



My college essay was titled “School Lunches, TS High, and Me,” and it was every bit as terrible as you’d expect.

I stared at a poster on the wall behind Mrs. Wentworth’s desk while she read. It was this *National Geographic*-looking photo of a pride of lions on a veldt. One was out front, looking particularly majestic. Golden sun dappled its mane, and whereas the background lions were looking here and there, this one’s dark eyes gazed right at me. Underneath the picture, the word **ACHIEVEMENT** was printed in big serif letters.

Clearly, this was supposed to inspire something in me. I wasn’t quite sure what. Run faster. Kill more gazelles. Be better than those riffraff lions hanging at the periphery.

Mrs. Wentworth cleared her throat eventually, and all she said was, “School lunches.” It posed the question “why?” without formally asking it.

“The prompt said to write a page from the story of my life. You eat an awful lot of school lunches in your lifetime, don’t you?”

“And this cafeteria food was somehow . . . meaningful to you?”

“There were some deeply moving mashed potatoes—I’m not going to lie.”

There was something strange happening around her lips, a weird sort of twitching motion. I think a frown and a smile were locked in mortal combat. “Devon, I really need you to take this seriously.”

She meant take it seriously like go home and write an essay about a dead relative, or a sick bird I had nursed back to health when I was little, or a mission trip to build houses in Guadalajara. I just couldn’t find it in my heart to do that. I’d never been to Mexico.

But then she surprised me. “Don’t get me wrong,” she said. “It’s not the topic. It’s the execution. You could’ve run with this. It could’ve been witty and inventive and really captivating. But it reads like you wrote it during a commercial break.”

I took offense to that. I wrote it during at least four commercial breaks.

“How much thought did you really give this?”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t given *any* thought to it. I had even gone as far as composing an essay in my head, written in the style of Jane Austen. Jane was my favorite author, hands down, and I knew that my true life’s story would be told in her style.

Jane didn’t shy away from the truth about people. I felt like I knew her from reading her books, like I knew the kind of person she had been, and it was someone I liked a great deal. Someone who saw people for who they really were, someone who was capable of calling bullshit in the most elegant way imaginable. Jane would tell it like it was.

Unfortunately, how it was for me wouldn’t make the best sort of college essay. *Miss Devon Tennyson requests admission to your university, despite the fact that she is stunningly average.*

I couldn't say any of this to Mrs. Wentworth. I didn't expect her to understand it, how I took comfort in seeing things through Jane's lens sometimes. She couldn't possibly comprehend the satisfaction I drew from imagining myself as *Miss Devon Tennyson* and unextraordinary, as opposed to regular Devon Tennyson and just plain boring.

When I didn't speak, Mrs. Wentworth set my essay aside. "Devon, this is crunch time. You've got a lot of work to do this semester if you want to get your applications competitive. Your GPA isn't bad, but your extracurriculars are definitely lacking. Are you at least aware of this?"

One brief tryst as girls' cross-country team manager. One failed run for Homecoming Court. One nonspeaking role in the drama department's annual desecration of *Beauty and the Beast*. I was definitely aware of it.

I would've pointed out that I had joined Mrs. Wentworth's own club—the Road-to-College Club—but it was hardly optional, and as of now, I was the only member. So I just nodded and tried to look solemn.

"You've still got time. It's only August, but before you know it, deadlines are going to start creeping up. You've expressed some interest in Reeding. Let's pursue it. But we need to explore all our options. If there are any other schools you've got in mind, let's visit them."

"Visit?" For a brief second, I imagined myself on the road with Mrs. Wentworth, arguing over complimentary shower caps in some cheesy motel room.

"You can't make informed decisions without knowing what you're getting into," said Mrs. Wentworth. "You wouldn't buy a dress without trying it on first, would you?"

I choked back *Maybe if I bought it online* and just shook my head. It wasn't the idea of college visits I was apprehensive about. It was the concept of Road-to-College Club in general. *I think this will be good for you*, my mom had said, holding up a flyer sent home in the mail and officially making Road-to-College Club akin to broccoli and sunscreen. Maybe it would be good for me. But that didn't mean I had to like it.

"Are there any particular majors you're interested in?"

"Not really." Saying *advanced breakfast with a minor in cable television* would surely bring about some epic battle that Mrs. Wentworth's smile was doomed to lose.

"Well, you've got some things to think about. This week I want you to look for extracurricular activities. Join a club. Start your own. It's not too late to get yourself out there and get involved."

Ugh. She sounded like a brochure. I suppressed an eye roll and opted for a noncommittal head bob.

It was quiet for a moment. I thought she was going to dismiss me, but when I looked up, Mrs. Wentworth was examining me through narrowed eyes.

Her first name was Isobel. She wasn't very old in the grand scheme of things, but by high school standards, she seemed it. She wore patterned sweaters and long, shapeless floral skirts. Still, Mrs. Wentworth's eyes were very beautiful. Her lashes were thick and dark, and the color of her eyes was just as vibrant, just as green as it must've been when she was my age. I liked to think that she was incredibly popular in those days. All the guys would follow her around and offer to drive her home and tell her that she looked like the girls in the magazines. And she would laugh and flip her dark curls and have no idea that there would be a time in her life

when she would be Mrs. Wentworth, and care what some obnoxious girl wrote to get into Reeding University.

“Devon,” she said, and somehow it felt like the voice speaking was a little more Isobel and a little less Mrs. Wentworth. “Do you *want* to go to college?”

No one had ever asked me that. College was the natural order of things. According to my parents, between birth and death, there had to be college.

“I don’t know what else I would do,” I said.

“Join the army,” was her simple reply.

I made a face. “I hate being yelled at.”

“The Peace Corps, then.”

A choking noise erupted from my throat, something like a cat being strangled. “I hate being selfless.”

“All right.” The twitching around Mrs. Wentworth’s lips started up again. “Get a job.”

“Just start working? Just like that?”

“Lots of people do it. Some very successful people never went to college.”

“Yeah. Look at Hollywood.”

“There’s one. Go to Hollywood. Become a star.”

“But I can’t act. I’ve never even *talked* in a play.”

“So join drama club.”

“Oh yeah, chorus member number twelve will be my ticket to stardom.”

“Why not?”

“First, you have to like doing that kind of stuff, which I don’t, and second, you have to be good at it, which I’m not.”

“So what are you good at?”

“I don’t know. Nothing, really.”

“Now, how can you say that?”

I couldn’t express it right, not without Jane’s help. Those turns of phrases she used that gave elegance to even the unpleasant things. She would say I was *wanting in singularity*. Staunchly average. Spectacularly . . . insufficient, in situations like this. In the face of all-caps ACHIEVEMENT. Because what if you didn’t have it in you? What if, deep down, you were just one of those background lions?

“Everyone’s good at something,” Mrs. Wentworth said after observing me for a moment. “You’ll find your niche. And you know a good place to find it?”

“College?”

“See, you’re a good guesser. There’s something already.”

I smiled a little.

“I think you’re a perfect candidate for college. Don’t think I’m trying to dissuade you here. I just want to know why you want to continue your education.”

“My parents,” I said. She could’ve just asked that straight out of the blocks.

“To get away from them?”

“To keep them from murdering me.”

A particularly fierce twitch seized her lips. “I want you to get involved,” she said, sticking the essay back into my file. It was the only thing in there, save the crumpled postcard from Reeding University I showed her at our first meeting. “And give the personal statement another try. Heck, write the whole life’s story while you’re at it.”

I made another face.

“All right, all right, I won’t get ahead of myself. Have a good day, Devon.”

“You, too,” I said, and left the office.



I walked down to the football field after our session and thought about what Mrs. Wentworth had said. Mostly I thought about the essay—a page from the story of my life. I imagined writing about myself in the Peace Corps: a philanthropic Devon, traversing jungles and deserts, filled to the brim with the opportunity to self-sacrifice for the good of others. That’s the kind of shit those college people wanted—some spectacular tale of unflinching originality, sandwiched between your grade point average and your ACT scores. How many volunteer hours have you performed, and tell us exactly when your stunning triumph over adversity occurred.

