

famous

in a

small

town

emma mills



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Becky—this is me dedicating a book to you

I'm not trying to make this a downer, understand.
I mean, I really do think that love is the best thing
in the world, except for cough drops. But I also
have to say, for the umpty-umph time, that life
isn't fair. It's just fairer than death, that's all.

—WILLIAM GOLDMAN, *The Princess Bride*

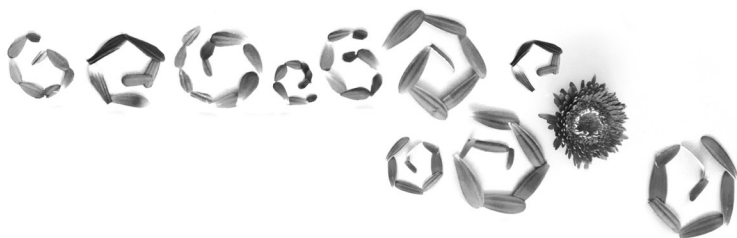
Getting smaller in the rearview

Sitting taller as I drive

Lord help me, I'm never going back

Lord help me, but I am never ever going back

—MEGAN PLEASANT, "Steel Highway"



one

Brit had been fired from the Yum Yum Shoppe, which came as a shock to approximately no one.

We sat on top of one of the picnic tables outside McDonald's afterward, eating vanilla cones in defiance. The sun had set, but the sky still had that pinky-blueness to it, fading to purple as we cursed Brit's manager, the Yum Yum Shoppe, its fourteen flavors of ice cream, and every person who asks for more than two samples while there's a line.

"No, screw that," Brit said. "People who ask for samples in general. There are fourteen flavors. There have been fourteen flavors there for the last, like, *fifty-seven years*. Really? You want to sample strawberry? Do you really need to *try* strawberry?"

"In the Yum Yum Shoppe's defense, there were twelve flavors up until, like, five years ago. Remember, they added peanut butter



crunch, but then there was this whole thing about there being thirteen flavors so they had to add cherry chip?”

“We’re not saying anything in the Yum Yum Shoppe’s defense right now, Soph. We’re dragging the Yum Yum Shoppe and everyone in it.”

“I’ll never go there again,” I said, even though I knew I would.

“Thank you,” Brit replied, even though she knew it too.

The truth was, if I stopped going to places just because Brit got fired from them, I couldn’t go very many places. It’s a testament to how small our town was, and also how often Brit cycled through jobs.

“It’s fine,” she said, in that way where I knew it really wasn’t fine, but she wanted to believe it was. “What do I want to spend all summer scooping ice cream for anyway? I’d end up with one jacked arm and one puny arm. Who needs that in their life?” She gestured with her cone. “All they have to do to make one of these is pull a stupid lever.”

“I’ll ask Mel if there’s something at the library,” I said, chasing a dribbler running down the side of my cone. It was hot out, and the soft serve was melting fast.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“No, just come by on Monday.”

“I can get another job all by myself, Sophie.”

And you can get yourself fired from it too. “I know.”

We finished up our ice cream in silence. Brit leaned back on the tabletop when she was done, folding her arms behind her head. She

was still wearing her Yum Yum Shoppe T-shirt, an anthropomorphic ice cream cone on the front with FOURTEEN FLAVORS OF FUN printed in big bubble letters around it. The cone itself was flashing a double thumbs-up and a crazed smile. Its eyes seemed to say, *Try the strawberry, you know you fucking want to.*

“Okay,” Brit said, and I knew a question was coming. “What do you want right now?”

“I mean, I would like it if the deranged Yum Yum Shoppe cone wasn’t staring at me.”

“I’m going to burn this shirt.”

“Good.”

“In the fire pit. Tonight. With extra lighter fluid.”

“You should.”

“It’s gonna be a literal tower of flames.”

“We’ll dance around it.”

Brit glanced over at me. “Will you drop it off for me tomorrow, though? Tyler said he’d take it out of my paycheck if I didn’t bring it back.”

“You want me to give Tyler the ashes?”

She grinned. “I probably like the idea of burning it better than I’d like the actual burning of it.”

“It’s good you know that about yourself.”

It was quiet for a moment, her grin fading in contemplation. “For real, though. What do you want right now? If you could have the one thing you want most in the world, right this second, what would it be?”

Sometimes Brit's questions were a joke. Sometimes they were a test. You couldn't laugh at them in case it was the latter, and if indeed it was, you'd never know for sure if you'd passed or not, except for the slight wrinkle that occasionally appeared between her eyebrows that meant you probably answered wrong.

"For everyone I love to get everything they want," I said.

In this case, the wrinkle appeared immediately. "That's way too much. That's cheating."

"Why?"

"I said one thing. You love tons of people, and each person wants their own thing. That's like using a wish to wish for infinity wishes."

"I don't love *that* many people."

"You love at least a hundred and fifty people."

"Do not." A pause. "I top out at like a hundred and ten, max."

She gave me an exasperated look, but there was fondness underneath it.

"How many people do you love?" I said.

"Two point five."

"How can you love half a person? And if you say it's Aiden Morales and it's the bottom half, I'm gonna punch you."

"Love and lust are different, I hope you know that." She looked up at the sky. "One thing. Right now. The thing you want most in the world."

"Some fries would be great."

Brit rolled her eyes. "You're no fun."

"I told you. The people-I-love thing."

“Yeah and I hate that you said that.”

“Why?”

“Because this is a good question, not an excuse for you to be noble.”

“I’m not noble.”

“That’s why you’re noble, you don’t even *know* that you’re noble.”

“Okay, if my answer’s so shitty, then what do you want?” I said, even though I already knew what Brit wanted most in the world, right that second, and every other second too.

She didn’t say it, though, just shook her head minutely. “Fries do sound good.”

“You get them. I got the cones.”

“I don’t want to go back in there.” Brit sat up. “I can’t bear to watch Flora charming the shit out of everybody.”

