

time between us // Tamara Ireland Stone

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san francisco, california

Even from this distance I can see how young he looks. Younger than the first time I saw him.

He and his friends have been skating around Lafayette Park for the last couple of hours, and now they're sprawled across the grass, downing Gatorades and passing around a bag of Doritos.

"Excuse me."

Eight sixteen-year-old heads spin in my direction, looking confused, then curious.

"Are you Bennett?" I ask and wait for him to nod, even though I'm sure it's him. I'd know him anywhere. "Can I speak with you for a moment? In private?"

He knits his eyebrows together, but then he stands up and flips his skateboard over to keep it from rolling down the hill. I catch him looking back at his friends and shrugging as he follows me to the closest bench. He sits at the opposite end, as far away from me as possible.

Everything about him is so similar, so familiar, that I almost scoot over to close the distance, like I would have done so naturally when I was younger. But sixteen years have come between us, and that's enough to keep me on my side of the bench.

"Hi." My voice shakes, and I twist a curly strand of hair around my finger before catching myself and returning my hand to my sides, pressing both palms into the wooden slats.

"Ummm . . . Hi?" he says. He studies me through the uncomfortable silence. "I'm sorry, am I supposed to know you or something?"

My instinct is to say yes, but I stop myself, press my lips together, and shake my head instead. He doesn't know me. Not yet. "I'm Anna. Here." I reach into my bag, pull out the sealed white envelope, and smile as I hold it out to him.

He takes the letter and turns it over a few times.

"I thought it would be safer to explain in writing." My next words are the most important. After all my practice, I should have this part perfected, but I think through each word in my head again, just to be sure. "It's too easy for me to say the wrong thing today, and if I do, we may never meet at all."

His head springs up, and he stares at me, wide-eyed. No one's ever said anything like that to him before, and with that one statement, he knows that I'm in on his secret.

"I'd better go." I stand up. "Read that when you're alone, okay?" I leave him on the bench and walk back down the hill. I keep my eyes glued to a single sailboat skimming across the San Francisco Bay so I won't turn around. After years of agonizing over this moment, I expect to feel relieved, but I don't—I just miss him all over again.

What I just did could change everything, or it could change nothing. But I have to try. I've got nothing to lose. If my plan doesn't work, my life will remain the same: Safe. Comfortable. Perfectly average.

But that wasn't the life I originally chose.

march 1995

1

evanston, illinois

I shake out my arms to get the blood flowing, rock my head back and forth until I hear a little pop, and take a deep breath of early morning air that's so cold it stings on the way down. Still, I muster a silent thanks for the fact that it's warmer than last week. I tighten the neoprene belt that holds my Discman around my waist and turn up the music so Green Day is loud in my ears. And I'm off.

I take the usual series of turns through my neighborhood until I reach the running path that hugs the glassy expanse of Lake Michigan. I twist around the last bend, giving myself a clear view of the route all the way to the Northwestern University track, and I spot the man in the green vest. As we run toward each other, our ponytails—his gray, mine unruly—swing back and forth, and we raise our hands and give each other a little wave. "Morning," I say as we pass.

The sun is slowly rising over the lake as I turn toward the soccer field, and when my feet connect with the spongy surface of the track, I feel a new burst of energy that makes me pick up the pace. I'm halfway around the loop when the CD shuffles again and the new song transports me back to the coffeehouse the night before. The band was amazing, and when they played those first few notes the whole place exploded, everyone bouncing and head-bobbing in unison as the line that separated us local high schoolers from the transitory college students disappeared completely. I take a quick look around to be sure I'm alone. All I can see is empty row after row of metal bleachers, heavy with a winter's worth of snow that no one's bothered to dust off, so I belt out the chorus.

I'm racing around the curves, legs throbbing, heart pounding, arms pumping. Inhaling arctic air. Exhaling steam. Enjoying my thirty minutes of solitude, when it's just me and my run and my music and my thoughts. When I'm completely alone.

And then I realize I'm not. I see someone in the bleachers, hip-deep in the icy fluff of the third row and impossible to miss. He's just sitting there with his chin resting on his hands, wearing a black parka and a small smile, watching me.

I steal glances at him but continue to run, pretending not to care about his presence in my sanctuary. He looks like a Northwestern student, maybe a freshman, with dark shaggy

hair and soft features. He doesn't look threatening, and even if he is, I can outrun him.

But what if I can't?

My mind jumps to the self-defense courses Dad made me take when I started running in the near dark. Knee to the groin. Palm thrust to the nose. But first, you should try to avoid confrontation by simply acknowledging the attacker's presence. Which sounds much easier.

As I come around the bend, I give him a slight nod and a glare that probably conveys a weird mix of fear and tenacity—like I'm daring him to make a move but terrified that he just might. And as I run by, staring him down, I watch his face change. His smile disappears, and now he looks sad and dejected, like I just used those self-defense skills to punch him in the gut.

But as I follow the curve of the track and start heading toward him again, I look up, right in his direction. He gives me a more hesitant smile, but it's warm, like he knows me. Genuine, like he might just be someone worth knowing. And I can't help it. I smile back.

I'm still grinning as I turn the next bend, and without even thinking about it, I flip around midstride to look at him again.

He's gone.

I spin in place while my eyes search the track for him, and then I sprint to the bleachers. At the bottom of the steps, I hesitate for a second, wondering if he was ever there at all, but I gather my courage and trudge up.

He's not there, but he had been. He left proof: the snow is packed down where he sat, and on the bench below, two depressions show where his feet rested.

And that's when I notice something else.

My own footprints are clearly visible in the powder around me, but where his should have been—leading to and from the bench—I see nothing but a thick layer of untouched snow.

2

I race into the house and take the stairs two at a time. I turn on the shower, peel off my sweat-drenched clothes, and stand naked while I down a glass of water and let the steam fill the bathroom. My reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror fades away behind the thick fog, and when my image becomes completely obscured, I run my palm across the glass, clearing a wet, dotted path in the condensation. I consider my face again. I don't look crazy.

I spend my entire shower wondering if he was real, whom I can tell, and how I might possibly come out of that conversation sounding sane. As I get dressed for school, his face is still creeping into my thoughts, but I do my best to push the whole thing out of my mind and try to convince myself I imagined it. Still, I vow to avoid the track for the rest of the week. I know what I saw.

I shake it off as I zip into my boots and give myself one last check in the full-length mirror. I run my fingers through my curls, scrunch them up in my hands, and shake my head again. Useless.

Throwing my backpack over my shoulder, I force myself to move on to my morning ritual. I stand before the map that decorates the largest wall in my room; I close my eyes, touch it, and open them again. Callao, Peru. Good. I was hoping for someplace warm.

With my travel dreams on his mind, one day last summer Dad spent a secret hour in the garage adhering this giant paper map of the world to a foam-core board. "You can mark all the places you go," he said as he handed me a small box of red pins. I stood there and stared at it—this colorful expanse of paper, with its topographic mountain ranges and changeable shades of blue to depict the various depths of the ocean—and saw a map of the world, but knew it wasn't mine. My world was much, much smaller.

After Dad left the room, I stuck the little red pins into the paper, one by one. My class had visited the state capital last year, so I put a pin in Springfield. We once took a family camping trip to Boundary Waters, so I put one in north-eastern Minnesota. We spent a Fourth of July in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My aunt lives in northern Indiana, and we go twice a year. That was it. Four pins.

At first, all I could see was that pathetic little cluster of red near the state of Illinois, but now I view the map the way Dad intended. Like it's asking me to see every square inch of it with my own eyes, challenging me to make my little world larger and larger, pin by pin.

I give the map one last look and head down the stairs toward the glorious scent coming from the kitchen. I don't even need to hit the landing to know that Dad's standing at the coffeepot pouring out two mugs—one black, for him; one with milk, for me. I grab my cup from his outstretched hand. "Good morning. Mom already gone?"

