

**BEEN
HERE
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ALONG**

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Sandy Hall



Swoon Reads New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

An Imprint of Feiwel and Friends

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*For Holly West, without whom this book,
and so many others, would not exist.*

PROLOGUE

Twelve Years Earlier

Ezra

Like a hundred years ago my mom asked me to watch my five-year-old brother Gideon while he played in the backyard. But then I got bored, because he's a boring kid, and now I realize he's not actually in the backyard anymore.

I need to find that little a-hole before my mom notices and I get in trouble for him going missing or whatever.

I can't yell for him, though, and I can't let my mom notice that I can't find him, so I need to be super stealth about it. Like a ninja. On the other hand, if she comes outside and doesn't see him, I can just say that we're playing hide-and-seek. It's good to have a plan.

I tiptoe around the yard, whispering his name.

I finally find him, all the way behind the garage, where he's not supposed to play because it's so close to the woods and the highway behind the woods. Our dad says they need to build a wall by the highway, but they haven't yet. That's why Gideon isn't allowed back there. I'm technically not allowed back there either. But I'm almost eleven, and I make my own decisions.

"You're not supposed to be back here," I say when I find him. He's playing in the dirt with some tiny little blond kid who looks at me like I'm trying to kidnap him or something.

"I made a friend," Gideon says, pointing at the blond kid.

The kid stands up and stares at me.

"What's his name?" I ask. Maybe Gideon found a runaway. Maybe there's a huge reward for this kid. Gideon's young and dumb and I could keep most of the money and just buy him some toys. He'd never know the difference.

"He didn't tell me," Gideon says as he stands up. He takes the other boy's hand protectively.

"Are you lost?" I ask him.

He squeezes Gideon's hand and shakes his head. He points toward the house next door.

"Did you just move here?" I ask.

He nods a whole bunch of times in a row.

"You should go home," I tell him.

His eyes go wide and he runs in the direction of his house, which probably seems a lot farther away than it really is, since the kid's so tiny.

"Good-bye, new friend!" Gideon yells after him, waving.

“I’m gonna tell Mom that you were behind the garage and she’s gonna be so pissed at you!” I tell Gideon as we walk toward the house.

“I’m gonna tell Mom you said a bad word,” Gideon answers. He’s too smart for a five-year-old.

one

Gideon

Football players.

Cheerleaders.

Basketball players, when they make the state championships.

Maybe people in the marching band?

I'm trying to make a list of people who actually enjoy pep rallies while I'm getting ready for school. It seems like a limited portion of the population. Because let me tell you, as someone who's always sitting in the bleachers during pep rallies, they are probably the most boring things on the face of the planet. I'd rather watch golf.

I definitely never feel the proper level of pep while I sit there. It's just people hopping around on the gym floor. I don't

even know what they're doing, or what it's supposed to look like. It really just seems like everyone is bouncing up and down and trying to get me to bounce up and down.

I have zero desire to bounce.

I also dislike clapping. What are we, trained seals?

I have far better things to do with my life than deal with any of this. But apparently having certain aspirations does not preclude me from having to attend another pep rally. My request to use the wasteful pep rally time to study SAT vocabulary was quickly shot down by the vice principal. Doesn't mean I'm not going to have a pile of flash cards in my pocket. The administration can't stop me from becoming more than my monosyllabic classmates could ever imagine.

For the record, I'm self-aware enough to realize my biggest issue with pep rallies is that they bring into harsh focus what a complete nerd I am. But I don't need to spread that around to anyone.

As I walk into the kitchen, my mother's pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"Pour me one, too," I say.

"For starters, please or thank you goes a long way. And since when do you drink coffee?" She continues preparing her own cup with plenty of cream and sugar.

"Since forever," I say, getting out my own mug, since she's obviously not going to be any help in this matter.

She leans a hip on the counter and stares me down. "You need a haircut."

"My hair is fine, Ma." I put a piece of bread in the toaster.

"And coffee stunts your growth."

“Thank you for bringing the topic of my height up at 7:07 in the morning. It’s never too early to remind me that I’m Lilliputian.” I pour some coffee from the carafe and drink it black, as if trying to prove my virility and manliness via coffee preferences.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad!” she insists. “I’m your mother. I know you want to be tall. You want to be at least as tall as Ezra.”

“Ezra’s only five-ten,” I point out, gesturing toward her with my mug and then taking a sip, wincing a bit and giving in to the call of cream and sugar.

“And how tall are you these days?” she asks, eyeing me up.

“Five-seven,” I say. “Almost.”

“Just think how much taller you would be if you didn’t drink coffee.”

“I really don’t think it works like that.”

“But what if it does, Gideon? What if it really does and you’re harming yourself?”

I roll my eyes and sigh deeply. I chug the rest of my coffee and shove toast in my mouth while she nags me for a few more minutes, then put my mug in the dishwasher and run back upstairs to brush my teeth.

“Gideon,” she calls after me.

“Can’t now, Ma, Kyle’s gonna be ready to go any second.”

As soon as I say his name, I start thinking again about the pep rally. I need to find out if he actually likes them. Maybe Kyle is the key to the mystery of pep rallies.

He plays center for the varsity basketball team. My mom always says that Kyle’s like a puppy that’s still growing into

his paws. Which is probably true but a weird thing to agree with your mom about in terms of your best friend.

I should have pointed out to her that Kyle drinks coffee sometimes and he's six-three.

Because of his height, he spends a lot of time hunched over and brushing his hair away from his ears, trying to hear what all the tiny peasants around him are saying.

I just can't imagine that he really enjoys this clichéd high school ritual. I can already see him standing in the middle of the basketball court, trying not to call too much attention to himself, while the cheerleaders and the rest of the team draw everyone's focus.

Kyle definitely prefers the simpler things in life. Sports, video games, Lord of the Rings, even though I keep telling him he can't be a true Tolkien fan without reading the books. He pretends he can't hear me when I say stuff like that.

I think he's one of those guys who is really lucky because he's quiet, but instead of people thinking that he's an aloof weirdo, people find him sort of charming. He's not as quiet as he used to be. When I first met him when we were five, he was so quiet I didn't know his name until his mom told me.

As I head back downstairs to leave, my mom's gathering up her stuff by the front door to leave for a meeting.

"You know," I say, "Kyle's six-three and he drinks coffee."

"Maybe Kyle comes from a stronger gene pool."

"Do you just stay up all night thinking about ways to make me feel bad?" I ask.

"Don't be a smart aleck. I love you," she says, then kisses me on the forehead, leaving a lipstick stain for sure. I dart out

of the way before she decides to do something gross like lick her thumb and clean off my forehead.

“Be a good boy, Gideon.”

“See you later, Ma,” I say, closing the door and rubbing at the lipstick with my own spitless thumb.

Kyle

I’m definitely running late.

Up until I was about ten, I firmly believed there were little elves that came into my room every night and rearranged all my stuff. At seventeen, I realize that’s not how it works, but it doesn’t keep me from wishing that there really were little elves, because it’d be nice to have someone else to blame. The reality is that I’m extremely disorganized and forgetful.

Finding all the stuff I need for school every morning takes up a solid half hour of time. I have no idea why. I try to do better and yet here I am, running around the house looking for my basketball jersey that I need for this afternoon’s pep rally.

I don’t even like pep rallies.

Too many people looking at me.

I check all the usual places for my jersey: my bedroom, the downstairs bathroom, the upstairs bathroom, the linen closet, just in case. I systematically check all of my dresser drawers. But nothing. My mom set up all these cubbies and color-coded systems and foolproof ways to keep everything I need exactly where I leave it. Unfortunately, I am a fool.

