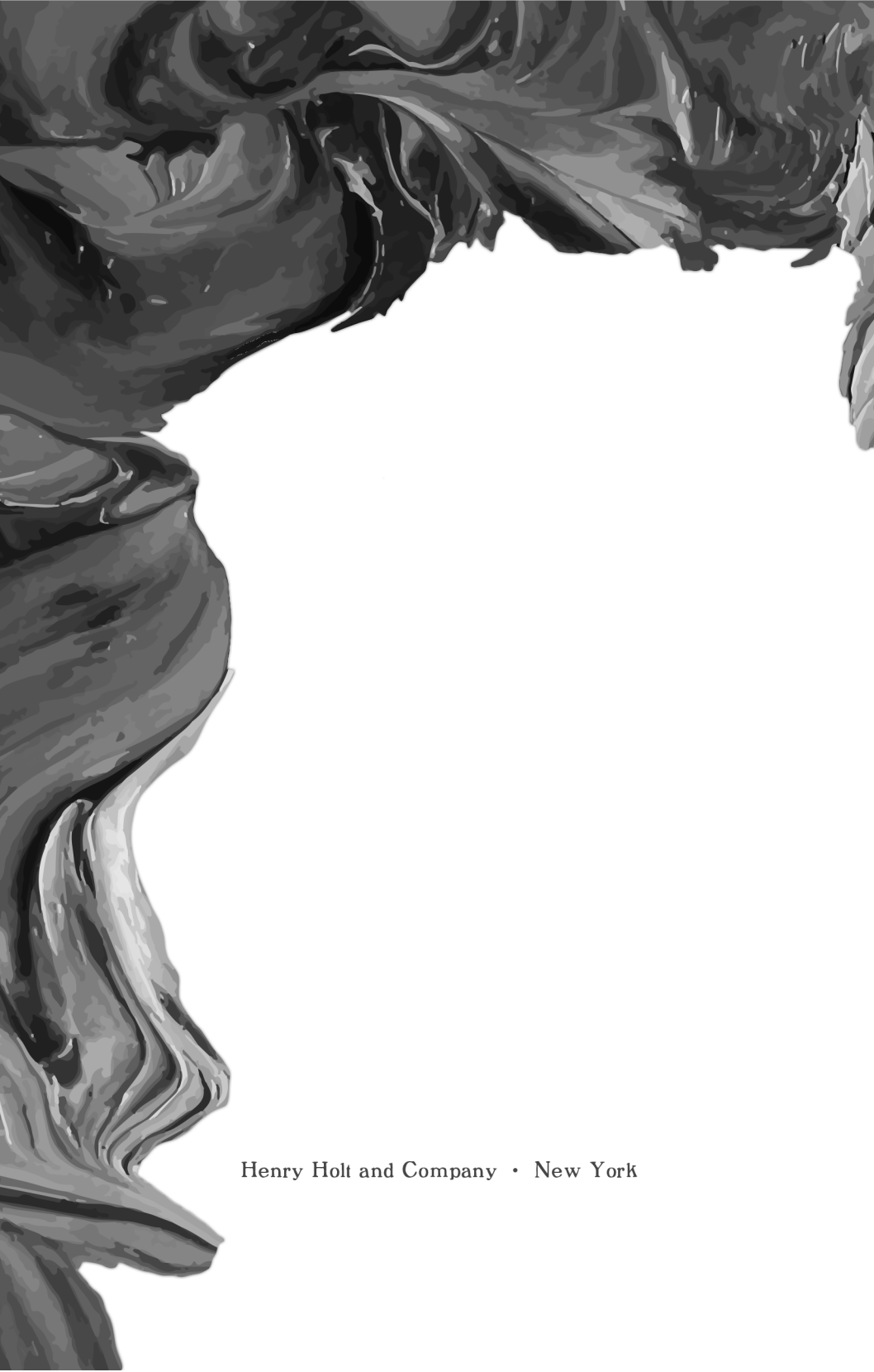


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For the greatest papa (my papa)

The adventure is over. Everything gets over, and nothing is ever enough. Except the part you carry with you.

—E. L. KONIGSBURG,

From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler



one

My immediate priority is air.

Bree has dragged me to a house party, and the place is too warm. Everything is a little too close.

I don't like being in a stranger's house at the best of times. Seeing the pictures on someone else's fridge, the knickknacks on their mantel, whether or not their toilet-paper roll goes over or under . . . that stuff is personal. To be so outside of it, and yet still privy to it, feels like some kind of a violation.

I can't say this to Bree. So I just listen in on one more conversation about whether Jen and Asher from calculus are finally "official" ("Do they need to be notarized?" I ask, and no one laughs), and then I make my way to the kitchen to escape out the back door.

Unfortunately, escape is barred.

"It's not a big deal," this kid is saying, pitching his voice over the thrum of the room. Clearly it is a big deal, because a ring of onlookers has formed around him. It's that sort of Shakespearean chorus that pops up at parties like this, to observe and cast judgment and report back to the masses later.

