

I SEE
REALITY

I SEE

TWELVE SHORT STORIES ABOUT REAL LIFE

REALITY

Jay Clark Trisha Leaver
Kristin Elizabeth Clark Kekla Magoon
Heather Demetrios Marcella Pixley
Stephen Emond James Preller
Patrick Flores-Scott Jason Schmidt
Faith Erin Hicks Jordan Sonnenblick

COMPILED BY GRACE KENDALL

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
175 Fifth Avenue, New York 10010

“Three Imaginary Conversations With You” copyright © 2016 by Heather Demetrios
“The Downside of Fabulous” copyright © 2016 by Kristin Elizabeth Clark
“The Night of the Living Creeper” copyright © 2016 by Stephen Emond
“Makeshift” copyright © 2016 by Kekla Magoon
“Things You Get Over, Things You Don’t” copyright © 2016 by Jason Schmidt
“Coffee Chameleon” copyright © 2016 by Jay Clark
“Hush” copyright © 2016 by Marcella Pixley
“Blackbird” copyright © 2016 by Trisha Leaver
“Gone From This Place” copyright © 2016 by Faith Erin Hicks
“The Sweeter the Sin” copyright © 2016 by Jordan Sonnenblick
“The Mistake” copyright © 2016 by James Preller
“The Good Brother” copyright © 2016 by Patrick Flores-Scott

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Kristie Radwilowicz
First edition, 2016
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

macteenbooks.com
realTYreads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

I see reality : twelve stories that don't hold back / edited by Grace Kendall. — First edition.
pages cm

Summary: “Popular young-adult authors weave together questions of identity, loss, and redemption into poignant tales for today's teens”—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-374-30258-0 (hardback)

ISBN 978-0-374-30259-7 (e-book)


1. Teenagers—Fiction. 2. Short stories. [1. Short stories. 2. Interpersonal relations—Fiction. 3. High schools—Fiction. 4. Schools—Fiction. 5. Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. 6. Family life—Fiction.] I. Kendall, Grace, editor.

PZ5.I24 2016

[Fic]—dc23

2015006007

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



You can tell a book is real when your heart beats faster. Real books make you sweat. Cry, if no one is looking. Real books help you make sense of your crazy life. Real books tell it true, don't hold back, and make you stronger. But most of all, real books give you hope. Because it's not always going to be like this and books—the good ones, the real ones—show you how to make it better. Now.

—Laurie Halse Anderson, author of *Speak*

CONTENTS

THREE IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOU | 3

Heather Demetrios

THE DOWNSIDE OF FABULOUS | 31

Kristin Elizabeth Clark

THE NIGHT OF THE LIVING CREEPER | 61

Stephen Emond

MAKESHIFT | 87

Kekla Magoon

THINGS YOU GET OVER, THINGS YOU DON'T | 107

Jason Schmidt

COFFEE CHAMELEON | 129

Jay Clark

HUSH | 151

Marcella Pixley

BLACKBIRD | 179

Trisha Leaver

UNTITLED | 205

Faith Erin Hicks

THE SWEETER THE SIN | 219

Jordan Sonnenblick

THE MISTAKE | 237

James Preller

THE GOOD BROTHER | 267

Patrick Flores-Scott

About the Authors | 287

I SEE
REALITY



THREE IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOU

Heather Demetrios



I'm breaking up with you today.

After two years, four months, three weeks, five days, and eight hours of being Gavin Davis's Girlfriend *I am breaking up with you.*

You won't see it coming. Your little high school girlfriend who never says no to you, the one who blows off her friends for your college keggers, the one who just sits there when you tell her she's a drag and that dating a girl in high school fucking sucks—*that* girl is Breaking Up With You.

I'm breaking up with you even though Christmas is next week and I already bought you a present it's too late to return.

I'm breaking up with you even though the thought of breaking up with you hurts.

This is how it will go down:

First we'll go to *The Nutcracker* because your mom bought us tickets as a Christmas present and I'll decide it'd be shitty not to go because she'll feel like I'm rejecting her and I only want to reject *you*. This will be a terrible decision, but I'll make it anyway

because when we end, your parents—who see me as a daughter who’s going to be in their family forever—will be collateral damage. I want them to hurt as little as possible. Obviously what I plan to do after the show is even more shitty, but at least your mom won’t feel like she wasted the money. I just know that if I don’t do this before Christmas, I never will. Because if I wait, you’ll get me a sweet gift like you did last year (Who buys a first edition of a girl’s favorite childhood book? *You.*)—and I won’t be able to go through with it.

I *have* to do this.

I’ve pictured it a thousand times, a thousand different ways. This is one of them.

First: When you come to pick me up, I’ll wonder if I should wait just a few more days because of how your eyes light up when you see me in my dress. I’ll think about how in a few hours those eyes are going to be red-rimmed and pleading. (Note to self: wear something terrible.) And, of course, you’ll be crazy hot, wearing a tie or something and the thought of you dressing up for another girl after we break up will make me insanely jealous, which is so stupid, but I won’t be able to help it. Then I’ll start psychoanalyzing what that means, like, if I feel jealous, then doesn’t that prove that, deep down, I want to stay together? Meanwhile, I’ll feel even more uncertain as I watch you play with my little brother, who you genuinely adore and constantly compare to the kid in *Jerry Maguire*. You’ll call him little dude, which he loves. I’ll see Sam kiss you on the cheek before we leave for the theater and you’ll kiss him right back and it’ll be the sweetest goddamn thing I’ve ever seen. Fuck you for that.

On the way to the theater, we'll get into a little argument and I'll feel vindicated. You're upset that my parents want me home by eleven. You'll sigh and shake your head, like you're the most put-upon boyfriend in the universe. "You're lucky I love you so much." Compliment and criticism rolled into one, as usual. But the thing is: I'll believe you. Because I know my parents are super strict and I'm a little bit of a prude. And because I still can't shake the awe that when we were in high school together, you chose me over girls who were so much prettier, so much *more*. I don't understand why you *still* choose me over college girls who are independent and flirty and fun. So, yeah, maybe I'm lucky. I'll still want to break up, though.

In the theater parking lot or going up the fancy staircase inside, I'll think about that day at the park, when we were on the swings and you said, *Jessa, you have no idea how hard it is to love you. But I can't stop. I won't stop.* You expanded on this. You went on and on about how hard I am to love with my negativity and my strict parents and my crazy ideas about chastity. You call me Eeyore, as in the depressive donkey from *Winnie-the-Pooh*, and not always affectionately. You say I'm a wet blanket and a tease and you don't care how much I get punished when I come home after curfew. You don't care what price I have to pay for us to be together. This is my ammunition and I have stored it carefully inside me: proof we are bad together.

After the show (you'll be a perfect gentleman, buying me the expensive souvenir program and kissing my neck), we'll be sitting in your mom's car outside McDonald's, our typical late-night-snack place. You'll have coffee, black. I'll have the McFlurry I

don't want (You'll buy it for me even when I say not to because you hate eating or drinking or doing anything alone. You'll tell me I love McFlurries and that will be that).

"Hey, I know it's early, but . . ." You'll reach into your pocket and I'll shrink away. (*Crap! I thought I was doing this early enough!*) You'll hand me a long, thin velvet box. A jewelry box. I won't want to know what's inside, so I'll decide not to open it. This time, I won't let you trick me into staying together.

I'll shake my head. You'll think I'm being coy and you'll smile your sweet, sexy smile—not the cruel one—and you'll push it closer. (*Pushing—you're so good at that, aren't you?*) I'll hug the door of the car, keep my hands behind me. Your smile will slide off your face and God, I won't be able to do this. Because I'll see your heart breaking, like you already know what's going to happen.

"What's up?" you'll ask. Your voice shakes a little, but you'll try to keep it casual.

For a minute, I won't be able to answer because you are so familiar to me and I'll start thinking (like I always do) about what it would be like not to have this: you, across from me, having our little traditions like coffee and McFlurries. I'll start wondering if this is the last time I'll ever sit in this car and my resolve will start to waver, just a little. I'll watch you for a minute because even then, preparing to break up with you, I can't stop looking. I can't stop wanting you.

Your hair is blond and the fluorescent parking lot lights make it gleam. I used to call you Prince Charming, before, when you were the popular senior captain of the water polo team, the guitar-playing god who noticed mousy little me and said *I'm taking you*

out tonight. I'm only now realizing that wasn't a question. Technically, you never asked me out. You didn't give me the option of saying no.