I’m an especially tired fool because I kept myself up half the night worrying about coming out as bi to my girlfriend.

But that's a whole other circle of thoughts that I don't have time get into at the moment.

I need my damn basketball jersey.

"Mom!" I yell, finally giving in.

"Mom!" I call again as I run down the stairs. I check the clock on the cable box as I breeze through the living room. It's already 7:17. I have three minutes until Gideon's going to be standing outside, waiting for me. Gideon is never late. Gideon never loses anything. Ever.

I guess that's just what his parents expect from him. Although I've known the Berkos since I was five, and they've never struck me as the kind of parents who would force their kid to be something he's not, and yet Gideon is a model son.

But you should see Gideon's older brother, Ezra. He's got the raddest freaking tattoos all over his body, and instead of going to college, he decided to move to California and become a professional surfer. I honestly can't think of anything cooler than that. Or any one human being more opposite to Gideon.

And on top of that, the Berkos were totally cool about it. And actually supportive. I feel like if I proposed that to my parents, they would basically lock me in my room for the next four years and force me to get an online degree. After the online degree, they would probably let me do whatever I wanted, but they're super into going to college. I think because they didn't go themselves.

"Mom!" I yell again. "Mom! Mom!"

"What, what, what?" she asks, coming up from the basement with my basketball jersey in hand.

"I was looking for that!" I say, grabbing it from her.

“I washed it for you. I told you I was washing it for you.”

“Oh.”

“Now eat something before you’re late.”

I look over at the breakfast table, where my sisters are eating bowls of cereal and being complete opposites as usual. Julie is typing furiously on her phone while Emma looks about half-asleep.

“And you two need to get out to the bus,” she adds, staring them down.

My mom works in an office that she loves doing a job that she hates, but she doesn’t have to be there until nine, so she’s still wandering around the house in her pajamas, yelling at us. It’s not until my sisters leave for the bus to the middle school that she goes upstairs to get ready herself and I’m left in peace and quiet for the ninety seconds it takes me to eat a Pop-Tart, brush my teeth, and grab the rest of my stuff.

“See you later, Mom!” I yell up the stairs. I get a muffled reply as I turn to walk out the door, but a second later she’s at the top of the stairs.

“Hold on,” she says.

I freeze, trying to remember what I’m in trouble for.

“Gideon’s gonna kill me if I’m late,” I say, glancing toward the living room again, but I can’t see the digital clock on the cable box anymore.

“Are you going to be home for dinner?” she asks.

“I’m supposed to hang out with Ruby after basketball practice.”

She sighs that kind of put-upon mom sigh that I know too well. I haven’t been home for dinner much lately.

“But for you, Mom, I’ll make an exception.”

She rolls her eyes but smiles. “All right, get out of here before Gideon calls in the SWAT team.”

When I get outside, Gideon’s leaning on my car, checking his watch like it holds the secrets of the universe.

I’m about to apologize when he starts talking.

“Do you like pep rallies?” he asks.

“I can’t stand them,” I tell him honestly, shuddering a little at the very thought.

“Awesome,” he says, climbing into the passenger side.

“You have lipstick on your forehead.”

“Damn it,” Gideon says, pulling down the visor and checking himself in the mirror.

“Should be a napkin in the glove compartment,” I say.

He roots around in there while I pull out of the driveway and head in the direction of the Dunkin’ Donuts drive-through.

“So, what’s up?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“Why were you running late?”

I shrug.

“No, really, you seem weird,” he says, side-eying me. “You’re all twitchy.”

“Um, well. I think I’m going to come out to Ruby.”

“What? Seriously? Why?”

“Well, um . . .” I can’t find my train of thought, and I have no idea why I’m so nervous.

“I mean, like, why now? What changed?”

“It kind of feels like I’m lying to her.”

“But you like girls. Like, how relevant is this? What guys do you even like?”

“Chris Evans,” I say.

He rolls his eyes. “Barring the unlikely event that you happen to run into Chris Evans, how big of a role does being bisexual really play in your everyday life?”

“Why are you acting like this?”

“Like what?” he asks.

“Like I’m on trial for wanting to come out to my girlfriend.”

His jaw drops as he realizes that’s exactly how he’s acting.

“Is it because you’re one of those people who don’t believe bisexuality exists or something?” I ask.

“Hell, no.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know, it’s one of those things where I know I’m acting weird but I can’t get myself to stop. I’ll do better. I promise.”

“Good.”

“So how do you think she’ll take it?” he asks, holding on to the “oh shit” handle for dear life as I take a curve a little too fast.

“Hopefully she’ll be cool about it. I don’t think she’ll assume it means we should have a threesome or something.”

“Who did you come out to that asked you to have a threesome?”

“No one. But think about it. It’s got to happen all the time. ‘Oh, you swing both ways? Let’s invite a second dude into our ménage.’”

“Exactly how much porn have you been watching lately, Kyle?” he asks, his face mock serious.

“There is nothing wrong with porn,” I say, wrenching the steering wheel in the other direction.

“I didn’t say there was, just that you might be watching too much of it.”

I roll my eyes.

“Just so I’m up on all of this, who knows you’re bi?”

“Pretty much my whole family except for my great-aunt Alba, but that’s just because she’s senile, you, your parents, your brother, Buster, Sawyer, and Maddie. Why, did you hear something?”

“Nope. But who’s going to gossip about you to me?”

“An excellent point.”

“I guess what I don’t understand is why you seem nervous about coming out to her when so many people already know.”

“Another excellent point.” I chew my lip. “I guess it’s just different with Ruby because, I don’t know, she might not like me as much after she knows. Or something.”

“If that’s the case, then she’s basically just an asshole.”

“I know.”

I make a sharp left into the Dunkin’ Donuts parking lot and gun the engine toward the drive-through.

“You could warn a guy,” Gideon says, rubbing his throat where the seat belt cut into his neck.

“Hey, Gideon, we’re going to Dunkin’ Donuts,” I say.

“Thanks for the heads-up,” he says.

“I had a Lord of the Rings marathon last night,” I tell him after I place our order.

“Is that why you were actually running late?”

“Um, maybe,” I say.

“You watched without me? I thought we were saving it for spring break.”

“Well, we were, but I don’t know, I couldn’t sleep. I was thinking too much about coming out to Ruby. I only watched the first two and not the extended editions!”

“Oh,” he says his voice quiet.

“Anyway, I was thinking—”

“We’re not having the conversation about the eagles again. We’re not going down that road. Our friendship cannot withstand that debate.”

“I’m not talking about that,” I say, trying to get him to listen.

“Good. I’m not prepared for that debate at 7:32 in the morning.”

“I’m mostly just wondering what would happen if someone swallowed the ring,” I say when I finally park the car on the side street next to the high school.

“Why would anyone swallow the ring?” he asks.

“I don’t know. But hypothetically, what do you think would happen?”

Gideon shakes his head and continues walking toward the front doors.

“No, but really, Gid, come on. I thought we could have a nice conversation about this!” I call after him.

“It’s not going to end well,” he says over his shoulder as I catch up.

“But just think about it.”

He rolls his eyes, but I can tell he’s going to think about it. This is how it is, was, and always will be between Gideon and me.

two

Ruby

I don't really understand why people hate pep rallies.

I'm head cheerleader. I probably love them by default. There's a semi-decent chance that I'm biased about the whole thing. But really, what's not to like?