“She left before you did. Early shift.” He watches me take a sip, and then he steals a peek out the kitchen window. “Where did you run today? It’s still pretty dark out there.” He sounds worried.

“Campus. The usual.” There’s no way I’m telling him about the guy at the track. “It’s freezing, too. That was a tough first mile.” I pour myself a bowl of raisin bran and plop down on the stool at the counter. “You’re welcome to join me, you know,” I say with a grin. I know what’s coming next.

He looks at me, eyebrows raised. “Wake me up some morning in June and I’ll run with you. Until then, you aren’t getting me out of my warm bed for that kind of torture.”

“Wuss.”

“Yes.” He nods and raises his coffee mug in a mock toast. “Yes, I am. Unlike my Annie.” He shakes his head. “I created a monster.”

Dad turned me into a runner. He had been an Illinois Cross-Country State Finalist in high school. With his glory days behind him, now he’s the crazy guy in a professorial sport coat standing at the end of the course, clapping wildly and cheering me on in a booming voice that threatens to take down the forest’s most sturdy oaks. It’s gotten worse now that the cross-country season has ended and I’m running track, where he’s never out of sight and there are no trees to muffle him. Even though he’s beyond embarrassing, he’s devoted. In return, he’s the only one I still allow to call me Annie.

Dad goes back to his paper while I down my coffee and finish my cereal in comfortable quiet. Unlike Mom, who seems compelled to fill silence, Dad lets it stick around like a member of the family. But then the low horn of Emma’s car breaks the calm.

Dad drops one side of the newspaper. “There’s your Brit.”

I give him a peck on the cheek and head outside.

The car is humming in the driveway, and I walk toward it as quickly as I can without banana-peeling on the ice--covered concrete. I let out a little breath of relief when I swing open the door of Emma’s shiny new Saab and fall into warm leather.

“Morning, love,” Emma Atkins chirps in her British accent. She throws the gearshift into reverse and flies out of the driveway. “Did you hear?” she blurts out, like the words have been locked up in there for hours and she’s finally setting them free.

“Of course not.” I look at her and roll my eyes. “Why would I hear anything before you do?”

“New kid starting today. He just moved here from *California*. That could be good, right?” While Emma’s seen the world, she hasn’t seen much of the States beyond the Midwest. California seems like a fantastic American oddity to her, like frozen custard or a hot dog dipped in cornmeal and impaled on a stick.

“Anything new is good,” I say, and when I turn to look at her, I see that she’s wearing more than the usual amount of eye shadow, extra accessories, and the uniform miniskirt she had hemmed to make it “mini-er.” Clearly the new guy’s been heavy on her mind since she woke up this morning. When we stop at the light, I watch her stretch her neck to look into the rearview mirror and blot her lipstick with her fingertip. Not that she needs any extra help. She’s English, but she looks more like a Brazilian supermodel with her high, defined cheekbones and dark, sultry eyes. Today I didn’t even bother to put on lip gloss, and when we walk into school together, whether Emma’s all dolled up for the new guy or not, I know which one of us turns heads.

Even more extraordinary than the extra effort she’s taken with her appearance is the fact that she hasn’t bothered to put on music. I reach into the glove compartment and start sifting through the pile of CDs, loose and scratching up against each other, until my fingertips feel suede. I unearth the hot pink case I bought Emma for her birthday last year, and start slipping the disks into the little plastic sleeves.

“Hey, why aren’t you more excited? This is big news, Anna. We haven’t had a new student since . . .” She trails off as she thumps her fingers on the steering wheel, like she does when she’s deep in thought.

I don’t even look up from my project as I finish her sentence. “Me.”

“Really?”

I shrug and nod. “Yeah. Eighth grade. Zits and braces. Frizzy hair. That horrible plaid Westlake jumper.” I wince at the thought of that last one. “New kid. Me.”

“Really . . .” She stares out the window and thinks about it, like there’s a chance I’m wrong. Then she says, “Huh. I guess so.” She reaches over and pinches my cheek. “And see what a good day that turned out to be! Without you, I’d be singing all by myself. Speaking of which, we’re going to be at school before you choose one. Here.” Emma reaches over and grabs the disk on top. “*Vitalogy*. Perfect.”

We’ve been playing the new Pearl Jam CD practically nonstop for the last three months. She slips it into the stereo and turns up the volume as high as she can without distorting the bass. She looks at me and smiles, moving to the beat as the opening guitar notes of “Corduroy” start out quietly, then build, escalating at a steady rhythm until the car is filled with sound. I lean back into my seat as the drums join in, softly at first, then louder. We hear the last five notes of the intro and that’s our cue—we look at each other and sing.

The waiting drove me mad. . . .

You’re finally here and I’m a mess. . . .

We sing every word, loud and off-key, but the final minute of the song is instrumental, so that's where we really let go. I air-guitar and bob my head while Emma drums on the steering wheel, her hands flying around and slapping the leather, but as close to "ten and two" as I've ever seen them. As if she were capable of choreographing our arrival, she pulls into her usual parking space just as the last guitar notes fade to black and twists the key in the ignition. "Pearl Jam's coming back to Soldier Field this summer, you know? You should get Freckles to get us tickets."

"Stop calling him that." I stifle a laugh. "His name is Justin. And yeah, he can probably get us tickets. . . ."

She looks at me sideways, eyebrows raised. "*Probably?* Come on, he'll do anything you ask. That boy has it *bad* for you."

"No, he doesn't. I've known him since I was five. We're just friends."

"And is *he* aware of this?"

"Of course he is." My parents and Justin's have all known one another for years, and for most of them, he and I were inseparable. But things have changed. Justin Reilly used to feel like a comfortable pair of sweats, but now he's more like a prom dress. Lovely but itchy.

"Fine, then would you kindly ask your *friend* if he can score us Pearl Jam tickets?" She's just about to get out of the car, but she stops, seeming to have had a new thought. "Wait, what if he can't get them? Then what?"

I stare at her. "Do you want to see Pearl Jam this summer, Em?"

She nods. "Of course."

"And when was the last time you didn't get what you wanted?"

I wait while she thinks about it. Then she shrugs and smiles. "Am I that spoiled?"

"No," I lie. Emma gives me her puppy dog look, and I say, "Sometimes, but I love ya anyway," and that gets a smile.

Emma and I walk from the student lot to the side entrance. Inside, we stamp our feet on the doormat, watching as the heater above us melts the snow on our boots and makes it drip, and for the first time all morning, I have an opening. If I'm going to tell anyone what happened at the track, Emma is the one, and now is the time, but I don't know where to start. How am I supposed to tell my best friend that a guy appeared out of thin air, smiled at me, and disappeared before my eyes, leaving me with nothing more than an impression of his butt and a nagging mystery to solve?

"Em?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I tell you something . . . weird?" I look around to be sure no one can overhear me, because it's one thing to tell your best friend that you may be losing your mind and another

thing entirely for the news to catch fire and start making the loop.

“Of course.”

We walk toward our lockers and stop, but just as I open my mouth to tell her, Alex Camarian comes around the corner, wearing his basketball jacket and a huge grin, and throws his arm over Emma’s shoulder.

He sticks his face between the two of us, and I hear him murmur into her ear, “Good morning, gorgeous.”

“Ugh, Alex,” Emma says, giving him a small push but still egging him on with a half smile. “Can’t you see we’re having a conversation? What do you want?”

Before he can answer her question, the first bell rings. “I’ll tell you what I want . . .” he says, pulling her to his chest, “. . . if you walk The Donut with me.”

Emma looks at me. Then at Alex. Then down the circular hallway dubbed The Donut.

