

JASON GURLEY

AWAKE  
IN  
THE  
WORLD



Roaring Brook Press • New York

Quotation from Ann Druyan, *A Famous Broken Heart*, copyright © 1977 Ann Druyan. Reprinted with permission from Ann Druyan and Democritus Properties, LLC. All rights reserved this material cannot be further circulated without written permission of Ann Druyan/Democritus Properties, LLC. Credit Ann Druyan.

Quotation from Carl Sagan, *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*, copyright © 2006 Carl Sagan. Reprinted with permission from Democritus Properties, LLC. All rights reserved this material cannot be further circulated without written permission of Democritus Properties, LLC. Credit Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan.

Quotation from Ann Druyan, *Skeptical Inquirer*, copyright © 2003 Ann Druyan. Reprinted with permission from Ann Druyan/Democritus Properties, LLC. Originally published in *Skeptical Inquirer*. All rights reserved this material cannot be further circulated without written permission of Ann Druyan and Democritus Properties, LLC. Credit Ann Druyan.

Copyright © 2019 by Jason Gurley  
Published by Roaring Brook Press  
Roaring Brook Press is a division of Holtzbrinck  
Publishing Holdings Limited Partnership  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010  
fiercereads.com  
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018944869  
ISBN: 978-1-250-14183-5

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational,  
or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan  
Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442  
or by email at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

First edition, 2019  
Book design by Aimee Fleck  
Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For Connie and Seth, without whom  
this book simply wouldn't exist*

Even if it's very late at night.  
Someone's always awake in the world.

—Ann Druyan,  
*A Famous Broken Heart*

I believe that it is very difficult to know who we are until we understand where and when we are. I think everyone in every culture has felt a sense of awe and wonder looking at the sky.

—Carl Sagan,  
*The Varieties of Scientific Experience:  
A Personal View of the Search for God*

I don't think I'll ever see Carl again. But I saw him.  
We saw each other. We found each other in the cosmos,  
and that was wonderful.

—Ann Druyan,  
“Ann Druyan Talks About Science,  
Religion, Wonder, Awe . . . and Carl Sagan,”  
*Skeptical Inquirer*, November/December 2003

PART ONE  
September 2012



Top three unluckiest things to happen to me this week:

1. I dropped my house key into a storm drain.
2. Ms. Grace informed me that I'm one credit short for graduation next spring.
3. I tore Dad's hoodie.

And it's only Monday.

The hoodie pissed me off the most. The impound lot is fenced in with chain link, and the twisty-tie barbs atop the fence are as sharp as upturned ice picks. I dropped to the other side of the fence and examined the rip. I could see my jeans through it. *Damn.*

I hefted my backpack and moved through a thicket of rusted Hondas and forgotten Toyotas toward the lot's oddest resident: the fishing boat. Behind it, a sign hung on the impound lot's fence:

**SMILE, YOU'RE BEING  
WATCHED**

Below the words was a picture of a camera with an eyeball for a lens.

But there weren't actually any cameras. I was certain of that. I'd managed to escape detection all this time, despite some close calls, but I sometimes wondered if it was because I was just *that* stealthy . . . or if I was fooling myself. Maybe everyone knew about my secret predawn infiltrations. Maybe they left me alone because they felt sorry for me. It's like this: Sometimes it feels like the whole town is waiting to see what wallop of bad luck will hit me next; other times, I can feel them quietly rooting for me. I'm never certain which is true when.

On the boat, inside the wheelhouse, I sank into the old captain's chair and snapped on the deck lantern. The warm orange glow chased the shadows from the walls, where my father's face stared down at me from a hundred tacked-up sketches.

"Morning, Dad," I said softly.

I opened my sketchbook and returned to an illustration in progress. Sometimes this was my only time to draw, these early hours on an impounded, slowly rotting boat. Between school and my job at the market, and the girls and their homework, and their bedtime stories—well, I didn't have space for much more than that. Quietly, I roughed in the structure of my father's boat on the page. It peeked through the haze of the marine layer, the shroud that blanketed the sea on early summer mornings.

The sketchbook was a gift from my father in 2008, which had been a good year until it wasn't. "Things are going to change," Dad had said to Mama after the promotion at Bernaco. And he was right: They had, although not exactly how I think he'd intended. He'd given me a stack of sketchbooks like

this one: bound in leather, or something like it; expensive, toothy paper. “I’m tired of seeing you draw on the gas bill,” he’d said with a wink. Between then and now, I’d filled every inch of every page of each book, except this one. This was the last of them. Nothing I’d drawn in this book seemed good enough.

Not for the last thing my father ever gave me.

The pencil broke, etching a dark gash on the page. I sighed. I could fix it, but . . . The weight of the previous day had settled on me, and I was tired. I went to the window and pulled back the blanket that hung across it. From here I could see the credit union sign announce the time: 3:35 A.M.

I bagged my sketchbook, extinguished the lantern, and closed the wheelhouse door. When I dropped to the ground beside the boat, my ankle rolled beneath me, and I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle a cry. I tested the foot gingerly. It wasn’t serious—not a break or a sprain—but it qualified, I thought, as a small warning from the universe.

*Remember whose side I’m on.*

Yeah. Not mine. Got it, universe.

I tugged my hood over my head, then carefully scaled the fence and limped home, aware, as always, that when luck goes bad, it tends to stay bad. Some things just don’t change.



The stranger rolled his ankle when he landed, and I cringed. I'd done that a few times, back when Mom and I played on the Santa Barbara public tennis courts. Those memories always ended with Mom helping me to the car. But the stranger limped away, and I reviewed my notes: I didn't know who he was, or why he broke into that lot a couple of times each week, or what appeal that old boat held. And yet, we weren't so different, except maybe for the breaking and entering. Two souls, wide awake in the most wee of hours.

I'd found him entirely by accident, of course. Mom and I had just moved into Aaron's house in the hills of Orilla del Cielo. From the window of my new room, I had a panoramic view of Orilly and the Pacific beyond. (That's what everyone calls the town, I quickly learned. As in *O, RLY?*) The vista was lovely, but it held secrets, too. Aaron had pointed out the scars left by a severe storm that hit the coast years before: an abandoned trawler, moldering on the rocks, saw grass growing through holes in its hull; the rubble of an old stone pier that had collapsed, dumping Aaron's favorite seafood restaurant into the sea. And despite the million-dollar view, Orilly is an oil town, strictly blue collar. Bernaco Oil, where Aaron works, owns

most of the land, and its drilling platforms stand like sentries offshore, watching the townspeople. It's the polar opposite of Santa Barbara, where I'd lived before and where one might bump into Rob Lowe at the supermarket or sell Girl Scout cookies to Oprah. Orilly has no such glamour. There isn't even a movie theater. Highway 1 serves as a neat seam, separating the town into two halves: the hills, where Aaron and the rest of the oil executives live among bright lawns and lush eucalyptus groves, and the lowlands, where the oil workers are stuffed into little boxes among nail salons and strip malls.

