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**Karma Police**

by Pylades Drunk
The almost sixteen hour drive from Huntington Beach, California to Salem, Oregon had been total gitmo. It went from road trip to guilt trip in no time at all. And the torture didn’t let up for the entire 958.8 miles. And yes, Ryan counted. Beach Boys and Janis Joplin were his only escape from his quarreling brother and sister.

“IF YOU HADN’T SENT A DICK PIC TO ASHLEE, WE’D STILL BE IN HUNTINGTON BEACH!”

“IF YOU HADN’T DECIDED TO NEARLY KILL RYAN, WE’D STILL BE IN HUNTINGTON!”

Ryan’s only saving grace was the fact that Pete and Hillary weren’t mad at him. And that Pete had given him the window seat.

“Peter! Hillary! Enough!” His dad snapped from the passenger seat of the new family suv. Green in both color and fuel Efficiency, it was one of the many overtures his parents had taken to show the locals that Peter and Dale Wentz were more than just great-looking wealthy transplants from the 90210. Which was WAAAY off. The zip code for where they lived was 90742.

Stop getting sidetracked Ryan!

The thirty-six pre-shipped UPS boxes filled with Kayaks, sailboards, fishing poles, and all of that good stuff that rich people get for mountain living.

While Hillary and Pete’s argument got quiet, Andy had started up.

“Ahhhh, August in pOre -egon!” The six year old sniffed, “Ain’t it grand?” An eyeroll followed that Ryan didn’t need to see to feel Andy suddenly start kicking at the back of his seat. He ripped his ear buds out and would have smothered his little brother if Pete hadn’t suddenly grabbed his arms.

“Andrew, I swear to god!” Ryan snapped.

“Boys!”

“I want my seals!” Andy yelled. Pete leaned down and pulled out a stuffed seal that had gone flying through the car an hour into the drive.

“Don’t throw it.” Pete said. Andy being the little kid he was, threw it in Pete’s face. Ryan and Hillary locked eyes over Pete’s head and immediately held Pete down to prevent him from murdering their baby brother.

“I don’t get it,” Hillary continued over Pete and Andy yelling gibberish at each other. “Ryan survived fifteen years breathing smog. One more won’t kill him. He could wear a mask. People could sign it, like they sign casts. Maybe it would inspire a whole line of accessories for asthmatics. Like inhalers on necklaces and—”

“Enough, Hillary.” Dale sighed, obviously exhausted from the month long debate.

“But next September I’ll be in college,” Hillary pressed, not used to losing an argument. She was pretty, perfectly proportioned, and used to getting what she wanted. “You couldn’t wait one more year to move?”
“This move will be good for all of us. It’s not just about your brother’s asthma. Merston High is one of Oregon’s top schools. Plus, it’s about connecting with nature and getting away from all that California superficiality.”

Ryan smiled to himself. His dad, Peter, was a well known attorney and old money, and his mother had been a school placement counselor. At one of the best schools in Huntington Beach. And Pete was well acquainted with the punk scene. Of all of his siblings, Ryan was the tallest, bordering on gangly, pimply from a random surge of hormones, had the dumbest looking haircut, and always managed to look like an overgrown twelve year old girl. Unlike Pete who dressed like your average sixteen year old baby punk or Hillary who dressed like a forest elf. And then there’s the matter of hair. Besides his dad, none of his siblings had the same kind of curly hair he had. Hillary, Pete, and Andy had very curly hair they inherited from their grandma. Convinced the wrong family had taken him home from the hospital, Ryan placed little stock on outward appearance. What was the point? His chin was thin, his teeth were fang like, and his hair was a flat brown. No highlights. No lowlights. No butter or toffee drizzle. Just flat brown. His eyes, while fully functional, were as brown as a doe, which was the only thing he liked, and made him look, once again like a little girl. Not that anyone noticed his eyes. His nose took center stage. Composed of two bumps and a sharp drop-off, it looked like a camel in downward-facing dog.

Not that it mattered. As far as Ryan was concerned, the ability to sing was his best asset. Music teachers had gushed over his pitch-perfect voice. High, angelic, and haunting, it had a mesmerizing effect on everyone who heard it, and teary audiences would spring to their feet after every recital. Unfortunately, by the time he turned eight, asthma had taken center stage and stolen the show. Once Ryan started middle school, Peter offered to get him rhinoplasty. But Ryan refused. A new nose wouldn’t cure his asthma, so why bother? All he had to do was hold out until high school, and things would change. Girls would be less superficial. Boys would be more mature. And academia would reign supreme.

As if!

Nobody talked to Ryan because his nose made him look like a girly, brunette snape. They didn’t look at him. By Thanksgiving he was practically invisible. If it weren’t for his incessant wheezing and inhaler sucking, no one would have known he was alive.

But, of course, the accident happened and he had to get reconstructive surgery. Not that anything big changed. Except his nose. The doctor gave him a thinner, less camel-looking nose.

Back at Huntington High, the girls were gawking, the boys were less judgmental, and hummingbirds seemed to fly a little closer. He found a level of acceptance he had never dreamed possible.

But none of this newfound handsomeness made Ryan any happier. Instead of flaunting and flirting, he spent his free time buried under the covers feeling like his sister’s holographic backpack—beautiful and shiny on the surface but a terrible mess on the inside. How dare they act nice just because I’m pretty! I’m the same person I’ve always been!

By summer, Ryan had completely withdrawn. He dressed in baggy clothes, never brushed his hair, and accessorized solely by clipping an inhaler to his belt loops and his ever present pageboy hat.

During the Wentz’ annual Fourth of July barbecue (where he used to sing the national anthem), Ryan had a severe asthma attack that landed him in Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. In the waiting room, Dale anxiously flipped through a travel magazine and stopped at a lush photograph of Oregon, claiming she could smell the fresh air just by looking at it.
When Ryan was released, his parents told him they were moving. And for the first time ever, a smile spread across his perfectly symmetrical face.

“Helloooooo, adOre-egon!” He said to himself as the green BMW forged ahead. He let go of his twin brother and relaxed back into his seat.

Then, lulled by the rhythmic swish of the windshield wipers and the tapping of falling rain, Ryan drifted off to sleep.
This time for real.
Welcome To Paradise

The sun was finally up. Robins and sparrows were chirping their usual morning playlists. Outside Spencer’s frosted bedroom window, kids on bikes began ringing their bells and circling the Radcliffe Way cul-de-sac. The neighborhood was awake. He could finally blast Green Day.

More than anything, Spencer wanted to bop his head to “Welcome to Paradise.” No. Wait. That wasn’t entirely true. What he really wanted to do was jump up on his metal bed, kick the fleece-coated electromagnetic blankets to the polished concrete, swing his hair, wave his arms, shake his booty, and bop his head to “Welcome to Paradise.” But disrupting the flow of electricity before the charge was complete could lead to memory loss, fainting spells, or even a coma. The plus side, however, was never needing to plug in his phone. As long as it was near Spencer’s body, the device’s battery had more juice than Juicy Fruit.

Luxuriating in his morning infusion, he lay supine with a tangle of black and red wires clamped to his neck bolts. While the last electric currents ricocheted through Spencer’s body, he leafed through the latest issue of AP magazine. Careful not to rip the pages like last time, he searched the musicians’ smooth, odd-colored necks for metal rivets, wondering how they managed to “amp” without them.

As soon as Electra (the name he and the twins had given the amp machine, because its technical name was too hard to pronounce) shut down, Spencer delighted in the itchy tingle of his thimble-size neck bolts when they started to cool. Feeling invigorated, he got up to light the sangria scented candles his mom had let him have after he complained about the smell of the chemicals giving him a headache. Suddenly the door to the Fab blew open and the twins came running in. Franny and Vicky both latched onto his arms squealing.

“Do I smell your mother’s candles?” His dad called.

“Yesss!” Spencer called back, freeing his arms from the twins iron grip.

Vincent was swinging a leather duffel and wearing a black Adidas tracksuit and his favorite brown UGG slippers with a hole in one toe.

“Well and old, just like your mom,” he’d say when Vicky made fun of them, and then his wife would swat him on the arm. But Spencer knew he was just joking, because Viola was the type of woman you wished was in a magazine just so you could stare at her mismatched chartreuse-and-cerulean-colored eyes and shiny brown hair without being called a stalker or a freak.

His father, however, had more of an Arnold Schwarzenegger thing going on, as if his chiseled features had been stretched to cover his square head. People probably wanted to stare at him too but were afraid of his six-foot-four frame and super-squinty expression. But his squints didn’t mean he was angry. They meant he was thinking. And being a mad scientist, he was always thinking…. At least that’s how Viola explained it.

“Can we talk to you for a minute, sweetie?” Viola asked in a singsong way that mimicked the swooshing hem of her soft pink linen sundress. Her voice was so delicate and similar to her namesake that people were shocked when they heard it coming from a six-foot-tall woman.

Vi and Vince walked across the polished concrete floor holding hands, a united front, as always. But this time, traces of concern lay beneath their proud grins.

“Have a seat, dear.” Viola gestured to the pillow-covered ruby-red Moroccan chaise Vicky had Spencer order online from Ikea. In the far corner of the Fab, along with his sticker-covered desk, his
flat-screen Sony, and a rainbow of colorful wardrobes stuffed with Internet buys, the lounge faced the only window in the room. Even though that window had been frosted for privacy, it gave Spencer a glimpse into the outside world.

“Are we in trouble for buying a whole bunch of harajuku stuff?” Vicky asked

“Or was it my fifth video game haul?” Spencer asked.

“Or all of my science and craft stuff?” Franny added.

“Nothing like that. But we are going discuss your experiments Francine.” The three Smith children padded across the fluffy pink sheepskin, yet another Vicky choice, path from his dresser to the lounge, silently fearing that his parents had seen his latest charges from iTunes. Nervous, he pulled on the track of fine black stitches that held his head in place.

“Don’t pull,” Vincent insisted, lowering himself onto the chaise. The birch frame creaked in protest. “There’s nothing to be nervous about. We just want to talk to you.” He placed the leather duffel by his feet.

Viola tapped the empty cushion beside her, then fussed with her signature black muslin scarf. Spencer, seeing the distress on Vicky and Franny’s faces, plopped down next to her, Vicky tightened her long hot pink Harajuku Girls robe and chose to sit on the pink rug instead.

“What’s up?” Franny asked, smiling and trying to sound as if she hadn’t just spent $59.99 for a season pass of Gossip Girl.

“Change is in the air.” Vincent rubbed his hands together and inhaled deeply, as if gearing up to tackle a hike up Mount Hood.

No more credit cards? Spencer speculated with dread. He knew he shouldn’t have let Vicky and Franny decorate his room but he liked the sense of freedom the card gave him.

Viola nodded and forced another smile, her dark purple painted lips holding tight to each other. She looked at her husband, urging him to continue, but he widened his dark eyes to communicate that he didn’t know what to say.

Vicky shifted uncomfortably on the rug. Spencer understood the thirteen year old’s worry. He too had never seen her parents at such a loss for words. Franny and Vicky started sparking madly.

“Relax, sweetheart.” Viola leaned forward and smoothed her hand over both twins long light brown hair. The soothing gesture stopped the energy leak but it clearly did nothing for her insides. His parents were the only people Spencer and the twins knew. They were their friends and mentors. Sure Vincent didn’t quite understand Spencer’s love for music or Vicky’s love for anything japanese and korean but he actively encouraged them. Disappointing them meant disappointing the entire world.

Vincent took another deep breath, then exhaled as he made his announcement. “The summer is over. Your mother and I have to go back to teaching science and anatomy at the university. We can’t homeschool you three anymore.” He jiggled his ankle restlessly.

“Huh?” Vicky knit her perfectly sculpted eyebrows. Spencer could see the cogs turning in his little sister’s mind.

Viola placed an I’ll-take-it-from-here hand on Vincent’s knee, then cleared her throat. “What your father is trying to say is that you three are fifteen days old. On each of those days, he implanted a year’s worth of knowledge into your brain: math, science, history, geography, languages,
technology, art, music, movies, songs, trends, expressions, social conventions, manners, emotional
depth, maturity, discipline, free will, muscle coordination, speech coordination, sense recognition,
depth perception, ambition, and even a small appetite. You have it all!”

Spencer nodded his head, wondering when the part where one of them being in trouble for their
spending was coming.

“So, now that you’re a trio of beautiful, smart teenagers, you’re ready for…” Viola sniffed back a
tear. She looked over at Vincent, who nodded, urging her to continue. Licking her lips and exhaling,
she managed to work up one last smile, then—

Spencer sparked. This was taking longer than ground shipping.
Finally Viola blurted, “Normie school.” She said it like nor-mee.

“What’s ‘normie’?” Franny asked, clearly fearing the answer. Is that some kind of rehab program for
shopoholics? Spencer didn’t know but he knew he didn’t want to go there.

“A normie is someone with common physical traits,” Vincent explained.

“Like…” Viola picked up an issue of Teen Vogue that Vicky left on the orange-lacquered side table
and opened it to a random page. “Like them.”

She tapped an H&M ad featuring three girls in bras and hot pants—a blond, a brunette, and a
redhead. They all had curly hair.

“Am I a normie?” Franny asked, feeling just as proud as the beaming models.

Viola shook her head from side to side.

“Why? Because my hair is straight?” Franny asked. This was the most confusing lesson of all.

“Because we’re a mint shade of green.” Spencer said, rolling his eyes. “And I don’t think they
charge like we do. Right mom?”

“Yes. And normies are afraid of people like us.” Viola continued.

“I mean not ALL of them because there are people who adore us but most are scared of us.” Spencer
rambled.

“Spencer, sweetheart.” Viola placed her hand on Spencer’s shoulder.

“No, not because your hair is straight,” Vincent said through a frustrated smirk. “Because I built you.
And like Spencer said, your mint skin.”

“Didn’t everyone’s parents ‘build’ them?” Vicky made air quotes and crossed her legs. “You know,
technically speaking.”

Viola raised a dark eyebrow. Her daughter had a point.

“Yes, but I built you three in the literal way,” Vincent explained. “In this lab. From perfect body
parts that I made with my hands. I programmed your brain full of information, stitched you together,
and put bolts on the sides of your neck so you could get charged. You have no real need for food,
other than enjoyment. And, because you have no blood and because I made them myself, well, your
skin, it’s… it’s green.”

Spencer looked at his hands as if for the first time. They were the color of mint chocolate chip ice
cream, just like the rest of him.

“I know,” Franny giggled. “Isn’t it voltage?”

“It is.” Vincent chuckled. “That’s why you’re so special. No other student at your new school was made like that. Just you three.”

“You mean the school will have other people in it?” Spencer looked around the Fab, the only room he’d ever truly known.

His parents nodded, guilt and trepidation wrinkling their foreheads.

Spencer searched their moist eyes, wondering if this was really happening. Were they really going to just cut them loose? Drop their only three children in a school full of curly-haired normies and expect them to fend for themselves? Did they really have the heart to walk away from their educations so they could teach lecture halls full of perfect strangers instead?

Despite their quivering lips and salt-stained cheeks, it seemed that they actually were. Suddenly, a feeling that could only be measured on the Richter scale rumbled through Spencer’s belly. It climbed up his chest, shot through his throat, and exploded right out of his mouth:

“VOLTAGE!”
Testosterone Boys

A honking horn scared Ryan awake, accidentally making him backhand Pete.

“Ow! What the fuck Ryan!” Pete howled.

Ryan peeled his ear off the cool window and opened his eyes. At first glance, the neighborhood seemed to be covered in cotton. But he then realized his glasses had fallen into his lap. He shoveled them on and the world sharpened like a developing Polaroid as his eyes adjusted to the hazy morning light.

The two moving trucks blocked access to their circular driveway and obstructed the view of the house. All Ryan could make out was half of a wraparound porch and its requisite swing, both of which appeared to be made of life-size Lincoln Logs. It was an image Ryan would never forget. Or was it the emotions the image conjured—hope, excitement, and fear of the unknown, all three tightly braided together, creating a fourth emotion that was impossible to define. He was getting a second chance at happiness, and it tickled like swallowing fifty fuzzy caterpillars.

Beepbeepbeepbeep!

A husky mountain man wearing baggy jeans and a brown puffy Carhartt vest nodded hello as he pulled the Carvers’ eggplant-colored Calvin Klein sectional from the truck.

“That’s enough honking, dear. It’s early!” Dale swatted her husband playfully. “The neighbors are going to think we’re lunatics.”

The smell of coffee breath and cardboard to-go cups made Ryan’s empty stomach lurch.

“Yeah, Dad, stawp,” Hillary moaned, her head still resting on her holographic bag. “You’re wakey-waking the only cool person in Salem.”

Peter unclipped his seat belt and turned to face his daughter. “And who might that be?”

“Meeee.” Hillary stretched, her chest rising and then sinking inside her light blue tank like a buoy on a choppy sea. She must have fallen asleep on her angry, balled-up fist, because her cheek was imprinted with the heart from her new ring—the one her teary best friends gave her as a going-away present.

Ryan and Pete, desperate to dodge the I-miss-my-friends bullet Hillary would undoubtedly fire when she noticed her cheek, were the first to open the door and step onto the winding street.

The rain had stopped and the sun was rising. A purplish red layer of mist cloaked the neighborhood like a thin fuchsia scarf over a lampshade. It cast a magical glow over Radcliffe Way. Damp and glistening, the neighborhood smelled like earthworms and wet grass.

“Get a whiff of that air, Georgie, Pete.” Peter smacked his flannel-covered lungs and lifted his head in reverence to the tie-dyed sky. Pete snorted at Ryan’s childhood nickname, inspired by how in love he’d been with the IT miniseries and Georgie whom he shared a first name with and Eddie whom he shared asthma with.

“I know.” Ryan hugged his dad. “I can breathe better already,” he assured him, partly because he wanted him to know he appreciated his sacrifice but mostly because he really could breathe better. It felt as if a sandbag had been lifted from his chest.
“You gotta get out and smell this,” Peter insisted, tapping his wife’s window with his gold initial ring.

Dale lifted her finger impatiently and then cocked her head toward Hillary and Andrew, in the backseat, to show she was dealing with another meltdown.

“Sorry.” Ryan hugged his father again, this time with a softer grip, a grip that begged forgive me. Pete jumped in on the hug.

“For what? This is great!” He took a long, deep breath. “The Wentz’s needed a change. We had SoCal dialed. It’s time for a new challenge. Living is all about—”

“I wish I was dead!” Hillary screamed from inside the SUV.

“There goes the only cool person in Salem,” Peter mumbled under his breath. Pete and Ryan looked up at their father. The instant their eyes met, they burst out laughing.

“All right, who’s ready for a tour?” Dale opened the door. The tip of her fur-lined hiking bootie lowered tentatively toward the pavement as if testing the temperature of a bath.

Hillary leapt out of the SUV and bellowed “First one upstairs gets first dibs!” Ryan immediately bolted inside, Pete and Hillary close on his heels. He stopped when he saw his beloved pets, Dottie, Eleanor, Hobo, Peggy, Marcie, and Eliza. He shrieked and hugged all of them. Dottie and Hobo, his beagle pups, lapped at his face while Peggy, Marcie, and Eliza all gathered around his feet.

“Behind you,” grunted a sweat-soaked mover trying to negotiate the plump couch through the narrow doorway.

“Oops, sorry.” Ryan laughed nervously, stepping aside.

To his right, a long bedroom spanned the entire length of the house. Peter and Dale’s California king was already inside holding court, and the master bath was in the middle of a major facelift. A tinted sliding glass door opened onto a narrow lap pool that was enclosed by an eight-foot-high Lincoln Log wall. The indoor pool must have sealed the deal for Peter, who swam every morning to burn off the calories his nightly swim might have missed.

Overhead, in one of the remaining four bedrooms, Hillary was pacing and mumbling into her phone.

Across from his parents’ room was a cozy kitchen and dining area. The Wentz’s sleek appliances, glass table, and eight black-lacquered chairs looked futuristic compared to the rustic wood. But Ryan was sure the situation would be remedied as soon as her mom and dad located the nearest design center.

“Help!” Hillary called from upstairs.

“Huh?” Ryan called back, peeking at the sunken living room and its view of the wooded ravine out back.

“I’m dying!”

“Really?” Ryan bounded up the wooden staircase in the middle of the cabin still holding Dottie. He loved the way the uneven wood slabs felt beneath his black doc marten boots. Each one had its own unique personality. It wasn’t a celebration of symmetry, cohesion, and perfection, like SoCal. It was the exact opposite. Every log in the house had its own patterns and nicks. Each was unique. None was perfect. Yet they all fit together and supported a single vision. Maybe it was a regional thing.
Maybe all Salemites (Salemonians? Salemers?) celebrated unique patterns and nicks. And if they did, that meant the students at Merston High did too. The possibility filled him with a burst of asthma-free hope that propelled him up the steps, two at a time.

At the top, Ryan unzipped his black hoodie and threw it over the railing. The pits of his orange tee were soaked with sweat, and his forehead was beading up.

“I’m dying. It’s so seriously fuego.”

Hillary appeared from the bedroom on the left wearing nothing but a baby blue bra and jeans. “Is it two hundred degrees in here, or am I going through the change?”

“Hillary.” Ryan tossed her the hoodie. “Put this on!”

“Why?” she asked, casually inspecting her belly button. “Our windows are limo-tinted. It’s not like anyone can see inside.”

“Um, how ’bout the middle aged movers?” Ryan pointed out.

Hillary pressed the hoodie against her chest and then peered over the railing. “This place is kinda weird, don’tcha think?” The flush in her cheeks burned straight up to her hazel eyes, giving them an iridescent glow.

“This whole house is weird,” Ryan whispered. “I kinda love it.”

“That’s because you’re weird.” Pete said from down the hall while Hillary whipped the hoodie over the railing and sauntered into what must have been the bigger bedroom. A sassy mass of chocolate brown hair swung across her back as if waving good-bye.

“Someone lose a top?” called one of the movers from down below. The black garment was slumped over his shoulder like a dead ferret.

“Um, yeah, sorry,” Ryan answered. “You can just throw it on the steps.” He hurried to the only remaining bedroom so he wouldn’t think he was hitting on him.

He looked around the medium sized rectangular space: log walls, low ceiling with deep scratches that looked like claw marks, a tinted mini window that revealed a view of the next-door neighbor’s stone fence. The closet smelled like cedar when its sliding door was opened. The temperature in the room must have been close to five hundred degrees. A real-estate listing would call it “cozy” if the agent wasn’t afraid to lie.

“Nice coffin,” Hillary, still dressed in her bra, teased from the doorway.

“Nice try,” Ryan countered. “I still don’t want to move back.”

“Fine.” Hillary rolled her eyes. “Then at least let me make you jealous. Check out my boudoir.”

Ryan followed his sister past the cramped bathroom and into a spacious, light-filled square. It had an alcove for a desk, three deep closets, and an expansive tinted window overlooking Radcliffe Way. They could have shared it and still had room for Pete’s ego.

“Cute,” Ryan muttered, not sounding the least bit envious. “Hey, wanna walk into town and get some bagels or something? I’m starving.”

“Not until you admit that my room rocks and you’re jealous.” Hillary folded her arms across her
chest.

“No way.”

She turned toward her window in protest. “Um, how about now?” She blew a fog circle with her breath and then finger-drew a heart inside.

Ryan proceeded with caution. “Is this some kind of setup?”

“You wish,” Hillary said, eyeing the bare-chested boy in the garden across the street.

He was watering the yellow roses in front of a white cottage, backflipping through the yard. Lean back muscles undulated every time he flipped. His worn jeans had slipped just enough to reveal the elastic band on his pink boxers.

“Is that the gardener, or do you think he lives there?” Ryan asked.

“Lives there,” Hillary said with certainty. “If he was a gardener, he’d be tanned. Tie me.”

“Huh?”

Ryan turned to find his sister dressed in a purple, black, and silver zigzagged Missoni jumpsuit, holding the halter straps behind her head.

“How did you find that?” Ryan asked, tying a perfect bow. “The wardrobe boxes are still on the truck.”

“I knew Mom would give it to me if I kept complaining, so I snuck it in my bag before we left.”

“So all of that stuff in the car was an act?” Ryan’s heart began to trot.

“Yeah. I mean, Pete even got the biggest room out of this because he wouldn’t stop crying about leaving behind his band and soccer team.” Hillary pointed out. “Now go put on a dry shirt and fix your hair.”

Ryan wasn’t sure whether he wanted to hug his sister or hit her. But there wasn’t time for either.

Hillary had already slipped on a pair of Dale’s silver platform sandals and scuttled back to the window. “Now, who’s ready to meet the neighbors?”

“Hillary, don’t!” Ryan begged, but his sister was already struggling with the iron latch. Trying to tame Hillary or Pete was like trying to stop a moving roller coaster by waving your hands in the air. It was an exhausting waste of time.

“Hey, Hot Stuff!” Hillary shouted out the window, then ducked below the ledge.

The boy turned and looked up, sheltering his eyes from the sun.


Ryan wanted to shout “I don’t need you to tell me who I can and can’t have!” But there was a shirtless boy with oversized red-framed glasses and a mop of brownish black hair staring at him. All he could do was stare back and wonder what color his eyes were.

He waved awkwardly, but Ryan remained frozen. Maybe he’d assume he was one of those life-size cardboard cutouts in the lobby of the movie theater and not a really socially awkward boy who was
about to kick his sister in the shin.

“Ouch!” Hillary wailed, grabbing her shin.

Ryan moved away from the window. “I can’t believe you did that to me,” he whisper-shouted.

“Well it’s not like you were going to do anything,” Hillary insisted, her pale brown eyes widening from the strength of her own conviction.

“Why would I? I don’t even know him.” Ryan leaned against the bumpy log wall and lowered his head in her hands.

“So?”

“So... I’m tired of people thinking I’m a freak. I know you can’t relate to that but—”

“RYYYY-ANNNN!” Pete hollered from downstairs. “I WANNA GO EXPLORE BUT MOM SAID WE HAVE TO GO TOGETHER!”
Spencer jumped to his bare feet and began dancing to the Green Day tunes lingering inside his head.

“So you’re okay with going to school?” Viola’s spidery black lashes fluttered with disbelief.

“Why wouldn’t we?” Franny asked honestly. “I mean. We get to go outside and talk to people. Right?”

“Hold on a minute,” Vincent interrupted, serious as science. “It’s not that simple.”

“You’re right!” Vicky gasped. “What am I going to wear?”

“This.” Vincent leaned forward, placed the leather duffel at her feet, and then quickly backed away, as if offering a side salad to a hungry lion.

Instantly, Vicky changed course and headed toward the bag.

“Ouch!” She pulled her hand out of the bag as though it had teeth. “What was that?” she asked, clearly still reeling from brushing up against the coarse object inside. Spencer peered inside.

“It’s a sharp wool pantsuit.” Spencer said.

Viola gathered her hair and flung it over one shoulder.

“Sharp is right!” Vicky countered. “It feels like a cheese grater.”

“It’s darling,” Viola pressed. “Try it on.”

Vicky turned the bag upside down to avoid touching the abrasive garment. Three large chocolate-brown makeup cases plopped onto the rug. “What’s that?”

“Makeup,” Vincent declared.

“From Sephora?” Franny asked hopefully, giving her parents the chance to redeem themselves.

“No.” Vincent ran a hand over the comb tracks in his slicked-back hair. “From New York City. It’s a wonderful line of stage makeup called Fierce & Flawless, meant to hold up under the brightest theater lights on Broadway. Yet, it’s not too heavy.” Vincent pulled a soap-filled pad from the bag and scrubbed his forearm. A pinkish-yellow smudge was on the pad. A green streak was on his arm.

Spencer gasped. “You have mint skin too?”

“So do I.” Viola scrubbed a similar streak across her cheek.

“What?” Vicky’s hands sparked. “Have you always been mint?”

They nodded proudly.

“Then why do you cover it up?” Spencer asked.

“Because”—Vincent wiped his finger on the leg of his tracksuit—“we live in a world of normies. And many of them are afraid of people who look different.”

“Different from what?” All three teens wondered aloud.
Vincent looked down. “Different from them.”

“We are part of a very special group descended from what normies call monsters,” Viola explained. “But we like to refer to ourselves as RADs.”

“Regular Attribute Dodgers,” Vincent clarified.

Spencer reached for his neck stitches.

“Don’t pull!” His parents said together.

Spencer lowered his hand and sighed. “Has it always been like this?”

“Not always.” Vincent stood. He began to pace. “Unfortunately, our history, like that of so many others, is full of periods of persecution. But we had finally moved beyond the Middle Ages and were living openly among the normies. We worked together, socialized together, and fell in love with each other. But in the 1920s and ’30s, all that changed.”

“Why?” The twins crawled onto the couch and snuggled up to Viola and Spencer. The smell of their mother’s gardenia body oil seemed to comfort them.

“Horror movies took off. RADs were being cast to star in all kinds of films, like Dracula, Phantom of the Opera, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And the ones who couldn’t act—”

“Like your grandpa Henry,” Viveka teased.

“Yes, like dear old Henry Frankenstein.” He chuckled, recalling a memory. “He had a problem memorizing his lines and, truth be told, he was quite stiff. So he was portrayed by a normie actor named Boris Karloff.”

“Oh I love him!” Spencer crowed. Vicky twirled her finger around the tie on her robe.

“That sounds fun!” Franny said.

“It was.” Vincent stopped pacing and looked straight at her, his grin fading like dusk. “Until the movies were released.”

“Why?” Spencer asked.

“They portrayed us as horrifying, evil, bloodsucking enemies of the people.” Vincent paced again. “Normie children screamed in terror when they saw us. Their parents stopped inviting us into their homes. And no one would do business with us. We became outcasts overnight. RADs experienced violence and vandalism. Our life as we knew it was over.”

“Didn’t anyone fight back?” Vicky asked, recalling the many historical battles waged for similar reasons.

“We tried.” Vincent shook his head, mourning the failed attempt. “Protests were pointless. They turned into frenzied autograph sessions for fearless horror fans. And any action stronger than a protest would have made us look like the angry beasts the normies feared we were.”

“So what did everyone do?” Frankie curled up closer to her mother.

“I know this part!” Spencer sat up straight. “A secret alert was sent out to all the RADs urging them to leave their homes and businesses and meet up in Salem, where the witches lived. The hope was that the witches would identify with our struggles and take us in. Together we could form a new
“But didn’t the Salem witch trials get rid of all the witches, in like, 1692? And wasn’t this the 1930s?” Franny asked.

Vincent clapped his hands once and then pointed at his daughter like an effusive game show host. “That’s right!” he gushed, taking pride in his daughter’s implanted book smarts.

Viola kissed Franny’s head. “Too bad the brainless zombie who sent the alert wasn’t as smart as you.”

“Yeah.” Vincent smoothed his hair. “Not only were the witches long gone, but he got the wrong Salem. He was thinking of Salem, Massachusetts, but he gave the coordinates for Salem, Oregon. All the RADs realized his mistake, but there was no time to change course. They had to get out before they were rounded up and thrown in jail.

“When they arrived in Oregon, they decided to just make the best of it. They pooled their money, disguised themselves as normies, built Radcliffe Way, and vowed to protect one another. The hope is that someday we’ll be able to live openly again, but until that time comes, it’s crucial that we blend in. Being discovered would force us into exile again. Our homes, careers, and lifestyles would be destroyed.” Viola explained.

“Which means we have to hide our bolts and seams.” Spencer concluded. “Ugh! Does this mean I can’t wear t-shirts and hoodies?”

“Not unless you wear scarves and gloves.” Viola pointed out. Spencer groaned.

“That’s total bolt shock!” He groaned. “We’re all gonna stick out like sore thumbs if we dress like we’re always cold and frumpy!”

“I know baby.” Viola soothed. “But that’s how it is.”

“Can I at least wear long sleeves and thermals under my wool stuff?” He asked. “So that it doesn’t hurt my skin?”

“Of course.” Viola nodded.

“Then I’ll go along with it.” He decided.

“I can dress like a mori girl.” Vicky pleaded. “I’ll wear long skirts and lots of sweaters and scarves. Just don’t make me wear wool!”

“I’ll wear it.” Franny said. “I mean it’s not too bad if you wear like some thermals and accessorize it correctly.” She smiled slowly. “Hell, I could probably just modify some of my other clothing so that I can wear them to school without exposing us!” All three smith children smiled.
Despite the early hour, the elder Wentz children took to Radcliffe Way with the boundless energy of three teens who had been cooped up in an SUV for nearly sixteen hours. Surprisingly, their new neighborhood was abuzz with activity. At the end of the street kids circled the cul-de-sac on their bikes, and a few doors down an entire family of jocks was playing football in the front yard. Several were running around while two sat up on the porch, one reading what looked like Doom Patrol. The other was drawing in a sketchbook. The one with the comic book was lanky and had big glasses and mousy brown hair. The other was slightly stockier and had a curtain of long black hair, standing out among his assumed siblings with his almost goth look.

"Is that one family?" Ryan asked as they approached the cavernous stone house, where no fewer than five boys were charging the shaggy-haired hottie with the ball.

"The parents must have had multiples," Hillary noted while fluffing her hair.

Suddenly, the game slowed, and then stopped, while the pack watched the Wentz siblings stroll by.

"Why is everyone staring at us?" Ryan mumbled from the side of his mouth.

"Get used to it," Pete mumbled back. "People stare when you're pretty." He smile-waved at the high school–age boys, each with his own adorable mess of shaggy brown hair and a maybe-it’s-Maybelline cheek flush. Smoke from their Hummer-size grill circulated the tangy smell of barbecued ribs through the neighborhood at a time when most people hadn’t finished their first cup of coffee.

Ryan gripped his hollow stomach. Dinner for breakfast sounded great right about now.

"I loved you in last month’s Abercrombie and fich catalog," Hillary called out.

The boys exchanged confused looks.

"Hillary!" Ryan smacked his sister’s arm.

"Have some fun, will ya?" Hillary laughed, clicking along the pavement in her mother’s silver platforms.

"Everyone we pass looks at us like we’re from another planet."

"We are."

"Have some fun, will ya?" Hillary laughed, clicking along the pavement in her mother’s silver platforms.

"Everyone we pass looks at us like we’re from another planet."

"We are."

"Everyone we pass looks at us like we’re from another planet."

"We are."

"Hillary tightened the neck straps on her Missoni jumpsuit.

"Maybe it’s because you’re wearing Saturday night on a Sunday morning."

"I’m pretty sure it’s because you’re wearing yesterday’s road trip today," Hillary snapped. “Nothing says make new friends like a sweaty orange T-shirt and day old jeans."

Ryan considered retaliating but didn’t bother. It wouldn’t change anything. Hillary would always believe that good looks were a skeleton key for success. And Ryan would always hope that people were deeper than that.

They walked along the rest of Radcliffe Way in silence. The winding road cut through some kind of forest or ravine—the homes on both sides had grassy front yards and dense, woody thickets for backyards. But that’s where the similarities ended. Like the uniquely marked logs in the Wentz cabin, each house had defining features that made it individual.
A gray concrete slab in the cul-de-sac was fenced in by an unsightly tangle of electrical wires and phone lines. An old Edwardian was completely shaded under a canopy of big-leaf maples and had an endless flurry of propeller-like seeds that helicoptered to the mossy ground. A black-bottomed swimming pool and dozens of mini sea-creature fountains provided tons of fun for everyone at No. 9. Even though the sun was tucked away under a duvet of silver-colored clouds, the neighbors were out swimming, splashing around like a school of playful dolphins.

It was becoming more and more evident that Salem was a town that celebrated individuality, a real live-and-let-live kind of place. Ryan felt a gut punch of regret. His old nose would have fit in here.

“Look!” He pointed at the multicolored car whizzing by. Its black doors were from a Mercedes coupe, the white hood from a BMW; the silver trunk was Jaguar, the red convertible top was Lexus, the whitewall tires were Bentley, the sound system Bose, and the music was classical. A hood ornament from each model dangled from the rear view mirror. The sight had Pete in stitches and Hillary viciously texting her friends. Ryan silently enjoyed the green beauty of Radcliffe Way. The greenery and the individuality made him want to write a song.

Hillary and Pete went around asking where the cool people hung out. The answer was unanimous: the Riverfront. But it wouldn’t be hopping for a few more hours.

After a leisurely latte stop and several pauses to peer into clothing stores (deemed “unshoppable” by Hillary), it was finally pushing noon. With the help of Peter’s map and the kindness of strangers, the trio navigated their way through the sleepy town and arrived at the Riverfront—fully caffeinated and ready to announce their presence to the cool people of Salem.

“This is it?” Hillary stopped short, as if she had hit a pane of glass. “This is the epicenter of Northwest chic?” she shouted at the snow cone vendor.

“Not everyone likes malls, Hills.” Pete said honestly. “I think this is very picturesque. Very Ryan.” Ryan kicked Pete who kicked him back. Ryan yelped and hopped around on one leg.

“Watch how hard you kick dumbass!” Ryan hissed, rubbing his bruised shin.

“Then don’t kick me, string bean!” Pete shot back. Ryan went still.

“Mmmmmmm, I smell movie theater lobby,” he announced, sniffing the air scented with popcorn and hot dogs.

“You can take the nose out of Snoregie,” Pete cracked, “but you can’t take Snoregie out of the nose.”

“Very funny.” Ryan rolled his eyes.

“No, actually, it’s not!” Hillary huffed. “None of this is very funny at all. In fact, it’s a total nightmare. Listen!” She pointed at the carousel. Manic organ music—a must for horror movie soundtracks and psycho clown scenes—mocked them with its menacingly playful lilt.

“The only person over the age of eight and under the age of forty is that dude over there.” Hillary pointed at a lone boy on a wooden bench. “And I think he’s crying.”

His shoulders were hunched, and his head hung over a note pad. He lifted his eyes for quick glimpses of the spinning carousel, then went right back to scribbling. Every once in a while he’d take a sip out of the capri sun next to him.

Ryan’s armpits prickled with sweat, his body recognizing him before his brain did. “Let’s get out of
here,” he said, tugging Hillary’s thin arm. But it was too late. His sister’s lips curled with delight, and her platforms held firm to the gum-spotted pavement. “Is that—”

“No! Let’s just go,” Ryan insisted, tugging harder. “I think I saw a Bloomingdale’s back there. Come on.”

“It is!” Hillary dragged Ryan and Pete toward the boy. Beaming, she called out, “Hey, neighbor!” He lifted his head and then smacked a chunk of fluffy dark brown hair away from his face. Ryan’s stomach lurched. He was even cuter up close.

Thick red glasses surrounded his crackling brown eyes, making them look like framed photos of lightning in a dark sky. His glasses made him look like Buddy Holly which had Ryan’s insides all twisty and fluttery. Ryan loved Buddy Holly.

“You remember my brother from the window, don’t you?” Hillary asked with a trace of revenge, as if it were Ryan’s fault the Riverfront was a bust.

“Um, hey… I’m… uhm… Ryan,” he managed, cheeks burning.

“Brendon.” He smiled goofily.

Hillary pinched his black tee. “We almost didn’t recognize you with your shirt on.” Brendon smiled awkwardly; his eyes fixed uncomfortably on his notepad.

“You’re kinda curdy,” Hillary cooed, as if her contraction for cute-nerdy was actual English. “Any chance you have an older brother with good vision… or contacts?” she pressed.

“No in your age range.” Brendon’s clear, pale skin reddened. “Just me and my half-sisters.” Ryan pressed his arms against his body to hide the pit sweat. “What are you writing?” He asked. It wasn’t the most exciting question, but it was better than anything Hillary was going to say.

Brendon consulted his note pad as if seeing it for the first time. “It’s just a drawing of the carousel. You know, while it’s moving.”

Ryan leaned over and examined the blur of pastels. Inside the smudged rainbow were subtle outlines of horses and children. It had a gauzy, elusive quality to it—like the haunting memory of a dream, appearing and disappearing in fractured flashes throughout the day. “That’s really good,” he said, meaning it. “Have you been doing it long?”

“Well not too long.” He said, smiling like a dork. “I’m just waiting for my mom. She had a meeting around here, so…” Ryan laughed lightly. “No, I meant have you been drawing long. You know, as a hobby.”

“Oh.” Brendon ran a hand through his hair. The choppy layers fell right back into place like cards being shuffled. “Yeah, you know, a few years. I prefer singing and writing though.”

“Nice.” Ryan nodded.

“Yeah.” Brendon nodded back.

“Cool.” Ryan nodded again.
“Thanks.” Brendon nodded back.

“Sure.” Ryan nodded.

The organ music blaring from the carousel suddenly sounded louder. Like it was trying to save them from their monosyllabic bobble-heading by offering a distraction.

“So, uh, where are you from?” Brendon asked Hillary and Pete, eyeing Hillary’s out-of-state outfit and Pete’s soccer tan.

“Huntington Beach,” she said, like it should have been obvious.

“We moved here because of my asthma,” Ryan announced.

“Real sexy, Ry.” Hillary sighed, giving up.

“Well, it’s true.”

Brendon’s tight features unwound into a comfortable smile. It was as if Ryan’s admission had asked his confidence to dance. And it had said yes.

“So, um, have you heard of Merston High?” He asked, his words providing the necessary music.

“Yeah.” He slid over, silently offering half the bench. “I go there.”

Ryan sat down, his arms still pressed against his sides in case he was downwind. “What grade?”

Hillary stood above them, texting.

“Starting tenth.”

“Same.” Ryan smiled more than he needed to.

“Really?” Brendon smiled back. Or, rather, his smile was still there from before.

Ryan nodded. “So, what are the people like? Are they cool?”

Brendon lowered his eyes and then shrugged. His smile faded. The music had stopped. Their dance was over. The oily smell of his pastels lingered like a crush’s cologne.

“What?” Ryan asked sadly, his heart thumping a woeful dirge.

“The people are fine, I guess. It’s just that my mom’s the music teacher and she’s pretty strict, so I’m not exactly on anyone’s speed dial. Plus I’m apparently too loud and boisterous for some people according to Elizabeth Berg.”

“You can be on mine,” Ryan offered kindly.

“Really?” Brendon asked, his forehead starting to glow with sweat.

Ryan nodded, his heart now thumping a livelier beat. He felt surprisingly comfortable with this stranger. Maybe because he wasn’t simply looking at his face; he was looking through it. And he didn’t stop just because he wore sweaty road trip clothes and told curdy boys he had asthma.

“Okay.” He studied his face one last time and then scribbled his cell number on his sketch with a red pastel. “Here.” He tore the sheet from the pad, handed it to him, and then quickly wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “I better go.” Ryan carefully avoided smudging the number as he quickly entered it in his phone.

“Okay,” Ryan stood when he stood, lifted by the strength of their connection.
“See you around.” He waved awkwardly, turned toward the whirling carousel, and hurried away. Ryan smiled down at his phone.
I lost all of the previous chapter but it was basically just that Vicky got traumatized by some closed-minded cheerleaders. Spencer had to carry her to the car and she's the green monster Linda and Jac were talking about.

The lunchtime bell *bwoopbwooped* like a European busy signal. The inaugural morning at Merston High was officially over. It was no longer a mysterious place in Ryan’s imagination, filled with endless possibilities and hooks on which to hang hope for a better tomorrow. It was completely—boringly—normal. Like meeting an online crush after months of e-flirting, the reality didn’t live up to the fantasy. It was dull, predictable, and way more attractive in the photos.

Architecturally, the mustard-yellow brick rectangle was plainer than a pack of Trident. The sweaty-pencil-eraser-library-book smell that would undoubtedly morph into a sweaty-pencil-eraser-library-book headache by two o’clock was so typical. And the goofy desk etchings that said BITE ME, FRNK!, WEAK FOR WEEKES, and GLUTEN-FREE GEEK paled in comparison to the ones he used to see in Huntington Beach, which had read like TMZ text alerts.

Tired, hungry, and disappointed, Ryan felt like a refugee, only slightly more fashion-forward, as he ambled along with the masses in search of food. Dressed in Pete’s black skinny jeans (at his sister’s insistence), a red T-shirt under his only leather jacket, and black oversized combat boots, he was ‘70s revival in a school that still wore original Woodstock.

His outfit seemed unnecessarily harsh amid the flowing skirts and flannel, making him feel like he was at the wrong concert. Even his brown hair hung with anti establishment apathy, thanks to a travel bottle of conditioner that had been incorrectly labeled SHAMPOO.

He hoped the tough guy getup would show the students at Merston that he was nobody’s Snore-yan. Which it must have, because everyone pretty much ignored him all morning. A few girls eyed him with marked interest. Like he was a slice of cake on a passing dessert cart and worth saving room for. In some instances he even allowed himself to smile back, pretending that they were seeing him for him, not some perfectly symmetrical creation. Like Brendon. The two had texted each other the whole weekend bonding over their shared love of books and music. Ryan really felt like he had a chance with him. Something he hadn’t felt since Dan.

Ryan shuffled into the cafeteria with the rest of the students. Everyone scattered to claim a table while the rolling reggae-ish beat of Jack Johnson’s song “Hope” spilled from the speakers. Ryan himself was currently immersed in the Beatles song playing from his headphones.

He hung back by a sign-up booth for the September Semi Committee (whatever that was), pretending to read about the various volunteer opportunities while assessing the lunchroom politics. He’d assumed he would have seen Brendon by now. It was the first day of school and his mother, Ms. Urie, was a music teacher, after all. But he had obviously skipped out on school.

The tangy-carcass smell of ketchup and cows (meat loaf?) was more overwhelming than the four different “food zones.” Defined by chair color and identified with spirited hand-painted signs, the Peanut-Free Zone was brown; the Gluten-Free Zone was blue; the Lactose-Free Zone was orange;
and the Allergy-Free Zone was white. Students carrying color-coordinated trays clamored to mark their territory as if racing for seats at the IMAX 3D opening of Avatar. Once their territory had been claimed, they strolled toward the appropriate food station to make their dietitian-approved selections and catch up with friends.

“In Huntington Beach there would be one zone,” Ryan told the horse-faced brunette manning the September Semi sign-up booth. “Food-Free.” He giggled at snorted own joke.

Horse-face knit her thick brows and began tidying her already tidy stack of sign-up sheets.

Great, Ryan thought, clomping away from Horse-face. Maybe they’ll come up with a Friend-Free Zone just for me.

The Jack Johnson song ended and transitioned into something equally nostalgic and groovy by the Dave Matthews Band. It was time for Ryan, like the playlist, to change tracks. At least he could cling to Pete, who was seated with what looked to be the soccer team. Ryan hesitated. His twin, while his best friend, tended not to see when his friends were bullying Ryan. He decided he’d make his own choice right then.

Ryan slid his white tray along the rails, fixing his gaze straight ahead to the last slice of cheese-and-mushroom pizza. A couple standing behind him held hands and peered over his shoulder for a peek at the day’s lunch specials. But they didn’t sound the least bit interested in meat ravioli or salmon burgers. Instead, they were talking about her latest Twitter update. Which, if Ryan overheard correctly, was about a monster sighting in Mount Hood.

“I swear, Jac,” said one girl, her voice quiet and steady. “I want to be the one to catch it.”

“What would you do with it?” The other girl asked, sounding genuinely concerned. “Oh, I know! You could hang the head over your bed. And use the arms for coat hooks, the legs for door jambs, and the butt for a pen holder!”

“No way,” she snapped, as if offended. “I’d earn its trust and then make a documentary about the annual migration.”

The what?

Ryan couldn’t feign interest in garlic mashed potatoes for one more second. Curiosity was killing him. With a strained half turn, like the kind used to silence loud talkers in movie theaters, Ryan looked. The girl had red hair dyed black at the ends and shot through with white streaks with frayed, uneven edges that were cut by either a rusty blade or a vengeful woodpecker. Warm, honey brown eyes flickered against her pale skin.

She caught him looking and grinned.

He quickly turned away, taking the image of her green Bride of Frankenstein hoodie, flowy black skirt, and black nail polish with him.

“Linda!” the girl barked. “I saw that!”

“What?” She sounded like Peter when Dale caught him smoking outside.

“Whatever!” Jac yanked her toward the salad bar. She had on a tight black skeleton tank top and a white tulle skirt. Wardrobe-wise, Linda was the Beauty to Jac’s Beast.

The line inched forward.
“What was that all about?” Ryan asked the small girl standing behind him. Dressed in a long and thick tartan wool skirt and high collared, long sleeve blouse under a soft burgundy wool pullover, and a full palette of makeup, she may have been at the wrong concert too. She was dressed like she would have preferred, instead of a rock band, Hannah Montana on her way to some posh private school.

“I think she’s jealous,” the girl mumbled shyly. She had dainty, symmetrical features that would make any plastic surgeon salivate. And long brown hair.

“No.” Ryan grinned. “I mean, about that whole monster thing. Is that some kind of a local joke?”

“Um, I dunno.” The girl shook her head, her mass of thick, curly, Brown hair falling around her face. “I’m new here.”

“Me too! My name is Ryan.” He beamed, offering his right hand.

“Victoria.” She gripped firmly and shook back.

A tiny spark of static electricity passed between them. It felt like taking off a sweater in ski country.

“Oops!” Ryan laughed lightly. “I think your wool is a little staticky.”

“Sorry,” Victoria blurted, her fine features contorting regretfully.

Before Ryan could tell her it was okay, Victoria took off, leaving her white tray on the rails and the sting of another botched friendship on Ryan’s palm.

Suddenly, a camera’s flash went off in his face. “What the…?” Through a flurry of pulsing white spots, she saw a tall girl with dark brown bangs scampering away.

“Hey,” said a familiar male voice.

Slowly, the flash spots began to fade. One by one, like a cheesy special effect, they fell away, and his blurry vision sharpened.

And there he was….

Wearing an untucked white button-down, crisp back-to-school jeans, and beat up red converse. An unstoppable grin lit his geekily handsome face.

“Bren!” Ryan grinned.

Brendon grabbed a bag of Baked! Lays and a can of Sprite. “So, um, you wanna grab seats together? If not I understand….”

“Sure,” Ryan said, and then proudly followed her first friend (with boyfriend potential) at Merston High toward the Allergy-Free Zone.

Two attractive alternative girls, consumed by their own conversation, tried to squeeze past them. The artsy-looking one, who had black curls and a tray stacked with Kobe beef sliders, made it by Brendon. But the other one, with black bangs and chunky blue highlights, got sandwiched between Ryan’s shoulder and a blue chair.

“Watch it!” she barked, teetering on her gold wedges.

“Sorry.” Ryan grabbed the girl’s latte-colored arm before she fell. Unfortunately, he couldn’t save
the lunch. The white plastic tray dropped to the floor with a loud smack. Red grapes scattered like pearls on a broken necklace as the divided cafeteria came together for a round of applause.

“Why do people always clap when someone drops something?” Brendon asked, rolling his eyes at the applause. “Mornin Sarah.”

“Oh! Brendon!” Sarah’s face lit up and Ryan’s heart took a nose dive. Brendon already had a girlfriend.

“Sorry about your grapes, uh, Sarah.” Ryan rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Nah it’s fine. She can have mine.” Brendon held out the grapes to Sarah. “Told you a billion times to be careful wearing those torture devices.” He teased.

“Well, someone has to be the tall friend and it sure isn’t you.” Sarah joked back. “And I want his grapes.” She jutted her chin at Ryan.

“No.” Ryan said, affronted, “you squeezed past me. That’s not really my fault.”

“Give me your grapes or I’ll take what’s yours.” Sarah threatened.

“Sarah, lay off of him!” Brendon snapped.

“Sarah, please. Let’s just go!” The other one pleaded, startling Ryan with her voice. It was on the boyish side and she sounded like she smoked a pack a week.

“It’s the principle of the thing Bren, Gee.” Sarah snapped.

“Just take my damn grapes Sarah!” Brendon groaned.

“I think no.” Sarah grabbed Brendon by the collar and kissed him deeply. Ryan’s eyes watered as Brendon initially struggled but then went along with the kiss. Ryan shoved his food away and stormed away, tears obscuring his vision. Suddenly a thin hand grabbed his wrist and tugged him.

He stopped.

“C’mon. Let’s go to the restroom. They tend to be harsh on crying boys in the commons.” A feminine voice whispered. He dutifully followed the voice. Once in the safety of the restroom, he dried his eyes and saw that it was Jac and the camera girl from the lunch line. Now that Ryan could see her, Ryan realized that the brunette was wearing a teal dress with a pink sweater.

“I’m Jac Vanek.” Jac said.

Ryan nodded, eyes stinging again.

“What’s up?” asked the girl. “You seem kinda down for a PT.”

“A what?” Ryan snapped, craving just one second of normalcy.

“PT,” echoed the brunette girl who had snapped Ryan’s picture and made him see spots before he showed up.

“What’s a PT?” Ryan asked, but only because no one else was talking to him and he was tired of being alone.

“Physical threat,” Scene explained. “Everyone is saying you’re the hottest newcomer of the year. And yet…” Her voice trailed off.
“And yet what?”

“And yet you’re being treated like a total…” She tapped the side of her head. “Ugh. What’s the word?”

“Anti-threat,” brown-bangs answered for her.

“Yes! Perfect word choice.” Scene girl wiggled her texting thumbs. “Enter that.”

Brown-bangs nodded obediently. She pulled a phone from the side of her green faux crocodile-skin attaché case, slid out the keyboard, and began thumbing.

“What’s she writing?” Ryan asked.

“Who? Breezy?” asked Scene, as if there were dozens of girls taking notes on this bizarre conversation.

“She’s assisting me.”

Ryan nodded like that was super-interesting.

Scene’s hand appeared under Ryan’s nose. “I’m Jac Vanek. Author of Jac and Better Than Ever: The True Story of One Girl’s Return to Popularity After Another Girl Whose Name I Won’t Mention —SARAH!—Hit On Linda Then Got Hit by Jac Then Basically Told the Entire School That Jac Was Violent and Should Be Avoided at All Costs.”


“It’s gonna be one of those cell phone novels.” Breezy offered as snapped her keyboard shut and then dropped it back into her case. “You know, like they have in Japan. Only this will be in English.”

“Assumed.” Jac sighed, in a you-can’t-get-good-help-these-days sort of way. She sat on the sink, and swung her legs, very neary flashing Ryan who immediately looked at the mirror and cringed. His eyes were red and his face was blotchy again.

Breezy licked her apple-red lip gloss and adjusted her glasses. “I’m documenting her struggle.”

“Cool.” Ryan nodded, trying to be encouraging.

Something about Jac and Breezy reminded him of Hillary and Pete’s line between ingenious and insane. Ingenuity inspired their dreams, and insanity gave them courage to pursue them. It was something Ryan wanted for himself. But he didn’t have any inspired dreams worth pursuing now that Brendon turned out to be a liar. And a cheat.

“I want to crush her too,” Jac said.

Ryan’s cheeks burned. Was it that obvious what he’d been thinking?

“We could team up, you know.” Jac’s pale blue eyes bored into Ryan’s.

Breezy pulled out her phone and began typing again.

“I don’t want revenge,” Ryan insisted, scraping the clear polish off one fingernail. What she wanted was currently feeding grapes to a PT at another table.
“How about a friend?” Jac’s expression warmed Ryan like hot cocoa on a rainy Sunday.

“That could work.” Ryan gathered a handful of over-conditioned brown hair and pushed it out of his face.

Jac nodded once at Breezy.

The dutiful assistant pushed aside the paper towels on the counter, reached inside her attaché, and pulled out a cream-colored sheet of paper. She slapped it down on the table and stepped aside to let Jac explain.

“Promise you will never flirt with Linda Ignarro, hook up with Linda Ignarro, or fail to pummel any girl who does hook up with Linda Ignarro and—”

“Who’s Linda Ignarro?” Ryan asked, even though he had a strong hunch it was the wannabe monster documentarian.

“Linda is Jac’s girlfriend.” Breezy swayed from side to side dreamily. “They’ve been together since seventh grade. And they are sickly-ridickly cute together.”

“It’s true. We are.” Jac grinned with unapologetic glee.

Envy pricked Ryan’s skin like a mosquito. He definitely didn’t want Linda, but un-apologetic glee would have been nice.

“Lately she’s been checking out PTs when she thinks I’m not looking.” Jac smirked. “What she doesn’t realize is—”

“She’s always looking,” Breezy said, typing.

“I’m always looking.” Jac tapped her temple. She turned back to Ryan. “So, sign the document stating that you won’t violate my trust, and I’ll give you a lifetime of loyalty in return.”

Breezy stood next to Ryan, clicking a silver-and-red pen—the ballpoint Ryan would use, should he choose to accept this offer.

Ryan fake-read the document to give the appearance that he wasn’t the kind of chump who signs things without reading them, even though he was. His eyes sped across the words while his mind searched for a reason to walk away from this unusual proposition. But Ryan didn’t have much experience in the friend-making business. For all he knew, this was how it was done.

“Looks good to me,” he stated, grabbing the ballpoint from Breezy fingers. He signed and dated the document.

“School ID.” Breezy asked kindly as she stuck out her palm.

“Why?” Ryan asked.

“I have to notarize.” She pushed her glasses further up her pert nose.

Ryan tossed his Merston High ID on the sink counter.

“Nice picture,” Breezy mumbled smiling, jotting down the necessary information.

“Thanks,” Ryan mumbled back, studying his expression in the tiny laminated square. He was glowing like a jack-o’-lantern with a candle inside. Because he had been thinking about him. Happy because Pete thought he was good, which obviously meant Ryan knew he was good. If only Ryan
could go back in time and tell the dreamy-eyed boy in the laminated square what he knew now…

Breezt returned the ID and then began connecting a digital camera to a portable printer. Seconds later a photo of Ryan, minus the candlelit glow, was being clipped to the corner of the document and filed inside the attaché.

“Congratulations, George Ryan Wentz. Welcome to the fold,” Jac said, pulling him and Debby in for a group hug. One of them smelled like strawberries. The other, cheap cigarettes, heavy perfume, and mildly of cheap wine.

“There are two rules I’d like to share with you.” Jac squeezed some clear gloss from a tube and dabbed it on her lips. She waited for Breezy’s thumbs to make contact with her keyboard. “Number one: Friends come first.”

Breezy typed.

Ryan nodded. He couldn’t agree more.

“And number two: always fight for your love.” With a war cry, Jac ran from the restroom wielding a Ziploc of strawberries. Ryan got out there as she whipped one across the cafeteria. It bounced off Sarah’s chunky blue highlights.

Ryan burst out laughing. Jac launched another missile.

Sarah stood and glared at her opponent. Drawing her arm back, she—

“Duck!” Jac shouted, pulling Breezy and Ryan behind the wall.

The trio laughed themselves a side stitch as a hailstorm of mayo-coated luncheon meat smacked the wall in front of them.

It wasn’t the first time Ryan had found himself in the center of a lunch incident that day. But it was the first time he enjoyed it.
Sparks Fly

Spencer ran walked down the empty hallway. He needed to be in the classroom first, as it was imperative he find a seat in the back. As far from view as one could possibly be without being marked absent. He didn’t need fifteen days of math to know that rumors of a monster sighting plus shocking a girl in the cafeteria equaled trouble. Thankfully Vicky had art on the other side of the school.

The bell *bwoooped*. The halls buzzed with freshly fed normies searching for their fourth-period classrooms. Spencer, mega-paces ahead of the pack, hurried into room 626 for his first history class. So far, school life hadn’t gone as planned, but at least he was living it.

“No!” He heard himself say aloud upon entering the classroom. The desks were arranged in a circle! No dark corners. No back rows. No place to hide! His pre-lunch reapplication of Fierce & Flawless would be his only cover.

“This can’t be happening,” he mumbled under his breath while trying to assess which part of the circle would be the least conspicuous. Tiny sparks of electricity shot from his fingertips and sizzled up the metal spine of his Runaways-covered binder. He opted for a seat in front of the windows instead of one facing them, to avoid the sun’s revealing rays.

“What’s with the circle?” A geeky, but also very cute boy entered the room. He was dressed in a white button-down, jeans, and hiking boots. His swagger seemed more leather than L.L.Bean. What he lacked in style he made up for with sass.

He stood by the door, his head cocked as if admiring art in the Louvre. Only he was admiring Spencer. “I’m thinking we should turn this circle into a heart.” He lifted a globe from the shelf and spun it on his finger like a basketball.

Spencer lowered his eyes, wishing he could fire back with something equally flirtatious and cool. *Wanna see me burn your initials in this desk with my finger?* But instead of playing Spencer, he had been cast in the forgettable role of shy normie by the window.

With one hand in his pocket and the other clutching a tiny flip-top pad (because cool guys don’t take a lot of notes), he strutted over to Spencer. He took his time as he ambled past the wall of maps and the blackboard, probably so he could admire him. “Is this seat taken?” he asked, running a hand through his floppy brown hair.

He shook his head. Did he really have to sit right next to him?

“I’m Gabe,” he said, slouching down in the wooden chair.

“Spencer.”

“Pleasure.” He extended his hand for a shake. Spencer, afraid of sparking, responded with a smile-nod. Gabe tapped his shoulder with his hovering hand, as if that had been the intention all along.

*Bzzzt.*

“Well, well.” He shook his wrist and looked amused. “Aren’t you the little firecracker?”

Fuck! Spencer immediately turned away and opened his World History textbook. He began focusing on the introduction to keep himself from hyperventilating. The class began to fill up quickly, and two
kids, in mid-conversation, filled the empty seats beside him.

“I swear,” said the one with short red hair on the sides and wearing a black long sleeve and fingerless skeleton gloves, his lips tight against his teeth like someone embarrassed to talk with new braces, which made his lip piercing stand out against his lips. “The caf has nothing good for vegans.” He shook two pills from a bottle labeled IRON COMPLEX, and swallowed them without water. His eyes were smudged with black makeup.

“Why not give the mashed potatoes a go?” asked his friend, a fair-skinned raven haired girl with a thick new jersey accent. Dressed in blue plaid, black gloves, a misfits shirt, and blue jeans, she looked like she had taken fashion advice from Kurt Cobain.

“I loathe garlic,” said Vegan, crossing his legs to reveal a pair of black knee-high lace-up boots that Adam Lambert would go gaga for.

“Not as much as you should loathe mirrors, buddy,” joked the Jersey native as she pushed back a tangle of rope and bead bracelets, rolled down the gloves, and slathered her dry arms with coconut-scented body lotion.

“Help me,” Vegan insisted, lifting his black bangs away from his face.

The New Jerseyan snapped the cap back on her cream, leaned toward her friend, and began wiping Vegan’s cheek with her thumb. “Jesus Christ,” she whispered. “You’ve got red eyeliner where your blush should be. Looks like you were caught in a paintball bingle.”

They burst out laughing.

Spencer returned to his textbook to keep from staring. Even though he wanted to stare forever. Their breezy banter was a comfort of friendship—a comfort Spencer longed to have.

“Hey, daddy-o.” Spencer’s head whipped up.

“Uh, it’s Spencer actually.” He said awkwardly.

“Jamia calls everyone daddy-o. She’s going through a 1940s slang phase.” Vegan explained. He thrust his hand out. “Frank Iero. This here is my best friend in the whole damn world and my wing woman Jamia Nestor.” He appraised Spencer and noticed the faint eyeliner around his eyes.

“Can I borrow some red eyeliner?” Jamia asked. “This fat-head keeps using the cheesy shit from CVS.”

“Oh yeah. Here!” Spencer held out his game-boy makeup bag.


Ryan, the boy Vicky’s shocked in the cafeteria, hurried in after the teacher and grabbed the seat across from Ryan. He smiled awkwardly. Or was that normie for I’m onto you?

Spencer pulled his collar up to keep his sparking bolts from giving him away. The teacher, a woman with long curly blond hair and a turquoise sweater set, clapped. “Let’s begin!” She drew a big circle on the blackboard and tapped her long stick of chalk in the center. “This is our world. It’s round, just like the configuration of your desks. And I intend to show you how—” The chalk snapped in half and shot across the room.

“Ahhhh!” The possible RAD gripped the side of her neck and fell off her chair. “I’ve been hit!”
Everyone laughed. Spencer leaned forward, concerned.

“That’s enough, Linda.” The humorless teacher sighed as she picked the errant piece of chalk off the ground.


She crawled back onto her chair and locked eyes with Spencer, making him spark more. For an instant it felt as though her performance was just for him.

