

MISS
you
LOVE
you
HATE
you
BYE

ABBY SHER

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX · NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

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Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Elizabeth H. Clark
First edition, 2020

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2018057872

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For Grano
you're an amazing friend
thank you for putting me in my place

*and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid*

*So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.*

—**AUDRE LORDE**

October something.
All I know is it's Tuesday.
And I know that because it smells like tacos
even though it's only 8:30 in the morning.
Yum ☹️

My dearest Hank,

Greetings from the loony bin!

Wish you were here!

Just came back from the shuffleboard court and have but moments to spare before my personal masseuse visits me. Did I mention that each morning I'm greeted by a chorus of delicate sparrows, I've learned how to windsurf on a rainbow, and everyone here is heavily sedated on stiff doses of antipsychotics?

Yeah.

I know it's been a while and we never really got to say goodbye properly. I also know you're the reason why I'm stuck here and I'm feeling all sorts of ways about that.

Just to be clear, I will always love you.

But more than that,

my dearest Hank,

I HATE you.

CHAPTER 1

pepe le meowsers

I STILL DON'T CONSIDER MYSELF A CRUEL PERSON. BUT I DID HAVE a moment—or really, several—when I was ready to strangle that cat.

Zoe says that Pepe le Meowsers *chose* her. Her mom joined some mega-gym-spa that had just landed in our town. Zoe went for a tour and on the bulletin board she saw a note about a litter of newborn kittens that were available for adoption. It said if they didn't find homes soon, they'd most likely be put to sleep. By the end of one fateful Zumba class, Zoe was caught in a herd of women, all doing cool-down squats around a plastic crate with five squirming tabbies. As she said, maybe it was just from over-exertion, but when she saw how tiny and fuzzy and malleable these small creatures were, she felt faint. She literally *swooned*.

“I mean, what the what? I’m not even a cat person,” she reported to me twenty-four hours later as I sat in her basement. Actually, Zoe wasn’t talking just to me. She was declaring her newfound feline love to the world—perched on a metal stool in front of a sky-blue fitted sheet. I was holding her phone, filming her testimonial and trying desperately to stifle a sneeze.

“There was just something so *primal* and yet indescribable connecting us in that moment,” Zoe recounted. “I don’t know. All of a sudden, I was lying on my back and the whole gym was sort of turning this peachy-sunset color and fading away. And then . . .”

It was as if Pepe knew she was in distress. Apparently, he leaped over the side of the crate and risked his life tripping on a StairMaster machine, then scrambled up Zoe’s arm, gumming her face, pawing at her eyes. She still had the tiny pink scratches to prove it. Three jagged lines etched into her left cheek. She also had a splotch of blush on her nose and whiskers drawn on her face in what looked like navy eyeliner.

Zoe Grace Hammer and I had been best friends since our moms bumped into each other while pushing us in strollers. Or at least that’s how Zoe always relayed our past. She also claimed that we hid in the bathroom at nursery school and ate blue Play-Doh, but I have no recollection of that. I think that was either told to her or she made it up. Which I guess is the definition of anyone’s history, really.

I do not remember how Zoe and I met. Only that she was there, with her sparkling green eyes, already laughing. Waving her hands at me from across the room as the morning bell rang

on our first day of kindergarten. She had already dumped out all the wooden blocks onto the carpet for circle time and was using the empty toy bin as a boat. Her first-day-of-school dress was a patchwork pattern of every color in the rainbow. It was also tiny enough to fit a doll.

“Come here!” Zoe beckoned. “I’ll save you from the storm!”

Even though I had no idea what she was talking about, I heeded her call.

Our friendship didn’t grow or evolve. It was instantaneous. While the rest of our kindergarten class made their introductions, Zoe nested me in her lap, trying to tame my curly hair into a semidecent braid. Two hours later, she presented me with a pact of undying bestfriendhood. Of course, I said yes.

I learned how to sing from Zoe.

I learned how to do a cartwheel from Zoe.

I learned how to melt broken crayons and sneak jelly beans in the sides of my cheeks from Zoe.

All vital skills that made my life feel more colorful and vibrant than ever before.

When Zoe came to play at my house, my mom liked to say that she “brought the party with her.” She always had matching Froot Loops necklaces or glitter tattoos that we had to put on right away. She would kick off her shoes and twirl me around and before I knew it, we were mixing ingredients for slime or having a naked dance party in my room or both at the same time. Zoe was pure electricity—darting and leaping everywhere, because walking was too predictable and slow.

To be honest, I preferred going to Zoe's house—with a drawer just for Fruit Roll-Ups and framed Disney pictures everywhere. Her bedroom had so many pillows and ruffles, I felt like we would both float away on a unicorn sneeze or tumble into a vat of cotton candy. Everything was enchanted. Especially Zoe. She was an Irish firecracker, with stick-straight ebony hair that shimmered and huge eyes that took in everything. Her nose was barely bigger than a thimble. As an infant, she'd been the cherubic face of BabyFresh Ultra Diapers and made a buttload of money in some car commercial about antilock brakes. Also, she got to sing the jingle for IPopUPop microwave popcorn and traveled to fifteen states with the national touring company of *Annie 2*.

There was a whole photo album of her commercial work in her living room, but Zoe didn't like to talk about it much. She once told me that the day she met me was the day she decided she was done running off to auditions and memorizing tap dance routines. She just wanted to stay home and be *a plain ol' kid, like you*.

Which I chose to take as a compliment.

I'd always wanted to be Zoe's twin, though I was far from it. Zoe came up to my shoulder—if I was slouching. Where she was petite and wiry, I was a mess of loose limbs. If I had to describe myself, I'd say I was mildly awkward with grand intentions. Mud-brown hair to my chin that was somewhere between wavy and unmanageable, a nose that took up too much face real estate, and a unibrow that was hazardous. I did like that my eyes

were the same sea-glass turquoise as my mom's. Also, that I wore mismatched socks on purpose. I was an avid recycler, and one of my teachers called my punctuation "exemplary!?!;,"

But I longed to be more like Zoe. From the moment I met her, I did basically anything Zoe told me to do—sit, stand, lie down, roll over. At night, I tried to train my nose to slope up like hers at the very end. I practiced walking with my feet turned out to match her ballet strides and joined the track team briefly to literally chase after her. When we had sleepovers, I memorized the stripy patterns in her mint-green wallpaper, as if they could lead me closer inside. She started calling me *Hank* instead of Hannah, because she said it gave me more personality. I had to agree. Zoe was the sun, and I would gladly orbit her in whichever direction she chose.

Here's a pathetic secret that I have no interest in holding on to anymore: In seventh grade, when I was developing faster than Zoe, I even shaved my lady parts, so we'd look the same *down there*. Which turned out to be the itchiest, most unrewarding experience ever.

Until maybe this moment.

