year, Vicky brought it up at a party—we were all pretty tipsy—and we laughed and laughed, Vicky most of all, until her face turned almost as purple as it had all those years ago in the gym.

That was weird thing number one.

Even weirder than that was the fact that we'd all just been talking about it—how it would be just before you died, I mean. I don't remember exactly how it came up, except that Elody was complaining that I always got shotgun and refusing to wear her seat belt. She kept leaning forward into the front seat to scroll through Lindsay's iPod, even though I was supposed to have deejay privileges. I was trying to explain my "greatest hits" theory of death, and we were all picking out what those would be. Lindsay picked finding out that she got into Duke, obviously, and Ally—who was bitching about the cold, as usual, and threatening to drop dead right there of pneumonia—participated long enough to say she wished she could relive her first hookup with Matt Wilde forever, which surprised no one. Lindsay and Elody were smoking, and freezing rain was coming in through the cracked-open window. The road was narrow and winding, and on either side of us the dark, stripped branches of trees lashed back and forth, like the wind had set them dancing.

Elody put on "Splinter" by Fallacy to piss Ally off, maybe because she was sick of her whining. That was Ally's song with Matt, who had dumped her in September. Ally called her a bitch and unbuckled her seat belt, leaning forward and trying to grab the iPod. Lindsay complained that someone was elbowing her in the neck. The cigarette dropped from her mouth and landed between her thighs. She started cursing and trying to brush the embers off the seat cushion and Elody and Ally were still fighting and I was trying to talk over them, reminding them all of the time we'd made snow angels in May. The tires skidded a little on the wet road, and the car was full of cigarette smoke, little wisps rising like phantoms in the air.

Then all of a sudden there was a flash of white in front of the car. Lindsay yelled something—words I couldn't make out, something like sit or shit or sight—and suddenly the car was flipping off the road and into the black mouth of the woods. I heard a horrible, screeching sound—metal on metal, glass shattering, a car folding in two—and smelled fire. I had time to wonder whether Lindsay had put her cigarette out.

Then Vicky Hallinan's face came rising out of the past. I heard laughter echoing and rolling around me, swelling into a scream.

Then nothing.

The thing is, you don't get to know. It's not like you wake up with a bad feeling in your stomach. You don't see shadows where there shouldn't be any. You don't remember to tell your parents that you love them or—in my case—remember to say good-bye to them at all.

If you're like me, you wake up seven minutes and forty-seven seconds before your best friend is supposed to be picking you up. You're too busy worrying about how many roses you're going to get on Cupid Day to do anything more than throw on your clothes, brush your teeth, and pray to God you'll do your makeup in the bottom of your messenger bag so you can do it in the car.

If you're like me, your last day starts like this:

ONE

“Beep, beep,” Lindsay calls out. A few weeks ago my mom yelled at her for blasting her horn at school fifty-five every morning, and this is Lindsay’s solution.

“I’m coming!” I shout back, even though she can see me pushing out the front door, trying to pull on my coat and wrestle my binder into my bag at the same time.

At the last second, my eight-year-old sister, Izzy, tugs at me.

“What?” I whirl around. She has little-sister radar for when I’m busy, late, or on the phone with my boyfriend. Those are always the times she chooses to bother me.

“You forgot your gloves,” she says, except it comes out: “You *forgot* your *gloveths*.” She refuses to go to speech therapy for her lisp, even though all the kids in her grade make fun of her. She says she likes the way she talks.

I take them from her. They’re cashmere and she’s probably gotten peanut butter on them. She’s always scooping around in jars of the stuff.

“What did I tell you, Izzy?” I say, poking her in the middle of the forehead. “Don’t touch my stuff.” She giggles like an idiot and I have to hustle her inside while I shut the door. If it were up to her, she would follow me around all day like a dog.

By the time I make it out of the house, Lindsay’s leaning out the window of the Tank. That’s what we call her car, an enormous silver Range Rover. (Every time we drive around in it at least one person says, “That thing’s not a car, it’s a *truck*,” and Lindsay claims she could go head-to-head with a eighteen-wheeler and come out without a scratch.) She and Ally are the only two of us with cars that actually belong to them. Ally’s car is a tiny black Jetta that we named the Minime. I get to borrow my mom’s Accord sometimes; poor Elody has to make do with her father’s ancient tan Ford Taurus which hardly runs anymore.

The air is still and freezing cold. The sky is a perfect, pale blue. The sun has just risen, weak and watery-looking, like it has just spilled itself over the horizon and is too lazy to clean itself up. It’s supposed to storm later, but you’d never know.

I get into the passenger seat. Lindsay’s already smoking and she gestures with the end of her cigarette to the Dunkin’ Donuts coffee she got for me.

“Bagels?” I say.

“In the back.”

“Sesame?”

“Obviously.” She looks me over once as she pulls out of my driveway. “Nice skirt.”

“You too.”

Lindsay tips her head, acknowledging the compliment. We’re actually wearing the same skin. There are only two days of the year when Lindsay, Ally, Elody, and I deliberately dress the same: Pajama Day during Spirit Week, because we all bought cute matching sets at Victoria’s Secret last Christmas, and Cupid Day. We spent three hours at the mall arguing about whether to go for pink or

red outfits—Lindsay hates pink; Ally lives in it—and we finally settled on black miniskirts and some red fur-trimmed tank tops we found in the clearance bin at Nordstrom.

Like I said, those are the only times we *deliberately* look alike. But the truth is that at my high school, Thomas Jefferson, everyone kind of looks the same. There's no official uniform—it's a public school—but you'll see the same outfit of Seven jeans, gray New Balance sneakers, a white T-shirt, and a colored North Face fleece jacket on nine out of ten students. Even the guys and the girls dress the same, except our jeans are tighter and we have to blow out our hair every day. It's Connecticut: being like the people around you is the whole point.

That's not to say that our high school doesn't have its freaks—it does—but even the freaks are freaky in the same way. The Eco-Geeks ride their bikes to school and wear clothing made of hemp and never wash their hair, like having dreadlocks will somehow help curb the emission of greenhouse gases. The Drama Queens carry big bottles of lemon tea and wear scarves even in summer and don't talk in class because they're "conserving their voices." The Math League members always have ten times more books than anyone else and actually still use their lockers and walk around with permanently nervous expressions, like they're just waiting for somebody to yell, "Boo!"