At some point between leaving the theater and arriving at McDonald's you'll have grown tired of the tie and dress shirt and changed into the shirt I bought you two years ago, right after we got together. Just a stupid Hollister shirt, but you love it and sometimes ask me to sleep in it so it'll smell like me. It's faded now and has a hole near the shoulder and isn't that us, I'll want to say right then, *Isn't that us?*

I'll take a deep breath. "Wehavetobreakup."

You'll go still. Utterly, completely still.

You'll swallow. Look at the little box in your hand. A truck full of guys will rev past us and I'll jump. They'll swing into the drive-through and order half the menu while we sit there, staring at each other. You'll set my Christmas present on the dashboard.

"I'll kill myself if you break up with me."

You've never said this before, but when I imagine breaking up with you, I hear this. Because you said it to someone else, didn't you? And when she had the courage to do what I'm about to do . . . you *did* try to kill yourself. And, silly me, at the time I thought that was beautifully tragic. I saw you as the spurned lover, the ultimate romantic. God, what was I thinking? You were insane. I was reading too much Byron at the time, that must have been what it was.

I'll sit there in the passenger seat of your mom's sensible, slightly expensive car, the one with the seats that warm our asses, and my mind will freeze, like brain freeze only worse.

Kill.

Myself.

And then I'll get angry. Just imagining you doing this and putting your hypothetical suicide on me—it makes me so angry. Angry is good. I'll need to stay angry. That's how your ex did it and that's how I'll do it. I'll think about how you're saying this in a McDonald's parking lot. *In a McDonald's parking lot.* And I'll think: *Aren't you supposed to declare the intent to end your life in an abandoned alley or on a windswept moor—something just a little bit poetic?*

Then I'll be scared. Because . . . what if you mean it?

"No you won't." I'll whisper those words, as if saying them more quietly will calm the sharp-beaked thing inside you.

You'll take the keys out of the ignition and grip them in your palm and I am the keys, I am the one being held so tightly in your white-knuckled fist.

"Yes. I will." This will be said slowly, as if you were talking to a child, as if me still being in high school and you being in college automatically makes you the mature one. This is your Calm Boyfriend voice. I hate it now and I'll hate it then, too.

"I've thought about it before," you'll say. "I have a plan." You'll look at me. "You know I'll go through with it."

"Jesus, Gavin."

"Do you want to know how I'll do it?"

"No." Then I'll explode. "What the fuck is wrong with you? That's *sick*."

"Do you think I like being like this?" You'll hit the steering wheel with your fist, hard. "It's your fault, for saying shit like that."

“I meant it. I don’t want to be with you anymore.” I’ll start shaking and I won’t be able to stop because I’ll feel it slipping—me, my resolve, all of it.

“Then I mean it, too. Leave me, fine. I just hope you’ll go to my funeral.”

“What the *fuck*, Gavin?”

And I’ll hear my best friend’s voice, as though she’s right in the car with us: *Stop letting him manipulate you, Jessa. He knows exactly what to say to keep you with him. He always does.*

It’ll be quiet in the car for a long time and my mind will start to wander, to try to get away. In these almost-break-up moments it does that. I’ll think about weird stuff like how I need to dust my bedroom or rework the thesis for a paper. But this night, I’ll think of Adam. I know because I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him for the past two weeks, since the cast party for the school play. You didn’t want me to go. You wouldn’t come because it was a “stupid high school party,” but I finally put my foot down. It’s my senior year and I want to enjoy it. I’m tired of ditching my friends because they’re too lame for you.

So while you sit there imagining your suicide, I’ll replay the cast party. It has become my happy place.

Adam is just my friend. I don’t know if I like him as anything more than that, but when I was hanging out with him at the cast party, I realized that I might be feeling something for someone who isn’t you. Nothing serious, just a tiny revelation that there are other guys in the world. I found myself wondering what it would be like to kiss him. Or even hold his hand. I didn’t. I just imagined it.

Even though it was cold as hell, we sat by the edge of the pool

at Jason Scheffer's house and talked all night and laughed so hard our stomachs hurt. For the first time in so long, I wasn't ashamed to be in high school. To be a kid. I told him about my necklaces, about how each one I make means something, has a story. I told him about how I collect the beads, sometimes for months or even years, and I wait until I can put the story of the necklace together. And the next day, he gave me a bead. Sea green with white swirls. He'd found it in the greenroom, when he was helping pack away costumes. It was such a small thing—literally, figuratively—but it felt huge. It was a gift from another guy and I kept it. *I kept it.* This scared the shit out of me, contemplating me with Adam or even just me without *us*. Our lives, after two years together, have become so entwined that the thought of unraveling you from me is almost as bad as the thought of never kissing someone else.

But back to the McDonald's parking lot. I need to picture all of this before you pick me up looking hot in your suit and kissing my little brother's cheek. I need to imagine the worst-case scenario because then when it happens, it'll be old news and you won't be able to shock me into staying together. So, you'll say you're going to kill yourself. I'll think about how I love you and how I don't want you to die. God, that's exactly what you'll want, isn't it? I love you + I don't want you to die = I don't break up with you. But they don't have to add up to that, they don't. I'll decide to be strong. I'll think about that bead and the possibility of dating lots of guys and not being Gavin Davis's Girlfriend, but instead . . . me. That will sound kinda nice. It will give me courage, that thought.

"Gavin." I'll put my hand over your fist. "I still love you. But I think we're over."

“You’re my life,” you’ll say.

Wait. If you tell me this . . . what will I do? Because . . . I’m your life? Not your band or your friends at school or whatever, but . . . me? You’ve never told me that before. The doubt creeps in and I hate it because it’s telling me to wait. *Just one more chance*, you always say. *I didn’t know you felt that way . . . I can change . . . I’ll give you more space . . .*

I’ll stare at you. Your eyes will be more blue than green and I’ll think that no one really knows that but me—how your eyes change color. Tonight they’ll be sad and desperate and full of love.

“We can be so good together, you know that,” you’ll say. “Once you graduate, this will all be a bad dream, I promise.”

Memories, so many. I’ll think about the time you made me soup when I was sick and how you skipped the party for the water polo championships and stayed curled up next to me, risking the flu and reading me my favorite picture books. And of course I’ll think about the first song you wrote me and how you serenaded me as I came out of math class. You even got some of the water polo team to back you up. (I still don’t know how you convinced them to do that.) And, God, our first kiss: in the rain, against a wall in an alley—even now it makes me blush.

But I’ll remember that there are words in my head, ones I’ve been practicing for months and never have the guts to say because right when I’m going to say them you do something wonderful. But I think I’ll be able to say them tonight. *You can do this*, I’ll tell myself.

“Gav. We aren’t happy together.” I want happy. So, so much.

“We fight. All the time. You’re always in a bad mood when I’m around.”

“Because your fucking parents never let me see you!”

“I’m seventeen!” I’ll be yelling now. There’s always a point where we start yelling and when you talk about my parents as *your fucking parents*, that will be the button you push that I can’t ignore. I love my fucking parents. “I have a curfew. I have class every morning at seven thirty. I can’t stay out until three a.m. like you do.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. Jessa, please—”

You’ll reach out and your fingers will touch the necklace around my neck. Because I’m feeling sentimental, I’ll be wearing the one I made the week we got together, in a total frenzy, where each bead represented a daydream about you. Your fingers skim over the beads, over those fantasies about you and guilt, guilt, guilt because I’ll think of that glass bead, which has been in my pocket since the day Adam gave it to me. How many times have I touched it over the past two weeks thinking, *what if, what if?*

“We have to break up,” I’ll say again. If I keep saying it, then maybe it will happen.

You’ll turn away from me and take the necklace with you. I’ll feel it go taut against my neck and then it’ll be gone, beads everywhere, flying all over the car. I’ll only know it’s an accident by the shocked look on your face.

I’ll have this thought: *I’ll never be able to put it back together.* The necklace, us. Never, never.

You’ll say you’re sorry about a million times and we’ll look at the beads and then, God, you’ll be crying. Sobbing, almost. Fuck. Fuck. I’ll want the anger to stay, but it’s going . . . going . . .

“You’re my soul mate, Jessa. We’re supposed to be together. Forever. That was the deal.”

Then you’ll shatter right in front of me, just like you did when your dad said *I can’t do this anymore* and walked out your front door with a suitcase in his hand. And I’ll have to clean you up, put you back together. I’m glue. I’m glue.