It was the day before our first day of junior year at Meadowlake High. I hadn't seen Zoe in practically two months. And now I'd walked into some situation that felt a little bit like cat porn. Zoe had on a loose gray tank top and what looked like the hot-pink polka-dotted short shorts that she wore for our first-grade ballet recital. Once upon a pirouette, I had matching ones too. (Just to clarify—I wasn't in the recital, because it was by audition

and I sucked at ballet. But my mom knew how much I wanted to be like Zoe and sewed me some facsimile short shorts out of retired bedsheets.)

“I just felt so alone and misunderstood until I met you, sweet Pepe,” Zoe declared now. “I really didn’t know how or if I’d even make it through this horror. You are my *hero*.”

Zoe tipped her head back and started kissing the animal all over his body. He squirmed and wriggled, and his hind legs looked as if he were trying to run a marathon. Then she cradled him like a baby and hummed a lullaby until his ears sagged. “Ooh, you see? He loves me too. He really does,” she cooed.

I know it wasn’t the cat’s fault. That thing was probably just as stunned as I was by all this smoochy-faced madness. I just felt allergic to everything inside this basement—the dander, the drama, the long watery gaze that Zoe fixed on this multicolored hairball.

To be fair, Zoe had a lot going on. She had been away basically all summer. First, she spent a month by the Jersey Shore with her grandparents, who were awesome, but they ate dinner at 5:00 P.M. and didn’t have a great Internet connection. While Zoe was wandering the coastline, her dad, Travis, moved out of their family house. I didn’t know much about his new place, other than it was twenty minutes away and next to a car wash. Zoe described it as “a beige coffin.” Then she went to performing arts camp, where she was cast as the scarecrow in *The Wiz* and made out with three different Munchkins. Alli (her mom) picked Zoe up on the last day of camp—the night after an “epic”

cast party—and took her straight to a weeklong mother-daughter self-empowerment retreat in the Catskills that involved a lot of sage and a ginger juice cleanse that was “energizing, but in an angry way.”

I only knew all this because Zoe posted pics on a special secret Tumblr called Zoozoo4u. She was documenting all of her feelings about life, her parents’ separation, and those sexy Munchkins. It was supposed to be password protected so Alli and Travis couldn’t see it. Only, the password was zoozoo4u too, so that wasn’t much protection.

Zoe loved putting it all out there on social media. She’d even made an Insta account for the two of us called ZoenHank, where she put up pictures of us cheek to cheek or trying on granny glasses at the drugstore. I loved that she did this for us, but I never got into it as much as she did. Maybe I’d watched one too many scary movies about private eyes or online trolls. Something ooked me out about dumping all my thoughts into the ether for some interweb audience to behold. Yes, I was the last holdout from my grade, or my hemisphere really. And the only teenager I knew who owned a dollhouse. But still.

Even though we were less than an hour apart for most of the summer, Zoe and I had communicated mainly through photo captions and hashtags. She said talking would be “too intense,” and I wanted to respect that. Also, I didn’t have much to report from the home front. I’d been home doing my usual summer job for the past six weeks: arts and crafts counselor at the Y. The most excitement I had was one day when a camper almost choked on

some googly eyes. Also, I went to the pool, and learned how to finger knit, which is just slightly less thrilling than it sounds.

Yeah, it was a typical boring summer until I got a text message from Zoe a half hour ago that said:

we're home! wanna come by and meet my new lover?

The first thing I saw when I came over was a hulking green dumpster in the driveway and a lopsided stack of cardboard boxes next to it. Someone had scrawled TRAVIS on the sides of each box in brazen red Sharpie. The *T*s looked so ferocious, as if they might eat all the other letters. Alli was humming while bent over a milk crate of cassette tapes, and I knew I should say *Hi* and *How ya doing* but I didn't have all the words ready yet, so I stole into the basement through the side door.

All I could see was what was missing. The gray beat-up couch where we'd made forts was gone. So was the wooden coffee table where we'd spilled nail polish remover and taken off a blob of finish. And the red easel where I'd painted such childhood masterpieces as *Upside-Down Rainbow*, *Upside-Down Rainbow 2*, and *Today, with Rainbow*.

Of course, Zoe was the only one with any real talent in drawing. She drew me these hilarious stick figures with huge eyes, saying silly things like, *Welcome to planet Marzoompf, may I take your coat?* or *Hey! You look like a fish I once dated*. Together, we had plans to start an art gallery that also served potato pancakes. Or else we were going to write a book called *Have You Seen My Nosehair Named Larry?* (based on a true story). I was in charge of the writing and I still had all the pages in a purple folder in the top drawer of my

desk at home. Zoe was in charge of the illustrations. Which—from the looks of it—were now in a dumpster.

Everything that had been in here was gone. There were no plastic bins of markers, Play-Doh, and decapitated Barbies. There was no Leaning Tower of Board Games on the shelves above the washing machine. What I missed most of all was the Powerpuff Girls drum kit and the disco ball . . . catching those last slips of streetlamp light when we convinced her parents to let us stay up just one more hour.

“What happened to the—?” I started to ask.

“I know, right?” Zoe said. “It’s just too sad.”

“Did he take everything with him?”

“Who? Travis? Ha!” Zoe coughed out a bitter laugh. “No. He has nothing in his new place.” She looked around the shadowy basement with a frown. “This is just Alli’s whole purging idea. *Start over with simplicity* or whatever that decluttering self-help guru she bought into on that retreat said.”

I felt like I’d just been purged of most of my vocabulary.

“Wow,” I said again. “That sounds . . .” I didn’t want to end my sentence with *dismal*, *horrible*, or *scarring*. But those were the only adjectives I could dig up at the moment.

“Ooh! But I did save one thing for you!” Zoe said. She ran to the basement stairs and brought back a lavender-colored journal with a glittery unicorn on the cover.

“My nana actually gave this to me a while ago, but you’re the real writer, so . . .” She pushed it into my hands. I felt bad that I hadn’t brought her anything.

“Thank you. I tried to make you one of those tie-dyed headbands, but it came out supersplotchy. But maybe we could . . . I mean, would it help if you stayed at my place for a few nights?” I offered.

“Oh, you’re the bestest, Hank. No, that wouldn’t help anything.” My face must have registered as insulted because she followed that up quickly with, “I mean, thank you. It would *help*, but there’s just too much going on here right now, including—bah!”

Apparently, Pepe had plenty to say. He was purring and batting at Zoe’s dark bangs like they were catnip. It looked like a horrible game to me, but Zoe had now transformed from sullen back into camera-ready pep. “I’m sorry,” she gushed. “I really do want to catch up about everything and hear about your summer, but can you just press *PLAY* while he’s letting me hold him? I mean, can you even believe the cuteness happening right this very second?”

She held up Pepe in front of me, so I could see his terrified, unextraordinary face. He yelped wildly, clawing at the wisp of air between us. “I mean, the stripes and the whiskers,” she explained.