People are so anti-pep that the administration had to move all pep rallies to the middle of the day so that everyone would stop cutting them at the end of the day.

I mean, I guess it's always nice to get out of school early. Maybe if I didn't have to cheer during them, I'd want to leave, too.

But what I really don't understand is why Gideon Berko is currently sitting in the bleachers going over flash cards. Probably SAT vocabulary.

Instead of trying to understand him, I just clap my hands and shake my pom-poms even harder. It's the least I can do for Kyle, who's so bashful during these things it makes me want to prod him out into the spotlight. His hands are shoved deep into his pockets, and he's shaking his head just the right way so his hair falls in his eyes. But he's smiling. He can't hide the fact that he's smiling.

He's a good boyfriend. An amazing one, even. Probably the best I've ever had, because I don't think he's dating me just to be able to say that he's dating a cheerleader.

I thought for sure my senior year would be completely boring and devoid of fun. Until Kyle showed up, looking adorable and nervous as he approached me at the homecoming dance back in October. For once there was a guy who liked me who didn't say all the right things.

I'd be lying if I said I'd never noticed him before. It was hard to miss him when he was a sophomore playing starting center. He made a pretty big splash for a kid who up to that point seemed to have only one friend.

When the pep rally finally ends, I help the other girls clean up some of the posters and confetti. I spot Kyle and Gideon leaving the room together. They're like magnets. They will find each other anywhere, anytime.

After they're gone, I think about how other people look at them. People who don't know them. But it's hard, now that I've spent time with Kyle and Gideon, to look at them with the same way I used to.

I used to think they were just really big nerds.

Looking back, though, I also remember seeing them

laughing all the time. Like they were sharing the best jokes that the world has ever known. They didn't actually care if I was sitting across the cafeteria from them, thinking that they were nerds. It didn't keep them from passing notes in Elvish.

It still doesn't keep them from doing that, no matter how many times I've joked about being uncomfortable that they're talking shit about me in a made-up language. Kyle insists that they're not saying anything bad. But he never actually says they're not talking about me.

But as Kyle is so quick to remind me, not *everything* is about me.

I like to tell him that it should be. And I'm only joking a little bit when I say it.

Kyle

I think the new English teacher is out to get me or something. Mrs. Masterson, my old teacher, who was really, really, really old, freaking loved me. She knew I was smart and she didn't pressure me. I'd had her for English since freshman year, and she let certain things slide. Like how bad my spelling is or when I couldn't make the right connections between characters while we were reading *The Crucible*.

But we only read two or three books a year with her. It helped that she would read most of them to us in class, because I don't think she knew what else to do with the time. Also she'd read us a lot of poetry. She was really into poetry.

During winter break she fell on some ice and broke her hip. I guess that made her realize how old she was, so she decided

to retire. Now I have this new teacher for English, Ms. Gupta, who's trying too hard to connect with everyone.

We started on a Shakespeare unit in January. Our first play was *King Lear*, and I just didn't get it. None of it made sense to me. Sometimes she'd give people parts to read out loud. That's when she noticed how much trouble I have with reading. I just couldn't keep up. My hands got all sweaty and the words started to blur. The worst part was how quiet everyone else got around me while I tried to push through one stupid sentence.

We're juniors in high school. We should never be forced to read aloud in class. I can read fine to myself when I can go slowly. I'm just really bad at not getting nervous and stumbling and I take a long time. Everyone gets bored listening to me.

And in elementary school I used to get made fun of because I was so bad at reading. That doesn't help. That doesn't make you a very confident reader later in life. But that shouldn't make or break my English grade ten years later.

After the *King Lear* incident, she started calling on me more, and then she started asking me to stay after class.

So for the past three months she's been trying to "work with" me because apparently in her world I'm close to failing English, even though I always got a C+ from Mrs. Masterson. But since it was the last class of the day and I had basketball practice, there hasn't really been time to talk.

Unfortunately, today all the class periods were a couple of minutes shorter to make room for the pep rally earlier, so when the bell rings, it kind of throws me off. I'm usually ready to sprint out of this classroom in fear that Ms. Gupta is going

to want to talk. She catches me, of course, since I'm one of the last people walking out of the room.

"Kyle?" she calls out. She has a nice voice. I really like it, actually. It's got just this little hint of an Indian accent, and she sounds all smooth and smart.

"I don't wanna be late for practice," I say, just barely turning around.

"I know, I know. Big game coming up. But just one second."

I turn fully around and make sure I don't meet her eye. I'm playing cool, pretending to be a tree. That usually works pretty well for me.

"Yeah, can't disappoint the team," I say, when she fails to continue. I sneak a glance at her desk and notice she's going through some papers. Probably the essays we handed in last week.

She grimaces and shows me the 60 percent on the top of my paper. "Did you understand any of the instructions?"

I take the essay from her and look at all the red slashes through words and sentences, different call-outs that I can't actually read right now because my brain is so foggy and nervous.

I hand it back to her and squeeze the straps of my backpack. "I worked really hard," I finally say. I sound so whiny.

"I think there's more to it than just needing to work hard. Some of this is—" She pauses, skimming the page again. "You have moments where I can see how smart you are, and there are other sentences where you obviously let spell-check change every word and it turned into gibberish."

“Spelling is, like, not my best.” My tongue is heavy in my mouth and my brain is working in slow motion so I can’t even think of the right words.

“It’s not just the spelling, though. It’s the context and comprehension. There’s so much more going on here.”

I know she’s trying to make eye contact with me, like we’re supposed to be having some kind of moment. But I can’t. I stare outside and watch a squirrel hop around in a tree. I wouldn’t mind going out there and joining him. Maybe just live in that tree for the rest of my life and learn English through the classroom window.

“I really don’t want you to fail this marking period. Grades are due next week, and you’re right on the cusp. An F isn’t going to look great on your report card.”

“I know,” I say, still watching the little squirrel.

“It could mean summer school if you don’t pull it together.”

I wince at the idea of more school. Especially since I found out last week I got accepted into a really prestigious basketball camp for this summer.

She gives me detailed instructions about what she wants me to do for extra credit, and I make sure I write everything down. I really don’t want to have to worry about this.

“I believe you’re a very smart kid who’s having some problems,” she says after the world’s longest instructions. “We will be able to come up with a solution. You are not a lost cause. I checked your grades, and I see you’ve done just fine in the past.”

“Yeah, Mrs. Masterson was a good teacher.”

She nods distractedly. “I have to wonder if there’s something else going on.”

“Something else?” I ask.

“A personal problem, maybe? I’m not trying to pry. I want to understand what changed. It might help me.”

“No,” I say. “Nothing changed.”

“Everything’s good at home?”

I nod and wipe my forehead. I feel sweaty and nervous and like I can’t focus on anything.

“Okay, well,” she says.

I take that as the opportunity to leave without saying another word, because there’s nothing else to say.

The halls are almost clear by the time I get to my locker, and Ruby’s leaning on it, waiting for me.

“You okay?” she asks.

I blink hard. “Uh, yeah. I just had to stay and talk to Ms. Gupta for a second.”

“Oh, cool. I love her. Such a step up from Old Lady Master-son. That woman did not like me.”

I nod but decide to drop the topic while I grab what I need from my locker, and then I’m ready to go.

“You’re really okay?” she asks as we turn down the hallway in the direction of the gym.

“Yeah, fine, just a lot on my mind.” We pause outside the locker rooms before parting ways. “I know we were supposed to go out tonight after practice, but I have to go home. My mom’s on my ass about never being home for dinner.”