“Don’t be like him,” you’ll whisper. “Please, Jessa. I can’t watch someone else walk away.”

Ah, yes. The final nail in the coffin. This memory, this is what it always comes down to:

A fireplace. Christmas. Pretty lights and hot cocoa, you looking down at me.

“Don’t ever leave me,” you say.

“I won’t.”

Candy cane kisses, snow angels, mistletoe.

“Promise me.” Your lips, so close to mine. “I don’t want us to be like my parents. I want forever with you. Promise me, Jessa.”

“I promise.”

The memory will wash over me and your tears will cut me and I’ll decide I won’t do this to you, not after everything we’ve been through. I’ll reach up and put my arms around you.

“I love you, I love you,” I’ll whisper. “I didn’t mean it. I don’t want to break up. I don’t. I’m sorry.”

You’ll press your lips against mine and they’ll be salty with tears and I’ll breathe you in and even though my stomach will churn a little because a part of me has grown to hate the smell of your cologne, I’ll let you pull me into your lap. We’ll make out and we’ll fall into it, so easy, so natural. And I’ll tell myself I love you. I do. I do.

Your hands will cover my body like they own me. They stopped asking permission a long time ago. We'll go further than we ever have because I'll feel like I owe you, for putting you through this. I'll want to throw up. I'll want to kill myself.

"I'm glad I don't have to die tonight," you'll say a few hours later, as you drop me off at home, well past curfew. You'll smile, as though we're in on the same sick joke and, in a way, I guess we will be.

When I get inside, I'll put Adam's bead at the bottom of my jewelry box.

I won't look at it again.

2

I'm breaking up with you today.
I mean it this time.

I'm breaking up with you because when we took a "break" last month, you showed up on my doorstep every single night with a bouquet of flowers and a song you'd written about me, even though I told you I needed space.

I'm breaking up with you because instead of going to my senior prom tonight, I'm going to some stupid party your band is playing at.

I'm breaking up with you because I just found out that I got into your college and I'm scared that if I don't break up with you, I'll actually go there. And then you'll get me pregnant and I'll

have to marry you and wear the scarves your sister knits me for the rest of my life and pretend to love you even though by then I'll hate you.

This is how it will go down:

I'll be standing against a wall at the party, by myself. Every time you come over, someone will pull you away and you'll give me an apologetic look and I'll turn into Stepford girlfriend and smile and say, "Go, go, I'm fine." I'll be dressed a little bit slutty because you like that, you like that it makes me look older. I'll wear too much makeup and the high heels will be killing my feet, but I'll wear them because you begged me to. You said they turn you on.

I'll check my cell and it'll be late, almost curfew. I won't want to check it too much because everyone will be posting pictures from prom and every time I see them I'll have to force myself not to cry. I'll think about what a mistake it was, coming to the party, and how I can never have another senior prom. The curfew thing will be stressing me out and I'll be so tired of pretending I'm actually going to drink the beer I'm holding in my hand.

By this point, I'll have told you I need to go five times already—five, I counted—but you'll keep saying, "Just a few more minutes." I'll feel jealous of the girls who hug you when they see you and are all starry-eyed over your sexy guitar playing and I'll wonder if I'm the biggest joke in the room. Finally you'll grab my hand and I'll think we might actually be leaving this time. "Guess we have to go," you'll say, all woe-is-me. "God, I can't wait until you graduate."

You are a broken record.

“You can come back,” I’ll say. “You know. After you drop me off.”

A guy will come up as we’re nearing the doors—the singer of the band that played before yours. Lead Singer smirks.

“Hey Cradle Robber.”

You’ll have the good grace to bristle. But then I’ll realize it’s not for my benefit: it’s for yours. I’ll see how you’re embarrassed for yourself, that you have to cart around a minor.

“Dude, shut the fuck up,” you’ll say.

“Just giving you a hard time, Gav.” The guy will talk like I’m not there—they all do. Like I can’t hear this conversation *about me*.

You’ll smile and lean in closer to him and I won’t be sure if I’m supposed to hear this—do you *want* me to hear this?

“The things she can do with her *mouth*.” You’ll shake your head, like you can’t even begin to describe how good my blow jobs are and the lead singer guy raises his hand for a congratulatory fist bump and I will burn with shame, on fire, Joan of Arc burning and you won’t see it, you won’t care and you’ll do the fist bump and I’ll hate you because I hate blow jobs and you know that, but you’ve never cared because, you say, “It’s the least you can do.” Like wanting to stay a virgin until I graduate is some kind of crime.

The guy will walk away and you’ll turn to me and you must finally see the spontaneous combustion in front of you because you’ll say, “Jessa. Don’t be such a wet blanket. Jesus.”

I’ll practically run out of there, which is pretty hard to do in my too-high heels. You’ll catch me halfway down the street and

I'll be crying by then and you'll hold me to you and you won't let go.

"I'm sorry," you'll whisper. "I'm such a dick. I'm sorry. He just got under my skin and I'm pissed I have to take you home. I miss you."

I'll smell the beer on your breath and the cigarettes on your T-shirt and it'll give me enough strength to push you away from me.

"No. I'm done."

I'll whip out my phone and dial my best friend. I'm calling her to pick me up—she said she'd ditch her prom date if I needed her to.

"Don't," you'll say, reaching for the phone. "Let me take you home."

"No." My voice will be a growl and it'll feel so good to say the one word that's been absent from my vocabulary for so long. I'll hold on to the phone like it's a can of pepper spray.

"*Jessa.*" Your voice will break and there's fear in it, real fear, and I'll suddenly get why you won't let me do this, no matter how hard I try.

"The only reason you're staying with me," I'll say, savoring each word, "is because you don't want to be alone. You're *afraid* to be alone."

"That's not true."

But I can finally admit it to myself. I hope it goes down like this tonight because I want to say these words to you so bad. They're crawling up my throat. I want to vomit them all over you. I want you to smell like them for days afterward.

"We're not soul mates," I'll say. "I'm your rebound. You and Genna broke up and then there I was, conveniently worshipping at your feet, and so you—"

“That’s bullshit.” You’ll move closer to me, but I’ll back away. Maybe I’m going too far with this fantasy, but it’s like a scene in a movie and I want to be the badass heroine who tells the jerk boyfriend to fuck off. “I was into you way before Genna and I broke up. I know you’re mad, but stop being such a bitch.”

This won’t hurt as much as it should because you’ve said it before, in various ways: *fucking bitch*, *goddamn bitch*. Say it enough and it doesn’t hurt anymore. That’s what I tell myself, anyway.

“You didn’t even know my *name* before you guys broke up—”

It’ll look like I’ve got you there, but you’re smart, so smart.

You’ll say: “What about the shooting star?”

That goddamn star. It’s why I’ve stayed with you so long.

We’re lying on the ratty old picnic blanket your parents keep in the backyard. I’m feeling so unbelievably lucky that Gavin Davis wants to make out with me under the stars. Your parents aren’t home, but I’m terrified they’ll come and catch this girl they’ve never met wearing nothing but a bra and way too short skirt that their son is currently putting his hands under.

“Maybe . . . um . . . we shouldn’t . . .” I try to get the words out but stars, and fingers, and your lips, your lips.

Your mouth is against my ear and you whisper, “We definitely should.”

I pull away from you, confused. Thinking how dumb I am, that maybe you just want to hook up. I’m not that girl. I can’t be—even for you.

“Gavin. I really like you.”

“I don’t like you.” Everything turns to ice, but then you smile and

reach for me and your eyes get glassy and your voice is so soft when you say, "I love you."

I don't realize that you're too good at one-liners and romantic moments. I think it's just for me. That I somehow inspire it all.

Later, we lie on our backs, staring at the sky. And then—a shooting star. We gasp at the same time and you reach out and grip my hand.

"I've never seen one before," I say.

You smile. "It's a sign."

"Of what?"

"That we're meant to be together."

"It wasn't a sign," I'll say. I'm tired of you using the star to build a case for our cosmic love. I'm over it. "A shooting star is just a rock."

Your eyes will narrow in that look that tells me you're going to say something especially cruel. "Those girls in there—" You point back toward the party. "Do you know how many of them have tried to hook up with me since I started going to school here? They don't have curfews. They're on birth control. They don't give a damn what Mommy and Daddy think and they have their own fucking apartments."

"Great, then as soon as we break up, you can go fuck all of them in their fucking apartments!"