I felt like I had never done anything. I had never suffered. I had never triumphed. I was a middle-class kid from the burbs who had managed to be rather unspectacular for the last seventeen years. A triumph over mediocrity—that was what I needed.

“Did college club get out early?”

Wherever I was, Foster had a way of finding me.

Until this past summer, he had been the kind of cousin you see only every fourth Christmas or so. His family lived in California, we were in Florida, and that had been perfectly fine, a perfectly acceptable dose of Foster. But things had changed, and the new dosage of Foster in my life was pretty hard to tolerate at times.

He threw his bag to the ground and plunked down next to me on the bleachers.

“Did moron club get out early?” I said.

He looked at me for a moment. Then he said, “I see what you did there. I said ‘college’ for your club, and you said ‘moron’ for my club. Clever.”

I looked out at the field, partially to avoid having to reply to that, and partially because practice was just starting and this was my

favorite part. All the players would circle up on the field to do calisthenics. I liked the jumping jacks best, the way they'd chant each count aloud together. It was hard to see faces when everyone had their equipment on, but I could spot Cas Kincaid from anywhere. His jumping jacks were always half-assed.

Foster didn't like Cas, but I didn't like Foster. I probably should've felt bad for him, but Foster had this inability to do or say anything remotely human. Sometimes I thought the earth could rip open and swallow our house up whole and he would just stand there on the sidewalk changing tracks on his iPod.

"What'd you learn in college club?"

"Stop calling it college club."

Like "Road-to-College Club" was so much cooler.

"Stop calling it moron club," Foster countered.

Ironically enough, if any club was "college club," it was his. At freshman orientation, Foster signed up for the Future Science Revolutionaries of America Club. It was a biweekly meeting of those genius kids who like to build robots and memorize the digits of pi. Most of them could probably get into more colleges as freshmen than I could as a senior.

The chanting stopped as the guys moved on to a new exercise. Foster followed my gaze to the field and, more particularly, to Cas.

"Don't you feel dumb always following him around?"

I didn't answer, but I wasn't really listening.

"Don't you feel dumb hanging around and waiting for him?" he repeated as he bounced up and down a little in his seat, a rubber band perpetually wound too tight.

"Why would I feel dumb?"

"Because he doesn't hang around and wait for you. Don't you want a boyfriend who waits for you?"

“He’s not my boyfriend. We’re friends.”

“So how come you close the door to your room whenever he comes over?”

“So you won’t come in.”

“You don’t have sex in there?”

“No!” I looked over at Foster. I was fairly confident he was the scrawniest, most immature fourteen-year-old in all of Florida, quite possibly in the entire world. “No. No one’s having sex anywhere.”

“I’m sure there are people having sex right now. All the way around the world. I’m sure there are millions of people having sex right now. It’s nighttime in Europe. People have more sex at night, don’t they?”

“Stop talking about sex, Foster.”

“Why? Does it make you uncomfortable? Does Cas make you uncomfortable? I could punch him, you know. I know how to punch.”

“No punching. No talking. Let’s just be quiet, okay? Let’s play Zip Lip.”

“Okay.” Foster liked to think he was best at this game. I was old enough to know that my mom only invented it to keep me quiet when I was little. He should’ve been old enough to realize that, too.

“But wait. Is your dad picking us up? Because I’m not driving with Cas. He smells.”

“You smell.”

A pause. “I see what you did there.”

I sighed. “Zip your lips, Foster.”

“Do yours first.”

I drew my fingers across my lips. Foster did his, and there was temporary peace.

The peace lasted through the drive home, even after I greeted my dad, effectively losing Zip Lip.

“How was school?” My mom asked that evening, with one hand resting on her hip and the other stirring a wooden spoon in a pot of pasta sauce. Foster was tucked away in front of the television, and my dad was in his office. The house was quiet, aside from the gentle bursting of bubbles in the sauce and the dull hum of Foster’s TV.

“It was fine.” I took to setting the table, because I knew she was going to ask me to do it anyway.

“How was Foster?”

I hated questions like that. What can you possibly say? It made him sound like a weather system. Foster was cloudy with an 80 percent chance of precipitation.

“He seemed fine,” I said as I grabbed some napkins out of the cupboard. I still wasn’t quite used to getting four instead of three.

“Do you . . .” She was trying so hard to sound casual. “Do you think he’s fitting in well?”

“It’s only the third day.”

“But do you think he’s making friends?”

“I don’t know.” That was a lie. “I haven’t seen much of him.” That was a lie, too. I knew he couldn’t have been making friends, or else he wouldn’t be trying to hang around me so much.

“What about gym class?”

Physical education wasn’t a freshman requirement until my sophomore year, so after having put it off for so long, I was dutifully bound to two semesters as the only senior in a class of hormone-ridden freshmen. A class that happened to include my cousin Foster. I hated sports and I wasn’t too fond of freshmen, so gym class was a blight on my otherwise seamless senior schedule.

“We’ve only had one class,” I said.

“And?”

“And Mr. Sellers told us about dressing out and lectured about the sports schedule and that was it.” Mom opened her mouth to speak, but I went on. “As far as I know, nobody’s shoving him into lockers or calling him names or treating him any different than any other freshman.”

This seemed to satisfy her, but I knew it could only be temporary, so I threw some silverware on the table and hurried up to my room before she could ask any more questions.

I got Cas on the phone that night before bed. It was one of my favorite things—curling up under the covers with the phone pressed to my ear, knowing I could drift off to sleep as soon as I hit End.

“A number four,” I heard Cas’s muffled voice say on the other end of the line, “with a Pepsi and no—hey, Dev, remind me to tell you about practice—and no pickles on the burger and extra ketchup.”

Cas was nearly unable to devote his entire attention to a single conversation at any given time. But it was difficult to ever reproach him for it; he just thrived on constant engagement—interested in everything and everybody. When you really needed him as a friend, he’d rein it in.

“What happened at practice?”

“Coach reamed Marburry because”—to the drive-through window, “Thanks, man, could I get a couple napkins?” and back to me—“because he nearly killed himself trying to take Ezra down.”

“Why would he do something like that?”

“Because he’s a fucking idiot,” Cas said thickly, because now he was eating and talking and driving all at one time. “No, but seriously, he’s pissed he got moved to safety and Ezra’s still starting running back.” There was just the slightest hint of darkness to his voice, something that I heard only because I had known him so long. “And, you know, because of the Bowl.”

Everyone knew. In addition to being named a *Parade* All-American, Ezra Lynley had been chosen for the army's All-American Bowl East team. The entire town made such a big deal out of it that you couldn't use a public restroom without a CELEBRATE TEMPLE STERLING'S OWN ALL-AMERICAN poster staring down at you from the back of the stall door.

"Yeah," I said. "What an exciting and unexpected opportunity for him."

Cas laughed. That was the tagline under CELEBRATE TEMPLE STERLING'S OWN ALL-AMERICAN: AN EXCITING AND UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY FOR TS HIGH'S EZRA LYNLEY.

There was a pause during which I'm sure Cas shoved a few more french fries into his mouth, and then, "How's your new brother?"

"Don't call him that."

"Well, that's what he is."

"Is it bad that I don't want to be around him at school? I mean, I see him all the time at home, but does that, like, make me a bad person?"

"Why would that make you a bad person?"

"I don't know." Except I did know. "His mom just abandoned him like that."

"So? Joe Perry's mom abandoned him, and last time I checked, you said he was the most obnoxious person in the world ever ever."

"I did *not*—"

"You did so, two *evers*. Twice the *ever* is, like, the obnoxiousness squared."

"That's probably the nerdiest thing you've ever said."

"Don't change the subject. You hate abandoned children."

"I don't hate anybody!" I knew he was goading me, but I always

played along. “And Joe’s mom left in, like, the second grade. It’s different.”

“No matter how long it’s been, an abandoned child is still an abandoned child.”

“Stop saying *abandoned child!*”

“You said it, too.” I could hear the grin in Cas’s voice. “Hey, you know somewhere a kid is, like, being abandoned because of this conversation.”

“Don’t say stuff like that.”

“Don’t censor me! *I’ve got freedom of expression that will never be broken!*”

“Shut up,” I said, but I was laughing all the same. “You’re going to drive off the road.”