Over the span of the next forty-five minutes, he managed to glean that Frank had a crush on Gabe. That Gabe had a crush on his “Firecracker.” That Frank could have Gabe because, while he was cute, he didn’t have Linda’s mystique. And that Ryan’s RAD-ar must have been beeping because he could not stop staring at Gabe, who would not stop trying to get rezapped. It took a tremendous amount of physical control—which felt like trying not to think, which felt like not being able to breathe, which felt like being dead—for Spencer not to light up like Vegas.

When the bell bwooped, he bolted from his seat and raced to the boys’ bathroom. Frank and Jamia called after him, but he ignored them. Spencer didn’t know if he had enough willpower to hold back any more sparks.

He burst into the bathroom, locked herself in the first stall, and let it rip. He was thankful that the bathroom was empty, because energy—charged by making eye contact with Linda, being poked at by Gabe, and being stared down by Ryan—flew from his fingers in a powerful bout. He flushed the toilet several times to cover the sound. Relieved and drained, he opened the door with an exhausted sigh.

“Sounds like someone’s got the grumblers,” Frank said, with a sympathetic smile. He rubbed his stomach. “I know what that’s like, dude.”

Jamia, who Spencer knew shouldn’t be in the boys room, giggled into her palm.

“Yeah.” Spencer washed his hands. Better they think he had to go number three than something so odd that it didn’t even have a number.

“You forgot this.” Frank waved the Fierce & Flawless makeup case like a flag.

“Oh, thanks.” Spencer placed his hand where his heart would be. “I’d be lost without this.”

“Why?” Jamia twirled a wool-covered finger around one of her black locks. “You’re so cute. You don’t need all that makeup.”

Frank nodded in agreement.

“Bad skin.” Spencer shrugged. “Plus I never know when the twins is going to need some makeup.”

“Awe that’s so sweet!” Jamia cooed. “You carry makeup for your sisters?”

“Yeah.” Spencer smiled awkwardly. “Vicky and Fran insisted on tiny backpacks that they can’t fit jack shit into and I didn’t think Vicky would appreciate having to ask other people for makeup.”

Frank turned to Jamia. “Hey, are we going to the spa this weekend?”

“You mean, am I giving you another guest pass?” Jamia fired back exuberantly.
“C’mon, babe, that place is so damn pricey, I can’t afford my own membership. And if I don’t get in for a steam, I’m gonna be shivering until June.”

“Try layering,” Jamia suggested.

“Only if you try a bubble bath.”

Spencer laughed, tickled by the lyrical friskiness of their banter.

“Hey, we should bring Spencer this week,” Jamia suggested, scratching her arm. “I bet some time on the tanning bed would clear up your skin.”

“Cool!” Frank exclaimed through tight lips. “That’ll give you the confidence to nab Linda away from her Sheila.”

“What?” Spencer clenched his fists to keep from sparking.

“Caught you staring,” Jamia teased, opening the bathroom door.

“Oops.” Spencer pretended to be embarrassed. But all he really felt was joy, to be inducted into their playful game of back-and-forth.

“So, can you make it on Saturday?” Frank asked as they joined the foot traffic in the hall.

“Sure.” Spencer nodded graciously. He had no idea what a tanning bed could do for him, but if that’s what normies did to attract girls like Linda, this daddy-o was in.
On Friday, Jac greeted Ryan with a celebratory high five. “You survived your first week of classes at Merston High.” Her pale cheeks had the same rosy hue as her dusty pink boyfriend cardigan. Paired with a black tutu and knee-high hot pink wellingtons, she was a welcome burst of color on a rainy afternoon.

“I know.” Ryan hooked a very heavy, book filled, khaki army surplus backpack over his shoulder. “It actually kinda flew.”

“You sound surprised,” Jac noted, heading down the crowded corridor.

Breezy followed behind, documenting the conversation. Her blue timberlands squeaked as she hurried to keep up the frenzied pace.

“I am surprised.” Ryan zipped his black hoodie as they got closer to the exit. “I was the victim of a kiss-and-run, and that can make for a slow week. But I actually had fun.” He smiled, recalling the food fight with Sarah, late-night Tumblr dm marathons with Jac, and the futile stakeouts during which he, Hillary, and Pete spied on Brendon’s house. There was no suspicious activity—or any activity at all.

“Correction,” Breezy interrupted. “Technically, the victim would be Brendon, not you. Sarah’s girlfriend came back from Greece last night.”

Ryan’s hands twitched. He hated cheaters. Ever since Dan, Ryan’s hated cheaters. His eyes finally found what Breezy was talking about. Sarah Orzechowski was wrapped around a tall girl wearing the rocker version of a rebelde school uniform, large, reflective gold and red sunglasses, and a grey owl beanie that had wings sticking out of the sides.

“No way!” Ryan’s hand flew to his mouth.

“See?” Breezy asked, feeling offput. “Brendon got kissed. Now Sarah is moving on. So he’s the victim of the kiss-and-run.”

“God, now I can’t be mad at him!” Ryan groaned.

“Um. Want me to enter that in the notes?” Breezy added, rocking back and forth on her tiptoes while tugging the bottom of her pink plaid scarf.

“Nah,” Jac said dismissively.

Breezy stopped rocking.

“Who is that girl?” Ryan stopped to fake a drink from the water fountain so he could get a better look.

“Her name is Lindsey Ballato. Or Lyn-Z,” Jac explained, faking a drink after Ryan. “She spends the summers in between Greece with her mom’s family and Scotland with her dad. She just got back. She’s not as cute as Linda, but she’s still super cute.”

“And super Sarah’s,” Breezy added. “They’re totally exclusive when he’s in town.”

“Looks like Brendon will be looking for a date to the dance,” Jac noted, peeling masking tape off the
September Semi mural that hung above their heads. She balled it up between her black and hot pink acrylic tipped fingers and flicked it onto the floor.

“Yeah, well, so will I.” Ryan huffed, making his way toward the doors. He didn’t mind a little rain. At least no one would see him cry.

“Hey!” Jac lit up. “You should go drop a lip bomb on him, you know, to get back at Sarag for making out with Brendon.”

“Ha!” Ryan hollered at the absurdity. Everyone turned to look, Sarah and Lyn-Z included. So much for lying low.

“Do it,” Jac whispered.

“No way,” Ryan whispered back. “You do it. You want to get back at her just as much as I do.”

“Yeah, but you’re not committed to anyone. I am.”

“Thanks for reminding me.” Ryan half-smiled.

“Hey, Ry-Nerd.” Sarah inched closer, the corners of her overactive lips curling with delight. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Projecting Rihanna fabulousness in black glitter kneesocks, a glittery black cinched dress, and gold wedges, Sarah had the attention of everyone around them. Even Jac, who glared at her nemesis with a mix of disdain and envy.

“Why?” Ryan asked, with egg-like composure, even though he felt as if he could crack at any moment.

“I wanted to let you know”—Sarah spritzed her neck with amber-scented perfume, then leaned close and hissed—“you can have that goof back now. I’m through with him.”

The words were spoken into Ryan’s ear, but he felt them in his stomach.

“Wait.” Sarah straightened up. Her pale blue eyes tracked something in the distance.

Ryan curiously peered over his shoulder. It was Brendon. He was walking toward them carrying a fistful of ceramic flowers he must have made in art class. His glasses hid the expression in his eyes, but Ryan could tell by his tentative gait that he was nervous.

“I may be through with him”—Sarah licked her glossy lips—“but he’s obviously not through with me.” She pouted and sighed. “Poor guy. Look at those pathetic flowers. No girl is going to choose geek when she could have Greek.” Sarah mussed Ryan’s brown hair condescendingly. “Except you.” She laughed.

Ryan looked directly into Sarah’s eyes, his heart beating like a battle drum. But Sarah glared back, refusing to back down from whatever it was they were really fighting about. Territory? PT status? Grapes?

Ryan told himself that Sarah was a typical bully just testing the new girl. That he should fight her hate with love. Be the bigger person. Walk away. Stay out of trouble. Lie low. Check his ego at the door. Move past it. Get over it. Sleep on it….

And then Sarah winked at Brendon. Not because she liked him, but because she didn’t and Ryan
Something in Ryan shattered and before he could stop himself, he shoved Sarah out of the way and grabbed the equally as tall as him Lyn-Z, and pulled her toward him. Somehow he found her lips and…

A collective gasp was the only way Ryan knew he was not imagining this. Then there was the part where Lyn-Z’s lipstick and gloss covered lips softened and began kissing him back. And the part where he could smell her leather jacket. And the part where he opened his eyes for a second and saw his reflection in her sunglasses, along with the reflection of half the school standing behind him…

He was really doing this!

Ryan pulled away. Instead of thinking about the high fives he would get from Breezy and Hac, the respect he would get from his classmates, the wonderful humiliation he might have caused Sarah, or even the damage he might have done to himself, all he could think about was Brendon—and wonder whether he cared.

“Woooo-hoooooo0000!” Jac and Breezy hollered. It was the first time anyone had cheered for him since he stopped singing.

“Sorry,” Ryan mumbled softly to Lyn-Z.

“I’m not,” she mumbled back with a grin.

“Not bad.” Sarah applauded the impromptu performance with slow measured claps. “Next time try not to look so constipated.” She did her best to sound unaffected, but moist eyes gave her away.

Ryan didn’t respond. Instead, she searched Sarah’s hands for Brendon’s ceramic flowers. But the ring-clad fists held nothing except anger. Brendon was gone.

“Are you okay?” Sarah asked Lyn-Z as if she’d been attacked. Her expression was strained. She was fighting her bucking cool with the determination of a bull rider.

“I don’t know.” Appearing dazed, Lyn-Z rubbed his tanned forehead. “What happened?” he asked, leaning against the wall as though he might pass out.

*Kiss she could, but act she could not.*

“Can we have some room here?” Sarah’s seethed, forcing the onlookers to disperse and form subclusters.

Ryan pushed through the doors in desperate need of air. Instead of a refreshing slap on the cheeks, something that felt more like a damp towel greeted her. A cover of fog pressed down on the front parking lot. A row of headlights at student pickup colored the slick asphalt like a giant highlighter spill, and windshield wipers fought tirelessly against the relentless downpour. For Ryan, however, wet clothes were a nonissue. He was already numb.

“Wait up, superstar,” Jac called, splashing down the steps in her black Wellingtons, with Breezy by her side.

Ryan stopped suddenly. Not because Jac wanted her to, but because there was something in the puddle by his soaked black Converse. And it was worth stopping for.
“Uh-oh.” Jac groaned.

Breezy gasped.

Ryan had no words.

Everything that needed to be said was carved in narrow script on one of the petals in the smashed ceramic bouquet.

FOR RY.
The rain continued into Saturday. Spencer popped open his Astrodome-size, ocean-colored umbrella and hurried into the downpour. Despite his heavy application of Fierce & Flawless Aqua—the waterproof line—daylight shone through the blue-green canopy and cast a green glow on his hand.

*Ha*

He longed to share the irony with the kids in the black Escalade. But that was impossible. They had to believe he was a normie. And his parents, watching from the doorway, were silent reminders of that fact.

He turned to wave. “Bye.”

Vincent and Viola waved back, the worry behind their eyes undermining the smiles on their faces.

“Have fun at the library,” Viola called over a boom of thunder as she tightened her black scarf.

“Thanks,” Spencer answered, as a tiny spark of electricity escaped his fingers and scurried up the umbrella pole. It was his first lie. And it felt even worse than he had imagined. Dark. Heavy. Lonely. But if his parents knew he was going to a normie spa with Jamia, Frank, and two voltage people he’d seen around school but hadn’t really met, they would stress about skin exposure. And when Frank mentioned that kids have been lying to their parents for centuries, Spencer decided to give it a try. After all, Vince and Vi wanted him to fit in with the normies. So if this was what normies did…

Jamia poked her face out the front passenger-side window. Swirls of black hair were piled high atop her head like butterscotch soft serve, and her angelic features had been scrubbed clean of makeup. “Mornin', Mr. and Mrs. Smith.” She waved, revealing a long pair of purple leather gloves.

“Hi, Jamia,” they called back. They looked instantly relieved.

Spencer grinned. His parents seemed to know everyone on the street. And soon he would too.

“How’re your aunt and uncle liking this rain?” Vincent asked with a trace of familiarity.

“Lovin’ it.” She opened her mouth and lifted her face to the cloud-covered sky. Spencer envied her freedom and yearned for the day when he could feel a raindrop’s kiss on his bare cheek. But until then…

He hurried inside the SUV to avoid a makeup smear, and struggled to close his umbrella without soaking the soft tan leather interior of what smelled like a very expensive amber-scented car.

“Wow.” He laid his backpack by his feet. “This is one serious pimped-out ride.”

“Thanks.” Jamia smiled.

“They bought it off BeyonJay,” Frann teased.

“Wouldn’t it be Jay-B?” said the dark-haired stranger beside him.

“I like Jayoncé,” added the girl next to the window.

They all giggled.
“I’m Spencer.” He smiled, mindful not to shake their hands.

“Sarah,” said the girl beside her. She had sad eyes that matched her tropical-blue off-the-shoulder tee, and the most voltage blue streaks in her hair. Spencer wondered how such an exotic beauty could be so forlorn. How could anything be bad when you looked like her? Were her tiger-striped leggings too tight? “I didn’t know Mr. and Mrs. Smith had a son.”

The girl seated on the other side of Sarah giggled.

“You mean me?” Spencer shifted uncomfortably.

Sarah raised her arched brows and nodded slowly in a who-else-would-I-be-referring-to? sort of way.

“Yeah. I’ve been home-schooled my whole life, you know…”

“Hey, Spence,” Jamia interjected, “did you meet Gerard?”

Gerard turned away from the window. “Hey,” she said, tearing open a bag of organic turkey jerky. Her looks—greenish-hazel eyes, a mess of black hair, long manicured fingernails painted black—were just as striking as Sarah’s but in a more wild, feral way. Her style, however, seemed tamer: old school punk with a touch of old-world Hollywood glamour.

Gerard turned away from the window. “Hey,” she said, tearing open a bag of organic turkey jerky. Her looks—greenish-hazel eyes, a mess of black hair, long manicured fingernails painted black—were just as striking as Sarah’s but in a more wild, feral way. Her style, however, seemed tamer: old school punk with a touch of old-world Hollywood glamour.

The leather jacket, striped grey and black hoodie, dark skinny jeans, and armful of multicolored plastic bobble bracelets were so hot topic.

However, the brown fur stole peeking out of the top of her jacket was so not. Spencer began sweating at the very sight of it. The heat in Jamia’s car had been set to Planet Mercury.

“It’s nice to meet you both.” Spencer beamed, folding his arms over his embarrassing peach-colored turtleneck sweater. The hideous color matched his makeup, in case of smudges. The prim cut was designed to cover his skin. And the black jeans and the doofy looking, glittery combat boots were the result of Vicky and Fran being given free reign over his wardrobe. “Everyone ready?” Frank cranked up the volume on the stereo. The Black Eyed Peas blared through the speakers.

“I gotta feeling that tonight’s gonna be a good night…”

“Ready!” they shouted.

Jamia stepped on the gas and tore out of the Smiths’ cul-de-sac with a screech.

“I gotta feeling that tonight’s gonna be a good, good night…”

The girls fell back in their seats and burst out laughing.

“Oh, your parents are gonna love that.” Frank bounced to the pulsating beat.

“Whatever.” Spencer shrugged. He didn’t want to think about his parents. He didn’t want to think about green skin or normies, or how his bolts were itching from his morning charge. He just wanted to experience a day at the spa with girlfriends & Frank. Not through an implanted memory or a Netflix movie. He wanted to breathe it. Live it. Smell it. Feel it. And remember it forever.

“Hey, Frank.” Gerard leaned forward. “Any chance you can turn down the heat? My turkey jerky is melting to gravy back here.”

Spencer smiled. It was stifling.
“Maybe you should take off your scarf,” he suggested, trying to show them he wasn’t too shy to jump right in.

“Ahhhhhh,” Jamia hollered. “No, he didn’t!”

Everyone burst out laughing except Gerard, who shrank back in her seat, clearly hurt.

“Sorry.” Spencer muttered, wishing he could take back whatever it was that Gerard found so offensive. “I was just trying to help.” He pinched the wool on his sleeping bag of a sweater. “I’m superhot in this turtleneck, so I was just thinking maybe you were—” Sarah’s gold platform wedge slammed into her shin. “Ouch!” He sparked.

Sarah and Gerard exchanged a quick glance.

Spencer quickly sat on his hands to smother the surge. “Why’dja kick me?”

“I was trying to stop you from embarrassing yourself even more,” Sarah explained.

“Huh?” Spencer said, leaning forward to rub his throbbing leg.

“Sarah would know.” Frank snapped off the stereo.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You have a lot of experience with embarrassing yourself, that’s all,” Jamia said, stopping at a red light.

The squeaking windshield wipers were the only sound in the car.

“Care to explain?” Sarah asked, like someone who already understood.

Frank’s hazel eyes found Sarah’s in the rearview mirror. “It means you were making out with my crush in public all week.”

Spencer wanted to know who they were talking about but decided it would be best not to ask. There was no telling who he might offend next.

“Do you seriously think I was kissing him for me?” Sarah asked, sounding genuinely hurt.

“Um, yeah!” Frank countered.

The light turned green.

Jamia stepped lightly on the gas and coasted through the soggy intersection, Frank’s dark lashes blinking back tears.

“Frank, I was doing it for you.” Sarah rested a hand on her friend’s black-hoodie-clad shoulder. “He was hanging out with that new boy, Ry-nerd, and… well…”

“What?” Frank sniffed. “He’s better looking than me?”

“Different types of good looking.” Spencer said softly, finally finding his voice. “You have more of the punk rock glamour. He’s got that awkward please-don’t-hurt-me writer look about him.”

Spencer’s explanation clearly did the trick because Frank dried his eyes.
“Frank, you have so much more to offer than Ry-Dork,” Sarah practically spat.

“It’s true.” Gerard stuck a piece of turkey jerky into her mouth. Something in her face led Spencer to believe Sarah had gone against Gerard’s wishes and that she was also unhappy with Sarah.

“But she was moving in on him,” Sarah insisted, “and if someone didn’t break them up fast, you would have lost him for the second year in a row.”

Spencer eyed Sarah with newfound respect. Beautiful, loyal, and selfless, she gave normies a good name.

“Gabe knows I’m with Lyn-Z,” Sarah continued. “He knows a kiss from me doesn’t mean anything. But Ry-nerd doesn’t. And he’s —”


“He’s not prettier!” the girls insisted.

“How do you think I feel?” Sarah sighed. “Ry-Nerd went public on Lyn-Z to pay me back and…” Her voice trailed off.

“She didn’t like it,” Gerard insisted, as if it weren’t the first time they’d had this conversation. “She was in shock, that’s all.”

“I know, I know.” Sarah dabbed the corner of her eye with her blue T-shirt and sniffled back everything else she had been trying to keep inside.

“Okay, fine, I believe you.” Frank surrendered. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I’m over him. Did you see how sweaty he was after that kiss? I could practically see my reflection in his forehead.”

“Still can’t believe you got around that,” Jamia teased.

They all laughed.

Spencer, suddenly feeling like an intruder, looked out the rain-streaked window. He made eye contact with a gaunt, stubble-faced man in a white Kia whose finger was working overtime to liberate something stubborn from his nose.

Fortunately, Jamia made a left turn before he had a chance to reveal it.

“We’re here,” she announced, sounding more upbeat. She stopped the SUV under a white awning and gave her keys to the valet.

“I would never do anything to hurt you. We have to stick together,” Sarah pulled Frank in for a hug.

“I know.” Frank hugged her back. “I’m sorry.”

Spencer smiled with his entire body. He felt lucky to be included in their close-knit group, and silently promised never to let them down.

They pushed through the gold-and-glass revolving door and stepped into something that could pass for a normie womb. Dimly lit, cozy, and filled with the sounds of trickling water and muffled voices.

“Hi, Sapphire,” Jamia whispered sweetly, presenting her membership card to a blissed-out brunette behind the candle-topped desk.
“Good afternoon, miss,” Sapphire swiped the card gently before returning it. “Will you be soaking with us today?”

“Yup.” Jamia opened a book of green guest passes and tore off four. “Frank is going to steam, Sarah is getting the Pamper Package, Gerard needs a wax….”

They giggled.

“Enough!” Gerard barked.

“And this is Spencer,” Jamia said. “He’s going to use the tanning bed.”

“Hey.” Spencer grinned, his eyes wandering to the jars in the glass case behind Sapphire’s head while his hand reached for her wallet.

“Do those creams really work?” he asked, pointing to the line called NoScar. Vicky would love that.

“Guaranteed to dramatically reduce the visibility of scars in one hundred days,” Sapphire said proudly. “Believe it or not, the active ingredient is rodent whiskers.”

“How much is it?” Spencer asked, scraping his fingernail along the raised digits of his father’s Visa card.

“Eleven hundred for members, thirteen hundred for guests.”

“Oh.” Spencer dropped the card back into his backpack. Maybe the Glitterati will hook me up.


“Cool.” Spencer nodded like that was a suitable plan B, even though he highly doubted it.

After punching a few keys on her computer, Sapphire handed Jamia several locker keys.

“Namaste,” she cooed, a brown ponytail flopping over her head as she bowed. Gerard and Frank split off from everyone and Spencer followed.

Inside the locker room, men padded across the cream-colored rug, wearing nothing but the spa’s plush complimentary robes and the glow of total relaxation. But most seemed happy to wander freely and let their normie parts dangle.

Spencer felt the sudden urge to spark. “Are we supposed to walk around naked?”

The duo giggled at his naïveté.

“Haven’t you ever been to a spa before?” Gerard asked, her eyes glinted with keen suspicion.

“No,” Spencer admitted.

Gerard raised a curious eyebrow. Frankie chose to ignore it.

“Here,” Frank said, handing each teen a key. With a single twist, Spencer’s dark-wood locker popped open. Inside were the plush robe and padded slippers he was expected to wear during his visit. “Voltage!” He said, marveling at his discovery. But his relief quickly changed to panic once he took a closer look at the robe.

“You nervous about showing too much skin too?” Gerard asked. Spencer looked at her. Gerard
smiled secretly and whispered “Just head into the tanning room fully dressed. Tip from your local non-binary lady.” Spencer smiled happily at Gerard. That made so much sense! She had a masculine name because she was nonbinary!

“Thanks for the tip Gee.” Spencer said honestly.

“No prob bob.” Gerard said, grinning and showing off his fang like teeth. Frank stripped quickly, revealing all kinds of tattoos.

Two women dressed in pink uniforms appeared, clipboards in hand.

“Mx. Way,” said an older blond, smiling, “I'm Theresa, your wax technician.”

“Wait? Where’s Anya?” Gerard asked, her hazel eyes darting in panic.

“Wellness seminar,” Theresa stated, and then splayed an arm, pointing Gerard down the hall toward the treatment rooms. “Shall we?”

Gerard stood, pinched the top of her robe closed, and followed Theresa down the hall. She looked back at the boys and crossed her eyes, letting them know she was less than pleased with the sub.

“Good luck!” Spencer mouthed.

“The tanning bed is in room thirteen,” Frank explained, her teeth chattering. “Read the operating instructions before you get naked. It’s cold in there. I’m going to steam.”

“Okay, thanks.” Spencer smiled, grateful that he didn’t have to undress in front of them.

Room 13 smelled like normie sweat and sunshine. It was absolutely toasty inside. Maybe Frank has circulation issues, Spencer wondered, locking the door and fortifying it with a chair. A curved bed that looked more like the love child of a Hummer and a coffin lay waiting. A small vinyl pillow and a folded towel rested neatly on its sanitized glass mattress. Spencer felt like Snow White instead of like Emma Swan.

After reading the instructions, Spencer’s suspicions were confirmed. Fifteen minutes on the bed would not solve his problems. It wouldn’t make Linda like him. And it would not turn his skin white. Nothing would. But it might show him that electrifying buzz Vicky said she felt while standing with her bare face beneath the sun at Mount Hood High. And if it wasn’t all that, so what? At the very least, his fifteen minutes would be something to add to his small but growing collection of real-life experiences.

Giddy with anticipation and grateful for the privacy, Spencer wiggled out of his turtleneck sweater and whipped it into the corner. Minutes later he was resting his head on the vinyl pillow wearing nothing but the seams and bolts his dad had given him, a coat of Fierce & Flawless, and silver protective eye stickers.

Feeling for the wall behind his head, Spencer located the power button and pressed. With a single amplified clack, rows of fluorescent bulbs snapped on. He lowered the roof and wiggled his way to ultimate comfort.

Ahhhhhhhhhh. There it is… the buzz… just as Vicky described.

Unlike a home charge, which streamed the electricity through his bolts, this penetrated every inch of his skin. It was the difference between a drink of water and a bath. And it felt absolutely voltage.
Visions of himself without a shirt, frolicking on a secluded beach with Linda, filled Spencer’s imagination. Warmed by nature’s heat lamp, his bolts, seams, and rock-solid green abs would wake her inner poet and inspire her to write. Fine sand would warm the spaces between his toes, and their late-night bonfire would crackle and spark in the darkness. They would snuggle, share stories of their painful double lives, and find solace in the other’s embrace.

Ahhhhhhhh…

These visions seemed so real, so possible, that he could practically smell them. Smoldering marshmallows left to blacken while their lips expressed love… smoke pirouetting all around them… the burned-cardboard stink of singed hair...

AHHHHHHHHHHH!

“Oh no!” Spencer shot upright, whacking his forehead on the glass roof of the tanning bed. He ripped the stickers off his eyes and saw ribbons of smoke rising from his ankle seams. His bolts were spraying like sparklers.

“Oh no oh no oh nohnooohnooohnohnohnooo!” Shaky and confused, he pressed the yellow button on the wall, hoping to cut the power, but that just tacked on another ten minutes to his session.

“Stop! Stop!” He smacked the smoldering seams, but panic made him spark even more. His seams began to hurt his skin, making him cry out in pain. He could hear someone wiggling the doorknob and calling his name. Gerard. The angel.

“Spencer! What’s going on!”

Spencer reached for the black cord in the wall and yanked. But it held tight. He tried again. And again…

Sparks were shooting everywhere. All of a sudden, a flash of electricity shot from his hand, snaked along the cord, and slithered into the outlet.

Pop!

The room went completely black.

“What happened to the lights?” someone shouted in panic from the room next door. It sounded like Sarah.

Several other voices—some amused, most agitated—fused in a chorus of dismay and mild anxiety. Through the crack under the door, Spencer saw flickering candlelight, and she heard hurried footsteps pass by the room.

“Is something burning?” asked a concerned female.

Paying little mind to his stinky seams, Spencer speed-dressed, then opened the door. Lo and behold, Gerard was right there.

“Come on!” Gerard grabbed his wrist and led him out the back way.

After following the red EXIT signs to the back door, they raced out into the pouring rain without a single word to anyone.

Outside, steam billowed around his sparking body like some cheap dry-ice effect in a B horror
movie. But he refused to cry. After all, he’d gotten his day at the spa. He breathed it. Lived it. Smelled it. Felt it. And (unfortunately) he would remember it forever.

“Come on.” Gerard tugged him in the direction of Spencer’s house.

Spencer’s cell rang. It was Jamia. Then Frank. Then Jamia. Then Frank. He let the calls go to voicemail.

After a six-mile walk where Gerard asked him what happened and got little response except a sniffle, they turned onto Radcliffe Way. His limbs were loose and his energy, zapped. Still, he refused to cry. He had to save his stamina for the inevitable lecture he would get from his parents. *You went where? You did what to their power? What if someone saw you? What were you thinking, walking so far on such a low charge? Do you know how dangerous that was? Not just for you but for all the RADs! Spencer, how many times…*

Just then a green BMW SUV sped by, its tires parting a puddle that rose up like the Red Sea. One wave smacked the passenger-side door. The other wave drenched Gerard who put herself between the puddle and Spencer.

This time he cried.
“Are you sure you don’t want to camp with us?” Dale shouted over the deafening moan of an inflating air mattress. “It stopped raining. And the fresh air will be good for your lungs.”

They were in the partially unpacked living room, watching through the sliding glass doors as Peter struggled to assemble a khaki GigaTent.

“No thanks mom.” Ryan declined. Who were his parents kidding? Cashmere jammies, an eight-person sleeping dome, Frette sheets over an AeroBed, takeout Korean beef skewers, a carafe of mojitos, and a projector loaded with season one of Lost did not qualify as camping. Why not wrap his mouth around the exhaust pipe on a Los Angeles city bus and call it an inhaler?

Besides, he had plans. As soon as Hillary left on her third date of the week, Ryan would sneak into her room with a bag of kettle corn and watch his favorite show, The Biggest Loser. Only it wasn’t on TV, and it wasn’t about weight loss. It was about a boy named Ryan whose crush on an unpredictable curdy finds him alone on a Saturday night staring at his bedroom window. And it was on its third night of repeats.

“Hillary out,” his sister announced, appearing before them in an bohemian, off-the-shoulder, haltered mini-dress in a orange, red, and purple boho print. The silver stiletto sandals made it perfectly clear, should anyone wonder, that she was sooo not from around here.

“How’s the hair?” she asked, palming her beachy blond curls. “Too sexy?”

“Do you even hear yourself?” Ryan asked, surprised into a giggle.

“I’m going out with Ryan Seaman. He’s a total B-lister,” Hillary explained, reglossing her lips. “I don’t want to give him the wrong idea. I just want to make Rian jealous.”

“The dress will give him the wrong idea,” Peter remarked, entering from the backyard. “Not the hair.” His soft-gray Prada fleece was flecked with bits of grass. “Now go back upstairs and finish getting dressed.”

“Dad!” Hillary stomped her stiletto. “Are we living in the same house? It’s Miami-humid in here. Another layer and I'll die of heatstroke. I didn’t even have to use my diffuser.” She pulled one of her curls and released it. “Observe.” The bounce spoke for itself.

“The furnace guy is coming on Wednesday.” Peter wiped his reddening forehead. “Now change or I’m going to stick that GigaTent over your body, and you can make Ryan jealous in that.”

“Rian!” Hillary corrected him.

“Why don’t you try my foam-green boho dress over your pretty black tights?” Dale tested the fullness of the AeroBed with her toe. “It’s in the wardrobe box marked YSL.”

“I dunno.” Candace sighed tentatively. “It calls for boho leather boots, and I don’t have any.”

“Borrow my paisley patterned leather boots.” Dale blew a wisp of flat ironed black hair away from her green eyes.

“Great idea!” Hillary exclaimed as if she hadn’t already thought of that. She winked at Ryan to show she had.
“You are such a weasel,” Ryan teased as he followed her sister and collapsed on Hillary’s Parisian canopy bed. Andy following behind them, holding onto a teddy bear Ryan recognized as a gift from Dan. The harshness of the pewter bars was offset by frilly pink sheets and a white satin duvet cover. It was the complete opposite of Ryan’s bed, which was a black sleep loft from Pottery Barn with a practical desk nook underneath.

“You have to go for what you want in life, Ryry,” Hillary explained, forcing her foot into the stiff leather boot. “Eyes on the prize, especially with guys.” She nodded her head toward Brendon’s dimly lit bedroom window.

“Nothing’s going on with him,” Ryan said, hating the way that sounded. Why is saying it out loud so much harder than thinking it?

“What about the ceramic flowers?”

“He was making out with Sarah all week. He’s probably just using me to make her jealous because Lindsay’s is back.” He rolled onto his side. “He’s a player, Candi. And I’m tired of being played.”

“You give up too easily. You always have.” She smoothed her hands over the flowy hem of the green dress and tilted her head to the right. “This works.”

Headlights streaked across the log walls of her room. “My B-list chariot awaits.”

“Try not to be too sexy,” Ryan teased.

“Only if you try to be more sexy.” Hillary waved a hand over Ryan’s bright blue ravenclaw sweats, like airport security. “This is not acceptable.”

“They’re comfortable,” he tried.

“Yeah.” Hillary spritzed herself with the latest Tom Ford fragrance. “And you’re comfortable being a frump.” She mussed Ryan’s hair. “You should think about getting out for a while. If the boredom doesn’t get you, the heat will.” She snapped. “Hillary out.” A sultry mist of Black Orchid perfume lingered in her stead.

Ryan lay on the canopy bed, tossing a white satin pillow into the air and trying to catch it before it landed on his face. Was this really his new life?

He waited for the sound of boots on the wooden steps and then walked over to the vanity. He quietly picked up Hillary’s cast collection of eyeliners and eyeshadows and set to work making an intricate design on his face. By the time he was done, he had red across his eyes and nose and birds going down one side of his face.

Ba! Ba! Ba! Ba!

If it hadn’t been for his phone, Ryan might have never torn himself away from his own reflection.

He slid his thumb across the screen, putting a sudden end to the psycho shower sting ring tone. “Hey,” he answered, rolling his sister’s white padded desk chair over to the window.

“What’s going on?” Jac asked. Ryan could hear “Look What You Made Me Do” playing in the background. Ryan resisted the urge to text Taylor that his new friend was a fan of hers.

“Nothing.” Ryan looked out at the white cottage across the street. Rustic wooden boxes overflowing with wildflowers hung from the ledges. A giant maple in the front yard played mall to the food court of bird feeders tucked away in its branches. Radiating mama’s-boy charm, the quaint home didn’t
“Ryan! Can you help me!” Andy called. Ryan quickly grabbed him off of Hillary’s makeup and held onto the curious first grader.

“What are you doing?” Ryan wondered. “I thought you and Linda were hanging out. What happened to sneaking into the new Saw at the Cineplex?”

Taylor was replaced by the click clack click clack click clack of fingers on a keyboard. “My parents want me to stay home because of the whole monster thing.” She smacked something solid. “It’s so lame. I waited all week to hang out with him, and now…” She smacked the solid thing again. “We were only going to the movies. What do they think? We’ll be attacked by the Wolfman? Ghostface? Oh, no, wait. What about the Piranha?”

“Jac. Not to be a dick, but Ghostface is about as supernatural as a tree.” Ryan pointed out. “I think you mean Jason Voorhees.”

“Whatever.” He could hear the amusement in her voice.

“Why don’t you ask Linda to come over?” Ryan asked, squinting to determine whether the flicker behind Brendon’s blinds was a sign of activity or wishful thinking.

“I did. She won’t.” Her tone shifted from anger to disappointment. “She has to see it opening weekend. So she’s going with Dallon… or so she says.”

Brendon’s bedroom light shut off. Ryan’s show was canceled.

“Explain this whole monster thing,” he said, finally showing some interest. People at school had been talking about an incident at Mount Hood High, but she hadn’t given it any serious attention. After all, they’d been talking about monsters. Besides, nothing could be scarier than the girls at Huntington Beach High, so why panic? But parents keeping kids indoors made it sort of seem real… almost. “Is it actually legit?”

“My parents seem to think so.” Bekka groaned.

“Mine too,” said a familiar voice.

“Breezy?”

“Hey, Ryan.”

“When did you get on the phone?” Ryan asked, wondering if he missed that detail while peering into Brendon’s bedroom.

“She’s on all my calls,” Jac explained. “Transcribing for the book.”

“Oh.” Ryan bit his thumbnail, finally realizing that the background noise was Breezy’s typing. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the invasion. “Anyway, where were we?”

“Monsters,” Breezy stated.
“Right, thanks.” Jac inhaled sharply. “There are all kinds of rumors floating around, but I go with Linda’s story because she is super into this stuff.”

Click clack click clack click clack…

“She says that there are families of monsters that live in Hells Canyon, about two hundred miles from here. They drink and bathe in Snake River and feed in the Seven Devils Mountains. In the summer the canyon gets so hot they migrate west to the ocean, traveling only at night or on super-foggy mornings.”

All of a sudden Brendon passed in front of his window. The surprise sighting gave Ryan a chill. He had never actually seen him in his room. Kara and Kyla? Sure. More often than not, Ryan saw them go in there and rooted through Brendon’s closet and then leave.

He turned off the light in Hillary’s room so that he couldn’t see in, and feigned interest in Jac’s lesson in local folklore.

“Really?”

Click clack click clack click clack…

“That’s what Linda says,” Jac explained. “Then when fall comes and things cool off, they go back. So it makes perfect sense that there was a sighting, because it’s peak migration season.”

“I shouldn’t have kissed Lindsay,” Ryan said sulkily, tired of the hokey monster talk. “It only made things worse.”

“What things?” Jac asked. “You and Brendon weren’t in a relationship.”

“Harsh.” Ryan snorted. His new friend was right. This stalking-and-sulking routine was getting stale. It was the anti–fresh start.

“It’s true,” Breezy confirmed Jac’s allegation.

“I know.” Ryan leaned his forehead against Andy’s fluffy head. “I totally fell for the dorky musician thing. He’s not even that cute.”

“Rude.”

Ryan jumped. “Ahhhhhhhh!” He whip-turned to face the thin silhouette in Hillary’s darkened doorway. Adrenaline revved his heart like an outboard motor.

“Ryan, are you okay? Answer me!” Jac shouted into the phone. “Is it the monster?”

Click clack click clack click clack…

“No. I’m fine.” Ryan placed a hand over his booming chest. “It’s just Brendon. I’ll call you back.”

Click cl—

He hung up and tossed the phone on Hillary’s bed.

“Was that Lindsay?” he asked.

Basking in the warmth of his jealousy, Ryan decided to let him think it was.
“That’s irrelevant. What are you doing here?”

“The homeless couple camping in your backyard let me in.” He stepped into the darkness.

Ryan squinted. “Have you been eavesdropping?”

“Hey,” he said, approaching the window. “Is that my room?”

“Yup!” Andy chirped. “Ryan’s mad at you.”

“Andrew. Out.” Ryan said. Andrew stuck his tongue out and left the room.

Brendon’s brown eyes illuminated when he saw him. Ryan’s cheeks burned. He realized he still had his little art project on his face. Suddenly, he felt very self-conscious. Not because his face was an art experiment, but because his experiment was.

“Um, so,” he stammered, wiping his slick forehead, “I just came to tell you to stay away from Lindsay.”

“Why?” Ryan grinned vengefully. “Because you’re jealous?”

“No.” He took off his dumb red glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Because he’s dangerous.”

“Jealous, jealous, jeal-ous,” Ryan sang like a little girl in a playground. To his surprise, his voice sounded a smidge clearer than usual.

“I’m not jealous, okay? I’m worried,” Brendon’s upper lip began to bead. “About a fellow human being. Man, is it always so hot in here?” he snapped.

“Yup,” Ryan said, trying to sound as though he wasn’t gutted by his lack of jealousy. “There’s a fan in my room,” he offered. “But you probably just came to give me that message, so…” He clomped over to Hillary’s door and held it open for him with all the grace of a giraffe on roller skates. “Have a great night. And thanks again.”

Brendon walked out, leaving Ryan to feel as if he were falling into a giant crevasse. He lowered his reeling head in his hands.

“Much better!” Brendon called.

He was in his room. Lights on. Fan whirling. Falling down a crevasse feeling—gone!

Brendon had already made himself at home. Sitting on the wooden floor under her black loft bed, knees drawn into his chest, fan blasting on him. He was wearing a black short-sleeved shirt, faded blue jeans, and black Converse (just like his!). The geek chic of it all smacked of a Marc Jacobs print campaign.

“Interesting,” he said, taking in the unpacked boxes and the 70s vinyls and record player being the only other things out of place.

“It’s not so bad.” He sat, thinking more of him than his tiny disheveled room.

A short, awkward round of bobble-heading followed.

“So what’s with you and Sarah?” Ryan blurted, as if his thoughts had been greased with cooking oil.

“Whadda’ya mean?” He closed his eyes and leaned closer to the fan.
“Seriously?” Ryan heart revved all over again. “Look, I know you’re a player. That’s fine. I get it. The best we can hope for is a neighborly rapport, so you might as well be honest with me.”

“A player?” Brendon practically laughed in his face. “You’re the one who was kissing Lindsay in the middle of the hall.”

Ryan stood, his face burning under his makeup. How dare he turn this around on him? “We’re done.”

“What? What did I do?”

“I’m not an idiot, Brendon!”

A cyclone of emotions tore through the back of his throat and blew tears to his eyes. He must have uttered that sentence a thousand times. The only variable was the name tacked on the end.

“Then maybe I am.” He reached for his hand. It felt like the smell of gingerbread cookies on Christmas Eve. “Tell me.” He squeezed. “What did I do?”

“All week you’ve been avoiding me, playing tonsil hockey with Sarah, and flirting with that shy kid with all the wool!” Ryan snapped. “And I was the idiot who fell for your stupid face!”

This time he lowered his head in shame.

“Ah-ha! So you do remember!”

He shook his head from side to side. “No, I don’t. That’s the problem.”

“What?” Ryan sat down beside him and removed his shoes.

“I have blackouts,” he admitted, peeling a loose piece of rubber off the toe of his sneaker. “My mom thinks anxiety may trigger them, but she’s not sure.”

“What do the doctors say?”

“No one knows for sure.”

“Wait, something doesn’t make sense.” Ryan shifted to face him. “Hold on,” he said, reaching for a box marked COMFY. He lifted a pair of green sweats out and left the room. “Better.” he smiled with relief, coming back wearing the sweats. “Okay, so how can you kiss people when you’re all blacked out?”

“That’s a good question.” He ran a hand through his choppy layers and sighed. “I wonder if I’m getting worse?”

“Don’t worry.” Ryan touched him gently on the knee. “There are tons of people who can help you.”

“I’m more worried about my mom than me,” he said. “I’m the baby of the family and my mom and step dad tend to worry a lot about me.”

Touched by his selflessness, Ryan leaned closer. His brown hair got swept up by the breeze of the fan and whipped the sides of their faces. It was pure Hollywood cheese.

“Relax.” He gripped his wrist with mock urgency. “You’re not going anywhere. The good people of Salem need us!”
“Then fight, I shall!” Brendon replied cheesily.

They burst out laughing, letting go of all unnecessary jealousy and welcoming the mystery of their uncertain fate.

“You know that I just kissed Lindsay to make you jealous, right?” Ryan admitted.

“No, but it worked.”

“Yay,” Ryan squeaked, relieved to hear him say it.

He searched his face, his eyes smiling like he was reading Mad Libs.

“What?”

“Your name,” Brendon said. “It suits you.”

“Really?” he asked, surprised. “Ryan sounds so… peppy and straight, and I’m so… not.”

“Yeah, but look at the meaning.” He crossed his legs so their knees were touching. “Illustrious. Little King. And that’s you.”

Ryan giggled nervously, then looked at his calloused bare feet. Pete was right. Would it kill him to get a pedicure every once in a while?


Brendon smiled wide. “That means tiller of the soil, or farmer. And the most famous George is St George, patron saint of England, who struggled with a fire breathing dragon symbolizing the devil.”

“Nerd.” Ryan laughed.

“But I’m your nerd.” Brendon joked. Ryan sobered up.

“Thank you,” he said, touched by his own shyness. “No one ever put that much thought into my name,” he admitted. “Not even my parents. They wanted to name me Serg, but my mom had some crazy sinus infection while she was giving birth. So when it came time to tell the nurse what to write on the birth certificate, Serg sounded like George. They didn’t catch the mistake until it arrived in the mail three months later. So they decided to go with it.”

“Well, it suits you perfectly. It’s really pretty.” He swallowed.

Here it comes…. Don’t say it, please don’t say it, please don’t…

“Like you.”

“Crap. I was afraid you were going to say that.” Ryan stood, bracing himself for the inevitable.

“What?” Brendon stood too and followed him to the box marked BEVERLY HELLS.

“Look.” He shoved his old school ID under his nose.

Brendon adjusted his glasses and then examined the card. “What?”

“How can you say that THAT is pretty or good looking at all?”

“Because I see you. My dorky writer, guitar playing, crossbreed of hippie and emo boyfriend.”
Brendon admitted, cupping Ryan’s cheek.

Wow.

Ryan’s throat cyclone was building strength. Traveling due south, it was headed straight for hid stomach. The heat in the house mingled with the heat in his body, and he was being drawn toward him. “We should probably kiss now,” he blurted, shocking himself.

“I agree,” he said, stepping toward him. The salty-sweet smell of his skin filled her like kettle corn never could.

Closer… closer… closer… and…

“STAND BACK!” shouted a frantic woman.

“I got it mommy!” Andrew’s squeaky voice called. “Ryry can’t help cuz he’s kissing his boyfriend!”

Ryan leaned away from Brendon and yelled “So says the little troll that broke all of mom’s expensive eyeliners!”

Brendon started laughing, making Ryan laugh and lean his forehead against Brendon’s.

Brendon smiled and leaned up, connecting their lips.
Spencer slept like a chicken with its head cut off—his brain and his body were on totally different programs. After five boring hours of restitching, during which Vincent insisted on watching the news, Spencer was safely tucked between a fresh set of electromagnetic blankets with a warm current of power streaming through his bolts. His brain, however, was running in a panicked frenzy. Sound bites of the lies he had told Vi and Vince taunted him like a never-ending loop of carnival music.

Viola: Vincent! There’s something wrong with Spencer!


Gerard: I’m so sorry Mr. Smith. Spence had a freak out at the library and I offered to walk him home. I didn’t want him to walk alone.

Spencer: I’m okay, just a little cold and tired. (pause) Dad, did you know rodent whiskers remove scars?

Vincent: What? (to Viola) Is he hallucinating? (to Spencer) Spencer, can you understand me? Do you know where you are?

Spencer: Yes, Dad.

Vincent: Where are the others, Gerard? (He lifts him and carries him to his metal bed.)

Gerard: They wanted to go to the movies after the library. Spencer wanted to go but said that you guys wanted him home. So I offered to walk home with him.

Viola: And they didn’t drop you off first? (She flicks on the massive overhead light, pulls the arm, and positions it over Spencer’s body, making it feel like an interrogation.)

Spencer: Um, they offered, but we didn’t want them to be late.

Vincent: You could have called and asked to go with them. We would have said yes, especially if we knew you’d be walking home alone in the rain.

Spencer: It wasn’t so bad. But I am kind of tired. Do you mind if I rest?

Vincent: (He dabs something cold and wet over his stitches.) Of course not. Go ahead. (mumbling to Viola) They almost look burned.

Gerard: I’m going to go home and tell the girls and Frank that we’re okay. Frank and Sarah were freaking out about letting us walk.

Viola: (mumbling) Probably just frayed from the wind. Thank you for making sure he got home Gerard. You’re a very sweet child.

While they assumed, worried, tended, stitched, and listened to the local news, Spencer struggled to get back to that imaginary beach where he and Linda were running freely. He finally arrived—but it was raining.

At some point Spencer must have slept, because he couldn’t recall the moment his parents left and turned off the lights. But for the past hour he had been lying in bed listening to the Glitterati burrow beneath sawdust, wondering how Gerard knew about him. Lying to his parents about the spa trip was one thing. But how does a human electrical outlet sell the old dead-phone-battery excuse? It would definitely take some practice.

Hoooot hoooot.

Spencer switched off Electra and lifted his head.

Hoooot hoooot.

Either there was an owl in the house or his parents were experimenting with ringtones.

He checked on the Glitterati, expecting them to be scratching at the glass in a fight-or-flight attempt to escape a winged predator. But they had fallen asleep, curled into mini white disco balls.

Hoooot hoooot.

“Hello?” Viola said, sounding concerned. Her voice was muffled by the wall. “I understand…. We’ll be there as fast as we can.”

Seconds later, bare feet were slapping across the polished concrete, closet doors were sliding along their tracks, and a toilet flushed.

In movies, late-night calls meant someone had died. Or there’d been a fire at the factory. Or aliens had burned circles in the crops. But this was real life, and Spencer had no idea what had happened. Vicky and Fran hurried into his room.

“What’s going on?” Fran asked.

The door began to open. The thin band of light from the hallway widened like a Japanese folding fan.

“Kids?” Viola whispered, her purple lipstick already on.

“Yeah?” Spencer squinted in the brightness.

“Get dressed. We need to go somewhere.”

“Now?” Spencer glanced at his phone. “It’s four in the morning!”

Viola zipped the hoodie of her black Juicy tracksuit, her tiny bolts momentarily exposed. “We’re leaving in three minutes.”

In the background, Vincent was filling two travel mugs with coffee.

Spencer jumped to his feet. The floor was cold. His new seams felt tight. “It takes me at least a half hour to put my makeup on and—”

“Forget the makeup. Long sleeves and a hood should be fine.” Spencer tossed Vicky and Fran two
of his hoodies and tugged his own on quickly.

“Where are we going?” Spencer asked, oscillating between fear and excitement.

“I’ll explain on the way.” Viola left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

The rain had stopped, but the wind was still blowing. Silver moonlight reflected off the slick cul-de-sac pavement, reminding Spencer of a huge bowl of milk. But instead of leaves, his would be full of Fruity Pebbles.

“Where are we going?” Fran tried Vincent.

He responded with a yawn as he backed the Volvo out of the garage.

“We have a meeting,” Viola said, a slight hint of worry in her voice.

“At the university?” Spencer asked, worried it was about him or Vicky.

“A different kind of meeting.” Vincent said, eyes fixed on the red taillights of the black Prius ahead. Considering the early hour, a surprising number of cars were heading up Radcliffe Way.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, you know. Something’s obviously going on,” Vicky snapped.

“Girls, Spencer.” Viola turned to face them. For a brief moment everything smelled like her gardenia body oil. “Remember we told you there were other people like us in Salem?”

“The RADs?”

“Exactly. When something happens in our community, we get together and discuss it.”

“And something happened?” Spencer asked, lowering the window and welcoming the cool night air.

Viola nodded.

Was it me?” Vicky asked.

Viola nodded again.

Vicky sparked. “What are they going to do to me?”

“Nothing!” Viola assured her. “No one knows it was you.”

“And no one ever will,” Spencer insisted. “I’ll kick anyone’s ass if they even lay a finger on you.”

“You’ll like our get-togethers. While the grown-ups talk, the kids get to mix and mingle with other RADs,” Viola explained.

A tingle filled Spencer’s heart space. “I’ll get to meet other RADs?”

_Linda! Linda! Linda! Linda! Linda!

“Yup.” Viola smiled, turning back to face the road. “Ms. Urie is a wonderful youth counselor. She leads discussions about the issues you’re facing and—”


“Voices down, windows up,” Vincent whispered, turning onto Front Street. He pulled up to an
empty stretch of curb beside a public park and shut off the engine. “Shhhhhhhhh,” he hissed, with a finger to his lips.

The Riverfront carousel was directly across the street, its painted horses still and silent, like the rest of Salem. Traffic lights changed from red to green to yellow and then back to red, performing for an audience that never showed. Even the wind had stopped.

**What are they waiting for?**

Spencer controlled his urge to spark, but it wasn’t easy. The beam of a flashlight flickered across the windshield.

“Let’s go,” Vincent said, stepping out of the SUV.

A man appeared, dressed all in black. Without a word, he took Vincent’s keys and drove off with their car.

Too afraid to speak, Spencer grabbed his little sisters hands and looked at his parents on the deserted sidewalk, asking a hundred questions with his eyes.

“He’s just parking it for us,” Vincent whispered. “Follow me.”

He offered his hands and led his girls behind a dense thicket. After a quick scan of his surroundings, he bent down and patted the wet grass.

“Got it,” he said, yanking something that looked like a rusty bangle. A hatch opened, and he hurried the twins, Spencer and Viola inside.

“What is this?” Fran asked, marveling at the underground walkway that snaked before them. Laid with cobblestone and lit by lanterns, it smelled like mud and danger.

“It leads to RIP.” Vincent’s voice echoed. “RAD Intel Party.”

Vicky beamed. “So, it’s a party?”

“It can be.” Vincent winked at his wife.

Viola giggled.

The low drone of cars on the road above them vibrated throughout the tunnel. But Spencer didn’t spark once. Filled with the hope of seeing Linda, he followed his parents along the cobblestone road with the bounce and promise of a day at Disneyland.

An old wooden door with thick iron hinges greeted them at the end of their brief trek.

“We’re here,” Vincent whispered.

“Mmmmm, smells like popcorn.” Franny rubbed her belly.

“That’s because we’re under Andy’s popcorn stand,” Viola explained while Vincent searched for his key. “And soon we’ll be underneath the carousel.”

“Voltage!” Spencer looked up, but all he saw was a mud ceiling and some broken lantern hooks.

“The carousel was built by RADs, you know,” Viola announced with pride. “A very nice couple who used to live on a horse farm, named Mr. and Mrs. Ballato. I believe their daughter Lindsay is in
your grade."

Sarah’s girlfriend? Does she know she’s a RAD?

“She and her daughter are gorgons. They can turn things to stone just by looking at them,” Viola continued. “So one day, Maddy hears an uproar in the stable. Turns out one of the groomers’ kids was throwing rocks at a nearby beehive and broke it. So when Maddy runs in, she is attacked and starts swatting like mad. Her glasses fall off, she looks at the horses, and just like that”—she snapped her fingers—“they turn to stone. The Ballatos spent the next five years painting the horses.” Viveka gasped at the sheer magnitude of the project. “And in 1991, Mrs. Ballato donated them to the city.” She giggled. “Oh, you should really hear her tell it. It’s so funny.”

“I bet.” Spencer feigned interest, but his thoughts drifted back to what was behind the door, not above it.

Click.

Vincent opened the door to his new social life.

“Remember,” he warned. “In here we’re family. But up there”—he pointed at the carousel—“any mention of RIP or its members is forbidden. Even in a RADs-only conversation. And that includes e-mails, texts, and tweets.”

“Okay, I get it.” Vicky pushed her father inside the round room and Spencer did a quick scan for Linda.

Dressed in PJs, kids of all ages were lounging on couches and club chairs, like they were hanging in a friend’s basement. Everything in this basement, though, had a casing of smooth white stone.

Apparently Maddy Ballato had lost her glasses a few more times.

“Voltage!” Spencer gasped. “Look at all the kids!”

“Vincent, Viola!” A woman wearing oversize black gucci sunglasses greeted them with open arms. Her hair was piled high under a seafoam-green Pucci head scarf, and her white linen pantsuit looked surprisingly chic, despite its Labor Day expiration date.

“Maddy Ballato, meet our daughters, Victoria and Francine and our son, Spencer,” Viola said, beaming.

Maddy clapped her hands over her mouth. “Oh, V, they’re just gorgeous. Vincent did a wonderful job.”

Vicky practically floated up off the cobblestones with delight. Spencer smiled. She was completely green, and someone thought she was gorgeous. Someone other than their parents.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Ballato.” Spencer held out his hand, not the least bit concerned about sparking.

“Call me Maddy,” she insisted, “or Mother-in-law.” She leaned closer to Spencer’s ear and whispered, “If Lindsay ever dumps Sarah, I’m calling you.” She tapped one of her dark lenses and said, “Wink wink.”

Spencer beamed.
“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Maddy said, becoming grave, “I’m going to borrow your parents.” She placed a hand on each of their backs and guided them through the stone doorway.

Once the grown-ups were gone, someone blasted “Don’t Stop Me Now” by Queen, and everyone shot up to dance. From what he could tell, no one else had seams or bolts. But there were a few guys with snakes for hair, a gilled-couple making out by the stone cactus, several swinging tails, and a serpent-skinned girl who resembled the voltage Fendi clutch Vicky had been gushing about seeing in Vogue.

“Spencer!” called a familiar masculine voice.

He turned. “Frank? What are you doing here?”

“I’d ask you the same thing, but…” He touched Spencer’s green hand. “It’s kind of obvious. Besides, I heard a rumor a while ago that your dad was making some kids. I just didn’t know they’d be so… voltage.”

Spencer beamed at the usage of his own expression.

“So you knew when we went to the spa?”

“I had a feeling. We all did,” Frank confessed. “But we’re not allowed to talk about RAD stuff out there.” He pointed up. “So we’ve been waiting for the next RIP to confirm.”

“Well, consider me confirmed.” Spencer smiled brightly, luxuriating in the weightlessness of freedom. “Um… what are you?” He blurted, unsure of the polite way to ask, or if there even was one.

Frank took a step back, placed his hands squarely on his hips, and smiled.

“I don’t see anything?”

Red-and-black hair… black cotton union pajamas covered in red bats… fleece scarf and gloves… hazel eyes… red eyeliner smudged halfway down his face… It all looked completely Frank.

“I dunno.” Spencer shrugged.

“Look.” Frank smiled wider for a photographer who wasn’t there.

“Fangs!” Vicky shouted excitedly over the music. “You have fangs! That’s why you always laugh with your mouth closed.”

Frank nodded excitedly.

Spencer was about to gush over how amazing it was they were both RADs, when he heard another familiar voice.

“Well top o the mornin, ya nerds!” Jamia called, spritzing her scaly bare arms with the spa’s Evian facial mist. Her forearms were spiked with triangular growths that looked like fins, and her fingers and toes were webbed. “Confirmed?”

Frank lifted Spencer’s arm and pointed at his seams.

“Killer diller!” The fins wiggled with delight. “Welcome to the party!”

“Ahhhhhhhh,” Sarah yawned, shuffling toward them. Other than her feet, which were clad in a pair of
fluffy gold platform sandals, and her ring-covered hands, she was totally wrapped in strips of white cloth. The fashion-forward look was so Rihanna at the 2009 American Music Awards. “Does anyone know what’s going on? Was there another sighting?”

Frank shrugged.

“Is she here?” Sarah asked.

Frank pointed at the three teens seated on a stone carpet in front of them. Lyn-Z appeared to be in a meditative state. Sitting cross-legged and wearing sunglasses, she was playing the flute for the tangle of black and coral snakes slithering on her head.

“Looks like someone’s having a RAD hair day,” Frank joked.

Sarah giggled into her palm and then turned away from her two-timing, normie-loving girlfriend.

“I can’t believe you’re here too!” Spencer exclaimed, inhaling a nose full of amber perfume.

“I would say the same thing about you, only I’m not the least bit surprised,” Sarah said smugly.

“Now pay up.”

“Huh?”

“Not you! Fangcis!” she snapped, her tired blue eyes smoked to perfection. “I told that vamp you were one of us the first time I laid eyes on you. Now she owes me ten bucks.”

“Who’s Fangcis?”

“It’s my RAD name—my real name,” Frank said, handing Sarah a ten-dollar bill.

Sarah folded it into the shape of a pyramid and stuffed it down her linen-enhanced cleavage. “Maybe if my family got some royalties from those Brendan Fraser movies or those tacky Cleopatra Halloween costumes, I wouldn’t need to take your money.”

“You don’t need to take my money anyway… but imagine how loaded I’d be from twilight.”

“I’d complain too,” Jamia scratched her scaly arms, “but Creature from the Black Lagoon wasn’t exactly a bonzer at the box office.”

“Shape of Water was.” Vicky offered, smiling. “Victoria Smith. Vicky to all of my friends.”

“How did you know I was a RAD?” Spencer asked Sarah, suddenly wondering who else might be onto her.

“I thought I saw you—” she pointed at Vicky. “—spark in the cafeteria. And then I saw you do it in Jamia’s car.”

“That’s not the only time I sparked yesterday.” Spencer giggled.

“That power outage was you?” Jamia asked.

Spencer nodded sheepishly.

“Fang-tastic!” Frank clapped.

“Do you have any idea how much I hate the dark?” Sarah asked. “It reminds me of being buried
alive."

“I thought I heard you screaming.”

“My masseuse had to piggyback me outta there,” Sarah admitted. “I was scared stiff.”

“You mean you ARE a scared stiff.” Frank teased.

The teens burst out laughing.

“It’s so voltage that you’re all RADs,” Spencer trilled. “I never would have thought—”

The door slammed. Everyone turned to find a pack of preppy, albeit hairy, boys entering the party, their long fingers clutching supersized McDonald’s takeout bags. Without a single word, they sat at the stone picnic table and began devouring their Big Macs. A skinnier, nerdier one plopped down against the stone couch.

“Mikey!” Sarah shouted at the youngest-looking boy, who had light brown, fluffy hair and was dressed in jeans and a hoodie. “Where’s your sister?”

“In the tunnel crying,” he said, chewing fiercely. “He got tagged again.”

Sarah and Frank exchanged a sympathetic pout.

“You don’t have to howl it to the whole world!” Gerard shouted from the other side of the door. “Um, you’re the one howling, not me,” he called, unwrapping another Big Mac and tossing the bun away.

“What am I supposed to do?” Gerard entered, sobbing. “Look what they did to me.” He tugged the patch of red fur around his neck.

“What happened?” Sarah patted his arm.

“It was those PETA activists again. They think I’m wearing fur.”

“You are,” Spencer reasoned.

“Yeah.” Gerard unbuttoned his navy-blue coat and revealed his fawn one. “My own!”

Spencer gasped in horror. Not from the shock of seeing werewolf hair under skeleton pajamas as much as from the memory of suggesting Gerard remove his fur. If only he had known!

“Oh my god.” Spencer gasped. “I’m so sorry I even suggested taking your own fur off!”

“You didn’t know.” Gerard shrugged. “Are you okay after that horrifying debacle of burning your seams?”

“I’m right as rain.” Spencer smiled.

“So that’s why you disappeared on us.” Frank grinned cheekily. “You were walking good old sparky home.”

Spencer sat on the arm of a nearby couch and pretended to pick a loose ankle seam.

“It’s okay. You’re safe now.” Sarah hugged the distraught lycanthrope. “Mummy’s here.”
Gerard burst out laughing and wiped his wet nose on Sarah’s cloth-wrapped shoulder. “That might be the corniest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“No, I think Frank’s ‘RAD hair day’ comment was worse.”

“You know”—Frank finger-combed Gerard’s tagged tuft reverently while changing the subject—it’s kind of punk rock.”

“And if you want, my mom and I could fix it.” Fran offered almost silently. She clearly was in awe of the nonbinary wolf-child

Gerard stared at Frank. “What’s with your cheek?”

“Eyeliner!” Jamia called.

“Surprise, surprise,” Sarah teased.


Ms. Urie entered and flipped the latch on the wooden door.

*What about Linda?*

Spencer let out a heavy sigh. She wasn’t coming. She wasn’t like him. She wasn’t an option.

“Better luck next time Spence.” Vicky whispered, patting his knee.

Ms. Urie shut off the stereo and everyone sat, like in a game of musical chairs. Jamia wrapped herself in a plush red robe and joined the others on the couch. She swung her legs into Frank’s lap and laid herself across Spencer and onto Gerard.

“Sorry I’m late,” Ms. Urie announced. “Car trouble.”

“Yeah, remind me to use that one the next time I’m late for biology,” Mikey barked. Everyone chuckled

“You need to get your license first,” she fired back, stepping up to the stone podium that faced the couch klatch.

“One more year,” Mikey announced.

“Till you get your permit!” Gerard teased.

Spencer studied Ms. J with renewed interest. Janis Joplin glasses, a strict brown ponytail, red lipstick, and a collection of pencil skirts and blouses in varying shades of black made her interesting for a teacher. But as a RAD, she lacked pizzazz.

“What’s she in for?” Spencer whispered to Frank.

“She’s a normie, but her kid is a RAD, only they doesn’t know. She thinks not knowing will protect them.”

“Is it Linda?” Spencer whispered excitedly.

“Why do you call him that?”

“Joke from middle school.” Gerard shrugged. “He used to think his blank spots in his memory were Satan controlling him.”

“How- what?” Fran asked, confusion clear on her face.

“Jac Vanek left a mormonism book in his locker as a joke.” Frank scoffed. “Z-Berg over there taught her a lesson.”

“Before we get started on today’s topic, I’d like to introduce our newest member,” Ms. Urie said. “The Stein children.”

Spencer and his sisters stood while everyone applauded. Their smiles so warm, they looked fresh from the oven. He smiled back with his entire body.

“Please introduce yourself to the smith kids after the meeting if you haven’t already done so. Okay, moving on…” Ms. Urie said. She flipped through some notes on a yellow legal pad. “As you know, there was a RAD sighting at Mount Hood High last week.”

Vicky tugged at her neck seams. Spencer and Fran shot her a look.

“I’m guessing it was a prank, but the normies are taking it very seriously. Several are staying indoors —”

“Awoooooooo!” Gerard’s brothers howled and stomped their loafers.

“Heel!” Ms. Urie snapped, her ponytail swinging. “There’s already adversity in this world. We need to come from a place of love. Got it?” she yelled.

The boys quieted down immediately.

“My point is, we need to exercise extreme caution until this blows over. Normie interactions should be kept friendly but distant—”

Sarah’s hand shot up. “Ms. Urie? When you say ‘distant,’ does that mean no kissing Ry-Nerd?”