I glanced over my shoulder, where through the front window I could see Flora Feliciano standing behind the counter. Her shiny, dark brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail under her visor, her uniform shirt immaculate. She was taking a guy’s order, and I watched as her eyes crinkled with a smile. The guy was definitely flirting with her, I could see it from here by the way he was leaning toward her, but I knew she couldn’t tell—she rarely could. She was sweet to everyone and somehow believed that everyone was sweet back, that no one ever had ulterior motives.

She couldn’t have been more different from Brit, but they were both my best friends.

I pulled a few crumpled ones out of my pocket and held them out to Brit. “She can’t help it,” I said. “That’s just how she is.”

“I know.” She took the money and slid off the table. “That’s why she’s the point five.”

She headed inside as a beat-up car pulled into the parking lot, snagging an empty spot facing the road. I recognized it—it was Heather Conlin’s car. She lived just down the street from me, and I babysat her kids all the time—Cadence, who was six, and Harper, who was almost a year old.

But Heather didn’t get out. Her husband, Kyle, emerged from the driver’s side instead, and from the passenger’s seat came a guy I had never seen before. In Acadia, that was saying something.

He looked about our age, maybe a little older—it was hard to tell. I watched as Kyle fumbled around in the back and then pulled Harper out of her car seat. Harper had what my grandma would describe as “two cents’ worth of hair,” which tonight was scraped together into the tiniest and cutest of pigtails, jutting off the top of her head like twin exclamation points.

Kyle hitched her up on his hip and was pulling a diaper bag out of the car when a phone began to ring.

“Ah, sorry.” He tossed the bag back down and handed Harper to the guy. “Gimme one sec,” he said, and then he stepped away to grab the call.

The guy stood a bit stiffly with Harper for a moment, until she pointed a chubby finger at the sky and he tilted his head back to see what had caught her eye.

“What are we looking at?”

Harper crowed something indistinguishable, and the guy nodded like it made sense.

“I see.”

She babbled something else and pointed again.

“Mm. I agree.”

And then she looked my way.

I did the fish face, her favorite—cheeks sucked in, flapping my hands by my head like fins. If it were just me and her in her room, I’d dance around in a circle and go “glub glub glub” to really complete the scene, but as it was, I just wiggled silently in my spot. Her face split into a smile, and she made a happy sound.

The guy grinned down at Harper, and then he followed her gaze to me.

I froze mid-flap.

Kyle sidled up beside them then, putting his phone away.

“Hey, Sophie!” he called, slinging the diaper bag over his shoulder and reaching for Harper. “Nice face!”

I lowered my hands and schooled my expression into something other than fish face as they approached. The guy’s grin had faded into something neutral.

“Don’t think you two have met yet,” Kyle said, gesturing to the guy. “This is my brother, August. August, that’s Sophie, she watches Cady and Harper.”

“Nice to meet you,” August said.

“That’s what I’ve heard,” I replied.

One corner of his mouth ticked up.

Kyle adjusted the strap on the diaper bag. “Still on for Tuesday

night? Heather's gotta take Cady to a dance thing, so it'll just be you and this one." He smacked a kiss to Harper's cheek.

"Yup, sounds good."

"Awesome, see you then!"

They headed inside. August grabbed the door for Kyle and Harper and glanced back at me as they passed. There wasn't enough time for me to make another funny face or to smile devastatingly—not enough time to decide between the two, if I was even capable of the latter—so we just sort of looked at each other for a second.

And then he was gone.

Brit came back out clutching a brown paper bag a few minutes later. "I'm not sharing," she said, while simultaneously extending the bag toward me.

I reached in and grabbed a handful. "Did you see Kyle in there?"

"Uh-huh."

"I didn't know he had a brother."

Brit shoved a few fries in her mouth and chewed unceremoniously. "Yeah, neither did he, apparently."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "Just something I heard." She wiped her hands on her shorts. "So it's Friday. What do you think? Should we go to Tropicana? *Gutter balls and matching shoes?*" She sang the last part, which was customary. It was a line from the one and only song ever written about our hometown. "Gave You My Heartland" by Megan Pleasant outlined a series of activities in Acadia day by day—Mondays

at Miller's for beers, Tuesday by the lake, so on and so forth. Fridays were bowling, and although I did love the Tropicana—

“It's actually Saturday.”

“Fuck, really?”

I nodded.

“Guess that's why I got fired,” Brit said, and grinned, not nearly as sheepish as she should have been.



two

Ciara:

You know, no one here understands the Yum Yum
Shoppe

People are like, if your town had a McDonald's why
didn't you just go there??

Mcflurry blah blah blah

Vanilla cone blah

I feel like you can't comprehend the Yum Yum Shoppe
until you have experienced the Yum Yum Shoppe

Its tacky wooden decorations

The window display

Mean Kim the manager

Sophie:

The weird sodas

Ciara:

YES

Do you want Dr Pepper? You're out of luck TRY
SOUR CREAM AND ONION SARSPARILLA
INSTEAD

Sophie:

Don't forget the 14 flavors of ice cream

Ciara:

Oh the 14 flavors
How could I?
They were so carefully curated
So hotly debated around town

Sophie:

We have to go when you're back from school
Dad can do that thing where he considers every
flavor and then orders vanilla

Ciara:

"It's a CLASSIC, you can't DENY a CLASSIC"
WELL THEN MAYBE START BY NOT DENYING
THE CLASSIC, DAD
MAYBE SAVE US THE DELIBERATION

Sophie:

☹️ If you could pick a 15th flavor for the list, what
would it be?

Ciara:

Something really niche
Like chewed up gum

Sophie:
Mothball

Ciara:
Old hat

Sophie:
Would new hat taste better than old hat?

Ciara:
No old hat tastes better
Like felt and history

Sophie:
What if the flavor wasn't a flavor at all?
What if it was a feeling?

Ciara:
Ooh okay. Like the feeling when you're little and you
start a brand new box of crayons

Sophie:
Night before Christmas excitement

Ciara:
Ineffable sadness

Sophie:
Lolololol

Ciara:
COME TO THE YUM YUM SHOPPE FOR
EVERYONE'S FAVORITE SEASONAL FLAVOR:
INEFFABLE SADNESS

Sophie:
It pairs great with old hat

“Ready?”

“Hm?” I looked up from my phone, closing out of the text thread with my sister.