But that view. The sunsets, practically nuclear, transform the ocean each night into a shimmering golden blanket. The grimy, bulky oil rigs become blazing, floating cities, strung across the horizon like Christmas lights.

That view is the reason OSPERT has a permanent home in my window, and the reason I spotted the stranger. OSPERT is my Orion SpaceProbe Equatorial Reflector Telescope. He's got an aluminum Newtonian optical tube, a rack-and-pinion focuser, and two Kellner eyepieces. All of which means he's exceptionally good at tracking anything that moves: comets, the International Space Station, Mars.

And strangers who break into the police impound lot.

I found him because of Twilight Guy, a weekend stargazer who keeps an amateur-astronomy blog. That night, weeks and weeks ago, TG was all lit up about a supernova: *Supposed to be a real light show*, he'd exclaimed. And that was good for me, because if TG could see something, then I probably could,

too; he blogs from Monterey, just a short hop from Orilly. You'd expect an exploding star to dominate the night sky, but alas, even the brightest supernovae are hardly more than a pale smudge among the stars. The magic, though, isn't in what they *look* like, but in what they *are*: the final echo of a stunning symphony, performed a million miles away, a thousand thousand years ago. They're a flourish of history, preserved against the cape of night.

Unfortunately, while TG is a perfectly competent astronomer, he's a shitty meteorologist.

### **Supernova a bust**

by Twilight Guy | June 23, 2012 • 1:48 a.m.

Sorry, folks! Low pressure system from the northwest made its way down the coast late last night, effectively ruining any West Coasters' chance of seeing PSN J11085663+2635300. Major bummer. International folks, send your own photos so those of us in the dark (LOL, *in the dark*) don't miss out!

*Major bummer, indeed.* I'd loaded up on caffeine and couldn't sleep. So instead, I turned OSPERT toward the earth, adjusting the finderscope until I found the oil rigs, glowing in the dark. Even that late, they were alive with activity. Eventually, I turned the telescope toward Orilly itself. And that's how

I spotted the stranger. He was practically the only thing moving at that hour. He wasn't hard to spot.

Jesus, if Mom knew I was spying on people . . . I could just imagine the headlines.

### **LOCAL VOYEUR STRIKES AGAIN**

Peeping teen allegedly points telescope down,  
not up; neighbors scandalized

But Orilly was dead tired, everyone asleep. Nobody would know.

Anyway, Mom already felt scandalized by OSPERT. And the stars, and the Carl Sagan posters, and the Cornell pennant tacked to my bulletin board. Though, of course, her true feelings had nothing to do with any of those things, and *everything* to do with my father.

Who I don't think about.

Below me, the stranger limped into shadow. With a yawn, I covered OSPERT's big glass eye with the lens cap and dragged myself to bed.

The administrative office of Palmer Rankin High School hummed to life around me. Derek—my older brother—was somewhere in the back offices, meeting with Ms. Grace, my adviser, about that missing course credit.

So I waited.

Always with the waiting. When you're a kid, that's just the way it is: You wait for the bus. Wait for the bell. Wait for summer, the weekend. Wait to grow up. Except then you do grow up, and you realize adults are always waiting, too. Waiting for a paycheck, for a letter from the lawyer, for your food stamps. Waiting forever for that moment when something just *clicks*, and your life finally turns into the life you *thought* you'd have.

You wait and wait and wait, and then, as you wait some more, you die. It's morbid.

While waiting, I opened my sketchbook. As I worked, the world went out of focus, until there was just me and the page. Me and the eraser, reminding the clock on the gash I'd created the night before. Drawing was always like this for me. It opened a tiny rip in the universe. Time didn't exist there. Except time

kept on existing for everyone else, and that fact had gotten me in trouble more than once. Most of my parent-teacher conferences, at least in my younger days, had been about my attention span.

Well, except one of them. The inciting event happened during lunch period in fourth grade. I'd filled a sheet of notebook paper with graphite, save a little twisting ribbon of white in the middle: a firework, captured in the moment of its unfolding, streamers of negative space rippling out from its warm heart. And then Bobby Longdale poured a carton of milk onto the drawing, destroying it. It was lasagna day, which is important because Bobby wound up wearing his, and I wound up in the principal's office, waiting for my mother. Dad had the car for work, which meant that Mama walked a few miles in the heat because of my stunt. And though I knew that, I still snapped at her when she reached for my hand on the walk home. I don't remember what I said, but I remember what Dad had to say when he came home later. He put away his dive gear, then came to my room, sat on the bed, and explained the difference between being human and being angry. He wasn't mad that I'd acted out at school; I'd done so with cause. He was disappointed that I'd taken it out on my mother. *Recognize the people in your life who give you love*, he said to me that afternoon. *Give love back. Just love.*

*Wait for your father to come home*, Mama had said.

Remembering that day hurt. I blinked to clear my eyes.

I wish I could wait, Mama. I'd wait a thousand years for him. I'd take a thousand lectures.

Derek's lectures weren't quite the same, though he tried. Right now he'd be listening to Ms. Grace say something about not applying myself. *Please*, Derek would sniff. *The boy applies too much of himself. He works two jobs. I can't stop him. I've tried. What do you want from him?*

None of this was new territory for me. For us.

Outside the office, the rest of the world swam past. Students chattering excitedly. The same conversations every day. Back and forth, wielding their opinions like knives, jabbing one another to see who bleeds more for the things they love. *Stab, stab*. Mama would have taken a lighter view: *Maybe they're just passionate about things*. But I'm less reasonable, especially on days that begin with Ms. Grace reporting about my squandered potential.

*Potential* is for people who are going places. But where am I going?