“Oh no, a nice home-cooked meal! That sounds terrible!” she says.

“You want to come over?” I ask, sort of hoping she’ll say no. I have too much to think about. For starters, I need to work on this extra credit thing for English.

“Nah, I think I’ll skip this round of family fun time at the Kaminskys’.”

“Figured it was worth asking.”

“Thanks,” she says.

“See you after practice,” I say.

She kisses my cheek and turns to walk away, but I grab her hand, pulling her back. I kiss her harder and longer than I normally would in the middle of the hallway at school. But it just feels kind of right.

“Such an animal, Kaminsky. I like it,” she says.

I can’t help but smile.

Ruby

By the time we’re both done, it’s getting dark outside and I don’t really feel like dredging up whatever was making Kyle nervous earlier. When I meet up with him outside the gym, instead I lean up to kiss him on the cheek.

“You smell like sweaty boy,” I say.

“Well, probably because I am a sweaty boy.”

“So sassy lately, Kaminsky,” I say, swinging our hands between us as we walk out to his car.

“Why do you like me?” he asks a few minutes later as we pull out of the school parking lot.

I study his profile in the flitting glow of the passing streetlights.

I try to think of an exact reason, to pinpoint something

that doesn't sound completely lame or trite. Because I like him for all those reasons you're supposed to like people. He's kind and warm and looks at me like I'm the coolest bitch on earth. And I am. But there's more to it.

"You don't have to answer that," he mumbles after I've been quiet for too long. "It's dumb."

"I think part of why I like you is that you ask questions like that," I finally say.

He licks his lips, waiting for me to go on, but when I don't, he babbles. "But why? Like, that doesn't really tell me anything. We've been together for six months and I've seen the way other guys look at you. You could have pretty much any of them."

"I like that you gave me a chance."

We're at my house by now and he pulls over, shutting off the car. "I gave you a chance?" he asks, turning fully to look at me.

"Yeah, you know. You don't talk to a lot of girls, but you talked to me. I didn't expect it. It made me feel special or something stupid like that." God, this is too hard to talk about for some reason. I don't think I like this emotional crap.

"So if I tell you something kind of personal, and sort of weird, you'll still like me?" he asks.

"Of course," I say, my voice quiet, remembering his discomfort earlier.

"So I'm bi," he says.

"Huh?"

"Bi."

"Are you telling me to leave?"

"What? No. I'm bisexual."

"Cool," I say.

“Cool?”

“Yeah, of course. I don’t know what you want me to say, but that’s cool. I’m cool with that.”

He rolls his neck and it cracks like a gunshot.

“So you were a little nervous about telling me that?” I ask, taking his chin in my hand and turning him toward me.

“I was. I don’t tell a lot of people, but we’re just, we’ve been getting closer? I felt like you should know or else it, you know, it felt like I was lying. And I really don’t want to lie to anyone, but especially not you and—”

My mouth is on his, and it drowns out whatever other useless words were trying to claw their way out of his throat. He doesn’t need to make excuses or overexplain with me. I hope he understands that.

His phone buzzes, and he leans his forehead on mine.

“That’s definitely my mom. And I definitely need to go home.”

“It’s cool. We have a date this weekend anyway.”

“Oh yeah, the dance,” he says.

“Hopefully it’ll be a victory dance when you guys win tomorrow night,” I say, the cheerleader in me leaking out of my pores.

“Yeah, it should be fun.”

I look right at him, forcing his eyes to meet mine in the dim light. “Thanks for coming out to me.”

“You’re welcome.”

I slide out of the car and run up the steps to my house, turning back to wave.

He always waits to make sure I’m safe.

Just one more reason to like him.

three

Kyle

Ruby and I walk into the gym like we own the place.

The basketball team won the state championships last night, so this dance feels like a serious victory lap.

She takes my hand and we do a circuit of the gym, where she says hello to people and I try to get a better look at the refreshments while fist-bumping and high-fiving people I'm not sure I've ever seen before. Do they even go to this school?

But there are leaf cookies on that table, and I want to eat all the pink ones. Ruby seems to be ignoring my soulful eye contact with the cookie table.

"Come on, let's slow dance," she says, yanking me toward the front of the gym, where a bunch of couples sway to a song

that sounds like a slow love ballad, but if you listen closely to the lyrics, it really isn't romantic. After threading our way through the crowd, she stops suddenly and turns, throwing her hands around my neck middle-school style.

"Kyle," Ruby says in a singsong voice, "what are you thinking about?"

I only half hear her because I see someone make a move toward my cookies.

"God you're cute when you're barely listening to me."

"Huh?" I say, hunching over to hear her better.

"You're cute," she stage-whispers.

I smile.

"Aren't I cute?"

"You're better than cute," I say. "You look awesome tonight, by the way, in case I haven't mentioned it."

"Thanks." She takes a deep breath and it's like every hair on my body stands up. Like I have a sixth sense that she's about to start a fight. "I don't want this to be a *thing* or whatever, but now that you've gotten through the big game, I just have a question."

"Okay," I say.

"How come you waited so long to tell me you were bi?"

That gets my attention away from the cookies. I blink at her, unsure of how to respond.

"I'm not offended, I just"—she pauses and cocks her head to the side—"I guess I don't understand why you waited until we were together for six months to tell me."

I raise my eyebrows and open my mouth to say something,

anything, because it seems like she's asking questions but they're also statements. She keeps talking before I can figure out what to say again.

"Really, it's not a big deal, but I kind of can't shake the feeling that you don't actually trust me."

I stop dancing and step back from her. "Would you rather I hadn't told you?"

"No. That's not what I'm saying at all. I guess I don't understand why you decided to tell me now."

"Because it's my choice when to tell someone personal things about me."

"But I'm your girlfriend."

"And that means you should know everything right away?"

"No, but I should know stuff like this before other people."

I cross my arms. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Like, when did you tell Gideon?"

"I don't know. A long time ago. But Gideon's been my best friend since before kindergarten. Of course I would have told him."

"So you've known the whole time we've been going out?"

"Yes."

"And you never wanted to tell me before?" she asks, throwing up her hands in exasperation. She pulls away from me and walks off the dance floor. I catch up to her right by the refreshment table.

"I did, it just makes me really nervous," I explain, hoping she'll get it. "Does it change something for you? Do you not like me anymore or something?"

"No. I still like you. I hate to sound like a broken record,

but I don't understand why you wanted to tell me now. Why not sooner?"

She stares up at me, and I get the terrible feeling like she might cry. She chews on the inside of her lip, like she's just barely holding back her tears.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings by not telling you sooner," I say. It's the best I can do in that moment, because the whole situation boggles my mind.

"I know you said in the car that it was because you felt closer lately, but haven't we always been close? I'm your girlfriend."

"Yes, you are. I guess I don't know what to say to you to make this better."

"I just, I need a couple minutes," she says, sniffing. She spins on her heel and speed-walks away. I'm left standing there by the refreshment table with my mouth hanging open.

And there's only one broken pink leaf cookie left.

Isn't that just the way life is sometimes?

Gideon

I sit up in the balcony completely stunned, watching the whole thing go down between Kyle and Ruby. I've never seen them so much as frown at each other before, but this is something different. This is an actual fight. Even from far away, I can tell that something is really wrong.

I don't know what Kyle's face looked like, because he had his back to me the whole time, but Ruby's was like a slide show of different kinds of emotions. Sad, angry, frustrated, very sad—it kept getting worse and worse.