“I’m almost home.”

“And it would be tragic to die a block from your house, wouldn’t it?”

“This from the girl who didn’t want to say *abandoned child*.”

“Foster wasn’t really abandoned,” I said, the smile slipping off my face. “He was just kind of . . . sent away.”

“Doesn’t make it any better, does it?”

“Maybe it does. She’s coming back for him.”

“Yeah,” Cas said evenly, and I wasn’t sure how much either of us believed it.



As far as I was concerned, physical education was evil.

You take a bunch of teenagers, make them strip down in front of each other in a locker room, have them don hideous matching uniforms, and then measure their worth based on their ability to chuck balls at a net, into a hoop, or at each other. It was just. Evil.

I dragged myself into the locker room at third period, dropped my gym bag on the floor, and ignored the gaze of anyone who might be looking at me. To be honest, some of the other girls really scared me.

When I was a freshman, I had braces and more pimples than I could count. I didn't wear makeup. I didn't own short-shorts. I had never tasted alcohol, and I certainly didn't know how or why you would ever want to blow anything.

Being in this class kind of made me feel like the stereotypical old man who sits with his cane outside the grocery store in cheesy movies, ranting "*In my day . . .*" Sodas cost a nickel. Kids respected their elders. Freshmen didn't show major cleavage. Or wear thongs. Or—my eyes widened but my mouth stayed clamped shut—tan BITE ME onto their backsides.

With no one to share in my disbelief, I kept it inside, mentally noting that maybe I should do like the Reeding application says and write it in the story of my life. Chapter One: How the TS freshman locker room has more push-up bras than a sale at Victoria's Secret.

Most of the boys weren't any better. They acted like the guys on teen soaps, preening and showing off, but the fact that they were as close to middle school as the senior guys were to college made calling them freshmen almost laughable. *Freshboys* was more like it.

If I had to be with these kids for two semesters, I wanted to surround myself with the quieter ones, the ones who looked and acted their age. The regular ones. But there were so few of them that I think the prostitutes and freshboys were what was considered normal.

As for Foster, he didn't resemble anything closely related to normal. Unfortunately, the only thing he was closely related to in this class was me.

"Hey, Devon! Dev!"

He jumped up and down, waving his arms in my direction as I left the locker room. I took a deep breath and went over to him.

He was wearing the same TS gym uniform as the rest of us, but even that couldn't look right. All the boys ordered their shorts big so that they hung down to their knees or lower. Foster's were well above his knees, and his shirt was crammed in unevenly around the waistline. His socks were pulled up as far as they could go, and the laces on the cross trainers my mother had insisted on buying him were tied in big fat bows.

I could tell—in my very high school roots, my senior class inner core—I could tell that no one was going to push Foster around. They wouldn't slam his books to the ground when they saw him

after class. They wouldn't pull his chair out from under him in the cafeteria.

"Hey, Foster!" A couple of PTs nearby waved at Foster. Foster, looking mildly confused, wiggled a few fingers in their direction. They all giggled, but it sure wasn't because they thought Foster was cute.

What these kids would do was laugh at him, and somehow that seemed just as bad to me. How do you stop people from laughing at you? How do you make them take you seriously?

By being cool. By fitting in. By . . . becoming friends with Fonzie. Fuck if I know.

I gave Foster a weary "Hello" and then wandered over under a basketball hoop, trying to inconspicuously distance myself from him. I wanted to maintain my senior mystique, but it's pretty hard to seem grown-up and sophisticated when you're wearing cotton briefs in a locker room full of girls with BITE ME butts.

Foster bounced along after me. "Hey, Dev, have you met everyone? Do you know everyone yet?"

I realized he was referring to the other freshmen.

"Uh . . . no."

"You don't talk to the girls in the locker room?"

"No."

"Not even Gracie Holtzer? You haven't met Gracie Holtzer?"

He gestured to what must've been the queen prostitot, a girl whose hair was so painstakingly flat-ironed that not one single twist of frizz dared leap off her chestnut mane. She tossed that silken hair back over her shoulder and smiled coyly at a band of freshboys standing nearby.

"Not even Gracie Holtzer," I said, glancing now at Foster. He wasn't looking at Gracie Holtzer the way the other boys were. They

were all just shy of lighting themselves on fire to get her attention. Foster, however, was eyeing her like he eyed the wasp nest in the eaves of our back shed. It was a look of mingled curiosity and fear.

“Let’s circle up!” Mr. Sellers emerged from his office, clapping his hands and heading to the center of the floor. The other students made their way over and formed a large, lopsided circle around him, which I dutifully joined, Foster in tow.

The girls whispered loudly to each other while Mr. Sellers started talking to us about fall sports. I tried to pay attention for the sake of not having to rehash the latest *Cosmo* tips, but my attention was broken, ironically enough, when the whispers all at once ceased. I looked around the circle and realized that all eyes were on the door.

A very familiar frame stood there. Any student at Temple Sterling probably could’ve picked it out of a lineup, even without a bright red 25 emblazoned across the chest.

I thought back to the bathroom stalls—there under CELEBRATE TEMPLE STERLING’S OWN ALL-AMERICAN, under AN EXCITING AND UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY, was the black-and-white image of this face.

I had never really seen Ezra Lynley close up. We had never had any classes together. No postgame-party run-ins. It was always me in the bleachers and him on the field.

He wasn’t thick-necked and huge like some of the football guys, but he wasn’t scrawny, either. Strong enough to take a tackle, but light enough to run in that way he was famous for. And he had good bones, as my mom would say. His jaw curved nicely, and his nose had this great line to it, but all in all, as the gym class and I stood shamelessly appraising him, I felt like his face left something to be desired. The right features had been assembled, but there was

no shine to his eyes, and the spot on Cas's mouth where a smile always seemed to lurk lay particularly slack on him.

After an awkward moment's pause, Mr. Sellers sprang to life. "Ezra! Coach said you'd be joining us! Hurry up and get changed. We're just getting started."

Ezra gave Mr. Sellers a look that said he wasn't about to hurry up for anyone. Twenty-five pairs of eyes watched him saunter off to the locker rooms. When I looked back at Mr. Sellers, he didn't look aggravated by Ezra's attitude in the least. In fact, as he caught my gaze, he gave me a sheepish "Boys will be boys!" sort of smile.

I rolled my eyes.

Today's activities, Mr. Sellers informed us, would begin with some warm-up exercises. Our first unit was football. So after learning the proper way to grip a football (a few of the guys exchanged knowing looks), we were supposed to get a partner and practice passing.

There was a mad dash for partners. Most of the girls grabbed their nearest friend, but a few of the PTs broke the boy-girl divide and giggled on over to chat up some freshboys.

I glanced around. People were pairing off fast. I locked my eyes on Ezra Lynley as he left the locker room and strode over to him.

"Hi," I said when I reached him. "I'm Devon."

I extended a hand toward him. He stared at it for a second before taking it briefly.

He didn't introduce himself. Of course I already knew him, but there was something instantly off-putting about that. Still, it was better than partnering with Foster, which was my only other option—an option that I could clearly see ending with Foster beaming me in the face with the football and breaking my nose, Marcia Brady-style.

“Do you want to be partners?” I asked, forcing some brightness into my voice. “Seniors, uh, sticking together?”

Ezra stared. “You’re a senior?”

I would’ve liked to think I looked a little more mature than the rest of the girls in the class. Then again, with the majority of them being PTs, I probably looked the most like a fourteen-year-old.

“Yeah. I’m a senior.”

He evaluated me for a moment and then said, “Get a ball.”

“Get it yourself,” I replied, because who did he think he was? Who did he think *I* was, for that matter—some football groupie eager to bask in his glory?

Ezra just looked at me, expressionless, and it was like being tested without knowing the criteria.

Apparently I passed, because he turned and crossed the gym to the bin of footballs by Mr. Sellers’s office. Turning back with a ball in hand, he chucked it from right where he stood, one smooth sweep of his arm that sent the ball sailing across the gym. Of course I didn’t catch it. It soared over the fingertips of my outstretched hands and bounced lopsidedly off toward the basketball hoop.