I fanned through the pages of my sketchbook. Page after page of intricate illustrations. Dense clouds spilling over mountaintops; a tree, split by lightning, smoldering. I was good, I knew that. But it didn't matter. You can't support a family with nice drawings. And anyway, artists were supposed to know what they were *about*. I had no idea what my art was about. If someone asked me to make an artistic statement, what could I say?

*My father gave me this book, and I loved him.*

I leaned back in my chair. For the first time, I noticed the fine layer of white dust on the other chairs in the waiting area, heard the din of power tools somewhere above. The ceiling tiles vibrated as I watched, coughing up more dust, and a piece of paper fluttered down from one wall and came to rest at my feet. It was bright yellow, with screaming type.

## **PLEASE EXCUSE A MESS; CONSTRUCTION!!!**

“Our educators commit the most grievous grammatical atrocities, don’t they?”

I glanced up to see a girl standing near the door. She raised one eyebrow in disapproval, and the corner of her mouth turned up slightly.

Palmer Rankin doesn’t get many new students. People aren’t exactly flocking to Orilly. So when someone transfers in senior year, just in time to mount a serious valedictory challenge to Cecily Vasquez—who was labeled “most likely valedictorian” at my kindergarten “graduation”—it’s difficult not to notice. The new girl and Cece were straight AP kids—except for health education, the random-ass elective that everyone puts off until they can’t anymore. Which makes it the one class I share with both of them.

Despite all that, I couldn’t remember her name.



*Thump.* Above me, a square ceiling tile bucked and clattered back into place.

“Maybe you should scoot over a few seats?” the girl said, casting a critical eye at the ceiling. Her dark hair fell away, revealing small-gauge eyelets in her ears—I could see right through her earlobe to the hollow behind. I’d never noticed a girl’s jawline before—my observation skills aren’t terrific, except when I’m bent over my sketchbook—but I noticed hers, and the way her neck sloped up to meet it. Over one shoulder she carried a messenger bag; strapped to its buckle was a bicycle helmet. Each of her fingers bore a different ring, sometimes two. Nebula-print leggings, a strappy top, shoulders *everywhere*.

“So you don’t get hit.”

“What?” I said.

“I said maybe scoot so the ceiling doesn’t squash you.”

I looked up at the tile. It was motionless. “It . . . seems fine.”

She shrugged, then lifted one hand dramatically. “Alas,” she said, projecting like a theater student. “How little I knew the young man. A bright future in the arts he might have had.” She dropped the act and grinned. “Or not. I mean, I’ve only seen the one drawing.”

“What?” I struggled to parse her words; she was talking on some frequency that hummed beyond my ability to hear, or maybe faster than I was able to sequence.

She sighed and pointed to the sketchbook. “It’s nice. Your drawing.”

“Wh—” I stopped, realizing I’d been able to keep up with her that time. “Oh. Thanks.”

“I mean, it’s nice for a *delinquent*,” she added.

“What?” *Oh, Zach, goddammit.*

She unfurled a hand, gesturing at our surroundings. “The administrative office,” she intoned. “Court of the detestable and ill-behaved. The fuckups, if you will. So what did you do wrong?”

“What?”

This time she looked at me as if she thought I might really *be* dumb. Some invisible wire strung through my chest twitched. I’d never felt *that* before. But I didn’t have time to examine that feeling more closely.

“Good morning, Zachariah,” chirped Mrs. Rhyzkov, one of the school’s guidance counselors. “I just saw your brother. Such a pleasure when he comes back to visit. He always was such a determined student, that Derek Mays.”

“It’s Zachary,” I muttered, but the counselor had already turned to the girl.

“Miss Drake, Vanessa, dear,” she said, and I thought, *Vanessa, that’s right, I knew that.* “Why don’t you come on back? You must be so excited about the college fair this week . . .”

Vanessa adjusted the bag on her shoulder and waggled her fingers at me. “Zachary,” she said primly, and her lips parted into a genuine smile.

I almost said *What* again, but she was gone before I formed

the word. After she'd disappeared into the back with Mrs. Rhyzkov, I tried returning to my sketchbook. But the pencil wasn't moving right, so I closed the book and leaned back in my chair. I watched the ceiling apprehensively.

*Vanessa.* Okay.

“Here’s the thing,” Mrs. Rhyzkov said, leaning across her desk and clasping her hands. “With your GPA, you’ll essentially have your choice of schools. I don’t understand why you would limit yourself to just one.”

“But with my GPA, wouldn’t I get in?” I asked.

She sighed. “Students who put all their eggs in one basket make me . . . uncomfortable. Can I ask a personal question?”

“Okay.”

“Is it just that Cornell is far away?” She gestured toward a map on her office wall. “Because I can say with certainty there are many other schools equally far from home. It’s wise to apply to at least a few more. To be safe.”

It wasn’t just that Cornell was far away. Cornell was . . . well, *Cornell*.

When I was small, my father would wake me in the dark. “Cass,” he’d whisper. (He’d wanted to name me Cassiopeia, but Mom wouldn’t agree to it.) “You’ve *got* to see this.” He’d bundle me outside, blanket and all, to point out the streaking light of the Perseids or Venus drifting like a champagne bubble.

My father talked about space in awestruck but rigid terms. For me, however, the sight of such things created an indescribable

feeling in my chest. When I was nine, I found words for that feeling: I saw Carl Sagan for the first time. He spoke about how small we were, yet how grand our aspirations; he spoke of the universe like a poet. My father grumbled about Sagan; he despised the easy popularization of science that Sagan represented. My father was a devotee of more *serious* scientists. It occurred to me, at that young age, that my father believed himself to be smarter not just than me, but everyone. The accessibility of science, of knowledge, somehow threatened him.

As a teenager, I smuggled home an old issue of *Popular Science* beneath my jacket, as if hiding a porno. Its very title was an affront to my father's sensibilities, but I didn't mind. That issue had a feature about Dr. Sagan and changed the shape of my future. Dr. Sagan, I learned, taught astronomy at a university in Ithaca, New York. A university called Cornell. To my father, I'd fallen prey to the siren call of "science for idiots." He wasn't proud; he was disappointed. "You're only about ten years too late," he said. I would never forget the smug contempt in his voice. "Your hero's been dead since you were a baby."

Later, after he'd left us, I learned that my father's heroes were no different from Carl Sagan. Richard Feynman, Stephen Hawking—in their way, they too made science essential to everyone. But it was too late to fashion that knowledge into a retort, and my father wouldn't have heard me, anyway. He was already gone.