You hear the phrase all the time, that someone raised their hackles, but I don't think I've ever seen it to actually identify the action. As Kyle stood there, his whole back, shoulders, and neck tensed up. It should have been hard to watch. But I couldn't look away.

I'm hanging out with my friends Maddie and Sawyer, the ultimate power couple of class politics, but they're totally unaware of the drama unfolding below. I'm glad neither of them notices that I completely checked out of the conversation several minutes ago.

I should stop watching. Their fight is none of my business. I know it, but I can't stop staring. I must sit there with my mouth hanging open for a good five minutes. I feel something welling up in my chest. It's something like hope, but I don't know why. And it makes me want to laugh for some reason, to the point where I have to put my hand over my mouth.

"You okay?" Sawyer asks, nudging my arm.

"Yeah, what's up? You're awfully quiet," Maddie says.

A couple of Kyle's basketball friends are hanging out behind us. I had situated my little group that way in hope that Kyle would notice and come hang out up here. But now that Ruby stormed away and he's making his way toward the balcony, I don't think I can talk to him without either laughing in his face or asking way too many questions about what happened with Ruby.

I make a quick excuse and exit the bleachers as fast as possible.

I make a beeline for the boys' locker room. No one's in

there, thank God. The last thing I need is to be harassed by a bunch of jocks while my emotions are going haywire.

“Why did I feel like laughing?” I ask the empty room. Row upon row of green lockers stare back at me like soldiers standing in formation. I’m definitely losing my mind, because it feels like they’re judging me. “Why did watching Kyle and Ruby fight make me want to laugh?”

“Do I like Ruby?” I ask the lockers, as I walk toward the sinks. “Do I have feelings for her?” I stand there in the empty locker room and think about Ruby. Her hair is nice. Long, dark, and shiny, all those things shampoo commercials tell you are important. I think about kissing Ruby.

“No. I don’t like Ruby,” I say.

I wash my face and try to make sense of what I’m feeling. I slump onto a bench and lean my head against the wall, closing my eyes and covering my face with my hands.

“What is wrong with me?” Again I find myself talking out loud to no one.

I rub my eyes and turn my head to the left. There on the window of the coach’s office is a posed photo of this year’s basketball team.

Kyle stands in the center of the back row. He’s the only guy smiling. All the others have on these stoic, tough-guy jock faces. I can’t help but smile back. I think about brushing his hair back off his forehead, which is not something I would ever do in real life, but I *think* about doing it all the time. Kyle pays better attention when his hair isn’t in his way.

The Gideon in my head does something completely

unexpected then. He runs his hand down Kyle's cheek and moves it around to the back of his neck, before pulling him closer and pressing their lips together.

The Gideon sitting in the locker room suddenly can't breathe.

All the air is gone from my lungs. Is this what a panic attack feels like?

I take a few deep breaths and try to calm down. I've heard that if you can talk, you can breathe, so I say out loud, "Why would I be thinking about kissing Kyle?"

Paranoia sets in immediately that while I was panicking, someone came in and might have heard me, so I take a quick circle around the locker room and make sure I really am alone.

I sink back down onto the bench when I'm positive that no one is in here with me. I've worked hard to never deal with these kinds of feelings. I decided a long time ago that I'd figure out dating and girls in college. I don't have time for that stuff if I want to get into a good school.

This is not part of the plan.

But maybe I didn't have time for girls because I don't *like* girls.

I think I might pass out. I'm sweating, my hands are shaking, my eyes are blurry. Maybe I'm getting sick. Or maybe I like Kyle and have repressed it so hard for so long that acknowledging it now has forced me to the brink of sanity.

Am I gay or do I just like Kyle? 'Cause if I'm just, like, with Kyle, then maybe I'm bi? Or pan or one of those other spectrum-y things? Could I possibly just be Kyle-sexual? Is that a thing?

I take a deep breath and count to ten. That's supposed to be soothing, right?

Then I start trying to think of an SAT vocabulary word for each letter of the alphabet. I love vocabulary words.

After about ten minutes, I stand up and face my reflection in the mirror. I hold myself tall, squaring my shoulders, and look myself in the eye. I take a deep breath, pulling air all the way into my lungs and taking a long time to blow it out again.

I feel better, less panicked, but I have some things to think about.

Kyle

I'm still stunned as I head up the stairs to the balcony, taking them two at a time to distance myself from what happened with Ruby out in the middle of the gym. If anyone saw it, then that means *everyone* will be talking about it soon enough. I really hope no one could hear the specifics. I'm not sure if I'm ready for everyone in school to know I'm bi.

I see Sawyer and Maddie first and walk over to them, figuring Gideon must be somewhere nearby.

"Have you guys seen Gideon?" I ask, leaning against the railing. I notice Buster and McKinley and a couple of other guys from the team are a row up the bleachers. I lean over to them and we slap hands. I'll go sit there as soon as I figure out where Gid is.

"He ran off a minute ago," Sawyer says, looking in the direction of the stairs I just came up.

"He looked kind of, I don't know, sick to his stomach," Maddie says, making a face.

“Is he coming back?” I ask. “I was supposed to drive him home later.”

Maddie shrugs. “He didn’t say. He just booked it out of here.”

I nod and then hop up the bleachers to sit with the guys on the team, half waiting for Gideon to come back and half wishing I was still talking to Sawyer and Maddie. Because even though I think of them as Gideon’s friends, they feel more like my people than a lot of these guys do. Except for Buster. Buster is totally my bro. He just gets me. I think because I was there when he got his nickname busting his hand while trying to karate chop a cinder block.

I lean my elbows back on the row behind me, close my eyes, and zone out for a while, imagining Ruby’s friends, and my friend’s, and Gideon’s friends doing something together.

But even just thinking about her makes me feel terrible. I feel shitty for making her feel like I don’t trust her, but I don’t like the fact that because I took my time coming out to her, she’s turned it around to mean something completely different. It’s a whole confusing circular issue, and I don’t know how to fix it.

Gideon sits down next to me just as I’m thinking that maybe I should go home.

“Hey,” I say, sitting up and turning toward him.

“Hey,” he says.

“Are you sick or something?”

“No. I’m fine.”

He doesn’t look fine, not at all. He looks kind of sweaty and confused.

“Just don’t throw up on me,” I say.

"I'm not gonna throw up on you," he says.

"You threw up on me that time in third grade."

"I threw up near you, not on you."

"Same difference. There was a splash zone," I say. "But seriously, if you feel sick, we should get out of here. I don't mind leaving early."

"You don't?" he asks, his expression doubtful.

"Ruby and I had a fight."

"Yeah, I saw."

"I don't know what to do."

"Apologize?"

"How do you know it was my fault?"

He gives me a knowing look.

"It really wasn't my fault, though. She's blowing the whole thing out of proportion."

"What?"

"She's upset that—" I pause, shooting a glance to see who's around us. Buster's leaning in to listen but I don't mind, so I continue. "That I didn't come out to her sooner."

Buster shakes his head. "Chicks are so sensitive."

"But it's not really her thing to be upset about," I say.

Gideon sighs. "It's not, but it's not like it has absolutely nothing to do with her. You've known for a long time. She might need a little time to adjust."

"But it's not her thing to adjust to. It's about me. It's not fair for her to be pissed about something that only concerns me."

"Maybe that's what she's pissed about, numb-nuts," Buster says from my other side. "Like, she wants you to care about

what she thinks and like, know that, I don't know, she's an important part of your life. That's she, like, concerned, too, or whatever."

