

# Meant to Be

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

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For Matt, Romy, and Dean

We were meant to be

# CHAPTER 1

My boobs don't look any different. Not that I expected them to melt or explode or turn into origami swans. Are they a smidge bigger? That's just what I need. It took me six months just to find a proper wrangling bra that doesn't give me uni-boob and also allows me to run in gym class without getting a black eye.

Gym class. There's some bullshit I will never be forced to endure again. No more lunchroom shenanigans, or hall passes, or "I swear I turned that in!" when I know I didn't. All those insignificant, overdramatized moments end today the second the final bell of high school rings.

How fitting that it's also my eighteenth birthday.

I examine my reflection again. It's not like the Name is going to pop up on my nipple. At least, I don't think so from the other Names I've seen: on my mom, on my best friend, Lish, and on countless celebrities wearing shirts low enough to show off the glamorous script above their impossibly perky décolletage. Supposedly it will materialize over my heart, near the center of my chest, favoring the

left side. Countless Instagram stories exhibit the variations of Name locations: smack-dab in the center of collar bones; written in loop-de-loop cursive like a carefully designed tattoo; horizontally, or diagonally, or arcing like a rainbow, or haphazard and scrawly like the signature of a serial killer.

“Where the hell are you?” I ask my chest. It itches back its answer. Something is going on underneath that pasty white skin of mine.

I try to distract myself by digging out my clothes for the day. From the depths of my t-shirt drawer I select a shirt with a once-red Monkees logo, one my mom gave me from her childhood when it was already considered vintage. The fabric is nearly worn to sheer, and my black bra peeks through in certain light. It’s a look I’ve worn before, mostly because I like the t-shirt, but also because I could get away with it. Before I turned eighteen. Before the Name emerges.

Maybe it won’t happen.

There *have* been cases. Not many, but they exist. A Name doesn’t materialize on a body, and those lucky individuals never have to deal with figuring out who the person is, spending way too much time trying to find someone who may or may not be *that* person. Maybe I’ll luck out and be one of those freaks.

Or maybe it’s over. Maybe this preternatural phenomenon that blew in out of nowhere a mere six years ago

to wreak havoc on the very soul of humanity will stop with me. No one will ever have to read a Name on their eighteenth birthday again.

But, no, I can feel it forming. I have all the typical signs: redness, itching, a warm, tingling sensation over my heart.

Lish claims it's like getting your period: One minute nothing's there, and the next you have a coppery stain in your underwear and your mom is taking you to the grocery store for pads and crying about how you're not her little girl anymore. Only this stain is permanent and isn't just something that makes you feel extra snacky once a month.

This is etched into my skin. This is real. This is forever.  
This is a stranger's name.

I scratch at my chest, egging on the words. Maybe if I squeeze the area like a zit, it'll pop out. My skin forms a minuscule mound as I push together the space under my collar bone. "Arise!" I shout dramatically. Definitely one of those moments when I hope no hidden cameras are in my bedroom.

"Aggy! Birthday breakfast!" my mom calls from downstairs. I keep forgetting it's my birthday. I let go of my flesh, now blotchier than ever, still void of the Name. There's too much going on for this to be taking so damn long: the last day of school, turning eighteen, the wheel of fortune that's supposed to magically show up but seems to be taking its

sweet time. Who can eat breakfast under such trying circumstances?

I walk into the bathroom. Once a mere closet, my uncle Jim converted it to allow me more privacy. Or so he said. I think it got too awkward once I went through puberty to see me walking around in a towel. Can't complain. I have my own bathroom. My cat, Rugburn, a grunchy old mackerel tabby who can't decide after ten years if he likes me or loathes me, curls up on the wet bath mat.

I check myself in the mirror again. Nothing visible through the shirt. I tie my shoulder-length hair into a messy topknot and slide in some earrings shaped like arrows, my favorite pair. Look at me, getting ready like it's any other day.

But it's not any other fucking day.

I lift my shirt.

"Asshole," I chide the Name, then elicit help from my boobs. "Can't you do something about this? Use your massive girth to bully it out of me?" My boobs don't answer. "Thanks a lot. See if I let Jesse Rothem touch you again anytime soon."