She gives me another glance, this time asking silent permission, and I give her what I think is an encouraging smile as Alex offers her his arm. “May I?” His pseudo-sexy voice is matched by an earnest expression that makes him look like he’s trying out for the lead role in a cheesy soap opera, and I watch as she lets him thread his arm through hers and lead her away. She looks back at me with a shrug and a grimace, like she has no choice but to go with him, and mouths the words *Later, okay?*

Maybe Alex’s intervention is a sign: if I am seeing disappearing guys, that information may best be kept to myself. I reach into my locker, grab books for my next three classes and a piece of gum for the road, and stand up.

And that’s when I spot him. I freeze, staring at him like the apparition he must be. Dean Parker’s arm is draped over his shoulders in a fatherly way as he guides him through the hall, past the throng of students, pointing into doorways and calling his attention to the signs on the walls. Directing him to his first class on his first day at his new school.

The new student. The one from California. A guy with dark shaggy hair—and there’s no question in my mind, the same guy I saw at the track.

They pass right by me, neither one giving me so much as a glance. I stand there, slack-jawed and pale, as the two of them round the corner out of sight.

3

I'm usually the first one through the door, but today I make it to Spanish just as the fourth-period bell rings. Señor Argotta watches me with this surprised look on his face, like I'm the last person he expects to be late for his class. He waves the bright yellow tardy slip back and forth in front of me as I walk by. "*Hola, Señorita Greene.*" He tries to look stern, but he can't hold the expression for more than a second before his face relaxes back into a grin.

"*Hola, señor.*" I race past him with my head bowed at first, but then I turn around and give him an apologetic smile as I collapse in my chair. I remove my spiral notebook from my backpack and dig around for a mint while I contemplate the mystery this day has become.

He's real. And he's *here*.

I can't stanch the flow of questions racing through my head. First: Where has he been all morning? I've walked The Donut between every class so far and he's nowhere to be found. Second: Why would a high school kid who's new in town be hanging out at a university track at 6:45 a.m. on a Monday? Third: Why did he look at me like he knew me, but pass right by me two hours later like I was a total stranger? Unless . . . maybe he just didn't see me. If I could just find him, I'd know.

Where is he?

Alex flops into the seat next to me, and Argotta picks up the pad of tardy slips and waves it at him with a scolding voice and matching expression. "You're late, Señor Camarian," he says in his thick accent. But within seconds he returns the pad to his desk, and Alex gets the same understanding smile Argotta gave me.

"Sorry, señor," Alex says toward the front of the room, and then he leans across the aisle, well into my space. "*Hola, Anna.*" I blink from the glare of his teeth, blinding under the harsh fluorescent lights.

"Hey, Alex."

He opens his mouth to say something else, but before he can verbalize the thought, Argotta clears his throat at the front of the room and begins speaking.

"Attention, please! Today we are welcoming a brand-new student." I look up and my breath catches. "This is Bennett Cooper." Argotta pauses dramatically while the new guy shifts his weight from one leg to the other and adjusts his backpack over his shoulder. "Everyone, please welcome our new amigo and make him feel at home here." Argotta points at a seat behind me and one row over, and the new guy starts walking toward it. "Now, essays, please, everyone."

Twenty sets of curious eyes follow him, settle on him for a moment, and turn their

attention to their respective bags to unearth stapled essays on Spain's admission to the European Union. My eyes are among those that look at him, but are also the only pair that can't seem to look away.

Bennett. His name is Bennett.

He's looking down at his desk and playing with the pages of his textbook like he's embarrassed by all the attention, but after a few moments, he slowly raises his head. I watch his gaze land on the door at the far end of the room, move clockwise around the perimeter of the classroom, and come to a sudden stop when he sees me. Because I'm still staring at him.

I don't know how long my face has been frozen like this, but as soon as I realize that he's caught me, the flush creeps up my neck and into my cheeks, and I feel myself do the only thing I can do at this point: I smile. And I wait for it to be returned, with not just any smile, but *that* smile. The one from the track. The one filled with warmth and recognition and . . . interest. But his expression contains none of the above. Instead he shoots me a small, almost shy smile. The kind of smile one might give a total stranger.

I can't possibly look that different in my uniform than I did in running clothes. *Why is he pretending he doesn't recognize me?* I realize I'm still staring at him, and now the tips of my ears are burning and my face has fully ignited. I flip around in my chair and reach down into my backpack, searching for a distraction. My hair starts to tickle my nose, so when I sit back up, I grab a handful of curls, twist it around my finger, and stick my pencil through the middle to hold it in place.

Twenty minutes later, Argotta snaps my attention back to the room when he holds his arms out wide and exclaims, "Let's do four practice groups today, okay?"

I look down at my notebook and discover that its pages are covered with words and phrases and conjugations, which is surprising, because I don't think I've heard a word Argotta's said. He points to Courtney Breslin in the front row and says, "Count us off, señorita! *Por favor.*"

"*Uno.*" And the count-off continues, snaking its way around the room until it comes to me.

"*Cuatro,*" I say, and then I listen. And work hard not to move my head at all. A few minutes later, I hear what I've been waiting for. The voice over my shoulder says, "*Uno.*"

At the end of the count-off, Argotta yells, "Bring your stuff," and we begin moving around the room to our newly assigned sections. I'm in Group Four and Bennett is in Group One—clear across the room—and this is where we will stay for the remainder of the class. As quickly as he appeared behind me, he is now as far away from me as possible; but at least I can study him better from this angle.

His uniform is the same as the rest of the guys': Black pants and a white oxford shirt

under a black V-neck sweater. I think he's wearing Doc Martens, but it's hard to tell from here. It's easy to see what's different: his hair. Most guys wear theirs in some conservative, neatly parted style. Others sport ultrashort Caesars or leave it a little long on top but shaved on the sides. But their hair is never *this* long. Bennett's is unkempt, hangs just a little over his eyebrows, and looks like it hasn't seen a brush in days. I can't remember what he was wearing at the track, but the hair . . . That's definitely the same. The hair I remember.

When the bell rings thirty minutes later, everyone stands up and moves for the door, blocking my view. I rise and reach for my backpack, quickly deciding to talk to him on his way to lunch, but all I catch is the blur of his head as he vanishes through the doorway.

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When I go through the double doors to the dining hall, I spot him right away. He's sitting alone at a table in the corner, with his back to the floor-to-ceiling windows. I make my way through the salad bar, grab a banana, and fill a large cup with Coke, all while stealing glances in his direction. As it turns out, I'm in no danger of being caught. In the five minutes it takes me to get my food, he doesn't look up once. He just sits in his chair, holding a paperback in one hand while he picks at his food with the other.

Danielle is already planted at our usual table, and as I set my tray down, I steal another quick look in Bennett's direction. He spoons out bites of red Jell-O without looking away from his book.

"Scoping out the new guy already?" Danielle asks.

I look at her with surprise, then panic. "No." I sit down and reach for my drink. "Why?"

"Oh, come on! I've been watching you. I've never seen anyone work a salad bar with her eyes glued on someone twenty feet away. It's impressive. Quite a skill."

The tips of my ears begin to burn. Again.

She laughs and takes a sip of her Coke. "You're talented, Anna, but you're hardly subtle." She moves close and gives my arm a reassuring pat. "Don't worry. He didn't notice. I don't think he's looked away from that book once."

Emma arrives breathless, plops her tray down on the table, and takes her seat. "So . . . what do we think?" She draws out the last word in a higher inflection.

Danielle shrugs and tilts her chair back, balancing on the two back legs and not even attempting restraint as she stares at him across the room. "He looks . . . oblivious. Do you think he knows there are other people in the room?"

"He looks older, or something," Emma chimes in.