"I can't believe I'm about to say this, but somewhere in there, Buster made a valid point," Gideon says.

Buster smiles like someone just gave him the Nobel Prize for Relationship Doctoring. "I am so valid," Buster says.

"Go make up with her," Gideon says, punching me in the arm and then staring at his knuckles like he just noticed they exist.

"Yes, you must go to her," Buster says like he's some kind of love guru. "It is the only way."

"All right, I'll be back to find you before we leave." I stand up and stretch.

"Nah," Gideon says. "Hang out with Ruby. I don't want you to get in even more trouble."

"Shut up, I never get in trouble."

"Sure you don't. But really, I'll get a ride home from these guys," he says, tapping Sawyer on the back.

"Cool, thanks."

I say good-bye to everyone, and as I head for the stairs I take a look behind me for a little extra reassurance, maybe a thumbs-up or something, but Gideon is watching me go with that sweaty and confused expression on his face.

Ruby

Kyle finds me outside the girls' bathroom near the senior lockers, hanging out with my friends Lilah and Lauren. I wanted to complain to them and tell them the whole story of what happened with Kyle, but it's hard because I know I shouldn't

talk about his sexual preferences. That's none of their business. I get that.

But it's my business when and how he tells me things, and this just felt wrong to me when I started thinking about it too much.

I know I'm being kind of a weirdo about the whole thing, but it made me question our relationship. Not whether he likes me or not, but why he would wait to tell me. It's a gray area, though. At least, that's what I've decided. Because with a little more distance, I know I'm partially in the wrong here.

And the fact that he came looking for me makes me feel very willing to apologize.

"We're gonna go back to the dance, Ru," Lauren says when she sees Kyle. She tugs Lilah's arm to drag her along.

"Hey," he says, wiping his hands on his jeans nervously. "I just—"

"No, wait. Listen. I am so sorry. I've been thinking about it, and I overreacted. It's like sometimes I forget that I'm not the boss of the world. It's your thing to tell, and you should take your time and wait for your moment."

"Well, I'm sorry I wasn't getting what you were saying," he says. "And it is my thing to tell, thank you for saying that, but I wasn't understanding your point at all."

"I wasn't doing a good job making my point." I roll my eyes. "I get super jealous sometimes of you and Gideon. You're just so close."

"You and me, we're close, too," he says, and I can tell how much he means it. "Gideon's a different kind of close. There's no way to compare you guys."

“I guess I just hoped that you liked me enough from the start to tell me this stuff.”

“I did like you from the start. And it’s not a measurement of my feelings for you. It’s mostly just about when I felt comfortable enough to share. I wasn’t walking around feeling guilty about you not knowing. It wasn’t taking anything away from us. I wanted to make sure we’d be together for a while before I told you. I don’t know why. I guess I wanted to make sure you liked me enough first.”

I make an exaggerated frowny face at him. “That is so cute.”

“Thanks,” he says.

“Wanna go back to the dance? There should be one more slow song.”

“Yeah, I definitely have time for one more slow song.”

We link hands and walk back to the gym, just in time for one last slow song.

four

Gideon

I've been home from the dance for a couple of hours and I can't sleep.

Kyle texted me a while ago to say that he and Ruby made up and everything is fine between them. He said he'd tell me all about it in the morning. But I don't think I want to hear about it in the morning.

I can't stop running this whole situation over in my mind. Maybe I shouldn't have told Kyle to apologize to Ruby. Maybe I should have listened more before giving him advice. Maybe I should have told Buster to shut up. Maybe that was my big moment to tell Kyle how I feel about him.

But you can't tell someone how you feel when you don't

really know yourself. I couldn't make some big sweeping declaration of love when I feel so unsettled about everything.

It's after midnight. My parents are in bed. I've been lying here in my room since I got home, hoping that maybe if I just concentrate hard enough, I'll be able to figure out how I feel about Kyle. Or at least go to sleep. It's not working.

I trudge downstairs to watch TV. I could watch in my room, but I think if I spend one more second in my bed I might actually lose my mind.

I put on *Parks and Recreation* in hopes that it will lull me to sleep. But then Leslie Knope is going on about time management and binders and getting things done, and I know what I need to do.

It's time to get organized.

I tiptoe back upstairs and go into the back of my closet, where I have a shelf full of three-ring binders of various sizes. I select a navy-blue one-inch binder, because that seems like it should be big enough. Then I grab a ream of loose-leaf paper from my desk along with a ruler and my lucky pen. Because crooked lines are never an option.

Down in the den, I spread all my supplies out on the coffee table and turn off the TV. It's time to concentrate.

My first list is obviously a to-do list.

- Research: am I gay or just into Kyle?
- Figure out what I'm going to do about being into Kyle. Because whether I'm gay or not, I'm pretty obviously into Kyle.

- Organize feelings.
- Create a plan of action.

I realize quickly there's not much more I can do at the moment, but I already feel more in control.

I flip to the next page and start a T chart with the heading "Am I gay or Kyle-sexual?" On one side I write reasons I think I'm gay, and on the other I write reasons I think this is just about Kyle. The number one reason I think it's just about Kyle is because I've literally never liked anyone else before. In my entire life. I can't remember being attracted to anyone.

I go through celebrities, models, athletes. I can understand how someone might find these people aesthetically pleasing, but I don't think I've ever imagined kissing anyone until I imagined kissing Kyle last night in the locker room.

But using the transitive property, of $a=b$ and $b=c$ then $a=c$, I figure I'm both gay and in love with Kyle. Because Kyle is male and so am I. Simple as that.

I take a moment to adjust to this idea.

I am gay. I, Gideon Isaac Berko, am gay. It actually makes a lot of sense.

The next blank page becomes a list of reasons Kyle and I will never work out. The crux of the issue, aside from him having a girlfriend, is that I am not anything like Chris Evans, since apparently that's the type of guy Kyle likes.

I am the antithesis of Chris Evans. I could be in a remake of the Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito classic *Twins*. Chris Evans would be the Arnold character and I, of course,

would be there in all my DeVito-esque glory to play opposite him. I scribble all of this down, just trying to keep my thoughts in order, no matter how embarrassing they might be.

The grandfather clock in the living room chimes twice, alerting me to the fact that it's already two in the morning. I've been working on these lists for almost two hours.

I shake my head to clear it and flip to another clean sheet of paper, starting another list, this one about all the ways I like Kyle. Because damn, I really like Kyle, and I need to get them down on paper. I start with shallow stuff but soon find that I get more and more detailed.

I have a feeling this list might get embarrassing, so I decide to write it in Elvish.

Reasons to Like Kyle:

- 1. He's tall and can reach things on the top shelf.*
- 2. He's adorably awkward and endearing and easy to like. Everyone likes him, not just me.*
- 3. He's not one of those guys who never shuts up about his car.*
- 4. He's not a jealous person.*
- 5. Our shared love of Lord of the Rings makes us better friends.*
- 6. Even though he has a girlfriend, he still has time to be friends with me. I was really worried when they first got together that I'd never see him anymore. But he's really loyal.*
- 7. He listens to me babble about wanting to be*

student council president even though he doesn't really care about that stuff.

- 8. We have varied interests but still get along really well.*
- 9. He's always willing to help me with SAT vocab prep.*
- 10. He tries new things even when he doesn't think he's going to like them.*

I read over what I wrote, and it's embarrassing. Oh man, so embarrassing. I actually start blushing, by myself, in the middle of my own living room just thinking about how much I like him. It's so ridiculous to put him on this high of a pedestal, because if anyone is aware of how not-perfect Kyle is, that person is me. I've seen him at his best, but I've also seen him at his worst.