I'm only three weeks in at Grove County High School, but I recognize the speaker from my AP biology class. His name is Mason, and he sits at the lab bench in front of mine.

I also recognize him from the pages of my father's novels. In a few short years, Mason could be the sheriff's son who backhands the preacher's daughter, or the ex-high school quarterback hell-bent on avenging some romantic slight. Guys like him were a dime a dozen in Everett Finch's world, and they usually died in a fire.

"She doesn't want to talk to you," the guy standing directly across from Mason says.

"And how the fuck do you know that? Twin magic? When she's hit on, you feel it, too?"

The guy doesn't reply, but there is this look in his eyes, a quiet rage that I wouldn't have messed with had I been Mason.

"Really, you should be thanking me," Mason continues. "I don't think she's a lost cause. I could help her turn shit around."

Mason steps into the other guy's space, eliciting a quiet but firm "Don't."

"Or what?"

The guy doesn't respond.

"Or what?" Mason repeats, and steps even closer. In different circumstances, they'd look for all the world like they were about to kiss. Mason's lips curve upward into a smile. "Is this getting to you? Are you wired wrong, too?"

"Don't," is all he says again.

"Come on, it's not like you're going to hit me. You want to know how I know?" When the guy doesn't answer, Mason reaches out and puts his hands on either side of the guy's head, forcing it up and down in a nod. "Yes, Mason, I want to know." And then he moves one hand to

the guy's face, smushing his cheeks between his thumb and forefinger. "Cause you're a *nice fucking guy, Fuller.*" He squeezes with each word.

The guy still doesn't move, and maybe Mason is right—maybe he won't hit him. Maybe he's too solid to respond.

But I'm not.

"Sorry," I say, angling through the people in front of me. "I'm sorry. So sorry. Don't mean to interrupt. It's just . . . are you for fucking serious?"

Mason looks at me, his hand still grasping the guy's face. Surprise cuts through his smirk. *A girl is volunteering to talk to him*, I think, and in that moment, I know which tack to use.

So I tamp down the outrage and manage something like a smile as I reach out and close my fingers loosely around Mason's wrist. A soft touch. He lets me guide his hand away without protest.

"I mean . . . these hands aren't really meant for that kind of thing, are they?"

His eyes track me as I lace my fingers together with his.

"These hands are for . . . for caressing," I continue. "For stroking, even."

"Oh yeah?" Mason says with a dumb little smile. His target just stands there, altogether forgotten.

"Yeah," I say. "Yourself. In front of the TV. Alone. Every night."

Mason doesn't get it right away, but there's a hoot from the crowd and a few barely suppressed guffaws.

If nothing else, you can at least use them to grasp for intelligence, or like, some semblance of human decency."

The crowd reaction amps up, like a sitcom soundtrack. Mason wrenches his hand out of mine.

"What's your problem?" he says.

"Your face," I reply, because that's what my sister, Laney, would say.

"Fuck you," he says, but he's lost control of the room. The chorus is already buzzing. "Fuck this." He smiles with too much teeth. "Got yourself a guard dog, huh, Fuller? Emphasis on *dog*." Like this will somehow hurt my feelings. But that's assuming I have them in the first place.

When I don't react, Mason shakes his head and retreats, the chorus folding in around us. I look back to where the guy had been standing, but he's already headed out the back door.

Bree appears at my elbow, clutching a plastic cup. Her cheeks are red, and she is grinning. "Geez. That was—was that a New York thing? Do they teach you that kind of stuff there?"

Yes. Here is your MetroCard, and this is how you publicly dismantle insufferable dicks.

"It was a person thing. That guy was an ass."

She shakes her head, still grinning. "Geez."

"What?"

"Gabe Fuller." She gestures in the direction of the guy's retreat. "You stepped in for freaking Gabe Fuller."

"Yeah," I say, because I don't know how to respond to that.

A kid I vaguely recognize from my lit class comes up then, holding his hand up for a high five.

"That was hilarious," he says.

I slap his palm, but suddenly it's too close in there again, too much, so I excuse myself and make my way to the door.

It's quieter outside. There's just the low hum of crickets and the soft smack of a couple making out on the porch swing. The chains attaching the swing to the ceiling rattle as she adjusts, he adjusts. One of them sighs, a soft little sound.

I ignore them, bracing my hands against the railing. The night air hangs thick with late-summer humidity, but a few deep breaths still put me right.

Some scraggly trees populate the backyard, and there's an attempt at a garden—a trellis hung with vines, a couple of thorny-looking bushes. The ground is a study in that patchy North Florida grass, which is mostly just sand and a thick coating of live oak leaves. The leaves shine in the light from the motion-sensor bulb on the garage. That same light throws two figures at the end of the yard into stark relief.

I can't hear them from where I stand. Rationally, I know it's none of my business. But I step off the porch anyway and move across the yard toward them.