“Yup,” I got out before sneezing three times in rapid succession. Zoe tucked the cat back into her chest and wrapped her arms around him protectively. “I swear I’d breastfeed him if I could. Did you know hundreds of thousands of animals go starving every day?”

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes.

“It’s so sad. The woman who brought the litter in is from the

Ukraine and she was telling us these horror stories about how cats are abused there and left to roam . . . and while she was telling us all this, Pepe was just clinging to me, yowling. Like he could hear what she was saying. It was just so *tragic*.” Zoe’s eyes puddled.

“Got it,” I said with a cough. Not that I didn’t care. I just felt too short of breath and displaced. Zoe knew I couldn’t stand to be around cats. We’d even once promised that if we didn’t find respectable partners by the time we turned thirty, we’d move in together and adopt a Labradoodle, a ferret, or a baby—really anything but a cat. I guess that deal meant a lot more to me than to her.

“Ugh, you really are allergic.” She sighed. More annoyed than remorseful though. “Okay, we’ll be quick. Are you ready for your close-up, Monsieur Meowsers?”

Zoe backed herself up onto the stool and shook out her dark mane while I wiped my drippy nose on the bottom of my T-shirt. Pepe got busy climbing up her neck and gnawing on her nose. Then draping himself around her milky-white throat and tickling her with his fur until she shook with giggles.

“Are you getting all this?” Zoe squealed. “Come closer! Make sure you can see his tiny tongue. It’s just beyond.”

“Uh-huh,” I wheezed.

“I really feel like this amazing little creature *chose* me,” she began. As she mused, I shut my eyes tight. Partly because they were burning and partly because I thought if I could just listen I’d hear my old friend. My sister-from-another-mother. My rock.

Zoe's voice was always so husky and clipped. She said what she meant and she meant what she said. She dared me to be bigger and wilder too. That's why I'd admired and adored her for most of our lives.

But even her voice sounded false now. It dipped and swirled as if she were following some melody I'd never heard before.

"Pepe le Meowsers," she serenaded. "In a world full of pain and uncertainty, will you be my *pussy* . . . cat?"

Pepe loved this line. He meowed on cue.

"Meeeoow!" Zoe chimed in, cackling with glee. The two of them sang over each other, louder and louder. As the cat licked Zoe's mouth, her nostrils, her dark silky hair. The cat was perfectly in tune with her too. Something I could never pull off when we sang together.

Which is why maybe I might have sort of fantasized about wrapping my itchy palms around that feline neck and squeezing until it all just stopped.

Now it's 9:55.

(Cuz, of course, had to stop writing for
"Morning Musings" Group.)

Okay, maybe hate is too harsh a word.

Despise? Abhor? Fiercely repelled by?

(I know, a preposition at the end of the sentence is a no-no, right?
You were always the greater grammarian, Hanky-Panky.)

Speaking of your superior brain . . .

Pop quiz!

When did you decide to abandon me like that?

- a. Yesterday.
- b. Today, with a side of tomorrow.
- c. It's been so long I don't remember.
- d. I still love you more than life itself.
- e. Sorry, I think you have the wrong Hank.

But seriously, betrayal takes a long time to plan. Was it a gradual realization or more of a sudden epiphany?

Speaking of epiphanies, there are three girls on my floor here who blacked out from starvation. Lucky ducks.

Coulda.

Woulda.

Shoulda.

I know that sounds horrific to you, but the way they describe it sounds absolutely dreamy to me. They are pitifully small and covered

in that malnourished-person body fur and here's the honest truth
(even though you don't deserve truth from me): I'm so freaken
jealous.

They hit that glorious rock-bottom moment.
That clear and definitive sign in the road that says
DO NOT ENTER.

That's all I wanted, really. I just wanted to faint or qualify as a
crisis in some way. I really still fantasize about all the lights going out
and maybe some thick straps pinning me down by the wrists.

Especially in the middle of a BodybyBernardo class.

With all those ladies clucking and sweating around me. Alli would
probably shit herself.

Ha!

But you couldn't even let me have that moment, Hank.

You just had to step in and "save the day," huh?

None of this is pretty, Hank.

You are not pretty.

I am not pretty.

Fuck pretty.

Even the word sounds airbrushed and unattainable. Isn't it hilarious
that right by the checkout counter with all the hangry impulse-buy
candy bars, you can get those tabloids with the horrifying pictures of

Lady Gaga's boobs falling or some Moroccan princess caught on film in a bikini with stretch marks?

Because it's so scandalous and unacceptable to grow.

I didn't do all this to be pretty, by the way.

It was never about being pretty.

Well, then what was it about? you ask.

A fine question, my fair ex-friend. And one that every doctor, nurse, and counselor keeps lining up to ask. If I ever have an answer, I'll let you know.

Actually, that's another lie. I don't feel like I'll be telling you anything anytime soon.

But if you have something to say to me—maybe something that rhymes with

I'm florry, or

I'm snorry . . . ?

Well, you know where I'll be for the next eon.

Seriously, they don't even let us know how many pounds we have to gain or how many self-affirmations we have to chant before we can get out.

This place SUCKS MY NOT-EVEN-THAT-SKINNY WHITE ASSSSSSS.

Yours till the kitchen sinks!

Xoxo,

Zoe

CHAPTER 2

most blustiferous, indeed

“ALLI! STOP TRASHING HIS STUFF!” ZOE BELLOWED, KICKING OPEN the back door. “You know you’re gonna regret it.” As I trailed behind her, she turned around and winked to make sure I was listening. Which I always was. There was something magnetic and terrifying about the way Zoe spoke to her mom. Always calling her by her first name and treating her like she was going to get detention. Alli looked thrilled to see us though.

“Oh, hello, girls!” she sang. *“Hello, hello! To the girls I love so!”*

Alli didn’t know how to just talk. She was constantly veering into a new tune or making sure her every word rhymed. She simply couldn’t help it—she’d been in musical theater for such a long time. That’s how she and Zoe’s dad had met—on some tour of the Midwest where she played Belle the Beauty and he was the

baddest Beast in town. They fell in love the first day of rehearsals. Travis had a young wife back in Michigan, so it took a little while for him to disentangle from that. (Alli had told me a few times that she “refused to be the other woman.”) By closing night of their show together, Alli was pregnant with Zoe. She moved back to New Jersey to be near her parents and soon secured her Beast a job with her daddy’s insurance company. Travis put a ring on her finger exactly a week before Zoe popped out, and they all lived happily ever after.

Sort of.

Alli had a lot of bright memories of being on the road and hearing standing ovations that eclipsed her humdrum today. She often referenced an agent who wanted her to spread her wings and some trip to LA that was forever being postponed. She always ended that story with her favorite self-composed ditty:

“Cuz I traded in my dreams for a minivaaaaan.”