That was the thing, though. He wasn't *gone* gone. His face stared back at me from my own features in the bathroom mirror.

I looked so much like him, sometimes, that my mother would look away. It wasn't only the shape of my nose or the way my eyes crinkled like his; it was what he'd left within me, this devotion to the stars. Sometimes I wondered: Were the stars something I loved because *I* loved them?

Or was it just *him*, still taking up space in my head?

Cornell wasn't just a top school for astronomy students. It was a rejection of everything my father represented. Choosing Cornell sent a message: *You're wrong about me*, it said. *Wrong about everything*.

"Okay," I lied. "I'll pick a few backup schools."

"Wise choice. You know, you and Ms. Vasquez, you're my legacy," Mrs. Rhyzkov clucked. "The first female chief justice, and the girl who named a star after me."

*And named a black hole for her father*, I thought.

In the hallway, I was nearly bowled over by a tall, red-haired man. "Pardon," he said with a quick glance to make sure I was all right. He passed through the waiting room and beckoned at Zachary, the artist boy. Zachary stood up and took a single step, and a ceiling tile cracked and fell onto the chair he'd just vacated. It detonated in a puff of white dust and tile fragments.

Zachary blinked, as if he couldn't believe he'd escaped unscathed, then looked around and saw me watching. His face changed—was that relief? Gratitude? His hood had fallen down, revealing thick red curls that dangled over his brow. The hoodie had seen a few years; the knees and thighs of his jeans were worn thin. I was struck by how tall he was—well

over six feet—and lacking in any sense of physical confidence. He was . . . *knobby*, I thought. Hands too large for his slender wrists. Shoulders so sharp I could've hung a hat on them. The boy was a walking coatrack.

I waved, and that seemed to snap him to attention. The smile that bloomed on his face was the most unreserved thing about him. I couldn't help but smile back. He dipped his gaze, almost bashfully, then limped out of the office, following the other man.

*Limped.*

I went after him, then stopped in the crowded hall, watching as Zachary pushed through the doors. It was windy outside, and he tugged his hood over those curls. As I stood there, Cece sidled up to me. Her eyes were glassy, her smile half-drunk. *Was* she drunk? I sniffed, then watched Zachary again. The boy in the hoodie.

But not just any boy.

My stranger.

Each afternoon, I left Palmer Rankin and walked three-quarters of a mile to Maddie's Market. My title was "associate," but that just meant I did it all. On this particular afternoon, I was the associate in charge of collecting carts. I'd found them at all ends of the parking lot, but our customers didn't always stop there. I'd found one parked in a grassy median in the middle of the road. I'd found one tipped over on an apartment lawn when I walked home at the end of my shift. I'd even spotted one at low tide, wheels rusted and clogged with grit, mostly buried in the sand. I didn't retrieve that one.

By the time I'd finished gathering them today, the sun had leaked out of the sky. Past the market, I caught a glimpse of the oil rigs, like campfires on a vast prairie. Derek, I knew, was probably out there right now. I understood why he was, but I never asked him what it felt like. Suiting up. Inspecting pipelines, welding joints, handling drilling assists. Working the same rigs that took away our dad. Everybody around him knew the story. But they wouldn't ask why he did it. They knew why.

*Above the water or below, we carry the wrench. It's what we know.*

The lament of the working-class man. I'd heard Dad recite



it a hundred times. The first time I drew him, it was as that workingman, at the end of a day: slump-shouldered, sunken-eyed. An enormous wrench dangling from his fingers. Derek looked just the same when he came home these days.

And one day, I knew, that would be me.



The girls were still up when I came home. Leah heard me shut the front door and came out to meet me. “Oh, thank goodness,” she said, sounding harried. “Derek isn’t home yet. I’m running late for a patient.”

“Evening shift?”

“This kind of work is all hours, Z, you know that.”

I dropped my bag beside the couch. “I’ll take over.”

“Thank you,” she said. She kissed my forehead, then gathered her things and disappeared through the door in a rush.

I didn’t know what we would do without Leah. She was practically family. The girls wondered, but didn’t ask, why she wasn’t *actual* family yet. She and Derek had dated all through high school and broken up when he went away for college. Despite that, she had stuck around: helping Mama prepare Thanksgiving dinner, buying presents for the girls. After we lost Dad, Derek dropped out of school and came back to Orilly, and Leah was right here, as if he’d never left. They fell into their familiar rhythms again. But Derek is a steam engine, desperately moving forward, trying to fill Dad’s shoes. Leah doesn’t

complain, just gives and gives. I worry sometimes we've taken advantage of her big heart.

I went to Mama's door and cracked it, just a sliver. Inside: darkness, stillness. The steady rhythm of her breathing. "Night, Mama," I whispered. I closed her door again, and for a moment I just stood there, feeling the house. The girls giggled in their bedroom. The rude thump of a stereo from our duplex neighbor rattled the plastic sheet that covered the door to my former bedroom.

The girls feigned sleep when I peeked in, until I snapped off the light. Robin cranked out a fake snore, and Rachael couldn't hold back her laughter. They were nine, the only twins in the fourth grade. Redheads, like me and Derek, but more freckled, and sparky, like neither Derek nor I had been for a long while.

"Past bedtime," I pointed out.

"Leah didn't read to us."

It was late. But I couldn't say no. We'd been reading our way through *A Wrinkle in Time* and its subsequent books. And not for the first time, either. This was our second lap through the series. I picked up the third book, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, and began to read. It was my favorite of the series, and I read longer than I otherwise might have. Two chapters later, Robin was asleep, and Rachael blinked sleepily at me.

"Sing?" she whispered.

My voice was nothing like our father's. He'd had a rich baritone, clear and strong, even at a whisper. I didn't have to ask

Rachael which song; there was only one. Dad's father had sung it to him when he was young, an old folk tune about a frog who romanced a mouse and married her.

I put my hand on Rachael's cheek, and she closed her eyes.

"Froggie went a-courtin' and he did ride, mm-hmm," I sang softly. I'd hardly made it to the second verse before she was asleep as well.

I slipped quietly into the hallway. Derek wasn't home. Our neighbor's music had stopped, though I heard the murmur of a television through the walls now. I had a slice of toast, then brushed my teeth and unfolded my blanket onto the couch. Before I fell asleep, I thought of Vanessa, the new girl. I'd embarrassed myself today; next time I'd have to think of something better to say.

I worked on that for a while, until sleep came.