I have—I hate myself even as I think the word—a *crush*. I have a crush on my best friend. I have become a teen rom-com cliché. There is no hope for me.

I'm in desperate need of a dose of reality.

I flip one more page and start my last list by going through each of the reasons I like him and trying to think of a corresponding reason I don't.

Everything That's Wrong with Kyle:

- 1. He's too tall.*
- 2. He's really awkward sometimes.*
- 3. He's a terrible driver.*
- 4. He's not as smart as me.*

5. When I gave him the Lord of the Rings trilogy to read, he said he just “couldn’t get into it.” I even tried to get him to read The Hobbit and he wouldn’t. And that’s practically a kids’ book.
6. He has a girlfriend.
7. He doesn’t care about school politics.
8. He’s too into video games.
9. He has a limited vocabulary, and I always have to explain words to him.
10. He didn’t get Inception. Or The Matrix. Or Looper. Or any of those awesome movies that are a little confusing.

About halfway through, I realized that I should probably be writing this one in Elvish, too, but it’s getting late and I’m having focusing issues. I promise myself that I’m not going to keep this list. It’s pretty brutal, but when you’ve been best friends with someone for twelve years, you know all the good and bad things about them.

But I finish it because it kind of feels good, cleansing, to get some of these things down on paper. I’m about to rip it up and throw it away, but then I’m startled by a noise at the front door. Someone’s banging around, obviously trying to get inside.

Perhaps it’s a really inept burglar?

I glance around the room, looking for something to use as a weapon, when I hear a familiar voice in the foyer.

“Ah, shit, crap,” the person says as something falls over.

I walk into the hall and find my brother Ezra standing there.

The prodigal son returns in all his tattooed glory.

EZRA

I knock over a lamp on the side table next to the door. That seems like a good way to announce my return home in the middle of the night. It's sure to put everyone in the family in a great mood. I haven't been home since last Thanksgiving, so hopefully they'll be happy to see me anyway.

"I didn't know you were coming home," someone says in a gruff voice.

I look up, and there stands Gideon in a pair of very matchy-matchy pajamas with anchors all over them. Definitely a gift from our mother.

"It's great to see you, Giddyup." I juggle my rolling suitcase through the door, nearly knocking over the antique umbrella stand that no one has ever put an umbrella in.

He rolls his eyes. "No, but really, did Mom and Dad fail to tell me you were coming home or am I having a mini stroke?"

"I'm home for Passover," I say.

"Passover isn't until next month."

"It's never too early to celebrate," I say with a smile.

He still looks perturbed, but then he sighs and pads over to me in his bare feet to give me a hug. A very tight hug. The kind of hug that makes me feel happy to be home.

He pulls away without a word and walks back toward the den. I follow him and find the coffee table a mess of paper and office supplies.

"You're really burning the midnight oil, huh?"

"It's a, um," Gideon stumbles and stammers as he collects all his papers and shoves them into a binder. It's probably

killing him not to organize them in a neat and orderly fashion, but it's pretty obvious that he doesn't want me to read whatever's written on them.

"I'm just working on something for my, um, election campaign."

"So you've still got your eye on the big prize?" I ask, trying to get him to be more Gideon-like, because whoever this person is fluttering around the coffee table like a demonic bird is not my little brother. I obviously caught him doing something that he didn't expect to be caught doing. Some kind of strange, middle-of-the-night, illicit paperwork. Maybe a scandal is rocking the world of high school politics.

I slump into our father's Barcalounger, the one no else is allowed to sit in if he's around, and try not to be too nosy. It was hard to miss the fact that some of the papers were written in Elvish. He slides everything under the couch and then sits primly down on it as if he's afraid he might crush his paperwork.

"So, how long are you planning to be in town?" he asks. His demeanor is making me even more curious about what he's trying to hide.

"What are you, interviewing me for the school paper?"

"Shut up," he says, finally smiling after what seems like forever. He's like a piñata of tension. I'm about to comment on it when there's a shriek in the hallway.

"Ezra!"

"Hi, Ma," I say, standing up to give her a hug and let her kiss me way too many times. My mom is a kisser. She kisses every-

one. She'll kiss anyone if they stand still long enough. And if they don't, she'll chase them down.

"Maurice," she screams in between laying kisses on my forehead. "Maurice! Ezra's home!"

My father runs down the stairs in boxer shorts and a deep-cut V-neck undershirt, as usual. It's the image of childhood breakfasts. He adjusts his glasses at the bottom of the stairs.

"Ezra," he says with a grin. "It's good to see you."

He pulls me away from my mom and gives me a hug that lasts a long time, with plenty of pats on the back. He smells the same, like peppermint and aftershave. He used to always smell like tobacco, too, but my mom finally made him stop smoking a pipe.

"We had no idea you were coming," she says, straightening my hoodie like it's school picture day. "Why didn't you tell us? I would have had something prepared."

"It's fine, Ma," I say. "I really don't need anything. I was just talking to Gideon."

Our parents finally notice Gideon sitting on the couch, pouting like he's about three years old and not getting enough attention at a family gathering.

"I thought you went to bed hours ago," Mom says.

"I did. But you forgot to tie me down," he mutters, crossing his arms.

I laugh. I can't help it.

My father tsks but smiles, and my mother ignores Gideon.

Kid's got sass and sarcasm down pat. It's really the only

way to make it through being a teenager in this house. I totally understand.

And then my dad asks the question I've been worried to answer.

“So what are you doing here, pal?”

“Just wanted to see you guys,” I say.

I don't tell them that I ran out of money. I don't tell them that I'm here indefinitely. For now I'll let them shower me with food and praise and let them act like it's not two o'clock in the morning.

But I'll have to tell them soon enough.

five

Kyle

I spend a lot of time during the next week trying to be invisible. This isn't really a recent development. I've always been more comfortable with being out of the spotlight. But between all this attention from the team winning state and my problems with English and my fight with Ruby, I need some "me time." This has been made much easier by the fact that it's Passover so Gideon has all these Seders to go to with his family, leaving my evenings wide open to hide under my bed. Not just under the covers, but literally under my bed. I need that much coverage.

The biggest activity I really focus on is avoiding Ms. Gupta. No matter how much effort I put into pretending I'm not in class, she always seems to call on me. I need to work harder on not existing.

I figured that after I spent the whole weekend and most of this week working on her extra credit assignment, maybe she'd go easy on me. I was wrong. I am always wrong.

Yesterday she wanted me to answer a question about how two random books we read this year were connected. I barely remember either of them. How can I possibly know what themes connect them? If she's so smart, she should already know how they're connected and not have to ask people about it.

What really sucks about the whole situation in her class is that I want to answer. Like, it would be awesome to be one of those kids, one of those people, who just understand things and answer questions like it's nothing. I don't think I ever noticed before how much I don't *get*. But, like, I do fine in all my classes. Unless maybe I'm not doing fine in all my classes and my teachers can't stand me so they keep passing me along.

That doesn't seem possible.

Obviously, they might not like me, that's completely possible, but the idea that they would pass a student just to get rid of them seems unlikely. It would seem to go against everything they believe as teachers.

Of course Ms. Gupta pulls me aside as I'm leaving class on Friday afternoon. But now that basketball is over, I have no excuse to make a fast getaway, even if Ruby is meeting me at my locker. Meeting your girlfriend to hang out isn't considered reason enough not to talk to your teacher, I would assume.