I sit on the toilet and force myself to pee. Only ten minutes have passed since my last go, but I tend to pee more when I'm anxious. I cut my nails. I attempt to apply eyeliner in a sexy cat-eye fashion, only I don't ever actually wear makeup and I end up looking like that Egyptian king from *Night at the Museum*. It takes forever to wash off the mishap,

and by the time I'm done the area around my eyes looks like I lost a brawl with my Build-a-Bear.

And then I see it. A shadow through my shirt. It's faint, but it's there.

My heart plummets into my gut, and I fight the urge to kneel in front of the toilet. Hands trembling, I peel up the bottom of my Monkees shirt. I think about a slow reveal, like they always do when someone first sees their Name in the movies, but this is real life and I've had years of anticipation. Or is it dread? I fling my shirt over my hair, and Rugburn complains loudly, zipping out of the bathroom when the shirt lands on top of him. Undeterred, I examine my chest, and there it is: a name written on my body. The font is neat, his handwriting at age eighteen (one fact scholars agree on). I can't imagine what he thinks of the mess that is my signature. The Name is smaller than I expected. An *H* starts below my left clavicle, where my cleavage begins its long descent. The letters continue in a horizontal path over the top of my left breast.

I don't hate how it looks. It's like my first tattoo that I accidentally got while drunk. Idiots do that all the time. What they think reads *love* in Chinese really spells out *moo shu pork*. But I'm not a heavy drinker, and these letters are in English.

I read the backward Name in the mirror.

*Hendrix Cutter.*

Am I reading that correctly?

I say it aloud.



“Hendrix Cutter.”

Interesting? Weird? Kind of cool? Does it even matter?  
I sigh.

“Nice to meet you, Hendrix Cutter,” I speak to my reflection. “I’m Agatha Abrams, and I’m your soul mate.”

## CHAPTER 2

*Soul mate* is a stupid term. Six years ago, before Names began invading the human body with no discernible explanation, *soul mate* had implications of sap. People believed or didn't believe, and it more or less felt like a concept made up for rom-coms and Hallmark cards. How could there possibly be only one person on this bloated planet whose destiny it was to be with another person?

Until the idea becomes science. Or an act of God. Or a blip in the evolutionary chain.

The world is full of hypotheses. Scientists tried to prove it has something to do with pheromones and hormones and homophones. Maybe not homophones. It's so blahblahblah, I stop listening. The religious zealots are no better. God, tired of seeing humans destroy a planet with murder and crime and all manner of catastrophic hate, created the meant-to-be (the preferred term over *soul mate*, so as not to be confused with its prior connotations). The True Lovers (the zealots' name for themselves, which I find ironically sexual-sounding for a group of religious devotees) believe that God wanted us to discover our meant-to-bes in a more

direct fashion than, say, online dating or Craigslist ads, making it much easier to find contentment, procreate, and bypass all the suffering that comes with heartbreak. And think of how much faster everyone will have babies! The population will explode! Love will flourish! We'll all be so fucking happy and sexually satisfied that there will never be war again!

I call bullshit. There are so many things wrong with this logic (logic? How is any of this ever going to be logical?), so many holes in this fabric of reason. One of my theories, and I have many, is that somehow a sinister corporation determined a way to taint our water supplies, or vitamins, or the air we breathe to disfigure the entire population with random letter configurations. It would explain why the term *soul mate* turned into *meant-to-be*, turned into *MTB*, officially trademarked by the world's largest and most commonly used search engine. Now everyone calls the names on their bodies *Names*, and the people *MTBs*. And instead of mass quantities of research and billions of dollars being thrown at science facilities to figure out why we suddenly *have* *MTBs* (I like to call them *MTs*, pronounced "Empties." Maybe I should trademark that), Urban Outfitters sells *YOUR NAME HERE* shirts for thirty-five bucks. The majority of the world accepted its cruel and unusual fate and stopped caring about why the hell it's happening and how we can stop it. Like in the beginning of *The Walking Dead*, where everyone wants to know why people are all of a sudden zombies and if they can find a cure. Eventually they realize it doesn't matter why

and instead have to figure out a way to survive in the new world without starving or being eaten.

I'd rather have a zombie apocalypse.