Today she was filling up that minivan with what looked like the last decade of her life. Milk crates filled with vases and frames. An espresso machine that looked powerful enough to launch a rocket.

“Oh, Hannah, what a mess, right? I mean, I cannot believe this, can you?”

I actually did believe it. I had spent most of the past decade over at Zoe’s house. I knew when to stay in Zoe’s bedroom because Alli and Travis were clinking glasses and hooting in the den. I also knew when to get under Zoe’s bed and turn up her stereo because

Alli and Travis were fighting about money and being responsible and the price of being a true artist. It was a little like going to the zoo—sickly fascinating and yet I always felt like they were both trapped in either an epic battle or a game of kissy-face tag. Over the years, I'd heard a few vicious phrases repeatedly, like:

You're pathetic.

You act like you're the only one sacrificing around here.

And even:

You think everything is a musical, don't you?!

Which seemed to be the biggest insult possible in their house.

"I mean, you plan, and you dream, and you believe in loooooove . . .," Alli warbled now, though it devolved into more of a moan than a melody. She was stunning, even in distress. Her blond hair had been chopped into a defiant pixie style and she was decked out in a lavender Lycra workout ensemble that had lots of straps. The smudge of dirt on her brow looked possibly preplanned.

"Hello?" Alli asked me and Zoe. We'd both been too busy looking at the packed-up belongings to give her the attention she needed. I felt a little embarrassed for her as she let two sparkling tears tip over the edge of her bottom lids without so much as a blink. I almost thought she was daring me to wipe them away for her. When I didn't, she opened her arms and pulled me into a dank hug.

“I mean, I guess the silver lining is, it can’t get any worse, right?” Again, I knew silence would be the best response I could give. And five more sneezes, since her size-two stretch pants were coated in cat hairs.

“Alli,” Zoe interrupted. “I need you to take Pepe inside. I don’t trust him all alone, and we need some fresh air. Hank’s allergic.”

“No!” yelled Alli. “Is that true?” She broke away from me and searched my itchy eyes for an answer. It was pretty obvious that I wasn’t lying, so I just coughed.

“It’s all good though,” Zoe assured her. “Looks like you could use a break. Plus, I need some one-on-one time with my girl and you have to feed this sweet little beast.” She mushed her nose into the kitten’s, ringed his face with kisses, and then slung him around her neck as if he were a calico stole.

Alli made a grimace. “Please do not call him Beast,” she said in a woeful grumble.

“Oops, sorry,” said Zoe, shoving the cat into her mom’s arms.

Then, although she was only a few steps away, Zoe took a running start before hurtling herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and dangling like a medallion. She’d always been ridiculously small and buoyant. I picked up her ropy legs and she locked them swiftly around my waist. I marveled at how Zoe could propel herself into my arms and know she’d be caught. Sometimes she came out of nowhere and I only knew to prepare as she appeared midair. I prided myself on the fact that I had only dropped her once. (We were in a bouncy house at the time.)

“Hanky-Panky Puddin’ Pie!

I love you so, and do you know why?”

Zoe had come up with this routine probably in first grade, and even though I protested, she knew I still adored it.

“Cuz you’re kind and you’re bright.

You dance like a sprite.

You’re musical. You have no fear.

I especially love the freckle on the side of your ear!”

She tried to switch up my winning attributes each time, punctuating every phrase with a smacky kiss on my lips.

“Well, you are—” I began.

But Zoe cut me off. “Hup!” She clamped a warm palm over my mouth to shut me up. “Just let me love you, pleeeeeease?” Nestling her head onto my shoulder. I closed my eyes to imprint this moment into my memory-scape. I really had missed Zoe these past two months. Whenever she was in my arms and I could smell her hot, sugar-free-Bubblemint breath, the whole world felt easier to me.

“You girls are too much,” I heard Alli say sadly. “I wish I had friends like that.”

Zoe slid off me and spun around to face her mom. “Listen! Enough with the pity parade. You’re gorgeous. You’re vibrant. And you currently teach two very popular Pilates classes. Now, I haven’t seen Hank all summer, so give us some space, would you please?”

“I’m sorry. You’re right,” Alli said with her head bowed. “But does that mean you’re going off and leaving me all alone?” she whined.

“You’re a big girl,” Zoe replied. “And we’ll just be out here in the backyard. Now go play with Pepe so I can tell Hank how you and Dad ruined my life.”

Alli gasped.

“Kidding!” Zoe shouted. “Oh! And I posted the video to YouTube, Insta, and catlife dot whatever, but if you want to put it on Meowser’s account, go ahead.”

Alli looked like she was going to tear up again. “I’m from the last century, remember? I don’t know how to download videos. Or is it upload? You see?” She turned to me for backup.

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t know how to do most of that stuff either,” I told her.

“Forget it. I’ll do it for you in a few minutes,” said Zoe, waving her mom away. “Just let me talk to Hank, will ya?”

Zoe and I stayed facing each other—eyes locked—until we heard the screen door open and clatter shut.

“Ladies and gentlepeople, that was the ever-daring, ever-emotive thespian Allison Sinclair!” Zoe griped. She spread her arms wide and faked the roar of a crowd. I started to laugh with her but got distracted by three more raw-looking scratches, these ones inside Zoe’s pasty biceps. Plus, now that we were standing without a cat between us, I could tell that those were definitely her polka-dotted short shorts from first grade. There was a chocolate stain on the edge from when we went out for peanut butter

parfaits after the recital. And almost a decade later, she not only fit into them but her tiny legs looked like Popsicle sticks below.

Zoe caught me staring and stuck her tongue out at me.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“You. What are you looking at?” I wanted to sound confident, but I knew I didn’t.

“*You*.” She smirked. “Plus, the sun turning this ferocious pink-purple-orange rainbow-sherbet color. It’s like a crazy halo around your head, lighting you up like some magical Medusa. Only, it also makes me see how the days are getting shorter and the nights are getting longer, the summer is ending, and we’re never gonna be kids again even if we invented a time machine, which we can’t, so we won’t, so yeah. That’s what I’m looking at.”

This was another reason I was in awe of Zoe. She could name and mash together all these images and emotions into one rollicking, run-on sentence. She was never at a loss for words or clogged up and confused like me. I often wished I’d thought to record Zoe’s random bits of poetry because she could never repeat them or even admit that what she said was in some way remarkable.

In fact, by the time I repeated, “Magical Medusa?” she was scrambling up her old jungle gym. Of course I followed, though I had to fold myself like an accordion to get onto the pirate ship platform on top.

“Aaaargh,” she growled. “’Tis a blustery blustoon out there, matey.”

“Most blustiferous, indeed, Captain,” I replied.

“Yet fear not!” Zoe turned to me and took my face in her hands. “Though the waters may blust, we will prevail!”

“Prevail we must!”

“We must increase our blust!”

She honked one of my boobs and slipped down the slide.