*Your eyes will widen—you can't believe I've got it in me to say any of that, can you? But then your lips will turn up and . . . and . . . I'll see that you're . . . amused—*what?* What. The. Fuck. I'll be so mad I could spit, but you'll start cracking up and suddenly I'll feel ridiculous.*

“Stop laughing at me,” I’ll say. I’ll still be clutching my phone and I’ll need to call Erin, I’ll need to call her and tell her to pick me up.

“I’m not laughing at you!”

I’ll look and it’s true—you’ll be smiling like the Gavin I fell for, back when we were both in high school. You’ll lay your palms against my cheeks and it’ll be like a scene from a movie where people get together in the end.

“I’m so in love with you, Jessa, you have no idea.”

“What?”

Bingo. You got me.

Because I’ll be so confused. Two seconds ago you were listing all the reasons dating me is a total buzzkill. Then you swoop in with a romantic declaration.

You’ll lean closer and I’ll hate that my body responds to that. How can I still want you?

“I’m sorry.”

You’ll whisper the words. Bedroom talk. “I said that thing about the girls to see if you’d be jealous. I had to know if you still . . . if you still wanted me.”

Your mind games. God, you’re so good at keeping me off balance.

“That’s *messed up*, Gavin!” I’ll actually hit you with my purse and it’ll feel good to hear the smack of the leather against your skin.

But you’ll smile. “You’re so goddamn sexy when you’re mad. You’re like this fierce goddess—”

“Gavin, stop. Just stop, okay?”

I’ll step away from you. Erin told me I had to do it tonight.

That this was the final straw. The one that broke the camel's back. The . . . the . . . oh God, whatever all those expressions are, this is all of that.

"No more. No more this or us or . . . just. No more. Please." I'll be begging you. Please let me end this. Please, please.

You'll suddenly turn serious. "I'm sorry about the prom. I know you wanted to go. I just . . . Jessa, I'm twenty years old. Like, I love you and I want to make you happy, but I can't go to a high school prom."

"And that's fine, I get it, but this was *my* prom and I'll never have another one—"

"I don't think it's crazy for me to be uncomfortable with the idea of you dancing with other guys all night."

I'll throw up my hands, frustrated. "Gavin, I told you I was going to dance with my friends as a group and sit out all the slow songs."

"I was gonna tell you to go without me," you'll say. "I really was. I knew how much it meant to you and I thought, *There's nothing to worry about—you trust her*. But then I saw those pictures."

I know you'll bring this up because it's been our daily argument for the past two weeks.

You saw the pictures from the cast party on my phone and how Adam and I were always sitting next to each other, laughing. Even though it was five months ago and *nothing fucking happened*, you completely freaked out. Wouldn't give me my phone back until you searched through my emails. And I let you. *I let you*. Because I don't know how to say no to you.

"That's bullshit," I'll say, totally pissed off. "Like I've told you a

million times, I have never done anything wrong—I would never cheat on you.” This is the truth.

“I saw the way you were looking at each other in those pictures.”

“You saw pictures of me sitting next to a guy who wasn’t you and decided there was something going on—*which there isn’t*,” I’ll say. “We go to school together every day. If I wanted to cheat on you, I could have. So what does it matter if I go to prom and he’s there?”

“You’ll dance with him, for one.”

“His name is Adam, not *him*, and no, I wouldn’t have, because he has his own prom date—”

“So the only reason you wouldn’t dance with him is because he has a date.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I’ll say. “You’re putting words in my mouth.”

I’ll take off my heels because my feet will be in excruciating pain and I’ll throw them against the brick wall we’re standing next to but will wish I could throw them at you because here we are, spinning on a merry-go-round from hell.

“Stop being such a child,” you’ll snap.

“If I’m such a child, then why are you with me?” I’ll feel hopeful when I say this—maybe you’ll be pissed off enough to break up with me. Maybe I won’t have to do it.

You’ll shake your head. “Look, I don’t want to argue anymore. I’m just saying, shit happens on prom night and that’s why I wanted to keep you close, all right?” You’ll look down at me, slightly paternal. “I’m not okay with the possibility of my girlfriend screwing some guy from her drama class on prom night because she had too much to drink and he looked good in his tux.”

“I don’t even drink!” I’ll yell. Then I’ll lower my voice because we’re in public and there are some things you don’t shout from the rooftops, such as: “And I’m a virgin. And I’m well aware of the fact that I have a boyfriend and that means something to me, like not screwing other guys on prom night.”

I’ll start to walk away. Screw the heels, I’ll be barefoot, heading toward the bus stop. But you’ll run after me, suddenly panicked.

“Jessa.” You’ll grab my arm and I’ll try to shake you off, but you’re holding on too tight. I’ll probably have a bruise. “Okay, I’m sorry.” Your voice will go soft. “Is that what you want to hear? I’m sorry I didn’t trust you, I’m sorry I love you so much. I’m sorry.”

“Gavin . . .”

“Listen. I know I have to work on the jealousy thing. It just makes me crazy, not being able to be with you—you parents, your schedule.” I’ll try to pull away, but I’m starting to lose steam. “If you’re not happy by the end of the summer, then okay, you can leave me. But you owe us the summer at least.”

When I told you that after I graduate, I won’t have a curfew anymore, you literally jumped in the air and shouted, a huge smile spreading across your face. I’ll remember that moment and the doubt will creep in.

“It’s just been so hard lately,” I’ll whisper. Suddenly I’ll feel so tired. I won’t have the energy to have this same fight again.

“I know. But I’m telling you, it’s going to be so great. *We’re* going to be so great.”

Those one-liners of yours get me every time, make me feel like I’m on-screen, people watching us as they eat popcorn. But this isn’t a movie, it’s my life and it sucks.

“I don’t know, Gav. It just feels like . . . we can’t fix this.”

There's a moment of silence, and I'll think I'm finally getting through to you, but then you'll say: "Do you want to know what I did last weekend, when you were studying for finals?" You'll tilt my chin up, so that you can look in my eyes. "I went ring shopping."

I'll go hot, then cold. "What?"

"I didn't buy it yet," you'll say. "Need to save more money. But I have it all planned out, how I'll ask you." You'll be bashful then, a soft, secret smile playing on your face. The ice around my heart will start melting. Not in a good way, in a global-warming way. But it's not frozen anymore and that's all that matters in this moment. "Jessa, I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

All that frustration in my chest will explode, silently, so only I'll know it's happening. Everything will feel dark and bad and hopeless inside me and I'll sit right there on the sidewalk and bury my head in my hands. I won't know if I'm crying because right at that moment my friends are at prom, having the night of their lives, or because I'll know that we're not breaking up. Not then, maybe not ever.

You'll reach down and pick me up and cradle me against you (*cradle robber*), thinking I'm crying from happiness.

I'll be dead weight.

I'm breaking up with you today.

I'm wearing a necklace made of beads, each one a promise to myself that I will break up with you. The first bead is the one Adam gave me, way back when, the sea-green one with the white swirls.

I'm breaking up with you even though you might try to kill yourself (and I don't think you will—you love yourself too much to do that).

I'm breaking up with you right before graduation. Because I won't let you ruin this day. I won't let you take one more thing away from me.

I'm breaking up with you because I'm going to spend the whole summer with the friends I've neglected for the past two years. And then I'll go to a college far away. I'll be by myself for a while. Then I'll find someone I don't want to break up with.

This is how it will go down:

You'll get my text and a few minutes later, you'll be walking toward me.

I'll have asked you to meet me in the high school parking lot because it's a public place. Because I don't trust you anymore. I'm scared to be alone with you. My best friend will be standing a few feet away. She has promised to break up with you for me, if I don't do it. I gave her permission to drag me away from you, if need be. She would do it, too.

You'll smile when you see me and dance a little jig because this is the day we've been waiting for. But I'm going to make it the worst day of your life. I'll be sick with nerves and sad and I'll hate that a part of me still loves you, still lifts a little when you walk toward me with that slacker shuffle.

"How's my girl?" you'll say when you reach me.

I'll feel the cracks spreading through my heart as it starts to break. You'll be wearing the tie I bought you—the one with the skull and crossbones. I know you love it. I know you're wearing it for me. "Jessa?"

I'll grip the necklace. It's too late for Adam and me, but I'm okay with that. Because it's not too late for *me*. It feels good to be selfish, but it's hard.

I'll open my mouth, but the words won't come. Despite everything, I won't want to break your heart. And I won't want you to break mine. I just want us to . . . drift away from each other. I'll wish there didn't have to be words. Or that you, for once, could be the one who has to say the hard thing.