I pretend to look around the room before letting my eyes settle on him again. It's not that he looks older—he's actually got a bit of a baby face. Danielle was closer. He looks indifferent, like he doesn't seem to care that he's here—or care that we're all staring, wondering *why* he's here—and that alone makes him even more interesting. At least to me.

"Hmmm . . . I think I'm disappointed." Emma stares straight at him, taking stock of every detail. She turns back to look at us, eyes wide, nose crinkled. "He's definitely not what I was hoping for. He looks like every other guy in this cold, dreary town. No tan. No hot blond surfer hair." She takes a bite of a bread stick. "I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up."

"Maybe that is surfer hair," suggests Danielle. "How do you know what surfer hair looks like?"

"You know, it's long." Emma wiggles her fingers next to her head. "It looks cool. Not like"—she directs her thumb toward Bennett's table—"that mop top of his."

"Come on, you guys. Give him a break." They both turn to me, their professionally shaped brows raised in matching expressions, and stare. "What?" I shrug and take a deep pull on my straw, letting the cold liquid slide down my throat and cool my face.

Emma finally picks up a forkful of salad and directs it toward her mouth, and for a split second, I think I'm off the hook. But then she stops. "Okay, I'll ask." The lettuce and tomatoes hover in front of her. "Why do you care what we think?"

"I don't. It's just . . . You're just being mean."

"We're not being mean!" Emma looks at Danielle. "Are we being mean?"

Danielle shakes her head no. "I didn't think we were being mean."

"We're just observing. Like . . . scientists." She shoots me a smart-ass grin and pops the fork into her mouth.

I let out a sigh and pick at my sandwich. She's right. Why *do* I care what they think? It's not like I know him. And since I don't seem to be at all familiar to him, I'm starting to wonder if the thing at the track this morning even happened.

Emma and Danielle are watching me intently and exchanging meaningful glances as they eat. Then Emma shoots Danielle her "don't worry, I've got this one" look, turns to me with those soft eyes, and begins to do what she does best: make people tell her things they don't want to tell her. It's like a superpower or something. "Anna?" she sings. "What's going on?"

I look at her like I know this trick, like I'm not about to give in to it, but then I fold. I bury my face in my hands. "It's nothing. It's just weird." I try to say it under my breath, but it comes out loud enough for them to hear. Emma gently pulls my hands away from my face and makes me look at her.

"What's weird?" Then she remembers this morning, and things click. "Wait, like the weird thing you were going to tell me before class?"

I look around the room, checking for anyone else within earshot, and when I turn back again, I find Emma and Danielle leaning in so close to me their cheeks are nearly touching.

I look around the room again before moving in toward them. "Fine." I let out a sigh. "So . . . I was on my run at the Northwestern track this morning. I ran around a couple of times, and all of sudden, I looked up in the bleachers and saw this guy sitting there, watching me. I ignored him at first—I just kept running and he just kept staring at me—but when I came around the bend . . ." I stop and scan the room one more time. "He was gone. And I mean, *gone* gone. He just . . . disappeared." I leave out the part about how he smiled at me.

"Okay, that's definitely weird," Emma says and looks at me wide-eyed. She must see something in my expression that tells her there's more. "And?"

I gesture with my chin toward Bennett's table. "And that's *him*." Out loud, it sounds even weirder than it did in my head.

Emma and Danielle spin in their chairs and take him in again. "Are you sure?" Emma asks without taking her eyes off Bennett.

I look past them, directly at his table. "He looks like the same person. Same build. Definitely the same hair. The weirdest thing was that at the track, he looked at me like he . . . knew me or something. But he doesn't even seem to recognize me now." They're still staring. "Please stop looking at him."

"He's not that bad, I guess," says Danielle.

"Yeah, if you look past the hair he's sorta cute," Emma agrees. But when she turns around again her expression is stern, maternal. "But you know, the track thing is sorta creepy."

I look past them, watching him. If he's noticed the three of us talking about him, sizing him up, he never lets on.

"I know!" Danielle says, and I peek up at her with optimistic eyes. "Go up and ask him."

I roll my eyes at her encouraging smile, but before I can even reply, I hear Emma say, "Good idea." She slaps her palms on the table and pushes herself to standing, with an emphatic "Let's just go get this sorted."

"What? No!" I shove my hair behind my ears. "Please don't. I swear if you go over there, I am not speaking to you."

She stops and turns on her heel. "I'm helping."

I grit my teeth and stare her down. "Emma. Atkins. Seriously; please don't."

Emma walks back to our table. "Look, he was watching you and he creeped you out and now he's acting like it never even happened. I want to know why." She turns and starts back toward him, and before I have time to consider bolting from the room, she reaches his table. Danielle and I watch, frozen and lame, as Emma invades his space with a little wave.

They shake hands and exchange a few words before she points back in our direction.

He dog-ears his page and stuffs the book into his backpack, then grabs his tray and follows a beaming Emma to our table. I'd probably get more than detention if I reached out and strangled her upon arrival, but that doesn't stop me from considering it.

"Ladies"—Emma extends her arms toward our guest—"this is Bennett Cooper."

He smiles at the two of us and then looks expectantly back at Emma.

"Take a seat here." She pulls an empty chair out from the table and returns to her own. "So, Bennett, this is Danielle. And this"—she pauses in a pathetic attempt at dramatic effect—"is our track star." She gestures toward me, and Bennett's eyes follow until they rest on mine.

"Cross-country," I correct her.

"Whatever." Emma shrugs at me and turns her attention back to Bennett. "She's a runner." She twists in her chair to face him straight on. "But you already knew that, right?" Her accusatory glare is fierce and unrelenting.

Oh. Dear. God.

He looks at her, then back at me, then back at her. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Didn't you two see each other at the Northwestern track this morning, Bennett?" she asks, sharp and critical, like a lawyer cross-examining her witness. Emma rests her hand on my shoulder. "She runs there at the crack of dawn. She saw you there. You were watching her."

Yes. Emma is going to die.

"Northwestern?" He furrows his brow and stares at us. Like he's never heard of the university that dominates this town. "I'm sorry, but that's impossible. I just moved here over the weekend. I've barely seen *this* campus, let alone the university." He looks straight at me and smiles—kind and sincere, like he's telling the truth—and even though it's not the same smile, it's much closer to the one he shot me at the track. Close enough to make me all the more certain I've got the right guy. "You must have me confused with someone else."

I don't. I stare at him with nervous anticipation, waiting for him to tell me he's just kidding and reach across the table to give me a friendly punch in the arm. But he just sits there. Looking at me like this is the first time he's ever seen me. And like maybe I'm nuts. "Are you sure? You were wearing a parka," I finally say.

There it is again. His smile is still tinged with confusion, still lacking any sort of recognition, but it's warm. Sweet. The *same*. "I'm sorry, I don't own a parka," he says. "It wasn't me." I want to believe him, but I can't, and when I look over at Emma, she's still wearing a questioning expression that makes me think she doesn't either.

Still, I decide to let him off the hook, and I try to match the warmth in his eyes. "You just

look . . . exactly like him. I guess I was mistaken.” I hope my expression is masking my lie. And my embarrassment. I reach across the table. “I’m Anna.”

He was already reaching his hand forward to meet mine, but it stops midway. “Anna?” He stares at me in disbelief. “Your name is Anna?”

“Ummm, yes. . . . Should it be something else?” I say, surprised to hear a flirtatious inflection creeping into my voice.

“So now her *name* rings a bell!” Emma says to Danielle, far too loudly.

He’s still staring at me, and for just a split second, I see a trace of recognition in his expression that reminds me of the look he gave me at the track this morning. But then he snaps out of it and reaches for my hand again.