“Did you get my letters?” I asked when she climbed up to the platform again.

I had sent her five handwritten letters and a batch of home-made peanut butter cookies. Even though she had warned me that she probably wouldn’t write back—she hated writing, especially when we were out of school.

“Aye, aye!” Zoe barked.

“And did you get to go to the Crab Shanty?” That was her grandpa’s favorite spot for dinner, and every time I visited, we went there for fried clams.

“But of course!” Zoe said. “Almost every night.”

I sucked in a deep inhale before trying my not-so-subtle segue. “Did you . . . eat?” I asked. “Because you look super-skinny to me.”

“Ugh, really?” Zoe snorted. Her eye roll was audible. I knew this was never the way to get an honest reaction from her, but I had to ask. Last year, while her parents were caught up in the cyclone known as themselves, Zoe had lost all this weight. She’d sworn to me repeatedly that she wouldn’t become one of those girls who only ate lettuce leaves and air. Sauntering by the public pool in their size-zero bikinis and snapping at each other hungrily. But this summer had obviously been a game changer.

She looked like a pocket-size version of her former self.

“Thanks a lot, Hank,” she said. “You know, this has been the absolute worst summer of my life and I need you to just be my BFF . . .”

She lost track of where she was, so I picked it up. “AETI.”

Which stood for Best Friends Forever And Ever To Infinity. We had a pact of BFFAETI-hood that we’d composed and decorated with smelly stickers soon after meeting. It was buried under the footpath leading to We Make Happy Dry Cleaners in town.

“Yeah,” Zoe said. “Probably need to dumb it down for Miss Dumbass over here.”

“You’re not dumb,” I told her.

“But I do have ADHD,” she replied. “The results are in! Alli made me go to another therapist out on the shore and they put me on some new attention-enhancing pill, which I swear makes me bloated, and I still can’t get through *The Great Gatsby*. So if you really think I’m skinnier, you need glasses.”

Then she bugged her eyes out at me and started to nibble on my shoulder through my T-shirt sleeve.

“Ow!” I blurted.

“Really?” she said, before slipping down the slide again and kicking a deflated soccer ball.

“Just . . . surprised me is all,” I said, scooting down the slide. I didn’t need glasses. I just needed my best friend back. I felt like my skin was stinging. Like everything about Zoe was too manic. It wasn’t just the whiskers and revealing outfit. It was the whole package. As if she’d rearranged her five nose freckles or taken

out all her teeth and put in new, sharper ones. Even her cobalt eyeliner looked darker and more extreme.

Zoe began scaling up the slide, vaulting herself onto a plastic swing, then dribbling the crushed soccer ball around the yard. It wouldn't go very far though, so most of her kicks just made muddy pockmarks.

"Good thing Alli's calling in a landscaper, huh? You know, she wants to redo the kitchen and then sell this place for a bazillion dollars so we can move to LA and she can do a one-woman show about her wrecked marriage."

"Wait—what?"

"Don't worry. It'll never happen."

"But why?"

Zoe chuckled bitterly. Then she blew a bubble with her gum and chomped into it with a snap.

"Well, children," she said in a clipped tone. "When a husband and wife decide that they can no longer cohabitate, communicate, or stop screwing their *creative headhunter* Roxanne—"

"Are you sure it was—"

"They often proceed to a little place called Divorce Court. Divorce Court costs a lot of money. More money than even a new dolly. Isn't that sad?" She paused just long enough to droop her face into an exaggerated frown before continuing. "It's really sad. Especially because Roxanne has fake boobs and a whiny voice and Travis forgot to put his savings in the piggy bank. Which makes him the biggest dickwad in the history of dickwads."

"Wait—that can't be right. Did he tell you? Did he say . . ." I

didn't know how to finish this sentence. Zoe just let me peter out. I'd never heard Zoe talk like this about her dad before. I knew he was a little too charming with the ladies. We all did. It was part of his persona. Zoe and I usually laughed it off—even when we heard him and Alli arguing about how long he looked at a waitress or why he loved his female dentist so much. Sometimes I felt like he was even flirting with *me*. Especially when he pulled out his guitar for us and sang these low, mournful tunes about losses too sad to remember. His lyrics melted into one another and typically involved a speck of stardust or a bottle of Jack.

I never thought Travis would actually do anything to break up his marriage though. I thought he loved his little family too much. Or at least his darling Zoe.

“Pretty amazing, huh?” Zoe scoffed. Her voice was so low and raspy, she sounded like she'd seen it all.

I stood there earning the award for New Heights of Awkwardness before summoning up the balls to say, “Sorry.”

“It's fine,” she said through a tight smile. “I mean, it's not fine at all. It's ridiculous and horrible and Alli has some crazy idea that she's gonna sweep out this place and then we can remake our reality in a decluttered geodesic dome or something. I mean, that's our second dumpster already. I swear. We've been home for four days and all we've been doing is cleaning.”

“You've been home for four days?” I gulped. I knew it wasn't big in the grand scheme of things—famine, nuclear war, the return of high-waisted jeans. But I faked a sneeze, just to have something to do instead of pity myself.

Again, Zoe read my mind. “Please don’t make this into something, Hank. I was gonna go straight to your house, I swear. But Alli was a wreck and Travis was texting nonstop and then she wanted us to join this gym and you were calling and I just *couldn’t*. I mean, that’s why this cat was like this miracle. Because he just gives unconditional love and snuggles, you know?”

I nodded, even though I couldn’t say I actually knew. Zoe leaned into me and kissed my shoulder. “Do you know I love you more than anyone on this whole stupid planet?” she asked.

I nodded faster, blinking back my simmering jealousy.

“Do you?” Zoe poked me in the ribs this time.

“I do,” I answered. “And I love—”

“Nope!” She cut me off. “I said it first!” Then she licked my cheek and sprinted up the big rock at the edge of her backyard. Or at least it used to be big. When we were little, we called it Mount Snooji and whenever it snowed we slid down it until our tailbones were bruised and the neighbors told us to go home. It took me a minute to catch up to her. By the time I did, she was hopping up and down with her cell phone, chanting, “No freaken way! No freak-*en* way!”

“No freaken way what?”

“I cannot believe this.” She was panting and giggling now, her head still tucked into her phone. “Did I tell you about the account we started for Pepe le Meowsers?” she said without looking up.

“We?” I asked.

“Me and Alli. It’s kind of like a video diary of how our lives have changed since we brought him home.”

I watched as she swiped through roughly two thousand pictures of Pepe le Meowsers. Pepe sleeping, Pepe licking his paw, Pepe stretching on a towel, even Pepe taking a dump. There was a whole series of Zoe smiling and nuzzling Pepe too. Then there was a video of Zoe walking by the duck pond behind Dunkin' Donuts, singing to her furry companion.

"So stupid, right?" said Zoe. "I think it was this one of him in the basket that got the most attention. Look how many people started following us after that!"