"I told you we shouldn't have gone to a non-Frank-sanctioned party," the girl is saying as I near. I'm shielded a bit by the shadow of the trellis.

"Why were you even talking to him?"

"He talked to me first. I'm not just going to ignore another human being. We can't all stare through people, Gabe."

"Yeah, well, try. Look at them, and instead of seeing them, see whatever's behind them. And then ignore that, too."

"Yeah, that's a super healthy approach. Super great social skills."

"Mason Pierce doesn't deserve your social skills. He doesn't deserve the hair in your shower drain."

"Who does deserve the hair in my shower drain? Should I start mailing it to Tash? Do you want me to save you some?"

"I swear to God—"

The end of that oath never comes, because it's then they realize I'm there.

Somehow at the sight of me, the guy—Gabe—looks angrier than before. It's not that quiet-rage burn, but more of an outward hostility.

The girl, on the other hand, smiles wide. It lights up her face. "Hey. It's you."

It's such a strange thing to say—like somehow I was expected—that all I can do is nod. "It's me."

"I didn't need you to do that," Gabe says.

"Thank you," the girl amends, "is what he's trying to say."

"I didn't need you to do that," he repeats, and for some reason, his irritation irks me. I did a thing. Stepped in. Dismantled a bully. I could've gone on and done nothing, like the rest of fucking Solo Cup nation in there. "I didn't need anyone's help. Everything was under control."

"So the part where he plied your face like Play-Doh was a critical step in your plan?"

The girl snorts, and Gabe shoots her a glare.

"I was fine," he says tightly. "Next time, don't help."

I nod. "Okay. Sure." But I am incapable of leaving it at that. "'Cause if this world needs anything, it's more passive witnesses to injustice, right? The U.N. should adopt that model. Amnesty International. Forget the barbed-wire candle—their symbol should just be like a guy leaning against a wall with his arms folded and a speech bubble that says 'Want to help? Next time, don't.' Someone should really get the number for the Gates Foundation and let them know."

"That's not what I'm—" Gabe begins. But once I start, it's kind of hard to stop.

"Hey, I know scientists are super busy trying to find cures for diseases and stuff, but maybe at this point in time they should just try *not* doing that—"

"I didn't say—"

"Humanitarian aid workers," I call out, like the yard is full of them. "Lay down your instruments of change, because 'Don't help' is the societal model we're going with now—"

"Okay," he says loudly. "Okay, fine, yes, I'm sorry. Thank you. For helping. Thanks. Please just stop."

The girl bursts out laughing. Gabe glares at her.

"Sorry," she says. "Just . . . your face. God. So good." She points at me. "You're great. You're staying. We're keeping you."

Gabe looks at her and then at me, and for a second I think he might laugh, too. His lips twitch, at least, and the corners of his eyes crinkle up a little as he looks away. It's almost as if something has been defused inside him. Like the right wire has been cut.

"Who are you again?" he says.

"Sloane," I reply. "Who are you?"

"Gabe. Fuller. This is Vera." He waves a hand at the girl. Framed in the light from the garage, I can see they favor each other—similar in the line of the nose and the curve of the lips. *Twin magic*, Mason had said. Two pairs of dark eyes look out from under thick lashes, framed by the kind of eyebrows that are equal parts impressive and intimidating.

"Nice to meet you," Vera says, and nudges Gabe. "Isn't it?"

"Yeah," he says. And then to Vera: "I'm going to go. Are you going to ride with Aubrey, or . . ."

"No, I'll go with you. Do you want a ride, Sloane?"

"That's okay, I drove somebody."

"Okay. Well," Vera looks to Gabe, who is now staring in the direction of the garage. "Thanks again."

"No problem. I'm here all week."

"You're vacationing?" She looks mildly alarmed.

"No. No, it's just . . . one of those things comedians say? 'I'm here all week' . . . 'Tip your waitress.'"

Vera grins. "I get it. You're funny." She glances at Gabe again, but he doesn't give confirmation. His jaw is firmly set once more. "See you at school, I guess?" she says.

"Sure. I'll be the one who looks like me."

She laughs, and it's weirdly gratifying. I haven't had such a receptive audience in a long time. Laney's only nine, but she knows all my dumb jokes by now.

Casting one last smile at me, Vera grabs Gabe's arm and leads him toward the house, and I am alone once more.

Except for the couple making out on the porch swing, I think, until I look back and see that they, too, have left. Maybe they fled during my humanitarian-aid-workers speech.

I return to the porch and settle down on the vacated swing. It creaks as I rock back and forth. The chains look like they probably won't withstand many more vigorous make-out sessions.

I check my phone. Nine thirty-four. I think my mom will be satisfied if I stay until ten.

You should go! she had said, when I mentioned tonight's party. *Get to know some new people! Do something fun!*

Just different shades of the same things she would say to me back home. So I gave my standard response: *These things are always boring.*

You won't know unless you try, she replied. *Maybe it'll be different here.*

She had a point. Maybe it would. That's sort of what I'm counting on, after all.



two

Saturday mornings are for my voice lessons, two hours away on the Florida State University campus in Tallahassee. My mom drives me, despite my protests of *I can go by myself*.