While it may make a modicum of sense for anyone who was under eighteen when the MTBs hit to learn they'd acquired a soul mate, it sure as hell rocked the fuck out of a lot of worlds for people older than that. Millions with marriages and partners and promising second dates had to learn that the person with whom they were cavorting, possibly for decades, wasn't the person with whom they were meant to spend their lives. Sure, some people could pretend they disregarded this brand-new development in their petrified existences, but a good portion of them couldn't ignore the temptation. Let's take, oh, I don't know, my mom and dad. Ellen and Arnold. High school sweethearts who followed each other to college, married soon after, and gave birth to the most adorable, hilarious, slightly-obnoxious-but-in-a-good-way daughter. Me. Their marriage wasn't perfect, but whose parents don't fight from time to time about dinner or where to go on vacation or who forgot to sign who up for soccer?

The second my dad discovered what *Florence Hildebrand* meant after it mysteriously appeared on his chest, he skedad-dled to Atlanta and cohabitated with the hag. My mom was left to wonder about her generically named MTB, John Taylor. A quick Internet search listed millions of possibilities, from an economist to a jazz musician to a member of the ancient band Duran Duran. Overwhelmed, she gave up on

her search before she even started. Mom wanted nothing to do with “this BS soul mate business” anyway. Her brother, my uncle Jim, younger by six years and battling crippling agoraphobia since his teens, moved in with us to help with the bills and fill the void that Empties created in our home. Uncle Jim was satisfied setting up his bedroom in our finished basement and his office in our attic, ensuring he wouldn’t have to leave the house and, god forbid, connect with another human being. He is far more content writing romance novels under the pseudonym Savannah Merlot. They’re wildly popular, even though he refuses to write any in the newest, beloved MTB genre. “I write about true romance, not some zit formation that happens to resemble a name.” I do so love my uncle Jim.

The fact of the matter is that a Name is here. My Name is presumably somewhere out there. People believe that if the Names match (and they pretty much always do), then that person is your MTB. My best friend, Lish, had been obsessively counting down the days until her Name appeared, and when it did she paid big money to use the Signature Analysis Website. You’ve seen their commercials on TV. “We scan so you can find your man. Or *woman*.” Clever. But the product sells itself: For a small (read: first-year-of-college-tuition-sized) fee, Lish entrusted a “trained technician” to scan her naked top half with a lubed-up wand in order to enter her name into the International Database of Signatures. Currently, the database only includes signatures of registered voters and military personnel, but governments

around the globe are gunning for mandatory signature entry from every person over the age of eighteen.

It's like being drafted into love.

That's why I just can't get myself to buy into all of this. I don't want to be forced to do anything, be it scan my Empty's Name, wear sunblock, or go to college. I like having choices. Or, I like the idea of having choices.

It's been the one point of contention in my long friendship with Lish, which began the second she moved in two houses down and her dog pooped on our mutual next-door neighbor's lawn.

"He always gives out circus peanuts for Halloween," I informed her. "They're not even wrapped. He totally asked for this poo." Instant friendship. When in fourth grade her family moved to a new subdivision with homes twice the square footage of my family's modest 1989 classic, we stayed best friends through cell phones, bike rides, and slumber parties.

The arrival of MTBs screwed up marriages, but it also wedged a chasm in the friendship of two little girls who used to merely want their Equestria Girl dolls to make it back to Ponyville.

Lish was smitten with the concept of *meant-to-be*, while I grew more skeptical. She believed the word *fate* was the antithesis of hate. Destiny was the final destination.

Fuck fate. Screw destiny. I'm team free will.

## CHAPTER 3

Lish and I sit at a cafeteria table during first period. We officially have classes we're supposed to be in, but when an ass-backward administrator sets the date for the graduation ceremony three days before the actual last day of school, I think we're golden. The only reason we're here is to pick up our report cards during final period. And for the ritual of it all, I suppose.

"Show it to me now." Lish is tugging on my shirt, not at all taking into account how many other seniors are ditching first period to hang out in the cafeteria.