"Wow," I said. Only I wasn't looking at the pictures anymore. I was too fixated on another cluster of angry scratches, this time on the inside of Zoe's left wrist. They were carved so neatly in three lines. Almost identical to the ones I'd seen on her upper arm. "Maybe he should be declawed though, huh?" I added.

"What?" Zoe followed my gaze and then balled up her hand into a fist so quickly that for a split second I thought she was going to punch me. "Aw, crazy cat," she said, and shook her head just as her phone buzzed yet again.

The kitchen door banged open and Alli came running out. "Zoo!" she yelled. "Zoo, did you see?!"

Zoe's "Will you be my *pussy* . . . *cat*?" video was now trending on Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook Live, and a pawful of cat-loving sites. In the few minutes we'd been outside, it had gotten liked and reliked, tweeted, posted, quoted, and hashtagged over and over again.

Someone named Rebro775 had commented that it was *Revolutionary*.

Manplan89 called it *Validating in this depraved, misogynistic society*.

A bunch of people had just written in variations on the word *Hot*.

And the one that made me squirm most was a DrNumNum who wrote, *I want some*.

“So freaken stupid,” Zoe kept repeating. But she was obviously thrilled. I could feel her trembling next to me as we watched her phone flicker with adoration. Little red hearts winking at us. Gathering all the fanatical fandom from the ether and putting it in the palm of her hand.

Her screen almost blocking out that patch of open skin.

CRAZY SAD LIBS

THE FRIEND WHO WASN'T REALLY A FRIEND

Once upon a time, there was a girl named

_____.

[NAME THAT RHYMES WITH "SPANK"]

She lived in a blue house on _____ Street.

[FRUIT OR NUT]

She liked to play the piano and wear two different-colored

_____.

[PLURAL NOUN]

Hank had a lot of great qualities. She was a great
writer and she could remember all the names of the

_____.

[PLURAL NOUN]

But she was a really _____ friend.

[SYNONYM FOR "TERRIBLE"]

Lots of people thought that she was _____,

[ADJECTIVE]

maybe a little _____.

[ADJECTIVE]

But on the inside, she was _____.
[UGLY ADJECTIVE]

And she lied a lot.

One day, _____ did a
[NAME THAT RHYMES WITH "SPANK"]
really mean thing. She broke into her best friend's house!

Yes, girls and boys, that is a serious crime
and _____ could have gone
[NAME THAT RHYMES WITH "SPANK"]
to jail for _____ years!
[NUMBER FROM 99-100]

But no one called the police because
_____ said she only did it
[NAME THAT RHYMES WITH "SPANK"]
to save her friend Zoe's life. And Zoe's parents listened to
that story because Zoe's parents were _____-holes.
[LETTER OF THE ALPHABET]

And then, instead of Hank getting in trouble, Zoe was the
one who got sent away for _____ years.
[NUMBER FROM 99-100]

And none of them lived happily ever after.

CHAPTER 3

spinal freedom

NOT THAT I WANTED TO SIFT THROUGH MORE OF ZOE'S *PUSSYYYYY...*
cat comments or was prepared to go to Bernardo's seven fifteen FitBidness class with Alli and Zoe at their new gym, but as soon as I turned the corner back onto my street, I felt a knot of loneliness lodge in my chest. I could smell the ecofriendly briquettes and the rack of tempeh or whatever it was that Elan had promised to come over and grill for us. It was Labor Day after all. And Elan loved anything involving tempeh or my mom.

Ugh, Elan.

He wasn't a bad guy. He wasn't mean or abusive or addicted to juggling puppies and knives. His biggest "vice" was sticking wheatgrass in his coffee. He also loved to tell us about the time he got caught by a park ranger going off trail in Oregon so he

could photograph a rare mountain lion. Elan loved hiking. He also loved running, swimming, Rollerblading (gross), making his own cashew milk, and recycling old mason jars to turn them into mossy terrariums.

He just wasn't—nor ever could be—my dad.

My dad died almost nine years ago. A heart attack just after he got on the 7:29 A.M. train from Meadowlake, New Jersey, to Penn Station. It was all over in one startling, horrific minute. Mom told me later that someone from his advertising firm was on that same train and tried to give him CPR. You had to wonder what that felt like, to lock lips and puff all your morning breath and hope into someone's dying lungs. Then there were sirens and paramedics, heroic efforts, gasping commuters, and a lost briefcase that would get marched up to our front door eight months later, as if it mattered.

Still, nobody could undead him.

I know there's supposedly a rhyme and a reason for everything (except maybe canned sardines). But I'd like to register a complaint to the Ministries of Mysteriously Poor Timing because my dad's death was really not well-planned.

First off, David Ernest Leinstein was only forty-seven years old when he stopped existing, and he left behind an adoring wife (my mom) and two incredible children under the age of ten (me and Gus), both of whom were going about their day as his pulmonary artery seized, his life flashed before his eyes or at least hopefully he got a whiff of the angels at the end of the tunnel, and then he collapsed.

Second, there was that unreturned call to his mom (Grandma Dot) about her not-so-adjustable curtain rod; that suit he'd never picked up from the dry cleaner's; the leaky gutter; mortgage re-financing; and that we were only halfway through reading the Harry Potter series together.

Third, I had really practiced hard for this day. As in, memorizing and rehearsing my speech about Native American warriorhood eleven times into my Hello Kitty pocket mirror before it was my turn to present to my second-grade class.

There was only a smattering of applause, even though I'd gotten through the whole thing without a single stop. Looking back, I'd easily call my Oneida Tribe Warriors oration the peak of my performing career. But my teacher, Ms. Dennison, wasn't even paying attention. She was standing by the door with Principal Connell doing that thing where her eyes were on me, but her head was tilted toward him as he said something in her ear. Probably the fact that my dad was dead and my mom was in his office shaking and nobody had enough lollipops to make this better.

"Thank you so much for that thorough presentation, Hannah," Ms. Dennison said. "And now I believe Mr. Connell would like to talk to you for a . . ."

Poor Ms. Dennison. She ran out of breath and bit her lower lip nervously. Connell thanked her profusely and told the class he was so impressed with our investigative skills.

Then he turned to me and said ominously, "Bring all your things. I doubt you'll be coming back to class today."

“Oh dawg,” said Nicholas Pratt as I stuffed my notebook into my backpack.

I’m hoping he still regrets that stupid statement. I made sure to growl at him on the way out.

As Mr. Connell and I walked down the corridor he started firing questions at me:

“How did you learn all of those things about Native Americans? Were they hard to memorize?”

I hated when adults made up stupid stuff to talk about. Though looking back, I could tell he was really scrambling to keep me engaged. When we got outside his office, he just stood there. I wondered if he needed help opening the door. Talk about embarrassing. After an eon of silence, he said, “Sorry. Your mom will explain.”