Terrance Cunningham stood before me, backpack on. “I said, are you ready? For. All. Of. This.” He punctuated each word with a robot move, adding a flourish at the end, and a weird hip gyration.

“I’m ready for about half of that.”

“Seventy-five percent.”

“Sixty-three.”

“Eighty or I walk.”

“We’re walking anyway,” I said, pushing up off the front stoop. “And you’re bargaining in the wrong direction.”

“Always bargain up. It’s a good tactic. Throws people off.”

Although school was technically over for the year, Terrance and I had one final bit of business to attend to—the last booster club meeting before the marching band’s hiatus in June. We would reconvene the last week of June to practice for the July Fourth parade, and then there would be band camp, and then regular practices would resume.

Terrance and I were the future vice president and president of the Marching Pride of Acadia Student Fundraising Committee (MPASFC, which Terrance pronounced as “map as fuck” when there were no booster club members around, and we spelled out properly when there were). After this last meeting, we would be the present vice president and president proper, newly minted, and responsible in part for raising the funds necessary to send the Marching Pride

of Acadia to the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena this coming winter.

“No sweat,” Terrance had said, back when Acadia was preparing their audition for the parade and we first joined the committee—my sophomore year, Terrance’s freshman. “We only need to sell like twenty kidneys if we get picked. There are over a hundred of us. Twenty people should be willing to give up one measly kidney.”

“I mean, you and I would definitely have to step up,” I said. “As student leaders.” I was very into being an official member of MPASFC. It would look good on my college applications, and anyway, I loved the band. I wanted to help however I could.

“You know, if we pick the most hydrated people, we could probably get better prices. Like maybe only ten kidneys, if they’re super-high-quality kidneys.”

“Terrance.”

“Marcy Keane is always chugging those bottles of fruit water.” She was, and she insisted on referring to them as *fruit infusions*, which made it insufferable. “You know she has some high-quality kidneys.”

“She makes Matt drink the infusions too.” Her boyfriend at the time.

“There we go. That’s like forty-k worth of kidneys right there.”

Kidneys didn’t come up in the booster club meeting this evening. What did come up was the candy sale that just finished up (it raised about what was expected, but not as much as was hoped), and our fundraising strategies for the coming months: the Fourth of July barbecue in conjunction with the Lions Club (a quarter of all

proceeds from food sales would benefit the band, and the members would be responsible for cleanup), the school-wide garage sale, the formal dinner, half a dozen car washes, and, of course, the fall festival.

“So twenty percent of fall fest concession and ten percent of games will go toward fundraising,” Mrs. Benson said.

Next to me, Terrance tapped his pencil absently against his notebook as Mrs. Benson talked about concession logistics. *Tap tap tap*. It started to take on a rhythm—*tap tap TAP tap, tap tap TAP tap*.

Mrs. Benson paused for a second to glance pointedly in our direction, and then resumed speaking.

Terrance looked over at me, brown eyes full of mirth, and then tapped again.

I grinned.

I had known Terrance my whole life—our moms were both teachers at Acadia Junior High. My mom taught language arts, and Terrance’s mom taught science. They had been friends themselves since high school, had gone off to college together and later came back to Acadia—first my mom, then Mrs. Cunningham, who we called “Aunt Denise.” A plastic-framed photo hung on our fridge showing the two of them in college, posing together wearing matching denim jackets, each with their hand on their hip. My mom had bangs teased to an impressive degree, while Aunt Denise had gorgeous box braids. *This is a genuine moment in time right here*, Aunt Denise would say when she was over, tapping the picture on the fridge. *No, this is a genuine betrayal*, my mom would reply, *seeing as*

you never told me how terrible I looked with that hair. Aunt Denise would just laugh.

Mrs. Benson continued about the fall festival: “And then we’ve got the Megan Pleasant contest. Fifteen bucks to enter, but we’ll keep ten and five will go toward the prize.”

I watched Terrance print *MP contest* in his notes.

It was a tradition—every fall festival for the last eight years had featured a Megan Pleasant talent competition. It was lean the first couple of years, when she only had a few songs out. You’d end up hearing “Blue Eyes” or “Make Your Move” a dozen times or more. But now there were three albums’ worth of material to work from, and you could sing any Megan song you wanted, or lip-sync (though you’d never win if you lip-synced), or dance, or do an instrumental cover. The grand prize was a cut of the entry fees, and we’d take the rest for the fundraiser.

So many people entered that it was one of the highest-earning parts of Fall Fest. There would be guaranteed at least two hours of Megan Pleasant-themed content to sit through, and the town ate that stuff up. She was by far the most famous person to come out of Acadia. In fact, she was pretty much the only famous person to come out of Acadia.

I guess Brit was a little famous in her own right—the fastest high school girls’ runner in the state. They put her name up on the sign at the town line—*BRIT CARTER, IHSA CLASS 1A 100M RECORD HOLDER*. But that wasn’t remotely like having your own fan site, or arena tour, or feature in *Rolling Stone*.

Terrance and I walked home together after the meeting. He toed a rock on the ground, and we kicked it back and forth as we walked.

"Party at Tegan's on Saturday," he said as we neared my house. "Should be fun."

I nodded. I was thinking about Mrs. Benson's parting words—*This won't be easy, but we just need to buckle down and focus and we can make it happen*. It was encouraging, until after a moment's contemplation she added a second *This won't be easy*.

"Obviously, I'll see you before then, but like, don't forget," Terrance said, bumping his shoulder into mine.

"You mean, don't forget to tell Flora."

I wanted Flora and Terrance to be together, with the same spirit that I would smoosh my dolls' faces together when I was little.

His lips twitched. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh."

"I genuinely—No idea."

"Sure," I said, heading up the steps to my front door. "Good night."

He waved and continued on down the street.

It wasn't that I had forgotten about the encounter at McDonald's on Saturday—meeting Kyle's brother for the first time. But come Tuesday night, it wasn't at the forefront of my mind as I laid Harper down in her crib.