"Dude. I'm not lifting up my shirt here. I don't need everyone crowding around me pretending to read the name of my Empty but really ogling my tits." My brain flashes to the last person who saw me topless: one Jared Mason who charmingly dumped me on his eighteenth birthday. I wonder how many people have been dumped on someone's eighteenth birthday in the last six years. What do the True Lovers have to say about that? Probably, "It's all for the greater good. When you meet your meant-to-be, there will never be pain again."

Gag me with a spoon.

“Can’t I just tell you the name and show you when we’re alone?” I wrestle the bottom of my Monkees shirt out of Lish’s hand. “You’re strong for a midget,” I tell her.

“*Little person* is the correct term.” She lets go of my shirt but remains ready to pounce. “For which I am not. Nor are you.”

“Hey, don’t drag me into your old-timey circus act. I am a whole half inch taller than you. It’s an entirely different world up here at five feet one inch.”

“Wow, I bet you really thought talking about my height for the six trillionth time was going to make me forget about your MTB.” Lish dives for my shirt again.

“Okay. Okay,” I concede, grabbing her wrists and twisting upward. Lish yelps and crosses her arms into a pout. “I will tell you the name of my *Empty*”—I emphasize the derogatory word—“and then we sneak off to the bathroom and you can fondle me there.”

“I’m not going to fondle you in the girls’ bathroom!” Lish announces a tish too loudly, drawing the attention of everyone within a thirty-foot radius. I laugh at her indiscretion. “You can lift your own shirt,” she whispers, then says, “Besides, I showed you mine.” She winks at me. We laugh at our titillating conversation, and Lish prods me to disclose the name.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“Do you see me salivating?” Lish confirms.

“His name is . . .” Pause.



Long pause.

Excruciatingly long pause.

Lish punches me in the MTB.

“Ow! I think you punched my Empty off.”

“Tell me the name, or I am not inviting you to my wedding.”

“You do realize that’s not really a threat to me.”

“Aggy, I’m about to take an X-acto knife out of my art box and cut a bitch, so you best be telling me his name.”

“Hendrix Cutter,” I cough.

“What?” Lish scrunches up her nose.

“Hendrix Cutter,” I enunciate each sharp syllable.

“Really?” She looks disturbed.

“What? What’s wrong with his name? Do you know him?” I panic.

“No. No, I don’t know him. It’s just . . . interesting, you know? Intriguing. Mysterious.” Lish changes her face from distressed to aroused. “Sexy. Domineering.”

“Lish!” I chide her. “You can’t get all of that from a name. I will remind you that his parents gave it to him when he was a tiny baby who was most definitely not sexy or domineering.”

“Is his signature cool?” Lish’s eyes attempt to burn a hole through my shirt. “I can’t make it out enough through that crusty shirt of yours.”

“It’s not crusty. It’s classic,” I defend the ancient, frayed assemblage of fabric.

“Just make sure you don’t wear that when you meet

Hendrix for the first time. Or the second time. Maybe it's time for the Monkees shirt to go into retirement."

"Considering I'm not going to meet him, I guess the Monkees shirt doesn't need to worry about retirement."

"Aggy!" Lish scolds. "We've talked about this."

Since the MTBs first appeared, Lish and I have debated what we would do when ours materialized. From day one, Lish knew she wanted to find hers. Back then, of course, she assumed it was her latest YouTube obsession. I secretly wished for Rupert Grint in his *Goblet of Fire* years. As we aged into our teens, and real dating prospects materialized, Lish was constantly guessing which schoolboy would ultimately be her MTB. The thought that any one of these gangly douchecarts might be the guy I am supposed to spend the rest of my life with paralyzed me for years. Until I decided I wasn't going to let a wacked-out version of destiny determine who I want to hang out with.

You'd be surprised at how open teenage boys are to helping me rebel against society's constraints on companionship.

Or maybe you wouldn't be.

I will admit that I used my newfound stance on free will somewhat liberally my sophomore year and made the pool of guys who hadn't seen my boobs practically kiddie-size. But that's as far as I let them go. Until junior year. I really thought Jared Mason and I were in love. I sapped out and dreamed of the day his name would manifest across my chest as my MTB. Lish was on best-friend cloud nine, cutting out articles on MTB weddings, decoupage lamp shades with

pictures of us and overlaid wedding dresses. I don't think I was as ready as she was for marriage, but I let Jared go further than anyone before him. So we said I love you. We had sex. We made plans for our future: to move to Australia and pick fruit and roll around with wombats.