I don't mind it, actually. Sometimes Lindsay and I make plans to run away after graduation and crash in a loft in New York City with this tattoo artist her stepbrother knows, but secretly I like living in Ridgeview. It's reassuring, if you know what I mean.

I lean forward, trying to apply mascara without gouging my eye out. Lindsay's never been the most careful driver and has a tendency to jerk the wheel around, come to sudden stops, and then gutter the engine.

"Patrick better send me a rose," Lindsay says as she shoots through one stop sign and nears the next one. Patrick is Lindsay's on-again, off-again boyfriend. They've broken up a record thirteen times since the start of the school year.

"I had to sit next to Rob while he filled out the request form," I say, rolling my eyes. "It was like forced labor."

Rob Cokran and I have been going out since October, but I've been in love with him since sixth grade, when he was too cool to talk to me. Rob was my first crush, or at least my first *real* crush. I did once kiss Kent McFuller in third grade, but that obviously doesn't count since we'd just exchanged dandelion rings and were pretending to be husband and wife.

"Last year I got twenty-two roses." Lindsay flicks her cigarette butt out of the window and leans over for a slurp of coffee. "I'm going for twenty-five this year."

Each year before Cupid Day the student council sets up a booth outside the gym. For two dollars each, you can buy your friends Valograms—roses with little notes attached to them—and then they get delivered by Cupids (usually freshman or sophomore girls trying to get in good with the upperclassmen) throughout the day.

"I'd be happy with fifteen," I say. It's a big deal how many roses you get. You can tell who's popular and who isn't by the number of roses they're holding. It's bad if you get under ten and humiliating if you don't get more than five—it basically means that you're either ugly or unknown. Probably both. Sometimes people scavenge for dropped roses to add to their bouquets, but you can always tell.

"So." Lindsay shoots me a sideways glance. "Are you excited? The big day. Opening night." She laughs. "No pun intended."

I shrug and turn toward the window, watching my breath frost the pane. "It's no big deal." Rob's parents are away this weekend, and a couple of weeks ago he asked me if I could spend the whole

night at his house. I knew he was really asking if I wanted to have sex. We've gotten semi-close a few times, but it's always been in the back of his dad's BMW or in somebody's basement or in my dorm with my parents asleep upstairs, and it's always felt wrong.

So when he asked me to stay the night, I said yes without thinking about it.

Lindsay squeals and hits her palm against the steering wheel. "No big deal? Are you kidding? My baby's growing up."

"Oh, please." I feel heat creeping up my neck and know my skin's probably going red and splotchy. It does this whenever I'm embarrassed. All the dermatologists, creams, and powders in Connecticut don't help. When I was younger kids used to sing, "*What's red and white and weird all over? Sam Kingston!*"

I shake my head a little and rub the vapor off the window. Outside the world sparkles, like it's been coated in varnish. "When did you and Patrick do it, anyway? Like three months ago?"

"Yeah, but we've been making up for lost time since then." Lindsay rocks against her seat.

"Gross."

"Don't worry, kid. You'll be fine."

"Don't call me kid." This is one reason I'm happy I decided to have sex with Rob tonight: Lindsay and Elody won't make fun of me anymore. Thankfully, since Ally's still a virgin it means I won't be the very last one, either. Sometimes I feel like out of the four of us I'm always the one tagging along, just there for the ride. "I told you it was no big deal."

"If you say so."

Lindsay has made me nervous, so I count all the mailboxes as we go by. I wonder if by tomorrow everything will look different to me; I wonder if I'll look different to other people. I hope so.

We pull up to Elody's house and before Lindsay can even honk, the front door swings open and Elody starts picking her way down the icy walkway, balancing on three-inch heels, like she can't get out of her house fast enough.

"Nipply outside much?" Lindsay says when Elody slides into the car. As usual she's wearing only a thin leather jacket, even though the weather report said the high would be in the mid-twenties.

"What's the point of looking cute if you can't show it off?" Elody shimmies her boobs and winks. I crack up. It's impossible to stay stressed when she's around, and the knot in my stomach loosens.

Elody makes a clawing gesture with her hand and I pass her a coffee. We all take it the same way: large hazelnut, no sugar, extra cream.

"Watch where you're sitting. You'll squish the bagels." Lindsay frowns into the rearview mirror.

"You know you want a piece of this." Elody gives her butt a smack and we all laugh again.

"Save it for Muffin, you horn dog."

Steve Dough is Elody's latest victim. She calls him Muffin because of his last name, and because he's yummy (*she* says; he looks too greasy for me, and he always smells like pot). They have been hooking up for a month and a half now.

Elody's the most experienced of any of us. She lost her virginity sophomore year and has already had sex with two different guys. She was the one who told me she was sore after the first couple times she had sex, which made me ten times more nervous. It may sound crazy, but I never really thought of it as something physical, something that would make you sore, like soccer or horseback riding. I'm scared that I won't know what to do, like when we used to play basketball in gym and I always forget who I was supposed to be guarding or when I should pass the ball and when I should dribble it.

"Mmm, Muffin." Elody puts a hand on her stomach. "I'm starving."

“There’s a bagel for you,” I say.

“Sesame?” Elody asks.

“Obviously,” Lindsay and I say at the same time. Lindsay winks at me.

Just before we get to school we roll down the windows and blast Mary J. Blige’s “No More Drama.” I close my eyes and think back to homecoming and my first kiss with Rob, when he pulled me toward him on the dance floor and suddenly my lips were on his and his tongue was sliding under my tongue and I could feel the heat from all the colored lights pressing down on me like a hand, and the music seemed to echo somewhere behind my ribs, making my heart flutter and skip in time. The cold air coming through the window makes my throat hurt and the bass comes through the soles of my feet just like it did that night, when I thought I would never be happier; it goes all the way up to my head, making me dizzy, like the whole car is going to split apart from the sound.

POPULARITY: AN ANALYSIS

Popularity’s a weird thing. You can’t really define it, and it’s not cool to talk about it, but you know when you see it. Like a lazy eye, or porn.

Lindsay’s gorgeous, but the rest of us aren’t that much prettier than anybody else. Here are my good traits: big green eyes, straight white teeth, high cheekbones, long legs. Here are my bad traits: too-long nose, skin that gets blotchy when I’m nervous, a flat butt.