I had spent the evening getting her fed and keeping her occupied as you did an almost-one-year-old. I put the Conlins' dog, Shepherd, out in the backyard so Harper and I could have some

quality floor time. We looked at some books. We played with some toys and her favorite puppet: a black glove with a plush spider body on top (it made your fingers look like the spider legs, and it legitimately blew her mind). I got her in her jammies and sang her a made-up song about the ocean (*Harper and me, swimming in the sea, with the turtles and the dolphins and the fishy fishy fishies*). I held her and we danced around the room she shared with Cadence as I sang, turning in little circles until eventually she rested her head in the crook of my neck with a soft *thunk*.

I laid her down, switched on her night-light, peeked once more at her in the crib—her eyelids were drooping—then slipped out of the room and left the door cracked a bit.

So I didn't forget the encounter entirely, but it didn't spring to mind either that night. That's why when I swung around the corner into the kitchen and saw someone standing there, I let out an unholy yelp. I didn't register that it was August, Kyle's brother, standing in front of the open fridge and eating out of a Tupperware. All I registered was *stranger danger*.

He jerked in surprise and promptly dropped the Tupperware.

"Jesus," he said, clapping a hand to his chest.

"What are you doing?" I said, which didn't exactly make sense in the moment but came out all the same.

"I was eating." He blinked. "What are *you* doing?"

I had frozen in a weird defensive stance, which I apparently no longer needed to hold, now that the threat had been identified. "I thought you were an intruder."

"I'm not." Amusement shone in his eyes.

"Well, I know that now," I said. "You should announce yourself when you walk in somewhere."

"I didn't know anyone was home."

"You thought Harper was watching herself?"

"I mean, she does seem pretty independent for a baby. I saw her change the oil on the car yesterday."

"Yeah, but she always forgets to coat the gasket."

He grinned and then looked down to where the remains of the lasagna we had for dinner were spread across the floor.

"Sorry," he said, grin vanishing. "Sorry about that." He grabbed the roll of paper towels off the counter. I crouched down to help him clean.

"Were you eating cold lasagna?" I asked, scooping pasta remains into the Tupperware while he wiped up the trail of sauce.

"Yeah?"

"But the microwave is right there. Love yourself."

"I like it better cold."

"What?"

"Warm lasagna is too"—he waved a hand—"disorganized."

"*What?*" I repeated.

"It holds together better cold. It's more cohesive."

"Are you working on some kind of seminar about this?"

"Yup. Yeah. I am, actually. I'm the world's foremost cold-lasagna scholar."

August glanced up at me, and I couldn't explain it, but I was

struck with that brand-new-box-of-crayons feeling. Every color pristine, every as-of-yet-uncolored picture a tantalizing possibility.

Acadia High School was by no means huge—there were ninety-six kids in the upcoming senior class. Over the course of my past eleven years in the Acadia school system, I had had a handful of crushes. In seventh grade, Peyton Simms and I went to the Valentine’s dance together (we shared one awkward slow dance and then retreated to opposite sides of the gym). Sophomore year, Logan Turner and I hung out a few times, and kissed by the baseball field in Fairview Park (we called it quits a few days later).

That was okay. Not everyone could manage to spin out new romantic entanglements every other week like Brit did, or get together with their actual literal future spouse in high school, like Heather and Kyle. I was so busy with band, and school stuff, college applications, work. I could wait until college.

But I wasn’t super opposed to the idea of *not* doing that, should the opportunity arise.

August gave the floor a final swipe and then tore off another sheet of paper towel, handing it to me. My fingers were covered in sauce from picking up pasta pieces.

“So, uh.” I wiped my hands as he picked up the Tupperware and took it over to the trash can to empty it. “How long are you visiting for?”

“Not sure,” he said, his back to me.

“Kind of open-ended, then?”

“Sort of.” A pause. “It’s just temporary.”

“Like for the summer?”

Brit would inevitably make a joke about *summer lovin’*. She would be relentless. I was okay with that.

Before August could respond, there was a cry, suddenly, from Harper’s room. I got to my feet. “Be right back,” I said, pitching the paper towel into the trash and heading away.

He was gone when I emerged.

I checked the living room and out the back door. Shepherd bounded up, tail wagging, and I stepped aside to let him in. He followed at my heels as I opened the basement door and stuck my head downstairs, although there was nothing much down there. Just a washer and dryer by the stairs, and some old tools and piles of drywall—Kyle had been saying for ages that he was going to fix it up down there, make it into a proper room, but he hadn’t quite gotten around to it yet.

The place was empty. Except for Harper and Shepherd, I was alone. August didn’t return for the rest of the evening; he was still gone when Heather and Cadence returned.

“Jammy time,” Heather said, ushering Cadence toward her room and then plopping her purse down on the kitchen table to riffle through it.

“August was here earlier,” I said, trying to sound offhand but probably failing.

“Ah, sorry,” she replied. “I forgot to give you a heads-up he might be around. Kyle said you guys ran into each other the other night,

so hopefully it wasn't a total surprise." She located her wallet, thumbed through it. "I, uh, didn't want to say anything before about him coming because some stuff was still up in the air about it. But that's where Kyle was at, when he was gone last weekend. Getting August."

"Oh."

She handed me some money for the evening. "Hey, do you think you could do me a favor?"

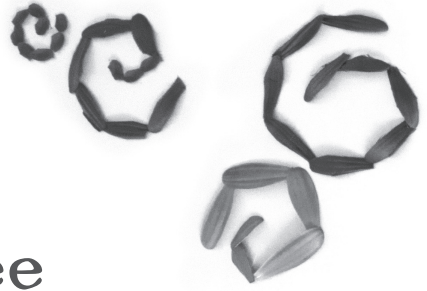
"Sure."

I had been babysitting for the Conlins for almost three years now, ever since she and Kyle and Cadence had moved into the house two doors down from us. There were very few favors I wouldn't do for Heather.

"Maybe you could help ease him in here a little bit, introduce him to some people. Help him get settled in so when school starts he's not going in cold, not knowing anybody?"

I bit back the word *temporary* and nodded instead. "Yeah, sure."

Heather looked relieved. "Great. Thanks. That would be great."



three

Sophie:

Is it hard being a new person in school?

Ciara:

Yes but no

I mean everyone is new at the start of college

So at the very least, you're all in the same boat

Sophie:

How did you make friends?