Ezra just stood there.

I turned and retrieved the ball, jaw clenched, and then sent it back hard, half because I was mad and half because I couldn’t throw worth shit.

It was an insane pass, too high and arcing too far to the left, but in a few great, effortless strides, Ezra thrust out his hands and closed his fingers easily around the ball.

Some of the PTs gasped in admiration, but Ezra didn’t look gratified. He just sent a soft, slow pass to me. I caught it, grudgingly, and sent it back.

After what seemed like way too many minutes of this, Mr.

Sellers told us to break into groups of three to run drills. I scanned the room for a lonely pair of girls to join, but Ezra was lingering close by, and before I could grab hold of a couple of freshmen—any freshmen—Foster loped over.

“Can I be in your guys’ group?”

I glanced at Ezra; he was staring at the wall as if it were staring back.

“Yeah, sure,” I replied, and tried to extinguish any thought of broken noses from my mind.

Mr. Sellers explained the drill to us, a confusing pattern we were supposed to execute across the length of the gym, one group at a time. He told us all to form three lines under the basketball hoop, and because Ezra, Foster, and I were the ones standing closest to that spot, everyone queued up behind us.

I cursed inwardly. How was I supposed to see how it’s done if I had to go first?

“What are we supposed to do?” I hissed to Ezra. He didn’t reply.

“All right!” Mr. Sellers clapped his hands. “Let’s go, first group!”

I had no choice but to take off across the floor. Ezra pitched the ball to me and then took off running behind me. I missed the ball and had to go back for it, and then I threw it to Foster, who seemed to share my aptitude for sports. Mr. Sellers had said something about people shifting places, so I moved over to the spot where Ezra had been and managed to grab the tip of the ball as Foster chucked it back at me.

“You were supposed to lateral it,” Ezra said, slowing to a stop behind us. “And *you*”—he pointed at me—“are supposed to be *there*.” He jabbed his finger at the spot where Foster stood.

I stopped, too, football still in hand. “Well, maybe I would’ve known that if you had explained it to me before.”

“Mr. Sellers explained it just fine.”

“Maybe I didn’t understand the first time.”

His face never changed. “Maybe you should’ve listened more closely.”

I opened my mouth to say something I’m sure wouldn’t have been very nice, but Mr. Sellers jumped in.

“Ah, well,” he said, and smiled good-naturedly. “We can’t all be All-Americans, can we, Ezra? Why don’t you join Rivers and Kenyon, and let’s put Gracie with the Tennysons and try running this one again? And make sure to keep your eye on Kenyon, Ezra. He’s our new up-and-comer on the defensive line!”

Kenyon was a particularly thick-looking boy with dark, bristly hair. If there was any person in this room you would peg as an up-and-coming human bulldozer, it would be this kid.

Ezra shuffled off to the back of one of the lines, and Gracie Holtzer made her way to the front, sticking out her bottom lip in an overexaggerated pout. As soon as she reached the front of the lines, however, her expression changed to one of horror.

“*Ewwwwwww!*” she crooned, pointing at something behind me.

I turned around. Foster was standing there, blood dripping down the front of his gray TS gym shirt.

“Dev,” he said thickly, two fingers clamping his nostrils together. “Dev, I think I’ve got a nosebleed.”

I sighed.

“So gym wasn’t fun?” Cas said at lunch, giving me a grin and then turning to his fish sticks.

I was still riled up about it. “I won’t make it through a year in that class. I can’t. It’s not humanly possible.”

“It’s kind of your fault for putting it off so long, isn’t it?”

I glared. “That’s not the type of sound bite I keep you around for.”

“It’s everyone else’s fault and you’re perfect?”

“Better.” I set about opening my carton of chocolate milk. “I don’t get why Ezra’s even in that class. You’d think the star player would’ve taken gym before senior year.”

“He needed an elective,” Cas said between bites, “so they’re letting him take it again. I heard him and Coach talking about it at practice.”

“Figures. I need an easy A, too, but no one’s going to let me take freshman English again.”

“You’re not an athlete. We matter more.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me. You love me so much you’re going to give me your chocolate milk.”

“We’re the only two seniors in the whole freaking school who still eat cafeteria food. You do realize that, right?”

“I like cafeteria food. It’s greasy, and more important, it’s cheap. No, more important, it’s greasy. Come on, gimme the milk.”

I took a long, pointed swig from the carton.

“You never mentioned how Ezra’s a great big giant asshole,” I said, abandoning the chocolate milk and turning to my pasta salad.

Cas laughed, nearly choking on a fish stick. “I thought it was common knowledge.”

“The star football player’s supposed to be all charming and winning and stuff. Not surly and mean-spirited.”

“The talented ones usually are.”

“You’d think they’d be grateful that they’re talented. It should

be the really untalented people who get to be jackasses. At least they have a reason to be angry at the world.”

“Well, I guess it’s hard for Ezra with all those exciting and unexpected opportunities cropping up everywhere. Like he goes into the bathroom to take a piss and all of a sudden an exciting and unexpected opportunity jumps out at him from behind a shower curtain and scares the living shit out of him.”

“At least he’s in the bathroom,” I said.

“For when all the living shit comes out?”

I grinned. “Exactly.”

Cas grinned back and then glanced up at a spot behind me. “Hey, Marabelle.”

When I turned, it was to the sight of Marabelle Finch stopped a few feet away from our table. She looked lost in thought, but for Marabelle, that was pretty typical.

“Oh,” Marabelle said, looking at Cas vaguely. “Hello.”

“How’s it going?” I asked.

She lifted her shoulders, a tiny, delicate shrug. “I can’t remember what I was going to do.”

“Get lunch?” Cas suggested.

“Baby’s not hungry,” she said.

“Is Marabelle hungry?” Cas’s face was deadpan, but his eyes were shining. He thought Marabelle was funny.

“No.” She stood there for a moment and then reached up suddenly and grabbed her chest as if checking to see if it was still there. “I’ve got breasts now. Have you seen?”

“Yeah.” Cas bobbed his head, unable to keep from grinning. “Yeah, they’re nice.”

I kicked out at him under the table as she took a seat.

“I don’t like them,” she said.

“Does Baby’s dad like them?” Cas asked.

Marabelle just looked at him. I, on the other hand, swung out harder and connected with Cas’s leg under the table. Marabelle and I weren’t great friends, but I had sort of a soft spot for her.

I first met her at the library—the town branch just a few blocks away from school. I went there pretty often, and I’d always see Marabelle in the stacks. Thumbing through a periodical or pushing a cart around, shelving books. She was two years younger, and we didn’t have any classes together, but we coexisted at the library nicely enough. I would say hi, and she would nod, or she’d check my books out and comment on what I had chosen.

“Do you like working here?” I asked one time as she was leading me to a copy of *Hamlet* for class.

“Well, technically, I don’t work here,” she said. “But they let me help out.” And she promptly found me four different editions of *Hamlet*—“You don’t want that one, though. They try to translate it all into normal words and it totally ruins it. The annotations in this one are better.” I learned that when it came to information, Marabelle was better than Google.

She was also singularly odd. I guess she reminded me of Foster in some ways. They both seemed to operate on their own wavelength. But whereas Foster excelled at being conspicuous, Marabelle was just . . . quietly eccentric. I wasn’t sure if she didn’t realize stuff sometimes—like Cas poking fun at her—or if she just didn’t care.

“How’re your classes going, Marabelle?” I asked as Cas dove back into his lunch.

She wrinkled her nose. “Trigonometry is awful.”

“Ah, yeah. Trig sucks. Sorry.”

She blinked. “For what?”

“I love that girl,” Cas said as we headed to class after lunch.

Marabelle had drifted off in the direction of the foreign-language hallway with one arm wound around the bump swelling beneath her baby-doll dress. “Like, I seriously love her. She’s the funniest person I’ve ever met.”

“She’s not trying to be funny, you know.”

“That’s why she’s hilarious.”

“She’s a teen mom. Have some sympathy.”

“Oh, so you can have sympathy for teen moms but not for abandoned children?”

I gave him a shove. “You’re a great big giant asshole, you know that?”