“Is he a normie?”

Cleo nodded.

The teacher removed her glasses and shot Sarah an are-you-seriously-asking-me-that? glance. “Then you know the answer.”

Lyn-Z stood and faced her girlfriend. “Sarah, you have to let it go!” Her snakes hissed in agreement. “I told you he attacked me. I had nothing to do with it. I love you and only you.”

Sarah’s thick (possibly false) lashes fluttered. “I know. I just wanted to hear you say it in front of everyone. Anyway, he doesn’t like you. He likes Brendon.”

Everyone giggled except Ms. J—and the smith kids.

“Stop being a bitch Sarah.” Everyone fell quiet. Spencer stared at Fran. “Just cut it out. You’re just a sad, insecure little bully. Ryan has been nothing but sweet. It’s not his fault you took it upon yourself to police who he can and can’t be friends with.” She was breathing heavily. “And I heard what you said to him when he kissed Lyn-Z. You were toying with Brendon’s feelings because you KNEW he liked Ryan and you didn’t want him to.” She jabbed a pink painted nail into Sarah’s chest.
“You’re just a big, ugly bully with a pretty packaging.”

“Fran!” Spencer hissed.

“For once can you stop avoiding confrontation!” Fran snapped. “I know you saw Sarah bullying Ryan. I know you saw how hurt Ryan was when you started paying attention to Brendon. And I know you saw how hurt I was when you kept ignoring me at School!” She sparked on the last word.

“Are you done Miss Smith?” Fran nodded, huffing.

“If everyone is through, then I’d like to move on to something a little more… pressing.” Ms. Urie stood and pushed back the puffy sleeves of her black blouse. “It came to my attention during our Friday staff meeting that this year’s September Semi is going to have a theme.”

Jamia raised her webbed hand. “Under the Sea?”

“I’m afraid not, Jamia Nestor,” Ms. Urie said sadly. “In light of the alleged monster sighting, they think it would be festive to make it a… a”—she inhaled deeply, then exhaled—“Monster Mash.”

The reaction was so explosive, Spencer couldn’t help but imagine the carousel popping off its hinges and spiraling down Front Street.

“That’s so offensive!”

“Totally cliché!”

“We did that in middle school, and it was lame back then.”

“How ’bout we have a Normie Mash?”

“We could all dress exactly the same and do absolutely nothing special.”

“Yeah, but if we go as normies, we’ll have to stay home!”

“And lock the doors.”

“And tell each other stories about all the scary monsters.”

Spencer started sparking. Not because he found the Monster Mash theme offensive, but because he didn’t. Not even a little bit. And saying nothing when you could be right seemed worse than saying something and being wrong. Plus Fran was right. He stood by while Sarah bullied Ryan and frosted him out. He wasn’t going to let Vicky’s dreams get crushed by an angry mob of RADs.

His hand shot up. “Um, can I just say one thing?”

His voice was too soft to get anyone’s attention, but his finger fireworks did the trick. Once the kids in the room settled down, so did the sparks. Everyone stared expectantly. But Spencer wasn’t afraid. He knew that what he was saying would impress them even more than his light show. Or at least it would show Vicky and Franny that he would stand up for them.

“Um, I kind of think the Monster Mash theme is a good thing.”

The murmurs started up again. Sarah kicked his in the shin, just as she had done in Jamia’s escalade.

But Ms. Urie clapped twice and returned the floor to Spencer.
“I think normies wanting to dress like us is a compliment,” he said. “Isn’t imitation the best form of flattery?” Some people nodded, considering Spencer’s words. “I mean, who isn’t tired of copying their style?”

Jamia and Frank applauded, the sound of their support charging him like the sun.

“Maybe it’s a sign of the times. Maybe normies are ready for a change. Maybe they need us to show them they don’t have to be afraid. And maybe the best way to do that is to go to the Monster Mash without costumes.”

Murmurs rose like abandoned helium balloons. Ms. Urie lifted her palm.

“What exactly are you suggesting?” she asked.

Spencer tugged at his neck seam. “Um, I guess I’m saying a costume party with a monster theme means we can go as ourselves. Then once everyone is having a good time, we can show them we’re not in costume. They’ll realize we’re harmless, and we’ll be able to live freely and openly.”

The room was silent.

“I could finally let my hair down,” Lyn-Z joked.

“I could take off this ridiculous blazer,” Mikey said excitedly.

“I could smile for pictures,” Frank announced.

“ Doesn’t matter.” Sarah grinned. “It’s not like you show up on film, anyway.”

Frank bared his fangs. Sarah rolled her eyes. Then they both giggled.

“How about we put it to a vote?” Ms. Urie said. “All in favor of coming out of the casket during the September Semi, raise your hand.”

Spencer’s arm shot up. His and his sisters were the only one.

“All in favor of staying hidden?”

Everyone else raised an arm. Ms. Urie raised two.

“Really?” Spencer sat, unable to make eye contact with anyone. Not that they were trying. Disappointment and shame fought inside Spencer’s for heart-space domination. But total depression came out of nowhere and stole the title.

*Why was everyone so afraid? How would things ever change if they didn’t take a chance? Will I ever dance on the beach with Linda?*

“It’s settled, then,” Ms. Urie announced. “Forty-three to three—”

“Four,” said a girl’s voice.

Spencer searched the room for his only supporter but saw no one.

“Over here,” said a floating sticker hovering above him. The sticker read HELLO, MY NAME IS HAYLEY. “Hey. I just wanted to let you know you had my vote.”

“Voltage,” Spencer said, trying to sound enthused by his invisible sister in arms.
“What are we going to do?” Ms. J shouted.

“Hide with pride!” everyone shouted back.

Everyone but the Smiths.
SARAH: Debs, why weren’t u at the RIP meeting? A new RAD was confirmed.
DEBBY: Missed it. Mrs. Gorgon is sending transcRIPts.
SARAH: ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ.
DEBBY: Z-Berg said you got bitched out by a twelve year old.
SARAH: Ka! She’s thirteen. She said I was being a bully to some normie.
DEBBY: That goofy tall kid who’s a student aid in the Special Ed classes?
SARAH: Oh geb. Don’t tell me you like him!
DEBBY: He isn’t the evil normie you keep making him out to be.

While Spencer Smith was busy pushing the RADs to go radical, Deadbora Ryan was staging a much quieter rebellion of her own. She flicked a strand of long red hair away from her eyes as she texted another plea to her parents, begging for permission to go to NekroCon, the first-ever zombie fan convention. According to the event website, only twenty tickets remained. How was that even possible when the con was almost a year away? Still, the countdown clock was urging fans to act fast before tickets sold out. But what were the actual zombies supposed to do?

Like all the other RADs, Debby lived a lie. At Merston High, she had to be Deborah Ryan. But this teenage daughter of the living undead didn’t mind the double-life thing. After all, two lives are better than none. Debby’s main problem with fitting into the normie mold? She was more tortoise than hare. It took her a couple of hours to walk home from school—and she lived only a few blocks away. When she talked, her words came out sooooo sloooooowly that it sooooounded like groooooooaning.

Even though she lived life in the slow lane, Debby was, ironically, the smartest cookie in the Tagalongs box. Moving slowly gave her ample opportunity to collect data, analyze it, and formulate the most efficient way to do things. Debby was first in her class at Merston High, and her parents fully expected her to be valedictorian at graduation.

She only asked for two things in return: Dead Fast graphic novels (okay, comic books) and a ticket to NekroCon—of which there were now only eleven left. She tried to type faster.

DEADBORAH: Dad, the comics are not trashy exploitation. How could they be when the zombie is the hero?
DAD RYAN: You can’t move fast enough to dodge the crowd. You will get trampled.

DEADBORAH: Would you keep your only offspring from this opportunity to experience the world and explore her passions?
DEADBORAH: To learn and—
DAD RYAN: Thinking about it…

Seven tickets left.
Desperate for a distraction, Debby spent the next nine minutes taking off her platform wedges—a new speed record!—and then sat down in her ergonomic desk chair to hack into the latest installment of Jac and Better Than Ever. Maybe reading about normie drama would distract her. She squinted at Breezy’s ongoing magnum opus as it scrolled across three computer screens.

Jac and Linda are the perfect couple, but even couples who are sickly ridikly kee-yoot together need to keep an eye on the competition after three blissful years. To this end, Jac has developed a strategic plan to keep Linda in her sights.

**Step 1: Identify PTs**. Warning signs include shiny hair, symmetrical facial features, and manicured nails. Keep an eye out for RED-ALERT PTs—physical threats who don’t own the fact that they are PTs.

Today there were two new students to assess:

Victoria—tons of makeup (she must have terrible skin). Atrocious clothing(clearly, this girl has watched too many reruns of Ouran High School Host Club). But she does have great hair. 
**Assessment:** not a PT, but monitor.

George Wentz—long brown hair, perfect nose and craggly fang-like teeth. Completely uncomfortable with his own looks, as apparent from his hoodies in unassuming colors. Observed: George was talking to Brendon—nerd alert—and actually got upstaged completely when SARAH SWOOPED IN and STOLE HIS SOUL through her glossy lips! (See past installments 1–678 for more details on Cleo’s crush-stealing, boyfriend-napping, home-wrecking ways.) Assessment: RED-ALERT PT.

Debby couldn’t read any more. The normies had it backward. All facts pointed to Victoria being the PT. It was obvious to Debby that the makeup and pantsuit were a cover for Victoria’s own RAD self. Okay, that and the fact that while walking to school this morning Debby had seen Mr. Smith driving her and her siblings to school. As for Sarah kissing Brendon, Debby didn’t doubt it. Bad Sarah, she thought. That mummy can’t keep it under wraps!

Debby checked the website again. Three tickets left!

An instant message popped up from her mother. Finally!

**ZeeBeeMOM1** : Sorry. We just want to keep you safe.

Two tickets left!

Debby groaned in agony and glanced despairingly at the signed and framed Dead Fast issue no. 1 poster on her wall. Was she forever doomed to buying collectibles on eBay? Not if she could move fast enough to…

The words SOLD OUT! flashed across her screen.

Slowly, she began lowering her head into her hands, hoping to catch her tears before they fell onto her keyboard. Seconds before her hands and glasses collided, she saw a new message pop up on her monitor: ENTER THE “DEAD FAST, DEAD FIRST” WRITING CONTEST AND WIN AN ALL-ACCESS CONVENTION PASS.

Debby scanned the rules—entry due one month prior to opening day… contest open only to amateurs, no professional writers… make yourself a character…
Debby read the guidelines again and again. She already had the plot in her head, and Gerard could help illustrate her story. The hard part would be getting it down on paper before the deadline. But she had to make it happen. Getting her parents on board would be another story—one that she hoped would have a happy ending.
Fran was standing in the back on the class, sitting on one of the shelves, chatting happily to Spencer and Brendon.

“Uh, Bren?” A quiet almost monotone voice asked softly. All three looked up and Brendon practically lit up at the sight of Ryan.

“Spence, Franny. This is Ryan. Ry? This is Fran and Spencer Smith.” Fran grinned at him.

“So you’re tall, dark, and nerdy.” She teased. “Helena and Z-Berg were right. You ARE cute.” Ryan’s face went red. Fran laughed.

“You can’t tell that the girls around here think you’re the best thing since Dallon Weekes? And man is he a cutie patootie. Too bad Breezy snapped him up before I could talk to him.” She could see Ryan beginning to squirm.

“Sorry. I’m not really used to other people.” Fran smiled awkwardly. “Homeschooling messes up your social perception.” Ryan relaxed.

“I kinda figured.” Ryan said sweetly. Fran internally swooned.

“Sorry about how I was freezing you out earlier this month.” Spencer said.

“Nah, it’s fine.” Ryan’s smile became more easy going. “I was a mess last week in the first place.”

Gosh, why couldn’t I have met him first? Fran thought dreamily. Back to task.

“Ry, we were wondering if you wanted to join up with us for our project.” Brendon asked.

“Not me.” Fran said helpfully. “I’m committed to helping out Vicky, Keltie, and Z-Berg.”

Ryan shifted from foot to foot. “I can’t sing though. My asthma makes it hard to hold notes and I’m not all that fond of my voice.” Brendon smiled sweetly.

“That’s fine. You can be our guitarist.” Brendon offered. “I can sing if it makes you feel better.” Fran could see just how smitten both boys were with each other. She smiled internally. They were like day and night but much, much sweeter.

“I know a guy who could be bassist.” Fran offered. “Jon Walker. He’s like really great.” All three boys relaxed.

“You three are life savers!” Ryan smiled. “I was so damn scared I was going to have to team up with Pete again.” Brendon snorted.

“Like I’d let my boyfriend languish in his brother’s shadow!” He said, slinging his arm around Ryan’s shoulder.

“I’m going to go over to my friends.” Fran smiled. “Maybe our bands could join up some day-”

Reeeeeewoooooo reeeeeewoooooo reeeeeewoooooo...

“On your desks!” Ms. Urie suddenly shouted. She jumped up on her own desk at the front of the room.
No one moved. Instead, all the students looked to their neighbors, wondering if this was some new prank-show trick. How else to explain a deafening siren, their teacher’s sudden hysteria, and their confusion?

Reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo...

“Now! This is an emergency drill.”

This time they did what they were told.

“Good thing I wore my flats today,” Z-Berg mumbled, admiring the black finish on her sky high Mary-Janes.

The others giggled, still not knowing what they were being drilled for.

Reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo...

“Silence!” Ms. Urie snapped.

“Tell that to the siren,” Gerard barked. Her hands were covering her ears, and her face was contorted in pain. “It’s deafening.”

Reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo...

“Maybe you have bionic ears,” Linda well-meaningly joked, from the top of her table.

“Or dog senses,” Jac added.

“You would know,” Jamia hissed. “With all those freckles, you must be half-Dalmatian.”

Jac gasped and then looked to Linda, expecting her to rush to her defense. But she couldn’t. She was too busy fighting the urge to laugh.

Reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo...

“Now lift up your chairs and jab them into the air,” Ms. Urie insisted, demonstrating on her own desk. With her black skirt, satin blouse, and paint-the-town-red lips, she could have been in a photo shoot for a new trend called lion-tamer chic. “And make as much noise as you can.”

She eyed her students, who were all at various stages of chair lifting and jabbing. Yet not even the most obedient ones could bring themselves to make noise.

“What are we doing?” Z-Berg asked, refusing to lift a heavy chair unless absolutely necessary.

Whooping, shouting, yelping, and stomping echoed through the empty halls. Clearly, the other classes were more open to this mysterious exercise.

“It’s a drill,” Ms. Urie repeated, still poking at the air with chair legs.

Reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo reeeeewoooooo...

“What kind of drill?” Several voices overlapped.

“A monster drill, okay?”

“A what?” Frank asked through tight lips.
“A monster drill,” Ms. Urie lowered the chair, “in case there’s a sighting at our school. Principal Weekes thinks it’s best to be prepared.”

_Seriously?_ Fran thought her teacher’s matter-of-fact attitude was disturbing. _Is she really okay with this?_

“Yeeeeeeah!” Linda began waving her chair around and hollering like a wild warrior.

The other normies did too. Fran couldn’t blame them. They had inherited this fear from their parents. But if they were taught to be afraid, couldn’t they be taught not to be?

Frank, Z-Berg, Keltie, and Gerard avoided each other’s eyes and halfheartedly performed the absurd exercise, just like Ms. Urie.

More than anything, Fran wished she could do the same. Cast her beliefs aside for the greater good. Make a mockery of her life instead of celebrating it. Hide with pride…

But it was impossible. Simply thinking about it filled her heart space with bricks. It was one thing for RADs to try to fit in. Acting afraid of themselves was quite another. Because fear leads to more fear, as was demonstrated by the horror movies that had started all of this. Until fear was gone, nothing would change.

_Reeeewoooooo reeeewoooooo reeeewoooooo…_

Fran released her chair. It landed with the sound of blatant refusal. Ryan, the absolute sweetheart, did too. Brendon and Spencer did too. Fran jutted her chin out and dared Brendon’s mother to scold her.

“Pick them up, kids. Let’s go!” Ms. Urie ordered, as if clueless to the mini-rebellion.

“But we’re not afraid,” Spencer said in lieu of Fran.

Linda stopped roaring and examined Spencer with renewed interest. Her brown and white hair poked out in all directions, but her eyes were fixed directly on him.

“Well, you should be,” Ms. Urie threatened.

“Cool,” Linda whispered.

Spencer turned toward her. “Huh?”

She pointed to his neck. Fran whipped around to look at Spencer. A snap of electricity zipped up her spine. All that poking and jabbing had loosened the scarf Gerard had lent him. His bolts were sticking out!

“Love the piercings,” she whispered, then opened his mouth and flashed her silver tongue stud.

“Cool.” Spencer giggled.

Finally, the siren stopped.

“Please take your seats.” Principal Weekes’ pinched voice came over the PA system. “Rest assured that this was only a drill. But we want to be prepared in the event of another sighting,” he said.

Both Smith children in the room rolled their eyes. If they only knew their dangerous “monster” was acing science.
“Now, guys and ghouls…” He snickered at his lame joke. “The faculty here at Merston High wants to show these colossal creatures that we’re not afraid.”

Everyone woo-hooed in agreement.

“So this year’s theme for the September Semi is… MONSTER MASH!” He paused, giving the students more time to cheer.

“A gift certificate for a dinner cruise on the Willamette Queen will be awarded to the couple with the creepiest costume, so get your tickets before they’re all sold owww-ooohoooot! Mwwwahh ahhhh ahhhhhhhh!” He signed off with his best howl-at-the-moon-maniacal-laughter impression. A clap of thunder sound effect followed.

Fran tugged her seams from embarrassment.

“I’m gonna be Elizabeth Frankenstein!” Linda called out.

“I’ll be your lovely bride,” Jac gushed. She grabbed her arm and glared at Spencer. Clearly her eagle eyes hadn’t missed the moment between them.

More than anything, Fran wanted to tell them they’d be going as her grandparents. And that the real lovely bride’s wedding gown was in her garage. And that Grammy Frankenstein danced barefoot that night because her shoes rubbed her seams. And that Grandpa made all the men put their suit jackets on the floor so she wouldn’t get her feet dirty. But apparently that story was too frightening to share.

“Cool!” Fran smiled. “Which version of the costume? Bride of Frankenstein, Frankenstein, or Frankenstein chronicles?”

“The book one if I can find my mom’s wedding dress.” Linda smiled.

“Cool! I think I’m going to go as an elf.” Fran smiled huge. “Since elves are considered monsters in all of the lore.”

Slumped against the desk, Spencer folded his arms across his itchy blazer. Fran could see him glaring at Ms. Urie, sending invisible rays of shame to the one woman she had hoped would save them from all of this. But Ms. Urie avoided Spencer’s and Fran’s disproving stares.

“Ooh! I have an idea!” Brendon gasped. “What if I went as a puppet, Ry went as a woodland faerie, and Spence here comes with us as something like Audrey II.” Spencer’s glare softened.

“You watched little shop of horrors?” Spencer asked excitedly.

“Only a million times!” Brendon gushed behind Fran.

“New idea, the three of us are Audrey, Seymour, and Audrey II.” Spencer offered.

_Bwooop. Bwoooop._

Class was finally over.

“Smiths, please stay behind,” Ms. Urie said, still fussing with her papers.

Instead of wishing her luck, the RADs quickly gathered their books and hurried out, while the normies took their time, exchanging costume ideas and whispering about their ideal dates.
“Good luck.” Ryan patted her elbow as he and Brendon left.

Once the room had emptied, both siblings approached Ms. Urie’s desk.

The teacher removed her glasses and slammed them on the wooden desk. “What do you think you’re doing? Do you have any idea how risky your behavior is?”

Spencer sparked.

Ms. Urie exhaled. “Listen,” she said, putting her glasses back on, “I know that you’re new here. I understand your frustration and your desire to change things. And you’re not alone. Every one of your friends has felt it. I have too.” Spencer scoffed. “And we’ve all tried. But eventually we each realized that it’s much easier, and a lot safer, to go with the flow.”

“But—”

“You don’t think I want to march up to”—she pointed at the speaker that had broadcast Principal Weekes’s announcement—“and tell him that his silly desk dance is unnecessary? Or that it’s more humiliating than the YouTube clip of Ariana Grande falling onstage?”

“But—”

“Because I do. I want to say all of those things and dozens more.” Her jaw tensed. “But I can’t. I have children to protect. And as a single mother I have to put their needs before mine.”

“But saying those things would help them,” Fran finally said. “It would change things, and they could have a better life than they have now.”

“That’s true. The kind of change you’re talking about would make his life better.” Ms. Urie rested her chin on her elbows. “But that’s not the change we’d get. We would have to leave Salem and start all over again somewhere else. Coming out would take us right back to the 1930s, Francine, Spencer.”

“Um, I think the monster drill has already accomplished that.” Fran pointed out. “Like pre-civil rights movement era.”

“Not even close,” Ms. Urie said. “People lost everything back then; some even lost their lives.”

Ms. Urie gently redid Spencer’s striped scarf so it lay snug against his bolts. “Someday things will be different. But for now I need you—we all need you—to lie low and play the game.” She smiled kindly. “Can you do that?”

Fran sighed.

“Please?”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.” Ms. Urie smiled. Her teeth looked extra white against her matte red lipstick.

Without another word, both siblings gathered their books and left.

As they left the room they locked eyes and knew.

They’d keep their promises to Ms. Urie and play the game.
But they’d follow their own rules.
It was a tomato-soup-and-macaroni kind of night.

Light, the color of muddy snow, was fading. Little by little, as if controlled by a dimmer switch, it begged its pardon from the ravine behind Brendon’s house. The fading sky could fool the eye into thinking a twiggy tree was a frail old man.

The rain stopped after school, but it was still “treeing”—a local term for excess water being blown from the leaves. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a local term for how bone-chilling it was. According to Linda, these were the ideal conditions for shooting her film The Monster Hunt Chronicles. But according to Jac, she was seven minutes late.

“I hope he’s okay.” Jac sat on a fallen tree trunk. She was wrapped with Breezy in one of the ThermaFoil blankets Ryan and Pete had borrowed from Peter. Made of some kind of heat-trapping silver foil and lined in fleece, they were supposed to warm mountain climbers on the snowiest of summits. But with Brendon snuggling beside him, Ryan decided the blanket was redundant.

At first, Ryan had tried to decline the offer to be in what he secretly referred to as The Linda Witch Project, because he had plans with Brendon, Spencer, and Jon to work on their music class project.

But Brendon and Jon had been standing by Ryan’s locker when Jac asked, and Brendon offered his property as a location. After years of neglect, the ravine was overgrown and wild. And coyotes—or were they wolves?—began howling after dark. Jac agreed it would be perfect and immediately texted Linda.

“You don’t think she’s hanging out with that new kid, do you?” Jac pulled the ThermaFoil so tight that she and Breezy looked like a metallic sushi roll.

“Which one?” Ryan asked, catching a vanilla whiff of his deodorant. It was trapped under his ThermaFoil blending with the odor of the guitars and flowers left on Brendon’s hands. Combined, it smelled like first love.

“Any of them!” Jac snapped.

“Well, we can rule them out.” Ryan shot back. “Spencer is currently mixing some 8-bit audio for our project and I think his sisters were headed to the costume store to find Z the right props for their music video.”

“Why are you so chummy with them?! The boy and the hag were flirting with Linda!” Jac wailed.

“Lay off of them Jac!” Ryan fought his way out of the blanket. “Spencer’s been nothing but nice and the twins are way younger than us! Leave them alone!”

“God, they’re sixteen you idiot!” Jac retorted.

“They’re thirteen!” Ryan stated. “And Fran has a crush on me anyways. She’s not going to try anything.”

“And Vicky doesn’t really like anyone.” Brendon pointed out. “Can we switch away from this topic? The Smiths are family friends.” Jac quieted.

“How is your mom anyways?” Breezy asked.
“Stressed out.” Brendon said. “Four kids and one assumed narcoleptic son is draining. But I don’t really know what she’s stressed about. She won’t talk about it.”

“I wonder if it had anything to do with that bizarre monster drill,” Breezy said with a disbelieving giggle. “I mean, what was that?”

“It was a little weird, but hey”—Jac shrugged—“if it keeps us safe, I’m all for it.”

“Safe from what, exactly?” Ryan asked, wondering how the primitive chair dance could ward off anything stronger than a fart. “Assuming these monsters really exist, it’s not like they’ve ever hurt anyone, right? Who knows? Maybe they’re nice.”

“Why are you taking their side?” Jac released her grip on the ThermaFoil and leaned closer to Ryan. He wanted to say, “Being judged on appearances is something I know a lot about, okay, Jac? The monster’s side is my side too.” Instead, he shrugged and mumbled, “I dunno, something to do, I guess.”

Jac responded with an illuminated grin. She jumped up so suddenly that Beezezy almost toppled onto the wet leaves. “Sorry,” she said absently, ripping the blanket off her friend. “You made it!” she called to the flashlight-wielding Linda.

“’Course I did,” Linda called, tromping toward her. Her mega-tread hiking boots crunched over dead leaves with monster-truck force. Dressed in a black fedora and a red-and-brown-striped sweater, and a long flowing black skirt, she was either paying tribute to Freddy Krueger or she was Freddy Krueger. Linda’s horror homey, Dallon, lagged behind, carrying two cameras and the sound gear.

“Hey, Dallon.” Breezy waved the way most people would clean a window. “Ready to shoot the breeze, Breezy?” The lanky, almost giraffe-like brunette snickered at his own wordplay and then dropped the gear by her feet.

Wearing sheer tights under a pair of black denim shorts and a striped crop top, Breezy had obviously dressed up for the occasion. She proved it by choosing to shiver rather than wear her black puffy jacket.

Dallon, however, had not, opting for ripped slim fit jeans and a gigantic black hoodie. “Cool location, dude.” Linda smiled gratefully at Brendon. “Man, if this was my place, I’d camp out here every night.”

“Wouldn’t you be scared?” Jac hurried to her side and enveloped her in the ThermaFoil.

“That’s the whole point, baby. I’m addicted to the smell of my own fear-omones,” Linda said, then kissed her as though they were alone.

Breezy and Dallon showed a sudden interest in the cameras. Ryan looked away uncomfortably.

“Get a room!” Brendon crowed.

“Jesus christ.” Everyone jumped. Pete, Jon, and Jon’s girlfriend Cassie stepped out of the shadows. Pete rolled his eyes at Jac and Linda still sucking face. “It’s like two dolphins fighting for the same ball.”

Dallon and Brendon both started laughing while Ryan groaned at his brother’s bad joke.
“Everyone, meet Pete. Pete, go away.”

“Aw but I heard you were filming a horror movie out here.” Pete whined. “You’ve got the nerd, the hot girl, the slut, and the shy kid. You need an athletic punk, the stoner, and the Stoner’s hot girlfriend.”

“Who’re you calling a slut?” Jac snapped.

“Who’re you calling shy!” Ryan retorted.

“You, RyRo, are the slut.” Ryan’s face went red.

“Let it die!” He complained.

“But it’s too funny.” Pete cackled. “I can’t believe the meek guy said you smelled like a slut!”

“That’s it!” Ryan jumped over the log and promptly tripped over his own feet.

“Man down!” Brendon called. Ryan kicked him in the shoulder.

“Help me up, jackass!” Ryan retorted. Brendon pulled him upright, laughing hard.

Finally Linda attempted to pull away without the consent of Jac’s lips. The confusion created a sloppy bite-a-juicy-peach sound. Everyone cringed.

“All right, people,” Linda announced, scanning the perimeter. “We’re losing light. Dallon, Brendon, Pete, come with me. We need branches so I can jimmy a tripod. I want the big camera locked down for the dismemberment sequence.”

Dallon collected their gear.

“You got it dude.” Brendon wiggled out of the ThermaFoil and followed the other boys into the thick woods.

Breezy raced for her puffy jacket, zipped it up, and joined the others on the tree trunk.

“Brendon is so much cooler than I thought,” Jac whispered.

“He’s nice,” Ryan said casually, trying not to gush.

“So you’re buying his whole blackout excuse?” Jac pressed. “You don’t think he knew he was hooking up with Sarah?”

Breezy pulled her phone from her pocket and began typing.

“Not everyone is as jealous as you,” Ryan practically snarled. Not because he thought Jac was wrong. But because Brendon had been genuinely distressed at the idea that he’d kissed Sarah. “I believe him.”

“Good.” Jac stood, making the fringe on her vintage suede jacket swing. She peered through clearings between the trees and cupped her ear.

“What are you listening to?” Ryan asked, his heart revving. “What is it? Do you hear something?”

“No,” Jac sighed, then scurried back to the trunk. “Okay, here’s the deal,” she whispered, leaning in to her friends. “Linda isn’t getting tripod sticks. She’s going to try and scare you.”
Breezy's thumbs scuttled across her slide-out keyboard.

Cassie looked up from her phone as a phone nearby went off. Ryan assumed Cassie was sending Jon memes again.

“Stop typing!” Jac insisted. “This is serious.”

Breezy lifted her head. Ryan awkwardly shoved his glasses up his nose.

“Why does she want to scare us?” Ryan asked.

“She wants genuine reaction shots for her movie. So don’t be scared, but act terrified.”

The night air turned crisp, illustrating their words with puffs of vapor that resembled conversation bubbles.

“Why are you telling us?” Ryan asked, genuinely confused.

Jac looked at Breezy, allowing her the privilege of answering.

“Friends first.”

“Even before Linda?” Ryan asked Jac.

“Always,” Jac said. Her lively face was dead serious.

“I’m gonna head out. Joe and Andy want to see how I do as bassist for their band.” Pete clapped, walking back up to the street.

Ryan waved at his twin.

“How is that your twin?” Jac asked quietly. “He’s got more of a tan and you’re...well...you’re pasty.”

“He’s a soccer player.” Ryan snapped, pissed off.

Jac went wide eyed and stopped talking. All of a sudden a twig snapped in the distance.

Jac winked at her friends. They giggled into their palms.

More footsteps crunching over leaves.

Then silence.

“Thank you!” Ryan mouthed to his friend. Without the warning he might have pooped his jeans.

Jac said, “You’re welcome,” with another wink and then sprang into actress mode. “Do you hear something?” she asked a little too loudly.

“Yeah,” Breezy whimpered.

“I’m sure it’s just the wind, you guys. Relax,” Ryan tried.

Another twig snapped.

“Oh my god! I hear it!” Cassie blurted, trying not to laugh.
Something that sounded like Darth Vader on a treadmill followed.

“You guys, I’m freaking!” Breezy squealed.

“Linda!” Jac called.

“Brendon!” Ryan shouted.

”Jon!” Cassie yelled.

More silence. And then…

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” Wearing a hockey mask and a bloodstained dress and swinging a plastic hatchet, Linda charged from the bushes. Dallon followed behind, shooting the action with a digital camera.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” the trio shouted, then jumped into each other’s arms.

Linda circled them, brandishing her hatchet. “Eenie, meenie, miney, mo. What to slice first? A finger or a toe?”

“Help!” Breezy cried. Either she was a gifted actress, or Jac’s warning had failed to sink in.

“Somebody help!” Ryan panicked, but only because Breezy was.

“Linda!” Jac called again.

“Annnd cut!” Linda shouted, removing her mask. “We got it.”

“That was you?” Ryan cried, embarrassed by his own bad acting.

“I thought the camera would have given me away but I guess you wimps were too freaked out to notice.” She bumped fists with Dallon and then pulled Jac in for a celebratory hug.

“Jerk!” Breezy shoved Dallon playfully.

“Crybaby.” He shoved back, then put her in a headlock and knuckled her head.

She laugh-smacked his legs, begging him to stop. But she probably hoped he wouldn’t.

Cassie kissed Jon sweetly on the lips and cuddled into his arms.

“Hey, where’s Brendon?” Ryan asked.

“Oh, he said he wasn’t feeling well,” Linda said dismissively.

“Where did he go?”

“I think back up to his house,” Linda said, moving in for another bite of juicy peach.

“Be right back,” Ryan announced to no one in particular. With nothing but a ThermaFoil blanket and the promise of true love’s kiss, he hurried off to find Brendon.

“Brendon?” she called, into the thick brush. “Brendon!”

What if he’d had a blackout? What if he’d had a blackout and fallen? What if he’d had a blackout and fallen on Sarah’s lips?
Ryan slapped poking twigs and sharp-edged leaves aside. Trying not to acknowledge that he was alone in a ravine where there might be a—

“Ryan?” He heard him whisper. Or was it the wind?

“Brendon?”

“Up here,” he said softly before jumping down.

“Are you okay?” Ryan asked. He was wearing the Therma-Foil like a cape around his neck, superhero-style. He tried to look past his lenses to see his eyes, but it was too dark. “You didn’t have a blackout or anything, did you?”

“Nope.” He shook his head with little-boy cuteness. “But it’s nice to know you care.” He leaned against the tree behind him and folded his arms across his zippered hoodie.

“Of course I care.” He stepped a little closer. “So, why did you leave?”

He shrugged as though it should have been obvious. “I didn’t want to scare you.”

Ryan sank deeper into that warm bath. And even though he didn’t say anything, he could tell that Brendon was sinking too. It was the safest he had ever felt around anyone who wasn’t family. If only he could take this moment, and the feelings that came with it, and seal it off from the rest of the world. So that it could always stay exactly as it was.

Stepping even closer, Ryan lifted the ThermaFoil above their heads and let it fall over them, sealing them off for real. And there, surrounded by darkness and heat, rustling leaves and distant howling coyotes, vanilla deodorant and floral-scented hands, they kissed… and kissed… and kissed…
I'm Not Pulling For You, You're Just Pulling At Me

… and kissed… and kissed… and kissed.

Sweat glazed their cheeks like fried pies and salted their lips like pretzels. If it hadn’t been for the lack of oxygen, plus Ryan’s constricting bronchi, he could have stayed in the curdy cocoon with Brendon until graduation. But it was getting harder to breathe, and Ryan didn’t have his inhaler.

“Air!” He gasped, throwing off the ThermaFoil and giggling at their mutually disheveled states.

“What… happened to… your… glasses?” He panted.

His face was dripping with sweat, and his brown eyes searched his hungrily. He leaned forward to kiss her again.

“Wait.” Ryan laughed, pressing his hand against his thumping chest. “I need to catch my breath.”

“Here.” He leaned closer. “Have mine.” His voice sounded lower, more in control.


“Who’s Chuck?” He pulled away, offended.

“From Gossip Girl.”

“Oh.” He dismissed the reference with a wave of his hand. Then he studied him face. “Actually, who are you?”

“What?” He giggled again, but something about his expression told him he wasn’t joking.

“Seriously, are we in a class together?”

“Brendon!” He blurted, despite the tightness in his lungs. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Who’s Brendon?” His expression soured, and he paused. Then his pinched look morphed into a mischievous grin. “Oh, I get it. You’re into role-playing.”

“Brendon, stop it.” Ryan took a step away from him. “You’re freaking me out.”

“Okay, I’m sorry.” He gently pulled him close.

Wanting to trust him, Ryan found himself breath and inhaled deeply. He smelled different, like vitamins. Or was that the stench of reality after the love had gone?

“So if I’m Brendon, who are you?”

“Eugh!” He pushed him away. “Enough!”

“Wait.” He took a step back. “I don’t get it. Are you into this or not? ’Cause I’m up for anything. I just want to know.”

Ryan’s stomach roiled. Was this another one of Linda’s jokes? Was Brendon part of her crew? Had Jac set him up and lured him into their twisted circle so they could capture a realistic heartbreak scene? He quickly searched the bushes for a hidden camera.
“I bet some music would help,” Brendon said. “Maybe we should head back to your place.” He offered his hand. The flower stains were gone.

“No, thanks,” Ryan said with a sniff. He grabbed his ThermaFoil off the wet ground and wrapped it around himself like a sympathetic hug.

“So it’s like that, huh?” He pulled back his hand and ran it through his sweaty hair. “It’s okay. I’m kind of stuck on someone else, anyway. And he’s a real firecracker!”

Ryan opened his mouth. But nothing came out. Even his voice was lost.

“Bye,” he managed, then hurried for home, his trembling body desperate to release the hurricane of tears gaining force behind his eyes. But he fought the surge, refusing to give Brendon any more of whatever was left inside him to give.

As he darted across Radcliffe Way, the first few drops eked their way out and rolled down his cheeks—the calm before the storm. Still, Ryan managed to text Jac a word of advice before her vision blurred completely.

**RYAN:** If Linda wants to find real monsters she should date guys. :((

He hit SEND.

And the dam broke.
“Spencer, dear, pass the asparagus to our guests, please,” Viola asked, with a hint of Madonna’s fake English accent. But Spencer wasn’t surprised. Everything about his parents’ little dinner party had been contrived. Right down to the relaxed smiles on their faces.

The truth was, if she had a horse, Viola would have ridden through the kitchen that morning shouting, “The normies are coming! The normies are coming!” Instead, she triple-checked everyone’s makeup, wrapped their turtlenecks with scarves and closed the door to the Fab.

“Tonight is very important for our family,” she had warned earlier, as Spencer helped her set seven places at a table that usually sat five. “The new dean may give your father a lot of research money, so we need to make a good impression.”

First Ms. Urie, and now his mother; Spencer was tired of being told how to behave around normies. “Should I set places for the Glitterati?” He asked, unable to squelch his frustration.

Viola set the last plate down with an audible clink. “Excuse me?”

“Won’t they be the ones affected if Dad gets this money?” Spencer folded a steel-gray cloth napkin and set it in place. “You know, since he’ll be experimenting on them.”

“Actually, it’s wounded veterans and people in hospitals waiting for organ transplants who will be affected by Dean Mathis’s money.”

“You mean normies in hospitals, right?” Spencer pressed.

“Everyone,” insisted Viola. She lowered her violet eyes. “Eventually.”

The timer went off in the kitchen, covering Spencer’s scoff.

Viola hurried to remove the roast from the oven. “Finally!” She sighed, pulling her dark hair to one side and examining the sizzling beef. “Perfect. Third one’s a charm.”

“You know”—Viola returned to the table with two more crystal glasses and a new spring in her stride—“if this goes according to plan, one day your dad won’t need seams to put people back together. His artificial body parts will attach to the patients’ existing tissue and regenerate.”

“Because seams are ugly, right?” Spencer’s eyes pooled.

“No, Spencer, that’s not what I’m saying.” Viola hurried to her son’s side.

“Well, that’s what you said!” Spencer stormed into the Fab and slammed the door behind her. The sudden breeze blew the face right off the skeleton—just another normie who couldn’t stand to look at her.

“Spencer, the asparagus, please,” Viola called from the head of the table, this time a little louder, bringing Spencer back to the present.

“Oh, sorry.” Spencer leaned forward to grab the white ceramic dish, and passed it across the table to Mrs. Mathis. But the plump woman with Hillary Clinton’s hairstyle in Bill Clinton’s hair color was
too taken with Vincent’s theory—on electromagnetic energy and how it could possibly give life to inanimate objects—to notice.

Mrs. Mathis tittered. “Did you hear that, Charles?” She slapped her sun-spotted chest. “Maybe you’ll be able to marry that flat-screen TV after all.”

“That’s why we love this mad scientist.” Dean Mathis reached behind his wife and squeezed Vincent’s shoulder. “One day he’s going to invent something that will change the way we live forever.”

If only he had the electromagnetic courage to tell Dean Mathis that the “something” had already been invented and was passing his wife a plate of asparagus.

“He already did,” Fran announced as Spencer was midway through lowering the dish.

“Is that so?” The dean sat back on the brushed-aluminum chair and stroked the sides of his salt-and-pepper beard. “And what might that be?”

“Spencer.” Fran beamed with all the charm of a modern-day Shirley Temple.

The dean and his wife burst out laughing. Vincent and Viola did not.

“Asparagus, anyone?”

“None for me, Vi, thanks.” Mrs. Mathis waved it away.

“Cora can’t stand vegetables,” the dean explained.

“Now, Charles.” She turned to look at him directly. “You know that’s not true. Just the green ones. There’s something about that color…. It’s not very appetizing. Am I right?”

The three teens at the table squirmed and Spencer sparked.

Vincent cleared his throat.

“Anyone for seconds?” Viola asked.

Spencer’s phone went off and he glanced at it under the table.

JON: Emergency @ Ryan’s. Come asap.

“I have to go.” Spencer said, putting his napkin on the table.

“Spencer where are you going?” Viola asked.


“It can wait.”

“Mom, this band is 50% of my grade!” Spencer protested. “I need to know if I have to find someone else to be lead singer.” Viola sighed.
“Go.” Spencer rushed to the front door and threw it opened. Only to come face to face with Frank and Jamia.


They exchanged a nervous look. “We, um, just wanted to drop off something for the kids,” Jamia explained, her black hair tied into stumpy pigtails.

Spencer grabbed the paper. “A petition?”

“We’re going to boycott the September Semi unless they change the Monster Mash theme,” Frank explained, shivering inside his black hoodie. “But don’t worry,” he whispered. “I’m not saying it’s offensive. Just scary for the freshmen.”

“I’m not signing it.” Spencer dismissed. “I’m already going with Brendon and Ryan.” Frank wilted.

“Now if you’ll excuse me. I have to go deal with a problem involving all three of my bandmates.” He pushed past them and ran down the street to the Wentz house.

He could see Jon and an unknown boy huddled around a shivering and crying Ryan. He got up the steps and asked “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“Brendon decided it’d be funny to lead Ryan on.” Jon explained. “Apparently he already has a boyfriend he’s been calling Firecracker.”

A lead weight filled Spencer’s stomach.

“Oh no.” He breathed.

“If I see him anywhere near my brother, I will rip him to shreds.” The unknown boy hissed.

“Pete, no.” Ryan moaned. “He isn’t worth it.”

“Like hell He isn’t!” Pete defended. “You’re crying! You haven’t cried since we were twelve.”

Spencer straightened up.

“I’ll go deal with him.” Spencer promised. Ryan sniffled again.

Spencer eventually found Brendon sitting on a curb near Gerard’s house.

“Hey!” Spencer yelled. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing breaking Ryan’s heart like that you fucking dick!” Brendon’s head whipped up and Spencer immediately realized something was wrong.

“Firecracker!” He smiled.

“Gabe.” Spencer slowed down. “Were you pretending to be Brendon!”

“Who the fuck is Brendon?” He snapped.
“My band mate and my friend’s boyfriend!”

“I’ve got no clue who that is. I just came to kissing him!” Everything shifted into place.

“No way.” Spencer breathed. “You really don’t know.”

“No! Now what the hell are you yelling at me about?!” Gabe shouted.

“You’re with Ryan and you’ve been flirting with me! Make a choice! The great guy crying over you down the street begging his brother not to hunt you down and tear you apart piece by piece or me, the guy who’s about to strangle you!” Spencer yelled back. Something in Gabe’s demeanor changed and he dug his glasses out of his pocket.

“Spence?”

“Brendon.” Spencer gave him a dark glare.

“I blacked out, didn’t I.” He asked, sounding tired.

“More like turned into an asshole.” Spencer seethed. “Go fix things with Ryan before I rip your head off and use it as a mirror!” Brendon scrambled up and ran down the street. A light inside Gerard’s house flicked on and Gerard came outside, bleary eyed and wearing a onesie.

“Whassgoinon?”

“Nothing Gee. Go back to sleep.” Spencer dismissed, already walking home.

“Did you fix your emergency?” Viola asked as Spencer came back inside.

“I think I actually caused it.” Spencer admitted. “Cause I think Ryan and I have been flirting with the same guy but neither of us nor him knew about each other.”

“Oh sweetie.” Viola hugged him.

“Am I bad?” Spencer mumbled into her shoulder.

“No baby.” Viola soothed. “None of you knew.”

Spencer sighed.

“But I feel bad.” Spencer mumbled again.

“I can ground you if it helps.” Viola asked, jokingly.

“That might help.” Spencer mumbled.
Lonely Moonlight

Breezy followed Jac down the “Till Death Do You Part” aisle of the Costume Castle like a dutiful maid of honor. Ryan followed Breezy like a jealous bridesmaid.

“What about this one?” Breezy lifted a sleek wedding dress off the rack.

“Too shiny,” Jac said.

Breezy held up another one.

“Too lacy.”

“This?”

“Too poufy.”

“This?”

“Too white.”

“Maybe you should go as Bridezilla instead,” Ryan grumbled.

“Maybe you should go as the Sulk Ness Monster,” Jac countered.

Ryan couldn’t help giggling at his friend’s goofy retort.

Jac giggled too. Then she got right back to business. “I want scary-sexy-cool.”

“This?” Breezy tried.

“Too frumpy.”

“This?”

“Too costumey.”

“Jac, we are at a costume store,” Ryan pointed out.

“Good point.” Jac reached for her necklace and slid the gold J charm back and forth on its chain. “So maybe you should be thinking about your own outfit. The Monster Mash is next Friday. And since today is Saturday, that gives you less than a week to—”

“Stop.” Ryan rolled her tired eyes. “I already told you. I’m not going.”

“Why? Because you and Brendon got into some silly fight last night and both Jon and Spencer swore to side with you?”

Breezy held up the last wedding dress.

“Too sweet.”

“It wasn’t silly,” Ryan snapped, wishing he had never mentioned it. How could he possibly explain something he barely understood himself? Brendon’s behavior left him with a feeling, not a story. And gutted was the only way to describe it.
“Fine, then take up Keltie Knight's offer to go to the Monster Mash,” Breezy said, pinching the tulle on a cobweb veil and rubbing it between her fingers.

“Ew, I swear I just saw flames. I wonder if they have better quality in the back,” Bekka said. “Hmmm.” She looked up at the massive spiders hanging from the ceiling and tapped her chin. “Bree, can you ask the—”

“I’m on it.” Breezy hurried off in search of a manager.

“So, do you have any costume ideas?” Jac asked, trying to sound helpful and supportive.

“How about the Invisible Girl?” Ryan ran his hand along the packs of waxy Halloween makeup. Colors called bat black, bloodred, ghoulish green, and phantom white stood at the ready inside their plastic casings.

“Knock knock,” Jac said, checking the price of a black garter.

“Who’s there?” Ryan sniffed.

“Boo.”

“Boo who?”

“Maybe you should go as a ghost since that’s the only sound you’ve been making.” Jac joked.

“Stop.” Ryan snorted. “I’m not picking anything out here because Jon, Spencer, and I ordered the stuff to be Audrey, Seymour, and Audrey II. Before Spencer backed out because he was grounded for yelling outside of Gerard Way’s house. So I can either be Seymour or Audrey II.”

Breezy returned, her hurried stride full of purpose. “I spoke to Kellin, the assistant manager. He said they aren’t expecting any more Bride of Frankenstein dresses until October. But he gave me”—she peeked at the business card in her hand—“Dan Avidan’s number. He’s the manager and will be back on Monday. So we can double-check with him.”

Breezy’s dedication to Jac tickled Ryan’s insides. They weren’t typical tenth graders, but they were loyal. And Ryan had grown to adore them for both those reasons.

“Nah, it’s okay.” Jac sighed, surrendering to the selection. “I can be Frankenstein himself.”

“I have clothing you can borrow for that.” Ryan offered. “I used to really love dressing really fancy.” Jac lit up and the offer.

“And look who it is!” Jac crowed.

“Um hi?” Ryan turned quickly and saw that it was Lyn-Z.

She stood out among the wedding dresses in her black sniper jacket, red bandana, oversized reflective heart shaped sunglasses, and a panda beanie.

“What brings you here?” Jac asked like a nosy mom.

Breezy began typing.

“Uh, costume shopping.” She raised her metal shopping basket. Assuming he had failed to notice her tattoo selection, she said, “I’m going to be Chloe Price.”
“And Sarah?” Jac pressed.

Ryan resisted the urge to smack her. Lyn-Z shifted uncomfortably. “She’s not going this year.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Nah, Frank, Debby, and Jamia are protesting the dance so Sarah’s probably going to hang out with them.”

“Oh that sucks.” Jac simpered. “Why don’t you come with us? Apparently he’s going to be Seymour from one of his musicals.”

“Jac!” Ryan stomped his black Converse. Inside, the ticklish feeling quickly turned to scratching.

“What?” Jac asked innocently, feigning interest in a blood-soaked bouquet. “It’ll be fun. Don’tcha think, Lyn-z?”

“Yeah, it would.” She nodded, warming to the idea. “But just as friends, cuz, you know, Sarah and —”

“Of course!” Jac negotiated.

“Okay.” Lyn-Z smiled sweetly.

“Get out your iPhone,” Jac insisted. “I’ll bump you Ryan’s number.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Ryan seethed.

“One-two-threeeeeee… BUMP!” Jac and Lindsay knocked phones.

“Got it,” Lyn-Z said to her screen. Then, to Ryan, “I’ll text you day of.”

“Cool.” Ryan grinned, his mouth still closed.

The short bike ride back from the Costume Castle was mostly silent.

Optimistically sunny, the blue sky seemed to challenge Ryan the same way Jac had, making it almost impossible for him to wallow. Every few blocks, Jac would assure Ryan that she was only trying to help. And Ryan would say he appreciated it but he hadn’t asked for help. And then more silence.

“This is me,” Ryan announced as they approached the top of Radcliffe Way.

“But you don’t have a real costume yet!” Jac whined.

“I still don’t care.” Ryan waved good-bye, partially smiling despite himself. Hurrying past his mother and the bottles of wine she was setting out on the table, Ryan stomped up the wooden steps to his room.

“We’re having some neighbors over for a wine-tasting class in an hour,” Dale called up the stairs. “In case you were wondering.”

Ryan slammed his bedroom door, letting his mother know he wasn’t.

“I have your fan,” Pete called from his bedroom. “I’ll bring it back when my fingernails are dry.”

“Whatever,” Ryan mumbled.
He climbed the ladder to his loft bed and flopped, belly first, onto his lavender and lilac Bartskull duvet. After the first wave of sobs passed, he rolled over and stared at the wood rafters on his ceiling.

His iPhone chirped. He had a text. It was from Lyn-Z.

LYN-Z: Just watched a clip of Little Shop of Horrors. Cute costume.

Ryan tossed his phone aside without responding. Was he really going to the dance with Lyn-Z? The thought of a pity date with someone else’s girlfriend felt lonelier than going alone.

Even with open windows, the heat in the house was unbearable, something Peter and Dale had been trying to have fixed for weeks. Not that Ryan really cared. He was numb all over. If it hadn’t been for the sweat on he forehead, she wouldn’t have even noticed.

He began to wallow all over again. Sweat brought back memories of the previous night… being under the ThermaFoil… kissing Brendon again…

“Hey,” he heard him say.

He shot up and bumped his forehead on a beam.

“You okay?” He put his hand on a black rung of the ladder.

Ryan nodded, unable to speak.

There he was. Glasses. Shy smile. Black short-sleeve shirt. Stained fingertips. As if nothing had ever happened. “It’s so hot in here.” He fanned his face.

“Then leave.” He flopped back down on his back.

“I don’t want to,” he protested.

“Well, what do you want, then?”

“I came by to tell you that last night was fun,” he said.

“Yeah, until it wasn’t.”

He sighed. “I blacked out again, didn’t I?”

“More like perved out, Brendon.” Ryan sat up. He hung his legs off the edge of his bed, leaned back on his hands, and faced his closet. Looking at him was almost as impossible as forgiving him. “And stop with this whole blacking-out excuse, okay? It’s insulting. Go try it on Firecracker. Maybe he’s bimbo enough to believe it, ’cause I’m not!”

“Look, I can’t remember anything after the kiss and before Spencer yelled at me outside of Gerard’s house.” Brendon defended. “And when I came over to apologize last night, Jon and Pete threatened to literally murder me!”

“Well, I should have let them.” Ryan hissed.

“If I did, you wouldn’t have a date for the September Semi,” he said, trying to be cute.

“Yes, I would,” she said, trying to hurt him. “I’m going with Lyn-Z.”

He didn’t respond. Mission accomplished.
“Ryan.” Brendon went to the foot of the bed and grabbed his shins. “I’m serious. The last thing I remember is kissing you under that blanket. After that I—“

“Trust me, Brendon.” He finally looked at him. His face was covered in sweat, shame, and confusion. “You’re not blacking out. I almost wish you had.”

“Then why don’t I remember anything?” He wiped his forehead.

“You do. You just use this blackout thing as an excuse to say what you want and kiss who you want and—”

Brendon removed his glasses and lifted his shirt over his head, giving Ryan a backstage pass to his glistening boy-band abs.

“What are you doing?” He reached for his iPhone. Involving the police was not out of the question, and he began recording just in case he needed proof.

“You again?” He lifted his brows. “I should have known from all this sweat.” He ran his fingers along his chest. “Boy, you make me hotttttttt.”

“Brendon, enough!” Melody jumped down from her bed.

“Why do you keep calling me Brendon?”

“Because that’s your name,” Ryan insisted, holding his phone to his face.

“No, it isn’t.”

“Really?” Ryan challenged. “What is it, then?”

“Gabe,” he said right to the lens. “Gabe Edward Saporta. As in Dr. Henry Jekyll and Mr. Edward Hyde. Just like my great-grandfather… who was super-freaky, by the way. I found some papers in our attic, and it looks like he did all these weird experiments with tonics back in the day—experiments on himself! After he drank these potions, he turned into quite a wild man. I’m not into drinking, but I do like a good dance party.” He winked and then looked around the messy room. “Got any music?”

Ryan ended his recording. Before she could stop him, Gabe Saporta had hurried toward the white docking station on his desk and attached his own iPhone. “Animal” by Maroon 5 came blasting from his speakers. Swiveling his hips and spreading his arms so his shirt looked like wings, he began dancing as if performing for a stadium full of screaming girls.

“What’s going on in here?” Pete and Hillary, Andy on Pete’s hip, appeared in the doorway, Hillary holding Ryan’s fan. Barefoot, dressed in baggy boyfriend jeans and a tight white tank, Hillary had the whole lazy-sexy look down. “Are you shooting an audition tape for something?”

“Yeah, it’s a little show I like to call And Who Might You Be?” He removed the fan from her arms and drew her into the middle of the floor.

“Hillary.” She giggled, allowing herself to be taken.

Maroon 5’s beats came at them like balls in a batting cage, and Gabe returned each one with an overhead snap of his fingers.

“Georgie, who knew?” Hillary called above the music. Then she raised her hands above her head
“Not me.” Ryan plugged in the fan.

“Wind machine!” Gabe shouted.

Suddenly, he and Hillary were gyrating in front of the fan. Gabe’s blowing shirt made them look as if they were actually inside Timbaland’s video.

“Whoooo-hooooooo!” Hillary shouted, her hands now turning tight circles above her head. She leaned over and cranked up the speed of the fan.

Gabe held out his hands like Superman. “I’m flying!” he announced as his shirt billowed behind him like a cape.

“What’s going on up there?” Dale called.

“Nothing,” Ryan answered. The truth was impossible to explain. Pete and Ryan looked at each other worried while Andrew clapped along.

“Well, turn that nothing down, please. My guests will be here any minute.”

More than happy to put an end to the party, Ryan quickly removed the iPhone from the dock.

It took a few seconds for Hillary and Gabe to stop dancing. A few more for them to stop laughing. And a few more for the room to cool down.

“That was awesome.” Hillary high-fived her dance partner. “You’re much more fun than you look.”

“’Scuse me?” He put on his glasses, sounding slightly confused.

“Those glasses and that shirt.” Candace pointed at his chest. “You know, when it’s buttoned.” She giggled. “They make you seem kind of nerdy. But you’re fun.”

He looked down and quickly fastened his buttons. “I am?”

Ryan felt the sting of clarity zip up his spine. “What’s your name?”

“Huh?”

“What’s your name?” she pressed.

“Brendon.” He backed up, leaned against her ladder, and rubbed his slick forehead. “Oh no. Did I just have another blackout?”

“Oh yeah,” Ryan said. “Only you didn’t black out.” He stood beside him and pressed PLAY on his iPhone. “Brendon, meet Gabe Edward Saporta.”

“Brendon, wait!” Ryan called. But he didn’t listen.

After seeing the way he had acted in front of Ryan, he hurried off faster than the paparazzi on a Duchess Kate lead.

Hillary didn’t say a word. All she did was glare at Ryan and shake her head disapprovingly.

“What?”
“Exactly.” Hillary lifted her hair and fanned the back of her neck.

“Exactly what?” Ryan snapped, his thoughts smudged and whirling like Brendon’s carousel sketch.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“What can I do?” Ryan glanced at the unpacked boxes in his room. Maybe he could tackle those. “I don’t think it’s a call-the-police kind of thing.”

“Maybe you should go after him,” Hillary suggested, like someone who actually cared.

“No, thanks.” Ryan picked a loose cuticle until it bled. “A relationship with an unpredictable… whatever that was… is not the kind of thing I’m looking for right now.”

“Well then, you’re missing out.” Hillary turned to leave, her butt splashing around inside the excess denim of her saggy jeans.

“Wait!”

Hillary froze.

“What do you mean, I’m missing out?” Ryan asked.

“Unpredictable is fun!” Hillary said, like she knew firsthand. “Even if Brendon’s only around half the time, you’re still ahead of most girls.”

Ryan thought of him and smiled. “He’s nice, isn’t he?”

“Go find him,” Hillary insisted, her hazel eyes radiating sincerity. “Because that’s what sticking with something means.” She snapped her fingers. “Love Doctor out.”

Ryan raced down the stairs and pushed past the tall couple in his doorway.

“Sweetheart, I’d like you to meet the Smiths from down the street. They have a son your age—”

“Nice to meet you,” Melody called over her shoulder. “I’ll be home soon.”

“Don’t worry,” the woman with the long black hair told Dale. “My son is the same way.”

Charging toward the white cottage, Ryan felt like a romantic-comedy cliché—racing to the airport before his jilted lover’s plane took off. But that’s where the similarities ended. As far as he knew, the guy chasing after a jilted crazy had not been done.

The door to his house was open a crack.

“Brendon?” He gently called. “Brendon?” He pushed the door with his index finger. An icy blast of air stung his hand. Ryan stepped inside. It couldn’t have been more than sixty degrees. Were thermostats in Salem really so difficult to control?

At first Ryan thought better of barging into Brendon’s home, especially since his mother was his music teacher, but he had done it to him twice, so…

“Brendon?” He called softly.

Dusty velvet couches, dark Oriental rugs, and cluttered corners filled with knickknacks that could have arrived via time machine from Old World London cramped the small space. And bogged it down with a sense of historical weariness—an unexpected contrast to the bright, cheery innocence of
the exterior. Ryan smiled to himself. It was a contrast he knew all too well.

“If you knew who I was, why didn’t you tell me?” Brendon shouted from somewhere on the second floor.

Ryan heard his mother’s voice. “I wanted to protect you!” she insisted.

Ryan knew he should leave but couldn’t.

“From what?” Brendon sobbed. “Waking up in strange yards? Making a fool of myself at the neighbors’ house? Freaking out the only guy I’ve ever really liked?”

Ryan couldn’t help smiling. He really liked him.

“Because you haven’t protected me from any of that!” Brendon continued. “It’s all happened. And that was just in the past twenty-four hours! Who knows what I’ve done in the last fifteen years!”

“That’s the whole point,” his mother explained. “This hasn’t been going on for fifteen years. It started to get worse as you got older.”

They were silent for a second.

“What triggers it?” Brendon asked, sounding calmer.

“Overheating,” Ms. Urie said softly.

Ryan shuffled through the memories of his Gabe encounters. Of course! ThermaFoil… his bedroom… the fan…

“Overheating,” Brendon repeated calmly. As though he should have known it all along. “That’s why it’s always so cold in here.”

“And why I never let you play sports,” Ms. Urie explained, sounding relieved to share her secret.

“But why heat?”

“Brendon, sit down for a second.” There was a pause. “I’ve never told you this, but your great-grandfather was Dr. Jekyll…. He was a shy, gentle man, almost like you. But sometimes his shyness held him back. So he created a potion that gave him courage, and made him more… forceful. He became dependent on it, and eventually… it killed him.”

“But how did I—” Brendon began.

His mother cut him off. “The potion was toxic and ended up corrupting his DNA. And the trait was passed down. Your grandfather and father had it too.”

“So Dad didn’t abandon us?”

“No.” Her voice cracked. “We met when I was a genetic research scientist, and… I did everything I could.” She sniffed. “But the mood swings became intolerable, and it… well, it drove him mad!”

Brendon didn’t respond. Ms. Urie was silent. The only sounds coming from the upstairs room were sniffles and heartbreaking whimpers.

Ryan cried too. For Brendon. For his mother. For his ancestors. And for himself.
“Is that going to happen to me?” he finally asked.

“No.” Ms. Urie blew her nose. “It’s different with you. Perhaps it’s mutating. But it seems to affect you only when you get too hot. Once you cool down, you shift back.”

There was a long pause.

“So are you like, his”—he paused—“… his mother too?”

“I am,” she answered matter-of-factly. “Because he is you… only different.”

“Different how?”

“Gabe is comfortable in the spotlight, whereas you tend to be on the shy side with strangers. He loves loud music; you love all music. He is confident, while you’re thoughtful. You are both terrific in your own way.”

“Does he know about me?”

“No.” She paused. “But he knows who his ancestors are.”

“How—”

Ms. J cut him off. “Gabe has done some digging into his past, but he doesn’t know about you. He thinks he has blackouts too. He can’t be trusted. No one can. You have to keep this to yourself. Promise me. Can you do that?”

Ryan took that as his cue to slip out. He didn’t want to hear Brendon’s answer. He had heard too much already.
Plan A was ready for activation. After a week of intense prepping and planning, it was the most respectable way for Francine to get herself and her siblings to the September Semi. But it wasn’t the only way.

“Mom, Dad, can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked, fresh from her evening charge and aromatherapy seam-steam.

They were on the sofa, listening to jazz and reading by the fire. Their Fierce & Flawless had been removed, and their neck bolts were exposed. Dinner had been made (thanks to Fran), the dishes had been cleaned (thanks to Fran), and there had been no indiscretions for seven whole days (thanks to Fran).

It was time.

“What’s up?” Vincent put down his medical journal and took his worn UGGs off the ottoman: an invitation to sit.

“Um…” Fran felt her neck seams. They were loose and relaxed from their steam.

“Don’t tug,” Viola warned. Her violet eyes ripened to an eggplant purple against her green skin. It seemed criminal that others couldn’t enjoy how naturally beautiful she was.

“Are you nervous about something?” Vincent asked.

“Nope.” Fran sat on her hands. “I just wanted to say that I thought a lot about my behavior last week and I agree with you. It was dangerous and insensitive.”

The corners of their mouths turned up just a smidge, as if they were unwilling to commit to a full smile until they knew where this conversation was going.

“Just like you asked, I came right home from school every day, I didn’t text, e-mail, tweet, or post on Facebook. And during lunch, I only spoke when spoken to.”

All of which was true. The only people she’d truly spoken to outside of her family were Z-Berg and Keltie.

“We know.” Vincent leaned forward and double-tapped her knee. “And we couldn’t be more proud.”

Viola nodded in agreement.

“Thank you.” Fran humbly lowered her eyes. One… two… three… GO!

“Sodoyouthinkyoucouldtrustustogotothedancetonight?” she blurted before losing her nerve.

Vincent and Viola exchanged a quick glance.

Are they considering it? They are! They trust—

“No,” they said together.

Fran resisted the urge to spark. Or scream. Or threaten to go on a charging strike. She had prepared
herself for this. It had always been a possibility. That’s why she’d read Acting for Young Actors: The Ultimate Teen Guide by Mary Lou Belli and Dinah Lenney. So that she could act like she understood their rejection. Act like she accepted it. And act like she would return to her room with grace. “Well, thanks for hearing me out,” she said, kissing them on the cheeks and skipping off to bed. “Good night.”

“Good night?” Vincent responded. “That’s it? No argument?”

“No argument,” Fran said with a sweet smile. “You have to see this punishment through or you’re not teaching me anything. I get it.”

“O-kay.” Vincent returned to his medical journal, shaking his head as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing.

“We love you.” Viola blew another kiss.

“I love you too.” Fran blew two back.

Time for Plan B.

“All right, Glitterati,” Fran said, taking her glitter-dusted confidants into the lounge area of the Fab. “This isn’t going to be pretty. Rules will be broken. Friendships will be tested. And huge risks will be taken. But they’re small prices to pay for true love and personal freedom, right?” She placed their cage on her orange-lacquered side table. They clawed the glass in agreement.