Ciara:

I honestly don't know

Sophie:

Super helpful

Ciara:

No, I just mean it kind of happens organically I guess

If you're lucky

There are people in your classes that you just start
talking to

People in your dorm that you see a lot

Going to events on campus, joining clubs and stuff

Sophie:

You have to be good at talking to people though

Ciara:

Good thing I am

And you are too

Sophie:

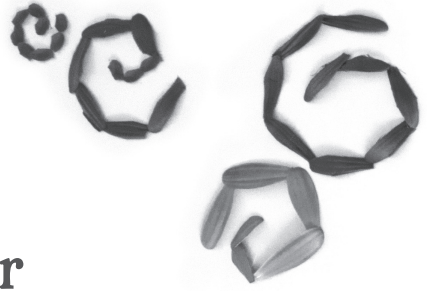
You think?

Ciara:

Yeah

Who do you think you learned it from?





four

I had gotten a job working at Safeway last year and had boosted my hours for the summer. I wanted to work as much as I could before band stuff started up again, so I was dedicating a fair amount of time these days to bagging groceries and collecting carts and restocking shelves.

I was helping an older lady load her grocery bags into her car, a couple of days after babysitting for Harper, when I heard voices nearby. I recognized one—it was Mrs. Benson, from the booster club. She taught at Harrison, the elementary school. Her voice carried, which was an excellent quality in a fourth-grade teacher, and also in an eavesdropping target.

Not that I was trying to eavesdrop. But I couldn't help it.

"You know, it's a huge honor, it's incredible, I get that," she was

saying. “But good Lord, the money that goes into this thing, it’s unfathomable.”

“How’s the fundraising going?”

“Honestly? I know everyone thought it was a long shot when they were getting the audition together, but I wish we had started then. With that kind of lead, we’d be all right, but as it stands . . . there’s so much more to go. Michelle, you have no idea. These kids would have to sell candy bars to the moon and back.”

I finished with the bags and shut the trunk. Quietly enough to not draw attention.

“Thank you, sweetie,” the older lady said, and I smiled as I took her cart and steered it back toward the cart return outside the front of the store. Slow enough so I could keep listening.

“There’s more to come, though,” the other woman—Michelle—said. “Sponsorships, July Fourth, the sports banquet.”

“Yeah, but we really need to get creative. If we do what we always do, we’ll get the same we always got, which is just enough to fund those little trips here and there. Honestly, coming from Indianapolis, I just don’t think she gets how chipping in two grand is impossible for most of these kids. And there’s only so much money we can wring out of the people and businesses in town.”

“She” was undeniably Meredith Hill, the band director, who had taken over for Mr. Haverty, the long-standing director of the Marching Pride of Acadia. He retired four years ago, and Ms. Hill had come from Indianapolis to replace him.

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” the other woman said.

Mrs. Benson nodded. “Keep your fingers crossed. I’d hate for

them to have to pull out. It's happened before apparently, with other schools, but . . . I know Sam, at least, is so, so excited to go. I'm sure Becca is too."

"Oh yeah."

"Well, keep it between us, and I'll keep you posted."

"Sounds good. Night, Jen."

"Night."

I slotted the cart into the one in front of it and headed inside.

I volunteered at the library on Saturday mornings.

It wasn't a huge place—just one room, with the checkout desk in the middle. The general-fiction shelves sat to the right in tall rows, with the nonfiction shelves lining the room. The kids and teen books were tucked on the other side, in each of the corners.

The head librarian was named Mel. She was probably mid-fifties, and humorless, but she knew everything there was to know about books. I'd swear there wasn't a book in there she hadn't read.

She knows everything, Flora said. *She's like the internet.*

She was possibly better than the internet sometimes. I'd volunteered there since freshman year, and Mel had never once redirected to an ad for male enhancement.

When I got to work this morning, I took a seat in the Kids Korner.

Why do we have to spell it like that? Why can't we just spell "corner" the normal way? I had asked, when Mel first announced her plan to redesign the children's area.

It's for kids, Mel had answered simply.

Yeah, even more reason we should spell it right, don't you think?

She looked at me, deadpan: *It's cute.*

So every few months I hand-lettered a new seasonal banner with KIDS KORNER outlined on it in sparkle paint, and it was cute, I guess—if an inconsistent foundation in spelling could be considered cute.

The Kids Korner faced the teen area in the opposite corner, which had its own banner, although it didn't change to match the seasons. It was a permanent fixture, a large purple sign with cutout bubble letters attached to it spelling out the words TEEN ZONE.

The Teen Zone sign had appeared after I started volunteering there. Mel never discussed it, but it was a source of great delight among my friends—so much so that we christened the Cunninghams' pole shed, where we did the majority of our hanging out, Teen Zone 2.

After all, it's where the teens are at, Brit had said. It's the zone for teens. We almost can't exist in any other kind of zone. Child Zone? Forget it. Adult Zone? Fuck that noise. I am for the Teen Zone only.

She also often used it as a euphemism: *I want to put my Teen Zone on his Teen Zone. I want her all up in my Teen Zone.*

Today I sat across from the non-euphemistic, original Teen Zone with my copy of *The College Collective*. The library was pretty empty for a Saturday morning—a couple of people wandering the fiction shelves, one tween girl thumbing through a stack of novels in the Teen Zone. But there were no kids to populate Kids Korner, so I flipped open my book.

The College Collective was a website whose college application timeline I had adopted. Unlike some of the other sites that guided more broadly, they broke it down month by month for your last two years of high school. Things to consider, action steps you should take, tips and helpful suggestions. I sent away for their hard copy handbook at the beginning of sophomore year and received a thick spiral-bound book with a multicultural band of smiling kids on the front, arms slung around one another. It was well-worn now, I had thumbed through it so often.

I had been one full year under the College Collective's guidance (it started with SOPHOMORE YEAR, JUNE), and, accordingly, I felt like I was in good shape. I had taken the SAT and ACT early, with plenty of time to retake (I knew I could do better on math). I had created my general list of schools, and I was prepared to narrow them down this summer to a finalized list that I would begin targeting closely. I had focused on my grades this past year (junior year transcript is essential), and my extracurriculars (homecoming committee, band). I volunteered (the library), and I had a leadership position (MPASFC), and work experience (the grocery store).