Becky DiFiore’s just as pretty as Lindsay, and I don’t think Becky even had a date to junior homecoming. Ally’s boobs are pretty big, but mine are borderline nonexistent (when Lindsay’s in a bad mood she calls me Samuel, not Sam or Samantha). And it’s not like we’re shiny perfect or our breath always smells like lilacs or something. Lindsay once had a burping contest with Jonah Sasno in the cafeteria and everyone applauded her. Sometimes Elody wears fuzzy yellow slippers to school. I once laughed so hard in social studies I spit up vanilla latte all over Jake Somers’s desk. A month later we made out in Lily Angler’s toolshed. (He was bad.)

The point is, we can do things like that. You know why? Because we’re popular. And we’re popular because we can get away with everything. So it’s circular.

I guess what I’m saying is there’s no point in analyzing it. If you draw a circle, there will always be an inside and an outside, and unless you’re a total nut job, it’s pretty easy to see which is which. It’s just what happens.

I’m not going to lie, though. It’s nice that everything’s easy for us. It’s a good feeling knowing you can basically do whatever you want and there won’t be any consequences. When we get out of high school we’ll look back and know we did everything right, that we kissed the cutest boys and went to the best parties, got in just enough trouble, listened to our music too loud, smoked too many cigarettes, and drank too much and laughed too much and listened too little, or not at all. If high school were a game of poker, Lindsay, Ally, Elody, and I would be holding 80 percent of the cards.

And believe me: I *know* what it’s like to be on the other side. I was there for the first half of my life. The bottom of the bottom, lowest of the low. I know what it’s like to have to squabble and pick and fight over the leftovers.

So now I have first pick of everything. So what. That’s the way it is.

Nobody ever said life was fair.

We pull into the parking lot exactly ten minutes before first bell. Lindsay guns it toward the lower lot

where the faculty spaces are, scattering a group of sophomore girls. I can see red and white lacrosse dresses peeking out under their coats, and one of them is wearing a tiara. Cupids, definitely.

“Come on, come on, come on,” Lindsay mutters as we pull behind the gym. This is the only row in the lower lot not reserved for staff. We call it Senior Alley, even though Lindsay’s been parking her car there since junior year. It’s the VIP of parking at Jefferson, and if you miss out on a spot—there are only twenty of them—you have to park all the way in the upper lot, which is a full .22 miles from the main entrance. We checked one time, and now whenever we talk about it we have to use the exact distance. Like, “Do you really want to walk .22 miles in this rain?”

Lindsay squeals when she sees an open space, jerking her wheel to the left. At the same time Sarah Grundel is pulling up her brown Chevrolet from the other direction, angling it into the spot.

“Oh, *hell* no. No way.” Lindsay leans on the horn, even though it’s obvious Sarah was here before us, then presses her foot on the accelerator. Elody shrieks as hot coffee sloshes all over her shirt. There is the high-pitched squeal of rubber, and Sarah Grundel slams on her brakes just before Lindsay’s Range Rover takes off her bumper.

“Nice.” Lindsay pulls into the spot and throws her car in park. Then she opens her door and leans out.

“Sorry, sweetie!” she calls to Sarah. “I didn’t see you there.” This is obviously a lie.

“Great.” Elody is mopping up coffee with a balled-up Dunkin’ Donuts napkin. “Now I get to go around all day with my boobs smelling like hazelnut.”

“Guys like food smells,” I say. “I read it in *Glamour*.”

“Put a cookie down your pants and Muffin will probably jump you before homeroom.” Lindsay flips down the rearview mirror and checks her face.

“Maybe you should try it with Rob, Sammy.” Elody throws the coffee-stained napkin at me and I catch it and peg it back.

“What?” She’s laughing. “You didn’t think I’d forget about your big night, did you?” She fishes in her bag and the next thing that flies over the seat is a crumpled-up condom with bits of tobacco stuck to its wrapper. Lindsay cracks up.

“You’re pagans,” I say, taking the condom with two fingers and dropping it in Lindsay’s glove compartment. Just touching it gets my nerves going again, and I can feel something twist at the bottom of my stomach. I’ve never understood why condoms are kept in those little foil wrappers. They look so clinical, like something your doctor would prescribe for allergies or intestinal problems.

“No glove, no love,” Elody says, leaning forward and kissing my cheek. She leaves a big circle of pink lip gloss there.

“Come on.” I get out of the car before they can see I’m blushing.

Mr. Otto, the athletic director, is standing outside the gym when we’re getting out of the car, probably checking out our asses. Elody thinks the reason he insisted his office be right next to the girls’ dressing room is because he rigged up a camera feed from his computer to the toilet. Why else would he even *need* a computer? He’s the *athletic* director. Now every time I pee in the gym I get paranoid.

“Move it, ladies,” he calls to us. He’s also the soccer coach, which is ironic since he probably couldn’t run to the vending machine and back. He looks like a walrus. He even has a mustache. “I don’t want to have to give you a late slip.”

“I don’t want to have to spank you.” I do an impression of his voice, which is strangely high pitched—another reason Elody thinks he might be a pedophile. Elody and Lindsay crack up.

“Two minutes to bell,” Otto says, more sharply. Maybe he heard me. I don’t really care.

“Happy Friday,” Lindsay grumbles, and puts her arm through mine.

~~Elody has taken out her cell phone and is checking her teeth in its reflective back, picking out sesame seeds with a pinkie nail.~~

“This sucks,” she says, without looking up.

“Totally,” I say. Fridays are the hardest in some ways: you’re so close to freedom. “Kill me now.”

“No way.” Lindsay squeezes my arm. “Can’t let my best friend die a virgin.”

You see, we didn’t know.

My first two periods—art and AHAP (American History Advanced Placement; history’s always been my best subject)—I get only five roses. I’m not that stressed about it, although it does kind of piss me off that Eileen Cho gets *four* roses from her boyfriend, Ian Dowel. It didn’t even occur to me to ask Rob to do that, and in a way I don’t think it’s fair. It makes people think you’ve got more friends than you do.

As soon as I make it to chemistry, Mr. Tierney announces a pop quiz. This is a big problem since (1) I haven’t understood a word of my homework in four weeks (okay, so I stopped trying after week one) and (2) Mr. Tierney’s always threatening to phone in failing grades to college admissions committees, since a lot of us haven’t been accepted to school yet. I’m not sure whether he’s serious or whether he’s just trying to keep the seniors in line, but there is no way I’m letting some fascist teacher ruin my chances of getting into BU.

Even worse, I’m sitting next to Lauren Lornet, possibly the only person in the class more clueless about this stuff than I am.