"What happened?" you'll ask. You are Concerned Boyfriend. I am Asshole Girlfriend.

Tears will be filling my eyes by this point and I'll shake my head. I'll think about how Erin will have to put more bobby pins in my hair because my mortarboard will be slipping off.

Your hands will grip my arms, your skin warm on mine. "Baby, what's wrong?"

Oh, God, you'll think it's not you, that there was some kind of graduation drama. Your voice will be sweet and I'll know you want to protect me and it'll be too much. The end of high school, the

end of us. The beginning of everything else. *I don't know if I can do this.* I'll turn my head and see Erin hiding behind someone's SUV. It'll make me feel strong, knowing someone has my back.

"We're breaking up. Right now. Please don't say anything." The words will come out in a rush and sweat will be dripping off me and *Please, God, please let me really do it this time.*

You have no idea how hard it is to love you.

You're such a wet blanket.

Tease.

Bitch.

Stop being such a child.

You're lucky I love you so much.

You'll stare at me. For once, you won't say a word. Because you'll know I mean it this time.

And then I'll walk away from you.

I won't look back.





THE DOWNSIDE OF FABULOUS

Kristin Elizabeth Clark



The classification of living things is called taxonomy,” Mr. Megars says, writing the word on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom. He’s left-handed, so *taxonomy* gets smeary and blurred by the time he gets to the y.

I’m pretty sure generations of tenth graders have been fooled into thinking their eyesight is going as a result of sitting in this guy’s class.

“This system was developed in the 1700s by Carl Linnaeus in order to identify and classify every living thing,” he explains. “Because labels are important.”

I add two Xs for eyes on the sketch I’m making of a bored kid sitting at a lab table. It’s got a manga feel to it that I’m a little stoked by.

My stomach rumbles, and next to me Liz mimics the noise barely audibly. Is it my fault bio is just before lunch? I’m a big guy, I get hungry! Mentally, I’m already piling into Gordon Alexander’s Suburban with the other theater tech crew geeks and Liz, if she’s not off eating with other people. She’s one of those rare

individuals who navigate the minefield of high school cliques without getting her legs blown off.

“Here, Chris,” she whispers, sliding me a bite-sized Mars bar under the table.

Megars glances back toward us. I palm the candy and sit up straight. My mom’s a teacher and her biggest complaint is students who sit in her class looking bored. I suspect her of grading those students harder. I try to at least give the appearance of looking alert because I’m screwed if I don’t bring home straight As.

He turns back to write something else.

Megars is dull, but his class does have a couple of saving graces. The first is that he doesn’t use a seating chart, which means I can sit next to Liz: provider of Mars bars when I’m hungry, next-door neighbor since kindergarten, best friend, and confidant. Up until recently, there was absolutely nothing one of us didn’t know about the other.

“Using man as an example, here’s how it goes,” Megars says, drawing a fuzzy pyramid. At the bottom he writes *Kingdom, Animalia*. On the next line up he writes *Phylum, Chordata*.

I look down at the handout, which has the same pyramid and says the same thing. I sketch the River Nile in the margin, add a boat, and then make the bored-looking kid the captain.

Megars continues up the pyramid through class, order, and family. When he gets to genus, the word is *homo*. Two tables over, Joe Trimble snickers. I look up just in time to see Tom Waters (saving grace number two) turn around and raise an eyebrow at Joe. The message is clear.

Not chill.

Joe looks down at his table and the tips of his ears redden.

That is one powerful eyebrow, I think.

There's just something about Tom—a worldly air to everything he does. His mom's a travel writer and his dad's a photographer and they're always taking Tom out of school to go with them to places like India and Japan. Sometimes for months at a time.

In fact, that happened so often in elementary and middle school, he's actually a year older than anyone else in our class. But when being held back is the result of hiking in Cameroon from February to May . . . Well, let's just say that Tom's managed to even make repeating eighth grade seem like the sophisticated thing to do.

He's on the student council, he's the lead in every drama club musical (right now it's *Guys and Dolls*), and he made varsity tennis his freshman year. He also started the Diversity Task Force, devoted to spreading the gospel of inclusiveness to our school.

The club is popular because Tom is popular.

He's also gay.

"You'll be working with your partner on making posters of three different phylogenetic trees and labeling them with the Linnaean classification system," Megars says.

I continue to study Mr. Saving Grace Number Two. He's got on a vintage white tux jacket. He wears it a lot, probably because it fits perfectly across his broad shoulders. Sandy blond curls just touch the collar, and from this angle I can see the slight scruff of facial hair along his square jaw. I think about its texture, about touching

it, and how it would feel under my fingers . . . I shut my eyes for a second.

“The only requirement is that one of the trees must be that of humans. As for the others, whatever floats your boat.”

What floats my boat is Tom Waters.

At first I thought my attraction to other guys might be just a phase. You know, something some guys go through on their way to getting hot for girls. Last summer though, Liz and I took her mom’s Volvo to the basketball team car wash. Cheerleaders were out helping them, and Liz made some snarky observation about the bikini Daria Evans was wearing.

I didn’t see the bikini. I was too busy noticing the little river of water running down the sharply defined bicep crease on point guard Rob Kendal’s Michelangelo-worthy arm.

That’s when I realized that three years is a ridiculous amount of time for a phase to last.

I’m not one for big announcements, so even when I realized I was definitely gay, I just figured I’d wait until there was a reason to come out. In fact, it’s now been four months and I’ve told no one, even though I know my parents will be fine with it.

When I was eleven or so, my Aunt Jen made the mistake of telling me I was going to grow up to make some woman very happy. My mom jumped all over her, saying that I was going to make some *person* happy, and that she wasn’t going to stand for her kid’s indoctrination into heteronormativity. (A word I only recently looked up.)

“Neatness counts, as does obvious effort.” Megars could not sound more bored. “In the next couple of days, choose your partner and get with them to plan. Today is Monday, posters are due a

week from Thursday; that gives you plenty of time. I'll be able to tell if you waited until the last minute."

Tom leans sideways to grab a book from his backpack on the floor, exposing a few inches of tanned wrist. I stare for a second, then snap my head toward Liz because I have this absurd notion that she, the person I'm closest to in the world, would have caught that one-second stare and realized what it meant.

Liz just looks at me like *what?*

Clearly telepathy is not one of my superpowers. I look back over at Tom, who may or may not know I'm even alive. I manage to keep a sigh from escaping my lips.

Of course Liz'll be the first person I'll come out to.

I think I finally have a reason to do it.

I don't believe you."

Liz and I are sitting on beanbag chairs in her den, controllers in our hands, Converse shoes in a heap next to us. (Mine are a little bigger and a lot rattier than hers. She also claims mine smell, but it's nothing I've ever noticed.) She unpauses the game (Mordock's Giant) and goes back to blowing up gnomes, like it's the end of the conversation.

I can only stare at her.

Of all the possible responses I'd imagined, this is one I never considered.

I'd prepared myself for "It's probably a phase." You know, because I actually thought that myself for the aforementioned three years. (Call me slow.) I'd prepared myself for "When did you

decide you were gay?” To which I had my response ready: “When did you decide you were straight?” I even prepared myself for a squirmy made-for-TV-movie moment of a hug and a promise of support. But “I don’t believe you”?

I don’t know what to do with that except pause the game again, before any fireballs can come out of the trees and decimate me.

“What? It’s true!”

“Pretending to be gay isn’t funny.” Liz’s dark eyebrows are raised and wisps of hair are falling across her furrowed forehead. Her exasperation is as plain as the piercing in her nose.

“I’m not pretending!”

“You can’t be gay.” Again, like *end of discussion*.

She starts to unpause the game. I turn it off.

“Why would you say that?”

“Well.” She exhales dramatically and looks up at the ceiling like someone spray-painted a cheat sheet up there. “There was that time in seventh grade, when we . . .” She lets the sentence trail off.

An embarrassing memory zaps my neurons. It was at Sam Nesbaugh’s end-of-the-year party. I spent the day in the pool wrestling with the other guys and the occasional girl who’d gotten thrown in. When it got dark, the kids who were still there played spin the bottle. The fact that Liz and I kissed was eclipsed by the memory of how I’d spent the day in the water with a half husker, hoping no one else noticed.

The smug look on Liz’s face says she thinks she’s stumped me somehow. Then I remember what she’s talking about.

“For crying out loud! That was spin the bottle! What was I

going to do? Refuse to play? And we both thought it was gross!” I remind her.