Today I was staring at the chapter labeled JUNIOR YEAR, JUNE–AUGUST: THE EVE OF SENIOR YEAR, but my mind kept wandering. I couldn't help but glance toward the bulletin board tacked up between a set of shelves in the Teen Zone. Right in the center was a clipping from the front page of the *Acadia News*, an old edition that had been pinned up for some time. MARCHING PRIDE OF ACADIA SELECTED FOR TOURNAMENT OF ROSES PARADE.

No part of the *College Collective* handbook covered how to raise the money for something like that. It had tips for financial aid and scholarship opportunities, and although I definitely needed both of those things for college to be a remote possibility, the money I needed right now was for a different purpose.

It was a huge honor—bigger even than marching in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, which Acadia did in 2007. We were a small high school, but it’s not like there was much else to do but sports or marching anyway, and everyone pretty much participated in one or the other or both. Sure, there was other stuff—Flora did art club, Terrance was in the school play last year—but the band and the football team ranked first and second in order of importance. (Although the football team probably saw it as the other way around.)

I thought about what I overheard Mrs. Benson saying in the parking lot the other day. *These kids would have to sell candy bars to the moon and back.*

I hadn’t really thought about the possibility of not raising the money. The booster club would pull through. They always did.

But maybe she was right to be worried. Nothing we’d done had ever cost as much before, and if we did all the same things we always did . . . maybe we wouldn’t make it.

My thoughts were interrupted by the pound of little-kid feet, and when I looked up, Cadence had appeared, dragging August behind her. I waved when he caught my eye.

“Sophie, what should we read that’s good?” Cadence said.

“They’re all good.”

“*Especially* good.”

I smiled, setting aside the *College Collective* handbook (would Mel endorse spelling it *Kollege Kollektive*, or was it no longer cute when higher education was concerned?) and getting to my feet. As I helped Cadence pick out a few books, I heard a baby-pitched squeal from near the front desk and saw Heather going after Harper, who hadn’t quite mastered her center of gravity yet, having only just begun to take on walking. Heather scooped her up and waved when she saw me. She gestured over to the general-fiction shelves and then retreated with Harper in her arms.

“Let’s read, Uncle August,” Cadence said after she had made her selections, tugging on August’s arm until he sank into a nearby yellow beanbag chair. She shoved a book in his hands and squashed in next to him.

They read, and I flipped back open to JUNIOR YEAR, JUNE–AUGUST. But really I was listening in on the random voices August was giving the characters, after Cadence complained that there wasn’t enough variation between them.

“The elephant can’t sound the same as the pig. They should sound different.”

August gave the pig a super deep voice, and the elephant an indeterminable accent.

They had read through a few by the time Heather came over.

“Okay, let’s pick out the ones we want to take home,” she said, gesturing Cadence up and following her back to one of the low shelves crammed with picture books.

August watched them for a moment from the beanbag chair, and then stood, stretched, and moved to look at a shelf nearer to me.

“So where was the elephant supposed to be from?” I said, because I was pretty sure he wasn’t interested in browsing picture books.

“Scotland,” he said, like it was obvious, and when I raised an eyebrow, “Scotland adjacent?”

I smiled, first at him and then down at the kids on the *College Collective* cover. I knew their names from the photo caption inside—*Jeff, Jackie, Sonja, Han, and Fadia enjoy time out on the quad*. I liked to imagine that Jeff and Jackie had dated briefly, but she left him for Sonja. The smile she and Sonja were sharing was just too knowing.

This didn’t seem like a solid avenue of conversation with August. At least not yet.

(I had mentioned it to Brit once, and she took one look and said, *Oh yeah, Jackie and Sonja have totally boned down*.)

“You disappeared the other night,” I said after a pause. “You should’ve left a note.”

“Why?”

“So I would know if you were really gone or not. I thought you might have been waiting to jump out at me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it’s funny. Well, it’s not funny if you’re the person being jumped at, but it’s funny if you’re the person doing the jumping.”

“You speak from experience?”

“I used to pull that shit on my sister all the time when we were

kids. Hiding in closets, or under the bed so I could reach out for her foot, like in a horror movie.”

“I’ve never done that.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” I said. “Anyway, if you’d left a note, I would’ve known when you were coming back.” He was looking at me strangely. “Not that I was, like. Anticipating. Your return.” I swallowed. “It’s just polite.”

He nodded. “Next time, I’ll leave a note.”

“Good.” I liked the idea of there being a next time.

His lips twitched, eyes shining. “Dear Sophie, mind your own business. Fondest wishes, August.”

“Rude.”

“I said ‘fondest wishes.’”

I fought a smile.

I thought of Heather’s words the other night—*Maybe you could help ease him in here a little bit, introduce him to some people?*

“So,” I said. “This girl from school, Tegan Wendall? She’s having this thing tonight and a bunch of people are going, so, uh, if you wanted to come . . . you know. You could.”

“You’re asking me to a party?”

“Yeah.” But that felt too much like a declaration. “I mean, no. But yes. I’m inviting you, but it’s not like, *with me*, it’s just . . . if you want to meet new people or whatever.”

For a moment I’d swear August’s face said yes, but then his mouth said: “I probably shouldn’t. But thanks.”

My mouth replied: “Cool, yeah, maybe next time,” but I’m not

exactly sure how my face responded. August wouldn't know either, though, because he had already turned toward Cadence, who had returned with a large stack of books in her arms. Heather had corralled Harper and was heading toward the checkout desk.

"See you around, Soph!" Heather called over one shoulder, as Cadence beamed up at August.

"I got more to take home!" she said.

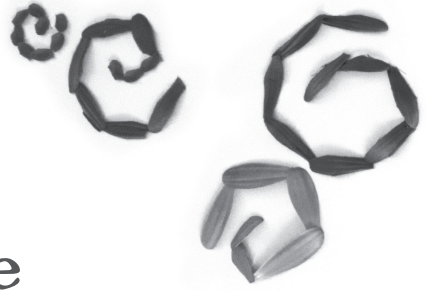
August reached for them.