You're not familiar with the roads here, she said simply when this argument first came about.

Yeah, you never know what you might encounter out there that we never had back home, my dad chipped in.

Like what? I said. *Roads are roads.*

Gators, Dad said simply.

I want to see a gator! was Laney's contribution.

Now that's the kind of enthusiasm I'm here for, Dad said. *You know, Jill, if we stay long enough, Laney might get an accent. Develop herself a fine Southern drawwwl. I might adopt one, too. I might get one of those Colonel Sanders suits.*

God help us all, Mom replied.

"Sloane?"

"Hmm?"

"I said, do you mind stopping? Laney wants one of those Floopy toys, from the movie. Think you can choke down a Happy Meal?"

I turn the corner down on the page in my book—even though it's completely pointless, as it's the very first page—and close it. "I'm willing to take one for the team."

Happy Meals acquired, we head back toward the highway. "Did you have fun last night?" Mom says as we merge back on. "You were out pretty late."

"Ten o'clock, wow. Should we throw a parade?"

"Hey, it's the odd night when you're not putting PJs on by seven."

"Maybe I sneak out and go to clubs where PJs are required."

"If there's a club where PJs are required, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't be the kind you wear."

I don't know, maybe I could charm the bouncer with my SpongeBob pants and my dad's old SUNY sweatshirt.

"How was the party?" Mom says, before I can get out a rejoinder.

"It was fine."

"Bree seems nice."

Bree is nice. One of the first things she told me about herself was that Kim Kardashian replied to her once on Twitter. I didn't know the proper way to respond to that. Like whether some kind of congratulations were in order.

Bree is my lab partner, the first person I met at Grove County High School, and arguably my only friend here. Not that we've done much else together besides AP bio worksheets and last night's party, and that was only because *You haven't been to one yet? Gosh, Sloane, you have to get out eventually!* No wonder my mom liked Bree; they were cut from the same cloth.

"Uh-huh," I say, and shove some fries in my mouth.

"Anything fun happen?"

I don't know if I would call dismantling Mason Pierce *fun*, particularly, but there was a certain satisfaction to it. Nor was meeting Vera and Gabe fun, per se, but it was . . . well, it was something different.

I just shrug. "Not really."

"How was your lesson? You didn't say."

"I did say."

"You said 'fine.' Can we expound on 'fine' a little bit? As the passenger, it's your obligation to keep the driver entertained."

This is something my dad says all the time. I think she realizes that, because she goes on quickly: "You're liking Eileen?"

My new voice teacher. I don't dislike her. But, "I miss Paula."

She glances over at me, and it's my turn to go on quickly: "But I mean, Eileen is good, too. Nice to . . . get an outside take, I guess?"

"Got to get you in shape for auditions."

My mom is approximately sixteen times more excited for college auditions than I am.

"It's still really early," is all I reply. I just sent in my prescreens before we moved. I would be learning new material with Eileen, as well as maintaining the audition pieces I started with Paula.

It's quiet as we eat. My mom has her own bag in her lap, occasionally pulling out a fry or taking a pull from her Diet Coke.

"You want me to read to you?" I say when I'm done eating.

"I thought you finished your book on the way in."

"Got another. One of Dad's." I hold up the cover for reference, but her eyes don't leave the road.

Her expression doesn't change, but her voice hardens just

a smidge: “Maybe I’ll just see what’s on,” and she clicks on the radio. NPR, *Fresh Air*.

I read anyway. The radio is easy to tune out, even easier when traveling familiar territory. I’ve read all my dad’s books at least once. *Some would argue that if you’ve read one, you’ve read them all*, he’s said before. It’s true, in a sense—there are definitely some standout Everett Finch tropes. Small coastal towns. Love as a means of salvation. Dead pets. It was rare that an entire cast of characters made it out of a book alive, but at the very least, the dog would bite it. Faithful old Rufus met his maker in *Heaven Sent*. Max the stray is cut down in *Summer Burn*. And Avery, the ten-week-old puppy, kicks the bucket in my current read, *Sand on Our Beach*.

I asked my dad once why the puppy had to die. He said simply, “Tragic irony.”

Despite that, *Sand on Our Beach* is still my favorite one. It tells the story of Sarah, a twentysomething living in the shadow of a terminal diagnosis, who moves to a small beach town to live out her final days in peace. She writes her memoirs (*I know it sounds stupid, but young people can write memoirs*, Sarah declares in chapter two. *Just because you have fewer years doesn’t mean they were any less meaningful*) and reconnects with the sea (*The first place I ever felt like there was more out there than myself*, she tells Jack in chapter ten).