But this afternoon was special because Ruby finally doesn't have to babysit for once. She's always had a lot of

responsibility at home, but lately it seems like there's more and more. I don't want to miss even a couple of minutes of hanging out with her, but I guess I have no choice.

"I finished going over your extra credit," Ms. Gupta says.

I make a noise somewhere between a yawn and a groan. Invisible people should not make noise. *Pretend to be a tree, pretend to be a tree*, I tell myself. *Trees don't speak*.

"It's not great, Kyle. I'm a little concerned that you rushed through it."

She seems to be waiting for me not to be a tree, but all I can manage to do is chew on my bottom lip.

"It's enough to push you into D range for the marking period, but that's not exactly a victory. I think you need to consider getting a tutor."

"Oh."

"If you could pull your grade up to a B next marking period, this blip won't seem so bad in the grand scheme of things. I'm still a little worried that there's something else going on, but you don't have to tell me about it."

"There's nothing else going on," I say, my voice sounding thin and nervous to my own ears, and I hate the guy I become when I'm put on the spot like this. I clear my throat. "I mean, I'm not having some kind of crisis at home or whatever you might be thinking."

She smiles a thin-lipped smile. "Well, I guess you should get out of here then, but before you go, here's a list of available peer tutors."

I take a quick look at it, and of course Gideon is right at the top.

“Do you know anyone on that list who you don’t mind asking for help? If not, I can get someone assigned to you.”

“No, I know someone.”

We say good-bye, and I shove the list into the bottom of my backpack.

This sucks, this sucks, this sucks, I think as I walk to my locker.

“Hey there, Mr. Crabby Pants.”

I’m so annoyed and lost in thought that I didn’t even notice I was getting closer to my locker, and I definitely didn’t notice Ruby standing in front of it.

“Oh, hi,” I say, kissing her cheek. At least things with Ruby and me are better.

“What’s up?” she asks, looking concerned. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you looking that pissed-off before. It’s a weird look for you.”

I try to pull in all the air I can and rearrange my face into a more relaxed expression. I can *feel* how tense I am. I can only imagine how tense I must look.

“Um. I didn’t do very well on an English assignment. No big deal.” It’s not a complete lie.

“Is that really all?” she asks, examining me from several angles as I kneel down in front of my locker and try to figure out what I need to take home with me tonight. I always keep a list going on a notepad of what’s due the next day, but I can’t find my notepad at the moment and everything feels wrong.

“Yeah, it’s nothing. Not a big deal. I just needed to talk to Ms. Gupta.”

“She’s so awesome.”

Hearing Ruby declare my greatest enemy “awesome” is too much to take. I don’t even care what’s due on Monday. I’ll care later when my mom asks me about what homework I need to do this weekend, and I’ll care next week when I don’t have anything to turn in, but right now, I do not care.

I shove whatever’s closest in my bag and stand up, slamming my locker door closed.

“Guess you’re not a fan?”

“Oh, uh . . .” I shake my head. “I mean she did just give me a bad grade, but I’ll get over it.” I smile. It’s forced, but it seems to make Ruby feel better. I take her hand and pull her in for a real kiss.

She smiles into it and then backs away. “That’s more like it,” she says.

I take a deep breath and feel a lot calmer. I lean on the lockers and realize that my notepad was in my back pocket the whole time.

“You ready to get out of here?” she asks.

“In one second. I think I forgot something.”

I kneel back down, open my locker, and take a minute to read my notes and make sure I have everything organized. I’ll show Ms. Gupta that I’m just fine and that I have everything under control. I’ll ask Gideon to tutor me, maybe leaving out the part where I’m failing and focusing on the part where I just want to keep my grades up for basketball camp. I know it doesn’t make any sense to try to hide this grade when my parents will find out on my report card in a couple of weeks, but maybe they’ll be less angry if they know that I’m already being proactive about my grades.

I finally have the right books in my bag for the weekend and I'm ready to go. This time I close my locker with a smaller slam. It's weird how much better I feel than even just a couple of minutes ago.

As we're about to leave, Gideon strolls up.

Gideon

"What's up, Gid?" Kyle asks when he sees me.

"You're giving me a ride home? And we're supposed to hang out tonight? We made plans, like, three days ago." I knew he'd forget. He always forgets this stuff.

"Oh crap!" he says, smacking his forehead.

"I knew you'd forget," I say.

"It's just that Ruby doesn't have to babysit for once," he starts explaining really fast. "And I had to stay after to talk to Gupta again, and I didn't forget. I just kind of didn't think about it."

I nod. "It happens," I say.

"But it's your birthday weekend," Kyle says. "We were supposed to start our marathon."

"It's cool, don't worry about it," I say.

At the same time, Ruby says, "I could go home. I don't mind."

"Maybe the three of us could do something together?" Kyle asks, glancing between Ruby and me. "You guys can come back to my house and we can hang out?"

Every single bone in my body says no. I can't imagine a worse situation at the moment than having to hang out with them being all lovey-dovey and couple-y. Not that they're

really one of those couples, but almost anything could be too much in my current fragile state of liking Kyle.

I look over at Ruby, hoping that she's not into the idea, but she's smiling and nodding. This is terrible.

We hop into Kyle's car, and I tell myself it's not going to be so bad. That I have this all under control. Even though I have a feeling it's going to be pretty awkward when it's all said and done.

As soon as we walk into Kyle's house, it's apparent that we're not going to be able to hang out there.

His sisters have every single member of the middle school softball team over for a start-of-the-season pizza party. The sheer volume of squealing will not be conducive to anything that requires concentration.

"What should we do?" Kyle asks.

"It's cool," I say. "We can go hang out at my house."

As soon as we walk in my front door, the peace and quiet is almost deafening, and I have no idea how I'm supposed to entertain Ruby. I know how to entertain Kyle. I've had years of practice, but I have no clue what Ruby's into. I should know more about her, since she's been my best friend's girlfriend for six months. But all I know is that she loves cheerleading and she spends a lot of time with her family.

"So what do you guys want to do?" I ask.

Kyle chews on his lip. "Um, maybe we should have grabbed my PS4 while we were at my house. Ruby's a big fan of Grand Theft Auto."

"Are you really?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's not so bad," she says.

Kyle gives me a meaningful look. "Would you mind helping

me get all the stuff together for it?" he asks. "You know I never grab the right cables or whatever."

"Um, sure," I say.

"Ruby, you stay here," he says quickly. "Go hang out in the den and we'll be right back."

Ruby looks a little taken aback, but she seems to follow his directions as we head out the front door and back to Kyle's house.

As soon as we're alone in Kyle's room, he starts talking. "I need your help, but I don't really want to tell anyone else, but I know I can trust you."

"Of course, anything."

"I'm doing kind of bad in English, and I need you to tutor me," he says. He licks his lips. "Please."

"Oh," I say. "Um, sure, of course."

"Gupta gave me your name on a list of peer tutors, so I figured you'd be into it."

"Definitely." I scratch my head. "What do you need to do?"

He shrugs. "Nothing right now. I have a paper due in a couple of weeks, but I turned in an extra-credit essay and that didn't go well. So she told me about the peer tutoring thing."

"How bad are you doing?"

He scrunches up his nose. Oh God, he's too cute.

"Well, I'm getting a D this marking period."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, and I need to keep my GPA above a C so I don't lose my spot at that basketball camp this summer."

"We'll figure it out," I say. "I promise."

He grins and seems more himself already.