"I can do it!" She turned away quickly, tightening her arms around the books.

"You're right, that's way too big a stack for me anyway," he said to Cadence, and then to me: "See you later."

"Fondest wishes!" I called.

He grinned, quick and bright, and then they were heading away.



five

“Those shoes are stupid,” Brit said, gesturing to Flora’s high-heeled sandals. “You’re gonna regret it.”

“I will not. I look cute.”

“We’re literally biking there. At least wear sneakers to ride.”

“I’m gonna sit on Sophie’s handlebars.”

“You know Sophie has terrible balance and you’re gonna end up on my handlebars, and I’m not letting you on my handlebars when you can obviously bike yourself with the right fricking shoes on. Sophie tell her—Where are you going?”

I was already crossing the lawn. “To Heather’s.”

“Why? She won’t drive us.”

“To see if August wants to come.”

“I thought he told you no.”

Technically, it was an *I probably shouldn’t*. I didn’t know how to

parse that exactly, but I figured it was worth one more shot, just in case. I told Heather I would introduce him to people. This was due diligence.

“Just gimme a minute,” I said, cutting across the neighboring yard to the Conlins’ house.

Brit huffed and set her bike down to follow. Flora carefully picked her way after us, in her platform sandals and short shorts—the kind that were *more ass than short*, according to Brit.

“This is Kyle’s secret brother?” Flora asked.

“He’s not a *secret brother*,” I hissed.

“When you have a brother no one knows about, that’s a secret brother,” Brit said.

I could see the TV on through the front window. I stepped up to the door and knocked.

“No one say ‘secret brother.’”

Shepherd barked from inside, followed by the sound of some shuffling.

“Clandestine sibling,” Brit whispered, before the door swung open.

“Hey, girls.” Heather had Harper in her arms, who was squirming to get away from her.

“Hey. We’re going to Tegan’s, and I was wondering if August wanted to come.”

Heather’s face lit up. “Yes! He does!”

“Really? ’Cause he told Sophie he didn’t.” Brit wasn’t much for second chances.

“He’ll be right out.”

August shuffled out a few moments later.

“Have fun! Back by curfew!” Heather called, and shut the door definitively.

We all stood for a moment. It wasn’t uncomfortable per se. But it wasn’t super comfortable either.

“This is Brit and Flora,” I said to August, and “This is August,” to them.

“Nice to meet you,” Flora said.

“That’s what I’ve heard,” he replied, and my eyes snapped toward him.

“That was my joke! I said that when we met!”

“Did you?” His face was totally stoic, but there was something alight in his eyes.

“I did.”

“Oh. So you own the copyright?”

“Yes. That shit is in the Library of Congress.”

He smiled, and it was a moment before I realized that Flora and Brit were both staring at us.

“Uh, so—”

“You got a bike?” Brit said.

“No.” August looked back at the house. “Maybe Kyle—”

“You can borrow mine!” Flora exclaimed. “I’ll ride on the handlebars.”

Tegan Wendall’s house was just a little ways outside of town, off 49. It was nice—surrounded by trees, set back a bit with a big yard.

We left our bikes propped against the garage and walked toward the back, where there was a fire pit with some plastic lawn chairs arranged around it. A crowd had already formed.

It was almost entirely people from band—Tegan was on the color guard—and I knew basically everyone, but we immediately zeroed in on one person in particular.

Dashiell Cunningham was standing a little apart from the groups that had formed, clutching a plastic cup. To most, he would appear disinterested in his surroundings, but I could see the tightness around his mouth, which eased immediately when Brit ran up and pushed him playfully with both hands.

He barely jostled. He was the size of a small mountain.

Dash got all the height and Terrance got everything else, I had heard someone say of the Cunningham brothers once. Brit had shut that down with a simple but pointed *Excuse me?* and as such, I had never heard it again.

Dash, Brit, and I had been in class together since preschool. I remember him bringing a plastic dump truck into show-and-tell back then, holding it under one arm and looking out at the class with solemn eyes while the teacher gently urged him to tell us more about it.

“It’s a truck,” he had said.

“What kind of truck?”

“A good truck.”

That was Dash. *The most serious four-year-old I’ve ever met*, my mom would say. *Always looked like he was trying to solve the world’s problems.*

She and Aunt Denise would trade off watching us sometimes, when the other had to stay late at work. *But when Dash smiled*, Mom would always add, *it was like the sun coming out from behind the clouds.*

Tonight Dash nodded at August when I introduced him.

"Where's Terrance?" Brit said.

"Getting drinks," Dash replied.

"Good idea." Brit turned to us. "Dash is covered. We need boring sodas for Sophie and Flora." She pointed at August. "What about you?"

"Surprise me," he said.

I followed Brit into the house, because a surprise-me drink from her could be lethal.

"So what's going on with you and the secret brother?" she asked when we reached the kitchen. She started uncapping a two-liter as I set out some cups.

"Nothing," I said.

She eyed me for a moment. "But you want there to be." She raised and lowered her eyebrows several times as she began pouring drinks. "You want to get your Teen Zone on his Teen Zone."

"Brit."

"Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're not right."

"That's a certified Sophie lie right there," she said, and forced two cups of soda into my hand. "Take that to your boyfriend. Tell him you're the surprise."

"I hate you."

“Now that’s a certified Brit *I love you*,” she replied, which was entirely accurate.

At any party or school thing, we always managed to carve out our own little spot. This time, it was at a wooden picnic table back by the trees, a little ways from the fire pit. Close enough that there was still light, but not so close that it was too hot. One of the drum majors, Jason Sosa, was nearby, strumming on an acoustic guitar, while two girls from the woodwinds—Alexa Valenti and Jessica Walsh—watched lovingly. Brit rolled her eyes at me in a *Get a load of them* kind of way, and I acted like I didn’t remember that she had a momentary crush on Jason Sosa in the seventh grade, and one on Alexa Valenti in eighth.

Terrance and I told everyone about the booster club meeting, which Brit pretended to find really boring. I had had to convince her—hard—to even march this year.