“Nice to meet you, Anna.” Now his voice sounds forced, his handshake is stiff, and anything that looked like recognition has been replaced by a certain stoniness. He lets my hand go and turns to Emma and Danielle, giving each of them a formal nod. “Nice to meet you, too.” He stands and carries his tray to the garbage bin in the middle of the room, and I see him shake his head as he walks out through the double doors and disappears into The Donut.

“Okay, *that* was weird.” Emma sighs. “But at least it’s done.” She brushes her hands together as if she’d just completed a nasty chore.

I know she only wanted to protect me, but that doesn’t make me feel any better about looking like an idiot. Words like *beyond awkward* and *mortifying* and *why?* pop into my brain, and I want to turn them into cohesive sentences and spit them out; but I can’t think straight. Besides, Emma knows that I’m nothing if not true to my word: I’m no longer speaking to her.

=

The little bundle of bells that has been hanging on the bookstore door as long as I can remember makes its jingle, and Dad looks up from behind the counter. I lug my backpack over to him and let it land with a thunk.

“What happened to you?” His voice is full of concern.

I left without saying good-bye to Emma and walked two miles through the frozen tundra. My teeth are still chattering, my face is red and chapped from the wind, and there’s not a pencil on earth large enough to wrangle my curls into place at this point. “Nothing.” I smooth out my hair and distract him with a question. “Has it been slow all day?”

He glances around the empty bookstore my grandfather bought when he retired from teaching at Northwestern fifteen years ago. “Typical March. It’ll pick up after finals.”

Dad watches as I remove a T-shirt from my bag to change into, then extract textbook after textbook and pile them on the desk. "Good God, how many books can you fit in there? That backpack's like a clown car." He laughs, but I know he's genuinely perplexed by how different my high school experience at Westlake Academy seems from the one he had at Evanston Township.

"You're the one who wanted me to go to that fancy school," I remind him as I wave one of my heftier books in the air.

He grabs it, grimaces like it's far too heavy for him to lift, and lets it crash onto the desk. "You're a rock star." He kisses me on the forehead and heads for the door. "It's supposed to start snowing soon," he says, zipping his parka and wrapping his scarf around his neck. "Give me a call if you want a ride home, okay?"

"It's only three blocks, Dad."

"And I know you're fearless and indestructible, but call me if you change your mind, okay?"

I roll my eyes. "Dad. Three blocks."

He's just about to push the glass door open when I realize that tomorrow morning's walk will be much longer. And colder.

"Hey, Dad." He turns around, one hand resting on the metal bar of the glass door. "I'll take a ride to school in the morning . . . if that's okay?"

"Oh. Does Emma have a doctor's appointment or something?"

"No."

He looks like he's about to ask me what's going on, but he must decide against it, because he just shrugs and says, "Sure," and the little bells jingle behind him.

4

“What am I doing?” I ask out loud as I add a second layer of lip gloss. Staring into the girls’ bathroom mirror, I apply a coat of mascara, then roll my eyes at my reflection.

So he’s cute. That hardly makes him worth the considerable effort it took me to decide on lip gloss this morning. I’m not a makeup-in-the-bathroom kind of girl, and I feel like I’ve lost it completely. Yesterday, I thought I was crazy because I was seeing things. I think I prefer that crazy over this one.

As I leave the bathroom and head to fourth period, I start to feel it—the adrenaline rush that I usually associate with the last half mile of a race. I stop outside the classroom for a moment to catch my breath and remind myself to enter the way I planned—looking cool and disinterested. I shake out my arms, rock my head back and forth, and take one last breath before I walk through the door.

I spot Bennett right away. He’s reclining in his chair, twisting his pencil back and forth between his fingers. I expect him to look away when we make eye contact, but he doesn’t. In fact, his face seems to brighten, like he’s happy to see me or something. Then he looks down, still smiling to himself, and starts doodling. He doesn’t look up again.

I take my seat and let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. For something to do, I start extracting my homework from my backpack while everyone else ambles in.

When the bells rings, Argotta throws his arms high in the air and shouts, “Pop quiz!” Thankfully, the chorus of collective groans and the noise of paper being ripped from notebooks drowns out the sound of my heart pounding against my rib cage.

My palms are sweating, and I’m pretty sure the heat from my body alone is about to make my curls frizz up. Without thinking, I sweep my hair back, gather it into a ponytail, twist it around my finger, and hold it in place at the top of my head with one hand while I search through my backpack for a clip. I feel books, a collection of gum wrappers, a roll of Certs, a jewel case, but no clip, no hair band. I look over at the pencil on my desk, which always works in a bind, but I have only one and I need it for the test. My elevated arm is falling asleep and I’m just about to give up when I hear a noise behind me.

“Pssst.”

I whirl around, still holding a handful of hair.

Maybe it’s because he’s leaning so far forward he’s practically lying on top of his desk, but he seems so much closer to me right now than he did yesterday. Or perhaps it’s not only his physical proximity; it’s also the combination of the distance and the expression on his face. His eyes aren’t vacant like they were when I stared him down in class yesterday, or confused like they were when my best friend accused him of being a creepy stalker. Today

his eyes are soft, like they're smiling completely on their own, and I notice that they're an interesting shade of smoky blue, dotted with little gold flecks that catch and reflect the light. When I finally realize what I am doing—staring into his eyes like a complete moron—I lower my gaze to his mouth to find that it's not only his eyes that are smiling. His mouth is too. Like he's amused. Like he's laughing at me. And that's when I realize I'm missing something.

He points with his chin, attempting to direct my attention away from his face and toward the hand he's been extending in my direction this entire time. The one holding a pencil.

I look at it, and then back at his eyes, puzzled. Then understanding takes over, and I reach forward and take it from him.

Thanks, I mouth.

I turn toward the front of the room, stick the pencil through my hair, and get self-conscious when I realize that in the process I'm revealing the flush creeping up the back of my neck. I take a deep breath and force myself to pay attention to the quiz, which has already begun, but I can't stop the smile creeping onto my face.

He *was* paying attention to me yesterday. He noticed me put my hair up.

It's probably just a plain yellow Dixon Ticonderoga number two pencil—exactly the same as the one I'm using to complete this ridiculous quiz—but perched in my hair, holding the strands in place, it feels a lot like what we had at the track yesterday: a connection.

=

Somehow I've managed to go all day without running into Emma. Until now.

I just finished track practice and I'm walking out of the locker room, heading for the student lot and chatting with a few of my teammates, when I see her. She's striding toward her car with her field hockey stick swinging by her side as she moves, and even though I assume she broke into a sweat at some point you'd never know now. Her makeup looks perfect, and her knit cap and gloves match the piping on her warm-up suit. I look down at my sweats. I came straight out of the shower, towel-dried my hair, and piled it under a baseball cap to keep it from freezing on my walk home.

"I'll get the heat going!" she yells when she sees me. After she opens the door and starts the engine, she gets out of the car and relaxes against the hood, waiting for me.

I take a quick look up at the sky and see a mass of dark clouds moving into formation, preparing to send down fury in the form of hard snow. I look down again and see Emma, smiling and beckoning. For just a split second, my resolve melts a little and I picture myself collapsing into the heated seat. I really don't want to walk home. But there is no way, *no*

way, I'm letting her off that easy.

I keep walking with the group, straight past her car.

"Anna!" I can hear the shock and hurt in her voice. "Wait." The sound of her tennis shoes padding cautiously behind me closes in and I pick up my pace a little. "Seriously, can't you just stop and talk to me? I'm trying to apologize." My teammates look at me and then at one another. I wave them on and slow down so Emma can catch up.

She grabs me by the shoulder. "I really am sorry." Her remorse looks genuine and her British accent makes her sound so sincere that I'm tempted to throw my arms around her and forgive her without another word. But I haven't forgotten how mortified I felt yesterday, how she made a fool of me. And so instead, I just stare at her.