We’d walked home together and agreed that kissing each other was a never-to-be-repeated experiment.

Wait. Am I the only one who thought it was gross?

Liz must read my mind (this time) because she punches me. Hard.

“Don’t even think it,” she says. “I most certainly have not been sitting around for three years pining over you and that kiss. I just don’t think you’re gay.”

“I’m a guy. I like guys. How is that not gay?”

Liz brushes over this fact like it’s a glitch in the screen. “You play video games. Sometimes obsessively.”

“So do you!” Am I really arguing this with her?

“True. But in me it’s unexpected, maybe even charming,” she says.

“Don’t make me puke. Plus, there *are* Gay-mers.”

“You’re always on the tech crew, never the stage.”

“Now you’re just being stupid! Besides, there *are* gay techies; Emily Lupine stage-manages every show.”

“One. One gay techie. And she’s a girl,” Liz says. “Also, you slouch.” Then she points to the stains on the front of my plain white T-shirt. “And sorry, but you’re a slob.”

I look down at my dirty shirt. My stomach pooches a little over my jeans.

“This proves nothing except that my hot sauce packet exploded at lunch!”

“Pffftttt—and you didn’t rush home to change immediately.”

What am I doing here, trying to assert my . . . gaytivity? And who the hell does Liz think she is to question me? I wrap the cord around my controller and slam it down on the TV stand.

“I wanted you to know this thing.” I raise my voice. “This one really important thing about me. I didn’t realize I’d have to pass the gay SAT to get your tiny mind to accept it!”

Liz stands up and drops her controller to the ground. “I am *not* small-minded!” she snaps, and then, “Your mom’s calling you.” This is our code for “time for you to leave.” It’s usually only invoked in jest, but Liz’s face is flushed and I know she means it.

Which is more than fine by me.

I shove my binder into my backpack. We haven’t even discussed the bio assignment.

“Clearly leaving,” I say, grabbing my shoes and opening the sliding glass door that leads to her backyard. Barefoot, I get to the side gate that leads to mine.

“Thanks for the support,” I yell.

The next morning I leave for school early in order to avoid walking with Liz. In bio, when I see she’s claimed our usual table, I pass by her without a word. I’m suddenly conscious of the fact that my show shirt from last year (the front says *tech crew*, the back says *techies do it in the dark*) is a little tight, and I have to do that annoying tug-to-make-sure-it-stays-down-over-the-gut thing. I’m also suddenly conscious of the way I’m carrying myself. Liz accused me of being a sloucher, and it’s true, I slouch.

But that doesn’t make me straight.

I grab an open table near the front of the room, sit down, and keep my eyes straight ahead like I'm fascinated by the smeary whiteboard notes left over from Megars's last class. I will not look back. I will not look back.

Someone slides onto the stool next to me and leans his arm on the table. I don't need to turn my head to know who it is. No one else I know has that exact shade of blond down on his forearm, and even if he did, no one else's blond forearm down could cause the reaction in my gut that *this* blond forearm down is causing.

"Okay if I sit here?" Tom asks.

"Positutely!" The second that word's out of my mouth, I would give anything for a time machine. I would go back to the day of my birth and rip out my tongue in order to keep it from ever uttering something so asinine.

Tom doesn't seem to notice though. He's checking out my binder, the one with the sketch of the kid with x-ed out eyes on it.

"Hey, did you draw this?" he asks.

"Um yeah, it's not . . ." He doesn't wait for me to tell him it's not my best work, it's just a doodle.

"This is great!" he says. "You really captured something there." He glances behind us. Before I can stop myself, I look back to see what he's looking at.

Liz sees me and makes her *what?* face.

We both turn back around.

"Fight with the girlfriend?" Tom asks.

"She's not, uh, we're not . . ." I'm tongue-tied. I finally come up with, "Nah, I just needed to move closer to the board."

I point to Megars's blurry handwork. "I think I'm going blind. That look fuzzy to you?"

Tom laughs. "I thought my contacts were dirty."

The bell rings. Megars takes roll and announces we'll be watching something called *The Private Life of Plants*. He pulls down the screen and turns off the lights.

"Oh my God," Tom whispers. "It's happened! I can't see!"

I laugh. And like him even more. Worldly, sophisticated, *and* a doofy sense of humor. An unlikely combo I'd never imagined until Tom.

For the next fifty minutes, I'm conscious of the heat of his arm, inches from mine on the table. Every once in a while one of us will make a stupid joke about the film. If possible, his jokes are even stupider than mine.

The bell rings just as the movie ends. Someone turns on the lights, and people start grabbing their stuff and shuffling out. Tom blinks, clearly coming out from the semistupor that educational films are designed to put their (helplessly captive) audience in.

I'm wide-awake.

"Hey," he says, slowly hefting his backpack over one perfectly formed shoulder. "Want to do the classification poster together? I can't draw, but I'm good at lettering and at looking things up."

Mute, I nod, and then shrug both my less-than-perfectly-formed shoulders, like *no big deal*.

"I have tennis right after school and rehearsal at seven o'clock, but if you come over at four thirty, we can do it in between," he says. He pulls out his phone and takes my digits so he can text me his address.

I leave bio feeling high.

Until Liz catches up with me on my way out of the building.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey,” I say in a monotone that would make Megars proud.

She touches my arm. “Look, I’m sorry.”

“Mmmhhmmm,” I say, heading for the parking lot. Other people jostle around us in the mad rush to get to their cars. Lunch is only thirty-five minutes long.

Liz grabs me. “Really, I was just surprised!” She doesn’t bother to lower her voice. “It never in a million years would have occurred to me that you’re gay.”

“Oh, I totally knew Chris was gay,” Gordon says from behind us. We both whip around, Liz’s hand on her mouth about five seconds too late.

My instamortification that he overheard is weirdly enough replaced by (brief but insane) instagratitude that he recognizes I’m gay.

“Really?” I ask.

“Oh, totally!” He laughs.

“How?” Liz demands.

Gordon’s mouth shuts. His eyes do that shifty anime-ninja thing.

A car peels out of the lot.

“Um, you’re serious?” he asks. “I thought you were joking.”

The words “Yes, I’m serious” grind out through my clenched molars.

“Huh.” Gordon looks down at his keys like he’s never seen them before. He jangles them a little in his hand. “You just don’t . . .”

“What?” I demand, even though I think I know what.

“It’s cool.” He scratches the back of his neck, then tilts his head. “But you just don’t *seem* gay.”

“Exactly!” Liz says.

Without a word I turn around and head back toward school. Freshmen aren’t allowed off campus at lunch. I’ll eat crap food out of the vending machine behind the theater with them today.

At four fifteen I leave a note telling my mom where I’m going, then head over to Tom’s. He lives a good six blocks from me and it’s Indian summer. Between the heat, my angry imaginary conversation with Liz, and my flirty imaginary conversation with Tom, I’m pretty sweaty by the time I get there.

I walk through a courtyard to get to the huge front door. I’m doing a surreptitious little sniff of my pits before ringing the bell when the door swings open and Tom is standing there. Caught, I pretend to be looking down (sideways) at a cast-iron doorstep in the shape of a poodle.

“Cool house,” I say, stepping into the front room, which is cavernous. To my right, an indoor fountain trickles. One entire wall is covered in books, and a huge statue of Buddha dominates the space.

“Thanks.” Tom leads me through an arched doorway toward the back of the house. “We can snag supplies from my dad’s studio, he won’t care.”

“He’s not home?”

“Nah, he and my mom went out mushroom foraging. They won’t be back until tonight.”

“Mushroom foraging? Is that a thing?” I ask.

“It is for my parents,” Tom says, shaking his head. “I don’t get it.”

“Me neither,” I say. And then take a chance. “But your dad sounds like a fungi!”

Tom bursts out laughing. “That was the worst joke ever!”

“And yet, you laughed,” I say, shaking my finger at him in what I hope is a playful, maybe even flirtatious way.

We continue on through the kitchen (also huge) and out the back door to a little house behind the big one. Inside, prints and notes cover every available surface. Studio lights and tripods lean together in one corner. There’s a corkboard covered in newspaper clippings I’m too far away to read, and several crowded bookshelves line the back wall.

Tom opens the door to a closet and starts pawing through paper supplies while I check out some mounted photographs leaning against a wall. They’re of landmarks I recognize, despite never having been to any of them. There’s the Eiffel Tower, the Christ of the Andes, the Colosseum. I come across a picture of Tom himself, standing on a huge stone walkway. Jagged green hills loom in the background.