Cece was still distracted. Not glassy-eyed—but off her game. She was uncharacteristically resistant to my subtle attempts to extract an explanation, so I had to go for the direct approach.

“What’s up?” I said.

“Nothing.”

“Girls,” said Mr. Herrera, our AP Spanish teacher.

I looked at Cece. “¿*Qué pasa?*”

“*Nada*,” she said back.

Mr. Herrera looked satisfied and went back to his desk work.

I lowered my voice and said, “So—what’s *up?*”

She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re all spaced-out.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You’re lying to me. I don’t believe a word you’re saying.”

“Climate change is real,” she said.

“Fine. I believe *some* of the words you’re saying.”

With a coy smile, she returned to her notebook. She’d been doodling for most of class, but I resisted the urge to snatch it away from her. She wasn’t herself, though. Until recently, Cece

had been laser-focused on college. Her life revolved around test scores and her GPA—which at the moment was, I thought, about a tenth of a point higher than my own.

Not that I was counting.

She spotted me looking and curled the cover of her notebook to obscure her work. Then she changed the subject. “I saw you,” she said. “Staring at Zach.”

“You weren’t even there.”

“Yes, I was.”

I amended my statement. “You were there. But you weren’t *there*.”

“I can keep a secret,” she said, undeterred. “Besides . . .”

I lifted one eyebrow. “Besides what?”

“If you get distracted, maybe your grades will suffer.”

“Because that’s how you want to win, huh? By hoping for your enemy to trip and fall on her own mechanical pencil?”

“Did you know there’s a betting pool?” she asked.

“Jesus. It’s not a competition.”

“*Everything* is a competition.”

“Well, fine. I withdraw,” I said. “I’ll bomb the next exam, and you can be Queen Valedick of 2013.”

“No fun if you throw the game.”

“But it’s okay to wish for me to blow it,” I said. “Anyway, it’s not a game.”

“*Everything*—” Mr. Herrera shot Cece a stern look. When he returned to his work, she hissed, “Why were you watching Zach? Did you talk to him? You didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t know I had to.”

“Um,” she said, adopting a Valley-girl lilt. “Like, we’re *besties*, like.”

“I thought we were at each other’s throats.”

“Eh,” Cece said dismissively. “Better for the pool if we play it that way, maybe. It’s up to seventy bucks.”

“Who gets the money?”

“Not us.”

“Unless we place bets.”

“Ooh,” she said, picking up the thread. “One of us takes a dive . . .”

“We split the winnings . . .”

“This is good.”

“How do we decide who dives?”

“You dive, of course,” Cece said.

“I already said I don’t care.”

“Yeah, but you’re a lying liar.” She wore a sly smile. “Who lies. About lying.”

The bell jangled overhead. We filed into the hallway together. “Why did you ask if I talked to him?”

“I saw him before. He was looking at you.”

“He doesn’t know me.”

She shrugged. “Put a pair of tits on something, boys are all about it.”

I looked down at my chest. “My body missed the memo.”

“I saw him,” she said. “Before. You were in the office, and he was . . . I could tell he liked talking to you. You, I couldn’t

tell so easily. I just . . .” She hesitated. “I don’t want you to be collateral damage.”

“Please. He’s a person, not a bomb.”

Cece swapped books at her locker; then we exited into the gravel courtyard between buildings. It was cluttered with discarded cigarettes and old potato chip bags and skinny freshmen who lumbered about in a fog of body spray. “They seriously need to clean this shit up,” she muttered disdainfully.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Look,” she said. “He’s a sweetheart. Seriously. I’ve gone to school with him my whole life, and you’ll never meet a nicer kid. I swear.”

“Collateral damage, though? Come on.”

Cece sighed, then turned to a knot of seniors who leaned against the wall, passing a cigarette. “Hey, Boyd,” she said. A boy with a scraggly topknot looked up, smoke leaking from his nose. “Zach Mays.”

Boyd shook his head, waggling the topknot. “Abandon hope, all ye who—”

Cece didn’t wait for him to finish. “See?”

I was unconvinced.

“Freshman year,” she said. “Someone hacked the district computers, erased a bunch of records. Kid from the hackathon group got caught and expelled. They got all the records restored, except one. Guess whose.”

“That’s awful. What happened?”

“They held him back.”

“That’s fucked up. It wasn’t his f—”

“Sophomore year,” she went on. “Zach got tall over the summer, so he got roped into basketball tryouts. He’s no athlete, but he tries. Takes one shot. Nowhere close to the basket. Hits those big metal things that hold up the whole backboard, right? *The whole goal* comes down. Like, falls off the ceiling, shatters on the floor.”

“So he’s a little unlucky. Nobody believes in luck.”

“He slipped on a dry floor, then fell down a flight of stairs and broke his arm,” she said, ticking off the episodes on her fingers. “Junior year, he worked at the Dairy Queen. He was robbed, like, four times. *Nessa, the Dairy Queen had never been robbed before.*”

“So he’s—”

“He got his driver’s license,” she went on. “His brother bought him a little Geo Metro. You know, those death traps you can buy used for, like, fifty dollars and a sandwich? It spontaneously combusted. In the parking lot. It caught a bus on fire, too.” She put her hands on my shoulders. “Collateral. Damage.”

“Bad luck isn’t contagious,” I said.

“What if it is?” She was serious. “What if it rubs off on you?”

“Cece.”

“Look,” she said. “Zach’s sweet. He’s just had . . . a really hard life. I don’t think he quite knows how to *be*. So . . . just be careful. Okay?”

“Good thing I only talked to him *one* time. Overreact much?”



“It’s not that you wouldn’t be the best thing to ever happen to him,” she said, ignoring me. “You would be. For sure. But I don’t know how he’d handle something good happening to him. Nothing ever has.”

“That’s a little melodramatic,” I said. “Can we just—”

The bell rang, silencing me. None of the kids in the courtyard moved except Cece, who held the door for me. Our next class was health ed, and we took our seats at the front of the room as Mrs. Harriman tried gamely to stuff plastic organs back into a model of a torso. The late bell rang a couple of minutes later, and Zach plunged through the door. His sketchbook fell out of his bag. When he reached for it, he kicked it by mistake. He retrieved it, then limped toward his desk, pausing long enough to smile—a little—at me.

I smiled back.

Cece clucked at me.

“Yo,” Vanessa chirped. She came from nowhere and slid into a perfect pose, reclined against the locker beside mine. “Zach.”