"I'm sorry," she repeats, and hugs me. I want to hug her back but instead stand rigid.

Her grip loosens, and when she steps back from me I can see how hurt she looks. But then her expression softens and she reaches forward, takes my face in her hands, and squeezes my cheeks in a soft-mittened vise grip. "I was an ass. Please don't be mad at me anymore. I simply can't take it."

I let out a sigh. "That was really uncool." My voice comes out garbled since she's now squeezing so hard my lips are pursed in a fish face.

"I know. But you love me anyway, right?" She wiggles my cheeks. "Right? Just a little?" And that's all it takes. Because I do. When I try not to laugh, my lips must look even funnier, because Emma lets out a snort, and that makes us both crack up.

She finally stops squeezing, but keeps holding my face. "I really am sorry. I just got carried away. I wasn't trying to embarrass you."

I bite my lip. "You did."

"I know."

"Please don't do it again."

"I won't," she says with a smile and a hard shake of her head. She grips my shoulders and air-kisses each of my cheeks. They still feel red from all the squeezing. "Can we get in the car now?" She clenches her jaw and shivers.

When I nod, she leads me to the Saab. She even opens my door and ushers me in before going around to her side and taking her place behind the wheel.

"Where to?" she asks. "Want to grab a coffee?"

"I can't. It's Tuesday."

"Right, family dinner night." She backs out into the nearly empty parking lot. We're silent for a few seconds, and I think she's going to reach over and crank the stereo like she always does, but instead she turns to me. "So, do you still think the new guy was the one watching you at the track?"

I shrug. "I don't know." I start to tell Emma about the pencil, but I stop myself. To someone who already considers him creepy, it might sound weird rather than charming. Come to think of it, perhaps *I* should have found it weird rather than charming. I reach up and touch the top of my head, having forgotten that I'm now wearing a baseball cap and the pencil is tucked safely in my backpack.

"Do you want my opinion?" Emma asks.

"Do I have a choice?"

"No. Stay away from him. I don't know what it is, but there's something . . . off about him."

"Oh, come on. That's just because of the track thing. He made it clear he'd never been to Northwestern. I must have been wrong." I'm not sure why I'm defending him, and I'm still sure I am *not* wrong, but I think I sound pretty convincing.

"What about how he reacted to your name?"

Yeah. That was weird. I shrug.

"Look at you. You think he's cute." She draws out the words as her accent intensifies.

"I don't even know him."

"You don't have to know him to think he's cute."

"Sure I do." I glare at her. "I'm just . . . curious about him, that's all." But if I'm being completely honest, Emma may be right. I exchanged a few meaningless glances and a pencil with him, and that somehow gave him the right to creep into my head and settle there.

The car skids to a stop in front of the house, leaving a two-foot space between my door and the snow-covered sidewalk. Emma turns to face me. "I missed you this morning, by the way."

"Me too." I finally reach over and hug her. I get out of the car and shut the door behind me, and she peels away, kicking up a flurry of dirty snow.

=

"Grab a knife!" Mom's singsong holler carries from the kitchen into the hallway, over Pavarotti's booming tenor. I follow the tantalizing smell of roasting peppers and onions and see Mom hard at work in the kitchen.

"Hi, honey!" Mom looks up with a smile and returns to her sauce. She's wearing a black apron over her scrubs, and her dark curls—the ones she passed down to me—are piled into a clip on top of her head, though a few loose ringlets have escaped to frame her face. She hums along with the Italian music as she draws a blade through ripe tomatoes. "Can you start slicing the mozzarella?" She uses her knife to point at the ball of slimy white cheese on the counter. "How was school?"

I twist around to watch Mom slide the last of the tomatoes into the stockpot, give them a little stir, and take a seat on one of the bar stools facing me. She rests her elbows on the counter, and I stop cutting to glance up at her. She's waiting for me to tell her everything, because it's Tuesday—the day we cook and I tell her who's dating whom, who's fighting with whom, and who's not quite cutting it on the track. Then I ask her what's going on at the hospital, and even though I imagine it's all fairly mundane, and often a sad place to spend a day, she makes it sound like she works on the set of *ER*, crafting dramatic stories about people who have pulled through even when there seemed to be no hope, and doctors who flirt with nurses, and patients who flirt with doctors. I'm glad she enjoys her job, especially since I know the only reason she went back to work was to help cover my Westlake tuition. It was my parents' idea to send me there, but it takes two salaries to pay for it. Tuesday-night dinner is pretty much all they ask for in return.

"Well?" Her eyes are wide, and she looks like she's about ready to burst. "Go ahead. Tell me about your week so far. Anything juicy?"

I hear myself say, "It's been fine," and I cast my eyes down at my cutting board, run the knife through the mozzarella, and watch it cluster onto the wood. "How about you? How was your day?" I ask in a voice that sounds far too high-pitched, and fake.

I don't look directly at her, but in the periphery I can see her squirm in her seat, like she doesn't know what to do with herself, and the seconds drag on until she speaks again.

"Oh, come on!" she finally says. "It can't be my turn yet." She gets up to check the sauce, hums along with the music again while she gives it a stir, and returns to her spot at the counter. "Come on," she repeats, beaming and practically begging. "There must have been *something* interesting."

I want so much to tell her the truth. Yesterday, someone disappeared right before my eyes. I almost got a tardy slip for the first time in my life. I walked home from school, because, until thirty minutes ago, my best friend and I weren't speaking. And there's a pencil sitting in my backpack that shouldn't feel quite so important. I want to tell her that, so far, nothing about this week has been normal, and that alone is interesting. Mostly, I want to tell her that there's a guy at the center of all of the excitement, so she can ask me if he's cute and I can blush and nod. Instead, I keep my eyes on the cutting board and say, "I got an A on that anatomy paper you helped me with last week."

She gives me a small, forced smile. "Oh. Well . . . that's good." I can still feel her watching me slice and hoping I'll say more, and I move slowly, waiting for the right amount of time to pass so I can turn the subject back to her. After a few minutes, I hear her start drumming her fingertips on the counter. Finally, when she can no longer stand the silence, she sits up, her back straight. "Okay, I'll go," she says, and she launches into a long story about one of

the nurses who got caught kissing an EMT out by the ambulance bay.

Fifteen minutes later, I hear the front door open and close. "I'm home!" Dad yells from the foyer. When he arrives in the kitchen, Mom and I are standing side by side at the counter, layering noodles, sauce, and cheese in a deep casserole dish.

"Hi, Annie." He leans down and kisses the crown of my head.

"Hey, Dad." I lift my cheesy, tomatoey fingers out of the lasagna and give him a little wave.

But before he can take another step, Mom turns around and grabs his face in her sauce-covered hands. "Hi, honey."

Dad takes two steps back, bright red handprints on both cheeks, and we both watch him, eyes wide as we wait to see how he'll react. He just stands there, stunned. Then he shakes his head and gives Mom a peck on her nose. "I'll just go wash up," he says.

"You do that," Mom says with a laugh, and the two of us crack up while we top off our creation with handfuls of shredded cheese. Then the dish goes into the oven, Mom heads for the shower, and I trudge up to my room to start on my homework.

I plop down on my shag rug and open my backpack. In the small zippered compartment in the front, I spot the pencil, right where I left it, now blanketed in gum wrappers. I take it out and run it back and forth between my fingers, just like Bennett was doing this morning as I walked through the door. I close my eyes, picturing the way he smiled as he held it out to me. And I start concocting a plan to return it.

5

Stalling.

There are more details behind my brilliant scheme to return Bennett's pencil, but that's basically what it comes down to—stalling. I intend to dawdle on my way to Spanish so I won't have time to return it before class. Then, when the lunch bell rings, I'll stand up, turn around to block Bennett's path, and give it back to him. If everything goes according to plan, I'll be able to keep him talking all the way to the dining hall.