“Just like Ezra Lynley?”

“Worse. You’re not as good-looking.”

Cas grabbed his chest. “That’s a terrible, horrible lie.”

“Come on.” I glanced at my watch. “We’re gonna be late for Calc.”

He clapped his hand to his chest again and stopped dead in the middle of the hallway.

“Oh, stop it. You know I think you’re pretty.”

Cas shook his head, massaging his chest like some great pain was brewing under there. “It’s not that.”

“What is it?”

He grimaced. “Senioritis.”

I hit him in the arm. “Get to class.”

“Good one, right?”

I couldn’t help but grin. “Go.”

Foster was awake by five thirty every morning. School didn't start until eight, and I was still trying to shake my summer sleep schedule, so I wasn't the most receptive to his early-morning clattering.

Usually after a few minutes I would sink back into a nice doze, but this morning my eyes refused to stay shut. My head couldn't find a comfortable spot on the pillow. The covers were too warm.

I flung them back and rolled over. A soft breeze blew through my window, pressing against the shade. Outside I could hear the scuff of sneakers on pavement and a faint intake of breath as a jogger passed by the house. A car door slammed somewhere not too far off. The blender buzzed.

Foster was making a smoothie.

I groaned. It was official: I was awake.

I never saw Foster in pajamas. He was always the last in bed and the first one up in the morning, looking just the same as he had the night before. He must've had more clothes from home than it appeared, but the problem was that they all looked the same. All the crisp new tees, the button-down shirts, the perfectly whiskered jeans that my mom had bought him sat unworn

in his dresser drawers upstairs. I felt bad that he refused to let go of his shit from home, but worse for my mom, who—although she wouldn't admit it—scrutinized clothes that other kids were wearing on TV and in the magazines so that Foster would have exactly the right stuff. When he refused to wear it, she said she'd been silly—of course he'd want to pick his own look. But another shopping trip that ended empty-handed said it all: Foster had a look, and it was dingy.

"You want a smoothie?" Foster said when I stumbled into the kitchen.

"It's really early to be using the blender, Foster."

"You know, it's only three thirty on the West Coast."

"Did you wake up at three thirty when you lived on the West Coast?"

"Sometimes," he said. "Doesn't waking up early make the day seem longer?"

To me, the day was twenty-four hours long, and no amount of getting up early would change that.

"You know what today is?" Foster asked when I didn't speak.

"Friday?"

"Uh-huh. And guess what happens on Fridays?"

The Future Science Revolutionaries of America focused their combined mental energies on moving the principal's car one inch to the left? Wait, no—that was yesterday.

"I don't know."

Foster's eyes widened. "You don't know?"

"What happens on Fridays, Foster?" I was getting impatient. Then it dawned on me. But there was no way on earth something so normal could leave Foster's lips. He couldn't mean—

"Football!"

I stared. It had only been three months. There was still so much I didn't know about him. "You like football?"

"I don't know. I've never been to a game in real life."

That was more like it.

"Aunt Kathy said you'd take me."

My mother had a way of volunteering me for Foster-related activities without my knowing. The look on Foster's face said mine gave that away.

"Will you take me?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, because what else was there to say? Things were different now.

Football wasn't as grand in Temple Sterling as in some of those places you hear about in Texas and even in other parts of Florida—twenty-thousand-seat stadiums and a full-scale town shutdown on game nights. But still, it was undeniably important. The football followers were devoted: parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins of boys on the team. Kids like me, unrelated but still wanting to be a part of something. Men, from the guys down at the bank to seventy-year-old Fred of Fred's Service Station, who played on past TS teams, who understood the feel of the stadium on a Friday night, and who migrated there Friday nights since to try to claim a little piece of it back. Football was something everyone had in common—like a mutual religion. We all believed in touchdowns and field goals. We were all baptized in the floodlights.

I wove through the crowd that night, Foster in tow. He grabbed the back of my shirt as we worked our way up to an emptier stretch in the far bank of bleachers, in front of the end zone.

"They look like an army," Foster murmured, and I followed his gaze to the visitors' bleachers, a sea of blue and gold.

After we claimed our seats, I surveyed the crowd around us. A rowdy bunch of freshmen was in front, and there was a large group of seniors behind us—people I recognized but no one I was particularly friendly with. In Jane’s time, they put a huge distinction between acquaintances and friends. Friends you could disclose your innermost feelings to and spend a lot of time with. Acquaintances you visited for a quarter of an hour because propriety called for it.

The equivalent of that quarter-of-an-hour visit today was a few smiles, some waves, and a “what’s up?” here and there. That’s what I received from the seniors, and what I readily returned with as much friendliness as the occasion called for, before turning back to observe the rest of the crowd.

Foster was sitting next to a Goth couple who were so deeply entwined it was hard to tell whose limbs were whose, and to my right, holding a cigarette and looking mildly bored, was Emir Zurivic.

“I was wondering when you’d notice me,” he said.

I didn’t know much about Emir; only that he had moved to America just a couple of years ago, and that he already knew cooler slang and more obscenities than I had learned in my seventeen.

“You psyched for the game?” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say but felt as if some conversation was required.

“Psyched to make some cash. I put a hundred down that we win by more than thirty.”

“More than thirty? That’s five touchdowns.”

He shrugged. “Flat Lake’s a shitty team, and that Ezra kid’s good.”

“Five touchdowns good?”

“You seen him play?”

Everyone had seen Ezra play, and everyone knew he was

good—five touchdowns good. He never missed a pass. Where the average guy could push five yards, he pushed twenty. But I thought about him in gym class, that lazy drawl, *You were supposed to lateral it*, and so I said, “He’s all right. Nothing special.”

Emir smiled. “I like a girl with impossibly high standards.”

I looked out at the field once more. Emir’s smiles tended to make me a little uneasy. Somehow frowns seemed more natural on his face.

I couldn’t imagine what it must’ve been like for him, transitioning to Temple Sterling. Emir was the source of many rumors around school, mostly concerning his pre-suburban Florida life. I thought most of them were pretty outlandish, but as Emir looked out over the field, I couldn’t help but examine his face for some indication of his past. Like maybe there was some sort of mark people bear if they’ve seen tragedy in their lifetime. A look around the eyes, some downturn of the lips. But nothing looked out of place on Emir’s face, aside from a slightly crooked bar piercing his left eyebrow.

Action started up on the field before I could ponder Emir’s past any further. The crowd around us leaped to their feet as the players entered, a wave of TS red and white from one end of the stadium. The cheerleaders had one of those paper banners, which the first few guys burst through with ease. From the other end of the field came the blue and gold, and the Flat Lake bleachers erupted. The scoreboard glowed like the tip of Emir’s cigarette, and the game began.

It wasn’t a particularly good game. Not too exciting, I mean, because we gained a three-touchdown lead in the first half and maintained it for the rest of the game. It pushed ahead to a five-touchdown

lead in the last quarter. Emir was practically beaming at the prospect of his wager.

I let my mind wander through the better part of the game; I had been rereading *Sense and Sensibility*—I called it my favorite, but every Jane Austen book was my favorite every time I read it. The only one I couldn't completely throw myself behind was *Mansfield Park*, because—spoiler alert—the main character has a huge thing for her cousin. I know things were different back then, and maybe it was completely acceptable in their eyes, but the idea of cousins declaring romantic love for each other made me feel a little queasy, especially since Foster had arrived in our lives.

The only other complaint I had about Jane's books, cousin-loving aside, was the getting-together part. They were stories of such unconquerable love, such strong feelings. You follow these characters through the ups and downs of an emotional roller coaster, this breathtaking will-they-or-won't-they, and is it too much to ask for a little more time spent on the I-love-you-and-want-to-be-with-you part? It was the very best part, and I wanted to draw it out. I wanted kisses—good, long, passionate ones. Jane never wrote about those.

She didn't write about high school football, either, so I wondered how I would do it, how to explain the pride Miss Tennyson felt when watching Mr. Kincaid rush ten yards. The crimson glow of TS helmets sparkling in the light of the flood lamps. The faint scent of marijuana hanging on Emir. Would anyone have dared to write about weed back then? Jane would probably be shocked.