Actually my grades have been pretty good in chem this year, but it isn’t because I’ve had a sudden epiphany about proton-electron interaction. My straight A-average can be summarized in two words: Jeremy Ball. He’s skinnier than I am and his breath always smells like cornflakes, but he lets me copy his homework and inches his desk closer to mine on test days so I can peek over at his answers without being obvious. Unfortunately, since I stop before Tierney’s class to pee and check in with Al—~~we always meet in the bathroom before fourth period, since she has biology at the same time I have chem~~—I arrive too late to get my usual seat next to Jeremy.

There are three questions on Mr. Tierney’s quiz, and I don’t know enough to fake an answer to a single one. Next to me, Lauren’s doubled over her paper, tongue just poking out between her teeth. She always does that when she thinks. Her first answer’s looking pretty good, actually: her answers are neat and deliberate, not frantically scribbled like you do when you don’t know what you’re talking about and are hoping if you scrawl enough your teacher won’t notice. (For the record, it never works.) Then I remember that Mr. Tierney lectured Lauren about improving her grade last week. Maybe she’s been studying extra hard.

I peek over Lauren’s shoulder and copy down two of her answers—I’m good at being subtle about it—when Mr. Tierney calls out, “Threeeeeee minutes.” He says it dramatically, like he’s doing a voiceover for a movie, and it makes the fat under his chin wiggle.

It looks like Lauren’s finished and checking her work, but she’s leaning so I can’t see the third answer. I watch the second hand tick its way around the clock—“Two miiiiinnuuutes and thirrrrrr secondssss,” Tierney booms—and I lean over and poke Lauren with my pen. She looks up, startled. I don’t think I’ve talked to her in years, and for a second I see a look pass over her face that I can’t quite identify.

Pen, I mouth to her.

She looks confused and shoots a glance up at Tierney, who is thankfully bent over the textbook.

“What?” she whispers.

I make some gestures with my pen, trying to communicate to her that I’ve run out of ink. She’s staring at me dumbly, and for a second I feel like reaching out and shaking her—“Twwwooooo minnnuttts” —but finally her face clears up and she grins like she’s just figured out how to cure cancer. I don’t want to sound harsh, but it’s such a waste to be a dork *and* kind of slow on the uptake. What’s the point if you can’t at least play Beethoven or win state spelling bees or go to Harvard or do something?

While Lauren’s bent over rummaging for a pen in her bag, I copy down the final answer. I kind of forget I even asked her for a pen, actually, because she has to whisper at me to get my attention.

“Thirrrrrtttyyyy seconndss.”

“Here.”

I take it from her. One end is chewed: gross. I give her a tight smile and look away, but a second later she whispers, “Does it work?”

I give her a look so she’ll know that now she’s being annoying. I guess she takes it as a sign I don’t understand.

“The pen. Does it work?” she whispers a little louder.

That’s when Tierney slams the textbook against his desk. The sound is so loud we all jump.

“Miss Lornet,” he bellows, glaring at Lauren. “Are you *talking* during my *quiz*?”

She turns bright red and looks back and forth from me to the teacher, licking her lips. I don’t say anything.

“I was just—” she says faintly.

“Enough.” He stands up, frowning so hard his mouth looks like it’s going to melt into his neck and crosses his arms. I think he’s going to say something more to Lauren because he’s shooting her a death stare, but instead he just says, “Time, everybody. Pencils and pens down.”

I go to give Lauren’s pen back to her but she won’t take it.

“Keep it,” she says.

“No, thanks,” I say. I hold it between two fingers and lean over, dangling it above her desk, but she just tucks her hands behind her back.

“Seriously,” she says, “you’re going to need a pen. For notes and stuff.” She’s looking at me like she’s offering me something miraculous and not a Bic pen with slobber on it. I don’t know if it’s her expression or not, but all of a sudden I remember the time we went on a field trip in second grade, and the two of us were the only ones left after everyone had chosen their buddies. We had to hold hands for the rest of the day whenever we crossed the street, and hers were always sweaty. I wonder if she remembers. I hope not.

I smile tightly and drop the pen in my bag. She grins from ear to ear. I’ll throw it out as soon as we’re done with class, of course; you never know what kind of diseases get carried through slobber.

On the bright side: my mom always said you should do one nice thing a day. So I guess that means I’m in the clear.

MATH CLASS: FURTHER LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY

Fourth period I have “life skills,” which is what they call gym when you’re old enough to be offended.

by forced physical activity (Elody thinks they should call it slavery instead, for accuracy). We're studying CPR, which means we get to make out with life-sized dummies in front of Mr. Otto. More proof of his perviness.

Fifth period I have calc and the Cupids come early, just after class has started. One of them is wearing a shiny, red unitard and has devil's horns; one of them looks like she might be dressed as the Playboy bunny, or maybe the Easter bunny in heels; one of them is dressed up like an angel. The costumes don't really make sense in the context of the holiday, but like I said, the whole point is to show off in front of the junior and senior boys. I don't blame them. We did it too. Freshman year Ally dated Mike Harmon—a senior at the time—for two months after she delivered a Valogram to him and he said her butt looked cute in her tights. That's a real love story right there.

The devil gives me three roses—one from Elody, one from Tara Flute, who's kind of in our group but not really, and one from Rob. I make a big deal of unfolding the tiny card that's looped around the rose stem and acting moved when I read the note, even though all he's written is *Happy Cupid Day Luv ya* and then in smaller letters near the bottom: *Happy now?*

"Luv ya" isn't exactly "I love you"—which we've never said—but it's getting close. I'm pretty sure he's saving it for tonight, actually. Last week it was late and we were sitting on his couch and he was staring at me and I was sure—*sure*—he was going to say it—but instead he just said from a certain angle I looked like Scarlett Johansson.

At least my note is better than the one Ally got from Matt Wilde last year: *Roses are red, violets are blue, if I get you in bed, it would be really cool*. He was kidding, obviously, but still. *Blue* and *cool* don't even rhyme.

I think that's going to be all of my Valograms, but then the angel comes over to my desk and hands me another one. The roses are all different colors and this one's pretty amazing: cream and pink swirled petals, like it's made out of some kind of ice cream.

"It's beautiful," she breathes.

I look up. The angel is just standing there, staring at the rose lying on my desk. It's pretty shocking for a lowerclassman to have the balls to speak to a senior, and it annoys me for a second. She doesn't look like the average Cupid either. She has hair so pale blond it's almost white, and I can see individual veins through her skin. She reminds me of someone, but I can't remember who.