I shit you not that his Empty bulged out in the middle of us doing it. Not rolling with wombats; having sex. He was on top of me, and I watched, mystified, as the name "Alanna Silverman" bubbled forth. He had no idea, of course; he was too busy enjoying himself. It took Jared a good three minutes to notice I was crying. I pointed to his chest, not wanting to say the Name, and he bolted off his bed to examine himself in the mirror.

"Alanna Silverman." Jared spoke her name aloud, and by the excited hitch in his voice, I knew we were over. And so was any commitment I had to the idea of One. True. Love.

Guys are fickle. My dad can't even bother to remember my birthday since he left my mom for his Empty. Every year he calls me exactly one day before, which I suppose I could be grateful for. I mean, at least it's early, right? But it's fucking wrong. He abandoned our life because of some stupid biological or celestial anomaly. I refuse to let it rule me.

"No, Lish, I don't want to meet him. I want to find love based on personality and common interests and sexual chemistry—"

"But I'm sure you'll find all of that in your MTB. That's why he's supposed to be your meant-to-be, right?"

"Who can really say for sure, Lish? It's only been six

years! That's not enough time to know if what these people's names represent is about 'forever' love. What if it's actually the name of your future assassin? Or the person you *think* you love but after  $x$  number of years you hate more than anyone else on the planet? What if the Names go away? Or change? Nobody knows the answers, and I don't trust anyone who claims they do."

The second period bell rings, and Lish gathers her bag, plump with remnants of overused school supplies and an underwashed gym uniform. "Way to keep an open mind," she jokes.

"Yeah, well, I hate people telling me I don't have a choice," I counter.

"I get that. So don't try and find *Hendrix Cutter*." She says his name with a sultry breath. I laugh. People pass us as we exit the cafeteria, people I have seen every day of my life and am completely okay with never seeing again.

As Lish and I depart for our respective classes, she calls down the hall to me, "Just because you don't want to meet Hendrix Cutter doesn't mean he's not going to try and find you!"

Well, shit.

## CHAPTER 4

The last few periods of the final day of high school are spent playing Hangman on whiteboards and chatting about summer and beyond.

“Why don’t you want to go to college again?” Finley Ellis chastises me while filing her nails. Do people actually do that? File their nails? Isn’t biting them more efficient?

“It’s not that I don’t want to. Eventually. I’d rather do something else right now. Like see all the world’s finest amusement parks.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Finley continues. I consider taking the nail file and buffing off her eyebrows.

“I most certainly am not. You’d be an asshole if your life’s goal wasn’t to visit Ocean Park in Hong Kong so you can work at a roller coaster called the Hair Raiser. It has a terrifying-slash-happy walk-through entry face.” Finley blank-stares me down. I switch gears to her average-person way of thinking. “I’m just not ready to commit to giving up my life’s savings or putting my mom in debt because I feel obligated to continue the prison term that is sitting in classrooms.” My calc teacher gives me a look that reads, *You’re not*

*out the door yet.* “You know what I mean,” I backtrack to Mrs. Drew. “I’m sure you feel that way, too, sometimes.” I see the look on her face soften a bit with a relinquished nod. It’s not like we haven’t all seen the Countdown to Summer Vacation clock in the corner of her computer screen.

“Isn’t your mom shitting bricks?” Finley asks. Finley, in all her white-blond blunt-bobbed glory, has been asking obnoxious questions since she transferred to our junior high from California. At first, we were mesmerized by her exotic accent and the albino-esque hair until we realized she was the plant at slumber parties who forced us into admitting that we once stole a pack of gum from Circle K and that we did, in fact, shave our pubes once with our dad’s face razor.

“No, she isn’t shitting bricks,” I retort. “Because she doesn’t know.”

“Such the rebel, Agatha.” Finley taps her newly shorn nails on her desk.

I have accumulated an arsenal of insults aimed at Finley for just this type of occasion, but seeing as there are two minutes left to high school and probably the only time I will ever see her again is when she returns home from her college break fifteen pounds heavier with a raging yeast infection, I stop myself.