I shut my locker and slipped my backpack on. “Vanessa.”

“Good!” She clapped once. “We know each other.”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Rhyzkov said your name,” she explained, walking beside me. “I think she got it wrong.”

“Yeah, but you knew my name already. From class.”

Vanessa shrugged. “I’m bad with names.”

“Maybe you’re bad with *uncool* people’s names.”

“Touchy.”

“I think it’s pronounced *too-shay*,” I corrected.

“Nope. That’s *tushy*.” She pivoted and lightly tapped her butt with one hand. I must have colored slightly, because she laughed. “That was my butt,” she said. “I just touched my butt.”

“I think only grandmas say *tushy*,” I pointed out. “Maybe Southerners. Are you from the South?”

“Santa Barbara. So . . . technically, yes, though that’s not what you meant.”

It didn’t occur to me until we’d arrived in the main hall that

she'd somehow taken control of our destination. I'd started walking, but now she was leading. I couldn't figure out how she'd done that. But: I also didn't stop walking with her.

"College fair is Friday," she said. My response was a grunt. "You're not turning backflips."

We passed a flyer, one of a hundred pasted up around school. Vanessa tore it from the wall. "Have you *looked* at this thing?"

"Not really."

Day-Glo yellow paper. Huge black letters.

## **CLASS OF 2103 COLLEGE FAIR**

She flicked the paper with the back of her hand. "You see what I see?"

"I see I'm stuck here a hell of a lot longer than I planned."

"Ninety *years* longer."

"So we can skip college fair Friday, then," I said. "We've got, like, eighty-nine years before we need to figure out our futures."

She laughed. Not the kind of laugh I expected to fall out of a face like hers. No, this was the laugh of a woman who'd smoked three packs a day for at least fifty years. Throaty, deep.

I liked it.

"I mean, just imagine what it'll cost in the twenty-second century," Vanessa said. "Probably a hundred million in annual tuition. *Per student.*"

"Not even close," I said. "By then we'll have achieved

enlightenment. Education is a human right. You can't charge for human rights."

Vanessa directed us to B wing, and I waited while she popped her locker open. She pulled out the messenger bag and her bike helmet. She rapped on the helmet with one knuckle. "My step-father says I should earn the money for my first car on my own," she said. "So I bike."

"Because you disagree?" I wondered what that was like. The ability to save money for anything at all.

Another shrug. "Driving seems . . . less fun."

"Than what?"

"The wind in your hair. Coasting down a long grade." She buckled the helmet to her bag. "Besides, if I got a job, my grades would take a hit."

"The valedictory pool," I said. "Yeah. I've heard about it."

"Cece can have it."

"Not in it to win it?"

She shut her locker. "I keep the grades up for other reasons."

"You've got a dream school," I speculated. "You *are* excited about college fair." She began walking again, and my feet—mind of their own, those things—joined her. "What school?"

"Cornell," she said, eyes glittering. "What's yours?"

"My dream school? I . . . don't have one." Suddenly I didn't want to have this conversation anymore. "I hear Santa Barbara's really nice. I hear a lot of famous people live there."

"Katy Perry had sleepovers at my house." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Farts. In her sleep. A *lot*."

I rolled my eyes. “I can’t imagine why you left.”

“My mom got married. And here we are.”

I walked with her to the bike racks, where she paused beside the most elegant contraption I’d ever seen. “What . . . is that?”

“It’s a Kestrel,” she said. I detected a hint of embarrassment. “My stepfather bought it for me.”

“I used to have a car. I think your bike *helmet* cost more than it did.”

She fastened her helmet strap. “Do you ride?”

“I don’t.”

“Shit.” She looked at the empty bus lanes. “Did I make you miss your bus?”

“No, I walk.”

She blinked. Palmer Rankin wasn’t exactly in the heart of Orilly. “Is it a long way?”

“It’s not bad.”

“How far to your house?”

“I’m not going home. I have one of those things. A . . . job, I think you call it?” I was mildly amused by her discomfort. She was different right then, which made me wonder how much of the sliding-up-to-the-locker thing had been an act. “Don’t forget your mirror,” I added.

She touched the folded mirror attached to her helmet, then blushed. “I feel like a walking cyclist-hipster catalog in front of you.”

“You’d have to be wearing bike shorts under your clothes

to achieve that,” I said. She looked mortified. “You are, aren’t you. You’re totally wearing spandex shorts under your clothes. Were you just planning to strip down right here in front of—” The turn of her smile said it all. “I get it. You’re fucking with me.”

“You’re an easy target.” She threw a leg over her bike. “See you at college fair, yeah?”

“Next century,” I said. “Sure.”

“Grammatical *atrocities!*” she howled as she pedaled away. I watched her go, then turned toward Maddie’s Market. Though it wasn’t far, my ankle throbbed uncomfortably by the time I tied my apron on.

I’d live. Always managed to.

Orilly didn't rate its own college fair, so we were off to San Luis Obispo. I boarded the old bus behind Cece. Zach was already there, a sketchbook open across his knees. He was working on something serious, frightful: the ocean, ominous and dark, rising up against a little seaside town. The curl of the waves looked like fangs, white and hard and cold; the sliver of moon above like a heavy-lidded eye.

This was a boy who needed some cheering up. As I passed him by, I tapped the tip of his nose with my fingertip. "Boop."

He flinched, then gave me a shaky smile.

By the time the bus chugged out of the parking lot, Cece was prioritizing the schools she planned to visit at the fair. I bumped her elbow—I'm a pest when I'm bored, what can I say?—and sent her pen looping across the page.

"*Stop* that," she chided. "I'm busy."

"You've already gone over that list fifty times."

"Listen, just because *some* of us have safety schools and backup plans . . ."

"Don't start," I warned. "Anyway, you can't work. We have to talk."

She shook her head, still bent over her list. "No, we don't."

“Yes. I think you’re not telling me something. So we do.”

At that, she did look up. Her cheeks had flushed pink. “No,” she began, but I cut her off.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. Couple of days ago. You had this—I don’t know. This *look*. So let’s hear it. What’s the big secret?”

“I don’t have a secret.”

I tapped a finger against my chin and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. “High school girl . . . easily embarrassed. Has a secret but can’t confess it. I mean, there’s only one thing it could be.”

She caved remarkably quickly. With a look left and right, she said, “You can’t tell *anyone*.”