Foster didn't talk at all through the entire game. I glanced over at him every so often to make sure he was still breathing, and each time found his eyes glued to the field.

“Did you have fun?” I asked as we joined the crowd flooding into the parking lot after the game.

He replied in typical Foster fashion, not with an answer but with another question: “How do you think they learn to beat up on total strangers?”

“I don’t know . . . it’s not really beating up, is it? Just tackling.”

“But how do you throw yourself at somebody without really hating them?”

“You don’t have to hate them. You just have to want them not to win.”

He considered this for some time and only spoke again when we were in the car heading home. “That Ezra guy’s good,” he said, just in the same way Emir had. “He was like a . . . ball magnet.”

I couldn’t help but snort. “A what?”

“A ball magnet. He was the magnet and the ball was the metal. It just flew to him and stuck every time.”

All-American. Four-year varsity starter. Ball magnet. I wondered how the great and powerful Ezra Lynley would feel knowing he had acquired such a title.

“Cas dropped the ball,” Foster said after a moment. It was true—Cas had fumbled in the third quarter. “He’s a ball dropper.”

I couldn’t even be indignant. I just snorted again.

Foster must've been in some deep contemplation that night; he didn't even think to invite himself to the postgame party until I pulled up to our house and he was halfway out of the car.

"Are you sure I can't go? I'll be quiet and I'll stay out of the way and if you want to get drunk, I won't even tell Aunt Kathy."

My eyes darted to the house to make sure the windows weren't open.

"I'm not getting drunk," I said. "No one's getting drunk. And it's already past your curfew, so get inside."

Foster's curfew was just what mine had been at his age—ten o'clock. At seventeen, I was up to eleven thirty. For a difference of three years, an hour and a half hardly seemed fair, but I wasn't going to push it.

"I'm not even tired," Foster argued, still standing with the door half open.

"Curfew doesn't mean you have to be tired. It just means you have to be home."

"But you need me there to look after you."

I laughed out loud. I couldn't help it. "Get inside," I said. He dutifully shut the door and watched me pull out of the driveway.

House parties weren't my favorite, but because it was the first one of the year, I felt obligated to go. As I made my way over to Martin Lahey's house, I wished it could be more like how it had been in Jane's time: ordering a carriage, wearing a gorgeous gown, having your name announced when you came into the room. Real dancing to real music. Some sense of decorum. In short, nobody throwing up in the bushes. Nobody fooling around. TV and movies liked to dress it up—put a pop-rock sound track under it, too few people, and too much lighting—but they kept the essentials true to life: High school parties are breeding grounds for idiotic people with too much drama and not enough sense. Walking into Martin's house (to be sure, no one announced my name), I recalled the one thing that TV and movies never mentioned, and that a summer away from this had allowed me to forget: If you're not one of those people, these things are damn boring.

I found Cas in the kitchen, standing around with some guys from the team, most of them nursing the classic variety of red plastic kegger cups. Cas's hands were empty, and he threw an arm around my shoulders as soon as I made my way over. He made some comment that I couldn't hear over the music, and I got a few hellos that I could return with only a feeble wave. Had these things always been so loud?

Stanton Perkins seemed to be leading the conversation; he was a huge, square-headed kid who played on the defensive line. His kegger cup was already drained, and he was the only one I could hear clearly over the pound of the Laheys' overtaxed sound system.

"Like I said, it was an okay game," he started up again. "Not

our best work, but like that even matters anymore.” He shot a meaningful look at Cas.

“I would’ve liked a little more play,” Cas replied.

“I feel sorry for you guys,” Stanton said, and as the music seemed to increase in volume, his voice spiked, too. “The whole offense is fucked as long as Lynley’s out there.”

One of the other guys said something about the interception Jackson got, and the fifteen yards Smith rushed for our fourth touchdown. But Stanton just waved one huge hand and said, “The only guys out there that get a hand on the ball are Wilcox and Lynley, and Wilcox only does because he’s the fucking quarterback! Anything else is just a fucking accident!” He downed the dregs of his cup and went on. “Without Lynley, we’d all be better off. Get the team going like it should be. Cas out front and not some little cast-off bitch from Shaunessy calling the shots.”

Stanton Perkins was inherently unlikable. You could tell he was one of those people who went around pulling cats’ tails and throwing rocks at cars when he was a kid.

I looked to Cas for a response. He just smiled and squeezed my shoulder, guiding me away from the group and saying something about drinks. Only when we had left the kitchen did he say in my ear, “That guy scares the shit out of me.”

I nodded. “Future mailbox bomber.” Cas laughed but didn’t get a chance to answer, because as soon as we made it to the living room, we were waved over by Jordan Hunter.

Not only was Jordan varsity and a straight-A student, but as old clichés go, he was also the coolest guy in school. And he was currently holding court on the Laheys’ overstuffed sectional, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up over a baseball hat, huge mirrored sunglasses reflecting the pool of admirers around him. Under the hood

lay Jordan's signature dreadlocks, and under the glasses shone his signature eyes. That was the mark of true cool—the luxury to cover up your best features.

Not that the rest of Jordan wasn't superior; he was an offensive back, broad-shouldered, and cut as all hell. He had perfect skin, and his teeth were toothpaste-ad white.

I was pretty much in love with him, but so was everyone else. It wasn't that burning sort of unrequited love, but a good, healthy regard. It was just so easy to smile around Jordan, and so hard to speak without sounding like a complete idiot.

"Cassidy, my man." Jordan slapped Cas's hand from where he sat on his dual-reclining throne. To his immediate right was a girl named Lauren McPhee, who I had English class with last year, and to his left sat Ezra Lynley, looking bored. The rest of the couch was teeming with people, spilling onto the floor, holding their own kegger cups, and basking in Jordan's glory.

"Hi," I said, when Ezra's eyes caught mine. Cas and Jordan had taken up a conversation about the game.

Ezra didn't reply but rather just stared at me, and I felt the same mixture of embarrassment and indignation that I had in gym class when met with that sneering *You're a senior?*

"We have gym together," I said flatly.

Something like surprise flickered across Ezra's face. "I know."

"Is that Devon Tennyson?" Jordan snatched my attention away in an instant. He pulled off his sunglasses, as if requiring serious visual confirmation, and then jumped to his feet.

A dopey grin took over my face, the kind only people like Jordan are really capable of producing. "Hi."

He threw an arm around me, the most casual, coolest,

best-smelling hug of my life. “Where you been, Champ? I didn’t see you all summer. What’ve you been doing with yourself?”

Admittedly, *champ* was usually the kind of endearment passive-aggressive dudebros called each other, but Jordan claimed it was short for “champion of my heart,” and I may or may not have melted a little each time he said it.

“Uh . . . we were in California for a little while,” I said when we broke apart.

“California,” he said, nodding. “Got to love those beaches. Nothing like some West Coast sun, am I right?” He resumed his seat. “You guys want some drinks? Where’s Martin?”

I hadn’t seen Martin Lahey all night—as was the way with house parties. More often than not, the host is of little or no consequence.

Without an answer regarding Martin’s whereabouts, Jordan went right on.

“D’you see the work our man Ezra did in the first half? Three-touchdown lead and I was there to cover his ass.”

He hit Ezra on the arm. “Don’t I always say I got your back?”

Ezra barely nodded.

“Shut up, man,” Jordan said, and hit him again. “You’re talking too much. Let somebody else get a word in.”

Not even the smallest smile cracked Ezra’s expressionless face. No one was safe from Jordan’s charm, but this guy seemed immune.

“There’s that sense of humor,” Jordan went on. “That’s why I love this guy. Such a fucking comedian. Seriously, Ezra, shut up and let someone else talk.”

Cas and I stayed with Jordan’s inner circle a little while longer, but it gradually grew more and more crowded (as Jordan’s stories

grew more and more animated), and we resigned ourselves to moving on once more.

We went into the front hallway, where over the noise of the crowd came a cry of “*Cas!*” All at once a shiny-haired figure broke away from the masses and flung herself at Cas. His hand slipped from mine and his arms encircled her. It was Lindsay Renshaw.

She broke apart from Cas and threw her arms around me.