She catches me looking at her and gives me a quick, embarrassed smile. I'm happy to see some color rush into her face—at least it makes her look alive.

"Marian."

She turns around when the devil girl calls to her. The devil makes an impatient gesture with the roses she's still carrying, and the angel—Marian, I guess—quickly rejoins the other Cupids. All three of them leave.

I brush my finger over the rose petals—they're as soft as anything, as air or a breath—and they instantly feel stupid. I open the note, expecting something from Ally or Lindsay (hers always say *Love you to death, bitch*), but instead I see a cartoon drawing of a fat cupid accidentally shooting a bird out of a tree. The bird is labeled *American Bald Eagle*, and it looks like it's about to fall directly on top of a couple sitting on a bench—Cupid's original target, presumably. Cupid's eyes are spirals and he has a stupid grin on his face.

Underneath the cartoon it says: *Don't drink and love*.

It's obviously from Kent McFuller—he draws cartoons for *The Tribulation*, the school humor paper—and I look up and glance in his direction. He always sits in the back left corner of the room. It's one weird thing about him but definitely not the only one. Sure enough, he's watching me. F

gives me a quick smile and a wave, then makes a motion with his arms like he's pulling back an arrow on a bowstring and shooting it at me. I make a point of frowning and deliberately take his note, fold up quickly, and toss it in the bottom of my bag. He doesn't seem to mind, though. It's like I can feel his smile burning on me.

Mr. Daimler comes up and down the aisles, collecting homework, and he pauses at my desk. I have to admit it: he's the reason I'm psyched to get four Valograms in calc. Mr. Daimler's only twenty-five and he's gorgeous. He's assistant coach of the soccer team, and it's pretty funny to see him standing next to Otto. They're complete physical opposites. Mr. Daimler's over six feet, always tan, and dresses like we do, in jeans and fleeces and New Balance sneakers. He graduated from Thomas Jefferson. We looked him up once in the old yearbooks in the library. He was prom king, and in one picture he's wearing a tux and smiling with his arm around his prom date. You can just see a hemp necklace peeking out of his shirt collar. I love that picture. But you know what I love even more? He *still* wears that hemp necklace.

It's so ironic that the hottest guy at Thomas Jefferson is on the faculty.

As usual, when he smiles my stomach does a little flip. He runs a hand through his messy brown hair, and I fantasize about doing the same thing.

"Nine roses already?" He raises his eyebrows, makes a big show of checking his watch. "And it's only eleven fifteen. Well done."

"What can I say?" I make my voice as smooth and flirtatious as possible. "The people love me."

"I can see that," he says, and winks at me.

I let him move a little farther down the aisle before I say, loudly, "I still haven't gotten my roses from you, Mr. Daimler."

He doesn't turn around, but I can see the tips of his ears go red. There are giggles and snorts from the class. I get that rush that comes when you know you're doing something wrong and are getting away with it, like stealing something from the school cafeteria or getting tipsy at a family holiday without anyone knowing.

Lindsay says Mr. Daimler's going to sue me for harassment one day. I don't think so. I think he secretly likes it.

Case in point: when he turns around to face the class, he's smiling.

"After reviewing last week's test results, I realize there's still a lot of confusion about asymptotes and limits," he begins, leaning against his desk and crossing his legs at the ankle. Nobody else could make calculus even remotely interesting, I'm sure of it.

For the rest of the class he barely looks at me, and even then only when I raise my hand. But I swear that when our eyes do meet, it makes my whole body feel like a giant shiver. And I swear he's feeling it too.

After class Kent catches up with me.

"So?" he says. "What did you think?"

"Of what?" I say to irritate him. I know he's talking about the cartoon and the rose.

Kent just smiles and changes the subject. "My parents are away this weekend."

"Good for you."

His smile doesn't waver. "I'm having a party tonight. Are you coming?"

I look at him. I've never understood Kent. Or at least I haven't understood him in years. We were super close when we were little—technically I suppose he was my best friend as well as my first kiss—but as soon as he hit middle school, he started getting weirder and weirder. Since freshman year

he's always worn a blazer to school, even though most of the ones he owns are ripped at the seams and have holes in the elbows. He wears the same scuffed-up black-and-white checkered sneakers every day and his hair is so long it's like a curtain that swings down over his eyes every five seconds. But the real deal breaker is this: he actually wears a bowler hat. To school.

The worst thing is that he could be cute. He has the face and the body for it. He has a tiny heart-shaped mole under his left eye, no joke. But he has to screw it up by being such a freak.

"Not sure what my plans are yet," I say. "If that's where everyone ends up . . ." I let my voice trail off so he knows I'll only show if there's nothing better to do.

"It's going to be great," he says, still smiling. Another infuriating thing about Kent: he acts like the world is one big, shiny present he gets to unwrap every morning.

"We'll see," I say. Down the hall I see Rob ducking into the cafeteria and I start walking faster, hoping Kent will get the picture and back off. It's pretty optimistic thinking on my part. Kent has had a crush on me for years. Possibly even since our kiss.

He stops walking entirely, maybe hoping I'll stop too. But I don't. For a second I feel bad, like I was too harsh, but then his voice rings out after me, and I can tell just by the sound of it that he's still smiling.

"See you tonight," he says. I hear the squeak of his sneakers on the linoleum, and I know he has turned around and started off in the opposite direction. He starts whistling. The sound of it carries back to me, getting fainter. It takes me a while to place the tune.

The sun'll come out tomorrow, bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there'll be sun. From *Annie*, the musical. My favorite song—when I was seven.

I know no one else in the hall will get it, but still I'm embarrassed and can feel heat creeping up my neck. He's always doing things like that: acting like he knows me better than anyone else just because we used to play in the sandbox together a hundred years ago. Acting like nothing that happened in the past ten years has changed anything, even though it's changed *everything*.

My phone's buzzing in my back pocket and before I go in to lunch I snap it open. There's one new text from Lindsay.

Party @ Kent McFreaky's 2nite. In?

I pause for just a second, blowing out a long breath, before I text back.

Obv.

There are three acceptable things to eat in the Thomas Jefferson cafeteria:

1. A bagel, plain or with cream cheese.
2. French fries.
3. A deli sandwich from the make-your-own sandwich bar.
 - a. But only with turkey, ham, or chicken breast. Salami and bologna are obvious no-nos, and roast beef is questionable. Which is a shame, because roast beef is my favorite.