“We’re on a bus full of kids. Nobody here knows how to keep their mouth shut.”

“Forget it, then.”

“Except me. Spill it.”

“No.”

“Fine,” I said. I raised my voice: “Cecily Vasquez, you have a crush, and if you don’t—”

“*Knock it off;*” she hissed. When she was certain nobody was paying attention, she curled back the cover of her notebook, like a poker player on TV. Written over and over on page after page was a single name.

Ada Lin.

*Oh my god,* I mouthed.

*I know,* Cece mouthed back. *I don’t know.*



*I mean, she's beautiful.*

"She *is*, isn't she?" Cece whispered, breaking our silence. Her voice was so soft I could barely hear her over the rumble of the bus. "She's my partner in AP English. I start sweating any time she looks at me."

"Does she know?"

"No." She blanched. "I don't know."

"Maybe when you look like Ada, you just assume everybody's into you." I raised my butt off the seat and peered over the head of the boy in front of me. "Is she on our bus?"

*"Sit down. Right now."*

I did, grinning. "She is. She's on our bus."

"She's not."

"She's sitting right next to Zach."

Cece sighed. "Well, there goes *your* crush. Sorry about that."

"My crush?"

"Yeah. He'll have eyes only for her by the time we get to SLO."

"Wait. My *crush*?"

She laughed at me. "You forget how well I know you."

Cece and I had met at Aaron's company barbecue last summer. As he'd taken Mom around, making introductions, I'd searched for faces my age. There had been plenty of kids: playing Frisbee, knocking a volleyball around. But I'd spotted a girl beneath a sprawling oak, reading a book. I'd sucked in a deep breath and tried to be confident, like Mom.

“You’re Mr. Bartlett’s new wife’s kid,” the girl said, after I’d introduced myself.

“That’s my name. It was a little hard to fit on the birth certificate,” I said. “And even harder to time travel in order to make it happen. But I pulled it off.”

“You’re a smart-ass,” she said. “That’s too bad.”

“Why?” I blurted.

She shrugged. “One smart-ass is the limit to every friendship. If *both* people qualify . . .”

“You’re messing with me.”

“I am.”

I sank to the grass. “I’m Vanessa. Which is your parent?”

“Like you know anybody here.”

“I don’t,” I confessed.

“Then it doesn’t really matter.” She put out her hand. “I’m Cecily Vasquez. Ernesto’s my dad.”

“Is your dad a lawyer, too?” I asked. Aaron was Bernaco Oil’s in-house counsel.

“Just your average hard hat.”

She was reading a book about the Supreme Court. Not exactly summer reading, I thought. “But you’re into law?”

She shrugged. “I’m into a lot of things. Law’s one of them. You?”

“Space.”

“Going?”

“Looking.” I leaned forward until I was uncomfortably close to her and stared.

She pulled back. "What are you doing?"

"Looking," I said. "I like your eyes. They're like Japanese pears."

"You're a serial killer."

I mimed plucking and eating one of her eyes, and, happily, she laughed. We'd hung out the rest of the summer, and through Cece I'd met a few dozen seniors before the school year began.

And now here we were, on a bus to college fair, our respective crushes possibly crushing on each other.

"I don't know what it is," I admitted to her. "Zach's . . . interesting. Like you."

"I think we're both idiots," Cece said. "High school's almost over. Afterward, you're off to New York. I'm off to . . ."

"Harvard. Columbia. Alpaca college."

"That's not a thing."

"Might be."

"It's not. I promise."

"Takes all kinds of people to make a world, Cece."

"My *point*," she continued, "is that we'd be stupid to *act* on our crushes. I can't exactly see Ada at law school. Or Zach at Cornell."

"So we'd be signing up for heartbreak. That's your point?"

An emphatic nod. "I say we focus on college. Ignore them both. Let Zach fall for Ada. That's probably happened already, actually. We just move on and preserve our exciting futures."

“I dunno,” I said, casting another glance toward Zach. “I’m . . . intrigued.”

Cece grabbed my arm. “Don’t go toward the light, Vanessa.”

“Whatever. You’re intrigued, too.”

She deflated. “It’s true.” Then her eyes narrowed, and she said, “Subject change: You’re a moron.”

“*What?*”

“You *have* to have a safety school. At least one.”

The bus lurched to a stop in front of the Madonna Expo Center, and my stomach swayed. “Tell me something nice,” I said. “I am nerv.”

Cece thought for a moment. “Less than a hundred yards from here sits a Cornell goddess who wishes to talk to you, and only you.”

I buried my face in Cece’s dark hair. “More.”

“Someone,” she went on, “from the very halls where Carl Sagan once walked—”

“*Dr. Sagan,*” I corrected.

“—from the school where the mythic, *mighty* Dr. Sagan once enlightened the unwashed peoples of the world,” she continued, “stands just inside this hallowed hall, waiting to sweep you away to the sparkling green hills of Ithaca, land of starstuff, where you, too, will navigate the solar tides in your sturdy Viking longboat—”

“Okay,” I said, lifting my head. “You’re overdoing it.”

“Good. I was running out of purple words.”

“They’ll want me, right?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Well . . . you *are* more emotionally *flimsy* than their usual applicants . . .”

I thumped her shoulder. “*Right?*”

“I promise they’ll save a brochure for you,” Cece said, standing up. “A postcard, at least.”

Oh, man, did I ever not want to be at a college fair.

I'd barely had time to take in the layout of the expo center before I was swept along by a river of students rushing from booth to booth. The safest place in the building, I soon learned, seemed to be the outer track, far from the booths themselves, and I aimed my feet and held my breath and—eventually—washed ashore there. My only company on that narrow beach were the teachers and parent chaperones from a dozen different high schools. A man in a tracksuit looked me up and down, then looked away.

Yeah, I wouldn't have bothered with me, either.

The sidelines offered a better view of the presentation floor: a flotilla of college booths sprawled beneath a complicated sky of catwalks and lighting grids. A banner dangled high above: CENTRAL COAST COLLEGE FAIR—WELCOME CLASS OF 2013.

I spotted Vanessa and Cece as they entered the stream. They split up quickly, Vanessa rising on her toes to scan the booth banners. Cece appeared to be driven by two competing interests: the list in her hands and the bobbing head of the girl she seemed to be following, not inconspicuously. I

recognized the girl: She was my seatmate from the bus. Ada something.