“Is this the Great Wall of China?”

Tom pulls out a poster-sized piece of thick white paper. He glances over at me and shrugs. “It’s the Pretty Okay Wall of China.”

I guess the very definition of worldly is someone who can be blasé about the Great Wall of China. I shake my head.

“Hey, I laughed at your worst joke, the least you could do is laugh at my best,” he complains in a mock whiny voice.

It makes me smile, but I can’t think of a clever comeback, so instead I ask, “Don’t you like traveling?”

“Some of it’s okay.” He closes the closet door. “But would you want to spend months at a time with just your parents and their friends?”

We go back into the main house and set up at the kitchen table. We decide to use the grizzly bear and the tulip for our phylogenetic tree, and Tom sits next to me. He opens a laptop so we can look up their classification and Latin names.

“Also, I’ve always wanted a dog,” he says, and it takes me a second to realize we’re continuing the conversation about travel. “But my parents say we’re never home enough.”

“A dog, huh.” I start to sketch. Tom’s so close I can smell him.

In a good way.

“You could get a poodle,” I say, thinking of the iron doorstep. “One of those little tiny ones that fits inside its own little purse so you could take it with you.”

There’s silence, and when I look up from my drawing Tom has a weird look on his face.

He gets up and goes to the refrigerator. He grabs a little bottle of Perrier but doesn’t offer me one.

“I was thinking more like a Rottweiler,” he says, pulling the laptop to the other end of the table and sitting down in front of it.

We don’t talk much after that, except about where to put different categories on the tree. When it’s time for Tom to get ready for rehearsal, we’re only two-thirds of the way through.

I get home to a note from my parents, reminding me that it's their date night and that they won't be back until later.

I grab a Coke, fill a bowl with Cheez-Its for dinner, and head upstairs, my mind on Tom. I think I'm alone in the house, so when I open my bedroom door, I'm incredibly startled to see Liz. I yelp, and the crackers go flying.

She jumps up. "Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! I didn't mean to scare you!"

Jesus! She should get a job as a hospital defibrillator; my heart is beating like crazy. "What are you doing here?"

"I grabbed the key from the flowerpot as soon as your parents left." Her voice is a little choky and her nostrils are red. "I wanted to let you know how bad I feel about everything."

She points to a banner I didn't notice in the midst of my heart failure. It's stretched across the window and spells out *I'm SO Sorry* in foot-high letters.

I don't say anything. Instead I put the Coke on my dresser and start picking up the crackers that went skittering across the hardwood floor.

She kneels down to help. "I know I should have just shut up and listened when you came out to me, instead of criticizing you." She pauses, one hand on the bowl, her eyes welling up. "I'm a shitty friend."

God, I hate it when she cries. I scoop the last of the Cheez-Its into the bowl, walk over to my desk, and grab her a Kleenex.

She takes it and dabs under her eyes, smearing her mascara.

I put the bowl on my dresser next to the Coke. Liz sits back down at my desk, and I'm about to sit on my bed, when she clears her throat and says, "But in my defense, Gordon didn't believe it either."

This is too much! "Gordon, who shouldn't've known until I told him!" I explode.

She tears up again. "I know! I'm the worst friend ever."

Ordinarily I'd hug her, but I'm not there yet. I do hand her another tissue and stand there awkwardly while she cries. I know that's not helpful, but it's what I can manage at the moment.

After a minute she blows her nose, and finally I sit.

She stares down at the Kleenex. "I have a plan to make it up to you," she says quietly.

"Does this involve inducing amnesia in Gordon so I can tell him myself?"

She crumples a little next to me. "I wish I could, but since I can't . . . you like Tom Waters, don't you?"

I give her a sideways look. I will admit nothing.

She starts shredding one of the tissues. Not the snot-rag one.

"You don't have to admit it, but I watched you in bio together today."

I grunt. It's not a commitment.

"So here's the thing. You don't seem gay. But if you are," she says, and before I can react to the *if* she corrects herself. "*Since* you are, you're eventually going to want to do something about it. If you want to make sure Tom knows you're gay, you need to be more obvious about it, you know? Make your sexual orientation more apparent."

"Really," I say, in that tone that means this isn't a question.

She looks at me, almost pityingly. “Chris, I’ve heard of gaydar, and I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I’m pretty sure you don’t set that off in anyone.”

She gets up from my desk and sits next to me on the bed. “If we give you a makeover, it’ll be more obvious.” She punches me in the arm.

I guess this violence is meant to prove that she’s back to her usual self.

“And I have the most brilliant idea!” she says, bouncing a little. “We’ll unveil the Fabulous New You at Lillian’s party on Friday!”

Lillian Bruner, president of the drama club, has a get-together once a semester. In theory it’s a meeting to talk about drama club business, but really it’s a parent-sanctioned excuse to have people over. It’s one of the few times the techies and the actors really mingle. Tom is sure to be there.

“Once we’ve made you over, he’ll be dazzled, and the rest will be history.”

“That is the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard,” I tell her.

And I mean it.

The next day, though, I walk into bio to see that Tom has claimed a seat next to Alex Lee. Alex may or may not be gay, but he wears collared shirts and penny loafers, and he has a killer smile.

I sit down next to Liz at our old lab table.

“Okay.” I give in. “Transform me to fabulous.”

By late Thursday afternoon, I have had just about enough. We're headed toward our third vintage clothing store of the day. After what feels like a gazillion hours spent shopping, I am now the owner of three button-down shirts and a pair of skinny (well, skinny for me) jeans. For the last two hours Liz has jabbered my ears off about *Real Housewives* and designer sunglasses. These topics have never before interested either of us, but Liz thinks I should know about them now in order to better convey my gayness.

"Did you listen to the playlist I made you?" she asks.

"Yeah," I tell her, even though I only listened to half of it. It's not that I'm not into music, but I just can't seem to get into Lady Gaga or the soundtrack to *Moulin Rouge!*

"Good. Tonight I'll send you the list of witty things you can say tomorrow to show off your snarky sense of humor."

"Your snarky sense of humor," I grumble.

But Tom sat next to Alex in bio again today, and he blew me off when I asked if we could finish the poster this weekend. I'm committed to Liz's plan.

A bell on the door tinkles when we walk into The Happy Dragon Consignment Store. A musty odor is the first thing I notice.

"Vintage stores cost more than Goodwill, but don't smell that much better," I complain. "And the Goodwill smells like poverty."

Liz laughs and says, "Now you're getting the hang of it."

This store has rows of clothing on old-fashioned wooden bars,

and mirrors at the end of the aisles that are pitted and speckled with age. There's a bored-looking clerk behind the counter, and a stuffed owl sitting on what looks like an old dresser. I step closer to take a look (at the owl, not the clerk) but Liz grabs my arm.

"*That is perfect!*" she squeals, pointing toward the back of the store. She drags me toward a white tuxedo jacket that's hanging face-out on the wall next to the dressing room. It's an exact replica of the one Tom wears, except that it's several sizes bigger than his.

Liz grabs it off the hook and hands it to me.

"Try it on," she orders.

"I'm going to look like the iceberg that sank the Titanic!" I protest. "Or like I'm trying to be his twin."

"Great line, but one, direct comments about the Titanic at other people, never at yourself, and two, his subconscious will know you're interested because you're dressed similarly."

Of the two of us, she is the successful dater—or at least the only one who's ever *had* a date—so I check out the price tag (twenty bucks) and stick my arms into the sleeves.

I have to admit it looks mostly okay on me. Not as iceberg-y as I thought.

"Voilà!" Liz says, straightening the collar. "Chris the Fabulous!"

It feels different on Friday night though, when we're walking to Lillian's. Trying something new when it's just me and Liz is one thing. People are going to notice I'm dressed up and think it's

weird. Even my parents asked if I was going somewhere special when I left the house in this getup.

“Remind me again why I let you talk me into this?” I ask on the way up the steps. My penny loafers are a little loose (at Goodwill, you take what you can get size wise) and a blister is already starting.

“Because you luuurrvvee Tom Waters, and now he’s going to notice you! You know I’m right.”

She rings the doorbell, and Lillian’s mom ushers us inside and points down a staircase.

“They’re in the rumpus room,” she says.

“The rumpus room,” I whisper, following Liz down. “If I was a housewife serial killer in the fifties that’s where I’d keep my victims.”

“Your snark is showing,” Liz whispers back. “And I love it!”