That was one of my favorite passages—her talk with Jack about the ocean. I’m tempted to flip ahead, but I can never really read books that way. I always end up going back and picking up what I’ve missed, even if I’ve read it a dozen times before. It doesn’t seem right, skipping to the best parts and ignoring the in-between.

We’re kind of at an in-between right now. I look over at my mom as we ease back onto 30A. I don’t know why I said I miss Paula.

I know they would've stayed, if I had asked. They would've stayed in New York so I could finish high school where I started it. But I didn't ask, because I didn't care. Maybe there's something a little bit wrong with me. Or maybe that's just what comes of being the daughter of a fictional puppy killer. Different sensibilities. Different priorities.

"I'm kind of too old for this stuff," Laney says when we present her with the Floopy toy back home.

"Fine then, I'll take it." I go to grab the toy from my mom's hand, but Laney snatches it away.

"No, I want it!"

"That's what I thought," I say, and she makes a face at me but clutches the plastic package to her chest all the same.



three

When I get to AP biology on Monday morning, I find my seat has been taken.

Technically it's not like there are assigned seats, but there is this self-imposed thing where you sit in the same spot every time anyway. It's basically unspoken classroom law.

"Sorry." I hover by the other chair at the bench where Bree and I usually sit. "Are you—did you want to partner with Bree?"

"No," the guy in my seat says. "We switched. I'm Remy."

Remy has close-cut hair and a faint goatee going, like it's something he wants to try out, but his face isn't certain of it yet.

I glance around and clock Bree sliding into a seat in the back, next to a stocky blond kid. She waves at me when I catch her eye and flashes me a smile and a double thumbs-up.

Huh. So either Bree is into that blond kid, or Remy is into me. You don't just up and switch. See unspoken-seat thing. That universally acknowledged tenet of *You sat there on the first day, and if you don't like it, you damn well better get over it.*

I take a seat and glance over at Remy. A shiny class ring gleams on his pointer finger. I can just make out the little sports emblems etched onto it: a baseball and bat flanking the stone on one side, a football on the other.

"I'm Sloane," I say.

"I know," he replies.

It's then that Mason Pierce sidles along the aisle in front of us. He settles into the seat in front of Remy, glances back at us, faces forward, and then does a double take. He looks between us, and his lips curve into a smile that's more like a sneer. Remy, meanwhile, gives him a nod.

"Johnson," Mason says curtly. "Got a new friend?" He manages to make the word *friend* sound like an insult.

"Let's just say I got a new seat and leave it at that," Remy says, with a smile that belies the edge in his voice. Before Mason can answer, the teacher clears her throat, and class begins.

It's a lecture today, no lab stuff, so Remy and I don't interact much. The lead in my mechanical pencil snaps at one point and ricochets off in his direction, to which I say "Sorry" and he says nothing. When class is over, he packs up his stuff, gives me a nod, and then heads out.

So maybe Bree really is into that blond guy. I can't catch up with her after class to ask, but it seems like the most likely scenario.

Until Vera plunks down in the seat across from me at lunch and says, "Remember me?"

I'm at a corner table in the cafeteria, munching on an apple and reading *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*.

"From the party," she adds when I look up.

"I remember."

"Good. Because I couldn't forget you. I've never seen Gabe that annoyed with someone who wasn't me."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Annoying Gabe is a great thing," she says with a grin. Then she angles her head, taking in the title of my book. "Sherlock?"

"Yeah." I don't know why I say it, but I do: "My, uh, my dad used to read them to me, when I was a kid." Now he reads them to Laney, and if I happen to stand in the doorway and hear a few, then so be it.

"They're the best," she says. "I just wish there was one where they finally admit that they love each other."

"Sorry?"

"Sherlock and Watson. They never really say that they love each other in the canon, but it's so freaking obvious. Like, Sherlock would straight-up kill for Watson."

I smile.

"Are your friends on their way?" she says, glancing around the room. "I don't want to take someone's spot."

I hold up the book. "Sherlock and Watson are my friends."

She looks at me for a moment, something alight in her eyes. Then she says, "We're going to eat lunch together, okay?" And takes a sandwich and an apple out of her bag.

"Okay."

Vera chats while she neatly works through her lunch. The garage light from the weekend's party hadn't really done her justice. My mom would describe her as "va-va-voom." Something tells me that there is no product in science or nature that could make my hair look that shiny, nothing Sephora has to offer that could turn my eyes that bright.

That being said, I get the feeling it's not really her looks that do it, or her hair, or her makeup, because if you took all that away, there would still be something about her, some kind of magnetism. Vera leans in to talk to me—like we are conspiring somehow—and the little smile at the corner of her lips sort of makes me want to smile, too.

It's only when we're making our way through the hall after lunch that Vera slants a look over at me and says, "Did he give you trouble? In class?"

"What?"

"Mason. Was he a dick to you in class?"

"Oh. No. I mean—how'd you know we have class together?"

"Remy said."

"You know Remy?"