Rob is standing over by the cash register with a group of his friends. He's holding an enormous tray of fries. He eats them every day. He catches my eye and gives me a nod. (He's not the kind of guy who does so well with feelings, his or mine. Thus the "luv ya" on the note he sent me.)

It's weird. Before we were going out, I liked him so much, and for so long, that every time he even looked in my direction I would get this bubbling, fizzing feeling so strong it would make me dizzy. No lie: sometimes I got light-headed thinking about him and had to sit down.

But now that we're officially a couple, I sometimes have the strangest thoughts when I look at him, like I wonder if all those fries are clogging his arteries or whether he flosses or how long it's been since he washed the Yankees hat he wears pretty much every day. Sometimes I'm worried there's something wrong with me. Who *wouldn't* want to go out with Rob Cokran?

It's not that I'm not totally happy—I am—but it's almost like sometimes I have to keep running over and over in my head why I liked him in the first place, like if I don't I'll somehow forget. Thankfully there are a million good reasons: the fact that he has black hair and a billion freckles but somehow they don't look stupid on him; that he's loud but in a funny way; that everyone knows him and likes him and probably half of the girls in the school have a crush on him; that he looks good in his lacrosse jersey; that when he's really tired he lays his head on my shoulder and falls asleep. That's my favorite thing about him. I like to lie next to him when it's late, dark, and so quiet I can hear my own heartbeat. It's times like that when I'm sure that I'm in love.

I ignore Rob as I get in line to pay for my bagel—I can play hard to get too—and then head for the senior section. The rest of the cafeteria is a rectangle. Special ed kids sit all the way down, at the tables closest to the classrooms, and then there are the freshman tables, and then the sophomore tables, and then the junior tables. The senior section is at the very head of the cafeteria. It's an octagon lined completely with windows. Okay, so it only looks out over the parking lot, but it's still better than getting a straight view of the short-bus brigade dribbling their applesauce. No offense.

Ally's already sitting at a small circular table right by the window: our favorite.

"Hey." I put down my tray and my roses. Ally's bouquet is sitting on the table and I do a quick count.

"Nine roses." I gesture to hers and then give my bouquet a rattle. "Same as me."

She makes a face. "One of mine doesn't count. Ethan Shlosky sent one to me. Can you believe it? Stalker."

"Yeah, well, I got one from Kent McFuller, so one of mine doesn't count either."

"He *looves* you," she says, drawing out the *o*. "Did you get Lindsay's text?"

I pick the mushy center out of my bagel and pop it in my mouth. "Are we really going to go to his party?"

Ally snorts. "Afraid he'll date-rape you?"

"Very funny."

"There's gonna be a keg," Ally says. She takes a tiny nibble of her turkey sandwich. "My house after school, okay?" She doesn't really have to ask. It's our tradition on Fridays. We order food, raid her closet, blast music, and dance around swapping eye shadows and lip glosses.

"Yeah, sure."

I've been watching Rob come closer out of the corner of my eye, and suddenly he's there, plopping into a chair next to me and leaning in until his mouth is touching my left ear. He smells like Total cologne. He always does. I think it smells a little like this tea my grandmother used to drink—lemon balm—but I haven't told him that yet.

"Hey, Slammer." He's always making up names for me: Slammer, Samwich, Sammy Says. "Did you get my Valogram?"

"Did you get mine?" I say.

He swings his backpack off his shoulder and unzips it. There are a half dozen crumpled roses at the bottom of his bag—I'm assuming one of them is mine—and besides that, an empty pack of cigarettes, a pack of Trident gum, his cell phone, and a change of shirts. He's not so much into studying.

“Who are the other roses from?” I say, teasing him.

“Your competition,” he says, arching his eyebrows.

“Very classy,” Ally says. “Are you going to Kent’s party tonight, Rob?”

“Probably.” Rob shrugs and suddenly looks bored.

Here’s a secret: one time when we were kissing, I opened my eyes and saw that *his* eyes were open. He wasn’t even looking at me. He was looking over my shoulder, watching the room.

“He’s getting a keg,” Ally says for the second time.

Everyone jokes that going to Jefferson prepares you for the total college experience: you learn to work, and you learn to drink. Two years ago the *New York Times* ranked us among the top ten boozier public schools in Connecticut.

It’s not like there’s anything else to do around here, though. We’ve got malls and basement parties. That’s it. Let’s face it: that’s how *most* of the country is. My dad always said that they should take down the Statue of Liberty and put up a big strip mall instead, or those golden McDonald arches. He said at least that way people would know what to expect.

“Ahem. *Excuse me.*”

Lindsay is standing behind Rob, clearing her throat. She has her arms folded and she’s tapping her foot.

“You’re in my seat, Cokran,” she says. She’s only pretending to be hard-core. Rob and Lindsay have always been friends. At least, they’ve always been in the same group, and by necessity have always had to be friends.

“My apologies, Edgcombe.” He gets up and makes a big flourish, like a bow, when she sits down.

“See you tonight, Rob,” Ally says, and adds, “bring your friends.”

“I’ll see you later.” Rob leans down and buries his face in my hair, making his voice deep and quiet. That voice used to make all of the nerves in my body light up like a firework explosion. Now, sometimes, I think it’s cheesy. “Don’t forget. It’s all about you and me tonight.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” I say, hoping my voice sounds sexy and not scared. My palms are sweating and I pray he doesn’t try to take my hand.

Thankfully, he doesn’t. Instead he bends down and presses his mouth into mine. We make out for a bit until Lindsay squeals, “Not while I’m eating,” and throws a fry in my direction. It hits me on my shoulder.

“Bye, ladies,” Rob says, and saunters off with his hat just tilted on an angle.

I wipe my mouth on a napkin when nobody’s looking, since the bottom half of my face is now coated with Rob’s saliva.

Here’s another secret about Rob: I *hate* the way he kisses.

Elody says all my stressing is just insecurity because Rob and I haven’t actually sealed the deal yet. Once we do, she’s positive I’ll feel better, and I’m sure she’s right. After all, she’s the expert.

Elody is the last to join us at lunch, and we all make a grab for her fries when she sets down her tray. She makes a halfhearted attempt to swat our hands away.

She slaps her bouquet of roses down next. She has twelve, and I feel a momentary twinge of jealousy.

I guess Ally feels it too because she says, “What did you have to do for those?”