My heart is racing as I arrive at the door. The bell rings, right on cue, but as I walk into the classroom and pass Señor Argotta, he claps and announces, "Conversation practice! Time to move, everybody!" He bursts out with it like he's declaring a celebration.

No. Not conversation practice. This is the worst of Argotta's clever little group exercises. I've timed my arrival perfectly, but it won't matter if Bennett ends up on the other side of the room again.

Argotta's walking through the rows of desks, breaking us up into pairs, and passing out laminated cards that depict a situation no one would ever find themselves in on a trip to Spain—or anywhere else in the world, for that matter. He gives me my card, and I shut my lids tight, fearing the worst. I open one eye and read: *Partner number one, you are interviewing for a job as a waiter/waitress at one of Madrid's finest restaurants. Partner number two, you are the restaurant owner.* I look over at Alex, my usual partner, and he winks.

Señor Argotta stops and turns back. "Señorita Greene, partner with Señor Cooper, *por favor.*"

What? No. I'm sorry, señor. I cannot partner with Bennett Cooper. All night I've pictured how I'm going to return his pencil. How I'm going to ask him again—when he's not under Emma's and Danielle's scrutiny—if he was at the track on Monday. I'm going to ask him why he seemed to know me then, but now he doesn't. I've pictured the whole discussion, right down to the last detail; but I've never pictured talking with him in *Spanish*.

I consider running for the door. Faking a seizure. I could move across the room and take the open seat across from Señor *Kestler*, as if I've misunderstood Argotta's accent. But it's too late. Bennett has heard the instructions just as plainly as I have, and now he's eyeing me with this "don't worry, I won't bite" look. He lifts his chin like he's commanding me to stand up, and when I do, he turns my desk around to face his.

"Hi," I say when we're both settled again.

"Hi. Anna, right?" Bennett looks completely relaxed, and the act of verbalizing my name doesn't seem to cause the odd reaction it did in the dining hall two days ago.

“Yeah.” I look down at the table, trying not to look at his eyes for fear of getting trapped in there again. “Bennett, right?”

He nods.

“Do you ever go by ‘Ben’?” Where did *that* come from? Oh, God.

He grins. “No. Just . . . Bennett.”

And here comes the flush. I wonder if he is as curious to know what I look like without a red face as I am to see him with a haircut. “Thanks for the loan.” As I pass him the pencil, I can feel all my questions just sitting there, waiting for me to launch them one by one, but I can’t seem to find my voice now that he’s sitting here across from me.

“Any time,” he says as he sets it in the long groove at the top of the wooden desk. The pencil must have magnetic properties, because it seems to be pulling both of us into it. “So, what’s our assignment today?” he asks as he leans forward, and I swallow the questions down.

“I’m afraid it’s a tough one.” I reach over, bridging the gap between our two desks, and set the card down with the words facing him.

He picks it up, and a grin gradually spreads over his face. “Oh, this should be easy.” He leans forward, like he has a secret. “I’ve interviewed for several waiter jobs in Madrid before.”

“Really?”

“No.” He smiles. “I’m kidding.”

I laugh too loud. “Well, good.” I take a deep breath to steady my nerves and press my palms flat on the desk to keep my hands from shaking. I move in toward him and say, “I have no idea how to hire someone in this country or any other one.” I take the card from his desk and lean back, trying to look comfortable. “So,” I begin in my most practiced Spanish diction, “tell me about your experience as a waiter, Señor Cooper.”

Bennett launches into a lengthy description of his work at various fictitious restaurants throughout Spain. In perfectly crafted sentences, he describes his expertise with a crumb scraper. He explains how he can talk any customer into getting the special of the day instead of the dish they really wanted. He can handle ten tables at once, including large parties, and he always overtips the bussers. He says it all with a straight face and the smallest trace of a glint in his eye.

I understand his Spanish, but I have to work to hear the words he says. He speaks beautifully. His voice is steady and strong, the cadence is balanced, and I’m completely transfixed, pulled into the richness of his voice. He tells about another fictitious job in a restaurant in Seville called *El Mesero Mejor*. The Best Waiter.

By the end he has me smiling. Laughing. And more than a little bit in awe. He concludes

in his perfectly confident Spanish: "So you see, I am a perfect waiter for your restaurant." I'm not sure how much time passes between the completion of this sentence and his next word: "Well?" He raises his eyebrows and waits for my reply.

When I realize he's caught me staring again, I bite my lip and wait for the flush to spread over my face, but this time, nothing happens. I go with it. "You're hired," I say with a shrug.

"Wow? Just like that?" he says in English. "You're an easy manager."

I try to think of a clever response, but my mind is blank. "Your Spanish is really good," I say instead.

"I did a study abroad program in Barcelona last summer."

I smile when I think about living in Barcelona with a local family. "I'd love to do that. It must have been fun to *live* there. To really get into another culture."

"It was pretty incredible." He rests his forearms on the desk. "How about you? Have you been to Spain?"

"No," I say under my breath. "I haven't been . . . anywhere. I work at my family's bookstore, and I spend a lot of time in the travel section. That's about as close to the rest of the world as I get."

"I'm surprised to hear that." He leans in even closer, like he's got a secret to divulge. "This is only my third day here, but it seems like a fairly well-traveled bunch."

"It is." I shrug again. "I'm just not . . . part of that particular bunch."

"So, you work in a bookstore." It's a statement, not a question. "And read travel books."

I look at him and try to think how to respond. I'm long past the point of being embarrassed by the fact that I'm the poorest kid in this incredibly wealthy high school, but he doesn't need to rub it in. "Something like that. I take it you travel a lot."

"Me?" He looks down at the table. "Yeah. You could definitely say that. . . ." He trails off and seems to be suppressing a smile. "I love traveling." My expression must show my confusion, because his face gets serious as he clarifies. "Yes. I travel a lot. . . . As much as I can."

"Lucky you." The words sound bitter as they leave my mouth, and I immediately wish I could pull them back.

"I'm sorry. Was that rude? I didn't mean it to be."

"No." It's not his fault I've barely left the state. "You weren't rude."

"Look, anyone who wants to travel can find a way to do it. You just have to get creative."

Señor Argotta suddenly turns the corner, coming within earshot, and Bennett switches back to Spanish. He looks me right in the eye. "You know what they say, *La vida es una aventura atrevida o no es nada*." He looks out of the corner of his eye, thinking. "I can't remember who said that."

I laugh under my breath.

“What?” Bennett’s smiling along with me, even though he has no idea why I’m so amused.

“Helen Keller,” I whisper, picturing the poster that hung on the wall in Miss Waters’s English class back in seventh grade, its white sailboat fighting against the current in the foreground and the quote *Life is either a daring adventure or nothing* in block letters below.

“She probably didn’t say it in Spanish, then.”

I try to stifle my laugh but it’s hopeless. “No, probably not.” We’re both still smiling and watching each other, but I break the connection when I look up to be sure Argotta can’t hear us speaking English. He’s clear across the room, kneeling down next to another team and helping them through a translation. When I look back at Bennett, I discover that his eyes haven’t left me.

“Well, whatever language it’s in,” I say, “I have to agree with her. I, for one, am ready for a *lot* more adventure and a lot less nothing.”

His smile fades, and he looks at me with a serious expression. I think he’s about to say something significant, but he presses his lips together. I watch him, waiting him out, until it’s clear that he’s planning to stay silent.

“Were you going to say something?” I finally ask.

He gives me a little grin. “Yeah . . . actually . . .” But then the bell rings. “Never mind,” he says rising and heading for the door. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

I watch him walk across the room and out into the hallway. When I look down at the desk I see the pencil, still sitting in the groove, right where he put it. I twist my hair and hold it against the back of my head with one hand while I stick the pencil in place with the other.