"Of course. Who do you think told him to sit next to you?" She grins and then grabs my arm and pulls me into the nearest bathroom, where she fixes her makeup. (It's flawless.) When she's done, she holds up her phone, very carefully angles her body so her waist looks incredibly small and her chest and ass look incredibly . . . prominent . . . flashes a smile, and clicks.

Then, "Sorry. That's so rude. You want to be in it? We can make it a photoset."

"Oh, I don't really—"

"Smile!"

I quickly turn to the side like Vera as she clicks again. Upon viewing the picture, Vera looks like a Victoria's Secret model, whereas I look like someone brought in for violating parole.

"I'll tag you—what's your Instagram?"

"Uh, I don't really . . ." *Document my life for the Internet.*

“No worries.” She flips through filters, and then her thumbs fly: “‘Post-lunch selfie with new friend Sloane.’” There is a pause. “Sweet. A hundred likes.”

“Wait . . .” I follow Vera out of the bathroom. “A hundred? You posted it like ten seconds ago.”

“I know. They think you’re cute.”

“They?”

“The Internet. I do stuff on the Internet. It’s fun.”

I will later learn that “do stuff on the Internet” loosely means that Vera has enough followers on various social-media sites to fill a professional football stadium, several times over. Companies send her stuff to promote. Strangers send her jewelry.

But right now, post-bathroom selfie, all I know is that in under a minute, one hundred people had “liked” a picture of me looking dismal and still thought I was cute. Maybe people just look better next to Vera. Like a planet shining brighter in proximity to the sun.

She walks with me to my next class and says, “We meet by the buses after school. You should definitely come.”

This begs some questions—like “Who’s we?” and “Why?”—but I don’t let them loose. I just nod and say, “Yeah, sure.”

“Awesome.” She gives me a sunny smile, and then she’s gone.



four

When I get home later that afternoon, my dad is sitting in his lounge with a towel draped artistically over his head. He looks like a shepherd in a Sunday-school nativity play.

“Where were you?” he asks when I come in.

“Hanging out.”

“Ooh, with who?”

“Some local youth.”

“You sound eighty.”

“And you look like a maniac. What are you doing?”

“I’m relaxing.” He rubs the towel. “Terry cloth is good for the brain.

I read an article on it.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Okay, I read a blog post. On a somewhat less-than-credible website. But it did say it could—how did they put it?—‘re-energize your photons?’” He fishes for his tablet.

“Really.”

“There may have been mention of a lizard overlord. But that shouldn’t automatically discredit what they say, right?” He swipes

the screen a couple of times. "It's supposed to 'clear the path to rationalization.'"

"Did you write anything today?"

"I wrote a slogan for that website. 'Come 'cause you're stressed, stay 'cause you're blessed . . . by the reptilian messiah.'" He does finger guns.

"Dad."

"Elder child." He tosses the tablet aside and slaps his knee. "Come. Tell me about your day. Tell me about these youth."

I sink down onto the couch. "They're from school."

"I figured as much. Gimme some names and faces."

Well, first, there was Aubrey, who sidled up to me in front of the buses and said, "Hey, it's new friend Sloane." Upon my look of confusion, she held up her phone. "I follow Vera," she said. "Like half the continent."

"Oh, cool," I said, still a little confused. "So you're like . . . a fan?" Was Vera so Internet famous that I could be recognized by proxy?

"I'm a friend," she replied. "She said to meet here after school?"

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry."

She gave me a tight smile and then promptly turned to her phone as Remy approached us with a wave; apparently he was part of Vera's *we*, as well. Finally, Vera arrived and declared that we'd be going to Opal for snow cones.

There are a handful of towns along the coast collectively termed the Beaches of Grove County. The vacation towns, like Opal, have very few permanent residents, so the majority of the kids at Grove County come from a town a little farther down 30A called Grayson. But Opal is good for snacks, the last vestiges of summer still operating.

Come the end of the month, summer hours would end, and snow cones would be harder to come by.

So we went, and sat, and ate. They chatted. Aubrey texted. I listened politely. Not a bad afternoon. All in all, it was . . . well, it was an afternoon.

I relate this, for the most part, to my dad, who listens with his eyes shut. When I'm done, he looks over at me.

"Sounds like a productive day."

"I guess?"

"You made three friends. People only make three friends in one day on sitcoms."

"We're not . . . friends. We ate snow cones. They talked about the Avengers."

"How do you think friendships are forged? Mutual interests. Food. Repetition. If you see them two more times, they're your friends."

I don't quite believe him. It's not like there's some kind of formula to it. And even if there was, I certainly wouldn't be the one to pull it off.

"Hey, you want to go pick up Laney from her thing?" Dad says. "After School Cultural Whatever It's Called?"

"Culture Camp?"

"Ugh. Yeah. Culture Camp. Have you ever heard anything more ridiculous?"

"Yes. Re-energizing your photons."

He grins. "Touché."

"Don't you want to go?" I ask. "You could, you know . . . put real clothes on."