Downstairs, all the theater nerds seem present and accounted for. Tom is standing in a corner talking to the actor types. He’s wearing his white tux jacket and a skinny tie. He must have had a haircut after school, because it’s shorter than it was in bio today, but he’s got the usual facial-hair-scruff thing going on. My fingers itch to feel it.

Still, I automatically migrate over to the techie corner where a game of air hockey is going on. Gordon’s leaning against the wall, waiting for a turn. “Dude, you’re a Dapper Dan,” he exclaims.

“Totally!” Emily Lupine agrees.

I *knew* this was a mistake. They’re all wearing black and I feel like a great white walrus next to them.

Tom breaks away from his group to grab a drink from the ice chest and Liz pokes me. “Go!” she hisses. “Make your move.”

My kneecaps are tingling as I walk over. I can’t tell if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

Tom’s fishing around in the ice. “Any Perrier?” I ask.

“I don’t think so,” he says, grabbing a Coke and straightening up to look at me. He takes in my jacket. If I felt stupid a minute ago, hanging with the tech crew, I feel ten times that now, because the look in his eye is not one of oh-you’re-dressed-like-me-now-I-know-you’re-interested-let’s-go-make-out. It’s more of a what-the-hell-am-I-seeing? look.

In the uncomfortable silence, I decide the tingling in my kneecaps is a bad thing.

“Sure we can’t get together this weekend to finish the tree? If not, early in the week is good, too. I mean anytime that’s good for you, is good for me. I don’t have much going on,” I babble because he’s not saying anything. He’s just . . . looking at me.

Liz comes over, thank God. This is not going well.

“Hey, Tom,” she says, and then, “Chris, what’s up with her?” she asks, pointing to Terilyn Coats, who is wearing her usual mismatched outfit. This time it’s a leopard top and a plaid miniskirt over hot-pink leggings.

“She looks like a fabric store threw up on her,” I recite as instructed.

“God, Chris, you’re such a bitch!” Liz says, playfully slapping my arm. She turns to Tom. “Would you say fabric-store vomit? Or massacre at the Scottish zoo?”

Tom arches an eyebrow. He looks me up and down, then

deliberately unbuttons his own jacket, takes it off, and folds it over one arm.

“I like her style,” he says, walking away.

Saturday and Sunday are miserable. I spend them both playing Mordock’s Giant by myself. I text Tom four times about the assignment.

I don’t hear back from him.

On Monday I talk to him just before the bell rings.

“The poster’s due in three days. We have to finish,” I tell him.

“It’ll get done,” he says, and turns to talk to Alex before I can ask him when.

He brushes me off again on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, I grab him in the hall after bio, even though I feel like an idiot creeper for doing it.

“It’s almost done, I’ll handle it,” he says.

He can’t draw, and it will definitely look like we waited until the last minute to do it. Which now we have, I guess.

“I am *not* getting a bad grade on this project because of you,” I say, my voice louder than I meant it to be.

“I said I’d handle it.” His voice is just as loud. He looks over his shoulder at the people flooding out of classrooms on their way to

lunch. “Besides, you might catch gay from me,” he says, then stalks away.

I stand there for a second, stunned.

Liz comes up behind me and touches my arm. “C’mon, let’s go.”

I ignore her and run after Tom.

“Wait! Why would you say that?”

He stops to face me. People bump around us.

“It’s not cool to make fun of gay people. Especially when you do it to their faces!”

“I wasn’t!”

“Yeah, right,” he says. “First you say I should carry a little yappy dog in a purse and then you show up at Lillian’s dressed like me and acting all . . . whatever! It’s like you and your girlfriend went to the stereotype store and cleaned out the merchandise.” His voice rises. “And. I. Don’t. Appreciate. It.”

My first thought is, *Damn!* And then, *Damn Liz’s Chris-the-Fabulous idea.*

Tom turns to walk away.

“I swear that’s not what I was doing!”

He keeps walking. “It sure seemed like it.”

I catch up again. “Really! The truth is . . .”

Oh my God, I can’t tell him the truth. Maybe just part of it?

“Liz decided I needed a makeover. She took me shopping and we saw a jacket like yours.”

Tom still looks suspicious. “Why would Liz give you a makeover to dress like me?”

Lillian and Alex are heading toward us, and I know we can’t

have this conversation right now. “Please. Just let me come over after school. We’ll finish the poster and I’ll explain.”

Even if I’m going to feel like the biggest dork in the world doing it.

He doesn’t look happy, but he nods and says, “Be there at four thirty.”

Four hours and a bag of Doritos later, I walk up the hill to Tom’s. When he answers the door, he doesn’t look any happier than he did the last time I saw him. Without a word, he leads me through the house into the kitchen. The poster’s laid out flat on the table, a couple of pens and drafting pencils are scattered next to it. His white jacket hangs over the back of a chair, and for some reason, this makes me conscious of the orange Doritos residue on my fingers.

I spent the last couple of hours rehearsing what I was going to say. Now that I’m here all I can come up with is, “Can I have a napkin?”

Instead of answering, he grabs a paper towel from above the sink and hands it to me.

Have you ever noticed how gritty that orange shit is?

“So. Homework first?” I ask.

I get the eyebrow.

Which I take as a no.

I’m pretty sure the term *dead silence* was invented for this exact minute.

I rub away at my fingers until the paper towel finally

disintegrates. I honestly can't remember exactly what I was going to say, and Tom clearly isn't going to help me out.

He leans against the wall, arms folded across his chest.

I feel stupid just standing there, so I ball up what's left of the orangish fibers in my hand, throw them away, and sit down next to the poster.

"Okay. First of all, I only thought of a little poodle when you said you wanted a dog because of the one on your porch. I didn't mean anything by it." I pick up a pen and play with it. "And Lillian's party . . . shit." My voice is shakier than I would like it to be. "Look, I know you won't believe me. Liz didn't, at first, and neither did Gordon, but . . ." I take a deep breath and blow it out.

"I'm gay."

Tom just stares at me for a minute. Like he doesn't believe me.

Here we go again, I think.

"Let me get this right," he says slowly. There's an expression on his face I can't quite read. "You're gay, so you asked for Perrier at Lil's house?" The left corner of his mouth quirks up. "And you're gay so you said that mean thing about the way Terilyn dresses?"

I press my lips together. Of course it was stupid.

The right corner of his mouth quirks up to match the left. He closes his eyes for a second. Then he laughs, but it's not a mean laugh. "And you're gay, so you need a white tuxedo jacket?" He pulls his off the chair by its lapels. "Do you think there's a gay handbook or something?"

Laughing again, he makes a big show of shrugging into his coat, smoothing it down, and brushing imaginary dust off the sleeves.

“No,” I mumble. “The jacket was because . . .”

He’s still laughing when he sits next to me.

“It’s a great look,” I say. “I mean, you look really . . . amazing in yours.”

Tom goes quiet when I say that. He studies me for a minute. I study him right back. There are a few deep gray flecks in his eyes that, for all my previous scrutiny, I somehow never noticed before. The grandfather clock chimes once.

My kneecaps tingle. In a good way, this time.

Tom’s the first to move. He grabs a drafting pencil and pulls the poster toward himself.

I shift closer and watch while he sketches a figure at the top of the tree. It has hair that looks remarkably like mine.

“I thought you couldn’t draw!” I say.

“I lied.” He shrugs his shoulders and adds a dimple to the chin that matches mine. Still focused on the drawing, he says, “I wanted us to do this together.”

He keeps sketching. “Something I like about you is that you make dumb jokes in biology. And, I like that you make dumb jokes everywhere else, too.” He adds little high-top tennis shoes to my feet. “I like that you dress like you don’t care what people think.” He draws a hole in one of the shoes. “In fact, I can tell you don’t care, and I *really* like that.” He tags the figure *Chris* and puts down the pencil. “And now you’re telling me you’re gay.”

“Yes, I’m gay,” I say. It feels good to say it. It feels right.

“I don’t know if I believe Megars about labels being important,” he says, facing me.

I look down at the drawing. Kingdom, phylum, class, order,

family, genus, species, and Chris. I trace the mini me with my finger, then look back at Tom.

It flashes through my mind that I'm actually glad Liz is such an idiot about stereotypes. And I'm glad I'm stupid enough to have gone along with her disastrous idea because it ended with me sitting next to Tom Waters, in this room, and at this moment.

I reach out and touch the scruff growing along his perfectly shaped jaw.

And it feels exactly the way I knew it would.