None of this lame local life matters because for years I’ve been secretly planning my escape. First stop: Australia.

I really wasn’t kidding about visiting the world’s amusement parks. I have a soft spot for the carny life, and what better way to learn about foreign lands than by visiting their

most heightened and stimulating destinations of pleasure? Junk food in Korea? Yes, please. Ferris wheels in Peru? Fo sho. Luna Park in Melbourne, Australia, has a ride called the Ghost Train, described thusly on their website: “I ain’t afraid of no ghost! . . . until I rode the Ghost Train at Luna Park.” Obviously, as close to heaven as one can get. I figure I can score a job at Luna Park no problem based on my buff amusement park résumé, work until I’m bored, then pick a fresh amusement park in a completely different country and start anew.

It doesn’t hurt that Australia is conveniently on the other side of the world. If someone were to die back home it would literally take me no fewer than twenty-four hours to return for their funeral, that’s how far away it is. Remind me not to use that as an argument to convince my mom that moving to Australia before settling down and going to college is the greatest idea since slicing your *own* bread (thicker slices, duh). Very cool films come out of Australia, as do megahot actors, and they have all those wacky animals you can only find down there. Kangaroos! Koalas! Wombats! I imagine myself strolling along a billabong (I don’t even know what that is), kangaroos piling on top of me while I giggle uncontrollably from their tickly tails, the intense sounds of a didgeridoo emanating from somewhere unseen.

Shit like that happens every day in Australia. I’m guessing.

The inspiration originally came when I saw the hybrid cartoon/real-life Australian film *Dot and the Kangaroo* as a kid. I read up on the unique species of creatures that live there,

including 100 poisonous snakes and 520 poisonous spiders. The dream solidified itself in my subconscious when, upon the first drips of anesthesia during wisdom teeth surgery, I announced, “I wanna go to Australia.” The oral surgeon humored me in my drunken state. “Oh yeah, and why’s that?”

“They have all different animals there,” I slurred. “It’s like a whole ’nother world.” And then I was out. Just think: If I’d had an adverse reaction to the anesthesia, those could have been my final words.

But they weren’t. I’m guessing my last words will more than likely be, “Mom, I’m not ready to go to college, and instead I’m moving to Australia to work at an amusement park. Okay, bye!” She’s already got the nasty aftertaste of moving out from my dad, just another way the asshole fucked me over. I have to figure out how to convince her that moving to Australia is me taking control of my life and making it my own, not me destroying any chance I have of living a successful existence.

Assuming I can save my last words until a much later date.



## CHAPTER 5

Lish, teary-eyed from a blast of sentimentality, drives us home one last time from high school. “I can’t believe he gave me an A,” I marvel. “I thought Mr. Mistrata hated me. At least since I wrote that essay comparing high school to the nine circles of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*.”

“That was a very well-written essay.” Lish nods. “I mean, Mistrata does kind of look like a three-headed dog. With one head.”

“How’d you do?” I ask her.

“Straight As, son.”

“It’s weird, isn’t it? Why does it even matter? If we’ve already been accepted into college?”

“Maybe jobs look at your grades when you’re older?” Lish guesses.

“That’s ridiculous. Why should any job I have as an adult give a flying fuck that I got a C in gym because I refused to participate in the swimming unit while I had my period?”

“Maybe someone will hire you *because* you refused to swim in gym class,” Lish notes.

“Maybe. But then I’ll have to explain in the job interview that I don’t like tampons. I hope that’s not a deal breaker.”

“Your phobia of toxic shock syndrome is not unfounded.”

“Thanks for having my vagina’s back.” I pat Lish on the shoulder.

A twinge of melancholy hits, and it has nothing to do with the end of high school. In a few days, Lish’s meant-to-be, Travis (*that name*), will move in with Lish’s family, and our slow crawl from best friends who have a slight difference in opinion will turn into a sprint to two friends who can’t agree on major life decisions. Life was so much simpler when we were merely drowning in high school hell.

We enter my house, like so many after-schools before this one, and pretend life is the same, *we* are the same. The opening of the front door activates our ritual: eating microwaved hot dogs and watching reruns of ’70s TV.