"And lose sight of the path to rationalization? Hell no." He waves me away. "Go get your sister."

Laney is not so easily obtained. At nine, she's already a natural social butterfly. I can see her on the lawn in front of her school from across the circle. They have long plastic folding tables set up, piled high with art stuff. They all appear to be painting geometric designs; Laney later informs me that it's "tile art," and my mom hangs hers in the kitchen.

Right now I watch as Laney leans in to whisper something to the girl next to her. They both giggle and consult a third.

It was easier back then, wasn't it? A few good packs of press-on earrings or some credits on Club Penguin and you were in. Or maybe Laney's just better at that stuff than me. I didn't do my best this afternoon. Mostly I stared into the depths of my snow cone and wondered how on earth someone could know so much about the Marvel universe (Remy), smile so frequently (Vera), or text with such vigor (Aubrey).

I greet the adultish-looking person at one of the front tables, who calls Laney over.

"Time to go," I say.

"Ten more minutes."

"Mom's making spaghetti."

"Yummmm, okay." Laney abandons her friends in the way of a nine-year-old, meaning she goes back to the table and hugs each of them good-bye as if she'll never see them again. It takes at least ten minutes.

We walk home together and she tells me about her day, and then it's Mom's dinner as promised. My dad takes Laney for a walk on the beach afterward, as the sun is going down. It's too early to see the stars, but Laney brings her constellation guide anyway—A

Comprehensive Guide to the Stars by Dr. Angela Fellows is one of her latest obsessions. Once she learned that different constellations were visible at different times—*Like the sky is changing, all year long! We're seeing different parts of the galaxy, Sloane!*—it was a done deal.

I don't join them tonight, instead opting to stay in for the usual. Homework. Practice. And when all is said and done—Laney is tucked away, my mom is watching the news, my dad is re-energizing his whatevers—I get online and search the screen name I saw on Vera's phone at lunch: @vera_marie.

The accounts come up instantly: vera_marie is on all the networks, including ones I've never even heard before. What is Flipit? ("Kind of like Snapchat, but videos only," Vera will say later when I ask.) What is Heartmark? ("Kind of like Flipit, but with emojis.")

The numbers are staggering. Followers, likes, views, winkydinks (courtesy of Heartmark). I click over to the image tab, and dozens of Veras stare back at me: Vera posing in front of a mirror in a crop top, Vera at the beach, Vera with her head pillowed on her arms in class.

Her Twitter is a study in affirmations and exclamation points. She at-replies more than she tweets, and there are so many words of encouragement and "<333333"s and "XOXO"s, to rival the number of "please answer it would make my life" and "omg ily"s in her mentions.

Her profile is the same across all platforms: *Vera Marie Fuller. 17. Loving life, my friends, my girl.*

I click on *my girl* and it brings me to another profile—@natashah19. A girl who looks, if possible, even more glamorous than Vera. The most recent picture shows the two of them together, lying across a beach blanket in the sand. Natashah19's arm is extended, holding

the camera, but they're looking at each other instead of into the lens. Vera's hand is wrapped in Natashah19's dark hair, pulling her in, and Natashah19 is grinning widely.

Gorgeous, the top comment reads, followed by one of those heart-eyes emojis.

I click over to one of my own neglected profiles and follow Vera. Then I shut down the laptop and go to bed.



five

“So how’d you start?” I ask, peeling the lid off my pudding cup. Vera sits across from me with one of those prepackaged salads, the kind they throw all kinds of fancy shit into to disguise the salad taste. As far as I’m concerned, no amount of cranberries or pine nuts is going to transform it into curly fries, so it’s not even worth it.

I was surprised to see Vera in my third-period calculus class. She plopped down in the seat next to me and said, “We had this one together the whole time! Who knew? I usually sit up front. Funny what you miss when you’re not looking, huh?”

After calculus came lunch, and how here we are, meal two of *If you see them two more times, they’re your friends.*

“The Internet stuff, I mean. How’d you start it?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, it kind of just happened.”

“So what, you tripped and took a selfie, and it went viral?”

A smile. “Not exactly. I don’t know, I started doing it more seriously sophomore year, and it just kind of took off. It’s a good distraction.”

“From what?”

Her eyes shine. “Everything.” She spears a piece of cucumber. “Everyone needs a distraction every now and then, don’t you think? It can’t all be school and homework and ugh, God, calc is terrible, isn’t it? We should study after school. Except I have to work. Put a pin in studying.”

“Where do you work?”

“At a boutique in Opal. But since school started, it’s only twice a week. Hey, do you need a job? Most places have scaled back because summer season’s ending, but I actually know a place that’s hiring. I could probably get you an interview.”

I have actually never had a job. I don’t want to admit that in this moment, so I just shrug. “I mean, sure. I guess. If you know a place.”

I had always thought a job would detract from my work. School. Practice. But I could handle twice a week, right?

“I will hook you up, girl,” she says with a grin.