Blasting Lady Gaga’s “Just Dance,” Fran tore open a box of hair bleach after texting Spencer and Vicky to come to the Fab.

Once they were inside, she painted chunky white streaks from her scalp to her ends. Spaced four inches apart, they would look just like her grandmother’s. While waiting for them to set, she reclined on her red pillow-covered Moroccan chaise and began texting Frank as Spencer. “Here goes.” She sighed.

SPENCER: Still boycotting?

FRANK: Yup. Sarah, Debby, and Jamia r here. Love that ur txting again. Sure u can’t come over?

SPENCER: punished :(

“This is the semi-manipulative part,” Fran told her gathered audience. “I’ve saved this secret all week, and it needs to be released.” She typed a message and then hit SEND. “Don’t judge me.”

SPENCER: FYI my parents were at Ryan’s last weekend for some wine-tasting party and heard he was going to Semi w/ Lyn-Z.

FRANK: FYI they rented that house from my grandparents, u know.

That was hardly the response she’d been hoping for.

SPENCER: Cool about ur grandparents’ place. Think it’s true about Lyn-Z? Does Sarah know?
Silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… It was 6:50 PM. The dance would be starting in forty minutes. Where was—

**SARAH:** I made a truce with tall, emo, and nerdy. Jac’s making them go together. Buuut I don’t trust Jac Vanek.

She smirked. Yes!

**SPENCER:** That’s what my mom said.

**SPENCER:** Wanna bust them?

**SARAH:** Totally but we don’t have costumes.

Yes! Yes! Yes! “It’s working!” Fran told the Glitterati and her siblings. She felt a certain degree of guilt for manipulating the situation. But everything she was saying was true. And her reasons for saying them were for her friends’ benefit as much as her siblings. Eventually, they would thank her. Everyone would. She just had to get them there.

**SPENCER:** It’s Monster Mash! We were born in costumes! Amazing, glorious costumes.

**SPENCER:** This is our big chance to see what people think of us. The real us.

**SPENCER:** We have to show em there’s nothing to be afraid of.

**SPENCER:** If we don’t get over our fears they never will.

It was time to take a break before his friends mistakenly accused him of sounding like a bumper sticker. But it was hard not to preach. She had never felt so strongly about anything. Not even about cute witch, Z-Berg.

Silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence…”

“What are they doing?” Spencer lay back down and sparked.

SARAH: Aren’t u grounded?

SPENCER: We’ll sneak out bedroom window.
Silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence… silence…

**FRANK:** Meet u at the top of Radcliffe in 5.

**FRANK:** This better work.

**SPENCER:** :)))

She bicycled her moccasin-covered feet in the air. Yes! Yes! Yes!

Fran blew a kiss to the Glitterati, turned off the music, and grabbed the garment bags she had pulled from the garage. Wearing nothing but sweats and a sheer coat of lip gloss, she and her siblings wiggled through Spencer’s frosted window and jumped the six feet to freedom.
“Okay, one more picture!” Jac’s father hurried out of the red Cadillac SRX. He was dressed in a burgundy fleece, Dockers, and blue slippers.

“Dad!” Jac stomped her borrowed oxfords. She pointed at the school’s front steps, which were spotted with giant green footprints and flecked with costumed kids acting too cool to enter the dance. Fog seeped from the blacked-out double doors, dragging thumping bass beats with it. “Linda’s waiting for me inside.”

“It’s okay.” Ryan put his arms around Jac and Breezy. “One more picture won’t kill us.”

“No,” Jac mumbled as a cluster of senior cheerleader zombies skipped by. “But the embarrassment will.”

“Smile!” Mr. Vanek insisted, lifting his glasses onto his balding head.

Jac and Breezy complied. Ryan tried. Recovering from facial surgery had been easier. Yes, he was healthy, almost asthma-free, and part of a loving family. But was it so much to ask for a relationship that lasted longer than a kiss?

All week Brendon had avoided him. Blaming homework or headaches, he had thwarted every one of Ryan's requests for hang time. And like a respectful friend-slash-eavesdropper, he had said he understood. But Ryan wanted to help. He wanted to be his shoulder to cry on. To share his burden. To tell him he had felt like a “monster” his whole life. To tell him that he understood. But obviously he didn’t want his shoulder, or any of his other parts. Which crushed his chest more than asthma ever had.

Alone in his box-filled room each night, Ryan resisted the urge to confide in Pete. Brendon’s secret was too damaging to share. Instead, he tried to convince himself that his distance had nothing to do with his Ryan feelings and everything to do with the promise he’d made to his mother. But there was only so much self-love he could administer to the wound. No matter how dirty the phrase sounded it fit. And after awhile it just felt pathetic, like sending himself flowers on Valentine’s Day.

Ryan couldn’t really shake off his mood, but he had managed to get himself dressed for the dance. He didn’t want to let Jac or Breezy down.

“You girls look great!” Mr. Vanek gushed, once again not realizing Ryan was a boy, while shuffling back to his open car door. “I’ll pick you up at ten, sharp,” he announced, then drove away.

His taillights faded in the distance, taking away any hope Ryan had of leaving early. Why had he agreed to leave his backpack in the car? Jac had said it would “free them up.” Ha! It would do the opposite, by trapping him for two and a half hours with the wrong person.

“Can you please try to have fun?” Jac pleaded, as if reading her mind.

Ryan promised he would. “You look great.”

“I’d better.” She sighed shakily and tromped up the stairs.

Jac treated her role as Frankenstein more like an audition to be Linda’s bride. Every part of her body had been colored bright Kelly Green—even the parts that her mother had stressed were “not to be seen by anyone except God and the inside of a toilet bowl.” Jac had opted for the Boris Karloff
version’s hair while dressing like a 1970s version of him. Her seams, made of real suture thread, had been attached to her neck and wrists with clear double-sided costume tape because drawing them with kohl would not have been “honoring the character.” Her Costume Castle dress had been exchanged for something more “authentic” from Ryan’s closet. If Linda didn’t see her future in her heavily black-shadowed eyes tonight, she never would. Or so she believed.

“You look great too, Bree,” Ryan added.

“Thanks.” Breezy grinned, looking like a possessed child beauty pageant contestant. Breezy was dressed like an undead bridesmaid. A tattered red whispers of love dress, very convincing latex and prosthetics transformed the beautiful Breezy into a corpse bridesmaid.

The instant Jac opened the school doors, Ryan’s chest constricted. “I can’t go in there!”

A skeleton and a Cyclops entered instead.

“Ry, get over it, okay?” Jac snapped.

“No,” he said, wheezing. “The fog machine. My asthma. Puffer’s in your dad’s…”

“Just go!” Jac pushed Ryan through the thick layer of gray smoke and guided him toward the gym. He leaned on the silver pump-handle, and the door hissed open. Ryan fell away from her and into the arms of a girl dressed like Natalie Portman in Black Swan. She shrieked and Jac immediately scooped Ryan away from her.

Darkness. Black lights. A Rihanna remix. Trash bags taped to the walls. Gigantic cocoons filled with fake dead people dangling from the ceiling pipes. The smell of rubber soles and duct tape. Snack tables divided into allergy zones and marked by gravestones. Round tables littered with fake body parts. Chairs wrapped in white sheets that were splattered in red paint. Costumed girls dancing on the dance floor. Costumed boys working up the courage to join them. As he struggled to breathe, these details rushed his senses, as if begging to be appreciated before he collapsed.

“Here.” Jac handed him an inhaler.

Ryan took a big puff. “Ahhhhhh…” he delighted in the steady exhale. “Where did you get that?”

“I took it from your purse before we left the car.” She handed it to Ryan. “Principal Weekes loves that machine. He even uses it on Thanksgiving. He says it was foggy the day the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.”

“I’ve complained multiple times about him using it.” A voice Ryan was glad to hear said.

“Thank you.” Ryan smiled and knit his brows at the same time. “If Linda doesn’t propose to you tonight, I will.”

“Forget the proposal. Just promise me you’ll try to have a good time.”

“I promise.” Ryan raised his palm. It was the least he could do.

Lyn-Z approached them with a confident swagger.

“Here comes Chloe Price herself,” Breezy announced.

Wearing a Burgundy beanie and blue wig, Chloe’s iconic outfit, and her signature sunglasses, Lyn-Z looked like if Chloe had jumped straight out of the game. Ryan decided that if he had to be stuck at a
dance with someone else’s girlfriend while missing his wish-he’d-be-my-boyfriend, Lyn-Z was the girl.

“Hey there Seymour,” she grinned.

“Are you my Audrey of the night?” Ryan asked cheekily. Lyn-Z snorted.

“Smooth. Didn’t Seymour get her killed in the stage production?” Lyn-Z pointed out.

“I mean he died too and Audrey II took over the planet.”

“We’re going to look for Linda and Dallon,” Jac announced, then quickly took off with Breezy before Ryan could stop them.

Suddenly left alone, they couldn’t help but notice the fun all around them.

Monsters of every imaginable sort mingled, greeting one another with compliments and yanking reluctant partners toward the dance floor.

“So, what’s with the shades?” Ryan asked, trying to make conversation. “It’s so dark in here. How do you see?” In the spirit of flirty party banter, he pulled them off.

“Give those back!” She shouted. She was so angry, she couldn’t even look at him. Instead, she looked past his shoulder, quickly shut her eyes, and then felt for her glasses as a blind man might.

“Here.” Ryan placed them in her pale hands. She put them on with urgency. “Sorry, I was just—” he cut himself off. What was he doing, anyway?

“That’s okay,” Lyn-Z said sweetly. “I should probably check in with Sarah. She’s home alone and everything, so… you cool here for a minute?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Great,” Lyn-Z said, accidentally knocking over a lone stone statue of a cat, and then sprinted for the exit.

After steadying the toppling cat (who looked a lot like a boy from his English class), Ryan set out in search of Pete or Hillary and, more important, cab fare. So what if he lived only three blocks away? Walking home alone from a dance was just as lame as couching it with Ben & Jerry’s. If the feeling were an ice-cream flavor, it would be Sour Grapes.

Now that it was pushing eight o’clock, the too-cool-for-punctuality crowd ambled into the gym. With swaggers implying that they had other, more happening places to be, they examined the decorations like prospective buyers. Clinging to one another in clusters, they resisted the urge to bombard the dance floor when Hozier’s “Take Me To Church” began playing, making it next to impossible for Ryan to spot Hillary, who was dressed as a Scary Fairy. Most brunettes used costume parties as an opportunity to go blond, and blonds never went brunette, so this was a needle-in-a-haystack situation, at best.

While searching the Vegan Zone for his siblings, Ryan found an elaborate meat-free spread that included baby carrots labeled GOBLIN FINGERS and tofu chunks called BEAST TEETH.

“Blood punch?” offered someone behind him.

His voice was soft but far from weak. Similar to a tone he recognized, but infused with an added kick of confidence. It was as though improvements had been made to the original model, and he was
about to meet version 2.0.

Gabe?

Ryan quickly turned. Red liquid splattered all over his face.

“Oh, gosh, I’m so sorry!” Gabe (or was it Brendon?) grabbed the stack of black cocktail napkins beside the bowl of Fritos marked DEMON FINGERNAILS.

“It’s okay.” Ryan wiped his face. “I’m not wearing any makeup.”

He instantly became a human tissue box, presenting a steady stream of napkins with the utmost reliability. Once the liquid had been absorbed and the napkins tossed into the bin marked MASH TRASH, they exchanged a warm smile that felt like returning home after a long trip.

“Brendon?”

He nodded sweetly.

“What are you doing here?” Ryan asked, relieved. “Not that you don’t have a legitimate right to be here or anything. I just… you know… you’ve been so busy lately.”

“I thought you might wanna go Somewhere that’s Green.” He pointed to the Audrey costume he was wearing.

“Oh.” Ryan's elevated spirits nose-dived. Grabbing his wrist, he led him to an empty table and whispered, “Gabe? Is that you?”

“No.” Brendon reddened. “It was a joke. I thought you could use some cheering up, that’s all.”

“Me? Why me?”

“I kind of saw Lindsay take off, and I know she was your date and everything.”

Ryan gasped, trying to seem offended. But he was struggling to look concerned about his date leaving, and failing as a smile kept tugging on his lips. He seemed adorably pleased with his discovery that he was now available. And, truth be told, Ryan was too. “You were spying on me?”

He lifted a green plastic doll arm off the table and shook it in front of his face. “I learned it from you!”

“Me?”

“So, you weren’t spying on me that night I found you in Hillary’s room?”

Ryan opened his mouth to defend himself but burst out laughing instead. He laughed with him and then grabbed his hand. A warm current passed from his body into his, and from his to his, like electrical sockets that were joined.

“So, did you come here to tear me and Lyn-Z apart?” Ryan teased.

He ran a hand through his long layers and looked out at the whirling monsters on the dance floor. “I wanted to make sure she was treating you properly, that’s all.”

He squeezed his appreciation into his hand. He squeezed back “anytime.” Surrounded by the giddy din of party noise, Ryan felt like a water balloon at a helium party. Bogged down by the burden of
knowing his secret. And bothered by his unwillingness to share it. With each day that passed, it would become harder and harder to connect with him. Their secrets would eventually come between them, forcing them apart like magnets of the same pole.

He ran his finger over the fake blood on the chair.

He smiled awkwardly.

He smiled back.

Now what? There was so much to say, but no good way to bring it up. No natural segue. No transition sentence. No way to justify a cutesy opener like, “Speaking of eavesdropping…”

“Speaking of eavesdropping…” he tried anyway.

“Huh?” He snickered in his usual way—a mix of fascination and bewilderment. The way one might watch millipedes mate.

_Ew. Bad brain. Stop it!

“So, you know how you caught me spying? And now I caught you spying?”

“Well, you didn’t exactly catch me spying. I came forward and—”

“Okay, even better.” Ryan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Because I am coming forward to tell you that…” He took a quick puff of his inhaler. “You know how you walked into my house a few times without calling?”

He nodded.

“Well, I kind of did that to you.”

He waited, hoping he’d react. Or maybe even figure out what he was trying to say, and finish the story for him. But he stared at him expectantly. Offering no easy way out.

“I know everything. I heard you and your mom talking and I could have left but I didn’t because I wanted to know.” He sucked in a breath. “I wanted to understand.”

Ryan’s heart thumped with the bass from the speakers. Say something!

Brendon looked at the gym floor and stood slowly. He was leaving.

“I have one thing to say.” He reached inside the front pocket of his jeans.

Ryan’s chest began to tighten. He took another hit from his inhaler. It didn’t help.

“What? Just tell me.”

He pulled out a battery-operated mini-fan from his fuzzy pink coat and flicked the switch. The white plastic blade began spinning around the blue base. It sounded like a bee. “This thing is the best!”

“Huh?” Ryan half-laughed. “Did you even hear what I said?”

Nodding, he leaned back and closed his eyes, luxuriating in the paltry breeze.
“Brendon, I know your secret,” he insisted. “I eavesdropped.”

“What do you want me to do?” He leaned forward. “Send you to your room?”

“No, but—”

“It’s okay.” He grinned. “I already know.”

“You do?”

“I left the door open for a reason,” he said coolly. “And I saw you running back to your house.”

“You did! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay with it. I didn’t want you to feel like you owed me anything. It’s kind of a heavy secret to carry around, you know?”

“Is that how you managed to get into that dress?”

Brendon laughed.

Ryan laughed.

And then they waited for a slow song and danced.

Cheek to cheek, they swayed to From Eden, a true Monster Mash in a gym of imposters. The invisible repellent force was gone. The only thing between them now was the soft breeze of Brendon’s mini-fan.
Standing outside the double gym doors, Spencer, Frank, Jamia, Gerard, and Sarah locked hands like the Pussycat Dolls about to take their final curtain call. They’d worked up their nerve on the drive over. Perfected one another’s outfits in the parking lot. And declared this outing a small step for monster-kind. Now all they had to do was work up the courage to go inside before the dance was over.

“Okay, when I count to three.” Fran rolled back her shoulders, which were semi-visible thanks to Grandma Frankenstein’s wedding dress having sheer sleeves. “One… two…”

Suddenly the doors flew open. And like a vicious Red Rover opponent, someone tore through the teens’ arms and broke their bond.

“Lyn?” Sarah gasped, her gold chandelier earrings swinging underneath her straight black hair. Her body was wrapped head to toe in white linen and adorned in a lavish blend of turquoise and gold jewelry. Made of solid gold, her snake-shaped crown with the ruby eyes could double as a weapon, and she wasn’t afraid to use it on two timing girlfriends. Or so she had said in the car.

“Hey,” she stammered, adjusting her beanie and wig. “I was just running out to call you. I thought you were at home… boycotting?”

“More like girl-catching!”

“Nice one!” Gerard, dressed in a hair-apparent mini dress, slapped her a furry high five.

“Wait.” Lyn-Z took a step back. “What are you wearing?”

He scanned each of the girls, taking in Fran’s white hair streaks and green skin, Spencer’s green skin, Vicky’s 1960s style Elsa Frankenstein costume, Frank’s fangs, Jamia’s fins, Gerard’s exposed coat, and Sarah’s mummified body. “Are you crazy?” She whisper-snapped, pushing them back toward the stinky fog machine.

A song Spencer had heard being practiced in music, “Grand Theft Autumn (Where is your boy)” if Spencer remembered right began playing inside the gym. “They’re playing my song!” Sarah announced, recognizing the song. She held out her hands, and the others latched on.

“Sarah, you’re not single!” Lyn-Z wedged her body between Sarah and the door. “This whole Ryan thing is a misunderstanding. I swear. I was just going to call you.”

“If you liked it, then you should’ve put a ring on it,” Sarah teased.

“Where?” Lyn-Z lifted her bejeweled hand. “There’s no room. The lot’s full.”

“Then park somewhere else.” She waved her away, kicked open the gym door, and dragged the girls inside.

“Don’t do this!” he called.

Spencer and Frank lingered back and mouthed “Sorry” at the mermaid gorgon.

But it was too late. The fast-clapping beat lured the teens with the hypnotic power of a Siren’s song, straight to the dance floor. Protected by their fraternity and propelled by his dedication to change,
Spencer moved through the crowd with superstar confidence.

Heads turned as they passed. Compliments landed at their feet like roses. The Glitterati would have been proud. So would Vi and Vince.

As they approached the edge of the dance floor, Jac and her kinder sidekick appeared. *Without Linda!* It was a great sign. She stepped out in front of Spencer, forcing him to release Frank’s icy hand.

“And who are you?” Jac asked, obviously put out by the copycat costume.

Spencer considered revealing his true identity but quickly thought better of it. “I’m Frankenstein’s creation,” she answered innocently.

“We’re his bride and daughter.” Fran and Vicky materialized on either side of Spencer.

Jac pointed at Fran’s bare feet. “Couldn’t afford shoes after you went dress shopping at the dollar store?”

“Actually, did you know that the real Bride of Frankenstein didn’t wear shoes at her wedding?”

“Did you know that the real Bride of Frankenstein had a groom?”

“I did,” Fran said smugly. “In fact, he was—” She stopped herself when Spencer elbowed her. It was one thing to play with fire. It was another to roll around in it. “You know, you look good green,” she said truthfully.

“You don’t,” Jac countered. “Which is surprising, because green is your color.” Her little friend stood by her side, texting.

“Um, okay, but that makes no sense.” Fran rolled her eyes.

The texter looked up from her screen. “Green is the color of jealousy.”

“And you’re obviously jealous of me and Linda.” Jac put her hands on her hips and then quickly scanned the gym.

“Why would I be jealous of her?” Spencer pointed at the texter.

“I’m not Linda,” the girl insisted.

Spencer laughed, then waved good-bye. He was much too amped to take any of this personally, especially coming from a wannabe with chomped up hair..

“That was hilarious,” a girl whispered in his ear.

“Hayley?”

“The one and only.”

Spencer turned around. A black rose was floating in the air in front of his face.

“Here.” The rose moved closer. “I swiped it off some Scary Fairy girl. It’s for you.”

“I think what you’re doing is really brave.”
She slid the rose into his buttonhole. “Don’t worry—I took off the thorns.”

“Thank you.” Spencer touched the flower gently, the way her gift had touched him.

“Awooooooooooo!” Gerard howled from the middle of the dance floor. Spencer could see Pete Wentz, dressed as a teenage vampire, Patrick Stump, dressed like a possessed teenager, Joe Trohman, dressed like a skeleton, and Andy Hurley, dressed like a werecat, on stage playing one of their other songs from class. Dance, Dance if Spencer’s ears were right.

“Awooooooooooo!” everyone howled back.

Spencer squeezed through the sweaty crowd, anxious to join his friends. On his way, hands reached out and touched his skin and his sisters skins.

“Awesome!”

“That green makeup looks so real.”

“Killer costume!”

“Are those neck piercings?”

“I want some.”

“I know, me too.”

“She’s got better seams than my baseball.”

Spencer was thrilled but not at all surprised by everyone’s positive reactions. He knew they would feel this way. There was never any doubt. It was all about proving it. And his friends, dressed as themselves and dancing with normies, did just that. Spencer peeked at his phone to note the exact time history was made. It was 8:13 PM.

“Yayyyyy!” Spencer and his sisters shouted as they joined the others.

“Spenceeeerrrr!” they shouted back.

“This is dynamite, Clyde,” Jamia announced, dumping a bottle of water over her head. Her scaly skin glistened with a silver opalescence.

“Woooooooo!” The normies cheered for what they assumed was reckless abandon.

Gerard’s fur was starting to curl with moisture. Sarah was crunking with a normie boy who was wearing her snake crown. And Frank was all smiles and fangs.

“Look.” He pointed at his pale forehead. “Perspiration!”

“You’re not cold?” Fran beamed.

“I’m not cold!” Frank whipped his cashmere cape into the crowd.

Their combined elation was a rush Spencer had never known. His sisters were even dancing around and goofing around to Wentz and his band.

“Hiya my handsome groom,” a girl whispered in his ear.
“Hayley?”

She turned him to face her. “Um, it’s Linda, actually. But I prefer Elizabeth Frankenstein.”

VOL-TAGE!

Gripping his satin clad shoulders, thumb-rubbing his shoulders, she stood before him in a wedding dress similar to Fran’s. Mint-green skin, bolts, seams, and long hair shot through fully with white streaks: She was the complete package. And she had come for him.

In his fantasy, they were hidden under the stairwell. And yet there they stood, in the middle of the party. Surrounded by normies and RADs. Openly touching. Looking into each other’s eyes. Not afraid.

She ran her hand over his formerly brown shaggy hair currently tied in a very Byronic hero style ponytail. It tingled with electricity.

“I’m glad you decided to go era appropriate instead of Karloff.” She smiled with her fawn-brown eyes. “It’s much hotter.”

Spencer couldn’t reply. He couldn’t do anything but stare.

Is this how zombies feel?

With warm hands, she held his neck… pulled his face toward hers… and first-kissed him. The way people kiss on soap operas. Only better.

Much better.

Spencer began to spark. Then he drifted off like a helium balloon liberated from a birthday bouquet. As his body floated higher, the world below got smaller and smaller. Sounds lost their meaning. Responsibilities were pointless. Consequences became unfathomable. His entire existence was about this very moment. Nothing before. Nothing after.

Just now.

She thumb-rubbed his neck seams with increasing pressure, as their kiss intensified. Spencer floated higher. Pleased with himself for having washed and oiled his seams. Proud of how soft and malleable they must feel to her. Certain they would end up being one of the things she loved most about him.

She gripped his head. Moved it from side to side. As if leading them in a dance that she choreographed just for them.

Hmmm. He liked that idea. A dance just for—

SKRRRRITCH!

A sudden sharp pain sliced through Spencer’s neck. His lips flash froze. Sparks flared in front of his eyes. Dizziness and disorientation overcame him. He was a teddy bear lost in the ocean. Then it stopped. All he saw was white fabric. And all he heard was “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!”

His head launched skyward with bullet force. He was face-to-face with Linda. Her honey-brown eyes were fading. They rolled left. Right. Then back. Her lids shut. She began to wobble. Spencer
wobbled too. They were falling… falling…

They crashed onto the gym floor. His body, limp as a rag doll, landed on hers. His head rolled toward the DJ booth.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!”

Screams, frantic footsteps, and widespread panic blended into a noisy, chaotic stew. A giant boot pulled back as if gearing up to kick him, but a gust of wind with hands snatched him up and carried him away.

“That head is floating!”

“It’s FLOATING!”

“FLOATING!”

“FLOATING HEAD!”

Nothing was clear. Fractured images shook all around him like vibrating puzzle pieces.

“MONSTER!” someone shouted. It might have been Jac, but it was impossible to tell for sure.

“Floating monster head!” someone yelled.

“Grab his body,” a girl whispered. “Don’t let anyone see it. I’ll meet you by Jack’s car.”

“Hayley? Is that you?” Spencer tried to ask. But the head jostling and searing neck pain made it impossible to speak.

Reeeewoooooo reeeewoooooo reeeewoooooo…

The monster alarm sounded.

“Everyone on the tables!”

Reeeewooooooo reeeewooooooo reeeewooooooo…

“Grab chairs!”

“Up! Up!”

“Hurry!”

Reeeewooooooo reeeewooooooo reeeewooooooo…

“Now scream!”

“Arggggreggreggreggreggrr!”

“Louder!”

A cloud of stinky fog enveloped Spencer. He squeezed his eyes shut, no longer able to endure the pain. Falling into darkness, he wondered what his world would be like the next time he opened his eyes.

Reeeewooooooo reeeewooooooo reeeewooooooo…
Assuming that there would be a next time.
It's Almost Halloween, Do The Trick Or Treat

Ryan and Brendon had been enjoying a post-dance cooldown in a mostly unpopulated corner of the gym with Jon, Cassie, and Pete when the incident occurred. A swell of screams from the dance floor didn’t distract him from Ryan’s hilarious stories about their freaky neighbors, or the way he’d punctuate each one with a soft kiss. It wasn’t until Jac started screaming “Monster!” that Ryan decided to investigate.

“What’s going on?” he asked a passing bat.

“They were making out, and this guy’s head fell off!” he yelled as he dashed toward the exit.

Brendon scratched his head. “Did he really just say that?”

Ryan giggled at the insanity of it all. “It’s probably just some special-effects trick put on by Weekes.”

“I hope so.” Brendon bit a fingernail.

“Are you scared?” Ryan teased.

“A little,” he admitted, checking over his shoulder. “But not of the boy.”

Most of the students and teachers were standing on the tabletops, jabbing chairs into the air and grunting. Those brave enough to fight at ground level ripped at each other’s costumes, hoping to uncover any remaining perpetrators.

In fact, one guy flipped up Fran’s skirt.

“Hey!” Ryan shouted.

“Yo man, fuck off!” Brendon snapped, pulling Fran towards them. “She’s fucking thirteen! Go try that shit with someone else you creep!” The boy scuttled off, leaving a trembling Fran next to them.

Jon draped his jacket over her.

“Do you have a ride or anyone we can call?” He asked softly.

“I don’t know where anyone is!” She whimpered. “Spencer and Vicky got separated from me and I can’t find any of their friends.” Ryan enveloped the smaller girl in a hug.

“Pete, take her, Cassie, and Jon back to the house with Hillary.” Ryan instructed, realizing everyone else was panicking. “Brendon and I will meet up with you later.” Pete, Cassie, and Jon both nodded and made their way through the crowd, protecting the barely teenage girl.

“MONSTER!” Jac screamed. “MONSTER! MONSTER! MONSTER!”

The closer he got to Jac’s screams, the more Ryan overheard. It turned out the girl in this tragedy was Linda, and the headless boy wasn’t Jac being unrecognizable in her costume.

Tracking the chaos, Brendon’s brown eyes moistened with panic. “Ryan, I really should get out of here,” he insisted, holding the mini-fan to his face. A student running for the door knocked the fan to the floor, and it skidded across the gym. Brendon tugged Ryan’s arm harder.

“I can’t just leave Jac,” he said, leading him through the chaos toward his horror-stricken friend.
“Why? She’s not in danger,” he snapped.

“She’s just cheated on her!”

“Monster!” A spastic ghost slammed into Brendon, then took off.

Four armed police officers burst into the gym, followed by a team of paramedics with a stretcher.

“Lock up your girlfriends and boyfriends! They’re infiltrating. They’re trying to mate with our species!” Jac shouted, kneeling beside Linda’s fallen body. She plucked a black thread off her finger and examined it closely.

“Come on!” Ryan gave Brendon a final tug toward the dance floor.

Jac stood up, her cheeks stained with tears, her wig half off. “There you are! Did you see what happened? It was awful,” she said, sobbing.

Ryan wasn’t sure if Jac was referring to the beheading or the cheating, but he agreed, either way, that it was awful.

Breezy and Dallon were giving their accounts to one of the officers while a paramedic waved smelling salts under Linda’s nose.

She came to with a start.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” She began to scream.

“She’s in pain!” Jac called. “Help her!”

They quickly gave her a shot of something that relaxed her into a blubbering baby.

“Are you okay?” Jac knelt at her side. “You thought that boy was me, didn’t you?”

Linda circled her limp wrist and then giggled.

“Linda! You thought it was me, right?”

She looked at her, then burst out laughing. “What happened to your hair?”

Jac ignored her question in favor of her own. “He wasn’t wearing mango lip gloss! Didn’t that tip you off?”

“Hey, jacwearsmanagolipgloss,” he slurred. “D’you know Ja-ac? She’smygurrrrrrrrrl.”

“I knew it, Officer,” Jac said.

“Actually, it’s Sergeant Mason.”

“That wasn’t a kiss, Sergeant Mason. It was a brain suck. That’s what they do! They lure people in and then drain their brains. You have to find him. You have to stop him!” She handed him the tiny thread. “Send this to forensics. It’s our only lead.”

“I have my best officers going door-to-door right now,” he assured her, dropping the thread into a plastic baggie. “If there are any more nonhumans in this town, I’ll find them. Just like my grandfather did back in his day.”
Ugh. Ryan was immediately repulsed.

“Did any of those nonhumans happen to be non white or human passing?” He snapped. “Because if I recall, back in the day it was still legal to lynch black people and freak shows were still a thing.”

Brendon tugged Ryan’s sleeve. “I should really go.”

The paramedics lifted Linda onto the stretcher.

“Where are you taking her?” Jac asked.

“Salem Hospital.”

“I’m going with you,” Jac insisted.

“Are you family?” asked one of the paramedics.

“I’m her bride.”

Brendon began fanning himself frantically. “It’s getting sweaty in here! We should probably go.”

“Ryyyy,” Jac called, scooting to catch up to the stretcher. Something felt way off about how she said her nickname for him. “Breezy’s going to stick around and interview the witnesses. You head out and try and find that… thing. I’ll check in from the hospital.”

“You want me to find it?” Ryan asked incredulously. “You don’t actually think there’s a real thing out there, do you? It was a trick.”

“That was no trick,” Jac warned. “Once you find the monster, turn the information over to me, and I’ll take care of it.” She waved. “Be careful!”

“How am I supposed to find an imaginary monster?” Melody asked Brendon.

“I don’t know, but I need to get outside.” He pulled her arm.

“Ryan, you need to get out of here.” Breezy said as soon as she got to them. “Either way, she’s gonna make me snoop through your phone and blackmail you.”

Ryan’s teeth were on edge. “I already saw the video. You left it on the video at lunch and I was worried Jac would snatch your phone.” Breezy looked so frantic. “I can’t outright help you since she has me in an indentured servitude contract but I call warn you.”

“Thanks Breezy.” Ryan said quickly. “I’ll find some way to get you out of your contract.” Dallon trotted up.

“Come on. I heard someone saying that Pete was fist fighting some senior who was going around flipping skirts.” Dallon stated. “You’ve got the monster thing right Breezy?” She nodded and shoved all three towards the door.

“Go! Before she finds out I’m letting you go!” All three ran outside.

Outside, squad cars flashed their lights while police officers urged kids to get home quickly and safely. The wind blew in strong, short gusts, like an asthmatic trying to deliver an urgent message. It rattled the red party cups that littered the emptying parking lot, creating the ideal score for a campy monster hunt. Ryan rolled his eyes until he saw Pete being arrested. Dallon went wide eyed and ran over to go stop him from being arrested.
“Need a ride?”

Ryan turned to find Hillary, Jon, Cassie, and Fran emerging from the fog-filled doorway. Dressed in a black lace minidress, black glitter wings, and a head full of black roses, she descended the steps with the grace of a Radio City Rockette.

The draining feeling of adrenaline going back to wherever it came from slackened Ryan’s entire body. His limbs loosened, his heartbeat slowed, and his breathing stabilized. His Scary Fairy godmother had arrived. “What are you still doing here?”

“I couldn’t leave a scene like that without knowing you were okay,” Hillary said, like it should have been obvious.

“I got separated from Pete when he saw the guy flipping more skirts.” Fran said, shivering.

“Besides, that was the most fun I’ve had since we moved here. Much more wild than any Huntington Beach High dance, that’s for sure.” Hillary added.

Ryan tried to laugh. “Let’s just go.”

“Look.” Hillary pointed at the white announcement board in front of the school. Someone had changed the black letters around, so instead of MERSTON HIGH, it now read MONSTER HIGH.

“Ha!” Ryan said, without laughing.

On the short drive back to Radcliffe Way, Ryan counted seven police cars whooshing by. The silent car stereo created a hush that was louder than any siren. Hillary was the type to blast music even when their father asked her to move the car from the driveway to the road. She was doing what Dale did: smoking Ryan out of his cave with silence, counting on the fact that the noise in his brain would become so deafening that he’d need to spill some of it out. And where better than the tranquil space they were inhabiting? It was an empty bowl just waiting to be filled.

By the time they got to the top of their street, Ryan started leaking. “Question.”

“Yes,” Hillary responded expectantly, eyes fixed on the dark street ahead.

“Have you ever had to choose sides between a friend and a boyfriend?”

Hillary nodded.

“Which side are you supposed to pick?”

“The right one.”

“What if they’re both right?”

“They’re not.”

“But they are,” Ryan insisted. “That’s the problem.”

“No,” Hillary rolled slowly past a police cruiser. “They both think they’re right. But who do you think is right? Which side represents the thing you think is worth fighting for?”

Ryan glanced out his window as though she was expecting the answer to be revealed on a neighbor’s lawn. Every house except hers had its lights off. “I dunno.”
“You do,” Hillary insisted. “You just don’t have the courage to be honest with yourself. Because then you’d have to do the thing you don’t want to do, and you hate doing anything that’s hard. Which is why you gave up singing and why you have no life and why you’ve always been a—”

“Um, okay! Can we get back to the part where you were sounding like Oprah?”

“I’m just saying, Georgie, what would you do if you weren’t afraid? That’s your answer. That’s your side.” She turned into the circular driveway and parked. “And if you don’t choose it, you’re lying to yourself and everyone around you.” She opened the door and grabbed her purse. “Oprah out!”

The door slammed behind her. Brendon, Jon, Cassie, and Fran all scattered back to their houses right after

Ryan sat back, enjoying the last bit of heat before the car cooled. He forced himself to see both sides. Not from Jac’s or Brendon’s perspective, but from his own. Loyalty versus acceptance. With every second that passed, a little more warmth left the car.

By the time Ryan had reached his final decision, he was cold.
Fran paced outside of the Fab, worrying about Spencer. Jon had lent her some clothing and his sister helped her cover up her skin so that she could get home safely. But she hadn’t gotten any word from her parents on Spencer’s situation or where Vicky was. She stopped and slid down the door, exhausted and scared. She could hear everything the adults were saying inside Spencer’s room.

“It’s a witch hunt out there.”

“I had two cops nosing around my attic for the last hour.”

“Our lives are ruined.”

“I don’t understand. How can you not notice your own children sneaking out of the house?”

“You call that good parenting?”

“I call it a danger to society, especially our society.”

“And what about the normie girl? If she doesn’t recover, this will make national news.”

“If it hasn’t already.”

“I assure you,” Viola said with a sniff, “we are devastated about this. And have just as much to lose as you do. Vincent and I will do everything we can to see that this never happens again.”

“Never happens again? We have bigger problems. How do we deal with what is happening now? My Frankie will need to have his fangs removed if this keeps up. His fangs!”

“Gerard and their brothers will need laser hair removal. Their pride will be shot. And with winter coming… they’ll freeze!”

“At least you know where your kids are. Brendon hasn’t come home yet. Every time I hear a police siren, I have to breathe into a bag. What if they start rounding up suspects? What if they—” Ms. Urie burst into tears.

“Brendon stayed behind with Ryan and Jon!” A voice interrupted. “Someone was flipping skirts and his boyfriend’s brother got into a fist fight to defend Fran and Gerard.” Fran sighed. Vicky was home. “And if you wanna be mad at someone. Be mad at me. I pushed Spencer and Franny to come with me to the dance. I’m the one that got Spencer and Linda hurt. I’m the one that wanted so badly not to hide that I got my brother and our whole community into danger.”

“Everyone, please.” Vincent’s tone was low and weary. “While we accept full responsibility for tonight’s… mishap, keep in mind that we have more at stake than any of you.” He sniffed, and then blew his nose. “This is our son they’re looking for. Our son. And, yes, he did something irreparable, but he is the one being hunted. My pride and joy. Not yours!”

“Not yet.”

“They’re looking for a green headless boy from a monster costume party,” Vincent said. “We can say it was a prank.”

“Some prank.”
“Viola and I will do whatever it takes to make this go away. And we’re starting by pulling Victoria and Spencer out of Merston. They’re going to be home-schooled and forbidden to leave the house.”

“I think you should leave Salem.”

“Yeah!”

“Agreed.”

“Leave Salem?” Vincent boomed. “I thought this was a community! How dare you turn your backs on us after all we’ve—”

“I think we’ve all had a long night,” Viola jumped in. “How about we reconvene in the morning.”

“But—”

Fran whimpered and cried into her arms. She shouldn’t have snuck them out just so that Spencer and Victoria could experience a dance for the first time.

“Fran?” The door opened.

“I’m sorry!” She wailed. “Don’t send me to school alone! I can’t handle it alone!”

“Oh baby.” Viola went to hug her. Fran shoved herself away.

“No! Keep sending us to school, just make Spencer dye his hair back to brown. Vicky didn’t show any of herself off. Not like me and Spencer. I’ll even wear the wool stuff unmodified.” Fran demanded, getting weepier as she went on.

“Pumpkin, we can’t just send Vicky and Spencer back to school after what just happened.” Viola tried. Fran scowled.

“So I have to suffer through endless bullying alone because of Frank’s useless dad?!” She practically yelled. “He’s never here and he acts like he knows what’s best for our community! I can see why Frank thinks he’s complete shit!”

“Francine Elizabeth Smith!” Viola gasped. “Language!”

“No!” She yelled. “I’m always the perfect one and when Spencer and Vicky get hurt because of my mistakes, you get mad at them! That’s not fair! I’m fucking sick and tired of slathering goop on my face just so that small minded normies like Jac Vanek don’t treat me like I ate a baby!”

“That’s enough!”

“No! No it’s not! I’ve had enough of playing by everyone elses rules!” Fran yelled. “Do you know what other thirteen year olds are doing that I can’t? Having fun with other girls, going to the mall, using stuff like snapchat and doing extracurriculars!” Her eyes were welling up again. “I want to try out for cheer but I can’t because I’m green and I was built instead of born! So I’m sorry that I supported Vicky and Spencer’s fight to let us exist as we are without hiding! I’m sorry we snuck out! I’m sorry Spencer and Linda got hurt! And I’m SORRY I EVEN EXIST!”
Ryan hesitated to ring the doorbell. Pushing it meant more than possibly waking some people up. It meant he had chosen a side.

He pressed the button and stepped back. His heart began to accelerate. He wasn’t afraid of the door that was about to open. Rather, the one about to close.

“Who is it?”

“Ryan Wentz. I’m a friend of—”

“Come in,” said Ms. Urie, wearing a black chenille robe and clutching a balled-up tissue in her hands. She peered over Ryan’s shoulder and then quickly locked the door with a chain. The back of her bob had been pulled into a squat ponytail, and mascara smudges marked her cheeks like Rorschach inkblots. Without her glasses, she looked like a regular worried mom.

Ryan peeked inside the dimly lit home. The dark funeral-parlor-style furniture seemed to sag more than Ryan remembered.

“Is Brendon okay?” Ryan asked softly. “Linda and Spencer are our friends and when my sister dropped us off, he seemed pretty upset.”

“He said that someone found a video of him that’s put his siblings in danger.” Ms. Urie said.

“I know. And I want to help.”

“I don’t know—”

“No.” Ryan touched the soft chenille sleeve of her robe. “I mean, I know about Brendon.”

“Excuse me?” Her expression hardened.

“I know what happens to him when he sweats. I know what he becomes, and I know why.”

Ms. Urie’s hazel eyes became shifty. Like she couldn’t decide whether to club Ryan over the head with a fire poker or run. “How? How do you know?”

“He told me,” he lied. “But don’t worry.” Ryan took her hand. It was cold. “I won’t tell a soul. I’m here to help. I’ll find him.”

“Ryan, you don’t understand what’s at stake if word about Brendon gets out. It’s more complicated than you know. More complicated than he knows. A lot of people could get hurt.”

“You have my word.” Ryan raised his right palm, ready to commit. Not because he had a crush on him. Or because his kisses woke his insides like a bite of chocolate cheesecake. But because saving Brendon meant saving Spencer and saving Spencer meant saving the best friends he’d ever remembered having. And Ryan would personally protect Spencer and Brendon from Jac’s rampage. And if “friends first” was truly her credo, she’d understand.

Ryan raced across the dark street to get his bike and a flashlight. Asking his parents or Hillary for a ride would mean violating Ms. Urie’s trust. And he couldn’t do that. He wouldn’t do that. Saving his friends and giving them safety was going to be his first big accomplishment. And it would have nothing to do with symmetry, noses, or being related to Hillary or Pete. This rescue mission would
show Ryan what he was made of.

“How was the dance?” Dale called from the living room. She lifted her teacup off the side table and walked into the kitchen.

“It was good,” Ryan said, following him.

“Do we have a flashlight?”

Dale shook her head. “We’re using lanterns now. They’re in the garage in the plastic bin marked OUTDOOR LIGHTING. Candles should be in there too. Why?”

“I wanted to go for a little walk. The dance was stuffy, and it’s so hot in here.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Dale rolled her fawn brown eyes. “The monsters are loose.” She placed her cup in the sink. “Can you believe it? It was all over the news.” She snickered. “You gotta love small-town living. They don’t know real monsters until they’ve visited our old neighborhood. Am I right?”

“Totally,” Ryan said anxiously. “Okay, good night. I won’t be late.”

Dale blew her son a kiss and then headed for her bedroom.

Ryan hurried for the door. Eager to start his search, he pulled it open and bash right into Jac. “Oh my god, what are you doing here? Is everything okay? How’s Linda?”

Did he sound as guilty as he felt?

“She’s stable. But she had a hysterical breakdown and can’t speak.”

Ryan reached to hug her but refrained, Breezy’s words coming back to him. “You must be so worried.”

“I am,” Jac said. “So, um, why aren’t you out looking for the monster?”

“I was actually just on my way out,” he said, proud of his non-lie.

“Good,” Jac said, without the slightest sign of relief. “Here.” She handed Ryan his khaki backpack. “You left this in my dad’s car.”

“Oh, thanks. You didn’t have to bring it by tonight.” Ryan cringed at the unnaturally high pitch of his guilt-laced, normally rather monotone voice.

“You know my rule.” Jac smirked. “Friends first.”

“Yup, friends first,” Ryan repeated nervously.

“Friends first.” Jac smirked again.

Something had changed. It was more than the shock of seeing her girlfriend allegedly kiss a monster. More than Ryan’s guilt for not chasing a special effect. The different thing wasn’t in the air. It was behind Jac’s eyes.

“You also left this in the car.” Jac handed Ryan his iPhone. But when Ryan reached for it, Jac pulled it back and double-tapped the screen. “Look what I stumbled upon.”

The video of Brendon turning into Gabe Saporta began to play.
“Gabe. Gabe Edward Saporta. As in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Just like my great-grandfather… who
was super-freaky, by the way. I found some papers in our attic, and it looks like he did all these
weird experiments with tonics back in the day—experiments on himself! After he drank these
potions, he turned into quite a wild man. I’m not into drinking, but I do like a good dance party.…
Got any music?”

Ryan’s stomach lurch. His mouth went dry. His breathing was labored.

“You snooped?” he managed. It was all he could think of to say.

“No, Breezy did. I questioned your loyalty.”

Oh poor Breezy.

Why didn’t I think to erase that? Ryan could feel his heartbeat in his brain as she thought of how
Jac’s discovery would affect Brendon and his mother. Jac was no longer the friend who tipped him
off to Linda’s scary pranks or brought his inhaler just in case. She was the enemy with a monstrous
upper hand.

“Give it back,” Ryan demanded.

“As soon as I e-mail the video to myself.” Jac tapped the screen and waited for the confirmation.

Boop.

“Here you go.” She smacked the iPhone down in Ryan’s icy palm.

“That video was a joke,” Ryan tried. “We were making a movie. Like Linda’s!”

“Lies!” Jac snapped her fingers. Breezy appeared from the side of the porch. The reluctant helper
opened her green attaché and pulled out Ryan’s signed contract. The one that said he would never
flirt with Linda Ignarro, hook up with Linda Ignarro, or fail to pummel anybody who does hook up
with Linda Ignarro. She tore it to confetti and then scattered it all over the DID YOU REMEMBER
TO WIPE? doormat.

It hurt much more than Ryan had ever expected it would. In spite of all their quirks, he really liked
Jac. She was his first real friend.

“Jac, I am so—”

Jac snapped her fingers and Breezy presented another document.

“Silence, monster sympathizer,” she snapped. “You obviously hang with that crowd, so you
obviously know where he is.”

“Breezy. You can’t do this.” Ryan tried. “You know what this will do to Brendon!”

She looked down. “I have to Ryan.”

“Look, I don’t buy into this monster thing but if you think hurting my mentally ill boyfriend will
make you feel better about the fact that you’re cheating on Linda and that she genuinely thought that
poor boy was you, then fuck you!” Ryan snapped. “Brendon’s not a monster. He’s got a form of
DID.” Breezy locked eyes with Ryan and got wide eyed, trying to tell him something. It clicked.

“Oh my god.” Ryan laughed. “You’re cheating on Linda! I should’ve known you were cheating on
her! No sane person obsessively controls who their romantic partner talks to!” Jac shrank back.
“You have forty-eight hours to find him. Failure to do so will lead to a video leak of… of your brother’s proportions.”

Breezy handed him the silver-and-red ballpoint.

“I’m not signing this.” Ryan stepped back.

“Then I’ll leak it now. It’s your choice.”

Ryan grabbed the pen and scribbled his name at the bottom.

“Date it,” Jac insisted.

This time, Ryan pressed so hard he punctured the page.

Breezy pulled a yellow egg timer from her case and turned the dial all the way to one hour.

Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick…

“Forty-seven more turns and we’re coming for you,” Jac said.

Breezy lingered as Jac stomped down the steps toward Mr. Vanek’s Cadillac.

“I tried to stop her.” Breezy said tearfully. “I’m so sorry Ry.” Ryan squeezed her hand.

“I’ll find a way to get you out of your contract.” Ryan promised. “And save the day.” Breezy nodded and went down to the cadillac.

Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick…

They pulled away, leaving Ryan with an unobstructed view of Brendon’s cottage. The cheery facade looked back at him with the warmth of a trusting puppy—a puppy he was about to be forced to put to sleep.
Spencer logically knew he was having a nightmare. But that didn’t stop the genuine fear he felt being chased by an angry mob while Vincent took apart Vicky and Viola locked Fran away.

“No! I didn’t kill her!” He cried. “I didn’t kill Linda! I swear!”

“Spencer!”

“I didn’t kill her!”

“Spencer wake up!” Spencer shot upright and saw Fran and Vicky standing at the foot of his bed. Vicky looked washed out and like she was on her fifth red bull.

“How much”

“-Was a dream?” Fran finished.

“You kissed Linda and she kinda sorta ripped your head off with how into it you both got.” Vicky said, her voice hoarse and her normally piercing blue eyes dulled to a barely there shine.

“Oh.” Spencer slumped in his bed.

“Mom says if you cut your hair, we’ll be safe to go back to school.” Fran murmured, crawling up onto the bed to curl up next to him.

“But I like my hair.” Spencer said sulkily.

“It was that or mom pull everyone but me out of school and let me take the brunt of every RAD teens ire.” Fran said dully. Spencer really looked at her and saw that her once warm auburn brown hair was dull and her face looked swollen, like she’d been crying for hours.

“What happened to you two?”

“We stood up to Frank’s dad and our parents.” Fran explained, combing her fingers through his hair.

“We’ll get through this.” Vicky promised. “Even if I have to dress up as you and turn myself in.”
Pacing across his porch, Ryan thought of those windup dogs he’d seen on display on tables in the mall. They’d yap, walk, sit, turn, and walk some more. Then they would bash into the side rail and fall on their hind legs. With a mini hop they’d return to all fours, ready to yap, walk, sit, and turn all over again. Like him, they moved but never got anywhere.

Where was he supposed to go? Should he waste his time tracking a beloved friend for a cheater and a bully? Hope to god his iPhone was still Broken and sending Pete’s dick to the world? Ask Peter for advice on the legality of indentured servitude? Confide in Hillary and Pete? Move back to Huntington Beach? He was ready for action. He just didn’t know which action to take.

Sneakers slapping on pavement caught his attention. A petite, slim figure was running up the street toward him.

“Ryan!” she called.

“Francine?”

He raced for her, propelled by the strength of a thousand regrets. Brendon came running out of his cottage to see what the big commotion was about.

“I’m so sorry!” She threw her arms around him. “I never should have let Spencer go to the dance or encouraged his crush on Linda.” The sobbing thirteen year old buried her face in Ryan’s chest and cried. Brendon finally caught up.

“Fran?” He asked, confused.

“Vicky’s going to turn herself in disguised as Spencer.” Fran whispered.

“I can’t ask her to do that!” Brendon hissed.

“She won’t take no for an answer.” Fran wiped at her eyes. “She says it’s her fault Spencer’s head fell off.”

“Take us to her.” Ryan said.

“What?” Fran and Brendon asked.

“Lead us there and I’ll stop her from turning herself in.” Ryan said. “She’s nowhere near Spencer’s height or build. She’ll just expose your whole family.”

Fran stopped and nodded.

“Follow me.” She whispered, aiming her flashlight down the street. They must have made a sight. A boy with a bob wearing a paisley shirt, brown corduroy slacks, and a sweater vest, a girl wearing a fur cloak and a victorian wedding dress, and a short boy in a high quality blonde wig, black bodycon dress, pink fur bolero, and red sky high stilettos.
A pebble bounced off the frosted-glass window.

Then another. Plink.

Spencer rolled onto his back.

And another. Plink.

He thought of a woman tapping impatiently on a countertop. Maybe it was that angry mob from his dreams, coming to put him out of his misery, once and for all.

He rolled onto his stomach, the lyrics of “Something Bad” playing on a constant loop in his head. Spencer wanted to stand on his metal bed and shout, “I fucking know something bad is happening in my little corner of Oz! Can’t you see that I know that!?” But he didn’t want to wake his parents. The sun would rise in an hour, and they’d be up shortly after that.

And then what?

Rolling onto his back, he wondered how much longer he could avoid them by pretending to sleep. A day? A week? A decade? Whatever it took, he was up for it. Shame was an intolerable emotion. But it required the presence of another person to survive. Someone to tisk-tisk while shaking their head side to side, then to rattle off the ways she had disappointed them. Without that person, the emotion gets downgraded to guilt. And while guilt can also be horribly uncomfortable, it’s an easier sentence to serve, because it’s self-imposed. And can therefore be self-removed.

“Spencer?”

Spencer sat up slowly, not sure whether he should trust his ears. After all, they were controlled by his brain, which had proven to be very unreliable.

“Spencer! Open up!”

Fran’s back!

Spencer thought about pretending to lock her out. Brothers did it in movies all the time. But he was under house arrest. And she was in danger. Who else would he talk about art to? Vicky? Their dad?

“Shhhh,” be hissed, quickly covering the unsightly hospital gown with his fluffy black bathrobe. Spencer unlatched the window. Fran quickly squeezed inside, like a grown dog through a puppy door. The sight of her spread a neon rainbow across his stormy day.

“What happened? Why did you take off like…” Spencer paused as a second body began to poke through the window. It had shiny dark hair, 70s style clothes, and a perfect nose. And it landed with a thump.

“Shhhhh,” Frankie hissed again.

A third body wiggled through wearing a dress and furry pink bolero.

“Oh my god, it’s true,” Ryan said, awestruck. “Your skin is really gree—”

“What is he doing here?” Spencer toggled between confusion and rage.
“He’s come to help us stop Vicky from getting herself killed to save you.” Fran said. “Brendon tagged along because he wanted to.”

“Whoa!” Ryan explored further into the room. “What is this place?” He pointed at the glass cage by Spencer’s bed. “Oh my god, are those rats?” A smile lit up his face. “I had you down as a dog person. I guess I owe Jon money.”

“Are you okay?” Brendon asked softly. “My mom said Vick stood up for us.”

“No.” Spencer sighed. “I’m under house arrest and my idiot baby sister is planning to get herself killed so that Fran and I can go back to school.”

“About that.” Ryan came back. “Vicky’s too small to pass as you. Jac would know immediately that it’s not you and there’s only so much her cheating ways can derail the news of Brendon’s condition from exposing y’all.”

Spencer’s heartspace swelled at the realization that Ryan was trying to save him.

“Who are you suggesting?” Spencer asked.

“Me.” Ryan stated. “We sound similar and we have similar builds. All we have to do is turn my face into yours and boom. You and your sisters are safe from harm and your community isn’t exposed before it’s ready.”

“You’d do that?” Spencer asked.

“I would do anything to save you and Brendon.” Ryan admitted. “You’re the best friend I have besides Brendon and Pete.”

“And you’re my best friend too.” Spencer smiled.

“Wanna touch my skin?” Ryan asked, like he was a monster too.

Spencer nodded. “Feels like mine, only colder.”

“Yeah.” Ryan rolled his eyes. “I’m always cold.”

“Really? I’m always hot. I guess it’s from getting charged and stuff.”

“So, wait.” Ryan cocked his head. “You really get charged? How does that work?”

Outside, the creeping morning light began brightening the milky frosting on the window. Still, it was impossible to see anything clearly. Spencer’s view—a kaleidoscope of blurry shapes and shadows—was a warning. Visiting hours were almost over.

“Kaleidoscope Eyes.” Spencer mumbled. Ryan and Brendon both looked at him. “It’s a phrase to describe what you see on LSD. A blur of colors and shapes. Like the window.”

Brendon and Ryan smiled despite the somber situation.

“Can either of you explain the whole Gabe/Brendon thing?” Spencer finally asked. “Because the night Jon called me, I saw Gabe turn into Brendon.”

“I can explain that.” Ryan waved awkwardly, back to his awkward, goofball self all over again.

“Just like a stalker…” Frank joked. “An explanation for everything.”
Spencer searched for a place to sit, now that the girls’ lounge was gone. But he quickly gave up once Ryan began.

As the rising sun continued to count down the minutes, the normie talked about his crush on Brendon Urie, his overheating issues, his mother, who was Ms. Urie the music teacher, his deranged ancestor, and how sweat plus deranged ancestor equaled Gabe Saporta.

Then he went on about Jac, jealousy, Linda, the kiss, the head incident, the video of Brendon, Indentured servitude contracts, the blackmail, needing to turn in Spencer, the forty-eight-hour deadline—which was now more like forty-six—and how he didn’t know what to do.

“So, let me get this straight.” Brendon beamed before Spencer could respond. “I’m hooking up with both of you?”

Ryan sighed. “Technically.”

“Yeah!” Brendon high-fived himself.

Frankie touched the back pocket of his jeans. There was a sizzle-pop sound and then a flash of light as Ryan smacked him in the back of the head with a random book he found.

“Ouch!” he shouted, grabbing his butt and rubbing his head.

“Shhhhhhh.” Spencer covered his mouth.

“That one hurt!” he mumbled through his hand.

“It was supposed to.” Spencer stepped away. “In case you weren’t listening, none of this is good news. None of it!”

“Fine.” He walked away, fanning the back of his jeans.

“So you’re going to turn me over to Jac?” Spencer’s voice trembled.

“No.” Ryan said. “I’m turning myself in as you. I really don’t want to hurt you.”

“Why not?” Spencer looked down. “Everyone else does.”

Ryan looked like he was considering this. “I guess I know how you feel.”

“Wait…” Spencer lifted his eyes. “Are you a RAD?”

“What’s a RAD?”

“It’s the nonoffensive way of saying ‘monster,’” Spencer explained. “It means Regular Attribute Dodger.”

“I was, not the same way you or Brendon or the twins are, but I kind of stopped dodging.” Ryan grinned, as if bidding farewell to a fading memory. He pointed at his nose for some reason. “But sometimes I wish I hadn’t.”

“Why?” Spencer asked, unable to imagine why anyone would want to go through what he was going through now.

“Because when you’re different-looking and people like you anyway, you know it’s for all the right reasons. And not because they think you’re a physical threat who might steal their girlfriend.”
“Huh?” Spencer stared at him, confused.

“I’m saying I’m on your side.” Ryan smiled a worried but pretty smile. “I don’t want to give in to intimidation. I want to fight. I want people to stop being so afraid of each other’s differences. So people like Brendon… and you…”

“And Gabe,” D.J. added.

“… and Gabe can live normal lives.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Spencer reached for her neck seams but hit gauze.

“First we have to get that video away from Jac,” Ryan said.

“How? I’m not allowed to leave this room for, like, ever, so…” Saying it out loud made it real.

“Leave that to us.” Ryan said. “Even if we don’t go with my plan, I’ll figure out something.”
She Lives In Her World So UnAware

Chapter Summary

This marks the start of book 2

The amber-infused air snapped with anxiety. It crackled with anticipation. It popped with impatience. Still, Sarah refused to rest until the de Nile Palace was fit for a king, even if the staff thought she was a royal pain in the—

“Better?” asked Lily, lifting the left corner of the papyrus banner she and her husband, Shaun, had been summoned to hang.

Sarah cocked her head and took three steps back to get a fresh perspective. Outside, the rain pounded, muting the hollow taps of her strappy platforms against the limestone floor. It was perfect weather for renting movies, snuggling with Girlfriend, and—

STOP! Sarah shook the cozy image from her mind. She needed to focus on welcoming her mom home.

Joining the tips of her thumbs, Sarah stretched out her arms like a film director lining up a shot. “Ummm…” Her latte-colored hands formed a frame through which she could scrutinize the banner’s latest position. It was crucial that she see exactly what her audience would see. Because her audience expected perfection, and she was due home in—

Sarah glanced at the carved sundial in the center of the great hall. Ugh! It was completely useless at night.

“Time check!” she called.

Shaun pulled an iPhone from his white linen tunic. “Seven minutes.”

High Dam!

It would have been much faster to type her message in seventy-two-point font and print it from her laser printer. But her mother had no tolerance for technology. When it came to notes, lists, or birthday cards, it was hieroglyphs or the highway.

Cleopatra de Nile—or Cleopatra Orzechowski, as Westerners called her—insisted that all under his roof honor their Egyptian heritage by writing with the ancient characters—characters that averaged twenty minutes apiece to perfect. Time that Sarah, formerly Queen Ankhesenamun, just didn’t have. Which is why the sign said WELCOME HOME instead of WELCOME HOME, QUEEN-
Fortunately, the mundane task hadn’t hindered her usual Saturday afternoon plans with Gerard, Frank, and Jamia, since the three S’s—sunning, spa-ing, and shopping—were no longer options.

Tanning in the solarium was out because of the storm. And the other two S’s had been canceled until it became safe for them to go out in public again.

Since the previous night’s dance at Merston High (the one that Lyn-Z took Ryan Wentz to!), Salem police had been searching for a “green monster” (Spencer!) whose head fell off during a massive make-out sesh with Linda Ignarro. The RAD (Regular Attribute Dodgers) community agreed it was best for all of their kids to stay home, just in case.

Luckily, Sarah’s mother was a world renowned archaeologist who didn’t really try to keep up with goings on in Salem, trusting Lily Allen and Shaun Simon, a married vampire couple Cleopatra hired to mind the eternal 16 year old, to keep an eye on her. The only thing she’d be worried about is that Sarah had gone to the dance as a mummy. She’d ground her until everyone who’d been at the dance was gone.

“’S good?” Shaun managed to ask through clenched teeth that blended in against his porcelain-colored skin.

Was it Sarah’s imagination or did the top left corner still seem slanted? Her chest buckled like an overwrapped corpse. She wanted to be done. She needed to be done. There was still wine to pour; there were appetizers to arrange and the Sharkiat playlist to cue. If she didn’t free up the house staff, those tasks would never be completed on time. Sure, Sarah could help, but she’d rather cut off an arm than lend a hand. After all, her mother always said, “There are bosses and there are workers. Yet you, my princess, are too precious for either role.” And Sarah wholeheartedly agreed. But no one said she couldn’t supervise.

“Higher on the left.”

“But…” Shaun began. Then he quickly thought better of it. Instead, he activated the carpenter’s level app on his iPhone and flipped it horizontal. He watched patiently as the digital bubble bobbed toward a verdict, his peach-colored lips mumbling at the screen that held his fate.

“Looks perfect to me,” Lily insisted, balancing on the gilded arm of an ancient Egyptian throne.

“The RAD (Regular Attribute Dodgers) community agreed it was best for all of their kids to stay home, just in case. It was best for all of their kids to stay home, just in case. It was best for all of their kids to stay home, just in case.

The woman had a point.

Sixteen years ago, Cleopatra commissioned Shaun to build a house that would have impressive “curb appeal” by Western standards and “royal palace appeal” by Egyptian standards. Months later, 32 Radcliffe Way did just that.

White and pigeon-gray, the multilevel exterior had the new-money patina of a suburban McMansion. The front door opened into a cramped wood-paneled foyer. Its walls were beige, dimly lit, and boring. How else could the family keep pizza delivery boys and nosy cookie-selling Girl Scouts from becoming suspicious? But on the other side of that fake foyer was a second door—the real door,
which gave access to their true home. Where the style dial had been set to palatial.

The main hall was three stories high and capped with a lofty glass pyramid. When it wasn’t raining, natural light soaked the interior like melted butter on a hot pita. When rain did fall, the rhythmic tapping lulled the inhabitants like an ambient symphony score. Colorful hieroglyphs tagged the limestone walls. Carved alabaster pots detailed the burial spots of their ancestors. And a Shaun-made river, filled with water from the Nile, snaked through every room in the palace. On special occasions, Lily would adorn the stream with glittering tea lights. Otherwise it held blue Egyptian water lilies. Tonight it had both.

“Five minutes,” Shaun announced.

“Hang it up!” Sarah decided with a sudden clap of her hands. Penny Lane, the most timid of the family’s seven cats, darted up the towering date palm that grew in the middle of the room.

“Sorry, Penny,” Sarah cooed. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

A quiet chime echoed through the hall. It wasn’t Sarah who had scared Penny Lane after all. It was —

“She’s home!” Lily shouted as she saw the crisp image of her boss in the security monitor by the real door.

“Hurry!” Sarah snapped.

Lily pressed her corner of the banner to the column with stick-or-else urgency and then eyed her husband, prompting him to do the same. But they were too late.

“Queen-Mother!” Lily’s currently pale cheeks turned the color of ripe apples. She quickly stepped off the gold arm of the throne and brushed away any prints her gladiator sandals might have left behind. Without another word, she and Shaun escaped to the kitchen. Seconds later, high-speed vocals exploded from the built-in speakers. With Mariah Carey’s multi-octave range and Alvin and the Chipmunks’ sound, Sharkiat rocked the palace with “Ya Helilah Ya Helilah.”

“Mother!” Sarah squealed, sounding both crisp and mushy, like a melted M&M. “Welcome home! How was your trip? Do you like my banner? I made it myself.”

She stood proudly between the columns and waited for her response. Even though she was on the mature side of sixteen (thanks to mummification), she still craved her mother’s approval. And sometimes that could be harder to get than lash extensions in a desert sandstorm.