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See you later. That’s what he said three days ago—*See you later.* But I didn’t see him later at all. He wasn’t in the dining hall, I didn’t run into him in The Donut, and he wasn’t in the student lot.

He was in Spanish on Thursday and Friday—and I’m certain he was watching the door for me both days, because the minute I walked in he looked down at his desk. But there was no satisfied grin when he saw me, no smile on his face as he doodled—and he didn’t look up again before I took my seat. Each day, I’d tried to return the pencil, but he bolted for the door in perfect synchronization with the bell. And it was as if our conversation had never even happened.

6

The storm that starts on Saturday morning rains out my track meet, keeps me awake all night, and doesn't let up until afternoon. I walk to the bookstore in a daze, and when I manage to make it to the corner without breaking anything, I decide to reward myself with a latte. Even with the stop, I have fifteen minutes to kill before my shift, so I head into the record store.

"Anna!" Justin yells over the loud, steady backbeat of music coming from the ceiling, godlike and omnipresent. He walks out from behind the counter and pulls me in for a hug. "I was hoping you'd come by this weekend."

"Hey, buddy," I say, and silently scold myself for calling him that. It's probably worse than calling him Freckles, but words like *buddy* or *pal* or some other brotherly sounding term seem to pop out of my mouth whenever I see him. He pulls back and looks at me, and even though it's only for a brief flash, it's there. A twinge, like I just insulted him.

"What's this?" I ask, pointing up at the music.

He leans in close to me. "I scored." He looks around the store to be sure no one's listening—and no one is, since we're the only ones here. "The drummer from Nirvana just cut a demo, and Elliot let me borrow it." I don't know who Elliot is, but I imagine he's someone important at Northwestern's student-run radio station, where Justin has been interning for the last three months. While I dream of visiting far-off places, he dreams of moving into a high-rise dorm just down the street so he can major in broadcasting and spend his college years as a DJ for the station's legendary *The Rock Show*.

"Do you want to borrow it?" he asks as he steps even closer to me.

"No, really, that's—" I'm shaking my head, but it doesn't matter. He's already walking away, and when he ducks down behind the counter, the music stops. He comes back carrying the CD. "Here, take it. Tell me what you think."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. Just bring it back sometime next week."

"Thank you. That is so cool of you," I say as I press it to my chest.

"I think you'll like it."

"I'm sure I will. You know I trust you completely." I look up and find him watching me, and that's when I feel it. Him wanting to kiss me.

"Any other new stuff?" I try to turn his attention toward the rest of the new releases on the wire rack.

"Not there." He shoots me a smile and gestures for me to follow him to his usual spot behind the counter. Then he disappears and pops up again, placing a jewel case on the

counter between us. The paper cover is painted in watercolors: blues and reds and greens, all swirling in interesting patterns and fading off at the sides. Like any watercolor, it's unique. One of a kind. Still, it matches all the others on my shelf in my bedroom.

"A new running mix!" I pick it up, flip it over, and read the track names. "You have no idea. I'm so tired of skipping through tracks on my CDs. I always run best to yours."

"I have to say, I outdid myself this time." He smiles and blushes, and I watch how the hue makes his freckles disappear. He's kind like no other guy I know, and I wish for a moment that I could think of him as more than a friend.

"I'm sure you did." And there it is again. In his mind, this is the moment in the movie where I leap over the counter and rip the buttons off his shirt. Instead, I look at my watch. Three fifty-nine. "Shoot." I gesture across the street toward the bookstore. "I've got to run and release my dad from duty. Do you need any books?" I hold up my new CDs. "You know the deal—one for one."

He nods. "Actually, I wanted to ask you some—" Justin trails off and we both turn our attention to the front door, watching as a girl in sorority letters walks in, comes straight to the counter, and stands next to me, waiting. Justin shoots me an annoyed look. "Never mind. I'll just try to come by the bookstore later."

Once my back is turned, I let out a sigh of relief and silently thank the Tri-Delt for buying me a bit more time.

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Time seems to have slowed to a crawl. Northwestern students come in and look around, then leave. Mothers come in with their toddlers in tow, browsing the Book Club Recommendations table while their kids destroy the picture-book section. I scan credit cards, adjust books into place until all the bindings are even and the newer books are displayed with prominence, and read the Michelin guide to the Côte d'Azur. At 8:50, I total the day's sales, zip the cash into the green vinyl envelope, and lock it in the safe in the back room. I flip the sign on the front door to CLOSED and click the dead bolt in place.

The coffeehouse is already packed. Finals week at Northwestern has just ended, and no one's studying tonight. In fact, most look haggard and worn, like they've been celebrating since Friday afternoon.

As I walk by, I casually look in the window to see if I can spot Justin with his radio-station friends. He seemed so eager to talk to me earlier, but he never came by the bookstore tonight.

I keep walking, and round the corner to my dark and quiet block. I see a sudden

movement in the park across the street and I slow my pace, squinting into the darkness. It's hard to see any details, but there's definitely someone there, and I narrow my eyes again until I make out the shape of a person, doubled over on the park bench, rocking back and forth. I step onto the grass to get a closer look. I gasp, because even from this distance, I'm pretty sure I know who it is.

My feet seem to move toward him on their own, and when I'm within earshot, I whisper, "Bennett? Is that you?" There's no response, but now I'm close enough to make out the sound of groaning, low and weak. "Bennett?" I take small steps, moving in a little closer. "Are you okay?"

"Go away," he grunts. He tries to raise his head, but it drops farther into his lap, and he rubs his temples, making that guttural sound again. I realize he's saying something, so I bend in closer. "I can't leave," he's whimpering. "I've got to find her." He's rocking and moaning and repeating the words, and I'm watching and shaking and starting to freak out.

Suddenly, he stops moving and his eyes find me. He seems surprised to see me standing next to him. "Anna?"

"Yeah, it's me. I'm going to go get you some help. Stay here, I'll be right back."

"No!" He says the single word with force, but it's tinged with agony, and I know there's no way that I can handle this alone.

"Bennett, you need help." I pivot on my heel to leave.

"No." He reaches out and grabs my wrist. "Please. Don't. Go." I stop cold and whirl around. It looks like it's taking all his strength for him to lift his head. "It's . . ." He takes another deep breath. "It's easing up now." But I don't believe him. In spite of the temperature and the frozen bench he's planted on, sweat is beading up on his forehead and running down his cheeks. He looks like me after a sprint, concentrating on each inhale and exhale. "Please. Just. Sit."

I look around the pitch-black park, drop my backpack on the ground by his feet, and kneel down beside it. I can't bring myself to sit on that cold bench.

"I'll be okay." He rubs his temples again and slowly raises his head. His voice sounds a little stronger now. "It's a migraine," he says between breaths. "I get them when . . ." His voice trails off. "Just sit with me, Anna? Please?" I look back toward the coffeehouse.

I start to lean forward to rub his back like my mom would, like a friend who knows him much better than I do might, but I catch my hands and force them to my sides. For the next five minutes, the only sound between us is his labored breath.

"Keep breathing." It's the only thing I can think to say, even though I realize it's not helpful.

Finally, he sits up a little straighter. "Do me a favor?" He hasn't even told me what it is

and I'm already nodding. "Don't tell anyone about this."

"I won't." I shake my head and watch the sweat still dripping down his cheeks. "But can I please go get you some water? I'll be fast."

He doesn't say yes, but at least this time he doesn't argue. Before he changes his mind and stops me, I stand up, leaving my backpack at his feet, and sprint back to the coffeehouse. The girl behind the counter gives me a cup of ice water, and I run back to the bench.

"Here you—" I start to say, but my words hang in the air. My backpack is still on the frozen ground, but Bennett is gone.