“Tell me more,” my dad says that evening, tenting his fingers together and resting them under his nose, some kind of knockoff BBC detective. “What’s she look like?”

“I don’t know, google her. She’ll pop up. She has a social-media presence.”

“My publicist keeps telling me to get one of those.”

“Everett Finch tragedies, a hundred and forty characters or less?”

My dad clears his throat. “‘Love me,’ Jake said. ‘I do,’ Annie replied. And then she died.’” He grins. “That’s it. That’s every book I ever wrote.”

“Not every book. They don’t always die.”

“*They don’t always die*. There’s my Twitter bio. What’s your friend’s handle?”

"Her *handle*? Geez, Dad, come on."

"Okay, what would you call it?"

"I don't know. It's Vera underscore Marie."

"Sloane?" My mom pokes her head in. "You want to tell Laney it's bedtime?"

"Jill, what should my Twitter bio be?" Dad asks.

She just smiles. "I'll defer to your judgment."

"Something about love," I say when she leaves. "Everett Finch will punch you in the stomach with love and then hit you over the head with tragedy."

"I like that. Get me set up and we'll go with that. But first it's lights-out for Laney."

"That sounded really sinister."

He grins. "I try."

When I head upstairs, the hall is bathed in light spilling from Laney's room.

For her ninth birthday, Laney wanted nothing so badly as a scrapbook. My parents got her one with a red fake-leather cover and binding, gold writing etched into the front: *My Memories*. It was the one she had specifically shown them in a craft store circular as being *totally perfect, this one, Mom, this is the one*.

Laney adds to *My Memories* frequently—so often that she has gone through four additional packs of filler paper already. Photos, pictures from magazines, newspaper clippings, papers from school, God forbid we see a movie—there is a whole page for movie ticket stubs—everything goes into the book.

She's working on it when I look in on her. She doesn't squawk when I appear, so I move into the room and sink down across the bottom of the bed while she clips pictures out of a magazine. It's

a brightly colored, glossy outfit I used to love when I was younger called *J-14*. As in “Just for Teens.” I really thought that was some next-level shit.

Laney does, too, despite not being a teen at all. I watch as she carefully cuts out the head of a boy-band member. She then glue-sticks the back and presses it lovingly into the book.

“Who’s that?” I ask, pointing to the guy. “Is that One Direction?”

“That’s Kai, from *This Is Our Now*, which you already know.”

I do, just like my dad knows that it’s not called “the MTV.” That stuff’s just funny, I guess—acting ironically crotchety.

“Mom says it’s time for bed.”

“What does Papa say?”

“He says ‘Don’t pit your parents against each other.’”

She makes a face, but after one last pat of the Kai clipping to make sure it’s firmly secured, she closes *My Memories*.

I help her pack her supplies back into a plastic bin and stow it under her bed. Then she slides under the covers and I pull them up around her.

“Which stuffie do you want?”

“Mmm, Phoebe.”

Phoebe is a soft brown rabbit with a lilac bow around its neck. I pull it down from the shelf above Laney’s bed and tuck it in beside her.

I’m about to switch off the light when she says, “Can I ask you something?” And then, “Don’t say I just did. Just say yes.”

There’s nothing she could ask me that I wouldn’t at least try to answer. But the sudden seriousness in her eyes worries me. I’ve been doing my best to keep Laney as oblivious as possible these past few

months. If that meant plying her with *J-14s* or watching the TION documentary for the umpteenth time, so be it.

But Kai and the boys are safely shut away in *My Memories*, and there's little to draw Laney's gaze from me.

"Sloane, say yes," she prompts.

"Yes."

"Is Papa depressed?"

That's not what I was expecting. "Sorry?"

"It's like we're not supposed to notice he just sits around the house all day."

"He works from home. People do that."

Even though she doesn't yet have the agency to tell me that she isn't buying my shit, Laney gives me a look that clearly states she isn't buying my shit. "He sits around the house all day, in his pajamas, doing stuff online. He's like one of those commercials for sad drugs."

"Well . . . I think he's just . . . in a slump."

"A slump sounds depressing."

"He's working through some career stuff," I say, because that's what Mom said to me. There's a good chance Laney thinks I'm wiser than I really am, because a lot of the time when my own explanation doesn't cut it, I just end up telling her stuff that our mom has told me first.

"Like what to write next?"

"Yeah."

"But he loves writing. How is that depressing?"

"I don't know . . . I guess it can be hard when it's your job." I shrug. "Every job has good and bad parts to it, right?"

"Skittles taste tester."

“Cavities.”

She screws up her face. “Okay, what if you’re Kai’s manager. And you get to ride on the bus with him and go backstage?”

“Yeah, but then you have to be around boys all the time. And they smell.”

She smiles. “Okay, what about singer? Serious singer. Fancy. Like you.”

I pause. “You’re right. That one’s perfect.”

“Do you really think so?” she says.

“I don’t know,” I say, because I don’t. I lean over and switch off the light. “Go to sleep.”