But not tonight. Tonight, Cleopatra pushed past her assistant, Bob, and headed straight for her daughter, her arms open to I-love-you-this-much proportions.

“Ma’am!” Bob called, his boyish voice jagged with concern. “Your coat!”

“My little queen!” Cleopatra said, pulling Sarah into her soggy brown trench and squeezing hard. Torrents of rain couldn’t wash away the stale smells of an international flight and a chauffeured car filled with tobacco smoke. It was all her mom. And she loved it.

“Are you okay?” Cleopatra asked. “Linda Iero called me to say that Anthony was trying to excommunicate that wretched Smith family.”

“The Smiths are good people, mother.” Sarah defended. “I’m close friends with their twins and their son, while naive, is well meaning and much better than say, Matt Pelisser or Jac Vanek.”
“What was that Spencer boy thinking? How could the Smiths have let this happen? They’ve put our entire community in danger.”

“So you heard?” Sarah asked. But what she really wanted to know was how much she had heard.

Cleopatra held up her rose gold iPhone X, displaying the frantic texts between Linda Iero, a dear family friend and divorcée, putting a sharp end to their tender moment. “Did Vincent forget to give him or those wretched little girls brains? One of them had the gall to stand up to Anthony and James in defense of her idiot brother.”

Sarah took a deep breath and held down the resentment threatening to bubble up and explode out at her mother’s derision of her friends.

The appetizer bell rang again.

“It’s not like anyone knows his name. And at school he wears all of that normie makeup, so no one recognized him. Maybe he was trying to grab the *ka* by the horns,” Sarah suggested, rocking nervously in her strappy platforms. “You know, to change things.”

“What kinds of things? He was created a month ago. What gives him the right to change anything?” she asked, lifting her gaze toward the WELCOME HOME banner. Finally! But her regal features showed no signs of appreciation.

How do you know so much about the Smiths? Sarah couldn’t help wondering. Because, seriously! She had friends whose parents didn’t venture farther than San Francisco. Yet they remained wonderfully unaware of what happened in their children’s lives. Yet here she and Frank were with parents who act like they know better than everyone. At this point Sarah genuinely wished she could grow up, just to escape her mother’s unbearable hot and cold demeanor.

“What’s with your generation?” she continued, ignoring her question. “You have no appreciation for the past. No respect for heritage or tradition. All you want to do is—”

“Mom, I AM history and tradition.” Sarah pointed out. “I’m the queer history that’s so often erased. It’s not us forgetting. It’s your generation censoring us!” Sarah clapped her hands over her mouth, wide-eyed. “Apologies Queen-Mother.” She said quickly. “I just meant the normie adults who were children and teenagers just 27 years ago act like horrible things like die ins and women’s rights weren’t things happening for them.”

“Ma’am?” Bob interrupted, his blonde head glistening with raindrops. He clutched the handle of an aluminum briefcase with such intensity that his dark knuckles had turned gray. “Where would you like this?”

While considering her answer, Cleopatra stroked her chin. After a moment, she glanced at Sarah and then gestured toward the grand double doors at the far end of the hall. Firmly gripping her daughter’s elbow, she led her across the airy foyer with well-rehearsed grace, and they stepped into the throne room.

A family of falcons flapped out and headed for the date palm. The birds’ pointed wings echoed throughout the palace like flags snapping in the wind.

Lit by flaming alabaster oil lamps, the hammered copper walls reflected a soft amber glow. A smooth woven reed aisle, polished by thousands of years of barefoot ancestors, led to the riser upon which their thrones sat. Sarah slid onto the purple velvet seat cushion and rested her palms on the jewel-encrusted golden armrests. Instinctively, her chin jutted forward and her eyelids lowered to half-mast.
Now, with her vision slightly obscured, everything came to her in bits and pieces. She was suddenly a queen, taking dainty sips of her kingdom instead of swallowing it in one big gulp: the black-and-emerald scarab above the doorway… the bulrushes along the snaking Nile… the two ebony sarcophagi that flanked the entrance.

The sights, smells, and sounds of her kingdom banished the tension of the last couple of days and made her feel safe, especially now that it’s ruler had returned. Breathing became less labored, and her skin tingled with entitlement. Oh, how right royal felt.

Once they were settled, Bob gently lowered the briefcase onto the copper table between the thrones and then stepped back to await further instruction.

Open it, Cleopatra conveyed with a mere flick of her wrist.

Bob clicked open the case, lifted the velvet-lined top, and took a long step backward.

“Behold,” Cleopatra said. “I found it in Aunt Nefertiti’s tomb.” She twisted her emerald wedding ring with quiet confidence.

Sarah leaned over the armrest and gasped. She immediately began taking a mental catalogue of the bounty that lay glistening before her.

- A lapis necklace fashioned in the shape of a falcon, its widespread wings meant to rest on the collarbones of Egypt’s most admired women
- Hammered cuffs joined by a ruby-and-emerald eye of Horus
- A solid-gold vulture-shaped crown, which was so weighted down with shiny jewels that Sarah could see her wide, desire-filled eyes mirrored in every colored stone
- A gold spiral ring with a gem ball–sized gray moonstone that practically glowed in the dark
- Pear-shaped jade earrings wrapped in gold wire that made Angelina Jolie’s 2009 Oscar emeralds look like hairbaubles.
- A gold collar necklace with pearls and peacock feathers hanging off the bottom
- A ruby-eyed snake cuff meant to wind up the arm, from wrist to bicep

A thick white business card jammed haphazardly beside the other contents of the case.

“Wait!” Sarah leaned closer and snatched up the card. “What’s this?” she asked, even though she knew. Who wouldn’t? The ubiquitous silver logo embossed across the top of the card was a five-letter word for “major opportunity.”

“Golden,” she whispered in awe. Quaking, Sarah read the words on the card, and the stacked bangles on her arm shook in time with the jubilant Egyptian music. “Where did you get this?” she asked.

Eyes still forward, Cleopatra grinned smugly. “Spectacular, isn’t it? How do you feel about your past now? Do you have any idea what these are worth? Not just in dollars, but in history? The ring alone —”

“Queen-Mother!” Sarah jumped to her feet. The throne was no longer wide enough to contain her excitement. She rubbed her thumb over the embossed letters one at a time—V… O… G… U… E…”

“How did you get her business card?”

As Cleopatra quickly turned to face her daughter, her raw disappointment was suddenly exposed. “What’s so special about this Anna Winter?” She snapped, shutting the briefcase. Bob stepped forward to remove it, but Cleopatra waved him away.
“Win-tour, mother!” Sarah insisted. “She’s the editor in chief of Vogue. Did you really meet her? Did you talk to her? Were her sunglasses off or on? What did she say? Tell me everything.”

Cleopatra finally wriggled out of her trench coat. Bob hurried to retrieve it and then quickly offered her a cigarette. As if delighting in her daughter’s squirmy anticipation, Cleopatra took several measured puffs before indulging her.

“She sat beside me in first class on the flight from Cairo to JFK.” She released a stinky cloud of smoke from her tight lips. “She saw the article about my dig on the front page of Business Today Egypt and started going on and on about her newfound love of Cairo couture… whatever that is.” She rolled her eyes. “She wants to dedicate a whole issue to it.”

From his post behind the throne, Bob shook his head. He looked just as offended as Cleopatra.

“She actually said ‘Cairo couture’?” Sarah beamed. Egypt was finally in vogue!

“That woman said a lot of things.” She clapped twice. Shaun and Lily hurried from the kitchen balancing platters of food on “the flats of their hands. Bastet, Leena, Penny Lane, Indie, Dylan, Usi, and Miu-Miu scampered hungrily behind them.

Sarah sat. “Like what?” she pressed. “What else did she say?”

“Something about a photo shoot for her younger magazine.”

Lily lowered a bronze platter in front of her. Cleopatra reached for a pita triangle and dipped it in a swirl of hummus.

“What?” Sarah gasped, waving away Shaun’s tray of cheese and lamb sambouseks. The only app she wanted was called Teen Vogue, and it was available on iTunes for $1.99.

“Something about models riding camels in the Oregon sand dunes wearing my sister’s jewels and the latest in Cairo couture.”

Sarah shifted on her throne. First she crossed her right leg over her left, then her left over her right. She shook her ankle, sat on her hands, and tapped her fingers on the plush armrest. Despite her mother’s intolerance for fidgeting, she couldn’t help herself. Every cell, nerve, muscle, ligament, and tendon in her body was prodding her to run outside, Spider-Man up the palace walls, and shout the golden news from the rooftops. If only it were safe to leave the house.

*Thanks again, Spencer Smith!*

“The whole thing is exploitative, if you ask me,” Bob mumbled.

Cleopatra nodded in agreement.

Sarah shot the servant a shut-up-now-or-I’m-going-to-cover-your-damn-head-in-goose-liver-and-call-the-cats glare. He cleared his throat and lowered his round, liquid brown eyes.

“I can organize it!” Sarah insisted, batting her lashes.

“Why?” Cleopatra stubbed out her cigarette in an ankh-shaped dish of baba ghanoush. Lily swooped in and removed it immediately. “I didn’t agree to anything.”

“You don’t have to.” Sarah defended. “I can take care of everything. Models, music, the outfits, everything. I’ll even be one of the models so that I can keep an eye on the heirlooms.”
“Good thing she decided to organize everything already,” Bob offered.

“How?”

Cleopatra shrugged, as if she cared too little to remember. “October fourteenth.”

“I’m totally free that day.” Sarah jumped to her feet and speed-clapped.

Her mother glanced over his shoulder and flashed Bob the same cats-on-your-bald-head warning.

“That Anna Winter acts more entitled than a queen, for Geb’s sake. I don’t want to work with—”

“Like I said, you don’t have to do a thing. I’ll work with her.” Sarah was so excited that she didn’t even try to correct their mispronunciation again. This must happen. It was destiny.

Cleopatra searched her daughter’s face for some sort of guidance. Despite her galloping heart, Sarah remained still and in control. As she twirled his emerald thumb ring, his almond-shaped eyes looked distant and thoughtful.

“Please,” Sarah pleaded, dropping to her knees. She bowed until her forehead touched the carpet. It had the same musky sweetness as her Moroccan hair oil.

Please say yes please say yes please say yes please say yes please say yes....

“I didn’t raise you to be a model,” she said.

“No, you raised me to be a queen and advised me when I was Queen,” Sarah said. “But queens and princesses are paragons of fashion. And I want to bring my heritage back to the forefront of fashion.”

She acknowledged her lifelong dream with a nod but still failed to see the point.

Sarah sat up. “What better way to network”—impress my friends and make Jac regret the day she ever forced the ugly Wentz and Lyn-Z together for the dance, she silently added—“than to work with the accessories editor of Teen Vogue?”

“Why do you need to network?” Cleopatra asked, sounding hurt. “I can get you any job you want.”

Sarah wanted to stomp her platform sandals and scream. Instead, she clasped her mother’s hand. “Queen-Mother,” she managed to say calmly, “I descended from a queen. Not a princess!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, her eyes warming to a more playful temperature.


“Excuse me, Miss Sarah,” Lily interrupted. “Would you like me to draw your bath?”

“Orange, please.”

The handmaiden nodded and then hurried off.

Cleopatra chuckled. “So much for wanting to do things yourself.”

Sarah couldn’t help smiling. “I asked her to draw the bath, not take it for me.”

“Oh, I see.” She smiled back. “So you want me to confirm the shoot, insist that you get to choose everything, and then stand back and let you do the rest?”
“Exactly.” Sarah kissed her mother’s well-preserved forehead.

Tapping her pursed lips, Cleopatra made one last show of considering her daughter’s request. Sarah forced herself not to fidget.

“Maybe this is exactly what your generation needs,” she mused.
“Pardon?” This was hardly the response she had been hoping for.

“I bet if Vincent Smith had encouraged his children to get more involved in extracurricular activities, none of them would have gotten into so much trouble.”

“I totally agree.” Sarah nodded so hard her bangs shook. “Who has time for trouble when they’re busy? I certainly don’t.” Sarah chose not to point out that two out of three were in bands and one was an aspiring comic book writer.

Relief washed over her mother’s face. She lifted the business card from Sarah’s fingertips and handed it to Bob. “Make the call.”

Yessss! No matter how stern Cleopatra acted, Sarah had her wrapped.

“Thanks, mom!” Sarah covered her mother’s cheek with glossy, berry-scented kisses. This was the first significant step on her path to fashion world domination. And the possibilities made her well-preserved heart soar higher than the highest WELCOME HOME banner ever hung.

*Spark off, Spencer Smith. There’s a new headline in town.*
Can't take the kid from the fight

Ryan was sprawled on the hardwood floor of the living room, staring at the ceiling with Dottie, Eleanor, Peggy, Eliza, and Marcie huddled under the coffee table. He absently scratched Hobo’s ears as lightning scared the poor pup.

Ping!

Ryan Wentz curled away from his older sister, Hillary, and burrowed into the cluster of animals hiding under the table. The new kitten, Captain Knotts, murped and curled into Ryan’s stomach while Hobo and Dottie planted themselves on Ryan’s chest. He pressed PLAY on his phone and braced himself for another iThreat.

“Tick… tick… tick…”

It was just like the others. Recorded by his ex-friend Jac Vanek and sent to Ryan’s iPhone every sixty minutes, it was a haunting reminder that the forty-eight-hour deadline was now more like twenty-three.

Jac’s goal was simple: to capture the green monster who had made out with, and traumatized, her girlfriend, Linda, at the school dance. Rather, she wanted Ryan to capture the monster for her. And Ryan had until ten o’clock on Sunday night to do it. If he failed, Jac would post a video of Brendon Urie turning into Gabe Saporta. Then he would be “wanted” too.

Ryan wanted to protect Brendon more than anything. But he had met this “monster.” In fact, he was Ryan’s bandmate and close friend Spencer Smith.

Another shock of lightning lit the ravine behind the Wentz’s house. Thunder boomed. The dogs and kitten scattered like beads on a broken necklace.

“Ahhhh!” Ryan and Hillary screamed. Ryan could hear Pete and Andy screaming from Andy’s room.

The TV flickered and settled… flickered and settled.

“Ugh! This is so ten thousand years ago!” Hillary smacked a velvety cushion. “I feel like a cave woman.”

“I don’t think they had HDTV ten thousand years ago.”

“Pay attention!” Hillary nudged Ryan in the shoulder with her pedicured foot. “I’m not talking about the TV.”

“Well, what are you talking about?” Ryan asked, focusing on his older sister for the first time all night.

Hillary—wearing a dusty-rose kimono—was surrounded by strips of cloth, Popsicle sticks, anthills of baby powder, and a bowl of what looked like congealed honey. “I’m talking about this stupid leg-waxing kit! It’s so primitive.”

“Since when do you wax your own legs?” Ryan wondered, checking his phone for any texts or tweets he might have missed during this brief exchange.
“Since last night’s monster drama scared the only decent salon in town into closing on a Saturday.” Hillary spread a thick dollop of wax on her shin and covered it with a white rectangular strip. “If it doesn’t open soon, Salem really will be full of scary beasts.” She rubbed the strip vigorously. “I mean, have you seen the girls at school? I told this one chick I thought her mohair pants were very rocker chic and you know what she said?”

Searchlights from a passing patrol car streaked across the log walls of the Wentz family’s living room as police hunted Spencer Smith with shark-like tenacity. Ryan picked his jagged cuticles. How much longer would he be able to keep his cool? An hour? All night? Until Jac’s next audio threat? The clock was ticking. Time was running out.

“Ry.” Hillary toe-poked him again. “You know what she said?”

Ryan shrugged, unable to take his mind off Brendon and the danger he’d be in if he didn’t think of a way to stop Jac from leaking his video—some way other than turning in Spencer or himself. Something cunning and clever and—

“She said ‘I’m not wearing mohair pants!’ ” Hillary reached for the wax strip on her leg. “You know why she said that? Because she was wearing a miniskirt, Georgie! A miniskirt! The poor girl was that hairy!”

She squeezed her eyes shut and ripped. “Arrrrrrgh! Hair out!”

Ping!

“What now?” Hillary asked, drizzling baby powder over her raw skin.

Ryan checked his phone. It was Brendon.

BRENDON: DID U SEE ARTIST SKETCH OF SPENCER ON THE NEWS?

RYAN: NO. STORM IS MESSING UP TV.

BRENDON: LOOKS LIKE YODA IN A TUXEDO.

Ryan snorted.

“What is it? What’s so funny?” Hillary asked, swinging her long brunette waves over her shoulder with the allure of a hair model.

“Nothing,” Ryan mumbled, avoiding his sister’s searching hazel eyes. Was he keeping Hillary and Pete in the dark to protect them? Or was he doing it to test himself? To see if he could survive this complicated situation—and maybe even triumph—without the help of his fearless, flawless siblings. He couldn’t be sure.

RYAN: ANY IDEAS YET?

BRENDON: NO BUT WE NEED TO THINK OF SOMETHING. IF JAC SHOWS THE VIDEO, MY MOM IS GOING TO SEND ME TO SALT LAKE CITY TO LIVE WITH MY STEP-AUNT.
The news tore through Ryan’s insides with the ripping force of a wax strip. Even though they had known each other only a month, he couldn’t fathom Salem without him. He couldn’t fathom anything without him. In the English language of love, Ryan was the letter Q and Brendon was his U. He completed him.

**RYAN:** LET’S TALK TO JAC! MAYBE IF WE BEG…

**BRENDON:** NO GO. SHE’S TOO BUSY WITH INTERVIEWS. SHE’S ALL OVER TV AND WEB. SHE’S NOT STOPPING TILL SHE GETS SPENCER. LINDA IN SHOCK. STILL AT HOSPITAL. MAJOR VIGIL. CRAZY! VIDEOS ALL OVER YOUTUBE OF FAKE MONSTER SIGHTINGS. DALLON SAYS SHE’S ONTO BREEZY.

Another wax strip ripped through Ryan’s insides. These updates were only stressing him out more. He needed to get off the couch and take action. To find a way to delete that video of Brendon from Jac’s phone and—

The front door swung open. A chilly gust of wind blasted through the cabin. It was followed by a clap of thunder.

“Ahhhh!” the duo screamed again. Hillary panic-kicked her legs in the air. Her hamstrings were covered with crooked patches of white cloth.

“Who’s ready for game night?” their mother called, shaking off her brown-and-gold Louis Vuitton umbrella before entering the house. “We’ve got UNO, Balderdash, and Apples to Apples,” she announced, depositing two wet Target bags and four from Nordstrom in the kitchen sink. The only thing the ex-placement counselor detested more than blue socks with black pants was water damage on hardwood floors.

Game night? Hillary mouthed silently.

Ryan shrugged. It was the first he’d heard of it too.

Pete and Andrew came thundering down the stairs.

“How about some low-fat thin-crust personal pizzas?” asked Peter, their father. He followed Dale with a bag of takeout and a fun-for-the-whole-family grin.

“Dad’s going to eat cheese? What’s the occasion?” Pete called from the stairs.

Dale appeared and handed each child a brown shoe box marked UGG. “We’re just trying to make the best of this whole curfew thingy. We want to let loose in case this is our last night among the living.” She winked playfully at Ryan, making obvious her belief that this whole monster-hunt hype was just a small-town strategy for boosting sales of canned goods, bottled water, flashlights, and batteries in a slow economy. But in the spirit of fitting in, his parents had decided to play along.

Hillary lifted the shoe box lid and carefully peeked inside. “Huh? You always said UGGs were the mountain man’s flip-flops. And that they should never be worn by single women.”

“That was when we lived in Huntington Beach,” Dale explained, untying her gold silk head scarf
and shaking out her dark hair. “We’re in Oregon now. The rules have changed. It’s chilly here.”

“Not in this house,” Ryan said, referring to the broken thermostat. Outside the wind was howling, yet he was sweating in shorts and having forgone a shirt.

“Is everyone wearing their UGGs?” Peter asked, clomping toward them in a new pair.

“Why are you guys so… happy?” Hillary asked, and then—rrrip!—she pulled another strip off her leg. “Owie,” she gasped, and then speed-rubbed the red blotch.

“We’re excited for some weekend family time.” Peter leaned over the back of the couch and stroked the top of his daughter’s head. “This is the first Saturday night in years Hilly hasn’t had a date.”

“Um, correction.” Hillary tightened the tie on her kimono and stood. A silver gum wrapper was stuck to the wax on her knee. “I had a date. It just got canceled ’cause of this stupid curfew. Now I’m stuck inside with board games, personal pizzas, and UGG boots.” She pulled off the gum wrapper, crumpled it into a silver ball, and whipped it at the stone fireplace. “Forget about Hillary out. From now on it’s Hillary in. Trust me, this is nothing to get excited about.”

“Sor-ry.” Dale pouted, quickly boxing up the boots. “I had no idea your father, brothers, and I were so horrible to be around.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Hillary rolled her eyes.

Ping!

Ryan checked his phone, grateful for an excuse to tune out the family-night family fight.

**BRENDON:** U STILL THERE? WHAT HAPPENED? NEED TO THINK OF A PLAN. TIME IS RUNNING OUT.

Just as Ryan lifted his index finger over the screen, the phone was yanked out of his hands.

“What are you doing?” He yelped at Hillary. She passed the phone to Pete who handed it to Andrew who skipped over to the balcony door.

“Trying to have a little family fun,” his sister teased as Andrew wave-taunted his phone. “You’ve been a total text maniac all night, and I want to know what’s going on.”

“George Ryan Wentz!” Peter said sternly. “Have you been sexting?”

“What?” Ryan snapped. “Ew, no! I learned my lesson from Pete!”

Under different circumstances, he might have laughed at his fatherly attempt to talk teen, but there was nothing funny about getting iJacked. “Andrew, give it back!”

“No Andy!” Hillary insisted. “Not until you tell me what’s going on! Who are you talking to? Ms. Punk Rocker?”

“Who?” Ryan lunged for the phone, but Andrew quickly ran away with it.

“That el mysterioso chick who always wears a hat and sunglasses. Didn’t she take you to the dance last night?”

“Not really. We were kind of forced to go together by Jac. We didn’t even hang out for very long before she hightailed it back to—” Ryan stopped. “Why am I even explaining this to you?”
“I knew it! It’s Brendon!”

“Andrew!” Ryan lunged again. “Give me back my phone! Dad, get it!”

“No way,” he moped. “You four are on your own.” He got up and UGGed back to the kitchen, grumbling sarcastically about the joys of parenting teenagers and a precocious kindergartener.

“An-drew!” Ryan whipped a pillow at his little brother’s chest, but Andrew batted it aside with the finesse of someone used to fighting off foreign invasions.

“Give it now!” Ryan insisted. He lunged across the couch, his fingers primed for hair pulling. Just as he was about to make contact with Andrew’s scalp, a puff of white powder clouded his vision.

Ryan began coughing instantly.

“Stay back!” Andrew warned, wielding the bottle of baby powder like a blade. “Or I’ll do it again.”

“Andy! No!” Everyone yelled. He squeezed and a cloud enveloped Ryan. Ryan inhaled some and began wheezing violently.

“My asthma!” Ryan managed, waving away the baby-scented fog.

“Give me that!” Hillary said, grabbing Andrew’s weapon. “Are you okay? Do you need your inhaler?”

Ryan gripped his throat and nodded. The instant Hillary turned, Ryan darted forward and ripped a wax strip off the inside of Hillary’s thigh. “Ha! Gotcha!”

“Ahhhh!” Hillary wailed. She jumped to her feet and, with a penny stuck to the back of her calf, made a run for the sliding glass door that led out back to the ravine. “Phone out!”

“You wouldn’t.” Ryan hissed.

Hillary unlocked the door and made a show of sliding it open. “Tell me what’s going on, or I swear this phone will be hanging like a flat-screen TV in some bird’s nest.”

Ryan didn’t dare call her bluff. The last time he tried that, his transformers backpack had been tossed into the back of a passing convertible. Instead he gave in, just as he always did, and whispered to Hillary, Andrew, and Pete all about Jac, Linda, the Smith kids, Breezy’s predicament, Brendon, the video, and the ticking clock.

“Wow,” Hillary said after Ryan had finished explaining. She handed back the phone without being prompted, cocked her head slightly, and stared. Her expression was a blend of intrigue and confusion, as if she were studying a stranger she could swear she’d met before.

Ryan bit his thumbnail, terrified of his brother’s reaction. Is she going to laugh at my predicament? Call me a sucker for not turning in Spencer? Blame me for becoming friends with Jac in the first place? Force Brendon out of my life? Tell our parents this whole monster thing isn’t part of Salem’s stimulus package after all?

A clap of thunder broke the silence that hung between them.

“Stop staring at me,” Melody urged. “Say something.”

“I already knew.” Pete admitted. He shook back the sleeve of his hoodie and showed off a tattoo. “Taylor got someone to cover up my bite-mark.”
“Bite m…” Ryan’s eyes went wide. “You’re a vampire?”

“Yep. I’m a vampire.” Pete nodded and flashed his teeth. Now their only similarity seemed odd.

“Wait, then why do I have fanglike teeth?” Ryan asked. Pete shrugged.

“You smell like a bird and the Mediterranean sea.” Birds and Mediterranean sea? Ryan ran through the monsters he could think of. The only one that came to mind was-


“Yeah? We already knew that.” Pete said.

“I didn’t.” Ryan said. “How old was I when I was adopted?”

“Well, we’ve been friends all our lives but one day, you moved in with us.” Pete said. “I remember something about that George Ross guy dad got put away for child ab- oh.” Pete and Ryan stared at each other. “The day you came to live with us for good, you had bruises and scrapes all over your arms and face.” Hillary looked down.

“Andy go to mom.” She said. Andrew stared at her. “Now!” He huffed and took off. Hillary pulled Ryan and Pete into the indoor pool room. She exhaled.

“I remember everything about what happened.” She admitted. “Your dad was always mean. Your mom left once you were old enough to survive without her and left you with George.” Her breath got shaky. “When you started school, I knew something was wrong because sometimes you’d show up with a black eye or some other bruise. So I told Pete to watch out for you.” Hillary’s shoulders shook. “When you were twelve, George pushed you down the stairs and you hit your head. Pete saw everything so he screamed for someone to help and a girl named Taylor called 911.” Ryan felt numb. “You couldn’t remember anything about George. You thought you were genuinely our brother, so mom and dad pulled some strings and we adopted you, moved out to Huntington Beach, far away from Vegas, and dad put George away for attempted murder because he murdered the boy you were before your accident. Taylor became a close friend and the rest is history.”

“So I’m just some abused amnesiac you took pity on?” Ryan asked weakly.

“No!” Hillary defended. “I genuinely thought you were so sweet and adorable and I didn’t understand why your dad was hurting you. I thought Pete could protect you.” Ryan dried his eyes and gently hugged her.

“Thank you for telling me Hills.” Hillary rubbed his back.

“You’re welcome Ryro.”

“Ryro?” Ryan asked.

“We used to call you that.” Hillary said. “Because you said George Ryan Ross the Third was too stuffy for you. The tiny singing wonder.”

“You said that if you could, you’d legally change your name to Ryan Ross just to avoid being George the Third.” Pete teased.

“RyRo.” Ryan smiled. “I like it.”

Ping!
Ryan checked his phone. It was another audio message from Bekka. This time she listened to it on speaker.

“Tick… tick… tick…”

Jac’s pasty face popped into Ryan’s mind. It was a face Ryan used to trust. A face he ate lunch with. The face of a friend. But now that face was smug. And it probably laughed like mwuhhhh hahaaaaa haaaaa every time Jac sent a stupid “tick… tick… tick” message. Ryan tried to imagine her ex-friend snooping through his phone. Stumbling upon the video of Brendon. Concocting this blackmail scheme. Vilifying Spencer. Leading a monster hunt. Spreading fear and panic. Using her bruised ego as an excuse to destroy lives…

_Ugh!_

“Ow!” Hillary yelped as she went to hug Ryan.

“What?”

“The wax is drying to my skin!” She complained.

Ryan’s heart pumped harder and faster with every thought. He wanted to stand up and take action. To tear off Jac’s head the way Linda had accidentally torn off Spencer’s. Ryan wanted to leap off the pool lounge he was sitting on grab one of the wax strips on the back of Hillary’s precious legs, and yank out his frustration.

So he did.

“Ahhhh!” shrieked Hillary.

Ryan marched into the living room with a new sense of purpose. “Next time I hear that scream, it’s gonna be coming from Jac.”

“Wait,” Hillary said, hurrying after him. “You think there are any hot ones? Or ones I’m not related to?”

“Easy, Bella! Now who’s riding the train to Trendy Town?” Pete asked jokingly.

“Stop!” Hillary insisted. “I want to help.”

This time Ryan turned to face him. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.” Hillary nodded with genuine sincerity. “I need a cause for my college applications.”

“Hillary!”

“What? The more support you have from non-monster people, the better, right?” Hillary said honestly. “Isn’t that how the civil rights movement worked?”

Ryan went wide eyed.

“Hillary you absolute genius!” Ryan breathed. “Get dressed,” Ryan said. “And keep it casual.”

“Airplane casual or yoga casual?”

“Super casual.”
“Why? Where are we going?” Hillary asked, fluffing her hair.

“I’m not sure yet,” Ryan said, climbing the uneven wood steps to his bedroom, Pete and the menagerie close on his heels. “But wherever it is, I’ll definitely need a driver.”
Spencer laid upside down on his metal bed with Green Day sitting on his chest as he stared blankly at the wall ahead of him.

“I have zero experience with this type of thing, but aren’t you usually supposed to check up on your friend after he and his crush are traumatized by your friend’s head getting torn off?” Green Day chuffed and pawed Spencer’s chest.

“Ryan’s just had a huge bombshell dropped on him.” Fran called from her perch on the desk. “Turns out he’s adopted and Pete was turned into a vampire.”

Spencer winced. *Yep, that’d be enough to leave him distracted.*

“Is Ryan ok?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. It’s more the Pete got bitten when they were 14 thing than anything.” Fran said.

“So is Pete going to out live Ryan?”

“Uh no. Sirens live as long as Vampires.” Fran said.

“Who said anything about sirens?” Spencer asked.

“Pete.” She said simply. “He says Ryan’s smell has gotten more bird-like since they moved out here.”

“So they’re both RADs? What about Andrew and Hillary?”

“Normies through and through.” Fran said.

Thunder rumbled overhead. Gaga, Gwen, Girlicious, and Ghostface Killah stood up on their hind legs and frantically scratched the glass walls of their cage. Green Day started scrabbling at Spencer’s chest.

“Shhh. Shhh. Shhh.” Spencer stroked Green Day’s back and began humming

Without a single knock or warning, Vincent and Viola entered.

Vicky, who’d been cooing at the other mice to calm them down, backed away from the cage and returned to the bed—the only place any of them still belonged.

“You’re up.” said his father, appearing neither pleased nor disappointed. His indifference hurt more than one hundred stitches with a dull needle.

“Good night, Spencer,” his mother said wearily. She folded her arms across her black silk robe, shut her dual-colored eyes, and rested her head against the door frame.

The green pigment in her skin had faded. What once had the vibrancy of mint ice cream now looked more like pickle juice.

Spencer hurried toward them. “I’m sorry!” He wanted to give them a hug. He needed them to hug him back. But they just stood there. “Please forgive me, I promise I’ll—”
“No more promises.” Vincent lifted his supersize palm. His eyelids hung at half-mast. The corners of his wide mouth sagged like a sweaty gummy worm. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

“We need to charge,” Viola explained. “We were up all night putting you back together, and today has been…” Her voice trailed off for a moment. “Draining.”

Spencer looked down at his drab smiley-face hospital gown in shame. His parents, fully grown, rarely needed to charge. But they obviously needed a boost now, and it was her fault.

Lifting his head, he forced himself to face them. But the door was closed and they were gone.

Now what?

On the other side of the wall, Vincent and Viola’s amp machine whirred to life.

Meanwhile Spencer and the twins, buzzing with more energy than Salem Electric, shuffled aimlessly across the shiny white floor longing for a life beyond the lab. Yearning for an update from his friends. But where were they? Had they been grounded too? Were they still her friends?

Crawling back into bed, he wrapped the fleece-coated electromagnetic blankets around her body. “Look, Cyclops. I’m an avocado hand roll.”

The lamp stared back blankly.

Loneliness blew through Spencer’s insides like the first crisp breeze of fall—a chilling hint of the darkness that lay ahead.


“It’s okay,” Vicky mumbled from her corner. “It’s just—”

Another flash.

The streetlights snapped off. The machine on the other side of the wall stopped humming. The lab went black.

“This is total bolt-shock!” Spencer kicked off the blankets and sat up. “Haven’t I been punished enough?”

Nervous energy crackled from his fingertips, lighting up the room. “Vol-tage!” he whispered with renewed appreciation for his otherwise embarrassing sparking habit.

Guided by popping yellow lights and Fran’s lit up phone, Spencer began making his way to the door. If he could just get to his parents’ bedroom before their last bits of energy drained, she could give them a jump start—a little something to carry them until the amp machine turned back on. Maybe then they’d realize how lucky they were to have the trio. Maybe he and Vicky would be forgiven. Maybe they’d hug them.

While Spencer was reaching for the door handle, another draft blew by. Only this one didn’t feel like loneliness. It felt like wind. He turned slowly to face the chill, straining to see in the darkness. But he could see only as far as the wrinkled hem of his surgical gown and the tops of his bare green feet.

The wind blew harder.

Spencer’s mouth went dry. His bolts began to tingle.
Sparks flew.

“Hullo?” His voice shook.

The Glitterati darted back and forth across their crunchy sawdust.

“Shhh,” Fran hissed, straining to hear what she couldn’t see.

*Thwack!*

Something slammed on the other side of the lab. A cabinet? The skeleton? The window?

*The window!*

Someone was breaking in!

*Jac!*

Had she sent the police? Were they going to take Spencer while his parents lay helpless on their bed? Thoughts of getting hauled away with no time for goodbyes made him light up like a baked Alaska…

And that’s how he saw the brick speeding toward him in the dark.

Spencer assumed it could only have come from a gigantic normie mob that had formed outside. And if he remembered the story of his grandfather correctly, the normies had pitchforks, burning bales of hay, and major intolerance for electrically powered neighbors.
I'm Slurring On Purpose

Spencer searched for any normie mob-dodging tips his father might have implanted in his brain when he built him. But the only thing that came to him was…

*Duck!*

Dropping to the linoleum, he lay on his belly and starfished his arms wide to get as flat as possible.

“Dude!”

“Spencer! You’re flashing us!”

“My eyes!”

Spencer immediately recognized one of the voices as Hayley.

“Oh my god!” Spencer shot upright and grabbed his blanket. He wrapped it around his middle, hiding his bare ass.

“Hayley?!” Spencer squawked.

“Yeah,” whispered his invisible friend.

Spencer snorted.

“I came in through the window. I hope you don’t mind,” she said from somewhere in the darkness.

“Not at all.” He beamed. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to check up on you,” she said sweetly. “And bring you this.” She placed something in his hand. It was the speeding brick. Only it wasn’t a brick. It was a box wrapped in silver paper.

“What is this?” Spencer asked, tearing off the wrapping. A silver rectangle lay in his palm. “An iPhone?”

“The iPhone 8, to be exact. I’ve been trying to call you, but a recording said your phone was no longer activated, so I thought you could use it.”

“How did you—”

“Gerard picked it up for me,” she stated.

“But it’s so expensive.”

“It’s not like I spend my allowance on movies or anything. I get in for free. And as far as clothes…”

“Ew!” He devolved into snickers as he realized that Hayley walked around naked all the time. Otherwise, everyone would see a dress floating around town.

“Turn it on,” she said, derailing his train of thought.

Spencer pressed the dark circle at the bottom of the device. A chartreuse orchid appeared, glowing on the screen.
“That’s a picture of me, holding a green flower. You can change it if you want.” She clicked through to a page of colorful icons and then the address book. “I loaded it with everyone’s phone numbers and contact info.” She tapped a fushia square. A seemingly endless list of album titles appeared. “And music, of course.”

Spencer stared at the gift, searching for something to say. It wasn’t the bolt-tingling technology that left him speechless. Nor was it the library of music, the pages of apps, or the packed address book. It was the kindness. “It’s so mint, Hayls. Thank you.”

“It was nothing,” she said, even though it so wasn’t. “Oh, check this out. When the power went out, I downloaded a candle app. So you can see in the dark.”

Spencer touched the screen. Digital warmth flickered around him. “This is beyond voltage,” he said, pressing the phone to his heartspace. “What did I do to deserve it?”

“Everything. You took a chance for us. And even though it kind of backfired, we’re all really grateful.”

“All?” The spinning steel blades in his stomach began to slow down. “So, no one’s mad at me?”

“A few of the parents are, but not us. The whole Linda freak-out thing was actually kind of funny.”

Spencer smiled with his entire body. If relief were electricity, he could have lit the entire country. “Thanks so much, Hayls,” he said to the darkness. “I’d totally hug you but…”

“Yeah, the whole naked thing;” she said. “I get it.”

Spencer smiled.

“By the way, where are your parents?” She asked.

“Oh, um, they’re out,” Fran said, pun intended.

“When do you expect them back?”

“Sometime tomorrow.”

“Perfect,” Hayley said, activating the candle app on her own phone. She aimed it at the frosted window.

“What are you doing?” Spencer asked, his paranoia resurfacing. Was this a trap?

“It’s okay,” Hayley said, still aiming.

“Watch…”

All of a sudden, the window creaked open. One by one, his RAD friends began slipping inside.

“It wasn’t safe to meet under the carousel, so we thought we could gather here,” Hayley explained. “I hope it’s okay.”

Once again, her kindness left him speechless. So Spencer and Fran raised their digital candles alongside hers and showed her how absolutely “okay” it was.
Sarah canceled her orange scented bath in favor of taking pictures of her Auntie’s jewelry. Kneeling on an emerald-green cushion by the foot of her bed, she laid the vintage bling on her tightly tucked linen duvet. Its old-world glamour was even more beguiling with the twinkle of candlelight reflecting in the stones. Even the cats knew this was major. Lying head to tail, forming a barrier around the gems. Sarah smiled.

When the power had initially gone out, she was pissed.

She couldn’t possibly model for Bastet, Leena, Penny Lane, Indie, Dinah, Usi, and Miu-Miu in the dark. But Lily had appeared with a box of one hundred amber-scented votives. And when Shaun had finished lighting them, Sarah’s two-story bedroom was transformed into an ancient temple. The flickering light cast dancing shadows on the stone walls. And it became easy to imagine she was Aunt Nefertiti, illuminated by Ra’s flame and the glow of natural beauty. Alone on the banks of the Nile, she was awaiting a secret rendezvous with a desert-hot prince named Khufu. As usual, his discerning eye would study her beauty from every angle.

She had to look her best.

Sarah lifted the collar necklace. The falcon in the center almost looked alive. Its ruby eyes glittered as if it were about to leap off on some poor unsuspecting bunny.

Next she struggled to raise the heavily adorned crown. Fifteen bicep curls on each side and she’d have Michelle Obama arms by Monday.

“What’s the point?” She sighed, placing the jewels back in the case. The Aunt Nefertiti fantasy could satisfy her glamour-amour for only so long. What she needed was a real admirer. Her modern-day princess. But she wasn’t able to talk to her right now. So she was stuck with a litter of snore-purring watchcats.

Sarah padded down the steps of her sleep loft and crossed the bridge to her sandy island. The trickling Nile water always soothed her. Kneeling, she placed her hands together in prayer and lifted her crystal-blue eyes toward the moonless sky beyond her glass ceiling. She had some urgent questions for the ancient goddess of beauty.

“O Hathor,” Sarah began, “why bless me with an abundance of gorgeousness and then deprive me of people to envy it? Especially on a Saturday night?” She was about to expound on the unfairness of Salem’s newly imposed curfew and how she shouldn’t have to suffer for Spencer’s mistake. But Cleopatra always insisted she look for solutions, not sympathy, and Hathor was probably no different.

“Okay, so here’s my real question,” Sarah continued. “Does Ra, god of the sun and fire, control firewalls too? Because I really need him to remove my dad’s firewall so I can send out a few texts. Two minutes, max. And then he can put it right back up. Bob did it in, like, five minutes. So Ra could probably do it in half that time. I mean, seriously…” She lifted the steel case of jewels so that Hathor could get a better view. “What’s the point of having all this beauty if no one’s around to admire it?”

Hathor didn’t respond.

Sarah lowered the case. “Exactly. There isn’t one.”

“I’ll admire it,” said a familiar voice.
The cats lifted their heads.

*Omigeb!*

Sarah smiled at the sight of Girlfriend leaning casually against the gilded doorway of her bedroom. Yet she refused to cross the bridge and greet her.

Dressed in a black miniskirt, a deliciously tight white button up, and the soft black combat boots Sarah had bought her for Labor Day, she made Sarah’s little bisexual heart soar.

*Thank you, Hathor!*

A descendant of the a selkie and the most legendary gorgon of all, Lyn-Z had snakes for hair and the ability to transform whatever she looked at into stone—hence, the beanie and sunglasses. Although the accessories were crucial to the welfare of others, Sarah nevertheless adored the softness the owl hat and mystery the sunglasses added to her otherwise brash style. Granted, the dark lenses made gazing into Lyn-Z’s eyes impossible, but it gave her the ability to gaze into her own eyes, which was always fun.

“Love the ancient temple aesthetic you’ve got going.”

Sarah ran her fingers lazily through the sand to avoid looking eager. “What are you doing here?” she asked with royal attitude, just in case she’d forgotten she was mad at her.

“I tried calling,” she said, stuffing her hands in her skirt pockets. “But you kept sending me to voicemail.”

*Kept?*

Sarah wanted to know how many times she had tried. What time of day, what she would have said had she gotten through, whether her absence made her heart grow fonder. But she didn’t dare tear down the facade. Why tell her that Cleopatra had cut her service? Instead, she decided to let Lyn-Z think she had ignored her on purpose. It gave her major aloof-appeal.

“So… what?” Lyn-Z mumbled. “You’re not talking to me”

Unable to breathe in her gut-gripping Herve Leger for one more second, Sarah stood. The purple bandage dress minimized her mini waist and maximized her cleavage—proving the French designer to be quite a Geb in his own right.

“What exactly would you like to talk about?” she asked, placing a hand on her hip and jutting out her shoulder. Why not let her see what taking that fashion-backward boy to the dance was costing him?

“I want you to know that I have zero feelings for Ryan.”

“Oh?” Sarah asked, checking her wonderfully moisturized cuticles. “Oh, you mean that thing whose only formfitting piece of clothing is a hair elastic.”

Lyn-Z shook her head and was probably rolling her eyes behind her sunglasses. She hated cattiness. But, hey, if she was going to act like a dog… me-owww!

Finally, she stepped toward Sarah. Flickers from one hundred amber-scented candles licked her deeply tanned skin. “I wanted to go with you, remember? I asked you to go with me. But you decided to boycott because of the”—she paused to make air quotes—“offensive theme.”
“So you went with him?”

“I was forced into it by his pushy friend Jac. I didn’t want to. And it was the worst night ever.”

Sarah longed to hear how unbearable her night was without her. When it came to Lindsay Ballato, she was a love camel—storing reassurance in her invisible heart-shaped hump, dipping in when her insecurities needed to be fed, rationing her words to get her through the dry patches. “You look cute” could feed her until noon. “I’ll miss you” might last a weekend. “I love you” was good for three days. But her betrayal had drained her supply. She needed a major refill.

“So, why was it ‘the worst night ever’?” she asked, attempting to sound bored by the topic.

“Besides not being with you? Ryan immediately had an asthma attack and them stole my sunglasses.” Lindsay pointed out.

Sarah gasped, recalling the oddly placed vampire statue propped up against a table in the gym. “You did that?”

Lindsay nodded shamefully. “I bolted as fast as I could, and that’s when I saw you and… anyway, you know the rest. Nothing happened. I swear on Artemis and Athena.”

“I dunno.” Sarah sighed. Her answer was so unsatisfying. She was supposed to say it was the worst night ever because she wasn’t with her, not because she stoned some vamp. It didn’t matter that Sarah believed that nothing had happened between her and Ryan. She wanted more reassurance anyway. Kind of like the time she bought the same pair of wedges in four different colors. If she could have more, why not take more? “Maybe we should start seeing other people.”

“Huh?” she said, jamming her hands in her pockets. “But I don’t want to be with anyone but you.”

*Bon appétit!*

Sarah could have stopped there. She’d be feasting on that admission until Monday. Instead, she sighed, milking her like a Starbucks barista.

“So, are we good?” Lindsay asked, ambling toward the bridge with a tentative swagger.

Sarah looked down and brushed the fine white sand off her dress. Barefoot, she slowly made her way across the cool stone archway. Once she reached the other side, she leaned back against the railing and folded her arms across her chest. The cats settled around her ankles.

“How about now?” Lindsay asked, stepping toward her and clutching a thin red box. MONTBLANC was written on the top in gold letters, and it had been poked full of tiny holes. It might as well have said GARAGE SALE.

Now face-to-face with Lindsay—and her own reflection—Cleo fixed the gap in her bangs and then accepted her gift. But not her apology. Not yet.

“Open it.” She grinned. “Slowly.”

Sarah lifted the hinged box top. It creaked in protest. She gasped at what lay inside.

“Beautiful, right?” Lindsay said, sliding her index finger under a delicate iridescent snake and lifting it toward Sarah’s arm. The snake’s silver scales caught the candlelight and reflected a kaleidoscope of rainbow-colored shifting sparkles that rivaled Aunt Nefertiti’s jewels. And the snake’s pearly silveryness popped against Sarah’s dark skin like a swirl of cream in black coffee.
“Lyn-Z, she’s absolutely royal!”

“Glad you like her. Now close your eyes.”

“Closed.”

The flames of one hundred amber-scented candles continued to twinkle in the darkness behind her lids. Was it an optical illusion? Or love reignited?

“Okay,” Lyn-Z said. “All done.”

Sarah blinked her heavily-lashed lids open.

“Here’s your rock,” Lyn-Z said, proudly tapping the now-solid Hissette on Sarah’s arm.

“Is she dead?” Sarah asked, petting the snake’s pebble head.

“No, just stoned,” she said, grinning. “She’ll wake up in a few hours feeling refreshed.”

Sarah beamed.

“Forgive me now?” Lindsay smiled.

“On one condition,” she pressed.

Lindsay nodded expectantly.

“From this moment on, we are completely exclusive. No more breaks during your family trips to Greece and Scotland. No more substitute dance dates. And no more Ryan.”

She placed one hand on her heart and lifted the other in a show of promise.

*Golden!*

Sarah’s lashes fluttered forgiveness. Her modern-day princess had arrived.

She leaned toward her, lips pursed.

Lindsay opened his mouth.

Sarah leaned closer…

“We’d better go.”

She opened her eyes. “Go? Where?”

“Haven’t you been reading your texts?”

“Um, yeah,” Sarah lied, still unwilling to fess up about the firewall.

“Then we should go.”

“I can’t just go! You haven’t even seen my new jewels yet,” she insisted, grinding her feet into the reed mats. “Besides, what about the curfew? My dad won’t let me leave. Especially with you…. Wait, how did you get up here, anyway? He’d never let—”

Lindsay pressed the bridge of her sunglasses. “My glasses kind of slid off when Bob answered the door.” She smirked.
“He’s stoned?” Sarah gasped.

“They all are. Well, not Shaun. Gerard would claw me to pieces. It was the only way I could get you out of here.”

“Lindsay!” Sarah stomped her foot, unsure of whether to be angry or amused.

“They’ll be fine in a few hours, don’t worry.” Lindsay nudged her toward the door. “Come on. We have to get moving.”

For once, Sarah allowed herself to be led. Usually she would have put up a bigger fight and insisted on knowing where they were going. But why spoil the surprise? She was dishing out romance at an all-you-can-eat buffet. And Sarah was famished.
The blackout had been a miracle.

Six fuel-burning lanterns had been placed strategically throughout the Wentz family’s cabin. White flames offered a taste of brightness to a home starving for light.

Creeping from one dim patch to the next, Ryan made it undetected to his post by the front door. Now, hidden in a pool of blackness, he gripped the brass knob and waited for his sister’s signal.

The decision to clue his siblings in to his whole Jac-leaking-Brendon’s-video-to-the-press stress was turning out to be very beneficial to the cause, which Hillary insisted on naming NUDI, or Normies Uncool with Discriminating Idiots.

“What about something more respectable, like WAR—We’re Against Racism,” Ryan tried, not wanting Andrew or Hillary to yell NUDI.

Hillary rolled her eyes. “Might as well call it BORE—Boring Oregon Racist Eliminators. I mean, seriously, RyRo, perception is everything,” she explained with authority she didn’t have. “WAR isn’t a term people want to be associated with. But NUDI? Who wouldn’t want to be part of that?”

“Um, me.” Ryan giggled. And then he noticed Spencer’s urgent text. The debate was over. It was time for their first mission—a mission Hillary had code-named Birdcage Escape. And it was set to launch in three… two… one…

“Mommmm?” Hillary shouted from the top of the stairs. “Daaaaaad?”

Shielded by his sister’s piercing voice, Ryan turned the squeaky knob. The front door clicked open. A storm’s sound track blared outside.

“Yes?” they answered together.

“The boys went to sleep and I’m bored! You wanna play UNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO?”

“Sure!” Dale called from the living room, sounding suspicious but pleased.

“I said, ‘You wanna play UNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO?’”

“Yes!” her mom called again.

“UNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Giggling as he closed the door behind him, Ryan no longer questioned his sister’s dedication. For Hillary, UNO with the parents on a Saturday night was the ultimate sacrifice—proof positive that she was more than a player. She was a team player. Pete ran up from the other side of the house, his red hoodie covered in leaves.

“Did you seriously jump out of the window?!” Ryan hissed as they ran across the street.

“Mom and dad would’ve seen me if I went out the front door.” Pete shrugged.

Once behind Brendon’s cheery white cottage (which projected optimism even at the bleakest of times), Ryan dipped into the ravine.
“What took you so long?” he whispered from somewhere deep inside the bushes.

“Where are you?”

“Follow the glow-in-the-dark heart,” he said, not even stopping for a kiss hello.

“Wha—?” Ryan began. “Oh,” he smiled, spotting the neon green sticker of the human heart on the back of his cap.

“It came in a box of cereal,” he said, stepping over a patchwork of fallen twigs and glistening leaves. “It’s less conspicuous than a flashlight.”

“True,” Ryan panted, trying to keep up. “How did you sneak out?”

“I didn’t. My mom knows I’m gone.”

“She let you?”

“We have a new truth pact,” Brendon whispered. “No more secrets. Total trust. I told her Spencer needed my help, and she said okay. She’s big on the whole community support thing.”

Suddenly Ryan wondered why he hadn’t thought of that. His parents had always been open and honest with him.

“We’re not telling them.” Pete called from further ahead. Ryan silently flipped Pete off. “I saw that dickhead.”

“Wasn’t she worried?” Ryan asked, turning to Brendon.

Finally, Brendon turned to face him. His silly red glasses were spotted with rain. Ryan furiously wiped at his own.

“Freaking was more like it. But I said the only way I could forgive her for not telling me about”—he cut himself off in case anyone was listening—"you-know-what was if we had full disclosure from here on out.”

And Ryan did know what. He knew it all. That he was a RAD. That he was a descendant of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. That a chemical in his sweat made Brendon transition into Gabe Saporta. That Gabe was more impulsive. That he was a music-loving life-of-the-party kind of guy. And that that was not the life Ryan could see himself fitting into. So he had to do everything he could to keep Brendon from overheating.

“Maybe we should rest for a while,” he suggested.

He ignored his suggestion and continued walking. “My mom told me there are other RADs at our school. It’s not just me and Spencer and you two, you know. How cool is that?”

A gust of wind shook the drops off the leaves overhead. Cool rainwater spattered Ryan’s cheeks and glasses again. More than the surprise shower, or even the news about the existence of other RADs, it was the sudden pinch of jealousy that caught him off guard. What if he wanted to hang with RAD girls instead of him? They were probably more interesting, and less likely to never come into their RAD heritage.

“Will you please slow down!” He snapped, smacking a branch with the indignation of someone who had just been dumped. “What’s the rush?”
“The rush?” Brendon snapped back. “Spencer’s house is at the end of the ravine, and the cops are everywhere. They’ll arrest anyone out past curfew and take him to the station for questioning. A little nervous sweat and the heat of an interrogation light and ‘Hello, you-know-who’!”

Ryan raised his eyebrows and folded his arms across his chest. He had never seen him lose his temper before.

“Sorry,” Brendon said, the crackle behind his brown eyes calming to a sizzle. “My mom has been stressing. Maybe it’s rubbing off on me.” He stepped closer. “Besides, if I get caught, who’s gonna do this?” He leaned forward and gave Ryan a long, soft kiss. Sincerity coated his lips like salve.

_Bake that, RAD girls!_

With renewed hope, Ryan offered his hand. “We’d better hurry.”

He pulled him through the thicket, the neon-green sticker on the back of his hat marking his path. Scrambling to keep up no longer felt like chasing—more like following her heart.

“Lyn, why are you going so fast?” a girl whisper-shouted in the distance.

Brendon and Ryan froze like frightened bunnies.

“Ahhhh, I just got treed on!” she whined. “My hair is soaked.”

“Shhh,” said a different girl. “It’s just hair.”

“Spoken by the girl in a hat.”

Brendon put his lips against Ryan’s ear. “Is that Lyn—”

He covered his mouth, goosebumps dotting his arms like Braille.

“Quiet!” insisted the other girl. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“No, you are,” the girl hissed.

“C’mon, we’re almost there.”

Their tromping footsteps got louder… closer…

_Bzzzzzzzzzzzzz._

Brendon’s eyes widened in horror.

“Sorry,” Ryan mouthed, quickly reaching into the back pocket of his jeans and shutting down his vibrating cell. He didn’t need to check the screen to know who’d sent the message. His heart, now used to Jac’s hourly audio texts, beat in time with the message.

_Tick… tick… tick…_

_Thu-thump… thu-thump… thu-thump…_

_Tick… tick… tick…_

_Thu-thump… thu-thump… thu-thump._ The footsteps were getting closer….

Ryan peeked at Brendon slowly, wondering if the sound of his shifting eyeballs would give them
away.

His jaw clenched in tiny pulses.

Ryan gripped his hand, assuring him that everything would be okay. As if he knew. Finally, after several petrifying seconds, the other couple was gone.

Ryan and Brendon ran the rest of the way in adrenaline-fueled silence.

Ghostly images drifted back and forth behind the frosted-glass window of Spencer’s bedroom. The familiar smell of amber perfume hovered around the rectangular opening like a warning. Ryan couldn’t place it, but something about it made him feel uneasy.

“Are you sure this is safe?” he asked, wishing his parents knew where he was.
“No.” Brendon sighed, surveying the dark cul-de-sac. “Maybe I should go first.”

Ryan rolled his eyes and let Brendon go first.

Stepping on a conveniently placed tree stump, he lifted himself up to the window the way someone might get out of a swimming pool, and then wiggled inside. His soaked black converse landed with a flat thwack.

The rain picked up again.

“Come on,” Brendon said, offering his hand. “Quick.”

Ryan shimmied his body through the narrow opening. Brendon caught him as he lost his balance and rolled inside. He landed in Brendon’s arms and smiled.

The lab that he had visited the night before was now teeming with kids from Merston High. Despite the dim candlelight, he was able to recognize most of them but didn’t know many by name. Some wore pajamas; others wore sweats. Some stood in tight conversation clusters; others sat on the floor like delayed passengers at an airport. Some talked freely; others bit their fingernails. But they all soon had one thing in common: The instant they noticed Ryan and, by extension, Pete’s butt wiggling into the window, they stopped what they were doing and looked to one another for an explanation.

“What’s going on?” Ryan asked Brendon.

He took off his baseball cap and mussed his brown hat hair back to life. “Not a fuckin clue, Ry.”

“Voltage! You’re here,” Fran said with the gracious smile of a birthday girl. Ryan was thankful for the hostess’s approval. At the very least, everyone would know he had been invited.

Conversations halted. Faces turned.

Ryan’s heart rate accelerated. “I thought you wanted us to come over because you came up with a plan,” he said, thrown by the unexpected gathering. “Because time is running out. Jac will be—”

“It’s okay. I figured it all out,” Spencer assured from behind both of his sisters. “I’ve been waiting for you to get here so I could share.”

“Then what are they doing here?” Brendon asked, eyeing the others. “Wait! They don’t know about my video, do they? I thought we were going to keep this just between us.”

“They are us.” Vicky winked.
“What?” Pete chimed from the back.

“They’re RADs.”

“RADs?” he mouthed silently, resting his hand on Spencer’s green shoulder, which was bare thanks to a chicly belted, drooping hospital gown. “No waaaaaaaay!”

As Ryan scanned the candlelit crowd, his skin prickled with a mix of fear and exhilaration. He saw the pale boy from his English class, Frank, Ryan remembered… the pretty kid with the black curls and fur boa, Gee,… the bubbly girl with the glove obsession… the cute J.Crew jocks Pete and Hillary had flirted with the day they arrived in Salem… omigod, LYN-Z! Did I really make out with two monsters in one month?

“Everyone?” Ryan asked.

Spencer nodded with delight.

“This is amazing!”

“Yup,” Spencer said proudly, hugging Brendon tighter than Spanx. “Can you believe it?” he asked him.

Brendon shook his head from side to side, too overwhelmed to speak.

“Why are those things here?” A familiar voice asked derisively.

“Well, they’re RADs too.” Fran said. “And they happen to be my friends.”

“What are they? Count Dorkula and Buddy the Elf?” A different kid said.

“Oh fuck you.” Pete sneered. “I’m a vampire you dickweed.”

“And Count Dorkula?”

“Siren.” Ryan mumbled, hiding behind his hair.

“What?”

“I’m a siren.” He said louder, his face going red. “Probably the only fucking siren who has asthma so bad he can’t sing!”

“Then how do you know you’re a siren?” A blonde with huge eyes and wearing a red velvet nightgown with a white fur coat.

“Because I Apparently smell like a bird lady according to my brother.” Ryan said. She nodded thoughtfully.

“Maybe boys can’t allure people?” She asked helpfully. “Or you’re a harpy.”

“Don’t be so naïve Elizabeth.” Sarah scoffed.

“Yo Mikey!” Pete whisper-yelled. A lanky boy with fluffy brown hair looked up. “You smell birds and sea brine too right?”

“Yeah.” He nodded his head awkwardly. “But Jamia and the Australian kids smell like that too. That doesn’t prove anything.”
“We’re not here to discuss whether or not my boyfriend is a bird lady.” Brendon interrupted.

“Oof!” Someone smacked Brendon on the back, pitching him forward, which sent Ryan tumbling to the ground. “It’s good to finally have you in the mix, ya two-faced freak.”

Ryan strained but couldn’t see anyone in the dark. “Who said that?”

Brendon fumbled to straighten his lopsided glasses.

“Meet Hayley.” Spencer gestured to the vacant space beside him. “She’s invisible. And the most voltage friend a boy could have. Just don’t hug her,” he added, giggling.

“Welcome,” Hayley said. A roll of Starburst appeared from thin air. A cherry candy was revealed briefly before it disappeared into Hayley’s mouth.

“Thanks.” Brendon smiled at the hovering wrapper.

“C’mon, I’ll introduce you to everyone,” Hayley said, tugging Brendon into the center of the lab. Brendon looked back at Ryan with an expression of dread, yet he made no effort to stay. So he let him go. Spencer grabbed him by the wrist and forced Ryan to join all three Smith siblings at the front of the room.

“Can I have your attention, please?” Fran whisper-called. She pressed her hands on the steel slab and lifted her tiny frame up to sit. Her bare feet swung like a child’s, but the somber expression behind her eyes was serious and adult.

“First,” she said, “I want to thank Hayley for bringing everyone.”

They began to applaud. Spencer waved his hands, urging them to stop. “Shhh,” he reminded them, with a finger to his lips.

“And thank you all for coming,” Spencer continued. “I know how dangerous it is to go out right now, so it means megawatts that you’re here. I seriously thought you all hated me.” He smiled.

Ryan grinned, tickled by his friend’s disarming honesty.

Spencer sighed. “Last night,” he said, growing serious, “I kinda…”

“Lost your head?” joked one of the J.Crew jocks. His brothers high-fived him.

“Dude shut up!” The black haired girl with them hissed.

Spencer reached for his neck stitches but must have thought better of it and lowered his hand. “I feel terrible that your lives are in danger because of something I did. I’m so sorry. I want things to change around here. I want to stop sneaking around ravines during blackouts. I want to stop wearing normie-colored makeup to school. I want us to be proud of who we are and to be accepted by—”

“Ry-nerd?” Sarah shouted, pointing at Ryan, whose cheeks burned.

“Cut it out Sarah.” Suddenly, Brendon appeared by Ryan side and wrapped his arms around him. He was too terror-stricken to thank him. “If you would just get over your stupid ego, you’d realize Ryan not only has a place in our community but also that he wants to help us, whether he fits in or not!” Sarah raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”
“Hey, aren’t you besties with Jac?” called a girl with a frosty expression.

“Check his phone!” shouted a beak-faced boy. “I bet he’s tweeting about us right now.”

“He’s a spy!”

Ryan’s mouth went dry. “No! Jac and I aren’t friends anymore,” he managed, his voice raspy and unsteady. “I’m new here. When I met her, I had no idea what she was like. Believe me, I want to take her down just as much as you do.”

“Yeah, right,” said a boy with big feet and shaggy black hair. “She’s probably on her way over here right now with a TMZ crew thanks to you.”

Ryan gulped. Suddenly, breathing felt like sipping pudding through a straw.

Sarah grinned like a Cheshire cat. All she had to do was plant the seed, stand back, and watch their hate grow.

It’s not like that, Ryan wanted to shout back. Jac turned on me too! I’m literally like you guys! But he didn’t say anything. Instead Pete got up on the table with Fran and Vicky.

“Jesus on a stick, you guys have a fucking mob mentality!” Pete snapped. “Sarah says one thing and all of you immediately jump on my brother because he just has to be a normie. No way could a boy be a siren.”

“Get him out of here!” shouted Bigfoot.

“No,” said one of the J.Crew brothers. “Make him stay. We need to keep an eye on him.”

“How about an eyetooth?” said a different brother, licking his chops.

His friends howled with laughter.

Ryan gripped Brendon’s arm to steady himself. He turned on his fan and cooled his face.

“Stop!” Fran sparked. “Ryan is not the enemy, okay? Jac is.”

“Then they’re working together!”

“We’re not!” insisted Ryan, lips quivering.

“Prove it!”

“Yeah! Prove it!”

Spencer clapped his hands once. “Guys, it doesn’t matter because—”

“I can prove it,” Pete interrupted.

“How?”

“Because Jac is after Brendon as much as she’s after Spencer,” he said.

Ryan gasped. _Is he trying to save me or get me killed?_ Once they knew Jac had found the clip of Brendon on his phone, they would string him up to the carousel and play that creepy music until her head exploded.
“Ka,” snapped Sarah. “What do you have to do with this?”

“Jac found a video of me turning into Gabe. She’s going to play it on the news if Ry—” He paused, suddenly realizing where this was headed. “If I don’t tell her where Spencer is hiding.”

“How did she get it?” Sarah pressed.

“How’d she get it?” he stammered. “Um…”

_Omigod. Omigod. Omigod. I need to be brave. I need to come clean. I can’t be afraid. I have to tell them. I’m going to…_

“My phone,” blurted Brendon. “I dropped it at the dance, and Jac found it.”

Ryan’s shoulders relaxed back into their sockets. _Did he really just do that for me?_ He squeezed his thanks to Brendon. _You’re welcome,_ he squeezed back.


“How are we supposed to do that?” Hayley asked. “There’s a massive monster hunt going on out there.”

Sarah exhaled sharply. Her bangs did the wave and then settled. “I dunno. Spencer, wonder twins, can’t your father take you apart and then put you back together when this whole thing blows over?”

Some of her friends snickered into their palms.

“And what about me?” Brendon asked, fanning his face. “Who’s gonna take me apart?”

_Nice one!_ Ryan thought, squeezing his hand.

“I’ll ask my staff if they can preserve you for a few years,” Sarah suggested with a _what-could-be-easier-than-that?_ shrug.