“What should we dip our wieners in today?” I ask, scanning the fridge for saucelike items, ignoring the weight of the Last Day of High School and Beyond. “Our neighbor brought us back some sick salsa from Door County.”

“I finished that off today. Sorry.” Uncle Jim saunters into the kitchen in his ubiquitous pair of pocketed gray sweatpants and Mr. Bubble t-shirt. It’s not that he wears the same clothes every day; it’s that he owns at least seven identical sets of those exact clothes. He collected my empty Mr. Bubble bottles just to order t-shirts off the back label. Admittedly,

the most recent bottle was polished off last week. I'm a sucker for the gentle fragrance and abundant froth Mr. Bubble provides.

"How are you so skinny when you seem to only eat entire containers of food?" Lish asks Uncle Jim.

"It's all in moderation. One container at a time. Plus, I walk up and down the stairs at least a hundred and thirty-seven times per day."

Uncle Jim can be odd, although Lish is more than used to him. He's funny, but not always on purpose. He looks much younger than his thirty-five years and at the same time acts like a seventy-five-year-old man. Plus, the whole romance novel thing. When he writes, he keeps a pair of half-moon reading glasses perched on his nose, and when he's not writing they dangle from a beaded chain around his neck. I guess you could call it nursing-home—slash—museum-archivist—slash—five-year-old-in-a-bathtub chic.

"Enjoy your lips and assholes," Uncle Jim salutes our snack of choice and retreats to his writing cave.

Both Lish and I understand the obvious phallic hilarity of eating hot dogs, sans buns, while dipping them into liquidy condiments, but that doesn't stop us from partaking. No one can deny the processed joy of snarfing hooves and anuses with your best friend. Lish and I are slaves to rituals, and this is one of our finest. *Was* one of our finest.

"Ah, here's some horseradish mustard." I grab the jar from the fridge. "Coke?" Part of our process normally

involves a tossed-and-caught can of Coke, but today Lish holds up her hand like a stop sign.

“I think I’ll have water today,” Lish says coyly. When I arch my eyebrows in question, she admits, “Travis said I should stop drinking Coke. It’s like pouring battery acid on your teeth.” And so it begins.

“Travis said that?” I emphasize his name, *Travis*, probably a little more childishly than I mean. Or at least more than I want Lish to hear.

“Yes. He is studying to become a dentist. He is concerned for my teeth’s well-being.”

“My teeth are perfectly happy disintegrating if it means they can continue drowning in the sugary goodness of Coke. Hell, when they start to decompose I can get dentures out of Coke cans. Bling!” I tap my front tooth and ring out the shiny sound effect.

“It’s not just Travis who thinks actual teeth are important.” Lish glares at me. “I would say ninety-nine percent of the population is pretty attached to their teeth. I’d go as far as saying ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine-nine-nine-nine” —she repeats the number for eternity— “would prefer their own teeth to Coke-can teeth.”

Any mention of Travis makes me completely prickly. Lish seems absolutely mad about him in a very Hatter-like way. After she had her chest scanned into the International Database of Signatures and Travis came up as her MTB, his name manages to slink into nearly every conversation we have.

*Travis likes when I wear my hair like this.*

*Travis always says that.*

*Travis has been to Australia before. He can tell you all about it.*

That last one chafes me the most. I know Australia is an entire country—hell, a continent—and that people besides me visit there, but part of me feels like when I go, I will be a pioneer. I will survive and conquer. Not actual people, but more like live the shit out of life in a way that I could never do trapped by the constraints and expectations of our lame new world.

All Travis did was visit a couple of zoos on a family vacation when he was twelve.

“It’s almost three o’clock,” I interrupt the Travis static in my brain when I realize we’re about to miss the opening credits of *Sanford and Son*, possibly for the last time together. Once Travis arrives, I can’t imagine Lish will have time for our rituals.

We bolt into the family room and flip on the television. *Sanford and Son*, the show, is brilliantly hilarious, but the show is nothing without the funky junk of the theme song. Lish grabs a gray tasseled throw my mom knitted back when she had time to knit, and I swoop a green fleece blanket over my shoulders. The *bwakabwaka* starts, and Lish and I strut around the room, tossing the blankets up and back like they’re extensions of our dorky appendages. Completely straight-faced because, naturally, this is very serious, we dance like the world is watching. Rugburn, initially drawn to the meaty hot-dog scent, dashes out of the room for fear of being trampled.