“It’s a huge commitment,” she had said, sitting on the wall out by the athletic fields, playing slapjack with Dash. “I hate commitment. Anyway, you know I need to train.” She had been spending more and more time at the track or in the gym, conditioning. She was trying to shave time off her 200 meter.

“Training sounds like a commitment,” I said.

She made a face.

“You’re a good drummer. We need you.”

“One more drum’s not gonna make a difference.”

“Brit.” I blinked. “Please.”

She had stared back for a long moment and then rolled her eyes.
“Jesus. Okay. Fine.”

“You gotta teach me how you did that,” Dash said with a grin.

Tonight, we seemed to be the only people talking band-related stuff, if the snatches of conversation from the surrounding groups were any indication. Jason Sosa probably wasn’t thinking about fundraising during yet another flaccid acoustic ballad.

“The July Fourth barbecue should be good,” I said, when we reached the end of our rundown. “But we need to be able to bring in some real money at Fall Fest.”

Terrance took a sip of his drink and looked at me innocently.
“Is this the year you guys finally win the Megan Pleasant contest?”

“That was *one time*,” Brit said. “In sixth grade. Let it go.”

“I’ll never forget those moves,” Terrance replied. “Brit looked like one of those inflatable guys at a car dealership. Sophie looked like a knife caught in a garbage disposal.”

“What did I look like?” Flora asked.

“Perfect, right?” Dash supplied.

“The best dancer ever seen by human eyes,” Brit guessed, before Terrance could answer.

“Who’s Megan Pleasant?” August said from next to me.

Terrance, probably about to expound on Flora’s talents as a dancer, froze. “Who is Megan—*Who*? Who is Megan Pleasant?” he repeated, expression aghast. He turned to me. “Who is this kid? Where did you find him?”

“She’s a singer,” I told August. “From Acadia. She’s pretty famous.”

"Never heard of her."

"'Gave You My Heartland'? 'Letters Home'?"

"Sorry."

"She was on TV," Flora said helpfully. "They play her stuff on the radio."

"What kind of music?"

"Country."

He grimaced. "Oh."

"It's not terrible."

"I've never heard a country song that doesn't suck."

"Maybe you haven't listened to the right ones," I said.

"I know a country song that doesn't suck," Brit interjected.

"Written by a small-town boy with big-city dreams—"

Terrance's eyes grew wide. "Everybody needs to shut up right now right this second."

A slow smile spread across Dash's face. "Brit, does it take place on a farm?"

"It sure does, Dashiell," Brit said. "Inexplicably."

"Does it involve . . . footwear?"

"Oh yes."

"Sneakers?"

"Nope."

"Flip-flops?"

"No."

Terrance stood up. "I'm leaving."

"Clogs," Dash said sagely.

“Not clogs, dear friend.”

“This is the last time you’ll ever see me,” Terrance said, and started away.

“Terrance wrote a country song when we were in middle school,” I told August.

“‘The Girl with the Brown Boots,’” Brit said with relish, and Terrance doubled back instantly.

“It was ‘The Girl with the Blue Boots’ and you know it. Her eyes were brown, her boots were blue, that’s the first damn line of the song, Brit.”

“‘The girl with the blue boooooooooots,’” Brit half yelled, half sang.

“I was ahead of my time!” Terrance said loudly, and then to August, at a lower decibel: “Man, I was ahead of my time, okay? A few years later, everybody starts doing the whole retro-throwback thing, and I was right there on the cusp of it. Just without the *proper respect*—”

“It’s great because there are so many rhymes for the word ‘boots,’” Brit said.

“—that a *true visionary* deserves—”

“Shoots,” I said, just as Flora said, “Roots.”

Dash: “Toots.”

Brit: “Flutes.”

“Cahoots?” August offered.

“Nah, that’s too good,” Dash said.

With that, Terrance turned and really left. I was worried that he

was actually mad, until he returned with the acoustic guitar that Jason Sosa had earlier. A quick glance around the backyard revealed that Jason and Alexa were now making out fervently by the shed.

Terrance planted himself on top of the picnic table, the guitar over one knee. “Fine. Let’s do this,” and he began to strum, and to sing—poorly, but with conviction—“‘Her eyes were brown, her boots were blue—’”

“Wait wait wait!” August held up a hand. “Can we guess the next line?”

Brit snorted. “You say that like you think the lyrics to ‘The Girl with the Blue Boots’ aren’t indelibly burned into our brains for all eternity.”

“You all know this song?”

“We’re literally going to meet Jesus with the words to this song still in our heads,” Dash said.

“That being said,” Brit added, “I’ll pay you a thousand dollars if you get it right.”

Brit had probably seventeen dollars to her name. She went through money like it was water. But it was also a pretty safe bet.

August thought for a long moment, and then: “‘She had blond hair . . . and blue shoes?’”

Terrance looked offended. “That doesn’t even scan. And why would I mention the shoes twice in a row?”

“Like the real lyric is so much better,” I said.

“Hey!” he squawked.

“Okay, what is it?” August asked.

Terrance began again: “Her eyes were brown, her boots were blue. The cat meowed, the cow said moo—”

“Wait, what?” August said. “*What?*”

“He had to set the scene,” Brit explained. “You see, the animal sounds establish the fact that we’re on a *farm*—”

“I was a visionary!” Terrance bellowed. “UNDERMINED IN MY PRIME!”

“Oh man.” August put a hand over his mouth, but the crinkles at the corners of his eyes gave away his smile.

“You have to hear the whole thing. The lyrics don’t make sense out of context,” Terrance insisted.

“Be careful, though,” I said, leaning toward August a little. “If you listen to the song all the way through, you die in seven days.”

“It’s true,” Dash said. “We’re all dead right now.”

August grinned full-out now.

The song didn’t get better from there. The bridge—the height of “rhymes with boots”—was especially something.

Terrance finished with a flourish and looked at August, eyebrows raised expectantly. “What do you think?”

August looked conflicted—half like he was seriously considering it, half like he wanted to burst out laughing. Finally he spoke: “I mean. It’s so bad it’s almost good again.”

Terrance paused. “I’ll take it!” And then yelled, “ONE MORE TIME!”

We let out a cheer.