Her friends giggled again. Ryan wanted to grab the beakers off the steel countertop and hurl them at their heads.

_No! Bad! Then you’ll be just like your birth dad._

“No wonder you’re the queen of de-Nile,” Brendon scoffed.

_Yes!_ Ryan squeezed again.

Everyone cracked up.

Sarah fingered her gold hoop earrings with royal indifference.

“Guys!” Spencer finally interrupted. “It doesn’t matter! None of this matters. Because I’m going to turn myself in.”

Ryan’s mouth went dry again.

“Spencer, no!” Ryan hissed. “I thought we agreed that I would pretend to be you.”

“Change in plans.” Spencer shrugged.

There was an audible gasp.
“You’re crazy!”
“Do your parents know?”
“Can I have your makeup?”
“It’s suicide!”

“It’s for the best. The police want me, not you,” he explained like a true hero. If it weren’t for his sparking fingertips, no one would have known how nervous he was. “Jac won’t stop until she can pay me back for making out with Linda, so—”

“Woo-hoo,” whisper-cheered the pretty girl with the furry scarf. “Go, Spencer!”

Sarah’s friends began silently applauding Spencer and his lethal kiss. In a much-needed moment of levity, he stood on the operating table and curtsied.

“Stop!” Sarah shouted. “Nobody move! Hissette is gone!”

Everyone turned away from Spencer.

“My bracelet! The snake. She’s loose!”

A frantic search began.

“Maybe this is a good time to get out of here,” Ryan muttered amid the chaos. Brendon nodded and reached for the window.

“She’s going for the babies!” shouted the New Jersey girl, pointing at an aquarium and the snake that was slithering up the side of the tank.

Fran jumped off the operating table. “Get it before it eats the Glitterati!”

“It is a she,” Sarah hissed, running toward the snake.

Lindsay hurried toward Hissette, cupped her hands, and grabbed her.

“Eyes closed, everyone!” Lyn-Z announced.

Spencer quickly scooped up the five glittering rodents from their cage and kissed the tops of their heads.

Ryan and Brendon forgot all about the window and did what they were told.

“It’s safe. You can open them now,” Lyn-Z said.

She slipped the snake back up Sarah’s arm while her friends looked on in envy. She kissed her sweetly on the cheek.

“That was a live snake?” Ryan whispered to Brendon.

“Oh-huh,” he mumbled.

“And now it’s made of stone?” he whispered again.

“Yep. I’m pretty sure Lindsay did that with her eyes,” Brendon mumbled behind his hand.
Ryan nodded, finally understanding why Lyn-Z had freaked out when he took off her sunglasses at the dance.

“Hey, Spencer, now do you understand?” Sarah called out so everyone could hear.

“Huh?”

“Inviting a normie here is like asking my snake to hang out with your mice.”

“They’re rats,” Spencer insisted.

Sarah stomped her foot and pointed at Ryan. “Well, so is he!”

“He’s not a normie!” Pete hissed. “All of us with better smelling than the well preserved corpse. Raise your hands if it’s more bird-like and sea smelling in here than usual.” All of the j.Crew boys, the girl with the boa, and the pale boy from English raised their hands.

Just then all of the lights came back on and everyone scattered to the wind.
I Constantly Thank God For Hayley Williams

Fran woke up with her face pressed against the glitterati’s cage. Not because they needed comforting, but because she did. She was losing her brother so that everyone could be safe. It hurt like hell but she knew there was no talking him out of it. The only person even close to Spencer’s considerable height was Ryan and Spencer wasn’t letting anyone take the fall for him.

Fran rubbed the dried drool off the side of her cheek and straightened out her spiderman pajamas.

“You want irony?” Spencer grumbled, returning the Glitterati’s cage to the steel table beside his bed. “I was fighting for freedom. And now I have less than I started with. And it’s only going to get worse.”

Their pink noses twitched.

“Thanks.” Spencer tried to smile. “I love you too.”

“Who are you talking to?” Their father asked, entering without knocking. It seemed as though “right to privacy” had been added to the growing list of things taken away from them, right after eye contact, social interaction, parental interaction, a cell phone, high school, TV, music, a voltage wardrobe, Internet, bedroom accessories, vanilla-scented candles, and fresh air.

Spencer hid his new iPhone under his blankets. “The rats,” he said. “It’s been pretty lonely in here, you know. With just the twins and the rats.”

Vincent didn’t react except to gather up tools.

“Daddy?” Fran asked softly, walking up to his side and tapping his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Just tired, princess.” Vincent said gruffly.

“I can go get some coffee or something to help you wake up some more.” She offered kindly.

“What’cha making dad?” Vicky joined Fran by Vincent’s side.

“A family dog.”

“Can we name him Dylan?” Spencer asked from where he was.

“Can I help build him?” Fran asked.

“Your father likes to work alone when he’s stressed out.” Viola said, her skin, normally a beautiful green similar to mint ice cream, was dull and pale.

“What can we help with?” Fran asked.

“Stressed out because of me and Spence right?” Vicky asked.

Neither of their parents responded.

“Right?” Vicky sparked. Her anguish echoed off of the walls. Still everything was silent. “Just say something! Tell me how angry you are! Tell me how much trouble we caused! Just say you don’t love us anymore! Just. Say. Something!”
Fran could see the fear and frustration swirling in her twin’s eyes.

“C’mon. Maybe you should calm down before you do something bad.” Fran tried. Unable to control herself any longer, Vicky swiped her arm across Vincent’s tools, knocking them to the floor in a hailstorm of clattering noise.

Vincent stared. Viola rubbed her forehead. Vicky sobbed as Spencer and Fran soothed her.

Viola finally looked her daughter in the eye. “How could you possibly think we don’t love you, Vicky? Spencer? We feel this way because we love you.”

The much-needed connection sent a zip of energy through Frankie’s core.

“There’s just a lot at stake and…” She placed her hand on Vincent’s. “We’re scientists, and since there’s no science to keeping you safe, we feel like we’re in over our heads and—”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about it anymore,” Spencer said, smiling bravely. He picked up the scattered tools and piled them in front of his father. “I’m going to turn myself in.”

“Absolutely not!” Vincent boomed, smashing his fist on the table. The pile rattled.

“Frankie, darling, what are you trying to prove?” Viola asked, her icy eyes melting to water.

“I’m not trying to prove anything, Mom,” Spencer insisted, gearing up for another speech on his and Vicky’s quest for change and freedom. But he stopped himself for fear of sounding like Buffy in season seven. The once-cool slayer could have bored vampires to death with her self-righteous lectures. It was enough to make Fran turn the DVDs into nail polish coasters. “I just want to do what’s right.”

“Your decision is noble,” Vincent said, placing his palms on the table and looking at his three children. “But if you really want to do the right thing, you’ll stop and think before you act. Not just about yourself or your mission but about the people you could hurt along the way.”

“That’s just it,” Spencer insisted. “Turning myself in would help everyone. It would put an end to this whole thing.”

“But it wouldn’t help you. It would put you in serious danger,” Vincent said. “And that would hurt us.”

This time Spencer looked away.

“I filled your brain with fifteen years of knowledge,” Vincent continued. “What you do with that knowledge is up to you. But please, make safe choices. Turning yourself in may be noble, but it’s not safe.”

Viola nodded in agreement. “How about we give your father some space to tinker? I bet by the time the dog is built, he’ll—”

The frosted window blew open and then slammed shut.

“Mind if I interrupt?” asked a girl’s voice.

“Hayley?”

“Yeah,” she answered shyly.
“Hayley Williams?” Vincent asked, obviously acquainted with her from the RAD meetings.

“Yeah, um, hi, Mr. and Mrs. Smith.” Hayley picked up one of Spencer’s sheets from the heap by the window and wrapped it around herself. “I’m over here.” A burrito-like figure shuffled toward them. “I know it’s wrong to sneak into someone’s home. And I want you to know I’d never do anything untoward or pervy.”

Fran giggled.

“I just didn’t want to draw attention to the house by ringing the bell and having you open the door to some invisible girl. But I had to speak to you,” Hayley explained. “All of you.”

Vincent raised his thick eyebrows and glared expectantly.

“I know how to keep Spencer from turning himself in,” Hayley said.

_Uh-oh._

“How did you know he was going to turn himself in?” Viola asked.

“Um, I…”

“I texted her and another RAD friend last night when Spencer told me his idea.” Fran said quickly. “Since Spencer wouldn’t let my friend take the fall for him.” She shot a glare at Spencer.

“And why were you texting people about RAD matters?” Vincent asked.

“Uhm…”

“So, what’s your plan?” Spencer asked quickly, shutting down the interrogation. “Paint me green and dress me in one of his badass hoodies, creepers, & jeans so everyone thinks I’m Spencer. I’ll turn myself in, wash off the paint, and ditch the clothes. Then I’ll be invisible again, and I can escape.”

Spencer beamed. “You think my hoodies are badass?”

“Spencer!” Viola snapped. “This is serious.”

Vincent folded his arms across his lab coat. “If the police think Spencer has escaped, won’t they keep looking for him?”

“Not if I leave a bunch of bolts and seams behind too. They’ll think he gave up and took himself apart,” Hayley said. “Then all Spencer has to do is dress like a stuffy prep school geek and wear a beanie. Nobody would know Spence was the monster.”

“Hmm.” Vincent considered Hayley’s explanation.

Viola sighed. “I don’t know. What would your parents think? Everyone is already blaming us for exposing their kids to danger. It’s not responsible.”

“It’s okay. They’re cool with it. I already asked them last night after Fran texted me in a panic.”

Fran elbowed the sheet burrito.

“I mean, you’re right,” Hayley backpedaled. “I’ll definitely get their permission first. But for the record, my dad let me sneak into the KFC kitchen to find out what the seven secret spices are. And
my mom once had me shadow the treasurer of the PTA to see if she was stealing funds. So they’re cool with me doing things for the greater good.”

“You would do all this for us?” Viola asked.

“On one condition,” Hayley said.

“What?” Vincent asked.

“Let them fight.”

Fran smiled. She knew exactly what she meant.

“Excuse me?”

Hayley stepped closer to her parents.

“They want to change things. And all three of them are the only people I’ve ever met who are brave enough to do it,” she said. “I’ve been waiting for someone like them for a long time. We all have. Let them do it.”

“This is a war that can’t be won,” Vincent said. “Trust me. Everyone has tried at one point or another. And we’ve all lost.”

“With all due respect, sir, our parents have lost. We haven’t,” Hayley said. “But we’ve grown up hearing your generation’s horror stories. So we’re all afraid to stand up.”

“Ry isn’t.” Fran mumbled.

“Ryan knows about us?” Viola snapped.

“His brother’s a vampire.” Fran defended. “He already knew about us.” Viola relaxed.

“So Peter is a rad.”

“Ryan might be too.” Hayley smiled. “The Way kids and the vampires were complaining about a birdlike smell. Only problem is Ryan isn’t sure if he can allure or not because of his asthma.”

“Boys develop later than girls when it comes to sirens.” Viola admitted. “Daniella mentioned that when she was talking about her boys a year back. Boys only start alluring at sixteen. Girls at fourteen.”

“His birthday is a bit before my legal one.” Spencer said quickly. “He just turned 16.”

“So he should start alluring soon.” Viola said.

“I could probably whip up a Spencer face in about two hours. I still have the mold,” Vincent said.

“Ew, creepy!” Spencer shuddered.

“And you can borrow my bad-hair-day wig,” Viola offered.

“Am I that easy to replace?” Spencer asked, slightly offended.

“Not even close.” Vincent walked around to the other side of the table and hugged his daughter. He smelled like coffee and relief. “That’s why we’re going to do this.”
“So, it’s okay?” Hayley asked.

“As long as you keep us informed every step of the way,” Vincent relented. “If you’re going to ‘fight,’ you need to think things through and be patient because, I have to warn you, it’s going to be a very long and exhausting battle.”

“Voltage!” Spencer said, pulling them all in for a hug. “I won’t let you down this time. I promise.” Suddenly, he broke away and hurried toward the window.

“Where are you going?” her father asked.

“To get my phone. I have to text Ryan and tell him the plan. She needs to take SpenceHayley to Jac and—”

“Where did you get a phone?” Viola asked.

Spencer stopped and turned to the sheet burrito with a megawatt smile. “It just appeared out of thin air.”

For the first time in what felt like forever, her parents smiled back. Life was beginning to turn around for Francine Smith.
Lying on the sandy island in her bedroom—one knee up, one arm dangling loosely over the Nile’s gentle current—Sarah was enjoying a near-perfect Sunday. Warmed by the rays of the sun and fanned by the lazy sway of bulrushes, she let out a long sigh. Aside from the occasional splaying of her hand to let the cool red river ease through her fingers, it was the most she had moved in hours.

Everyone in the palace was napping off the headache caused by Lyn-Z’s stoning. But Sarah couldn’t seem to banish hers. The cause? Having a normie at last night’s RAD meeting. Especially a highly attractive one who had made out with Lyn-Z and was besties with Jac—the girl who just so happened to be the initiator of the current monster hunt. A monster hunt that had filled her community with fear, slapped a curfew on her date night, and moved her over-protective dad to cut cell communications to and from the palace. Seriously, had Ry-Nerd put some kind of normie spell on everyone? Idiot even tried to say he was a siren. Everyone knew Sirens were only women.

He clearly had a mysterious hold on Brendon and Spencer. Brendon. HER best friend. How else could he have gotten into the RADs’ well-preserved and heavily guarded circle? Sarah intended to find out… later. Right now she had bigger falafel to fry.

Peeling back the side of her bronze triangle bikini top, she checked her tan line. The two shades of brown—dark and darker—told her she was ready. After days of melatonin-sucking rain, her exotic skin had reclaimed its preferred tone—latte, light on the milk. It was time. She had to model Aunt Nefertiti’s jewelry collection for her friends within the hour. Any later and her color would start to fade.

After a speedy but thorough application of amber body oil, Sarah slipped on an ocean-colored tube dress, stepped into strappy leather platforms, and rolled Hissette up her arm. Careful not to clomp too loudly, she sprinted on tiptoe through the palace and hurried out into the sun-filled afternoon.

Striding down the block with her iPhone lifted to the gods, Sarah summoned the return of her service bars. When she was halfway down the street, near Brendon’s white cottage, a symphony of bwoops alerted her that she was back in the game.

She had seven text messages.

Thank Geb!

TO: Sarah

sept 27, 9:03 AM

LYN-Z: DID UR DAD LOOSEN UP YET? HOW’S HIS HEAD?

TO: Sarah

sept 27, 9:37 AM

GEE: DID U GET HOME OKAY? ME & BROS MADE IT JUST BEFORE DAD WOKE UP TO PROWL. PHEW. SO MUCH TO DISCUSS. RYAN, SPENCER’S SURRENDER, HISSETTE ALMOST EATING RATS. LMAO! WANNA HANG? SOMEWHERE SHADY. I NEED A WAX. BTW DIDN’T GET UR TEXT LAST NIGHT UNTIL LATER. WHAT’S
WITH THE JEWELS? SHOW ME. OH, AND LOVE THE SIGN-OFF. #######

TO: Sarah

sept 27, 10:11 AM

FRANK: JUST SAW UR TEXT FROM LAST NIGHT. DYING TO SEE THE GOODS. WHAT R U DOING NOW? UNCLE VLAD SAID I LOOK PALE. BEGGING ME TO EAT STEAK. SAID THE V IN VAMPIRE DOESN’T STAND FOR VEGETABLES, THEN CRACKED UP AT HIS OWN DUMB JOKE. GOING TO HEALTH IS WEALTH 4 IRON SUPPLEMENTS. WANNA COME? ALSO MUST DISCUSS LAST NIGHT. SPENCER IS GOING TO CONFESS. SHOCKING (PUN INTENDED). :::::::::::::::::

TO: Sarah

sept 27, 10:16 AM

JAMIA: GOT MY CHOPS BUSTED COMING HOME LAST NIGHT BY UNCLE. THOUGHT I WAS UP TO SOMETHING HINKY WHEN HE SAW MY BED WAS EMPTY. HE WAS SPITTIN MAD TILL I SAID I WAS OUTSIDE IN THE RAIN, SOAKING MY SCALES. TOLD HIM I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT A CURFEW MEANT. THAT IT MUST BE A WEST COASTER TERM. HE ATE IT LIKE A WOMBAT AT A SALAD BAR. WHAT’S UP FOR TODAY? THINK SPENCEY IS GONNA GO THROUGH WITH THE CONFESSION? I RECKON HE MIGHT PULL A YEWEY AND CHICKEN OUT. CAN’T WAIT TO SEE YOUR ROCKS. THEY SOUND KILLER DILLER. @@@@@@@@@

TO: Sarah

sept 27, 11:20 AM

FRANK: BACK FROM HIW. WISH U CAME. THEY WERE GIVING OUT FREE SAMPLES OF QUINOA ICE CREAM. YUM. HEADING TO SPENCER’S TO HEAR THE NEWS. SEE U THERE? ::::::::::::

Spencer’s?

TO: Sarah

sept 27, 11:22 AM

JAMIA: GOING TO MEET THE MOB AT SPENCER’S. U COMING? @@@@@@@@@

Spencer??

TO: Sarah

sept 27, 11:23 AM


SPENCER’S?

Sarah had no idea what they were talking about. Double no idea how they knew something before she did. And triple no idea why Spencer and the twins hadn’t included her. But each knock of her
wooden heels against the deserted sidewalk of Radcliffe Way was bringing her closer to the answers.

With a toss of her black hair and a roll of her glistening shoulders, Sarah marched across the cul-de-sac and rounded the side of the L-shaped fortress with mustered confidence. A tangle of electrical wires formed a barrier between the outside world and the dense rectangle of tall hedges inside. Creeping along the grassy perimeter, she listened for whispering voices, but the crashing sound of water drowned out everything else.

Now what?

Another text bwooped at just the right time.

TO: Sarah

sept 27, 12:43 PM

GEE: CRAWL UNDER THE WIRES AND THROUGH THE BUSHY THINGS. NOT AS THICK AS THEY LOOK. #######

Sarah did what she was told and emerged on a pristine flagstone path. The cascading sound grew louder as she followed the walkway through the leafy maze.

“Holy mother of Isis,” she mumbled when she reached the end.

A wide horseshoe-shaped waterfall gushed over a fifteen-foot cliff and crashed violently into a pool of froth and bubbles. One dip in that skin-ripping cauldron and Sarah would emerge pure bone.

Still, Jamia lay above the falls, scaly legs outstretched on one of the flat rocks, splashing happily in the rainbow-spotted mist while the others lay on their bellies on the manicured lawn to the right of the pool. Each one had a yellow towel. Each one rested their chin in their hands. Each one was smiling contentedly. They could have been posing for a painting titled Still Life of Moving On Without You.

“What’s up?” Sarah asked with fake easygoingness. At least she was tanned. That always gave her confidence a boost.

Gerard sat up. “Just talking about the school's battle of the bands. Invites are going out on Monday.”

“I know,” Sarah said. “I helped you address the envelopes, remember?”

“Isn’t this place cool?” Frank asked with hurried nervousness. “It’s a backup electricity generator. There are turbines behind the rocks. The Smiths use it so they don’t attract attention with high electricity bills. Come sit.” He patted the grass and fang-smiled freely. “It’s also the perfect place to gossip, because no one can hear anything,” he added, wrapping his ever-cold body in a towel.

Sarah remained standing.

“What are you doing here?” Spencer pushed himself up to sit. His ponytail was gone, and his skin was painted normie color again. Suddenly, Sarah felt like the green one.

“Better question.” Sarah twirled Hissette. “What am I not doing here? Why did I have to hear about this little get-together from my friends?”

Gerard and Frank exchanged an uncomfortable glance and sat up too. Jamia waved innocently from the top of the falls, her black ponytail wagging happily. It was obvious she couldn’t hear a word they
were saying over the sounds of the crashing water.

Vicky smoothed her pale pink dress and looked up, shielding her eyes from the sun. “I had some good news about Spencer’s whole, you know, confession thing, and I wanted to share it.” She shrugged to show it was that simple.

“And…?” Sarah squinted, the corners of her eyes still deliciously crisp from their morning bake.

“And… and I didn’t think you would be interested.”

“Why not?” Sarah asked with a deepening squint.

“You were so against everything last night that I didn’t think you’d care,” Fran said, not looking the least bit intimidated.

“Try me,” Sarah hissed, lowering herself to sit on the edge of Gerard’s towel. They told her about the SpenceHayley plan with an annoying amount of excitement. It was clever, and she told them that. But seriously, how long did she have to feign interest before she could tell them about her Teen Vogue shoot? Thirty seconds? Forty-five? Sixty? Anything longer than that and she would jump into the falls and hydroelectrocute herself… assuming such a thing was possible.

“Let’s just hope Ryan gets to Jac before the deadline,” Spencer said, checking the time on his iPhone.

“Ryan?” Cleo snapped. “What does he have to do with this?”

“He’s the one who’s taking SpenceHayley to Jac,” Gerard explained. “Weren’t you listening?”

“Yeah,” Sarah lied. “I just don’t understand why everyone trusts him.”

The Smiths, Gerard, and Frank stared at Sarah blankly. Jamia splashed around happily in the distance.

“He’s a normie!” Sarah plead with them. “They spread hate and propaganda with their sensationalized horror movies, trendy book series, degrading Halloween costumes, and corny school dance themes like Monster Mash.” Sarah’s eyes began to leak passion she didn’t know she had.

“Oh stop crying.” Fran scoffed.

“Ryan isn’t like the other normies,” Frank insisted. “He’s trying to help us.”

“Stop being such a sucker, Frank. They’re all the same. Normies have been exploiting my ancestors for centuries. FedExing our heirlooms to museums so that pretentious art lovers can ooh and aah about the ancient Egyptians and our incredible craftsmanship. Then, on their way out, they buy some King Tut coffee table book at the gift shop and complain that no one pays attention to detail anymore. And it’s total ka. They don’t want incredible craftsmanship. They want Crate and Barrel. Because no matter what normies say in museums, they don’t like different. I mean, hello? Have you watched The Hills boxed set? Spencer, your dad could build you another sister from the scraps their plastic surgeons toss. And guess who grew up in the Hills?”

The others kept staring.

“Ryan! Ryan is from the Hills,” Sarah continued, her voice cracking under the weight of her conviction.
“Dude, he’s from Vegas.” Frank said. “Not that he has solid memories of Vegas. Just Huntington Beach.”

Sarah resisted the urge to yank the vamp’s black and red hair until he cried.

“Well, wherever he’s from, he turned Brendon against me. Did you hear what he said to me last night? He actually called me the queen of de-Nile. I mean, how unoriginal? Comebacks don’t get more normie than that.”

Spencer’s iPhone bwooped.

The other teens leaned closer to the screen, obviously grateful for the distraction.

“Ryan and SpenceHayley are pulling up to Jac’s house now,” Spencer reported. They squealed with giddy anticipation. Sarah rolled her eyes. They were supposed to be squealing at her Teen Vogue news. Not Ry-Nerd’s escapades.

“Good luck,” Spencer said aloud as he typed. “Keep us posted.”

He hit SEND, and the others squealed again.

Minutes later, the update arrived.

“Jac is at the hospital visiting Linda,” Spencer read. “Heading there now. Still tons of time to make the deadline. Should be okay. BTW, Hayley is a riot.”

“Don’t you think one of us should go down to the hospital?” Sarah suggested. “Just in case he tries to double-cross us?”

“He’s not going to double-cross us, okay?” Fran sparked. Gerard and Frank lowered their eyes and picked nervously at the yellow threads on their towels.

“Oh, really?” Sarah leaned back on her arms and lifted her face to the sun. “And who’s the queen of denial now?”

“Still you.” Fran snapped. “Get out of my backyard if you’re just going to keep being a complete bitch Sarah. I like you but you’re really not helping with cheering Spencer up!” Sarah’s mouth snapped shut. “I invited Spencer’s friends excluding Jon, the Fob gang, and Brendon. Not you.” Sarah huffed.

“Fran stop it.”

“No! She doesn’t like me. She doesn’t like Ryan. She’s been using Brendon. And she’s so fucking uptight about normies! Ryan’s not even a Normie! You heard mom! Boy sirens don’t start alluring until they’re sixteen. He turned sixteen last month! He still has time to develop an allure!”

“Male sirens aren’t a thing.” Sarah scoffed.

“They actually are.” Fran hissed. “But Catholics struck them out of history because there’s no way a man could be as alluring and sinful as a woman!”
Preach with Conviction

California sunshine had finally found Oregon, and its intoxicating effect was hard to deny. Everything Hillary drove past buzzed with life—rain-spotted cars, hand-holding pedestrians, the gauzy silver needles of Douglas firs. Not even Jac’s latest audio threat could derail Ryan’s buoyant mood. He was minutes away from saving Brendon, the Smith kids, and hopefully freeing Breezy from her contract.

Minutes away from showing Sarah and the other RADs that he could be trusted. Minutes away from taking action. And glorious weather had arrived to celebrate.

Ping!

Another text from Mom. It was the third one in the last hour.

TO: Ryan

sept 27, 1:48 PM

MOM: IS HAYLEY IN HER COSTUME? DID YOU FIND JAC YET?

Brendon’s “full disclosure” policy with his mother had inspired Ryan to tell his parents the truth about his role in the local scandal. It took some time to convince them that this whole “monster thingy” wasn’t part of Salem’s economic stimulus efforts but was, in fact, very real. Especially to their middle children. Yet he had no regrets. As always, they told him how much they appreciated his truthfulness, and they vowed to keep his secret as long as he kept them informed. But three updates in an hour were a little excessive. So he simply replied STILL DRIVING and left it at that.

“NUDIs to the rescuuuuue!” Hayley bellowed from the open moonroof of Pete’s van.

A gaggle of mountain bikers turned their helmeted heads toward the bright blue VW bus, apparently expecting some full-frontal exposure. Unfortunately for them, all they saw was Hillary, dressed in designer camo, cracking up behind the wheel and high-fiving her new invisible best friend. It was the fifth time she had dared Hayley to scream something out the window. But they laughed as if it were the first.

A sharp turn onto Oak Street propelled Ryan from one side of the backseat to the other. But he wasn’t about to criticize his sister’s driving… or her sense of humor.

Hillary was the only member of NUDI with a license. For another month. And the clock was ticking.

“Hey.” Hillary turned to the empty passenger seat and slid her oversize white sunglasses up on top of her waves. Her hazel eyes filled with mischief. “Can I call you InvisiHayley?”

“Why are you looking over there?” Hayley called from the third row. “I’m back here.”

“No way!” Hillary smacked the empty seat. “You invisible dudes are so fast!”

In the right lane, a guy driving a rusty pickup wiggled his gold-ringed finger and pouted. “Taken,” he mouthed, and then shrugged as if to say it was his loss.

Hillary turned away. “Ew, guh-ross!”
“Stop flirting with married farmers,” Hayley teased.

“I thought I was talking to you,” she giggled, turning toward the back.

“Hey,” said Hayley, quickly returning to the front seat. “I’m over here.”

“I love it!” Hillary shouted, blasting her horn.

Snickering, Ryan leaned forward and gripped her sister’s shoulder. “Can!” He exclaimed, no longer concerned about offending his driver. “Stop honking. The hospital is a block away. We’re in a quiet zone!”

“Then why are you screaming?” Hillary whispered.

White news trucks—each with a satellite dish on its roof and a network logo on its side—were packed behind police tape like paparazzi banned from the red carpet.”

“Are you sure this is the psychiatric ward?” Ryan asked, shocked by the onslaught of people rushing toward the entrance. Few looked like concerned relatives. Most looked like reporters.

A computer printout of a hospital map floated above the front seat. “Building E,” Hayley confirmed.

“Yeah, E for eensane,” Hillary said, cruising up and down the rows of the bustling lot in search of a parking spot. A blond wearing an electric-blue blazer and a matching pencil skirt darted in front of the van gripping a microphone to her mouth. A camera-toting man hurried close behind. “I hope she’s running to get her roots done.”

“Are all these people really here because of Linda?” Ryan asked.

“Hey, InvisiHayley.” Hillary lowered the passenger-side window. “Why don’t you ask that poorly dressed reporter what’s going on.”

“Love to,” she said with an audible grin. “’Scuse me, miss?”

Hillary stopped beside her. Ryan sank in his seat.

“Can you please tell me what all the excitement is about?” Hayley asked.

Lips firmly closed, Hillary stared at the woman.

“Um…” The reporter, unsure of where to look, searched the tan interior of the van. “That girl who saw the monster is coming out of shock. Doctors think she’s going to speak.”

“A million thanks, sweetheart,” Hayley said in a bass-deep tone.

The woman’s light eyebrows shot up in terror. “What’s going on here?”

“A million thanks, sweetheart,” Hayley said in a bass-deep tone.

The woman nodded.

Hillary hit the gas. “Looks like you’ve come to the right place,” she called, cackling as she sped
away.

“You guys!” Ryan giggled. She couldn’t deny the humor, but practical jokes weren’t exactly the best way to improve the RADs’ public image. “I thought the NUDI goal was to show normies they have nothing to be afraid of.”

“You’re right,” Hayley said. “I’ll stop.”

“Fun out,” Hillary grumbled.

Ryan buried his fists inside the long sleeves of his black T-shirt and furrowed his brow. Had Hillary and Hayley just listened to him?

After ten more minutes of nearly running over reporters and gliding past rows of parked cars, Hillary ditched the van in a spot reserved for Dr. Nguyen. It was either that or park in the lobby.

“Let’s go!” Ryan grabbed his khaki backpack and led the NUDIs toward Building E. The video of Brendon was minutes away from destruction. He could practically smell the flower stains on his fingers as he held his face and kissed him thank-you. The promise of that kiss made his black Converse rev.

It wasn’t difficult for two attractive teens to flirt their way past reporters, student vigils, and the cell phone paparazzi. The two beefy security guards on either side of the sliding glass doors, however, didn’t seem quite as charmed.

“Hang back. Let me handle this,” Hillary whispered in Ryan’s ear. “I have a way with bouncers.”

“Hillary, no!” Ryan called, but it was too late. His sister was already approaching the man on the left.

“Is she always like this?” Hayley whispered in Ryan’s ear. He just nodded in exasperation.

“Press pass or visitor’s pass,” the security guard grumbled, adjusting the curly wire dangling from his earpiece.

“Really?” Ryan nibbled his cuticle. This was the psychiatric ward of a hospital, not the Vanity Fair Oscar party. Although he imagined that the two venues weren’t much different.

“Actually, sir, I was hoping you could make an exception.” Hillary removed her white sunglasses and smiled with her entire body. Her sleeveless camouflage jumpsuit took the fat out of fatigues and gave her the silhouette of a short Victoria’s Secret model. “You see, I really need—”

The human meatball raised his palm to silence her. “Hold on,” he barked, pressing his sausage finger against the earbud and lowering his eyes as he listened. Hillary turned to the other security guard, but his palm was lifted too.

Ryan continued nibbling his cuticle. What if they couldn’t get in? What if Jac didn’t come out? What if he missed the deadline? What if—?

“Maybe you should just give Hayley the bag and let her go in alone,” Hillary whispered while the meatball listened to… well, whatever they were listening to. “She is invisible.”

“Yeah, but the bag isn’t!” Ryan snapped.

“It’s not like anyone will notice,” Hillary pointed out. “It is the psych ward.”

“You already used that joke on the reporter. Now can you please be serious? This isn’t a game—”
“Sorry ’bout that,” said the security guard, fixing his attention on Candace. His hardened expression cracked, and out came a grin. It was a transformation Ryan had seen a thousand times and had dubbed “Can versus man.” Can always won.

“Hey, Garreth,” he said to the guard on his left, “isn’t this the cute girl you saw driving around looking for a parking spot before?”

“Might be.” Garreth nodded. “Were you driving that bright blue volkswagen?”

“Yup,” Hillary smiled proudly. “It’s diesel, you know. Good for the environment.”

“Nice.” He smiled. “Can I see some ID?”

“With pleaz-sha.” Hillary turned and winked at Ryan as she searched her metallic bronze tote. “Here you go.”

He looked at her California driver’s license and handed it over to his partner.

“Hillary Wentz?” asked the guy on the right.

She nodded proudly. “The first.”

“So you’re not Dr. Nguyen?”

“Huh? No, who’s that?”

“We got her,” he said into his mouthpiece.

“You have three minutes to remove yourself and your diesel from this lot, or we will have you towed.”

Ryan facepalmed.

“Two minutes,” insisted the meatball.

“But you don’t understand,” Hillary pleaded. “We have to get into the hospital.”

“Wait.” The guard turned to Ryan. “You’re together?”

Ryan shot his sister a soap opera–style leave-now-or-I-will-destroy-you glare.

“Hillary out,” she said quickly, and hurried off.

“No, we’re not together,” Ryan lied. “We’re, uh, here to interview for the job.” Hayley coughed, and Ryan jabbed his elbow into the air next to him. He heard a tiny oof!

“What job?” he asked.

“He’s waking up!” someone—a reporter?—shouted from a third-floor window.

The crowd that was keeping vigil cheered. The camera lights flicked on. A stampede of reporters rushed the doors.

“Stand back, people!” called the guard on the right.

“You have your hands full, so we’re just gonna go,” Ryan told him.
And for some strange reason, he let him and Pete pass with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Managing to outrun the press tsunami by mere seconds, Ryan, Pete, and Hayley raced up the dim stairwell to the third floor.

“Is this going to work?” He asked, panting, as the reality (or, rather, the risk) of what they were about to do set in. If they succeeded, this monster hunt would be over, and life would return to normal. But if they failed, Brendon, Spencer, and now Hayley too would be in grave danger. And Sarah would be right—Ryan would be to blame.

“You’re not getting cold feet, are you?” Hayley asked.

“Nah, just blisters,” he lied, taking the last flight of stairs two at a time.

They burst onto the bustling third floor and ducked into the nearest ladies’ room to prep SpenceHayley.

“Let me know if you need any help,” Ryan said, sliding his bag under the stall door.

“We’re going live in five,” someone shouted in the hallway.

“Live in five!” other voices echoed, spreading the word.

Minutes later, Hayley emerged looking green and gorgeous in Grandpa Stein’s suit. Ryan couldn’t believe how much she looked like Spencer had at the dance. They were even the same height thanks to the four inch high creepers Vicky had lent them. Aside from the lack of Adam’s apple in her thin neck, she was Spencer.

“Let’s wait until they’re taping,” Ryan suggested. “That way everyone will see that the mysterious green monster has been captured, and this whole thing will be over fast.”

“Sounds good,” she said, checking the firmness of her self-adhesive neck bolts.

“What do I do?” Pete asked.

“Hold onto the backpack.” Ryan said.

“Really? Are you sure about this?”

Hayley nodded.

Ryan put his arm around her surprisingly well-defined shoulders and smiled at the reflection in the mirror: a green monster and a dark-haired pretty boy. This is what he and Spencer would look like as real friends. Out together, standing side by side, in a public bathroom.

“Definitely worth fighting for,” she said as if reading his mind.

Ryan agreed and then fired off a quick text.

TO: Fran

sept 27, 2:36 PM

RYAN: TURN ON THE NEWS. WE’RE LIVE IN 5.

Ryan smiled to himself as he pulled open the bathroom door. After years of asthma and social
persecution, he was starting to use his voice again.

And people were going to listen.

Not because he was potentially a siren but because he had the confidence to pull this off.
A high-def shot of a drowsy girl lying in a hospital bed popped on the Smiths’ flat screen. Scrolling text along the bottom read: LINDA IGNARRO IS REGAINING CONSCIOUSNESS AFTER A SHOCKING MONSTER ENCOUNTER... FAMILY AND FRIENDS ARE STANDING BY, WAITING FOR HER FIRST WORDS.

“Ahhhh!”

A seven-way squeal, nearly powerful enough to spin the steel blades on the ceiling fan, rose up from the putty-colored L-shaped couch and filled the living room.

“Well, I’ll be danged!” Jamia slammed the cap on her tea tree moisturizer and rested her legs on Frank’s lap. “She looks like a parade float with all those flowers around him.”

“Normies can be so dramatic,” Sarah said, admiring her pedicure from the comfy corner seat.

“Yum. Look at that platter of cold cuts,” Gerard said.

“Ew,” Frank winced.

“Are you fur real?” Gerard teased. “What a waste of fangs you are. You know what you should be doing with your teeth?” She turned toward Jamia and pretended to bite her shoulder. “Paying a little visit to the Outback Steakhouse.”

“Down, Child!” The New Jersey native chucked her bottle of tea tree lotion at Gerard, who howled with laughter.

“You wanna talk waste?” Frank shivered, wrapping himself in a black wool scarf.

“What you wax off in one day would keep me warm for an entire year.”

“Harsh!” Giggling, Gerard whipped the bottle at Frank, knocking her hot pink boa off center.

“What about Jordan Sparks over there?” Frank whipped the lotion at Spencer’s butt. It landed on the rug with a thud. “He wastes Vegas amounts of electricity.”

“Nice one!” Sarah slapped him a high five. “The vampire strikes back!”

Everyone cracked up—except Spencer. He stood in front of the TV transfixed by the sight of Linda tucked under a blue-and-brown plaid comforter. Her Neutrogena-clear skin was the ideal backdrop for her bloodred mouth, doe brown eyes, and jagged black hair—a white canvas for the vibrant colors of her face.

Spencer’s lips tingled. His heart space swelled. It was the first time he’d seen Linda since their ill-fated kiss—a kiss that had ripped off his head, landed her in the psych ward, and threatened the future of Salem’s RADs. The very sight of her should have filled him with fear. Shame. Anger. But instead his insides buzzed with longing.

Gabe who?

“Did we miss it?” Vincent asked, hurrying in with his wife and youngest daughter. The tangy smells of sweat and metal wafted from his lab coat. The scents of gardenia and waxy makeup wafted from hers.
“Where’s Hayley?” Viola asked.

“Shhh,” Spencer hissed, standing before the TV with zombielike deference. “Linda’s regaining consciousness. She’s gonna speak.”

The camera shot widened to reveal the hospital room. Lemon-yellow walls were covered in get-well cards. A window offered a view of the parking lot. And Jac—who stood next to Linda’s mother—was wearing a WHITE IS THE NEW GREEN tee and a hopeful expression.

Spencer gasped. “How offensive is that shirt?”

“How offensive is her face?” Sarah said.

“Fur real,” Gerard agreed.

“I’m glad Grandma Stein isn’t around to see those tacky imitation hairstreaks,” Viola said to her husband.

“Shhh,” Spencer insisted as the camera zoomed in on Linda. Her beautiful lips were beginning to move.

A reporter hovered at Linda’s bedside with a microphone and squinty concern. “It appears as if Linda is trying to speak,” the man said in a deep voice that clashed with his boyish features. His name—ROSS HEALY—appeared at the bottom of the screen. “L-lady, can you hear me?” he asked.

“Whashe,” Linda mumbled.

Jac and Linda’s mother leaned closer.

“L-girl, can you hear me? It’s Ross. Ross Healy from Channel Two News—you know, ‘It’s all true on Twooooo,’ ” he sang.

“Whashe,” Linda mumbled again.

“She said ‘Mommy’!” Mrs. Ignarro sobbed joyfully, her black chin-length curls bobbing for joy. “Did you say ‘Mommy,’ sweetie?”

“I’ve got your mummy right here.” Gerard lifted Sarah’s hand.

The others giggled.

“Whashe!”

“She said, ‘Where is she?’ ” Jac explained, elbowing Linda’s mother aside. “She wants me. She’s looking for me.” She twisted the top of her hair, spiking it up even more. “Aren’t you looking for me, Linda?”

“Get outta there, ya crazy dame!” Jamia shouted at the TV. “She wants Spencer. Not you, ya cracked broad!”

“Jac?” Linda managed, and then coughed weakly.

A nurse hurried over with a beige cup of ice chips. Linda filled her mouth and reached for her girlfriend’s hand. The instant their hands touched, her face brightened. Hers beamed. Spencer’s dimmed.
“Are you okay?” She asked, her doe-brown eyes searching Jac’s hungrily.

Jac nodded. “I am now.”

A symphony of retching sounds burst forth from the L-couch. Spencer smiled on the inside.

“I was so worried about you,” Jac said, dabbing her wet lips with a tissue.

“Are you kidding?” Linda sat up. “I was worried about you.”

“Isn’t this amazing?” said Ross in a hushed voice, like some wildlife documentarian witnessing a giraffe birth. Spencer wanted to rip out his neck seams and strangle him. Now, that would be amazing.

“Jac, I thought I killed you.” Linda broke into a sob. A giant snot bubble burst from her nose.

“Aw, sick!” Jamia shouted. “Did you see that bush oyster?”

Jac’s beaming grin sank faster than a time-lapse sunset. “What do you mean, you thought you killed me?”

“Everyone, stand back,” ordered a young male doctor with the word INTERN on the back of his scrubs. He rushed to Linda’s side with a loaded syringe. “She’s experiencing a post-traumatic hallucination.”

“What?” Linda pushed the intern away. “I’m not hallucinating!”

“Yes, she is,” Jac insisted.

The intern stepped forward.

“I’m not.”

The intern stepped back.

“She is.”

The intern stepped forward.

“Let her speak!” Mrs. Ignarro shouted.

Everyone stepped back.

Linda tossed another ice chip into her mouth and turned to her mother.

“Remember my tenth birthday party?”

She nodded tearfully. “We made a haunted house in the basement. You wanted a scary cake, so I baked a stick figure and we stabbed it with plastic knives and then topped it with a cherry compote drizzle.”

“Yeah… well…” Linda scraped a chip of black nail polish off her thumb. “When I blew out the candles, I wished that…” She scraped some more. “I wished that I would…”

Scrape. Scrape. Scrape.

“It’s okay, L-Lady,” Ross whispered. “No one is here to judge you.”
Linda took a deep breath. “I wished that I would turn into a monster.” She exhaled. “And I did, Mom. I did!”

The intern stepped forward again. Mrs. Ignarro pushed him aside.

“Good gosh, Lindy. Don’t even joke!” her mother cried. “You’re not a monster.”

“How can you say that when I ripped my own girlfriend’s head off?”

“What?” Vincent and Viola cried out at the same time.

“Golden!” Sarah cackled. “He thought Spencer was Jac!”

“They were in the same costume,” Gerard pointed out.

“This is great!” Frank said. “You’re off the hook!”

Spencer managed a convincing smile, because technically Frank was right. This was great. If Linda had no idea he existed, how could he possibly be blamed? Her ignorance was a gift! A blessing! A get-out-of-jail-free card!

*Then why does it hurt more than getting my head ripped off?*

Different feelings rose and fell inside Spencer like painted horses on a carousel: relief, embarrassment, vindication, gratitude, melancholy, freedom, loss… But the one feeling that remained constant—the carriage seat that was bolted to the wood and didn’t budge—was insignificance.

“You think that was my head?” Jac asked.

Linda nodded.

“My head?”

“Yes!” She shouted at her hands. “I’m pure evil!” Spencer could see tears welling up in Linda’s eyes.

“Linda!” Her mother gasped. “Don’t ever—”

“It’s true, Mom. Only someone truly twisted would try to kill a girl during the best kiss of her life.”

*Did she just say the best—*

“Ahhhh!” The others jumped off the couch and raced for Spencer. They hugged and squealed as if he had just won American Idol.

“Settle down,” Vincent boomed. “This is my son she’s talking about.”

Viola comforted him with a loving shoulder squeeze.

“That was the best kiss of your life?” Jac asked, her blue eyes sad.


“Turn off the cameras!” Jac screamed so loudly that her bangs quaked.

“Absolutely,” Ross said, winking at his camera operator. “Okay, they’re off. Continue.”
“Lindy, that wasn’t me!”

“Yes, it was. I’m not crazy, you know,” she insisted. “I was Frankenstein’s bride and you were my groom. I remember everything.”

Spencer stepped closer to the TV. His friends followed.

“Linda, that wasn’t me! It was a monster. A real monster.”

She laughed. “Who’s the crazy one now?”

“It was me!” said SpenceHayley, barging into the room dressed as Grandpa Stein on his wedding day.

The entire city of Salem gasped at the same time.

Linda’s face brightened. Spencer’s beamed. Jac’s dimmed.

“VOLTAGE!” Spencer jumped up and down, applauding. Raucous cheering and applause filled the Smiths’ living room.

“Fang-tastic!” Spencer laughed. “She looks so much like you, Spencer!”

“What is this?” Jac stammered—one part suspicious, two parts scared. “What’s going on?”

“Linda, it’s me,” SpenceHayley said, walking toward her slowly. “I’m the one you kissed.”

A pack of security guards burst into the room.

“Wait! Leave him alone!” they heard Ryan shout in the background. “He’s harmless!”

Much to everyone’s surprise, the guards backed off.

“Who are you?” Linda asked.

“I’m the one responsible for all of this.” SpenceHayley gestured to Linda’s hospital bed and then to the mass of reporters and other people below his window. “And I want you to know that I’m sorry. I’ll never go near you, or anyone else, again. I didn’t mean to frighten—”

“Frighten?” Linda kicked off her plaid comforter and sat up straight. She was wearing her Frankenstein’s Bride sweatshirt—the one she’d worn on the first day of school. “I was afraid, but not of you. Of myself! I was afraid I killed you. Did I? I mean, did I hurt you? Because I didn’t mean to. One minute I was having the best kiss of my life, and the next I—”

“Help!” Jac yelled. “Somebody help him! That thing has taken over her mind!”

“Don’t hate me because I’m boo-tiful,” SpenceHayley said to Jac.

“Oh no, she didn’t!” Frank cracked up, high-fiving the others.

The security team moved in. This time, Ross and his crew held them back.

“VOLTAGE!” Spencer shouted. “This is just like watching Gossip Girl. Only it’s real. And about me!”

“Ryan did it!” Frank tossed his black scarf in the air.
Sarah rolled her eyes. “We’ll see. It’s not over yet.”

Linda stepped toward SpenceHayley. “Nothing has taken over my mind, Jac. Just my heart.”

“It has her heart!” Jac yelled. But no one cared what she had to say. Not when Linda was reaching for SpenceHayley’s hand. SpenceHayley gave it to him.

“Are they going to kiss?” Gerard gasped.

Jac lunged toward Hayley. “Get away from him!”

Two security guards raced toward her.

“Put me down!” She thrashed as they took hold of her. “That thing is a monster! This town is full of monsters! They’re stealing our lovers!” The guards lifted her by the armpits and carried her toward the exit. “Wait!” Jac slammed her feet on either side of the doorway. “I have proof. I can prove it. I can prove it right now.”

“Put her down,” Ross insisted.

“Send in my friend Breezy,” Jac insisted.

Seconds later, her morose looking best friend click-clacked into the room. She wore a fitted tweed blazer, baggy slacks, a newsboy cap, and her signature beige cat-eye glasses. The only thing that kept her from looking so five decades ago was the iPad in the outer pocket of her green faux crocodile-skin attaché case.

Jac wiggled her fingers impatiently. “Give it.”

“Breezy, no!” Ryan said. Hayley stopped and Jac snatched the iPad.

Fran tugged her neck seams. “What is she doing?”

Jac tapped the screen a few times, held it up to the cameras, and pressed PLAY.

“No!” Spencer shouted at the TV. “You can’t do that! Ryan got there way before the deadline! You promised!”

Vincent and Viola gasped.


“See?” Sarah grinned as the video of Brendon Urie turning into Gabe Saporta began to roll. “I told you normies couldn’t be trusted.”

“I’m going to burst your head in with a bone saw if you don’t shut up!” Fran hissed.
A swarm of reporters buzzed through the open door. Handheld microphones and suspended booms aimed for Bekka, eager to get a quote from the girl at the center of the story they had already dubbed the Salem Snitch Trials. But if it were up to Pete, snitch would be replaced with a more appropriate word for the two-faced female dog.

“Let me through!” shouted Ryan, pushing past them. People parted, letting the nearly six foot tall, angry teenager through easily. Pete hurried along behind him.

But it was too late. The condemning video of Brendon had just been broadcast on Channel 2 and was being picked up by the national affiliates. Next stop: YouTube. Final destination? The world.

“What are you doing?” Ryan grabbed the iPad right out of Jac’s clammy hands. “We had a deal! I gave you what you wanted.”

“Oh, really? Because that”—she pointed at Linda and Spence-Hayley, now seated on the edge of the bed and chatting softly—“was not part of the deal.”

Breezy reluctantly rifled through her attaché. “And I have the documentation to prove it.”

“So, now Brendon has to pay for something Linda is doing?” Ryan clenched his fists. “That makes no sense—”

“Excuse me, Miss Vanek?” called a reporter. “Can you tell us about the boy in this video?”

Anxious for the scoop, the media descended on Jac like pigeons on a pizza crust.

“Yes,” she answered, happy to help.


Jac went pale. “How did you—”

“— know about Breezy’s contract? Easy. She sent Dallon home instead of keeping him at the dance with her. And everyone knows Dallon Weekes and Breezy Douglass are inseparable.” Pete smirked.

“And I saw her contract.” Pete added. “You do know that forced indentured servitude is illegal right?”

“Are there others?”

“I’m sure of it. These freaks must have families.”

“Have you received any threats?”

“If stealing the love of my life isn’t a threat, I don’t know what is.”

“Back to the boy in the video. Is this split-wit capable of killing?”

Ryan backed away from the feeding frenzy—whipped, beaten, and pureed. The evidence of her failure was immediate. Brendon had become the new Spencer faster than he could text I’M SORRY. “The Boy Who Lost His Head” was old news. Everyone wanted the “Split-Wit” now. Not that
they’d find him. Brendon was probably boarding a flight to Utah, fanning his sweaty face, and ruing the day he had met George Ryan Ross III by the Riverfront carousel. Never knowing how deeply he would mourn his absence. Mourn the experiences they could have shared. Mourn the good they could have done. Mourn the voice he might have had. Death by media was quick and painful.

If only Hillary had been there. She would have done something to distract the reporters. Something to pull the attention away from Brendon and put it on—

— wait. Pete grinned.

“Excuse me for interrupting,” he said, pulling Hayley to her feet. “Did you paint your entire body or just the parts we can see?” He whispered into her wig. It had the sweet plastic smell of Barbie hair.

“Just the parts you can see,” she said softly. “Why?”

“Take off your clothes. Become floating limbs. Give them something new to chase.”

“Love it!” Hayley snickered.
A minute later, Grandpa Stein’s wedding tux was lying in a heap on the hospital floor. Two mint-green arms, Spencer’s fake head, and the nape of Hayley’s neck were all that remained.

“Trick or treat!” she yelled, jangling about like a floppy skeleton.

Shrieks and gasps filled the crowded room. The medical staff bolted for the exit.

“Catch me if you can!” Hayley called, leading the story-starved reporters down the hall of Salem Hospital’s psych ward.

“Wait! What’s your name?” Linda called. “Where are you going?” She began to chase after SpenceHayley, but Mrs. Ignarro insisted on going in her stead so that she could rest.

Jac grabbed Mrs. Ignarro by her rose-colored cardigan. “You’re seriously going to bring that thing back to her?”

“Mom, hurry!” Linda called. “They might hurt him.”

Mrs. Ignarro took off in a sprint. Jac followed her, shouting something about getting stuck with grandchildren the color of algae.

Once everyone had left, Ryan scooped up the lace dress and began smoothing out the creases. Mint-green makeup streaked the sides.

“Is he going to be okay?” Linda asked, her brown eyes moist with genuine concern.

Ryan nodded with quiet confidence.

Linda stood up anyway. She wobbled slightly and gripped the bed rails to steady herself. “I’m going to check. Just in case.”

Pete hurried to his side and eased him back onto the bed. “I think maybe you should stay here until you get a little stronger.”

She strained to see what was going on in the hallway. “But what if they hurt him?”

“Trust me.” Ryan grinned. “She’ll be fine.”
“She?” Linda asked, looking shocked all over again.

“I mean—” Pete searched her face and then sighed. Hasn’t the poor girl been through enough? Isn’t it time he knows the truth? “That wasn’t the boy you kissed,” he whispered in her ear.

“Aw, come on!” She shot up. “Is everyone trying to mess with me, or what?”

“No one is messing with you, Linda. I promise. We’re just trying to keep everyone safe. So that was a decoy. To keep Jac from exposing the real boy.”

“Who’s the real boy?”

“I can’t tell you that without his permission. But I’ll ask him if he wants to meet you.”

“Really? Does he go to our school?”

Ryan zipped his lips.

“Just tell me this: Is he a real monster?”

Pete hesitated. What was he supposed to say now? He studied her eyes in search of a clue. They were wide with hope. Moist with tenderness. Hungry for the truth. Finally, Ryan and Pete nodded.

Linda’s tight features softened to let them in. Her smile was wide at first, but it soon fell to a frown.

“What’s wrong?”

She sighed, lowering her gaze to her black fingernails. “I guess this means I’m not a monster.”

Ryan grinned. In some ways, Pete thought they were very similar. Darkness swirled beneath their shiny exteriors. They didn’t want what other shiny people wanted. They were attracted to the twisted. Like human equivalents of San Francisco—there were unpredictable faults under their beauty. Their lives were an endless search for a safe place to stand.

“Why don’t you become a NUDI?”

“A what?”

“It’s our sister’s pro-monster organization. Normies Uncool with Discriminating Idiots.”

She grinned. “Where do I sign up?”

“You just did.”

“Sorry, Ryan,” she said sadly.

“For what?”

“For Jac. I know you guys were friends. And Beebo’s a sweet guy. She shouldn’t have done that.”

“Can we tell you a secret?” Pete asked.

Linda nodded.

“Jac was cheating on you with Brent Wilson.”

Linda ducked her head. “I kinda figured. I’m past being mad. She wasn’t very good for me.”
“Thanks,” Pete said as Ryan pressed his forehead against the soundproof window. “Omigod, look!” He said, pressing his finger against the glass.

Below, cameramen were practically moshing as they fought for a shot of something on the pavement. Ryan could see Breezy and Linda’s friend Dallon off to one side, but the mob was so thick that he couldn’t see what had attracted the reporters’ attention.

Linda grabbed the remote and flipped on the small wall-mounted TV. The screen showed a tight shot of Spencer’s fake face lying on the curb of the parking lot. Nearby were the light brown wig and a stack of paper towels covered in mint-green makeup. Ross, slightly relieved but mostly disappointed, reported that the whole monster episode was a practical joke executed by a group of students at Merston High. Then he tossed back to the studio, where a special-effects expert was standing by, ready to speculate on how the crafty kids might have pulled off the prank.

Linda muted the TV. “It wasn’t a prank, though, right?”

“I promise, he’s real. I can introduce you tomorrow.”

She smiled sweetly. Her sincerity warmed Pete’s heart.

Minutes later, Ross Healy and his team returned to pack up their gear.

“You had me,” he said, punching Linda with a fake one-two to the stomach.

“I had nothing to do with it,” Linda assured him, frowning at him for treating her like another boy. “The joke was on me.”

“Brilliant, L-girl.” Ross handed her a card. “Lemme know when something else goes down at that freaky school of yours. I’ll hook you up with Gaga tickets or something.”

Linda raised her thick Brooke shields-esque eyebrows. “You think maybe I could shoot for you one day? I’m into filmmaking.”

“Who are your influences?” Ross asked.

Confident that Linda wouldn’t spill any secrets, Pete took his cue to leave and dragged Ryan out to find Hayley and Hillary.

Outside the hospital room, a police officer was pressing Jac for information about her involvement in the prank. “Miss,” he said, smacking his leather notebook against his palm “the more you cooperate, the lighter your sentence will be.”

“Sentence?”

He nodded.

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t a prank.” She sniffled. “These monsters are real. Where’s Breezy? Can someone find Breezy?”

“I saw her outside talking to Dallon,” Pete said, happy to deliver the bad news. “She’s not your lackey anymore anyways.”

Jac huffed. “Fine. Then ask her. She’ll tell you. I’m not lying!”

The police officer eyed Pete with suspicion. “Do you know this girl?”
“I do,” Ryan responded respectfully. After giving their names and address to the police officer, Ryan told him he was happy to help in any way he could.

“Oh, thank the Lord!” Jac began sobbing.

“To the best of your knowledge, can you see any reason why Jac…” He checked his notebook. “…Jac Vanek would have cause to believe she saw a monster?”

Jac widened her blue eyes in a desperate plea for mercy. Her look seemed to say “I’m sorry for everything”—the dissolved friendship, the blackmail, the phone threats, the broken promise, playing the video of Jackson…

Ryan pursed his lips and considered the apology. Now that the hunt was over and life for the RADs would return to normal, Ryan seemed to actually felt sorry for Jac. Linda was smitten with Spencer. Jac had made a public fool of herself. And Breezy was free from her control. Wasn’t that punishment enough? Did she really need to be arrested too? Pete smirked.

“Jac is an amazing girl. She would never lie,” Pete stated.

Jac stopped sobbing immediately. “See? I told you!”

“But a practical joke isn’t the same as telling a lie, is it? I mean, if you ask me, it shouldn’t be. Because what Jac pulled off was more like art.” Pete smacked her playfully on the back. “Just think about the amount of work that went into filming that video. Not to mention making the whole Frankenstein costume, organizing the special effects, and getting the police and the media involved. It’s kind of impressive if you think about it. If there was an awards show for practical jokes, Jac, my friend, you would clean up.”

“What? You’re lying!” Jac turned to the policeman. “He’s lying!”

“What’s going to happen to her, Officer? Nothing too serious, I hope. She was just trying to be funny.” Ryan asked innocently.

He adjusted his cap. “A healthy dose of community service, for starters.”

Ryan nodded in approval and then strolled off with a smug grin. Ryan had just done his community a service as well. And it felt fantastic.
Nothing against the Olympics. They’re inspiring, and they originated in Greece, just like Lindsay. But whenever they rolled around, Sarah’s favorite TV shows were taken off the air and replaced with—and let’s be honest—two weeks’ worth of obscure, unendorsable physical activities. During that time, Sarah would often find herself wandering aimlessly around the palace like a lost camel in the desert, in search of something familiar to ground her. It was a disorienting, unnerving condition for which the only cures were the closing ceremonies and the subsequent return of her regularly scheduled programming. Once order had been restored, she’d celebrate by eating one of Lily’s decadent chocolate pyramid cupcakes, to replenish the inevitable calorie loss she’d suffered during her fourteen days of wandering.

And now, seated in the Allergy-Free Zone of the Merston High cafeteria with her three best friends, Sarah bit off the chocolate point of the pyramid in celebration of a different kind of restoration: the restoration of her regularly scheduled life. The one in which Gee, Frank, and Jamia focused on her like a high-performance zoom lens. The one in which newbies (Spencer!) and fake RADs (Ryan!) weren’t making headlines. The one in which there was cell service in the palace. And dates with Lyn on Saturday nights. The one in which she’d announce her Teen Vogue shoot, and her friends would sweat envy for days. The one that she was about to get back.

So far nothing pointed to the contrary. The cafeteria was filling up with hungry normies en route to their usual tables in the Peanut-Free, Gluten-Free, Lactose-Free, and new Fat-Free food zones. As usual, girls passed Sarah and her friends with a sideways glance to check their fashion-forward outfits. If Lindsay wasn’t around—and he wasn’t on Mondays because of band practice—guys would do the same. They’d bop their heads to the lunchtime playlist, which today began with a student song “Hey Look Ma, I Made It” that Brenny boy wrote and performed last year at the battle of the bands. The lyrics couldn’t have been more appropriate.

Hey look ma, I made it
Everything’s comin’ up aces, aces
If it’s a dream, don’t wake me, don’t wake me
I said hey look ma, I made it

Sarah chewed the rich pyramid-shaped cake to the triumphant beat that signaled her return. And with calculated patience, she flipped through photos on her iPhone, waiting for someone to ask the inevitable question.

“Battle of the Bands invites went out today,” Gee announced, biting her double bacon burger. “I kissed each envelope with MAC Girl About Town lipstick before I dropped it into the mailbox, which is why I was late for math this morning.” She paused, obviously hoping for a reaction. Sarah refused—she hadn’t been the center of attention in days, and it was starting to dull the shine on her hair.

Finally Frank leaned closer and peeked at the screen with his hazel green eyes.

“Hey!” He flicked a dab of chocolate icing off the pyramid with his cold finger. It landed on Sarah’s black mesh sweater and fell onto her pink-and-gray tie-dyed leggings. “What are you looking at?”

“Um, my stained pants!”

“Seriously, baby doll, whatever’s on that celly must be dynamite, ’cause you haven’t even noticed Frank’s perfect eyeliner,” Jamia said, playfully tapping her gray-gloved fingers against her cheek.
“At least someone noticed.” Frank tossed salt on Jamia’s dry skin.

“Still can’t believe you realized you could show up on digital camera and on non silver backed mirrors.”

“That’s a good thing.” Gee twisted a turquoise and black curl around his long finger.

“No.” Frank gagged. “It’d be a good thing if I couldn’t smell your burger breath.” She pursed his lips to avoid smiling in public. “Do you know how awful slaughterhouses sound and smell?”

Sarah, however, smiled out loud.

Everything was back to normal.

It was time.

“I’m trying to decide what to model for the Teen Vogue shoot,” she said, as if they had been talking about it all morning. “I love the falcon necklace and the pear earrings, but wearing both together feels like overkill, you know?”

The girls knit their eyebrows in confusion. This scene couldn’t have played out any better if she had scripted it. Which she kind of had.

Sarah swiped through the iPhone lookbook she had photographed earlier that morning. At dawn to be specific, when the sunlight was at its richest. The orange glow woke the gold the way kohl woke her blue eyes. She shot the priceless pieces on the sandy island in her bedroom and framed them with bulrushes and wild grass. Forget Cairo couture—her collection was pharaoh fabulous!

“What do you guys think?” She showed them photos of the earrings and the collar necklace. “Too much?”

“I think you’d better pause and rewind.” Jamia twisted her recently bleached blond curls off her face and secured them with a pair of aqua-lacquered chopsticks.

“Fur real,” Gee said. “Those pear earrings are even better than—”

“Angelina’s Oscar emeralds, I know.”

Debby plopped down and leaned across the table, the ends of her red hair dusting the top of Sarah’s pyramid cupcake. “Is there more?” Or so Sarah understood.

“Tons.”

Sarah showed them the hammered cuffs, the stone-covered crown, the glow-in-the-dark ring, the feather necklace, and the ruby-eyed snake cuff—plus a beautifully lit shot of Anna Wintour’s business card.

“Is it legit?” Gee asked, touching the screen.

“Of course! My dad found it in Aunt Nefertiti’s tomb.”

“No,” Jamia scoffed. “The card!”

Sarah waved the girls and Gerard closer. Once they were inside her amber-scented circle, she told them about her father’s first-class encounter with Anna, the Teen Vogue shoot, the sand dunes, the camels, her upcoming modeling debut, and the limitless networking potential. Their eyes widened
with each new detail.

“Sounds cool.” Frank smiled.

“No joke! You serious?”

“I would eat meat to be in Teen Vogue.” Frank grinned. “Not like this but this is definitely bomb as hell.”

“I would go vegetarian!”

Intrigue had them wrapped around her like fine linen strips.

“Will you actually be on the camel?”

“Who are the other models?”

“Do they need any blonds?”

And banded them together with Herve Leger suction.

“Can we see the collection after school?”

“We’ll help you pick the best pieces.”

“Hey, mate, can we try anything on?”

By the grace of Geb, Sarah’s image as queen, their queen, had been preserved for at least another day or two. Crisis averted.

She could have gone on for hours, and they would have listened. But her chocolate chip pyramid, which had happened to be at the center of their huddle, rose off its plate and began disappearing in bite-size chunks.

“Hayley!”

The last bite fell to the plate. “Sorry.”

Laughter blew the amber-scented circle wide open to reveal Spencer, the twins, Ross, his vampire brother, and Brendon. They slid their white trays onto the rectangular table and sat as though they’d been invited. Which they hadn’t been—at least, not by Sarah.

“Hey!” Vicky beamed through a thick coating of normie-colored makeup. Her tiny frame was enveloped in a scarf and a black satin jumpsuit (which looked more like a flight suit). Cinching it at the waist with a thick woven belt was an admirable attempt to put some Cover Girl in her cover-up. But it wasn’t working. The one-piece garment had been made with the wrong kind of runway in mind.

“It’s so voltage being back.” Spencer said, appreciating the hustle and bustle of the lunchtime crowd and bobbing his head as the song switched to Lady Gaga’s “Alejandro.”