Half a minute later the performance is over, and we sit down with our hot dogs and mustard to watch the show.

“I still haven’t decided if I’m going to let Travis see me do that,” Lish muses.

“(a) No, you are not, because no one in the entire universe has ever seen you do that but me and my reclusive uncle, and (b) If you can’t show him the dorkiest side of you, then he’s obviously not your Empty, is he?” My voice escalates, as it is wont to do whenever I speak of Travis. I should probably get better at hiding my emotions.

“You just completely contradicted yourself, Aggy,” Lish fires at me.

“What? No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did. You said I couldn’t do the dance in front of anyone but you, and then you said that if I can’t do it in front of Travis, he’s not my MTB. Which is it?” She eyes me scoldingly.

“It’s both. Neither. I just meant that you are only *allowed* to do it in front of me, but if you were, like, forced at gunpoint to do the *Sanford and Son* theme-song dance in front of Travis, he’d be a dick if he didn’t see its brilliance,” I argue.

“Aggy, how can you hold anything against Travis when you haven’t even met him? He’s supersweet and nice, and we’re so compatible.”

“When did ‘so compatible’ become the criteria of an eighteen-year-old’s love life? Aren’t we supposed to whore around and make mistakes and think we’re in love and

realize the guy's a dick sandwich and then fall in love again and really think he's the one and then get cheated on and then swear off men forever until we crash into someone while chasing down Twinkies at a mini-mart at two-thirty in the morning and fall in love at first sight?" I'm a tad out of breath.

Lish laughs (*at me*, I would like to note, not *with me*. Because I'm not laughing). "Aggy, that sounds awful. I'm much happier knowing that I found the right guy. Now. Forever. Period."

"Allegedly," I enunciate each rolling syllable. "We don't know that for sure."

"Does anybody? Ever?"

"Maybe not. But doesn't it feel boring to you? Unromantic? Where's the exploration? The possibility? The tension? The hunt?" I enthuse.

"The closest I ever want to get to hunting is biting the end off this hot dog," Lish proclaims dramatically, tearing the hot dog wildly with her teeth for effect.

"Don't quit your day job," I say.

Lish chuckles, then looks at me with her big brown eyes and requests, "Can you save your judgment for Travis until after you meet him? No, wait. Like after you hang out with him a few times just in case he doesn't make a good first impression?"

"Fine. But only for you. Not because I believe Empties are real."

"You have three days to prepare your most sincere fake smile. I suggest you practice in a mirror."

We watch *Sanford and Son* for a while, and I try my best to live in this moment. Just me, my best friend, some hot dogs, and classic TV. Fred shouts to his dead wife, “This is the big one, Elizabeth!” always a favorite gag on the show, but I lose to my brain, stuck on Travis.

“What kind of name is Travis anyway?” I turn to ask Lish.

“What kind of name is Hendrix?” she blows back.

“I don’t know. Nor do I care.”

“Mmmhmmm.” She side-glances at me. “Just keep telling yourself that, Agatha.” Lish uses my full name when she thinks she’s being wise. “You know you want to meet your MTB. Even if you don’t want to spend your life with him, you’ve at least got to be intrigued. I bet you search for his name on the Internet tonight. How many Hendrix Cutters can there be in the world?” Lish is such a sensible pain in my stubborn ass. How am I going to resist the lure of an Internet search? Not a full-on Signature Scan, but just a basic Google search of his name? It couldn’t possibly bring up very many hits. And what about *my* name? Agatha isn’t weird, but I’ve never met another person named Agatha who isn’t over seventy-five.

God. There is a person out there with my horribly illegible signature scribbled onto his body. Is he looking for me? What if he finds me? What if he wants to get married right away and settle down and have babies and, God forbid, wants to be a stockbroker? Or worse: a dentist?

I refuse to look him up. I will use all my willpower and



only touch the interwebs for important things like movie times and Kylo Ren fan fiction.

Good thing I start work tomorrow. That should keep my mind off Empties. Because no one I work with is over eighteen and thinking about their Empty, too.