“*Who* did you have to do?” Lindsay corrects her.

Elody sticks her tongue out but seems pleased that we noticed.

All of a sudden, Ally looks at something over my shoulder and starts giggling. “*Psycho kille qu’est-ce que c’est.*”

We all turn around. Juliet Sykes, or Psycho, has just drifted into the senior section. That's how she walks: like she's drifting, being blown around by forces outside of her control. She's carrying a brown paper bag in her long pale fingers. Her face is shielded behind a curtain of pale blond hair, shoulders hunched up around her ears.

For the most part, everyone in the cafeteria ignores her—she's the definition of forgettable—but Lindsay, Ally, Elody, and I start making that screeching and stabbing motion from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which we all watched at a sleepover a couple of years ago. (Afterward we had to sleep with the lights on.)

I'm not sure if Juliet hears us. Lindsay always says she can't hear at all because the voices in her head are too loud. Juliet keeps up that same slow pace across the room, eventually reaching the door that leads out into the parking lot. I'm not sure where she eats every day. I hardly ever see her in the cafeteria.

She has to shove her shoulder against the door a few times before it will open, like she's too frail to make it work.

"Did she get our Valogram?" Lindsay says, licking salt off a fry before popping it in her mouth.

Ally nods. "In bio. I was sitting right behind her."

"Did she say anything?"

"Does she ever say anything?" Ally puts one hand across her heart, pretending to be upset. "She threw the rose out as soon as class was over. Can you believe it? Right in front of me."

Freshman year Lindsay somehow found out that Juliet hadn't been sent a single Valogram. No one. So Lindsay put a note on one of her roses and duct-taped it on Juliet's locker. The note said *Maybe next year, but probably not*.

Every year since then we've sent her a rose and the same note on Cupid Day. The only note she ever received from anyone, as far as I know. *Maybe next year, but probably not*.

Normally I would feel bad, but Juliet deserves her nickname. She's a freak. Rumor has it that she was once found by her parents on Route 84, stark naked at three A.M., straddling the highway divider. Last year Lacey Kennedy said she saw Juliet in the bathroom by the science wing, stroking her hair over and over and staring at her reflection. And Juliet never says a word. Hasn't for years, as far as I know.

Lindsay hates her. I think Lindsay and Juliet were in a couple of the same elementary school classes, and for all I know Lindsay has hated her since then. She makes the sign of the cross whenever Juliet's around, like Juliet might somehow go vampire and make a lunge for Lindsay's throat.

It was Lindsay who found out Juliet peed her sleeping bag during a Girl Scout camping trip in fifth grade, and Lindsay who gave her the nickname Mellow Yellow. People called Juliet that forever—until the end of freshman year, if you can believe it—and stayed away from her because they said she smelled like pee.

I'm looking out the window and I watch Juliet's hair flash in the sunlight like it's catching fire. There's darkness on the horizon, a smudge where the storm is growing. It occurs to me for the first time that I'm not exactly sure why Lindsay started hating Juliet in the first place, or when. I open my mouth to ask her, but they've already moved on to other topics.

"—catfight," Elody finishes, and Ally giggles.

"I'm terrified," Lindsay says sarcastically. Clearly I've missed something.

"What's going on?" I say.

Elody turns to me. "Sarah Grundel is going around saying Lindsay ruined her life." I have to wait while Elody folds a fry expertly into her mouth. "She can't swim in the quarter finals. And you know

she lives for that shit. Remember when she forgot to take her goggles off after morning practice and she wore them until second period?"

"She probably keeps all of her blue ribbons on a wall in her room," Ally says.

"Sam used to do that. Didn't you, Sam? All those ribbons for playing with horsies." Lindsay elbows me.

"Can we get back to the point?" I wave my hands, partly because I want to hear the story, partly to take the attention off me and the fact that I used to be a dork. When I was in fifth grade, I spent more time with horses than with members of my own species. "I still don't get why Sarah's pissed at Lindsay."

Elody rolls her eyes at me like I belong at the special ed table. "Sarah got detention—she was late to homeroom for, like, the fifth time in two weeks." I'm still not getting it and she heaves a sigh. "She was late to homeroom because she had to park in Upper Lot and haul ass—"

".22 miles!"

We all bust it out at the same time and then start giggling like maniacs.

"Don't worry, Lindz," I say. "If you guys throw down I'm totally putting money on you."

"Yeah, we've got your back," Elody says.

"Isn't it kind of weird how that stuff happens?" Ally says in this shy voice she gets when she's trying to say something serious. "How everything spirals out from everything else? Like, if Lindsay hadn't stolen that parking space . . ."

"I didn't steal it. I got it fair and square," Lindsay protests, bringing her hand down on the table for emphasis. Elody's Diet Coke sloshes over the side of the can, soaking some fries. This makes us start laughing again.

"I'm serious!" Ally raises her voice to be heard over us. "It's like a web, you know? Everything's connected."

"Have you been breaking into your dad's stash again, Al?" Elody says.

This is all it takes to really get us going. This is a joke we've had with Ally for years because her dad works in the music industry. He's a lawyer, not a producer or manager or musician or anything, and he wears a suit everywhere (even to the pool in the summer), but Lindsay claims he's secretly a hippie stoner.

As we're laughing, doubling over, Ally turns pink. "You guys never listen to me," she says, but she's fighting a smile. She takes a fry and throws it at Elody. "I read once that if a bunch of butterflies takes off from Thailand, it can cause a rainstorm in New York."

"Yeah, well, one of your farts could cause a massive blackout in Portugal." Elody giggles, throwing a fry back.

"Your morning breath could cause a stampede in Africa." Ally leans forward. "And I do *not* fart."

Lindsay and I are laughing, and Elody and Ally keep throwing fries back and forth. Lindsay tries to say they're wasting perfectly good grease, but she's snorting so hard she can barely get the words out.

Finally she sucks in a deep breath and chokes out, "You know what I heard? That if you sneeze hard enough you can cause a tornado in Iowa."

Even Ally goes crazy at this, and suddenly we're all trying it, laughing and sneezing and snorting at the same time. Everybody's staring at us, but we don't care.

After about a million sneezes, Lindsay leans back in her chair, clutching her stomach and gasping for breath.

"Thirty dead in Iowa tornadoes," she gets out, "another fifty missing."

This sets us off again.