Sarah rolled her eyes, unable to decide what bothered her more: the word voltage, the Smith children’s constant spotlight-jacking, or both. “The dance was Friday night,” she pointed out. “It’s Monday. You didn’t even miss a day.”

“I know.” Spencer smiled. “Thanks to these three.” He applauded Ryan, Pete and the empty space
beside him. Brendon, Frank, Gee, and Jamia joined in. Sarah pushed her cupcake aside. The celebration was over.

“Oh hey, Sarah!” Ryan perked up. “Vicky mentioned you were doing a thing for vogue. I found something you might like as a congrats gift!” He rummaged through his hideous backpack and pulled out a silver box.

“It’s got the most girl empowering songs from the 80s and now that Hillary and I compiled.” He held out the box to her with a smile. Sarah hesitantly took it and opened it. “I know Walkmans aren’t really that in style but I thought you’d like it. It’s got Cyndi Lauper, Hayley Kiyoko, Blondie, Lady Gaga, Ke$ha, Queen, and some songs I wrote back in middle school that I had Brendon sing.” Sarah carefully pulled out one of the tapes and saw that it said ‘Sorry we didn’t get along before’.

“Brendon and Lyn-Z mentioned your mom has a thing about modern technology and this isn’t too modern.” Ryan admitted, blushing. Sarah was genuinely touched by his thoughtfulness. Maybe she had misjudged him.

“I can’t believe Jac showed that video,” Frank said to Brendon. “Were you freaking?”

“Pretty much.” Brendon took off his black-framed glasses and cleaned the lenses on his crumpled black t-shirt. “I was running around looking for my suitcase when RyRo texted me with the good news.” He playfully pulled one of the strings on the normie’s signature fluffy hoodie.

Sarah examined the new couple, wondering what Brendon saw in Ryan. Feature for feature, he was undeniably attractive, maybe even super pretty. Long brown scene queen hair, huge brown eyes, a perfect nose, and mostly zitless skin. But style-wise he had the whole Kristen Stewart I’d-rather-be-comfy-than-hot thing going on. Only he wasn’t Kristen Stewart. So he looked like a pretty boy permanently stuck in Sunday mode.

“Hayley was a real hero,” Ryan announced.

“The diversion tactic was your idea,” she said, snatching up the discarded cupcake. “And you should hear how Ryan and Pete stuck it to Jac in the end. She has to do something like two hundred hours of community service.”

“I heard about that.” Gee laughed. “Not bad. But if it were up to me, I would have had her sent to the electric chair.”

“What’s so bad about that?” Spencer joked.

Ryan cracked up.

“Why are you even here?” Sarah blurted, no longer able to censor herself.

Ryan blanched.

“Sarah!” Brendon admonished. “Is being my boyfriend not enough for him to be allowed to join us over here?”

“I mean, um, don’t you have allergies?” she backpedaled, realizing she’d just offended her best friend. “Shouldn’t you be sitting in a different zone?”

“I have asthma, but it’s been much better since I moved here,” be said. “This morning I sang in the shower for the first time in years, and it actually sounded—”

“You sing?” Frank asked.
“You shower?” Sarah mumbled.

“Oh both.” Ryan said, ignoring the dig. “I used to perform when I was little. But I stick to guitar as of late. Why? Do you?”

“I play guitar,” Jamia said, “and I’m one of their roadies.”

“Still working on those scales?” Frank giggled into his napkin.

“Still working on those jokes?” Jamia fired back.

Sarah continued flipping through the photos on her phone, hoping to reroute their attention back to what really mattered.

“Jac got kicked out of math this morning and sent to Principal Weekes’s office,” Fran announced with a snap of her electric-blue and black rhinestone-covered compact.

“Why?” everyone asked, shifting to face her.

“It was first period. And Mr. Cantor was late, so we started talking about the whole… thing. When Jac came in, everyone started clapping and telling her how great the practical joke was. She tried to tell them it was real, but no one believed her. I guess she got so frustrated that she started whipping chalk around the room. And that’s when Cantor came in. He took a piece of blue chalk right on the forehead. Sent her straight to Weekes.”

“Nice,” Gee said, swiping a chicken strip from Brendon’s plate.

“Poor Breezy got sent up too,” Fran continued.

“Oh no!”

“Yeah. She decked Brent Wilson.” Ryan smiled. “I may have told her that Brent draws nudes of her.”

“You know why Linda wants a break?” Ryan interrupted.

They giggled and looked at Spencer. Spencer looked down at the table.

“That’s ri-ight,” Ryan sang. “She wants to meet you.”

The Allergy-Free Zone swelled with girly/Frank’s shrieks. Spencer sat on his hands. Brendon squealed the loudest, hitting a high G. Sarah wanted to hurl her phone at Ryan’s meddling face.

“It’s true. She begged me to introduce you.”

“That is so not safe!” Sarah snapped. “Are you stupid? What if it’s a trap?”

“Are you gonna do it?” Frank chomped on a carrot. “She is kinda cute for a girl… no offense, Jamia.”

Jamia smiled to show there was none taken.


“I guess I could talk to him for you,” he offered awkwardly.
“So, is that a yes? Should I go and find Linda?”

“No, don’t!” Spencer said. “Not here. Not in front of everyone. What if Sarah’s right? What if it’s not safe?”

“How about after school, then?” Ryan suggested. “At the Riverfront. Brendon and I will go with you, just in case.”

Spencer sighed again.

“Just say yes,” Ryan urged. “She really likes you.”

“Fine. Yes.”

The others squealed with vicarious delight.

“Can we go too?” Frank asked.

“Yeah! We’ll ride the carousel and pretend we don’t know you,” Jamia added.

“Let’s sneak out early or my brothers will follow us,” Gee said. “They don’t think it’s safe down there.”

“Hold on! I thought we were going to look at the jewelry,” Sarah said, unable to mask her disappointment.

“I know!” Jamia, the peacekeeper, lifted a finger. “Why don’t we do the Riverfront today and Sarah’s tomorrow?”

“No way!” Sarah answered.

“Why not way?” Frank asked. She wasn’t one for being told what she could and could not do.

“Because,” Sarah said, stalling. “Because of the surprise.”

“What surprise?”

“Um… I was going to tell you at my house but… Gee, Debby, Bren and Jamia are going to be models with me,” she blurted. “And Frank, I was going to have you help the stylists, since you don’t really like the camera too much, but—“

Another round of squeals filled the casserole-scented air. As usual, all the other students in the zone turned to see what they were missing. And as usual, Sarah grinned, loving the attention.

“But if you’d rather go to the Riverfront and chaperone, that’s fine. I just need to know because I’d have to find replacements. Your call.”

The others assured her that replacements would not be necessary and that they were totally committed to the shoot.

“Golden,” Sarah said, hoping to Geb that the editors at Teen Vogue would take the news with the same level of enthusiasm.

“I can’t go today Sarah.” Brendon said sheepishly. "I already promised to go with Ryan and Linda to the Riverfront if Spencer says yes."
A couple hours later, Debby found herself racing from the Riverfront after waving to Ryan and Brendon. She momentarily took one of her hands off of the handlebars and waved at Pete and his dog. The vespa wobbled. She steadied it and—

Some guy riding a skateboard jumped out in front of her.

“Ahhhhhhh!” Debby tried to turn towards the curb. The tassels of her vespa got caught on the strap of his messenger bag and both were flung from their wheels. Although her head hit the pavement, the cherry covered helmet made the pain seem distant. Magazines spilled from his bag. Strangers rushed to their side. A car swerved to avoid dead-fast, which was lying in the middle of the street. Debby absently noticed a heart shaped tear in her leggings, but was too stunned to see the symbolism.

“Yooooouuuuu ooooookkkkaaaayyyyyyy?” she finally asked.

The stranger propped himself up on his elbow and nodded slowly, his slightly rounded chin bobbing in slow motion.

Z.L.?

Same dark eyes… Same pale skin, Same sharp cheekbones. He was fantasy boyfriend, right down to the wide shoulders and hair close cropped on the sides and fluffy on top.

He reached out his hand and introduced himself. “Josh.”

I’m in love!

“Debby.” She slowly shook his hand. He smiled as much as one could at a person who’d almost run him over.

Flustered, she began gathering his scattered magazines and comics --

<Dead fast?> she gasped in delight, not realizing she had switched to zombie-speak as she admired the green skinned figure on the cover. Her heart began thumping. It had to be going at, like, ten beats per minute. <You’re a fan?> she asked. Or wondered.

He nodded. <Huge.>

Confirmed. He’s a RAD! Either that or she had damaged his brain.

She was about to tell him she had named her scooter after the series but he was pointing at the cracked wheel on his skateboard and still speaking in zombie. <I’ve got to get a new ride.>

She lifted dead fast with newfound strength and patted the seat, <I’ll take you.>

Debby swung her leg over the seat and scooted forward to make room. Josh took a step closer. Debby noticed he had a silver nose ring on his left nostril. He came closer still. Was he about to kiss her? Debby shrank back. She might be speeding through Salem, but she was hardly fast. The girls are going to die twice when they hear about this!

“She blushed. <Let’s take things slow.>
Josh laughed. <Just trying to get on the bike. How much slower can I get?>

Once he was on, Debby kicked up the kickstand and revved the scooter.

<How speedy is this thing?> Josh asked as they zoomed off.

<Dead fast!> Debby shouted back. <But why rush?>
She Had The World

Honey-colored sunlight saturated Riverfront Park, emptying the last bits of lazy heat onto the grassy lawns and walkways. The weatherman had promised a beautiful day, but he had said nothing about the thick golden rays that seemed to track Spencer’s face like a spotlight. That charged him from the outside in. That warmed his soft brown hair and left the sweet smell of cherry-almond shampoo in his wake. No, he had said nothing about perfect weather for falling in love. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to spoil the surprise.

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“So, this is the infamous lucky bench?” he asked his escorts as they motioned for him to sit.

“Yup.” Ryan grinned. “This is where I met Brendon.”

“I bet you weren’t wearing a full-piece bodysuit, ten tons of makeup, and a scarf,” Spencer said, wishing she could wear something a little more him.

“No, but I was,” Brendon joked, offering him some of his popcorn.

“No thanks.” Spencer rubbed his fluttering stomach.

Organ music swelled, and the carousel began to spin. Bobbing up and down on their chosen horses, normie kids laughed and waved to their parents. And their parents waved back, eyes flooded with joy, moved by life’s simplest pleasures. Children’s laughter, a warm afternoon, the smell of popcorn in the air…. If they only knew that their innocent landmark was the cork that topped the RADs’ underground lair, built by monsters for monsters, because their world—the normie world—was too dangerous.

Spencer sighed, giving in to his own confusion. *What am I doing?* His goal was to educate and enlighten the enemy, not to flirt with her. Not that Lunda was the enemy herself, but she had dated the enemy. So her taste was questionable. “Remind me why I’m here?”


Spencer turned. Linda was treading toward them in hiking boots. Her floating stride was deliberate—determined but not anxious.

“Right. Now I remember.”

Her skirt was the same navy blue as the Willamette River, and her black Blouse had faded to comfy perfection. Green Hepburn esque sunglasses concealed her eyes but not her megawatt smile.

Enemy who?

Away from the fluorescent lights of school, she looked different. Fresher. Girlish. Free. Out of her Frankenstein costume. No longer on TV. Without Jac. She held a bouquet of the most voltage sunflowers in one hand and Spencer’s cartwheeling heart in the other.
“Are those for me?” Brendon teased.

“You wish Boyd.” Linda teased back. “How’s it going?” She said to Ryan with a good-to-see-you-again grin.

Everyone exchanged glances, unsure of who was supposed to do what next, while Spencer stood slightly off to the side and waited for his introduction… and waited… and waited.…

But for some reason Ryan and Brendon stared expectantly at Linda, like the next move was unquestionably hers.

No longer able to handle the suspense, Spencer stuffed his sparking hands into his jumper pockets and then stepped forward.

“So,” Linda asked, her eyes passing right over him. “Is she here?”

“Hey.” Spencer smiled.

Linda looked at him, confused.

“It’s me,” Spencer pulled his scarf aside and quickly flashed a bolt. “See?”

Linda suddenly snapped to. “Oh, of course,” she stammered. “You can’t just walk around looking all—I didn’t realize—it’s you!”

Linda finally made the connection between the boy in her geography class with the cool neck piercings and the hottie with the green skin who had rocked her lips. She was stunned into open mouthed silence.

“Should we get away from all these people?” Spencer asked, fearing she might faint and cause a scene. He had promised his parents he wouldn’t do anything that would attract negative attention, and this time he intended to keep his promise.

“Sure,” she said, trying to recover with an easygoing shrug.

They began walking toward the water.

“Oh!” She handed him the sunflowers. “These are for you.”

“For what?”

“They’re kind of a sorry-I-ripped-your-head-off gift. And an I-know-boys-like-flowers thing.”

Spencer pulled his hands out of his pockets and accepted the flowers with a genuine laugh, releasing an entire weekend’s worth of tension, frustration, and shame into the breeze. From that moment on, their hands swung freely. His fear of sparking vanished a little more each time their fingertips accidentally grazed.

Ryan and Brendon followed them to a sunny patch of grass by the river, Ryan fiddling with a big clunky instant camera.

“Man, I can’t believe I’m hanging with some—” Linda paused and then sat. “Wait, what exactly are you guys?”

“We like to be called RADs,” Brendon explained, snapping a dandelion from the ground and pulling its stem apart in strips like string cheese. “Regular Attribute Dodgers.”
“Nice.” Linda lay back and folded his hands behind his head. “So, are all of you RADs?”

“Those of us here are, my sister-,” Ryan said.

“That’s right,” Linda said, recalling. “Your sister and the baby are NUDIs.”

“A what?” Spencer giggled, fixing his hair so she could catch a whiff of his cherry-almond shampoo.

“Normie Uncool with Discriminating Idiots,” she recited proudly.

Ryan applauded. “Nice memory.”

“So, Brendon, that video of you was real?”

“Unfortunately.” Brendon snapped another dandelion. “Something in my sweat triggers the transformation.”

Spencer sat up. “Speaking of which, is it too hot for you over here?” he asked, suddenly afraid that Gabe would show up and crash their date.

“Don’t worry. I’m cool.” He tapped the mini fan in his hoodie pocket. “Pun intended.”

Spencer laughed at his corny joke, but only because he was happy. He lay down and stared up at the white streaks in the sky. “I totally remember the first time I saw you,” he said to Linda.

Linda rolled onto her side and propped her head on her hand. “You do?”

Linda nodded. “It was the first day of school. You and Jac were talking behind me in the cafeteria line, and she said something about using a monster’s butt as a pencil holder.”

Her cheeks reddened. A flash startled both of them until they realized it was Ryan’s camera. “Oh, man, I remember that comment. It was so offensive.” Linda took off her green Sunglasses and began cleaning the lenses on her shirt.

“Why didn’t you say anything to her?”

She studied his face with her honey brown eyes while considering her answer. He sparked just a little.

She slid her glasses on. “Jac is kind of fragile.”

“Ha! If you think she’s fragile, how would you describe me?” he joked, pointing at his neck seams.

She laughed. “I guess I was afraid to set her off.”

Spencer rested his head on his hand, too, and then gazed out at the river. “Fear is boring.”

She snorted.

“What?”

“It’s just funny, that’s all.”

“What’s funny?”

“When I was younger, I wanted to be a monster so everyone would be afraid of me and I’d be afraid of nothing. And I was right. I mean, that’s kind of how it works, isn’t it? You’re not afraid of
anything, are you?”

Spencer thought about it and then shook his head.

“Wow.”

“But it’s not because I can scare normies. Please! They’re much more dangerous than I am. I’m not afraid because, well, I’ve only been alive a couple of months, and I’ve been hidden away in my dad’s lab for most of that time.”

“So?”

“So, I’m too curious to be afraid.”

Spencer scooted closer to her face and ran his fingers down her lenses.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s like those smudges,” he explained.

“What is?”

“Fear. It stops us from seeing clearly.”

Linda took off her glasses and gazed at Spencer as though they were in a romantic movie—specifically, the part where the girl realizes she’s falling in love.

“I wish you didn’t have to wear all that makeup,” she finally said. “Your green skin is so…”

“Mint?” He grinned.

“Yeah, mint.”

He sighed. “I wish normies knew what we were really like.”

Linda reached for his hand. He gave it to her. He rubbed his thumb over her black nail polish.

Another flash from Ryan’s camera and then “Omigod, hide!”

But it was too late.

“Freaks!” shouted a girl in the distance.

Spencer and Linda sat up with a start, then quickly lay down again as Ryan shoved them into the grass.

“Jac?” Linda mumbled at the sight of her ex-girlfriend. She was wearing an orange vest and dragging a giant trash bag through the park.

“Boyfriend-stealing zombie helpers!” she shouted at Ryan and Brendon, stabbing a juice box with her wooden harpoon. “This is so not over!” A man in a matching vest ran over and quickly moved her to another section of the park.

Ryan stood. “I don’t think she got a good look at you. Let’s get out of here before she realizes who you are.”

No one argued. They hurried off in silence.
Once they reached Front Street, Linda finally spoke.

“I think I can help.”

“I think she might need some space,” Ryan suggested politely.

“Not Jac. The RADs.” She pulled a business card out of her Cthulu wallet. “Remember that Ross Healy guy from Channel Two News?”

Ryan nodded.

“He asked me look out for good stories around school. Maybe he can do something about you guys.”

“Like what?” Spencer asked, secretly questioning her motives.

“A reality show?” Brendon said. “Like The Secret Life of the American Green ager?”

“No,” Linda said with a laugh. “Something serious. More like a news piece, to show people what you’re all about.”

Spencer considered this. A news story would reach a lot of people. But was it safe?

“You should direct it,” Ryan said, knocking her arm the way guys do. “You’ve been trying to make a monster movie. Why not make it an exposé instead?”

“I dunno if I’m ready for something that big,” Linda said humbly. “Besides, it’s not like Channel Two is just going to let some high schooler direct one of its shows. I’d be happy if they’d hire me to clean the camera lenses.”

“It’s safer than bringing an outsider on board,” Brendon said.

“That’s true,” Linda admitted, wiping the smudge marks off her glasses and slipping them on again.

“I dunno, you guys,” Spencer said, staring at the passing cars. Cars full of normies who were oblivious to the truth—a truth that would set the RADs free. But what if he messed up again? What if this exposé made things worse instead of better? What if someone got hurt? What if he didn’t try? What would his parents want him to do?

“On one condition,” he finally said.

They nodded expectantly.

“Everyone’s face would have to be blurred. Our identities could never be revealed.”

“I agree,” Linda said.

“You can interview me first,” Brendon said.

“I’ll go second,” Ryan said.

“I should probably call Ross before you get too excited,” Linda warned.

“Too late!” Spencer beamed. “I really think this is exactly what we need.”

“Me too.” Linda smiled as though she might have been referring to something else.
Spencer smiled back, catching a glimpse of himself in her lenses. He may have looked goofy in his jumpsuit, but he felt beautiful in his skin.

“We’d have to schedule around Sarah’s shoot.” Brendon said. “She’s really excited about her photoshoot.”

“Good point.”
Candlelight flickered against the stone walls in Sarah’s bedroom, providing a tomblike authenticity to her well-crafted jewelry display. Or, rather, the display she had asked the staff to create. She had texted Shaun and Lily while she tuned out a lecture on supply and demand during last-period economics class. But Mr. Virga would have been proud. Her text was supply and demand in its purest form. She had asked them to supply her with…

1. One hundred amber-scented candles
2. Three dry linen strips in a basket outside the bedroom
3. Polished stone floors
4. Raked sand on the island
5. Blue Egyptian water lilies floating in Nile
6. Three open sarcophagi outfitted with full-length mirrors
7. Teen Vogue playlist:
   a) “Poppin’ ” by Utada
   b) “So What” by P!nk
   c) “22” by Taylor Swift
   d) “Your Love Is My Drug” by Ke$h
   e) “Killer Queen” by Queen
   f) “Rude Boy” by Rihanna
8. A veggie-and-hummus platter for Frank
9. Lactose-free frappuccino for Brendon
10. Noncomedogenic dye-free moisturizer for Jamia
11. Organic beef jerky for Gerard
12. Jewelry hung on a linen-covered board
13. A washing basin with Egyptian cotton hand towels

…and had demanded it all be done by the time she got home from school.

Now, amid the heady scent of amber and the rhythmic claps in Utada’s song “Poppin’,” Sarah elbow-guided her blindfolded friends through her flickering chamber. She positioned them in front of the white wrapped board that showcased her twinkling treasures. It stood proudly before the three open sarcophagi like a highly decorated queen facing her handmaidens and chamberlain.

“Rea-dy?” she asked in a singsong voice.

They nodded anxiously.

“Okay, take off your blindfolds!”

The quintet pulled the linen strips off their eyes and dropped them onto the stone floor. Miu-Miu and Penny-Lane paddled over to claim their new toys and hurried off before the birds could steal them.

“Sarah!” Gerard gasped. “They’re even more amazing in real life.”

“That’s what he said.” Sarah giggled.

“Can I touch?” Jamia asked, whipping off her polka-dot gloves and reaching for the glow-in-the-dark moonstone ring.
“That’s what he said,” Frank blurted.

They all cracked up. But no one laughed harder than Frank, now free to let his freak fangs fly.

It was an old routine, something that brought them to giggle-tears back when they were in grade school. And it kept on delivering. The familiarity of it all put Sarah at ease. Her friends were back.

After washing their hands in the soapy basin, they reached for their favorite pieces and began trying them on. Frank crunched on celery sticks while fastening and unfastening the gold relics with the patience of a true stylist.

Without hesitation, Sarah lifted the jewel-encrusted crown and lowered it onto her head. The weight grounded her bare feet to the stone. Fused the tips of her black bangs to the tops of her lashes. Signified her position in the social hierarchy.

“Fang-tastic,” Frank said, recording the look in a papyrus notebook. “I say no earrings. Just that long snake bracelet and you’re done.” He was so confident behind closed doors—vivacious, opinionated, and strong. A totally different Frank from the shy, sullen boy he was at school. And for a split second Sarah saw the value in living openly. Liberation was Windex for the soul. It let the light shine through. But why dwell? Nothing was ever going to change.

“I agree,” Sarah said, admiring the completion of her first look in the mirrored sarcophagus.

“I’m all over these,” Debby dragged out, holding the pear-shaped jade earrings up against her ginger waves.

“Add these and you’re good,” Frank said, handing her the hammered cuffs. “Oh, and make sure you wax your arms right before the shoot.”

“I’ll book Anya right now. What’s the date?” Gerard asked, popping a piece of organic beef jerky into her mouth.

Sarah’s stomach lurched. Teen Vogue didn’t even know they existed yet. “Um, October fourteenth,” she muttered, and then reached for her goblet of pomegranate iced tea.

“Morning or afternoon?”

“Evening.”

“Will they be providing hair and makeup?”

“Of course.”

“Wardrobe?”

“Yes.”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“Will they give us notes so we can take the day off from school?”

“I’m sure they would.”

“What about transportation?”
“What about it?”

“To and from?”

“For the love of Isis! Stop talking so I can think,” Sarah snapped, wondering how she could have possibly forgotten to confirm the girls.

“What’s there to think about?” Gerard asked.

“Nothing. Sorry. I’m good.” Sarah whipped out her phone, quickly deleted some annoying cry-for-attention text from Fran, and fired off an emergency message to Bob.

TO: Bob

sept 28, 7:40 PM

SARAH: PLS CONTACT TEEN VOGUE ASAP. FORGET NORMIE MODELS. THEY NEED TO HIRE GERARD, BRENDON, DEBBY, AND JAMIA INSTEAD. FRANK AS STYLIST ASSISTANT. NEED CONFIRMATION NOW. ^^^^^^^^^^^^^

“What a beauty!” Jamia called from somewhere in the room, her voice muffled.

“Where is she?” Sarah asked Brendon and Gerard.

They shrugged, craning their necks.

All of a sudden, the sarcophagus in the far corner of the room opened with a slow creak. Jamia stepped out admiring the moonstone ring.

“What were you doing in my armoire?” Sarah asked with a charmed grin.

“I wanted to see if the stone really glowed in the dark,” Jamia said. “And it does. It dad well does! Like a giant pearly-pink clump of tobiko,” she said, referencing the flying-fish eggs that hatched her brethren. “I’m wearing this one for sure.”

Ping!

Sarah checked her phone.

Letitbegoodletitbegoodletitbegood…

TO: Sarah

sept 28, 7:44 PM

BOB: EDITOR NEEDS TO SEE THEIR MODELING PORTFOLIOS AND COMP CARDS BEFORE BOOKING.

“Ugh!” Sarah pressed down harder on the crown and summoned the strength of her ancestors before responding. What would Cleopatra VII do?

TO: Bob

sept 28, 7:44 PM

SARAH: NO DEAL. TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT. MY JEWELS, MY RULES.
A pair of gray Egyptian nightjars flew out of Sarah’s sleep loft to sip from the red muddy water of the Nile. If only they could appreciate how stress-free their lives were.

“You said the shoot was in the evening, right?” Gerard asked, pulling a red and blue encased iPhone from her red leather cross-body bag.

Sarah nodded at the screen of her iPhone, willing Bob to hurry and text back some good news.

“Hi, Anya, it’s Gerard. I’m going to be modeling for Teen Vogue and will need a full body wax the morning of October fourteenth.” She checked her long striped nails. “And a nail art manicure too. Something Egyptian. Please call me back to confirm at—”

“See if they can fit me in for a hydrating treatment,” Jamia called.

“I’ll take a steam,” Frank said.

Gerard nodded and continued adding to the message.

Ping!

TO: Sarah

sept 28, 7:53 PM

BOB: OKAY AS LONG AS THEY CAN PHOTOSHOP. THEY INSIST THAT THE GIRLS BE PROFESSIONAL. ANY MISHAPS AND THE SHOOT IS OFF.

“Yes!” shouted Sarah.

The Egyptian nightjars flapped back up to the sleep loft.

“Were you just reading Fran’s text too?” Jamia waved her phone.

“Huh? What text?”

“About being on TV and changing the world.”

Frank and Gerard checked their screens.

“We’re blowing up!” Frank announced. “First magazines, now TV!”

“I reckon we should hire agents,” Jamia said.

Gerard hitched her purse over her shoulder. “I reckon we should get going. The meeting is in three minutes.”

Jamia slid on her gloves.

“Wait,” Sarah said. “You’re not leaving now, are you?”

“Why not?” Frank asked, pulling a violet cashmere turtleneck over his head.

“Because”—Sarah splayed her arms—“we’re kind of in the middle of something here.”

“We’re done.” Frank waved his notepad as proof. “I have everyone’s looks. There’s nothing left to do.”
“What about pose practice? And squint-prevention exercises?”

“You’re joking, right?” Gerard said flatly.

“No.”

Flickering flames illuminated their blank stares.

“In case you forgot, we’ve never done this before. And if this shoot doesn’t go well, they’ll cancel the feature. Cairo couture will be out for another five thousand years, and my jewelry designs will never take off. This is my big chance.”

Just saying those words made her stomach roil.

“I totally get it, Sarah,” Jamia said, hating to argue. “But what about my big chance?” She hung the moonstone ring back on its hook. “You have dynamite connections. But what do I have? I want to be a pro surfer. Who’s going to sponsor a scaly girl in gloves?”

Frank snorted.

“Things need to change for us, Sarah,” Jamia said, scooping up some Nile water and rubbing it on the back of her neck. “Normies need to start accepting us, or we’ll never land our dream jobs.”

Sarah rolled her eyes.

“Aren’t you tired of hiding? Don’t you want to be normal?” Frank asked, spearing a couple of cherry tomatoes on his fangs.

Brendon laughed. “Frank, you couldn’t be normal if you tried.”

“There’s nothing special about normal,” Sarah insisted with a slight lift of her chin.

“Didn’t it feel good to go to that dance dressed as our real selves?” Jamia asked gently.

“It wasn’t worth the price we paid, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“What if there wasn’t any price?” Gerard tried.

“There’s always a price,” Sarah said, shocked by her own cynicism. Was it change she opposed, or a changing of the guard?

“I moved out here with my Auntie because of my parents,” said Jamia, suddenly very serious. “They said there was a killer RAD community here, and the RADs were going to change things. They wanted me to grow up better than they did. And ever since I got here, I haven’t had the heart to tell them bunk. My e-mails and postcards are full of bodgy lies.” Jamia walked to the door. “So I reckon we should give them a listen.” Her cute duck walk suddenly seemed annoying to Sarah.

“After the trouble those three got us into last time?”

“We’re just going to listen,” Frank said, following Jamia. “Come on.”

Gerard stood between them, fidgeting with the zipper on her purse, obviously torn. “We should work on our poses.”

Sarah grinned approvingly. She could always count on Gee to have her back.
“Not to be a stick in the mud, but we have two weeks for that.” Jamia placed her hand on the scarab doorknob. “And this meeting sounds important.”

“More important than Teen Vogue?” Sarah stomped her foot, wondering when Jamia had become so assertive.

Frank burst out laughing. No one else saw the humor, though.

“Oh.” He shivered. “I thought you were kidding.”

“Thought wrong.” Sarah folded her arms across her black mesh sweater and jutted out her hip. The sudden movement caused the crown on her head to tip forward, but she caught it before it fell. Unfortunately, the same could not be said about her social status. “Fine,” she said with a defeated sigh. “I’ll listen.”

She hung up her royal jewels and followed her friends to Spencer’s house, all the while silently swearing it would be the very last time.
RADs emerged from the starlit maze of trees and marveled at the sight of the Steins’ secret waterfall. Fran welcomed each of them with a thanks-for-coming hug and offered those with blankets a seat on the mist-covered grass. Those without joined Ryan on the stony ledge of the frothing pool. The tangy smell of dinner lingered on their clothes, and yet their eyes were full of hunger. But what were they craving? Change? Revenge? Their own MTV reality show? Ryan flipped up the hood of his black, fleece lined sweatshirt and buried his hands in his pockets. He’d know soon enough.

“Hey,” he said warmly to a girl with white cat-eye sunglasses, red zipper earrings, and a bob of blonde hair. “I’m Ryan.”

“Keltie.” She smiled. Then she pulled a thick day planner from her tote and crossed 8 PM MEETING off her three-page to-do list.

Others joined them on the ledge and whispered cautiously among themselves.

“Not bad for short notice, huh?” Jon said, high-fiving Ryan. “And it was all your idea,” he shouted over the sound of the pounding water.

Several heads turned when he said that. Once they saw he was referring to Ryan, they turned away and began whispering.

“It was not,” he insisted loudly. If this idea was a bust, he certainly didn’t need the RADs knowing who to blame.

“Was so.” He tossed back his floppy brown bangs. “What did you have for dessert tonight? Humble pie?”

Ryan rolled his eyes at his corny grandpa humor “Ha-ha.” He quickly changed the subject. “Looks like you’ve been drawing.”

“Just messing around.” He leaned back, dipped his fingertips in the rushing water, and dried them on his jeans. “While you and the twins were getting organized, Linda, Spencer, and I were working on graphics ideas and titles.” He leaned close and whispered, “We’re thinking of calling it ‘The Ghoul Next Door.’ What do you think?”

“I love it.” Ryan beamed.

“So does Ross.” Jon grinned.

Ryan’s insides inflated with joy. “Yessss,” he meant to shout. But it sounded more like singing. Clear, pure, beautiful singing. It was a sound he hadn’t heard in years. His elation was so uplifting that he leaned forward and hugged Jon to keep from floating away.

“Get a tomb,” someone snarled in passing.

Ugh! Sarah!

Flanked by her friends, the queen bee-otch trolled for seats with a reluctant shuffle. Keltie stood and offered Sarah her spot on the ledge. Without hesitation, Sarah took it. One after another, five spaces opened up, and her friends claimed them. Had they paid these girls to warm the stone until they arrived? Or were they just that intimidating? Like Ryan had to ask. He’d spent her whole life

Brendon plopped down right next to Ryan and flopped himself onto both Jon and Ryan’s laps.

Suddenly, the falls stopped falling, and the remaining water gurgled out like a high-speed bathtub. Silence—sharp and jarring—hit the group like a smack.

“Much better.” Spencer flashed a thumbs-up to his parents, who were standing at the back of the blanket-patched lawn with a remote control. They wanted to trust him. They said they did. But it was obvious from their tight grins and pained expressions that they weren’t quite there yet. And that they were going to hang around to see what happened.

“What I have to say cannot be shouted,” Spencer said softly.

Everyone scooted closer to hear.

“First, thanks for coming on such short notice.” He sat and began swinging his legs over the wet cliff. He was still wearing his flight suit and makeup, but his scarf was gone. With every kick, the moon found his delicate neck bolts and kissed them with its cool white light. “Last week I tried to show the normies at school how voltage we are, and, well, we all know how that turned out.”

Snickers swelled and then settled.

“But now, thanks to Ryan, we have another chance.”

Crap.

“The normie?” chirped a gecko-faced boy seated on a bamboo mat. “Not again!”

“Stop talking!” Ryan snapped, putting his irritation into his voice. Surprisingly, his mouth snapped shut. “I’ve said it countless times. I thought I was a normie. Turns out my mom was a siren. The only reason any of you hate me is because bitch-tits mcgee won’t stop turning everything into ‘Let’s ostracize the one guy who’s willing to help,’ all because I kissed her girlfriend to get back at her for playing with Brendon, and by extension Frank’s and my hearts.”

“Ryan’s right. You’re all being discriminating idiots because some outdated mummy girl says to.”

Ryan beamed a thank-you smile from one side of the lawn to the other so Hayley would see it from wherever she was.

“Ka,” Sarah said, coughing quickly.

Gee rolled his eyes and rubbed Frank’s shoulder soothingly.

“Neither of them are wrong Sarah.” He said softly. “You’ve been bitchy with all of us since Ryan got even with you.”

After years of sitting down, Ryan finally stood.

Dozens of eyes fixed on him. Glowing in the darkness like bulbs on a Christmas tree—some green, some red, most yellow. They watched him expectantly, waiting for him to move them to a place they had never been before. Just like the audiences that used to wait for hum to sing. Only this time, instead of drawing on a voice that had once come so easily, Ryan was forced to use the one that never had. He was stepping into the spotlight to defend himself—a role he had never imagined choosing. And yet there he was, front and center.
“I get why you don’t trust me,” he began, shaking. “And I guess if I were you, I’d have a hard time with it too. But I’m on your side. I thought I proved that when I took Hayley to the hospital, but I guess it wasn’t enough. So I’ll keep trying.” The more he spoke up, the lighter her lungs felt. His voice became clearer, smoother, and silkier. Like oil in an unused car engine, it just needed to be turned on and used.

“Why do you care so much?” asked Sarah, sounding bored.

“Because I know how it feels to surrender a seat to someone who thinks she’s better. I know how it feels to want ‘normal’ so badly you hide the qualities that make you special. Most of all, I know how it feels to change those things. And that’s the most degrading feeling.”

Debby and Keltie, obviously moved by Ryan’s admission, nodded in agreement but Debby lowered her head so sleepily that her sunglasses slipped off and fell to the ground. Embarrassed, she bent down, one vertebra at a time, picked them up, and then slowly backed into the darkness.

“So, please, trust me,” Ryan continued. “And when you stand up for yourselves, let me stand with you. So together we can—”

Everyone started applauding. Their shining eyes were moist with compassion; Ryan’s were moist with relief. Was it really that easy? Smiling at Brendon, he sat and exhaled sixteen years’ worth of angst into the starry sky.

Once the applause had faded, Spencer introduced the “voltage girl” who would help the RADs take their first steps toward standing. Linda Ignarro came out waving from the canopy of trees and was greeted with an audible gasp. She gasped back when she saw the illuminated eyes of her audience.

Frozen with awe, she addressed them from the back of the lawn. “Wow. Oh my gosh, this is so awesome,” she murmured.

They spun around to face her.

“So…” She clapped her hands together nervously. “Um, I have some great news…. Wait, I should probably introduce myself. My name is Linda Ignarro—oh, you probably know that, since we go to the same school. I’m the girl who accidentally ripped Spencer’s head off and then freaked, which you also probably know because it’s been all over the news.”

She snickered.

They didn’t.

“Anyway, while I was in the hospital, one of the news guys gave me his card and, well, long story short, Ryan, Jon, Brendon, and Spencer thought it would be a good idea if I made a documentary about you so people would see how cool you are, and Ross, the reporter, agreed. So he’s letting me direct it, and he’s going to put in on Channel Two during the Spotlight on Oregon week. Any questions?”

Hands shot up. It looked like a mass audition for a deodorant commercial.

“Um, yes, you with the sunglasses.”

“What’s up, Linda?”

“Oh, hey, Lindsay, I couldn’t see you in the dark. What’s up?”
“I was just wondering why you want to do this. It’s not like you have anything to prove.”

“This film combines my two favorite things in the world, movies and mons—I mean, RADs.” She paused and looked up at Spencer. “And now that I’m getting to know you, I want to help.”

“Cool,” Lindsay said, satisfied.

“That’s it?” Sarah sounded aghast. “You’re okay with that?”

“Yup,” Lindsay answered flatly.

“What do we have to do to be in it?” asked someone else.

“Agree to be interviewed. Share photos, stories, hopes, dreams…” explained Linda.

“Sounds dangerous,” someone whispered.

“All of your faces will be blurred, so no one will know who you are. Your identities will be completely concealed. It’s a first step toward showing people that you’re harmless.”

“Hey, Chickadee, will our relatives all over the world be able to see it?” asked Jamia.

“It’s just airing locally for now. But I can burn copies for you if you want.”

“Killer!”

The questions kept coming. “Where will you film it?”

“My shed. It’s completely private.”

“What’s it gonna be called?”

“ ‘The Ghoul Next Door.’ ”

A burst of laughter said the crowd liked it.

“Will you do any audio-only interviews—you know, for those of us who according to normie lore, don’t show up on film?” asked Pete.

“Sure! I’ll show other images while you’re talking.”

“Fang-tastic!”

“When does it air?”

“We were waiting on Sarah to tell us when her Teen Vogue shoot was going to be to set the date but Ross says before the 15th,” Brett said. “Oh, and if you’re going to be in the show, you have to be in the studio when it airs. They want you to answer questions from the viewers, live.”

“Then everyone will know who they are,” Vincent pointed out in his deep voice.

“I’ll make sure those shots are blurred too. And… we’ll get some security guards to keep the room private—no one will see you exit or enter.”

“I think my friend Taylor might know a good company we can go through!” Pete smiled. “Hell maybe Demi and—”
“I’m penpals with one of the kids on stranger things.” Brendon said suddenly. “I can ask Noah if Winona’s got suggestions!”


“Yeah?” Pete said, confused. “Tay’s been Ryan’s and my friend since Ryan and I were 8. And we met Demi when we were 12.”

“I actually have no clue how I got Noah Schnapp as my penpal but we talk a lot.” Brendon admitted.

“Oh my Ra.” Sarah breathed. “You guys are mini celebrities.”

“So are you.” Ryan pointed out. “A whole bunch of academics quote your mom all the time and I remember that my old school had a Sarah Orzechowski Fan Club. I was part of it.”

Ryan’s admission seemed to make Sarah stop for a second.

“Really?” She asked, confused.

“Well yeah.” Ryan ducked his head. “I saw a picture of you on Hillary’s Instagram and thought you were really pretty and hopefully nicer than my classmates.”

“You know what.” Sarah smiled. “Count me in. As long as it doesn’t interfere with my photoshoot.”
Sarah was leaning her head on her hand, internally bopping along to Janelle Monae on one the tapes Ryan had given her. Sarah smiled.

*He’s not so bad.*

The bell rang and Ryan walked up to her as she left the classroom.

“Um, Sarah. I need your help.” He said awkwardly.

“With what?” She asked.

“What are Brendon’s favorite flowers?” He ducked his head, his hair creating a curtain between him and the world.

“Sunflowers and roses.” Sarah said honestly. “And Egyptian blue lilies.” She tapped her chin and smiled.

“Are you trying to woo him?” She smiled teasingly.

“Yeah.” Ryan bobbed his hair. “Pete’s gonna take me to get my haircut and Hillary’s helping me find something that isn’t a hoodie or a band shirt.” Sarah’s eyes lit up.

“I have an idea.” Sarah grinned. “Come over after school. I think my brother Steve might have left some of his old clothing from high school that would definitely fit you.” Ryan relaxed and smiled.

“Thank you so much Sarah!” He smiled. “Next time any of Pete’s famous friends are in the state, I’ll get you tickets. Specially like Taylor or Demi.”

“Get me Bruno Mars tickets and we have a deal.” Sarah bargained.

“Oh hell yeah. Bruno’s cool.” Ryan grinned. “Sarah, I think this might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Ryan and Sarah were walking down the steps discussing celebrities. “Hurried footsteps closed in behind them.

“I think ve missed heem,” said a disappointed girl.

“I knew we should have split up,” slurped her friend. “What if Carlie and Maddie found him first?”

“Vatever, ve’re the ones in drama club. Ve’ll nail this. Ah-ah-ahhhh!”

Sarah turned to see two ninth graders dressed in black unitards and capes. Their faces were pasty white, and their lips cherry red. If it hadn’t been for their wax fangs, one might have thought they’d walked face-first into a wet painting of the Canadian flag.

Instead of following Ryan to the crosswalk, Sarah stopped. “Excuse me. Why are you dressed like that?”

The blond—who had obviously sprayed her hair black, because there was a yellow patch in the back...
—removed her fangs and leaned close to whisper, “Haven’t you heard?” She smelled like aerosol and cherry-scented lip gloss.

Sarah lifted one eyebrow and shook her head.

“Linda Ignarro is casting for a reality show about monsters. It’s being picked up by the CW.”

“I heard Fox,” said the naturally dark-haired vannabe.

“But you’re not monsters,” Sarah said, searching the thinning campus for a possible explanation.

“Yes, ve are.” The vannabe vinked and then removed her fangs.

“It sounds like another practical joke,” Sarah said, pretending not to notice Ryan waving her over.

“How’d you hear about this?”


“Just don’t be a vampire,” the brunette stated.

“How ’bout a pretty witch?” the blond suggested. “We saw a ton of witchy stuff in the costume closet. The drama room should still be unlocked if you want to take a look.”

“Or an evil Barbie?” Natural Brown countered.

“Or the bogeyman.” Blond Patch laughed.

“Omigod, yes!” Her friend cracked up. “You can hang bok choy from your nose.”

“Bok choy? Why bok choy? That’s so random!”

“I love saying it. Bok choy, bok choy, bok choy.”

They cracked up.

Sarah glared. If her head could have spun any faster, she would have taken off like a helicopter. “How’d you hear about this show?”

Blond Patch reached inside her tan leather backpack and handed Sarah a crumpled flyer.

You know that girl in your grade… huge glasses and wears really tight revealing clothing… lately has been trailing Linda’s ex, texting?”

Sarah nodded. Audrey that little bitch!

“She gave this to me during lunch.”

Sarah crumpled up the flyer. “This is just another practical joke. Trust me.”

“Whatever,” said Blond Patch, reattaching her fangs. “Your losssss.”

The girls hurried off in search of fame while Sarah tossed the flyer into the trash with a swish that would have impressed Lindsay, had she seen it. She caught up to Ryan and yanked out his right earbud. “Ready.”

“What was that all about?” Ryan asked, standing.
“Some normie freaks who want to be in Linda’s movie,” Cleo huffed. “I can’t believe Brendon’s evil ex is helping Jac screw us over.”

“Brendon’s evil ex?” Ryan asked as he crossed the street.

“Audrey Kitching. She tried to isolate him and almost ruined his and my friendship.” Sarah explained.

“Oh yeesh.” Ryan shivered. The two proceeded down to Sarah’s house.
Then We Should Feed Our Jewelry To The Sea

From the outside, Linda’s backyard shed had less hang-appeal than a frayed bungee cord. Relegated to the far end of the square lawn—past the tree house, grill, and tether-ball—it was the shy kid at the party watching everyone else have fun on the dance floor. Its worn cedar siding was masked by cobwebs, crusty leaves, overgrown weeds, and bird poo. The windows were streaked with mud. It was hardly the kind of place a gentleman took a lady on their first date. But Linda was no ordinary lady. And this was no ordinary date.

“Here it is,” said Linda, sliding open the shed door.

A pair of glowing red eyes flew toward them from the back of the shed and stopped dead in front of Spencer’s face. If he hadn’t seen the fake black rubber bat bobbing up and down on its zip line, he might have sparked until Thanksgiving.

“Cute,” he said tickling its distended belly. He saw the words MADE IN CHINA stamped under its wing.

Linda smiled, relieved. “Jac hated Radar,” she said, shaking her head at the improbability of it all. “She hated everything about this place.”

She lifted her arm to tug the pull chain that dangled from the bald red lightbulb.

Spencer inhaled her vanilla-scented deodorant all the way down to his belly.

“Whaddaya think?” she asked amid the hellish glow.

Had there been a more fitting word than voltage, Spencer would have used it. Instead, he fell back onto her black futon and looked around in awestruck silence, allowing his wide eyes to say it all.

Shoulder-high stacks of classic horror VHS tapes had been glued to form pedestals, on which were displayed her favorite monster busts: Frankenstein, Dracula, Godzilla, Sasquatch, a zombie, a werewolf, the Loch Ness monster, Medusa, and the headless horseman with a magazine cutout of Finn Wolfhard taped to his neck. The walls were papered from top to bottom with vintage Frankenstein movie posters. Arranged chronologically and protected by high-gloss shellac, the artist renderings of Grandpa Stein made the shed feel more like a scrapbook than a scrap heap. More important, they assured Spencer that Linda didn’t just accept him—she had been waiting for him.

“This is like a mini museum,” he finally said.

“I’ve been collecting since I was seven,” she said, sitting beside her. “It’s weird, but if you think about it, I knew your family before you did.”

Spencer angled his body to face her. Linda angled to face him. She rested her elbow on the back of the couch and allowed her hand to dangle alongside his chin. Black nail polish, a silver and opal skull ring, and a green watch face set atop a thick leather cuff; it felt as if she’d been built just for him.

“You know what would look great in here?”

Linda shook her head.

“My grandparents wedding outfits.”
“You mean the suit you wore at the dance? That was—”

Spencer nodded. “Yup. The real Frankenstein’s,” he said, charged with the promise of her excitement.

He held his smile, expecting her to gasp. Studied her doe brown eyes waiting for that spark of recognition. Checked her blood-red lips anticipating a jaw drop. But Linda hardly moved at all. She just gazed at him through the roughly cut frame of her bangs the way one might gaze at a beautiful sunset, with an expression frozen somewhere between admiration and gratitude.

Linda leaned toward him. Spencer lifted his face to meet hers. If only he had been wearing that strangely comfortable Victorian suit instead of a wool torture device… or maybe jeans and his green day shirt. Or some shorts and a tank top... But all that would have to wait until the RAD revolution was won. Not that Linda seemed to mind. Her lips were approaching his with one thing in mind…

Spencer quickly checked his neck seams while every crackling watt of electricity inside him seemed to be pressing against the front of his body, pushing him closer to her. As if he needed pushing. His eyelids closed, his lips parted, and his hands rested gently on her sides.

“Hey,” said Dallon Weekes, barging in through the sliding door, Breezy Douglass on his tail.

Spencer and Linda broke apart, currents of displaced desire undulating between them, unsure of where to go.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, dragging two six-foot-long light stands behind him. “Not late enough.

“We couldn’t fit everything on my scooter.” Breezy huffed, pushing her now black hair out of her eyes. She seemed to have abandoned the old school look in favor of a TARDIS dress and a very green bow headband.

“No worries,” Linda said, getting up to help her best-friends-slash-production-assistants. “Our first interview subject isn’t here yet, so…”

“Cool.” Wiping his forehead with the sleeve of his gold sweater, the giraffe-like brunette sighed. “Where do you want this?”

The trio spent the next fifteen minutes transforming the shed into a film studio. They covered the fake-blood-smeared windows with black felt. Pulled the futon away from the wall to achieve depth. Slid Radar the bat back into his starting position. And moved all eight VHS pillars into the background of the shot.

Once everything was set, Breezy powered up her lights. Their set snapped to life.

“Dude, this is gonna be so insane,” he said, admiring his work.

“You know this is top secret, right?” asked Spencer, even though Linda had assured her endlessly that her normie buddy and his girlfriend could be trusted. “No one can know where we’re shooting or who we’re shooting. Ever.”

“Why do you think I was so late?” Dallon asked. “I was being stalked by half the drama department,” he offered. “It looked like I was being chased down the street by a pack of vampires in one of Pete’s videos.”
“Man, I wish I’d been there.” Linda giggled. “How’dja ditch ’em?”

“I hopped on the public bus.”

Linda laughed. “Where’d you take it?”

“Across the river. I had to take call Breezy to bring back, or I would have been even later.”

“Oh, man, that’s classic.” Linda high-fived her buddy and then turned to Spencer. “Trust him now?”

Spencer was about to apologize when someone knocked.

“Who is it?” Linda called.

“Jon and Brendon.”

Breezy slid the shed door open and welcomed the first two subjects inside. The sight of Brendon weighted Spencer down with guilt. Somewhere behind his thick red glasses and swingy floppy bangs, Gabe was waiting to come out. And when he did, he would expect to find Spencer, not Spencer and Linda.

But what was he supposed to do? Time-share his boyfriend with Ryan? Advocate global warming? Deny his feelings to spare his? Thankfully, Brendon hadn’t broken a sweat in almost a week, so it hadn’t become an issue yet. But summer was only nine months away. He would have to tell Gabe the truth eventually.

“Killer space,” Brendon said, helping himself to a seat on the futon.

“Where’s Ryan?” Spencer asked.

“His parents are forcing him to have a family game night. She slept through the last one or something,” Brendon said, pulling out his phone to send a quick text. “He says he’ll try to come later. So, how does this work?” he asked, squinting against the glare of the bright white lights.

“Spencer will ask the questions from behind the camera, Breezy and I’ll shoot, and Dallon will do audio,” Linda explained, suddenly sounding very professional.

“Make sure you look at him, not directly into the lens. Don’t worry—your name won’t be mentioned, and your face will be blurred.”

“Ready?” Spencer asked, unfolding his list of ten interview questions.

Brendon pushed back the sleeves of his white blazer & lilac hoodie and crossed his legs. The rubber toe of his black Converse was decorated with a giant moon was drawn in lime green sharpie.

“Ready,” he said.

“What makes you special?” Spencer began.

“You could say I have a split personality—there are two people living inside me.”

“How did you end up this way?”

“My grandfather was Dr. Jekyll. He became addicted to a potion that gave him courage to act out his darkest fantasies. It altered his genetic code and was passed down to his son, my dad. Traces of it are in my blood. When I sweat, it comes out. The chemicals in my sweat trigger something in my brain.
That trigger activates Gabe. He’s my other half.”

“How long have you known about this?”

“About a week.”

“When did you first notice that you were different?”

“I always knew I had blackouts, but I never knew I actually turned into a party guy named Gabe Saporta, until my boyfriend showed me a video of the transformation actually happening. I was blown away.” Brendon began shaking his foot anxiously. Breezy panned down to capture his stress.

“What is the best part about being a RAD?”

“Being part of a community that looks out for each other.”

“What is the worst part about being a RAD?”

“Hiding.”

“Do you consider yourself or Gabe dangerous?”

“Only to each other. My mom hasn’t told him about me yet because she’s not sure how he’ll take the news. He might get jealous and try to keep me away or something. Also, I have a feeling Gabe doesn’t study as much as I do. So he could do some serious damage to my GPA. And I’m not that into parties, so I might be a drain on his social life. But other than that kind of thing … no, not really.”

“How would your life change if you didn’t have to hide your identity?”

“I’d play gigs with my boyfriend and his band ’cause I wouldn’t have to worry about sweating. I’d hang out at the beach. My mom would be able to turn on the heat in the winter. Oh”—Brendon reached into the pocket of his blazer and pulled out his mini fan—“and I’d ditch this.” He turned it on and held the plastic rotating blades to his face.

Spencer smiled and gave him a thumbs-up. The show-and-tell was great.

“Why did you agree to be in this film?”

“I want normies—uh—regular people to see that I’m a good person who is tired of hiding and tired of feeling ashamed of who I am.”

“Thanks, Beebo, we’re done.”

“I thought you said there were ten questions,” he said. “That was only nine.”

Linda lowered her camera. “You have to ask him the last one. It will be the best part of the show.”

“I think we’re good,” Spencer said, folding and refolding his questions until they could be folded no more. “We have six more interviews tonight. We have to stay on schedule.”

“What was the question?” Brendon asked.

Frankie lowered her gaze.

“We were kinda hoping you would, you know, let us talk to Gabe,” Linda said.
Brendon’s ankle stopped jiggling. “You serious?”

Spencer wanted to jump through the felt-covered windows and bolt. Breaking up with Gabe would be hard enough. Did it really need to be done that night? In front of everyone?

“Dude, the transformation will be the hottest part of the show,” Dallon added.

“It would be cool,” Breezy said. “Normies would see that even at your worst, they have nothing to fear.”

Spencer squirmed. He was uncomfortable with this, but Breezy and Dallon did have a point. It would be good for the show. And good for the show meant good for the RADs.

Brendon leaned back and considered this.

Spencer, Linda, Breezy, and Dallon waited silently.

“On one condition,” Brendon finally said.

Spencer clenched his fists. He knew what was coming next.

“Break up with Gabe.”

“Break up?” Linda asked, shocked. “What are you talking about?”

“Please,” Spencer rolled his eyes. “I didn’t have my head on straight back then. It was a total rebound thing.”

“Well, then I agree with Brendon,” Linda said. “You should definitely break up with him.”

“Why?” Spencer giggled.

Linda’s pale cheeks burned red. He had his answer.

“Fine,” he agreed. “Crank up the lights.”

The shed was thick with heat. The boys, Linda, and Breezy watched Brendon like a pot, but he refused to boil.

“Try jumping jacks,” Linda suggested. The camera sat on a tripod, facing Brendon and ready for action. Linda was leaning against the wall, her cheeks flushed and her hair damp with sweat. Brendon jumped. The shed shook. Linda made him stop.

“What about push-ups?” Spencer suggested.

Brendon obediently got down on the ground and pushed himself up.

“How are you dry?” Dallon asked, leaning against the blacked-out window and fanning his face with a bus schedule. “I can hardly breathe.” He fanned harder, kicking up the dust from the window ledge. His eyelids fluttered, his nostrils twitched, and… ah… ah… ah-choo! He sneezed with gale force, unleashing a stream of fire. Before it could do any damage, it retracted back inside his mouth like slurped spaghetti. Breezy’s skin was going redder by the minute.

“I- I can’t breathe!” She began waving her hands in her face and hyperventilating. “I think I’m gonna
be sick!” Spencer shot up and guided her to the door. She immediately began retching and becoming coated in ice crystals.

“Holy shit Breezy.” Spencer went wide eyed.

“What?” She swiped her hand across her forehead.

“You’re growing ice crystals!”

“Yeah. It’s been going on for a few weeks now.” She shrugged.

“Breezy, you’re a rad.” Spencer grinned.

“I’m a rad!” She squealed.

“Stay right here.” Spencer instructed. He went back inside.

“Holy shit,” Spencer pointed at the futon.

Brendon, sweat-soaked and stunned, looked straight ahead while his eyes shifted from hazel to black, black to hazel, hazel to black, and finally to a dark brown. His brown layers darkened to a coffee black, and a light dusting of stubble formed around his jawline.

*That’s new,* thought Spencer.

Gabe had arrived.

“Smells like burned toast in here,” he said, pushing his hair back. He took off Brendon’s white blazer, balled it up, and tossed it across the shed. “Firecracker!” He stood. “Where have you been?”

Stunned by the new physical transformation, Spencer spluttered to answer. “Uh, where have you been?” he countered.

Gabe scratched the back of his head.

“Someone’s a little needy.” He smirked. “We just saw each other last night. Before I blacked out…”

“Actually, it was almost a week ago.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to make up stories. I think it’s cute that you missed me. I missed you too.” He paused. “Wait, what’s Jac’s girlfriend doing here? What’s with the camera?”

“We’re making a movie about special people, and you’re special, so we wanted to ask you some questions.”

“As long as I get to ask you one when we’re done,” he said, rolling up the sleeves of Brendon’s hoodie and settling into the futon. Unlike his other half, Gabe splayed his arms over the back of the couch, a rock star between two invisible supermodels.

“Okay,” Spencer agreed, hands shaking. “Here we go.” He fumbled nervously through his notes, smearing makeup on the edge of the paper. “So, um, what makes you special?”

“I’m fun, I’m laid-back, and I get good grades without studying.”

“How did you end up this way?”
“One part genes, two parts charm.”

“Genes? Whose genes?” he pressed.

“Old man Hyde’s. The man was a mad partier. I read his journals and, believe me, he was out there.”

Spencer considered telling Gabe about Jackson right then and there. Imagine the footage! Oprah would have done it. But it wasn’t Spencer’s place. It was his mother’s. Their mother’s. All Spencer could do was skip a few questions and pray Gabe didn’t see Brendon’s interview when it aired.

“Why did you agree to be in this film?”

“Because you agreed to let me ask you a question.”

Spencer snickered. He was charming.

“Okay, what’s your question?” He gestured for Linda to turn off his camera. She did immediately. He steeled himself for the inevitable, reminding his guilty conscience that hurting him would help Brendon, Ryan, Linda, and himself. The benefits outweighed the costs in a mega way. Besides, he wasn’t around that much anyway, so...

“I was wondering,” Gabe asked, taking off Brendon’s glasses. His brown eyes were brimming with sincerity. Suddenly, it didn’t matter how well Spencer rationalized breaking his heart. He couldn’t bring himself to do it. He didn’t deserve it.

“Firecracker?”

“Yes,” Spencer said to the rounded toe of his red high tops. His bolts were starting to itch.

“Do you mind if we see other people?”

“What?” Spencer burst out laughing.

“I know you weren’t expecting this,” he said, reaching for his hand. “I’m sorry. It’s just that my life is kind of all over the place right now, and I never know where I’m going to be from one minute to the next. And that’s not fair to you.”

Linda and Dallon snickered. Spencer could hear Breezy wheezing with laughter just outside.

“I totally understand.” Spencer smiled. He opened the barn door, desperate for a rush of cool air and the return of Brendon.

But before the transformation occurred, he lifted his finger and gave Gabe a spark right on the cheek. He rubbed the tiny red spot happily. “What was that for?”

“Something to remember me by.”

“I’ll always remember you, Firecracker.” He winked.

Spencer’s heart space swelled. Tiny electric happy faces rained down inside him like fireworks. And then his eyes turned black. Then Brown. Then back to the chocolate brown Brendon's were.

Change was definitely in the air.
Think Of What You Did And How I Hope To God He's Worth It

Ryan shoulder-leaned on the bathroom door, grateful that he had three minutes to pee before language arts class. One more class until the weekend—not that it really mattered. There would be no time for sleeping in. No time for a “halfway decent latte search” with Hillary or a hallmark search with Brendon or band practice with the boys. Not when she and Pete had to screen every single RAD interview they’d shot over the last eight days. Not when Ross was expecting a rough cut on Monday so he could give notes. Not when it aired on Thursday. RAD duty called.

Instead of the typical third-floor bathroom smells, the scent of green tea and cinnamon greeted Ryan as he entered the boys’ room. Huntington Beach Snoregie would have darted for the second floor. But Salem Ryan refused to run.

Keltie exited the middle stall and clomped toward the sink in her platform heels. Silver hoops swung from her ears in perfect time with the flounce of the hem on her black and red skater dress. Her figure-skater style—emphasis on figure—was so uniquely her own, so incredibly flattering, that Ryan couldn’t help rethinking his Sarah approved outfit. He suddenly felt powerless, like a peasant in the presence of royalty.

“Hey,” Ryan said over the loud hum of the hand dryer. “Cute dress.”

Keltie pressed the silver button for another blast of air.

Clearly Keltie was mad at him for something.

“You know, I totally knew you were in here, ’cause I smelled your Green tea and cinnamon body mist, which is cool. I read that girls with a signature scent are more ambitious than girls without signature scents.”

Keltie responded with a third blast of air.

Stay sweet… stay sweet… stay sweet…

“Did I do something wrong?” Ryan asked finally. “Because we were fine on Monday but now you’re treating me like the Antichrist.”

Keltie’s eyes widened to a warning. But Ryan couldn’t stop. Assertiveness—combined with his ability to work in a historical metaphor—gave him more confidence than a figure-skater outfit ever could. “Is this about Fran or something,” Ryan continued. “I’m just—”

“Shhh,” Keltie hissed, gesturing toward the first stall, where a pair of peach creeper boots dangled above the vinyl flooring.

“Look,” Ryan whispered, refusing to let up, “I never meant to come between anyone. I’m just standing up for what I believe in.”

“So am I,” Keltie insisted, her triangle earrings swaying in concurrence.

“How? By being weirdly antagonistic for no reason because I befriended Sarah? Is popularity all that matters to you? What about equal rights and—”

Keltie stomped her foot. “What are you talking about? Have you seriously lost your mind? Did the zombies get you too?”
“What?”

Ryan searched Keltie’s eyes for an explanation—a wink, a tear, a sign—a clue floating his way before he drowned in confusion. But Keltie offered nothing. Her gaze was hard and cold, just as Jac’s had been when she discovered the video of Brendon.

“What.” Ryan smirked. “I know what’s happening. You’ve been hanging around with Jac and—”

Bwoop. Bwoop. Last period was about to start. Still, Ryan couldn’t stop. Keltie was being weirdly antagonistic, but she deserved to know the truth.

“Jac can’t be trusted. You need to be careful.”

The toilet flushed.

Jac emerged.

Ryan hurried into the last stall and slammed the door. But embarrassment, anger, and regret found him anyway. How could she have been so dense? The peach UGGs, the sudden zombie comment, the wide eyes of warning? Keltie had tried to tell him, but Ryan had been too seduced by his own voice to see the clues.

“Hey, Rynerd,” Keltie called over the running faucet. “Thanks for the warning.”

Jac burst out laughing, and then they were gone, leaving Ryan behind to drown.
The Special Keltie Chapter

Merston High was dimly lit and empty. Anyone with a life renounced school on Sundays. But the kids without lives were the ones Keltie worried about; the ones who geeked out in the AV room until the weekend janitor sent them home.

Because they would know that Keltie’s visit to their tech paradise was disingenuous. Not only would her elven beauty stand out among their plainness like a calla lily in a cabbage patch, but she had never even considered entering their subterranean lair before—especially during prime dance studio hours. If they didn’t suspect white-collar crime, they’d assume Keltie couldn’t afford her own computer. Neither theory would be good for her reputation.

So there she was, spending Sunday in the basement bathroom instead of in trailing behind Sarah Orzechowski and her group. Keltie was waiting for an “all clear” text from Jac. As soon as the geeks were gone, Jac would hack into Linda’s computer and erase “The Ghoul Next Door.” Which, thanks to Keltie’s access to her friends’ Facebook pages, they had learned Ross was expecting by the end of day on Monday. Keltie exhaled a weeks’ worth of social angst into the chlorine-scented air. Finally, the end was near.

She checked her iPhone. Zero messages.

Fuck!

It was hard to believe that Ryan hadn’t realized she liked him. After hers and Ryan’s fight on Friday, Vicky and Z-Berg began ignoring her even more. Apparently Ryan didn’t see what kind of pull he had with girls once he started wearing his hair in a mini-hawk and wearing Steve Orzechowski’s old clothing.

Keltie checked her phone again. Still no messages. Were her friends really having fun without her? Was it even possible?

Still, Keltie clung to hope.

Ping!

If it weren’t for Jac’s constant HUNT updates, Keltie’s cell phone would die from loneliness.

TO: Keltie

Oct 10, 4:03 PM

JAC: ALL CLEAR!

A pink rubber-gloved hand reached out and yanked Keltie into the computer-packed room. “Hurry,” Audrey insisted, shutting the door behind them and securing the window shade. Her stakeout ensemble—a huge pink blazer over teal leggings—couldn’t have been more conspicuous if it flashed neon and blasted death metal.

“Hey,” Jac called from the third row of computers. She was already clacking away but paused to wave her blue rubber-gloved hand. “This is easier than I thought. I should be done in a minute.”