“Where’ve you guys been?” she said, and squeezed far harder and with much more sincerity than most people afforded in their hugs. “I haven’t seen you once this week!”

She pulled back and I got my first good look at her after a summer apart.

Lindsay was a breathless sort of beauty; her cheeks were perpetually tinged like she had just had a nice, brisk morning jog. Wisps of hair were always hanging out of her ponytail, and she always seemed to be in a happy hurry, too busy and too in demand to stand still for more than a second.

And she wasn’t like those cheesy popular girls on TV, who push girls off the tops of cheerleader pyramids and scheme to steal other people’s boyfriends. There was something so inherently sweet about her that you couldn’t help but want to be her friend. That was the way I felt, despite Cas standing just a little straighter now that she had appeared, and the fact that her eyes shone just a little brighter when they turned in his direction.

Jane would have a fucking field day.

“How was your summer?” I said, trying to draw their attention away from each other.

“It was really awesome. I did Habitat for Humanity with my church group.”

Of course she did.

“How about you guys?” She smiled at Cas. “How was your summer?”

“Great.” Cas’s voice suddenly sounded deeper. “Really great. Worked a bunch. But great.”

Say *great* again, I thought. Go on, just say it.

“And two-a-days,” Cas continued. “Loads of ’em. But the team is really great this year.”

Lindsay didn’t seem to notice Cas’s inferior grasp of synonyms. “I know, the game was incredible, wasn’t it? And Devon”—she beamed at me—“I heard your cousin’s staying with you. That’s so awesome.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Have you met him?”

“Not yet. You should totally bring him around to the next party. I’m sure he’s a blast.”

“Foster’s not really the party type. And neither am I, actually.” I was pretty good at the quick escape. “I should probably get going.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Cas said.

“It’s okay. I’ll be fine.”

But Lindsay was already glowing at Cas’s gallantry, and I knew I couldn’t refuse.

“You’re staying, though, aren’t you, Cas?”

“Sure. As long as you save me a dance.”

I opened my purse and tried not to gag myself.

“Come on.” Cas reached for my hand, but I stuck it into the purse and rooted around noisily for my keys, even though my fingers had located the Matchbox-car key chain a good four or five times. In that nature, I headed to the front door, and Cas, undoubtedly casting some kind of devastating smile back at Lindsay, followed.

“Where’d you park?” he asked when the front door had closed behind us and the sounds of raucous partying were somewhat quieted. A few more minutes and the cops would probably be here.

“Just down the street. You really don’t have to—”

“The only time I don’t will be the time you get snatched, and then you’ll be dying in an alley somewhere cursing my name, and I’ll be haunted for the rest of my life by an all-consuming guilt.”

“That was a really well-thought-out answer.”

“Thanks. I try.”

When I looked over, Cas was smiling at me. It was moments like this when Jane would say something about my feelings for him. I was attached to Cas—that’s how she’d put it. It had been the truth for so long that I couldn’t really imagine it any other way.

One of my favorite things about Jane’s books was the *feelings*—she understood that whole unrequited thing, how it felt to pine, how it felt to hope. But the best part was that sometimes the feelings became requited, and that was undeniably another facet of the allure for me. The heroines dared to love, dared to hope; their hopes are dashed, but then . . . there’s the reversal! The revelation in the final act—the person reciprocates. They feel what our protagonist felt all along.

Cas didn’t have those kinds of *feelings*. Not for me, anyway. I was almost certain of it. He cared about me, but it was a brotherly sort of affection, one arm perpetually slung over my shoulders in a this-is-my-pal kind of way. And that was okay, most of the time. It was nice. But sometimes . . .

Sometimes I just wanted to kiss him so bad.

I came home in tears on the last day of eighth grade, having walked in on Cas making out with Molly McDowell in the home ec room after school. Molly McDowell had long, curly hair like a

Disney princess, and she played on the volleyball team, and she was always wearing the thing you were trying to get your mom to buy you. Nothing about the situation should've surprised me—obviously someone as cool as Molly and someone as cool as Cas would pull each other into their respective orbits—but it still stung.

My mom poured me a glass of milk, squeezed in a healthy dose of chocolate syrup, and told me that this just wasn't the universe where Cas and I were right for each other, simple as that. Maybe in another time or place, maybe if he were different or if I were different.

"But you don't want to make yourself different for a boy," she said. "You don't want to make yourself different for anyone."

My reply was something halfway between a sob and "*You just don't get it.*" But my mother persisted.

"Someday someone will like you for you, just the way you are. And as much as you like Cas, this other person will be so much better for you."

That didn't cut it at the time. I sobbed through the glass of chocolate milk, went upstairs, blasted the radio, and hid under the blankets in bed, hating Cas and Molly and the world.

It's silly, but even at this point, even at dumb postgame house parties, even knowing that Cas had now gone so much further than home ec room French kissing with girls like Molly McDowell, the image of them together still grabbed me in the stomach every so often. Just a quick little spasm, somewhere below the rib cage, that made me feel like I was in middle school again, and made me long for that universe out there where Cas and I were together, and hate the one where we weren't.

But I would never admit that. I just smiled back, and we

shuffled down the sidewalk toward my car, Cas with his hands in his pockets and me with my eyes toward the sky. It was a beautiful night.

We reached my car, which was a shameful distance from the curb and sticking into the street at a really awkward angle. I couldn't parallel park to save my life.

"Drive safe, okay?" Cas said as he took the keys out of my hand and unlocked the door.

"Oh, I was planning on driving recklessly."

Cas clutched a hand to his chest.

"Senioritis?" I asked wryly.

"Just picturing the world without Devon Tennyson. The sky's all black and torn open, and trees shrivel and die, and all the top-forty bands break up."

"You notice how we never have conversations grounded in reality?"

He grinned. "I love you."

I got into the car, half wanting to tell him not to say stuff like that and half wanting to say it back.

"Drive safe for real, okay?" he said before I could reply.

"Well, I *was* going to give it a go blindfolded, but I guess I could wait on that. For you."

I knew that was just as stupid as Cas's *As long as you save me a dance*. And I knew that sometimes around Cas my voice turned strange, too, that some sort of gravel jumped into it, like I was trying to sound cool and sexy and cavalier but really sounded just as idiotic as Cas had talking to Lindsay. But I couldn't help it.

He rapped the roof of the car. "Night, Devon." And then he shut the door, moved onto the curb, and watched me pull away.

The second week of school is decidedly worse than the first, most especially in senior year. The first week can have its novelties: seeing who changed their hair color, who bulked up over the summer. There are new faces to familiarize yourself with. New privileges to grow accustomed to.

But by the second week, the novelty has worn off. Now you're just back in school, plain and simple—another year that, despite Josh so-and-so's new physique and the fact that we can all park in the senior lot, is discouragingly like the last three.

The only difference, I guess, was that now that the end was so near, it seemed further away than ever. Now the future after high school was hanging vaguely in the distance.

I began my halfhearted quest for extracurricular activities on Monday, hoping to snag something before my next meeting with Mrs. Wentworth. I didn't know if I could handle the cold stare of disapproval from the ACHIEVEMENT lion if I went back empty-handed.

I scoured the student bulletin board between classes. There was the fall production of *Pippin*. Volleyball tryouts. Art Club. The

Enviro-thon team. The Future Science Revolutionaries were looking for someone with a car to join so they could go to the science museum. The school orchestra needed another percussionist.

I didn't fit the bill for much of anything. Most of the time I had a car (when, like all ancient used cars, it chose to cooperate), but I didn't see myself as a revolutionary of any sort, and the last thing I needed was to spend more time with Foster. I was entirely too uncoordinated for sports, and entirely too uninspired for art. Enviro-thon had potential, but just the idea of spending my afternoons dissecting ecosystems and talking about the layers of the atmosphere was enough to make me drowsy.

By the time the bell rang, I had exactly as many extracurricular prospects as I did before my sojourn to the activities board: zero.

Tuesday dawned bright and early, with the sounds of Foster bustling around the kitchen. All I could do was roll over in bed and groan. Tuesdays meant gym class.