Lindsay and I decide to cut seventh period and go to TCBY. Lindsay has French, which she can stand, and I have English. We cut seventh period a lot together. We're second-semester seniors, so it's like we're expected *not* to go to class. Plus I hate my English teacher, Mrs. Harbor. She's always going off on tangents. Sometimes I'll zone out for a few minutes, and all of a sudden she'll be talking about underwear in the eighteenth century or oppression in Africa or the way the sun looks rising over the Grand Canyon. Even though she's probably only in her fifties, I'm pretty sure she's losing it. That's how it started with my grandmother: ideas swirling around and colliding with each other, causes coming after effects, and point A switched with point B. When my grandmother was still alive we would visit her, and even though I was no more than six, I remember thinking: *I hope I die young.*

There's a definition of irony for you, Mrs. Harbor.

Or maybe foreshadowing?

Technically you need a special pass signed by your parents and the administration to leave campus during the school day. This wasn't always true. For a long time one of the perks to being a senior was getting to leave campus whenever you wanted, as long as you had a free period. That was twenty years ago, though, a few years before Thomas Jefferson got the reputation for one of the highest teen suicide rates in the country. We looked up the article online once: the *Connecticut Post* called us Suicide High.

And then one day a bunch of kids left campus and drove off a bridge—a suicide pact, I guess. Anyway, after that the school forbade anyone from leaving school during the day without special permission. It's kind of stupid if you think about it. That's like finding out that kids are bringing vodka to school in water bottles and forbidding anyone to drink water.

Fortunately, there's another way to get off campus: through a hole in the fence beyond the gym behind the tennis court, which we call the Smokers' Lounge, since that's where all the smokers hang out. No one's around, though, when Lindsay and I slip through the fence and get started across the woods. In a little while we'll come on to Route 120. Everything is still and frozen. Twigs and black leaves crack under our shoes, and our breath rises in solid white puffs.

Thomas Jefferson is about three miles outside of downtown Ridgeview—or what you can call the downtown—but only about a half mile from a small strip of dingy stores we've named the Row. There's a gas station, a TCBY, a Chinese restaurant that once made Elody sick for two days, and a random Hallmark store where you can buy pink glittery ballerina figurines and snow globes and crap like that. That's where we head. I know we must look like total freaks, stomping along the road in our skirts and tights, our jackets flapping open to show off our fur-trimmed tank tops.

We pass Hunan Kitchen on our way to TCBY. Through the grime-coated windows we spot Alex Liment and Anna Cartullo bent over a bowl of something.

"Ooo, scandal," Lindsay says, raising her eyebrows, although it's really only a half scandal. Everyone knows that Alex has been cheating on Bridget McGuire with Anna for the past three months. Everyone except Bridget, obviously.

Bridget's family is super-Catholic. She's pretty and really clean-looking, like every time you see her she's just scrubbed her face really hard. Apparently she's saving herself for marriage. That's what she says, anyway, although Elody thinks Bridget might be a closet lesbo. Anna Cartullo is only a junior, but if the rumors are true she's already had sex with at least four people. She's one of the few kids in Ridgeview who doesn't come from any money. Her mom's a hairdresser, and I don't even know if she has a dad. She lives in one of the shitty rental condos right off the Row. I once heard

Andrew Singer saying her bedroom always smelled like General Tso's chicken.

"Let's go in and say hi," Lindsay says, reaching for my hand.

I hang back. "I'm going through sugar withdrawal."

"Here. Take these." She pulls a pack of SweeTarts from the waistband of her skirt. Lindsay always carries candy on her, 24/7, like she's packing drugs. I guess she kind of is. "Just for a second, promise."

I let myself be dragged inside. A bell tinkles as we come through the door. There's a woman flipping through *Us Weekly* behind the counter. She looks at us, then looks down again when she realizes we're not going to order.

Lindsay slides right up to Alex and Anna's booth, leaning against the table. She's kinda, sorta friends with Alex. Alex is kinda, sorta friends with a lot of people, since he deals pot out of a shoe box in his bedroom. He and I have a head-nod friendship, since that's pretty much the limit of our interaction. He's actually in English with me, though he shows even less than I do. I guess the rest of the time he's with Anna. Every so often he'll say something like, "That essay assignment blowhuh?" but other than that we don't talk.

"Hey, hey," Lindsay says. "You going to Kent's party tonight?"

Alex's face is red and splotchy. At least he's embarrassed to be caught out with Anna so blatantly. Or maybe he's just having a reaction to the food. I wouldn't be surprised.

"Um . . . I don't know. Maybe. Gotta see. . . ." He trails off.

"It's gonna be super fun." Lindsay makes her voice extra perky. "Are you going to bring Bridget? She's *such* a sweetheart."

Actually, we both think Bridget is annoying—she's always really cheerful and she wears T-shirts with lame slogans like *Unless You're the Lead Dog the View Never Changes* (no lie)—but Lindsay despises Anna and once wrote *AC=WT* all over the bathroom right across from the cafeteria—the one everyone uses. *WT* stands for white trash.

The situation is beyond awkward, so I blurt out, "Sesame chicken?" I point at the meat congealing in a grayish sauce in a bowl on the table, next to two fortune cookies and a sad-looking orange.

"Orange beef," Alex says. He seems relieved by the change of topic.

Lindsay gives me a look, annoyed, but I keep rattling on. "You should be careful about eating here. The chicken once poisoned Elody. She threw up for, like, two days straight. If it *was* chicken. She swears she found a fur ball in it."

As soon as I say this Anna picks up her chopsticks and takes an enormous bite, looking up at me smiling at me as she chews so I can see the food in her mouth. I'm not sure whether she's doing this deliberately to gross me out, but it seems like it.

"That's nasty, Kingston," Alex says, but he's smiling now.

Lindsay rolls her eyes, like Alex and Anna are both a total waste of our time. "Come on, Sam."

She pockets a fortune cookie and breaks it open when we get outside. "*Happiness is found where one is not looking*," she reads, and I crack up when she makes a face. She balls up the little slip of paper and lets it flutter to the ground. "Useless."

I take a deep breath. "The smell in there always makes me sick." It does, too: that smell of old meat and cheap oil and garlic. The clouds on the horizon are slowly taking over the sky, turning everything gray and blurry.

"Tell me about it." Lindsay puts a hand on her stomach. "You know what I need?"

"A jumbo cup of The Country's Best Yogurt!" I say, smiling. TCBY is another thing we can't bring ourselves to abbreviate.

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