Mom actually couldn’t explain anything. She was a mess. She was wearing her long winter coat and purple sunglasses and I didn’t know if she was trying to be a spy or was running from the law. She pulled me into her sweaty chest and rocked me back and forth, back and forth. Humming into my hair.

When she did talk, she said a bunch of vague things about poor diet and cholesterol and how she had begged Daddy to slow down and stop eating so much cheese. (He had been pretty overweight. But I loved banging on his belly like a drum.) I still didn’t know that my dad was dead and my life was changed forever. Mom never said the words *dead* or *gone*. She just kept babbling about how she should’ve known something was wrong and how he was rushing that morning and that he hadn’t even taken off

the tags on his new dress shirt. Then my little brother, Gus, came into the office with his kindergarten teacher and told us a story about a dinosaur trying on hats. Gus loved to tell long stories. And that day nobody stopped him.

I didn't really get what was going on until we got home, and Gus asked for apple juice, but we didn't have any more apple juice, so he said, "Go get some at the store!" and Mom started weeping, "I can't. I can't."

That's when it became undeniably clear. Because going to the store for juice was nothing to cry about and Mom wouldn't stop. She kept getting shriller and wailier too. I'd never heard a sound this ugly. It made me sad and mad and, above all, scared. Mom's sobs grew and swelled. Soaking through the carpets and pressing against the walls and I felt like I needed to shut all the windows even though it was so hot out, especially for October. Meanwhile, Gus was still whining about being so thirsty he was going to "de-hydrate."

"Dehydrate," I told him sharply. I pushed him into the kitchen and grabbed an orange ice pop from the freezer; unwrapped it, and stuck it in a bowl. One minute on HIGH in the microwave and it melted into juice. We passed it back and forth, taking small sips. I felt guilty that I wasn't crying too, but I couldn't make anything come out. When I squeezed my eyes to make tears, there was nothing but static.

Mom did stop crying. Eventually. Or maybe she just got blotted out by all the new voices and footsteps, the doors and

cupboards opening and closing, the house phone ringing, and the hushed messages being passed around.

Out of the blue.

Total shock.

Maybe cholesterol, but who really knows?

Service at B'nai Israel on Wednesday at nine thirty.

What a tragedy.

“Do we get to see him at all?” I remember asking Mom. “Like his . . . body?”

“We can see him in our minds,” Mom whispered.

“So he’s . . .”

Mom shook her head, so I knew not to say anything more.

All I could see in my mind was the fold in my dad’s neck where a line of white aftershave always got caught. If I plugged my ears, I could maybe remember the gravelly voice he used to read me books at night. But besides that, it felt like I was always trying to grab scraps of Dad memories from pictures or dreams and tape them together. I was only eight, after all.

The funeral was awful—not that I was expecting a laugh riot. Gus kept pulling at his tie because it was too tight and he felt like he had to burp. Grandma Dot told me over and over again that it was too much, and she was going to die too, which didn’t seem fair since it was Dad’s day to be dead. I barely saw Mom the whole day—she was just passed from one shoulder to another, dropping tissues along the way. Afterward, lots of people came back to our house to eat bagels and blow their noses. They all

said something like, *You're in my prayers* and *Let me know what I can do*—as if that were my job. The worst was the rabbi telling us to hold a special place in our hearts for him. A noble goal, but couldn't he have changed the wording so it wasn't a cardiac pun?

My dad's younger brother, Uncle Ricky, came to stay with us for a month. He was in between jobs and in between girlfriends and seemed to have no idea what to do with his life, but he loved playing with me and Gus. Zoe came over a lot too. Uncle Ricky made us all bacon sandwiches and let us have as many potato chips as we wanted, so that was fun. But it also meant that Mom went upstairs and took a lot of naps. Whenever she wasn't in her room, Uncle Ricky told us to give her space, even though our house seemed to be nothing but space now. It was as if Mom had this outer shell of misery swirling around her, keeping her out of reach. She also kept wearing her long winter coat inside, even as we passed through the holidays and it thawed into spring. Zoe called it her Coat of Grief.

I still didn't know how to thank Zoe for getting me through that year. And really every year since. She helped me remember that I was still alive—coming over to my house every day with a floppy sombrero or a giant bar of chocolate. She wiped Gus's nose when he had a cold and planted whoopee cushions in my bed, determined to make me laugh. When her parents wanted to go to Florida for spring break, she insisted I go with them. And then she picked out a necklace of small pearly shells to bring back for my mom.

I missed my dad. Especially his laugh that was so big it shook

the floor. But to be honest, I missed my mom more. She was just so distant and fragile-looking for so long. She took a leave of absence from her job teaching ESL to migrant workers. I wondered if her students felt abandoned too. She was physically there for me and Gus—she got up in the morning when we left for school and she was there at the bus stop when we got off. But there was all this unaccounted-for time in between when I feared she'd just disappear. Hop a train and take it to the last stop. Maybe that's what she did during the day while Gus and I were learning our times tables and taking spelling quizzes. Just drifting.

At home, everything was officially on hold for a long time. The laundry piled up in drifts along the hallway; one of the fire alarms kept chirping to tell us it needed a new battery; the refrigerator stank of forgotten leftovers. One night, the kitchen sink clogged with popcorn kernels, and instead of getting it fixed, Mom suggested rinsing our plates and cups in the bathroom. When I looked up a plumber and called, he said I was very resourceful for a little girl. I told him that he was the first one listed in the phone book with a semidecent customer review. That showed him who was boss.

Mom's best friend Diane is the one who finally got her to put on some lipstick and go out. Diane was really into these adult education classes in our town that were apparently teeming with single men. (Diane was married to a painfully boring man named Al, who rarely spoke. Gus and I constantly caught him farting and then acting like it wasn't him.) It took Mom more

than two years to agree to it, but she and Diane took an eight-week class called Pinot and Pottery and brought home lopsided vases. Then they signed up for DIY Cybersecurity, giving me and Gus lectures about online identities. Finding Your Personal Spinal Freedom was supposed to be just a one-day seminar to help with Mom's lower-back pain.

None of us knew it would lead Mom into the arms of one Elan Sayel, doctor of holistic chiropractic sciences.

Elan specialized in lower-back pain and lumbar breathing techniques—which I guess were sexy words to Mom, because she came home from that seminar a new color of giddy. And I will admit, when she walked through our door that night, her neck looked longer and her hunchback of heartache was already softening.

Mom and Elan took things slowly. He called to check up on her sciatic nerve or to mention a new article about the soothing effects of coconut oil. One night, Mom got a babysitter and said she and Diane were going out with “some friends.” I camped out in Gus's room because his window was over the driveway. That way I could see if anyone else was in Diane's car when she came to pick up Mom. I stayed up until midnight looking at Elan's website about spiritual redemption by way of arnica salves.