During third period, Mr. Sellers led his troop of uniformed freshmen (and two uniformed seniors) down to the varsity field with a giant mesh bag full of balls in tow. He began throwing them to us as soon as we reached the fifty-yard line.

"Partner up!" he yelled, pitching a ball in my general direction. I flung out my hands to catch it and watched it pass right over my head. "We're going to practice passing. Remember how to place your fingers, and let's try to get a little spin on it, people!"

I was standing near enough to Ezra Lynley to give him a glance, but I knew we wouldn't partner again anytime soon; him with me because he was conceited, and me with him because, well, I thought he was conceited.

A swarm of prostitots was already forming around him with a general cry of, “Be my partner, Ezra! Be my partner!”

He glanced around for a second and then pointed to a particularly buxom PT. She had tied up her maroon TS gym shirt in the back so that it was now a midriff top. “You,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. The PTs dispersed, disappointed, and then divided into pairs. Ezra walked off, too, but to my surprise the tied-up-shirt girl didn’t join him. I followed Ezra’s path to a point just beyond where that PT had stood.

Foster was trying to balance his football on his forehead, the way seals at the zoo balance balls on their noses. His shirt was tucked in so unevenly that it had bunched up inside his shorts, giving him the appearance of smuggling a cotton inner tube around his waist.

Ezra reached over and plucked the ball from Foster’s face. “Stand there,” he said, pointing to a spot about ten yards away. Foster grinned and bounded away.

“Ready!” he said, turning to face Ezra and jumping up and down like an idiot.

“Devon!” Mr. Sellers barked. “Partner up!”

I glanced around. A rogue PT, a straggler, was standing alone. I made my way over to her.

“Come on. Let’s be partners.”

She looked taken aback, like I had just suggested slitting our palms open and making a blood pact, but, nevertheless, she trotted over to a spot across from me and turned to catch the ball.

She was wearing a particularly thick layer of makeup—dark eyeliner, sparkly shadow, iridescent lip gloss. Her shirt was tied up in the back, too, but unlike the buxom PT, you could see the pony-tail holder she used to fix it up.

I glanced over at Ezra and Foster as she retrieved a missed pass, just in time to see Foster wind his arm back and throw a rogue ball. It spiraled up and backward, landing just beyond the visitors' bench behind him.

"Oops!" Foster went galloping after it. I cringed inwardly. Ezra Lynley was a jerk, sure, but he was still the grand prodigy of TS football, and Foster was currently blaspheming his craft.

"That's your brother, right?" my PT asked, following my gaze.

"No, he's my cousin."

"Really? Because he said he's your brother."

"Why would I lie?"

She looked at me unwaveringly beneath sparkly eyelids. "Why would he?"

I was quibbling with a prostitot.

I turned my gaze back to my "brother." He had reached the ball and bent to snatch it up.

Don't throw it back, Foster, I willed. Don't throw it back.

Once upright, Foster pulled his foot back, released the ball, and kicked it. It looked like the easiest, most effortless motion.

The ball skyrocketed in a grand arc over our heads and landed somewhere in the bleachers on the other side of the field.

We all stood there, stunned, except for my PT, who chose that moment to lob the ball at me. It bounced dully off my shoulder. I barely even noticed.

Foster broke the silence first, yelling "Sorry!" and jogging back across the field. He emerged from under the bleachers, trotted up to Ezra, and handed him the ball.

"Sorry about that," Foster said, grinning sheepishly.

Ezra looked at the ball like Foster had just handed him a

potato, and then regarded Foster like he was . . . I don't know, someone who had just handed him a potato.

"Kicker," Ezra said.

"Foster," he replied. "But you're close!"

"He can kick." Ezra looked to Mr. Sellers. "Did you see that?"

It was the first time I had seen Ezra express anything more than lazy detachment. Mr. Sellers sauntered over with his arms folded, clearly ready to offer his expert opinion. Foster just looked confused.

The punt was good, I had to agree, but it had to have been a fluke. The wind and the angle of his foot and the weight of the ball must've all teamed up to create it. Maybe there was some sort of special rubber in the sneakers my mother had bought him.

Ezra waved Foster over, knelt, and placed the tip of the ball on the ground. "Have you ever done placekicking?" he asked.

Foster shook his head. I watched as Ezra told Foster what to do, and a sense of uneasiness penetrated my chest. This wasn't right.

Foster backed up a few yards and angled himself. It dawned on me what was about to happen here—Ezra would pull the football away and Foster would fly up and land flat on his back, like in those old Charlie Brown comic strips. Undeniably, it would've been funny, but it was also just plain mean, so I started to move toward them.

"Wait, Foster—"

Then Foster kicked.

It flew rogue this time, flying end over end and landing twenty feet shy and sharply left of the goalposts.

So it was a fluke. Foster looked vaguely interested, but not too concerned. Ezra, on the other hand, was all determination.

"Again," he said. "Let's do it again."

Mr. Sellers jogged over and retrieved the mesh bag of footballs, while Ezra talked quietly to Foster, gesturing to the ground and then to the goalposts.

“I want to see some passing!” Mr. Sellers bellowed as he moved through the partner pairs back to Ezra and Foster.

I spotted my own football a few feet away and picked it up, but my PT had drifted off to join another group. They weren’t passing so much as handing each other the ball while gabbing a mile a minute, probably about Ezra Lynley’s favorite brand of socks or something equally irrelevant.

I resolved to stay solo rather than be at the mercy of any conversation in that vein. I held the football so I could at least aim it in the direction of one of the groups if Mr. Sellers looked over, meanwhile edging my way around the other pairs to get closer to where Foster and Ezra stood.

Ezra knelt with the new ball and gestured Foster forward. “Try it again.”

This time the ball nicked the left goalpost and bounced off into the sidelines.

“Closer.” Ezra eyed Foster. “Again.”

He lined up another ball. This one did the trick.

That same powerhouse blast, the same cannonball force of Foster’s accidental punt, launched this ball cleanly between the goalposts.

“Shit,” I heard a nearby freshboy murmur. He punched the arm of the guy next to him. It was Kenyon, the kid Mr. Sellers had called “our new up-and-comer,” who received the blow. Kenyon, broader than two Ezras or three Fosters, was standing with his mouth wide open. “Shit, d’you see that?” the freshboy said.

Foster kicked four more times, two rogue shots and two that nailed it. Then Ezra demonstrated a proper punt. Foster copied his movements, and his ball landed ten yards past where Ezra's own had fallen.

I watched shamelessly for the rest of the period. It was oddly disconcerting . . . like learning that your dog could tap-dance. After dismissing us for the day, Mr. Sellers, Ezra, and Foster began to confer.

"What did he say?" I pounced on Foster after class. He was the last one out of the locker room. Even Ezra had strolled out with his duffel bag flung over his shoulder a good ten minutes after the freshmen had dispersed and a good five minutes into fourth period. He didn't give me a second glance.

Foster stooped down to pull up his socks. His backpack slid forward over his head as far as the straps would allow, giving him the appearance of a turtle retracting into its shell. "He said with some practice, I have a shot at varsity."

Shock and *surprise* were words too weak to describe it. "Varsity? He said *varsity*?"

"Uh-huh."

"But Mr. Sellers doesn't even coach varsity."

"Not Mr. Sellers. Ezra."

"Ezra? Why would Ezra say that?"

Foster shrugged. "Maybe I'm good."

He didn't say it with any sort of indignation, and I felt a little pang, knowing that I would be pissed if someone were that incredulous about me. "I didn't mean . . . it's just that freshmen don't usually make varsity."

"Mr. Sellers said to go to the C team field after school and he would talk to the coaches about me playing."

C team. That made more sense. Well, as much sense as any of this could make.

“Are you excited?” was all I could think to ask.

“Nobody at home cared that I could kick stuff.”

I frowned. “But Mom and Dad don’t even . . .” Foster was looking at the wall. I trailed off, and when I spoke again, my voice was a little too bright. “How’d you learn to kick like that?”

Foster looked back at me, and the moment was over. “I had a soccer ball. Sometimes I would try to kick it over our garage. I couldn’t get it every time. Ezra said if I practice, I’ll become consistent.”

“Well . . . you’re good at it.”

Foster smiled. “Apparently.”