“You’re not going to map your future from the sidelines,” a voice said, and I turned to see the tracksuited man studying me again.

“What?”

“I said you’re not going to map your future from the sidelines.” He nodded toward the crowded floor, framing the view with two hands, like a cinematographer. “Your future’s out there.”

*Sigh.* “Thanks,” I said, wondering if I could put some distance between me and this guy. He nodded curtly and wore a satisfied smile, as if proud he’d set me on the right path.

The college fair wasn’t explicitly a mandatory event . . . but it was definitely more than a suggestion. I’d tried arguing with Ms. Grace that I had no plans for college. She’d suggested we talk to my brother . . . and I really didn’t want him getting the idea of college in his head, so I caved. And wound up here, where I couldn’t be more out of my depth.

Vanessa and Cece, they belonged at a place like this. Those girls couldn’t be more unlike—Vanessa’s family had money, judging by her bicycle, and she’d probably get to go anywhere she wanted; Cece was more like me, from the kind of family where everyone had calluses on their hands as they passed food around the dinner table—but they were both wickedly smart. Money or not, they’d both be in college soon. Graduate top of their class. Line up six-figure jobs.

It wasn't that way for me. And it wasn't that I wasn't smart. I was smart enough. But that didn't factor into it. Things were different. Because my family needed me. Needed me at *home*. All hands on deck, so to speak.

I let the current carry me around the building, taking in the booths that represented futures completely out of my reach: Harvard, Yale, Princeton. All the California schools: UCSB, UCLA, UC Berk, UC Davis, USC, Stanford, Cal State, San Diego State . . . Even the schools I'd never heard of were walled-off paths.

Ms. Grace thought I didn't care about college. But that wasn't it, either. If things were different . . . But I had reasons to put college out of my mind right from the start. If she'd asked, I'd have told her why I wasn't going to college. I had a whole *list*.

1. College costs a hell of a lot of money.
2. College = staggering debt. For, like, *years*.
3. College ≠ guaranteed job. So you get to live with that debt. Forever.

But those are just the practical reasons. The real reasons I can't go to college have names. Rachael. Robin. Mama. Even Derek. If they didn't need me, if they didn't need every extra digit I could add to my paycheck, then yeah, things could be different. I'd let myself think about college then. Hell, it wasn't even like I'd have to actually *go*. I could just *imagine* it. I could join in the hallway conversations I heard every day: *What college did you get into? No WAY*. The other kids thrilled at the idea of leaving Orilly. They were all straining at their leashes. They'd



all caught a whiff of that impending freedom, the freedom that would land on them with a jolt as soon as they walked the stage at graduation.

Just to feel those things myself—that could *almost* be enough. A guy could live a lifetime in a moment of feeling like that. Come back to your body feeling like, for just a second, you'd been somewhere else. Been *someone* else. A second of feeling like that could probably float a guy for years.

But college wasn't real. Derek had gone, for a flicker of a moment. He got out, started a life. And then Orilly, like a strong current, dragged him right back.

Orilly's like that.

Well, for some of us.

Locating Cornell's booth took *forever*.

It was in the eleventh row of schools. Eleven rows of booth after booth after booth, half of them deceptively tinted burgundy. The arteries of the expo center's aisles thick with students. I felt like Theseus, struggling through the labyrinth. But at last I'd found my minotaur: row eleven, booth 3,472,041.

Along the way, it had been impossible to miss Cece. She flitted from one school to the next, scooping up brochures and cramming them into her bag, then hurrying after Ada. I found Ada's poise startling. She moved through the crowd with excellent posture, shoulders slim and high and strong, eyes patient and glittering. Cece had very good taste, I had to say, but it was hard to imagine a world in which Ada would ever go for a girl like Cece. Where Ada was practically ready for the red carpet of the world, Cece was already stooped beneath the weight of her bag, lurching around like a mad scientist's henchwoman. Much as I loved Cece, Ada was simply beyond the girl's reach.

Watching Ada move so confidently through the room made me think of my mother. Mom was Asian American as well, and exuded this sense of *belonging* wherever she went. I didn't have that sense of self-possession, that's for sure. While I'd moped

around Aaron's house after we moved in, Mom had dived right into our new town. She'd discovered an unoccupied seat on the city council, ran unopposed, and won. Just like that. For a few months there, her name was all over town, on lawn signs and plywood billboards. ELISE BARTLETT FOR CITY COUNCIL.

I wasn't entirely unlike her, at least. Though the mirror reflected my father's face back at me most days, traces of Mom were there, too. My eyes were deep chestnut brown, like Mom's. I'd scored one of her two rather winning dimples. But aside from the dark hair, it seemed her Japanese heritage had simply passed me over. I was a quarter Japanese, but you'd never know it. I still looked mostly like *him*.

And boy, would he ever be disappointed—no, *pissed*—to see me here, standing at the Cornell booth at last.

*Good*. He deserved it.

Except the booth was empty. I'd briefly entertained a fantasy of meeting someone important at the booth. An astronomy alum, maybe. They'd spot a glimmer of something that would inspire them to throw a scholarship at me, we'd fall into a stimulating conversation about the Pleiades or something, and—

A clatter, then a shout, from behind me. I turned and spotted the source of the commotion. Someone at another booth had knocked over a rotating display tower; they straightened up, lifting the tower back into place, and I recognized the red hair.

Zach started to gather up the brochures and booklets he'd spilled, but a volunteer waved him off. Zach took a step back, bumped into another girl, who yelped loudly. *That was*

*unnecessary*, I thought. I cursed her from afar. *May you always have rocks in your shoes.*

Zach looked as if he wanted to vanish, which wasn't easy for a flame-headed boy who towered over the other students. But that wasn't all: He also wore an expression of longing. I looked past him, at the booth's banner: THE FLECK INSTITUTE OF ART AND DESIGN. The walls were blanketed with student art and photos of the school's campus.

I barely knew Zach, but it was obvious he belonged at a school like that.

His embarrassment won out, and he shrank into the crowd, putting distance between himself and the art-school booth. I watched him go, then turned back to the empty Cornell booth and picked up an information packet. On impulse, I snaked through the crowd and lifted an application packet from the Fleck table, too.

Cece appeared at my shoulder. "We have to go. I can't stop stalking her. I'm awful."

As we moved toward the exit, I slid my backpack from my shoulder and safely stowed the Cornell and Fleck paperwork inside, two tickets out of this rusty old town.