“If he's bald, how come he has a full beard?!” I complained to Gus. “And what medical school did he go to?”

“Uh-huh,” slurred Gus. I knew he just wanted to get some sleep.

“He’s *so* not Dad,” I said definitively. Usually I tried not to talk about Dad with Gus because he got sad that he remembered even less than I did. “I guess that’s the whole point, right?”

Gus didn’t answer. He was already snoring.

That *was* the whole point. Mom needed to start over. Gus and I had to either get on board or step aside. I wasted months gritting my teeth and scowling at Mom every time she told us she had plans or that her back pain was completely gone. She either never noticed or willfully ignored me. Soon Elan was coming over to cook us dinner and helping Mom plant a vegetable garden in our backyard. For her fiftieth birthday, he got her a fancy mountain bike and they drove up to the Finger Lakes to pedal their way into fitness euphoria.

“Don’t you ever get scared that he’ll put your mom in a spinal-freedom trance?” Zoe once asked me. It felt good to have an ally in this fight. She agreed that Elan was a little too calm to be human. Also, that he cooked with too much turmeric.

Elan not only loved my mom; he also loved our kitchen. He graced us with his presence at least three nights out of the week now to concoct some vegetarian delicacy that often involved seaweed. He still paid rent on a studio apartment twenty minutes away, but most of his belongings (and camping gear) were in my home. He even had his own key. Which is why I shouldn’t have been surprised when I got home from Zoe’s house and he was the one to throw open the front door and say, “Well, hello, Miss Almost-Eleventh Grader. How was your day?”

“Hi, Elan. Fine. Is Mom home?” I tried not to use any inflection,

lest he think I was excited to talk to him. I no longer tried to stop Elan from coming over, but I also didn't encourage interaction.

"Yes!" He high-fived himself. "Mom's in the kitchen. Gus is upstairs. Grill will be ready in ten minutes. Booya!"

It was sad, really. Elan used so much energy trying to win me over. He was kind. And patient. He even had great posture and these hazel eyes that gazed at Mom without blinking for what felt like hours. The weird part about that was one of his irises drifted sideways. I got confused about where to focus when he was talking to me—which was way too often.

"Hey," I said to Mom as I walked through the kitchen.

"My girl!" Mom cheered.

I tried to kiss her on the cheek, but she was checking the temperature of the oven, so it was more like gumming her jaw.

"Damn it!" she said. "I burned the fennel spears *again*. How did I do that?"

"Just talented, I guess," I said, heading upstairs. Mom was definitely the worst cook I knew. When Gus and I were younger, we sang a song called, "That's Not a House Fire, That's Mom Using the Toaster." I was on piano. Gus came up with the melody and lyrics. I missed our scrappy talent shows with homemade refreshments (aka stale Halloween candy) and multiple costume changes. I would gladly eat Mom's charred pizza bagels for dinner every day for the rest of my life if it meant Elan would disappear.

But Elan was very much a part of our lives.

“Did you know that next weekend it will be exactly *three* years since your mother agreed to date me and consequently turned my world upside down,” Elan asked a half hour later as he lifted a glass of rosé on our deck.

“You should make sure nothing spilled out,” I muttered.

Gus gave me a swift kick under the table, but Mom and Elan were oblivious.

“And to celebrate,” Elan continued, “I was thinking we could all go camping this weekend at Tall Pines. I know it’s the first week of school, so you might have other plans, but . . .”

I had to make a concentrated effort not to spit my food across the room. “All together?” I croaked. Gus looked at me and bit his lip. I was pretty sure that he thought that was a horrible idea too, but he would never say it aloud.

“It’s a four-person tent, right, hon?” asked Mom.

“Yes, indeed.”

This was sounding more catastrophic by the moment.

“There’s no way I’m—”

This time Gus kicked me hard. I took a breath and started over. “I mean, first of all, thank you for the invite. But I think I should stay home. As you said, first week of school and . . . plans. Y’know.”

“Fair enough,” said Mom.

“Gus, you’re still welcome to come,” said Elan.

“Thanks,” said Gus. “Can I think about it?”

“Of course, buddy.”

The rest of the dinner was a fascinating discussion of which spices Mom and Elan had used on the barbecued tempeh and how sea salt differed from regular salt. I noticed that Gus was mostly pushing around his food like me but gave myself extra-credit points for not verbalizing my disgust. In fact, I uttered nary a word until Mom realized she’d promised to get a different kind of notebook for Gus and the only store open was going to close soon. Which I was pretty sure was one of her ploys to get me and Elan to connect more.

“You guys good to clean up?” she asked. “Be back in a jiff, I swear.”

“No problemo,” said Elan before I could answer.

Gus and Mom were already on their way out the door by the time I finished chewing and realized I was stuck alone with this uninvited-yet-so-close-to-permanent guest and a pile of uneaten fennel. Not to mention the five pans Mom had used in the kitchen.

We cleared the table in silence and I got to work out some of my aggression by scrubbing. Elan was, of course, very helpful, wiping down the counters and table.

“Thanks,” I said without thinking.

It was my own fault for opening the door to discussion with him. He put down his dish towel, leaned toward me, and said, “Hey. You’re welcome. Thank *you*.”

I turned the faucet on harder to drown out our silence. I only had two more glasses to rinse though. And Elan excelled at

waiting. After the glasses, I loaded the soap, turned on the dishwasher, and even scoured the sink. Elan just stood there. His feet planted squarely. His breath menacingly calm.

The moment I shut the water off, he said, “Hannah, I know these past few years haven’t been the easiest on you, and I just want to express my gratitude to you for allowing me into your life.”

I’d never allowed him in. And I’d certainly voted against him making a copy of our key and once *accidentally* tipped over his moped. But this was perhaps the most annoying part of Life with Elan™. I hated how he twisted everything around, so it sounded like he was complimenting me or that he was honored to feel the sting of my disdain. It was probably some espionage tactic—killing or at least coercing the enemy with kindness. He had to realize I was no sucker. I couldn’t be played by this onion-breathed mole.

“It’s all good,” I said forcefully, my jaw tight.

“And I trust that if there’s anything you want to discuss, you know I’m here.”

I knew he was here, all right. He could not stop being here.

“Because, you know, I think you’re really bright and perceptive, and I wonder when you’ll feel brave enough to express some of your feelings aloud.”

“Um, *brave* enough?” I asked. I was pretty sure there was steam coming out of my ears and nose at this point.

Elan shook his head and chuckled. As if he’d just done something silly like squeeze out too much toothpaste or put *i* after *e* instead of before. “I mean, *comfortable* enough,” he explained.

“Mmhmm.” I nodded. Ready myself. “I guess I do have something to say. Though it’s more like a question.”

“Of course!” Elan chirped eagerly. “Fire away. *Please.*”

So I spun toward his open, eager face and asked, “Has your one eye always done that weird thing or do you think you should see a doctor?”