Keltie winced, fanning the musty air. It smelled like flying coach beside a passenger eating nacho cheese Doritos. Cans of soda and balled-up fast-food wrappers overflowed the trash can by the door,
as if trying to escape the maddening hum of machines and unflattering fluorescent lights.

“Here,” Audrey said, reaching into her nightmare before christmas backpack and pulling out a pair of red wool mittens. “Put these on before you touch anything.”

Keltie pinched the itchy mitts as if they were covered in poo.

“Oh, and here’s a HUNT wristband,” she said, sliding a mangled yellow bracelet off her wrist. “I melted down my old LIVE-STRONG bracelets, and voilà!”

“Seriously?”

Audrey glared at Keltie in a why-wouldn’t-I-be-serious? sort of way.

“It looks like chewed gum.”

“Perfect.” Audrey snickered. “Since we’re trying to stick together.”

*Good Geb! Are all normies this scary?*

Keltie wanted to tell Audrey where to stick her itchy mitts and clumpy bracelet, but she wasn’t going to get into a power struggle now. Why ruin an already ruined Sunday? Besides, HUNT was only a means to an end. And that end was near.

“What can I do?” Keltie asked, trying not to inhale.

“HIDE!” Audrey whisper-shouted.

“What?” Keltie turned.

“Get down and turn off your ringers!”

Audrey sprinted from her post and tackled Keltie to the ground. Together they crawled across the crumb-covered carpet to the end of the third row. Knees burning, Keltie regretted her decision to wear a miniskirt almost as much as she regretted having joined this ragtag operation.

Knowing Audrey, this was probably just a drill.

They scurried under the long rectangular table and joined up with Jac.

“Who was it?” Keltie whispered, rearranging her black-and-pink chiffon banded mini to prevent a Cosabella sighting.

“Linda!” mouthed Audrey. “And—”

The door squeaked open. A pair of scuffed hiking boots, black converse, and beat up combat boots entered.

Ryan! Spencer!

The feet hurried inside, and the trio sat by a computer in the first row.

*What are they doing here?* Keltie asked with raised brows.

Jac responded with a shrug of her shoulders. *You tell me. Isn’t that your job?* her bugged-out eyes asked.
We’re dead, Audrey said by finger-slicing her neck.

Keltie lifted her gaze in reverence to the Triple Goddess. She was about to ask for guidance and protection, but when she saw a constellation of crusty boogers and mashed Skittles on the underside of the table, she decided not to involve the goddess in this one.

“Ready?” Spencer asked.

Someone began typing, then stopped after a few seconds and sighed.

“Ready,” said Linda.

“Good luck.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you. I mean, I wouldn’t have done it without you,” she said. Then came the sound of kissing.

Jac rolled her pale blue eyes, which were starting to tear. She lowered her head and hid, softly sniffing, behind the sway of her flatiron curtain.

Keltie was starting to feel sorry for her. Watching Ryan completely pass over her for that nerd Brendon hurt pretty bad. She couldn’t imagine Jac’s pain of knowing her girlfriend liked a lab created boy over her.

Boop…

Someone began dialing on speakerphone.

Boop… boop. Boop… boop… boop… boop.

“Ross Healy,” answered a man after the first ring.

“Whaddup? It’s Linda.”

“And Spencer and Ryan.” Ryan added.

Jac rolled her eyes.

“We just sent it,” Linda said.

Keltie gasped, then covered her mouth. Just sent it? Today? But it’s not due until tomorrow!

Jac shot her a how-could-you-screw-this-up? glare. Keltie flicked some carpet fluff off the side of her shoe, pretending not to notice.

“Hey, Linda girl, thanks again for getting it in a day early. The network is dying to see it.”

“As long as they know it’s rough,” Linda reminded him. “But I can change whatever. So just let me know.”

“You got it. Thanks again, L-doggy-dog. I’ll be in touch.”

The line went dead.

“I hope this works,” Linda said, sounding nervous.

“It will,” Spencer assured her. “You’ll see.”
If only someone were there to reassure Keltie. Someone to tell her she hadn’t just blown the biggest opportunity of her life. Someone to tell her she’d find a way to get back at that stupid pretty boy for stealing her crush. Someone to tell her this movie wouldn’t change life as she knew it, even though it already had.

Because that life was good. Things went her way. People listened to her. And no one—

A cell phone rang.

“Hey,” Linda answered on speaker. “Everything okay?”

“Everything’s great, Linda,” said Ross. “As long as you tell me this is a joke and you’re sending me the real movie in zero-point-two seconds.”

Jac lifted her head.

Morrigan is looking out for her!

“What do I mean?” Linda asked.

“What do I mean? I mean, what’s with all the blurred faces?” Ross shouted. “Our viewers are going to think they have cataracts. We can’t air this. Send me the clean cut.”

Jac and Audrey exchanged a luminous smile and a silent high five. This is exactly what they wanted—proof! And exactly what the RADs feared.

Another botched job by Spencer Smith. What a shock!

Now what? worried Keltie. A clean cut would be the end of the RADs. Their identities would be exposed. Their images would be downloaded all over the world. They would become targets. Medical experiments. Scapegoats. No matter how docile and charming the interviews were, normies would find some reason to be afraid. Some reason to discriminate. Some reason to hate. They always did.

Keltie wanted to sink into a lavender-scented bath. She wanted to snuggle with her puppy and bunny and laugh with her friends. She wanted a Sunday full of dancing and texts from her friends. But that life seemed like centuries ago.

“So, are you sending it?” Ross asked.

“No!” Ryan snapped. “We promised everyone that we’d protect their identities.”

“L-lady?” Ross asked, dismissing Ryan.

“Sorry. I can’t.”

“You’re kidding, right? This is a huge opportunity,” Ross pressed.


“Promised who?”

“My friends,” Linda countered.

Ross chuckled. “These freaks are your friends?”
“Yes, and they need to be protected.”

“She has integrity, you know,” Spencer added.

“Do you really think you’re going to make it in this business with integrity?”

“No,” Linda said. “I’ll make it with my talent.”

“Come on, kid. Talent has nothing to do with success.”

“Yeah, R-man.” Linda chuckled. “I knew that the minute I met you.”

The line went dead.

The trio were silent. It was over.

“Maybe we can ask Pete to put it up on his YouTube channel?” Ryan offered. “And have Taylor, Noah, and Demi promote the shit out of it.”

“We can’t put that pressure on them.” Spencer protested. “Especially not Demi.”

“The project dies with us.”
Hey Moon, Please Forget To Fall Down

Sarah came bursting into The Smith family’s backyard worried.

“Spencer. Are you okay? Is it Ryan? Did something happen to the movie?” The text she’d gotten from Spencer had left her in a panic.

“Movie.” Spencer said shortly. He looked more exhausted than Sarah had ever seen him.

“You look sick.” She said worriedly.

“Just stressed.” He sighed.

Ryan walked in looking dead on his feet.

“You’re not coming down with bird flu are you?” Sarah asked.

“My dad’s dying.” He mumbled.

“Peter? But I just saw him.” Spencer gasped.


Prison?

“Prison?” Sarah asked. “Why’s your dad in prison?”

“For attempting to kill me when I was twelve.” Ryan said softly. “God I can’t even stay mad at him. Like over the past few days I’ve remembered what he did to me. The bruises and the scrapes. The bottles. Having to go with Dale to pick him up from the hospital. But he’s still my dad. He’s the only one who can tell me about my mom.”

Sarah got up and hugged him tightly.

“We don’t ask for our parents.” Sarah murmured. “We just end up with them. Sometimes they’re great. Sometimes they’re abusive pieces of garbage. Sometimes they leave us before we could ever know them.” Ryan sniffed and hugged Sarah back. She just hugged him tighter and rubbed his back.

Before long the yard was buzzing with RADs. They greeted one another warmly, with hugs and energetic high fives. No longer a passive group bound solely by secrets, they saw themselves as a force—a proactive faction on a do-or-die mission to change the world. And their pride was palpable. All around Sarah, bubbles of conversation rose and popped, sprinkling the yard with giddy enthusiasm.

“HBO is gonna be all over this. They love edgy dramas.”

“Really? I see it more as a comedy.”

“Or a Broadway musical.”

“Oh, and you know some author will try to turn it into a teen series.”

“You think Oprah would put it in her book club?”
“Of course. She’s a sucker for outcasts.”

“Funny, I thought you were the sucker.”

“Funny, I thought you were funny.”

“Have you seen Gee's sketches? She drew doll versions of all of us.”

“Imagine getting yourself in a Happy Meal?”

“Yum. I imagine it all the time. By the way, is it me or is someone grilling a tenderloin?”

“Thanks for coming,” Spencer said.

The applause was uproarious. Debbie stared at Spencer expectantly, in her usual zombielike state. Mikey and the other Way kids howled triumphantly.

Spencer stepped up onto the stony ledge, just as he’d done before. But this time he made no attempt to silence the booming falls. Vincent and Viola stood at the back of the crowd, eyes low. They already knew.

“I’ll keep it short because most of us have a bio quiz tomorrow—”

“Yeah, thanks a lot, Z-Berg,” Mikey shouted from the back of the crowd.

“What does it have to do with me?” She blushed.

“Ms. Berg is your mom.”

“Well, she’s your teacher. And she said she’s gonna be your teacher again next year if you don’t pass this quiz.”

Everyone laughed at Z-Berg as if she were Kate McKinnon. It felt more like open-mike night at the Improv than a Monday after school.

“Hey!” Spencer sparked. Linda stood solemnly by his side. “Just stop talking for a second and listen, okay?”

The crowd quieted.

“We worked really hard on ‘The Ghoul Next Door’ and—”

Mikey snickered.

“Dude!” Linda snapped. “This is serious. The movie isn’t happening. Channel Two isn’t going to air it.”

Spencer pouted big enough for all of them. A chorus of shouts came from the RADs.

“What?”

“Fur real?”

“You’re bloody joking, mate. Right?”

“Of course he’s joking. Why wouldn’t they air it?”

“The network people said they’d air the piece only if we showed your faces,” Linda explained.

“They can’t do that!”

“It would destroy us!”

“We refused,” Spencer assured them.

“And another bit of news.” Linda said, glancing at Ryan’s slumped form. “Ryan’s biological father is dying. Make sure people lay off of him. Ok? He needs all the support we can give.”
I'm Not Trying To Hurt You, I Just Love To Speak

Bwoop. Bwoop.

Today, the bell was supposed to signify more than the last period of the day. It should have been a call to arms. A countdown to the millennial RADs' inaugural television address. An invitation to an after-party in Brett's shed to celebrate their first sanctioned outing since the 1930s. But it might as well have been “Taps”—the solemn bugle composition played at military funerals—that Spencer was hearing. Because his dreams were dead.

Normies would never know how hard Ryland Lynch was working for a sports scholarship. They’d never see Lindsay's impressive 381-piece sunglasses collection or hear about Jamia’s hope of becoming a pro surfer. They’d never cry with Gee while she relived the terror of being sprayed red by PETA activists or having to shower in the boys locker room after gym class. Never identify with Brendon’s embarrassing battle with sweat or sympathize with Gabe’s lack of control over his life. Frank’s refusal to smile would continue to fuel his reputation as shy, and Debbie’s zombie stare would always be mistaken for stupidity. Dallon would have to stay indoors during allergy season. Poor Hayley would never be able to date a boy who didn’t want to be accused of talking to himself. Spencer would remain hidden under the Spackle of pore-clogging makeup and yurtlike garments. Ryan would never be able to share his shock at learning he’s adopted and the sorrow of never knowing his mother and the way asthma derailed his dreams of singing and how difficult it is to be a male siren.

And Linda and Hillary would be burdened with keeping their RAD friends’ secrets.

Even though their faces would have been blurred, and the movie would not have solved all their problems, it would have been a first step—one they were finally willing to take together. One that hadn’t been taken in eighty years. One that had gone nowhere. Sure, Spencer could try again. But he was fresh out of ideas. Besides, who would trust him now? Everything he touched turned to mold.

It was obvious by the unusual silence that the others heard “Taps” too. Gerard, Jamia, Brendon, Debbie, and Frank were the only RADs who didn’t seem affected by the lost cause. How could they be, when they were about to be picked up by a shiny black limo with a window sign that said TEEN VOGUE? Holding hands, they ran through the halls with the subtlety of an old clunker trailing cans and a JUST MARRIED sign down an asphalt road. But instead of scratch marks on pavement, they left behind a sickly sweet trail of fruity lotion, floral perfume, and friends moving on.

Suddenly, Ryan appeared at Spencer’s locker, panting. “You’re not going to believe it!” His cheeks were flushed, his brown eyes wide, his short brown hair a wild mess. His beauty was undeniable, and he didn’t have to wear a stitch of makeup. A pinch of envy kept Spencer from asking what was wrong. After all, it was probably news about his dad.

“Pete is home sick,” Ryan continued.

“Bummer,” Spencer said, sensing the hollowness in his own voice. “I hope he feels better soon.” He closed his locker and hooked his blue backpack over his shoulder.

“Please, he’s totally faking,” Ryan went on. “But he was watching TV and saw a promo for ‘The Ghoul Next Door.’ Channel Two is airing it!”

Spencer began walking toward the exit. Ryan ran alongside him like a puppy.
“It must be a mistake,” Spencer decided, refusing to hope. “I’m sure someone would have called us.”

“It’s not a mistake. Pete called the station. They’re airing it!”

“Are you sure?”

Ryan nodded.

VOLTAGE!

Spencer stopped in the middle of the hall, ignoring the accidental elbow bumps from passing students, and texted Linda the news.

She appeared beside them within seconds. “Are you sure?” she asked.

Ryan told him about Pete’s news.

“Why wouldn’t Ross call me?”

The boys shrugged.

“What made him change his mind about blurring everyone’s face?”

“Maybe he felt guilty,” Ryan suggested.

“But I thought they wanted to show everyone watching the broadcast in the studio.”

“Just call him,” Spencer urged.

Linda tried Ross four times, her black-polished fingers dialing the number with uncontainable pep. But each time her call went straight to voice mail. “Oh, well,” she said, too excited to get discouraged. “Let’s have a screening party. Can you guys get everyone to the shed by five thirty? I’ll set up and order some pizza.”

They parted ways with renewed purpose. Spencer hurried down the school steps to spread the shocking good news.

In a little over an hour, Linda had transformed her monster museum into a cushy screening room. She’d hung a flat-screen TV, created four rows of mismatched seating, and set up a table stacked with pizza boxes, sodas, and bowls of candy. She left the doors open to keep Breezy from overheating. She had a fire extinguisher standing by for Dallon, marked three of the Domino’s boxes MEAT LOVER’S for the Ways, and even had a space heater on hand in case Frank stopped by after the photo shoot. The vase of green tulips was for Spencer.

The room quickly filled with people buzzing about the twist of fate. And at least five of them told Spencer how lucky he was to be with Linda. Not Linda the normie. Not Linda the NUDI. Not Linda, Jac’s ex. The qualifiers were gone. The lines had been blurred. She was no longer separate from them. She was just Linda. It was a good sign. If this group could come around, anyone could.

“Here we go,” she called, cranking up the volume.

The chewing and the chatter stopped. Everyone settled into chairs with squirmly anticipation. Linda stood by the screen, unable to contain her excitement. It reminded Spencer of herself only two weeks ago, standing with his nose practically pressed against the TV while he watched her in the hospital.
The unpredictability of life made him smile. One minute his head was coming off, and the next his heart was on his sleeve. Spencer Smith was finally living!

Everyone cheered when Ross appeared on the screen. He was standing in front of the Merston High letter board. His boyish features were the perfect complement to a story about judgments based on looks. With his smooth skin, wide brown eyes, and dimple-studded smile, he seemed more likely to scoop ice cream than the news.

“Should he be showing our school?” asked Lindsay.

No one answered. They were waiting breathlessly to see where this was going.

Z-Berg nervously fiddled with the buttons on her romper.

“It’s Spotlight on Oregon week here on Channel Two, and our slogan, “It’s all true on Two,” has never been more, well, true.” He snickered. “Two weeks ago, I received a red-hot tip that there were monsters—yes, monsters—living right here in Salem.” He strolled around to the other side of the board. There, the letters had been rearranged to say MONSTER HIGH. “It’s everyone’s worst nightmare come true… or is it?”

“Did he just say ‘nightmare’?” asked Mikey, gnashing his teeth.

“Shhh,” everyone hissed.

“What you’re about to see are interviews I was able to gather from these monsters. Some will have you laughing. Some will have you crying. But all of them will tell you everything you need to know about ‘The Ghoul Next Door.’ ”

The show’s title, which bled red, spun onto the screen and throbbed to the theme music from the movie Psycho.

“What happened to my graphics?” Jon called.

Puuurrrrp.

“Sorry,” Dallon said as a band of fire shot out the back of his chair. “That sausage pizza was super spicy.”

Suddenly, the shed felt more like a sauna. But no one seemed to notice—because Jac had appeared on the screen. Wearing a frilly white dress and too much blush, she was seated in what looked like a church pew. Everyone gasped.

“What’re they doing there?” Linda asked the TV.

Ryan leaned over and whispered, “What’s happening?”

Spencer tugged his neck seams. “I have no idea.”

The camera pushed in tight on Jac’s heavily made up face as she began to speak. “Hi. I’m Jac Vanek. My girlfriend, Linda, made the following film, but it was made under duress. The creatures you are about to see have possessed her. They have turned her into their propaganda zombie, forcing him to shoot these scenes to gain your trust. Once they have it, they’ll steal your souls and suck your minds. But this is not a time for panic. It’s a time for action. Stop them before they stop you. And, Linda, if you’re watching, I love you. You can come back now. I’ll keep you safe.”
How did this happen? Why did it happen? Who let it happen?

The show began immediately with an unblurred interview with Brendon. Ryan gasped.

“Linda, what are they doing?” Ryan shouted.

“I have no idea!”

“We were tricked!” Mikey howled, whipping a slice of meat lover’s pizza at the TV screen. It stuck and slid, landing with a thonk on the floor. “Everyone will know where we live!”

“We’ll never be allowed back in school!”

“What about my scholarship?”

“Where are we going to hide now?”

“How will we even get there?”

“My parents are going to kill me.”

“I’m already dead, and mine are still going to kill me.”

“I’ll never get to play Juliet now.”

“I was supposed to take my road test tomorrow!”

“Oh my god. Brendon and the others don’t know!” Ryan breathed, horrified. “I have to go find them!” He bolted from the room with Z-Berg on his tail.

“Omigod, how do we stop this?” Breezy asked amid the growing chaos.

“I have no idea,” Spencer said, trembling.

His cell rang. He answered on speaker, to avoid shorting the phone with his spraying bolts.

“Is this fur real?” Gee barked.

Spencer opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

“Keltie’s behind this,” Gee continued. “She’s been BFFs with Jac and Audrey for the last two weeks. She had to be involved.”

“Why would she do this to us?” Frank shouted in the background.

“What are you so worried about?” Jamia cried. “At least no one can see your face.”

“My mom’s going to send me to Utah because of my crazy ex girlfriend!” Spencer could hear Brendon wail.

Spencer’s insides churned. “Are you at the shoot?” he asked, not knowing what else to say.

“In the limo. We were on our way to the shoot, but we saw the whole thing on the TV in the car. We can’t get in contact with Sarah! I think something happened. We’re coming back home. That is, if our driver doesn’t kill us first. He keeps checking his rearview mirror. He thinks we’re playing
monster mind tricks on him. I swear he’s driving at least a hundred and forty right now. We were
crazy to trust Keltie… SLOW DOWN!” she shouted. “We’re not going to hurt you, okay? Spencer,
you should watch out for Linda. She probably masterminded this whole thing with Jac.”

Linda gasped. “That is so not true!” she shouted into the speaker.

“Oh, really? Because we were doing fine until you showed up.”

“Gerard, I would never—”

“Don’t listen to her, Spencer. Just get out of there as fast as you can. We’ll be home soon. Unless this
maniac kills us. I said SLOW DOWN!”

The line went dead.

Spencer didn’t know where to turn. Was Gerard onto something? Her theory did make sense. Jac
and Linda… dating forever. She’s a budding filmmaker looking for a break… and she stumbles on
the story of the century. They mastermind a plan… send Linda to work from the inside… to build his
trust and win his heart. Her shed was a set piece… the posters of Grandpa Stein were props… a
complex scheme with a single goal in mind… to go viral… global… Hollywood.

“How could you do this to us?” Spencer shouted at Linda.

“Seriously, Spencer, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Her weak response didn’t deserve another minute of Spencer’s attention. Linda was nothing more
than a pretty face that had been used (like the rest of them) to further Jac’s quest for immortality.
Ironically, immortality was something so many RADs came by naturally. But Jac had to go for it the
normie way—by selling her souls for fame.

“You lied to me!” Spencer shouted. But his words got lost in the barrage of insults, threats, and
finger foods being hurled at Linda. Still, he kept right on screaming. Linda just stood by the TV,
motionless, silently accepting his flogging.

“Run!” Lindsay called. “She won’t stay stoned forever.”

En masse, the RADs bolted from the shed and fanned out into the street in a complete free-for-all.
All sense of unity was gone. They were running for their lives once again. Spencer didn’t know
whether to chase after them, topple Linda to the ground, or call his parents and urge them to start
packing.

So he took the twins and ran.

They ran and ran and ran with no destination in mind. Sparking and sobbing his way down Baker
Street, Spencer couldn’t help thinking that maybe Sarah had been right. Maybe Vincent should take
him apart.

Because if he didn’t, someone else would.
I Know It's Sad But I Never Gave A Damn About The Weather

Thirty minutes after the mass exodus from the shed, he was still running. And never once did he have to stop for a blast from his inhaler. In fact, he could have kept going if he’d thought it would do any good. That was the silver lining on this horribly cloudy evening.

It sickened him to the point of nausea when he thought about Jac and Linda’s ploy. How much it had set the RADs back—not to mention his place among them—and for what? Jac’s pride? Linda’s career? A rush?

Ryan slowed to a walk. All this running wasn’t getting him anywhere. The bigger question was, What now? Keep searching for the missing RADs? Hide the RADs in his house? Have his father defend them in a court of law? Find Jac and Linda, slather them in steak sauce, and leave them on the Ways’ doorstep? Yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes!

Or he could confront the one person no one wanted to talk to. The one who probably had the answers. The one who needed Ryan as much as much as Ryan needed him, whether he knew it yet or not.

Sitting on a curb, he dialed Hillary. The teal sun Brendon had written on the rubber toe of his black Converse had smudged and started to fade. Is it a sign? Does he need me? Am I making the right choice? What if—


Ryan rolled his eyes. “I know you’re faking, Hills. You can talk normally.”

“Fine, what do you want?”

“You have to report for NUDI duty. I need a ride.”

Ryan bit his lip, dreading the shrill sound of Hillary’s you-gotta-be-kidding-me laugh.

“Where? When? Wardrobe?”

“Really?” Ryan asked, shocked that Hillary had agreed so easily. “Um, corner of Forest and Cliff. Now. Formfitting. Grab Pete and Taylor since I know she's at the house. Oh, and bring something for me too. I’m kinda sweaty. Hurry!”

“Hillary out!”

While Ryan waited, he dialed Brendon’s number, but his call went straight to his voice mail each time. The same thing happened when he tried to reach the twins and Spencer. Jon said he had no idea where anyone was. Ryan got up, stretched his legs as he leaned against the side of a tree, and called again. And again. And again. What if their phones have been confiscated? What if they’re in the back of a paddy wagon heading for Alcatraz? What if…

Weeeoooo weeeoooo weeeoooo.

The sound of an approaching police siren froze Ryan’s thoughts to fear-cicles. The roundup had begun. And everyone had seen his face as the fourth interview. Everyone knew he was a siren.
Weeeoooo weeeooooo weeeooooo.

He stood.

Weeeoooo weeeooooo weeeooooo.

His stomach was now in his throat. His arms were shaking with fright; his legs were twitching with flight.

Weeeoooo weeeooooo weeeooooo.

A forest-green BMW SUV screeched as it rounded the corner onto Cliff. The sirens got louder, but the paddy wagon was nowhere in sight.

“Hey!” Hillary shouted over the siren blaring in her car. Thin braids appeared randomly throughout her mess of blond curls. She wore a sleeveless black silk-chiffon halter dress, a peacock-feather necklace, and strappy turquoise booties. Her body had been dusted in shimmering bronze powder and spritzed with enough Black Orchid perfume to blow a second hole in the ozone layer. Ryan could see Taylor and Pete in the back row. “Hop in!”

“What is that?” Ryan shouted back, covering his ears.

“A police car sound effect. I downloaded it. As the NUDI driver, I thought I might need it someday. Don’t worry about the ninety-nine cents. It’s a tax write-off.”

“Well, can you turn it down?” Pete complained from the back seat. “We already have enough noise in our head right now.”

“Fine.” Hillary shrugged. “Siren out.”

And off they went.
Seated on a foldout throne made of black canvas and wood, Sarah gazed out of the white holding tent, feeling every part the Egyptian queen. Frantic worker bees buzzed all around her, running wires, cleaning camera lenses, and attempting to roll wardrobe racks through the sand.

Like the regal women who had come before her, she gazed out at the golden dunes, marveling at the amber-scented breeze and how it shaped and shifted the terrain with the delicate strokes of an artist’s brush. It was as if Ra had commissioned the wind to create beauty just for her.

In the old days, moments like this would have been preserved on dusty walls, portrayed by crude drawings of vultures, disembodied legs, and zigzags.

Thankfully, times had changed. As soon as her friends arrived, Sarah would be photographed by Kolin Van Verbeentengarden, lit by Tumas, and featured in Teen Vogue. If only the magazine could find its way to the afterlife. Aunt Nefertiti would be blown away.

After three hours of wardrobe and jewelry fittings, two hours of hair and makeup, a luxurious Dead Sea salt foot scrub, and a mani-pedi, Sarah was ready for her close-up. She was also ready for her medium shot, her sultry shot, her action shot, her regal shot, her I’m-too-sexy-for-this-camel shot, and her shot at making a name for herself in the highly competitive world of jewelry design. Her sketches and samples were locked away in the safe of Bob’s Bentley, patiently waiting for their turn in the spotlight. And they would get it, as soon as she had impressed the editors with her professionalism and her well-rehearsed repertoire of poses.

An emaciated intern pulled up to the holding tent in an ATV. “Any word yet?” she asked. Her hair was tied back with a Pucci scarf and reinforced with a pair of white-framed Guccis. A sheer lime-green tank billowed over her pore-clogging skinny jeans.

Um, who is the model here?

“Jaydra doesn’t want to wait any longer. We’re losing light.”

Where are they?

Sarah lowered her head and checked her phone again. She had service and plenty of battery left. But only one new text messages.

TO: Sarah

Oct. 14, 2018

RYAN: BRENDON AND THE OTHERS ARE MISSING! PLEASE TEXT BACK TO PROVE YOU’RE OKAY!

The beads on her gold headdress clinked together for what was bound to be the last time if Gee, Jamia, Brendon, Debby, and Frank didn’t show up.

“They should have been here two hours ago. I don’t understand,” she managed to croak, despite what felt like a giant hair-ball stuck in her throat. “What if there was an accident?”

“Then you have three minutes to scrape them off the roadway, or this shoot is canceled,” the intern snapped, slamming her YSL cork wedge on the gas and rumbling off.
Sarah could send another message, but what was the point? She had already sent eleven, in varying
tones, and had yet to get a single response. Normally Sarah might have wondered if her friends were
mad. But not today. They had texted all through last period, counting down the seconds until they
could join her on the set.

Sarah checked the Saran that had been wrapped around her feet to preserve her pedi. Then she heel-
waddled toward her blonde savior.

“Bob,” she whined, choking back tears that would land her right back in the makeup trailer. “Have
you found them yet?”

He stood at the back of the tent with four officers who had been charged with guarding the jewels.
Bob checked three cell phones at once. He lifted his dark eyes and grinned. “They are pulling up
now.”

“Thank Geb!” Sarah held out her arms in a virtual hug, avoiding contact for fear of ruffling her
feather bustier.

“Thank Geb is right,” he said, returning the gesture.

“Gather!” announced Jaydra, the feared accessories editor. She jumped off the back of the intern’s
ATV and gathered her A-team. Her short bleached hair, yogurt-white skin, and gaudy cocktail ring
on every finger gave Sarah some much-needed solace. The jewelry biz obviously wasn’t as
competitive as she had thought.

“The models are here, and they’re gorgeous! They just need a quick touch-up and wardrobe.
Anything we don’t get, we’ll fix in post. Let’s move! The sky is falling. Darkness is upon us.”

Did she say “gorgeous”? 

Sarah had always known that Jamia and Gee had a “look.” Fetching? Yes. Intriguing? Absolutely.
Exotic? One hundred percent. But gorgeous? By normie industry standards? Hmm, maybe the world
was ready for change after all.

“Sarah!”

She turned happily. It was the first time she had been called something other than “the Egyptian” all
day.

“Ryan? Pete? Hillary? Taylor Swift?” All four looked winded and were all dressed in designer
clothes.

“What’s going on?” Sarah asked, taking in Ryan’s tear streaked face and Pete’s stony look.

“Keltie betrayed us.”

“Wow, Jaydra was right,” gushed a pin-thin guy wearing red skinny jeans, a white tank top with an
iron-on of King Tut, and three muslin scarves. “I’m Joffree. One name. I see Taylor Swift, and you,
my dear must be size zero?”

“I’m a zero on the bottom and a large on top.” Hillary winked.

“And cutie pie and small, dark, and handsome.”

“Ry has problems with sleeves since he’s tall but skinny.” Sarah offered. “Pete’s a 35 all around.”
“Let me pull some things. Be back faster than you can say Snuffleupagus.”

“It’s sarcophagus,” Sarah corrected him for what felt like the billionth time.

“Omigod, men-tahl blahk,” he sang as he scampered away.

“Ryan, you didn’t tell me we came here to model!” Hillary beamed, smile-waving at the buff photographer.

“Cool.” Taylor grinned.

“They aired! The unblurred interviews aired.”

“Wait—what?” She stood completely still.

“Keltie and Jac teamed up and aired the unblurred interviews.” Ryan said.

“Ryan got me caught up.” Taylor said, finally tuning in. “The basics is Audrey, Keltie, and Jac are mad that they got passed over for boys so they aired the interviews, broke several laws doing so, and I’m guessing exposed your whole community to the world.”

The intern pulled up on her ATV, cupped her hands over her mouth, and yelled, “Joffree! Jaydra needs the new models dressed and on the camels eight minutes ago.”

“Then someone should have told me that nine minutes ago!” he huffed, sliding hangers along a wardrobe rack. “All right, New Girls, boys, back here with me,” he called.

“Coming!” Hillary began her wobbly trek toward the racks.

“Stop!” Ryan ordered. His sister stopped instantly. “We didn’t come here to model.”

“Yes, you did,” Sarah begged in a whisper. “Please, just do it. Please. I’ll tell you everything I know about Keltie. Swearsies on Ra.” She lifted her face to the sinking sun. “We have to get through this—it won’t take long. I’ll even float you some samples from my new jewelry line the minute it gets off the ground.”

“You promise?” Ryan asked.

“Definitely. Are you more a tigereye kind of boy or straight-up gold?”

“No! Do you promise to tell me what you know about Keltie’s obsession with me?”

“On all nine lives of all my cats.”

While the Wentz siblings and their famous guest were changing, Sarah tried to piece everything together. The show airing… unblurred… but how? She couldn’t imagine Linda doing it behind Spencer’s back. She seemed too genuine for something like that. Even if he had dated Jac, which Sarah still found hard to believe. What did someone like her ever see in… omigod! Jac!

Taylor emerged first.

Wearing the typical black wig with bangs, she looked like Halloween Cleo, minus the sass. The gown, a sleeveless deep V made from layers of airy white silk and gold Lurex thread, luffed like a ship’s sails in the early-evening breeze. Her blue eyes were heavily lined in turquoise kohl and adorned with gold false lashes. Even without the jewels, which would be fitted at the very last minute for security purposes, she defined Cairo-couture-meets-Babylon-babe.
Ryan stumbled out next, looking like every emo girl’s dream. He was wearing a white dress shirt that had frills, a fitted red vest covered in roses, a red sash, black skin tight slacks, and dress shoes.

“Oh wow.” Sarah breathed. “I can see why Keltie and Brendon are over the moon about you.”

Ryan smiled.

Finally.

Pete burst out in the shiny teal and black suit meant for Brendon, making Sarah snort.

“Marc Antony, Marc Antony, wherefore art thou, Marc Antony?” Hillary called, scanning the tent with a hand on her forlorn heart. Her wig was the same as her friend’s, but Hillary’s dress was gold, her kohl was black, and her fake lashes were dark jade. Jaydra was right: Wentz and friends were undeniably gorgeous. But Sarah was too grateful to be jealous. Besides, her hair was real! And that counted for something.

“Follow me.” The intern hurried them through the tent and past the admiring eyes of the crew members. Even without the stares, Sarah knew the quintet was Vogue-worthy.

“How does The Taylor Swift know you and your siblings?” Sarah mumbled.

“She’s the one who called the cops when my dad tried to kill me.” Ryan mumbled back. “Pete was so grateful he just latched onto her and Taylor just became a staple in our family.”

“Wow.” Sarah breathed.

“Whoa,” said Taylor up front. “I feel like I’m in one of those beach-inside-a-bottle things they sell at airport gift shops.”

Sarah giggled. Hillary was right. The sand had been dyed pink, yellow, and orange, and it was piled higher on the left than on the right, as if someone one was pouring it. Three camels sat at the lower end, legs tucked beneath them, chewing slowly and sighing.

“Oh yeah, for sure.” Hillary nodded

“Unbelievable. That’s exactly what I was going for,” said a muscular man wearing a black tank top, camo cargoes, and a blond ponytail. “I’m Kolin VanVerbeentengarden.” He extended a tanned hand to Taylor. “But most people just call me VanVerbeentengarden.”

Hillary swooped in.

“Hillary. But most people just call me Awesome.”

Ryan and Sarah giggled.

“I’m going to add the bottle and the cork during postproduction,” explained VanVerbeentengarden. “The concept is that you five—” He gestured to all of them, “—are ancient Egyptian monarchs who washed ashore in this bottle and—”

“And we have come to present-day America on a mission to share these gems with today’s modern teenager?” Hillary finished.

“Precisely!” exclaimed VanVerbeentengarden.

“Yeah,” Candace nodded. “I can totally see that.”
“And I can totally see you and me getting together after this shoot.” He winked.

“That depends,” Hillary teased.

“On what?”

“On how I look in the pictures.”

She was good.

“The very least of my concerns.” VanVerbeentengarden winked again as an assistant hooked a camera around his shoulder like an AK-47. Then the photographer turned his attention toward a case of lenses.

Overhead, a canopy of star-shaped lights flickered on, casting a magical twinkle across the shimmering sand. It was perfect. Aunt Nefertiti’s jewels were going to love it.

“I never would have guessed that this was supposed to look like a bottle thingy,” Sarah admitted.

“Me either,” said Ryan.

“Me either,” said Taylor. “I read it on Joffree’s clipboard.”

Sarah burst out laughing.

“Jeez Taylor. Clue us in next time!” Pete wheezed.

Ryan just rolled his eyes in a that’s-Hillary-and-Taylor-for-you sort of way.

“All right, kids, let’s get you on these camels,” the intern said.

Ryan and Hillary exchanged nervous glances. But not Sarah or Taylor. Sarah had been on a camel at Zanzibar’s petting zoo when she was seven. And from what she remembered, it was no different from riding a slow, lumpy horse, which she’d also done at Zanzibar’s.

“Stay on the path so you don’t mess up the sand. Each animal has a sticker on his hump with your name and his name. Please claim your animal and wait for the wrangler. She’ll help you up.”

“That’s what he said.” Sarah giggled.

“Nice one.” Taylor slapped her five.

The closer they got to the camels, the more it smelled like wet hay and cat poo.

Pete winced. “Ew, what is that?”

“Camel butt,” Ryan said with a giggle.

“I think mine is sick,” said Sarah. She pinched her nostrils and leaned closer to read the name on his hump. “Don’t worry, Niles,” she cooed, pulling a small atomizer from her cleavage. “This should help.” She walked around the tan camel while spritzing amber fragrance into the stinky air. He sneezed. She spritzed. He sneezed. She spritzed.

“Can I try some of that?” Taylor asked.

Sarah tossed her the perfume.
“Hey, Humphrey, it’s not just you and the boys anymore.” Taylor sprayed. “You’re in the presence of models. You have to smell your very best.”

She tossed the bottle to Pete. After the first spritz, Luxor sneezed, rocked to his feet, and took off. Niles and Humphrey followed.

The quintet jumped out of the way.

“Omigod, where’s the wrangler?” shouted Jaydra as the camels sneezed and stampeded, kicking up the confection-colored sand. “Where is he?”

“She is right here!” shouted a stocky brunette in cowboy gear and black gloves. “What’s happening?”

“My set!” shouted VanVerbeentengarden. “Do something, wrangler!”

“My name is Kora!” she said, readying the lasso that was clamped to her dungarees. “Jeez, you’d think someone with a name like VanVerbeentengarden could remember Kora.”

“I’ve got it!” Ryan called, launching after the camels. “Niles, Humphrey, Luxor?” He called from the top of the rainbow dune. “Niles, Humphrey, Luxor?” His voice had a musical quality to it—pure, clear, and angelic.

“Ry?” Pete gasped at the sight of his brother, lit to golden perfection by the sinking sun, the roses on his vest fluttering and his red sash fluttering around him.

“Niles, Humphrey, Luxor?” he sang.

Jaydra and VanVerbeentengarden stopped shouting.

The sound was like nothing Sarah had ever heard, yet something she imagined being standard in the afterlife.

“Nilesss, Humphreyyyyy, Luxorrrrrr?” Ryan trilled.

The crew stopped scrambling. Even Taylor and Hillary was quiet.

“Nilesss, Humphreyyyyy, Luxorrrrrr?” his irresistible singsong call was melodic silk, sailing over the darkening dunes. If Gee had been there, she would have rolled onto her back in peaceful surrender.

Kora turned off the ATV.


The camels stopped running. They stopped sneezing, grunting, and bucking. “Nilesss, Humphreyyyyy, Luxorrrrrr, come back.”

One by one, they did.

Kora raced over, hooked the camels with leashes, and led them back to their trailers.

“That’s a wrap,” Jaydra yelled, kicking a bag of oats. She stomped off in an I-am-so-not-looking-at-your-jewelry-sketches sort of way. Not that Cleo could blame her. The shoot had been a catastrophe. But far from disappointing.
Ryan jumped off the dune and raced toward them, seemingly unfazed by his breathtaking
performance.

“How did you do that?” Sarah asked, awestruck.

Crew members hurried by, wanting a closer look at the boy with the magical voice. But once they
approached, they seemed nervous and unsure, as if they didn’t know whether they should thank him
or pray to him. So most of them just kept walking.

“I think your voice is back!” Hillary hugged her brother tight. When they parted, her wig was
lopsided and mussed.

“Nice quick thinking, bird boy.” Pete grinned.

“I just knew what to do.” Ryan blushed ducking his head. “I figured ‘I freed Breezy, I can corral
some camels.’ And I did!” Ryan seemed giddy. “I knew I was a siren!”

“I have to call Mom and Dad. They’re going to freak,” Hillary said, hurrying away toward a table
topped with camera gear.

“Why are you going over there to call them?” Ryan asked.

“Because after I call, I’m going to ask VanVerbeentengarden if he takes yearbook pictures,” Hillary
admitted with a guilty smirk.

Ryan giggled.

“Do you think I can talk them into letting us keep the clothing?”

Sarah nodded. “I’d actually pay to see that.”

“Amazing,” said Bob when the girls entered the tent. His eyes were misty. “That was absolutely
amazing.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said shyly.

“Is your mother here?” he asked.

“No?” Ryan said, confused.

“Well.” He sighed, like someone recalling a fond memory. “Tell Daniella that Bob says hi. It’s been
way too long.” After a kind, lingering grin, he turned to Sarah. “I’m going to pack up the jewels. I’ll
meet you by the car.”

“I think you have me confused with someone else,” Ryan said.

“Oh no,” he scoffed. “That voice is unmistakable. Just like your mother’s. Daniella could get anyone
to do absolutely anything; it was that intoxicating.”

“Sorry, but I never knew my biological mother.” Ryan said. “The only mother I’ve ever known is
my adoptive mother Dale.”

He was staring at Ryan’s face in a way that would have royally creeped Sarah out if she didn’t know
him. “Bob!”

He shook his head. “You’re right. I am thinking of someone else.”
Ryan smiled forgivingly.

“I remember hearing that Daniella’s oldest son had a very unforgettable nose. It almost looked like a camel’s humps,” he chuckled. “And yours is perfect. My mistake. I’m sorry.”

Ryan was pale and shaking as Bob left.

“Ryan?” She asked softly.

“Do you think my birth father would tell me my mom’s name?” Ryan asked softly.

“With your voice. Definitely,” Sarah said.
“NUDI duty done!” Hillary peeled out of the dark parking lot and lifted her palm, expecting a triumphant sisterly slap.

“Hands on the wheel,” Taylor yelped.

Hillary did what she was told. “Okay, so that was seriously amazing on every possible level possible!”

*Ping!*

**TO: Ryan**

Oct 14, 8:19 PM

**MOM:** HILLARY TOLD ME YOUR VOICE IS COMING BACK!!!! CAN’T WAIT TO HEAR. LOVE YOU!

Without responding, Ryan tucked the phone inside the pocket of his new rose vest. He’d also talked the accessory editor into actually looking at Sarah’s designs.

“Hills? Would you say my old nose looked like a camel’s humps?” he asked, fixated on her reflection in the side-view mirror.

“Yeah,” Hillary said, giggling. “It kind of did. Hey, did you even know camels could run like that? I had no idea. Could you imagine if we had been on them? It’s not like that wrangler could have saved us, that’s for sure. She was so freaked, I think that poo smell was coming from her, not Humphrey. Too bad Van-Verbeentengarden didn’t get any shots. He said he didn’t want to get sand in his lenses, which I guess is for the best, ’cause he’s taking my yearbook picture in the spring. Hey, maybe he can be the official NUDI photographer. He can ride with us on missions and document our battles. Too bad he didn’t get you camel wrangling.”

Ryan tried to nod in all the right places. Tried to agree when Hillary gave an opinion. Tried to smile at the charming parts. But everything came out sounding like a tiny grunt. He considered asking Hillary if she’d ever heard of a Daniella, a woman with a voice so intoxicating she “could get anyone to do absolutely anything.” But maybe Bob had it all wrong. Maybe Daniella wasn’t his long lost mother.

“Okay, so here’s my theory on Jaydra. For starters, her name is probably Jane Drake, or something boring like that. And Jane Drake had terrible style until one day she landed a job in a clothing store, probably thanks to some relative. But it wasn’t a cool store like Intermix or the Co-Op. It was cool by her standards, like Rue 21 or Charlotte Ruesse. After a few months, she started getting discounts and bought some clothes. She’d copy the other, cooler salesgirls until one day, during her lunch break, someone at the food court complimented her outfit. And that rocked her world. That night she changed her name from Jane Drake to Jaydra and…”

Ryan sighed, wishing he knew who his mom was.
Desolation

Chapter Summary

Beginning of what should be book 3 starts here.

The moon—a delicately arched crescent—was weeks away from being full. It was not time to hide. They were not transforming. Their monthly battle with rapid hair growth, insatiable hunger, and extreme irritability was not the issue. Still, Gerard Arthur Way was in a dark ravine, running for their life.

“Slow down!” they barked at their far more athletic brothers who formed a protective rhombus around them as they charged, panting, through the woods. Their mud-stained construction boots pounded the twig-covered earth with tireless determination. Not a minute passed without one of them vowing to keep Gerard and Bandit safe, pledging to sacrifice his life for theirs. It would have been extremely sweet—romantic, even—if they were contestants on The Bachelorette. But since they were their brothers, it was getting super annoying.

“My feet are killing me!” they groaned between breaths.

Howlmond, aka Ray, the oldest triplet by sixty-eight seconds, peered over his shoulder and looked down, fixing his orange-brown eyes on Gerard’s pointy-toed gold ankle boots. “I’d kill you too if you stuffed me into those things.” He turned to face the thicket ahead. “It’s like the shoemaker only made room for one toe.”

Matt, the middle triplet, snickered. If Howldel, or Rydel, the youngest triplet, had been there, she would have seen Ray’s insult and doubled it. Rydel had boot issues of her own, thanks to Arrowhead Boot Camp. While Gerard suffered from blisters, Rydel’s pain came from a drill sergeant, five AM whistles, and group meetings about anger management. Ahhhh… just thinking about their certifiable sister’s yearlong sentence brought relief.

“They didn’t come from a shoemaker!” Gerard practically spit. “They were designed by L.A.M.B.”

“Is that why you’re running so baaaaaaaad?” joked Michael from the back. His nickname was Mikey because he tended to give feedback when it was unwanted.

The Way brothers laughed.

“What’s your excuse?” Gerard wanted to ask. But they already knew. Their sensitive canine ears heard the curses Mikey muttered every time he ran into a branch.

Now fourteen, their youngest brother’s fur was coming in fast. Mikey’s bushy brows, sideburns, and tangles of light brown hair undulated in front of his hazel eyes like sea grass. It was nothing a bobby pin or styling products couldn’t fix, but Mikey refused. He had waited all his life for big-boy fur and wasn’t about to let a few thwacks in the face bully him back to baldness.

“Owie,” Gerard whimpered. The sting of a heel rubbed raw slowed them sprint to a gallop.

Is it hard to get blood out of leather? If only Frank were here. He’d know. But none of their friends were around. That was the problem... well, one of them.
“Keep moving, Gee,” Rocky insisted, grabbing their wrist to pull them along. Leaves and long shadows blurred into bands of darkness. “We’re almost there.”

“This is so stupid.” They limp-ran, holding up their purple halter dress. “We don’t even know if anyone is chasing us and—”

“No, what’s stupid is a person running in lamb’s boots,” he snapped. “They were obviously made for hooves, not toes.”

The boys howled with laughter. Gerard might have chuckled too if her feet weren’t throbbing like techno. Instead, Rocky’s insane remark became an excuse to stop running and glare at him.

Named after the Sylvester Stallone character, Gerard’s younger brother often made dumb-as-rocks comments. But what he lacked in smarts, he made up for in speed—record-breaking, jowl-dropping, thirty-five-miles-per-hour speed. All he had to do to stay on the school track team—and retain his star status—was get straight Ds. Which he did, making the family’s fastest member also the slowest.

“Keep moving!” Matt barked as the others forged ahead.

They took a lot of crap from the other RADs for their birth names. But deep down, they had similar objections. Because, seriously, what had their parents been thinking? It’s not like all normie kids were named Norman, Norma, Normandy, or Normiena. So why the need to force Howl, Growl, and Claw on the Wolf kids? Being a person with a hairy neck was embarrassing enough. Couldn’t their parents have at least tried to make life less mortifying? At least Mikey got a normal name.

Rocky smacked Gerard’s butt playfully. “Giddyup, lamb.”

Growling, they started limping forward again, silently cursing the day for not turning out the way it was supposed to.

_Thursday, October fourteenth, I curse you! You tricked me! From now on, my year has three hundred sixty-four days._

It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. The itinerary had been solid. After school and a rigorous body wax, they, Frank, Brendon, Debbie, and Jamia would take a limo to the Oregon sand dunes. There, they would meet up with Sarah and the accessories editor for Teen Vogue. First, a team of hair and makeup artists would glam Gerard, Jamia, Debbie, Brendon, and Sarah into models. Under Frank’s direction, stylists would adorn them in priceless jewels exhumed from Sarah’s aunt’s tomb. Next, the famed photographer Kolin VanVerbeentengarden would photograph them on camels for a fashion editorial layout on Cairo couture. After a toast to their futures in fashion, they would sneak tiny sips of champagne—aka “model water”—then limo back to Salem. The next day would be spent delighting their classmates with enviable anecdotes from the set. Months later, their exotic beauty would be available on newsstands everywhere—printed on high-gloss paper and bound by Condé Nast.

But the quartet had never even made it to the sand dunes. They never got glammed. They never sipped model water. And they would never be printed on high gloss.

Rue you, October fourteenth!

During the ride down, she, Frank, Brendon, Jamia, and Debbie were searching the limo’s flat screen for TMZ when they happened upon a special called “The Ghoul Next Door.” It featured all five of them, plus Gerard’s brother Mikey and many of their RAD friends. The never-before-seen glimpse into the secret lives of Salem’s monsters was supposed to air only if their faces were blurred, homes
obscured, and names omitted.

But there it was, clear as Crystal Light. In high def, no less. Not a single blur. Not a single black box. Their true identities—identities the RADs had struggled to keep hidden for generations—were broadcast all over town. Now, instead of celebrating at a wrap party, they were under wraps, limp-running all the way to the Way family’s hideout.

_Thursday the fourteenth is the new Friday the thirteenth!_

Their faces were sure to be on the Internet and the AP wire by now. And the worst part? Gerard had actually trusted Keltie. Keltie was one of their friends. And all because her crush turned out to like a guy more than her, she leaked the film to Kim Kardashian proportions.

It was hard to imagine Keltie jeopardizing the entire RAD community. But as Gerard’s mother always said, “People do unimaginable things when they’re insecure. Look at Heidi Pratts.” Gerard got squirmy when their trying-to-be-hip mother referenced pop culture—especially when she got celebrities’ names wrong. But Donna was right: Keltie’s insecurities, like Heidi’s, had driven her toward the unimaginable.

_Still, how could she?_

Gerard began picking up speed, trying to outrun their rage. Popped-blistcr pain was minor compared to the sting of a stab in the back. Their high heels were sinking into the soft earth, and their dress was getting slick with sweat. Pumas and a comfortable shirt would have made a world of difference, but they had been forced into exile the moment they stepped out of the limo. By then the show had already aired, and the RADs were fleeing.

“Couldn’t we have packed a bag or two, at least?” Gerard asked, risking a mouthful of mosquitoes.

“Couldn’t you have not gone on TV?” Ray fired back. The honor roll student did make a good point, as usual.

“I didn’t know we were being set up!” Gerard complained.

“You should have,” he grumbled.

“Mikey and Ryland did it too,” Gerard added without guilt. Ray would never get mad at Mikey or Ryland—Mikey was the baby and Ryland was the eldest.

“I did it to watch out for you,” Mikey said breathlessly. A marching band tuba player, he was usually good at going long distances but his asthma tended to make that hard for him. “To make sure it wasn’t a trap.”

“And how did that work out?” Matt teased.

Mikey smacked him playfully on the arm.

Matt smacked him back.

Gerard missed their friends already. No more gossip sessions, side-grabbing laughter, clothing swaps, hair-streaking sleepovers, nail-art contests, or professional waxes at the spa.

They pumped their fists and ran faster. Every twig that snapped beneath Gerard’s boots was a closed-minded normie. _Banished from our homes. No more Internet. No more television. No more jogging along the river to Jamia’s killer playlists. Forced into hiding. Living in fear._ Gerard ran

Birds took off in flaps of panic. Rodents dipped back into their holes. Leaves rustled.

The clearing was visible now. Their mother, Donna, would be there, anxious to guide them to safety.

“Maybe we should grab Mom and go back home,” Gerard tried. “Maybe it’s time we stood up for ourselves instead of being afraid—”

“We’re not afraid,” Matt insisted. “Dad put us in charge of keeping you and Mom safe while he’s away, that’s all.”

Gerard rolled their eyes. It was the same story day after day. The boys were supposed to protect the girls. And ever since Gerard came out as nonbinary, they were considered one of the girls. But this girl didn’t want protection. They wanted to go back home and confront Keltie. They wanted to check the mail and see if anyone had bought tickets to the battle of the bands. They wanted to take a long, hot shower.

“You guys stay with Mom, and I’ll go back,” they pressed.

“No. We’re a pack,” Mikey said, “and—”

“Packs stay together,” they all finished, in a mocking tone.

“Keep going. We’re almost there,” Mikey instructed.

Gerard bit their bottom lip and did what they were told. But their tolerance for being babied was wearing as thin as their socks. Forget about protecting them—what about their home? Their individual rights? Their freedom? Those needed protection way more than they did.

Donna’s athletic silhouette became visible in the distance. As usual, she waved her kids forward, silently urging them to hurry. Going through the motions, Gerard picked up their pace, but the flight instinct had yet to kick in. Instead, they wanted to dig in their high heels and fight. And why shouldn’t they? They was just weeks away from their sixteenth birthday, too old to follow the pack. It was time to take control of their life, to show their family that they were more than just another shiny coat.

It was time for this Way and their L.A.M.B.s to stray.
Drained and aching from what seemed like hours of sprinting and hiding behind trees, cars, and lampposts, Spencer flopped onto a stone couch in the RADs’ underground hideout and surrendered to the weight of his eyelids. As usual, the lair smelled like popcorn and moist earth. The carousel overhead stopped circling at sundown, but familiar voices still swirled all around him. He was not the first to arrive.

Were his parents there? Had they made it safely? Was Linda really to blame for this?

Spencer tried not to think about her or he’d spark. And he couldn’t spark. He needed to preserve every last drop of energy in case he had to run again.

His fingers flopped against the tattered hem of Fran’s hated matronly peasant skirt. It felt frayed and muddy—definitely no longer wearable. He grinned weakly. At least some good had come of this.

“You okay?” Spencer heard a familiar female voice and smelled orange Starburst. He forced his eyes open. No one was there.

“Hayley?”

She unhooked a strand of brown hair from Spencer’s lashes and gently tucked it behind his ear. “Yeah,” she said softly.

He struggled to sit up. His invisible friend gripped his shoulder and eased him back down. “Rest.”

Police sirens wailed above ground. The room became noticeably quieter until they passed.

“I need to apologize,” he managed to mumble.

“No one blames you.”

Spencer sighed with doubt.

“It’s true. You did everything you could to protect us. Everyone knows that. Linda had all of us fooled. Not just you...” Hayley kept talking. Going on and on about how Linda was the wrong girl for him. How she had used him to further her film career. How he never should have trusted a normie who wears monster-movie tees.

Spencer nodded in agreement to show Hayley he was just as outraged. But if he were being honest, he would have told her that when Linda gave Channel Two the unblurred interviews, she did more than just break his trust. She broke his heart.

The underground lair began filling with the usual, albeit panic-stricken, RADs. Too nervous to sit on the stone club chairs, they paced. Their jittery movements blocked and then unblocked the lanterns that hung from ceiling hooks, creating a dizzying strobe effect. Brendon chewed his bottom lip while his mini fan blew the choppy fringe off his forehead. Beside him Jamia peeled off her fingerless gloves and began slathering her scaly skin with Burt’s Bees moisturizer.

Lindsay removed her green beanie so the snakes on her head could uncoil and stretch. Frank, looking even paler than usual, closed his ruby-red parasol and quickly joined their tight cluster. Debby greeted them with her endearing zombielike stare.
Ordinarily, bubbly conversation would fizz from their circle and overflow into the room like shaken soda. But tonight conversation was flat. Instead of giggly gossip, they exchanged what-do-we-do-now? glances set to a symphony of nail-biting, toe taps, and muffled sobs.

Hayley tugged Spencer’s finger. “Let’s say hi.”

“You go,” he said, too embarrassed to face his friends. Not because his mission to liberate the RADs had failed, but because he really liked Linda and had led everyone to believe she liked him too.

Hayley squeezed his hand before letting go. “Okay, be right back.”

Allowing his eyes to close again, Spencer heard familiar voices wash over him like waves of electricity.

“Who figured Linda was such a horse’s ass?” Jamia said, her new jersey accent thicker than usual. “I had her figured for a real pal.”

“Well, thanks to that ‘horse’s ass,’ I have to go back to Scotland,” Lindsay muttered.

“For how long?” Hayley asked.

“Dunno. Long enough for the coach to kick me off marching band.”

“Does Sarah know yet?” Frank asked. The sudden knick-knock knick-knock of wooden heels and a waft of amber perfume kept Lindsay from answering.

“Is everyone okay?” She asked in a hurry. “Ryan said people were still missing.”

“Coooool haaaiiir,” Debbie droned, noticing Sarah’s camera-ready do. The zombie was oblivious to the mounting tension.

Spencer wanted to peek, but opening his eyes had become impossible. He felt as if a dozen chandelier earrings were dangling off his lashes.

“Photoshoot with Taylor Swift and the Wentzes,” Sarah dismissed. She paused for a second and then asked, “What’s wrong with Spencer?”

“He just needs some sleep,” Hayley insisted. “He’ll be fine.”

“Really? ’Cause he looks a little green, if you ask me.” Sarah giggled worriedly.

“I’m guessing Ry explained the situation?” Lindsay asked.

“Actually Taylor did. Apparently she’s known since Pete got bitten,” Sarah said. “Keltie Audrey and Jac teamed up because all three were jealous of the rad boys dating their crushes.”

“That about sums it up.”

“Where’s Gerard?”

“No one knows.” Billy sighed. “They’re not answering their phone.”

“So wait, where are the wonder twins?” Brendon asked.

“Ryan’s having some mama drama.” Sarah said quickly.
—ouch! Tight. Bolt cramp. Ahhhhhhh…

Spencer’s body began to hum. White-hot currents zipped along his spine and energized his limbs. His fingers twitched. His toes wiggled. His eyes shot open. Is this how normies feel when they eat sugar?

His father was leaning over him and the twins and squinting intensely, as if trying to read his thoughts. “How’s Daddy’s perfect little goofballs?”

Spencer nodded slowly and sat up. His mother’s warm hands supported his back.

“We were so worried about you three,” Vincent said. “If Hayley hadn’t told us where you were…”

“Spencer, another five minutes and you would have been out,” Viola explained. “Memory loss, coma…” She shook the horrible thoughts from her mind.

“Here,” Vincent said proudly. A black quilted handbag with bloodred straps, a leather messenger bag, and a leather backpack purse dangled from his fingers. “They’re for you three.”

Confused, Spencer looked back at her mother. The bags were voltage, but it was an odd time for gifts.

“Go on.” Viola smiled. “Take one.”

The lair was teeming with parents racing to embrace their children.

“It’s a portable amp machine,” Vincent explained. “Keep it close to your body and you’ll stay charged.”

“We modeled them after a Chanel, that laptop bag you were eyeing, and that absolutely adorable backpack you were looking at,” Viola whispered triumphantly.

Spencer turned the messenger bag around in his hands. It buzzed life. The latched were made with miniature neck bolts, and the interior had more pockets than his cargoes. He instantly transferred his iPhone X, black-and-green wallet, rhinestone compact, Fierce & Flawless makeup case, STAR labs keychain, and bag of assorted saltwater taffy from his now-passé backpack. Everything fit beautifully.

“I adore it with my entire heart space!” Fran squealed, pulling her parents into a gigantic thank-you hug. They smelled like chemicals and gardenias—a scent she had come to associate with love.

“A rather unusual time for cutesy adolescent expressions and hugs, wouldn’t you agree?” A male voice, deep and melodic, suddenly filled the room.

The Smiths pulled apart to find a giant monitor lowering from the ceiling. It stopped in the center of the crowded room and hovered ten feet above the stone floor. The RADs quickly stopped commiserating and focused on the screen, which showed a distinguished man seated under a giant sun umbrella. Wearing mirrored Carrera sunglasses and a gold satin robe, he had a seven-layer tan and slicked-back hair that was stiff with comb tracks. The shot revealed very little about his location, other than the polished wood railing of a yacht. Jay-Z blared in the background. Women giggled. Champagne flutes clinked.

“Forgive us, Mr. D,” Vincent said, approaching the screen. “We were just so happy to see that our children were safe and—”
Folding his arms across his smooth chest, the man on the monitor shook his head disapprovingly.

“Sorry,” Vincent stated humbly.

Spencer could see Frank and his mom fuming.

Three women click-clacked by on-screen wearing heels and the kind of cutout one-pieces that left Mondrian-esque tan lines. Their long pink fingernails raked along the back of Mr. D’s neck as they passed.

Embarrassed, Frank buried his face in his palms.

“Oh leave them alone Anthony!” Frank’s mother defended. “Their children were nearly out of charge! How would you feel if it were Frank or one of your other children!”

Spencer broke away from his mother and inched toward his friends.

“How’d he get so bronzed?” Sarah asked Frank.

“Thirty hours straight in a tanning bed,” he whispered back.

“I hate those things,” Spencer interjected, remembering his mortifying electrical surge at the spa. “I felt like I was in a coffin.”

Sarah and Frank giggled.

“Um, something tells me he’s okay with that,” Sarah added.

They giggled again.

Missing the joke, Spencer turned away and whispered into Jamia’s bleach-blond Roxie Richter style ponytails, “Who is this guy?”

“Frank's dad,” Jamia whispered back. “He’s the big man.”

“The what?”

“The top dog,” Jamia said.

Spencer knit his brows.

“The boss!”

“Oh.”

“Smart as a whip, he is,” Jamia continued. “And quite a hit with the dames, if you know what I mean.”

Spencer nodded like he did.

Mr. D cleared his throat. “I’ll save the scolding for another time. I suppose being forced out of your homes is punishment enough for now. Am I right?”

Several parents lowered their heads in shame. Some sniffed back tears. Spencer backed up and hid behind Jon, just in case Mr. D started looking for a scapegoat. But he didn’t seem concerned with blame. Thankfully, no one did. Blame was a luxury they could no longer afford.
“I’ve made the necessary arrangements,” he stated. “My brother Vlad will collect your phones and identification. I have arranged for new mobile devices, phone numbers, and IDs for everyone so you can no longer be traced.”

Frank’s uncle Vlad appeared before Spencer holding open a giant black sack. No taller than five feet, with a mop of gray hair, round tortoiseshell glasses, and a black-and-white form fitting striped tee, he looked like a Happy Meal–sized Andy Warhol.

“Trick or treat,” he said, the tips of his Crest Whitestripped fangs poking his pillowy bottom lip.

“Can I just give you the sim card?” Spencer asked. “It’s cheaper and less destructive.”

“Smart boy.” Vlad grinned. “ID too.” Spencer popped the chip out of his phone and took out his ID. Those around him followed his cue.

“What?” He said, putting the cardless phone back in his backpack, to the staring of the Australian boys to his left. “Phones are expensive and all of my notes and songs are on here.”

He held out an envelope to Spencer.

“What’s this?”

“Emergency money, new ID, travel itinerary, and a gift card for a new iPhone redeemable at any Apple Store worldwide.”

“Travel itinerary?” Spencer asked. “Where are we going?”

“Make like a librarian and check it out, Feisty.” Uncle Vlad gestured toward the roomful of people still waiting for their envelopes. “You’re not my only customer.”

He and his ominous black sack moved on to Sarah.

She dropped her chip and id into the bag, opting to keep her phone and wallet.

Spencer rolled his eyes as he pushed his way to the front of the crowd.

“A fleet of jets is currently en route,” continued Mr. D. “They will be in the usual spot in three hours. You have been guaranteed safe passage from one of my contacts at the FAA. Remain here until that time. No one is to return home. It’s not safe.”

Murmurs swelled.

“What’s going to happen to Salem when we leave?” asked one of the grown-ups. “Who’s going to run my restaurant?”

“And my law practice?”

“And the fire department?”

“What about my students?”

“And my patients?”

The atmosphere quickly shifted from conflict to panic. These were high-powered people, beholden not only to one another but to the entire community. Did Mr. D really expect them to drop everything and leave? Who would take their places? How would society function without them? And what
would become of those left behind?

Forgetting his parents’ rule about not standing too close to the TV, Spencer approached the monitor and blurted, “Are you sure leaving is the best idea?”

Mr. D leaned closer to the camera, its round eye reflected in his sunglasses. “Mr. Smith?”

Spencer nodded.

“I know that a lot of us were exposed but I know the three hellbeasts that caused this.” Spencer said. “And technically what they did was illegal. Our parents all allowed this as long as our faces were blurred. The only one over 18 were Jon Walker. And as US citizens, us minors are protected because of the fact that none of our parents consented to Audrey Kitching, Jac Vanek, and Keltie Colleen Knight airing that show with our faces unblurred.”

“Where are you heading with this?”

“A RAD that isn’t here, his adoptive father is an attorney. He can help us sue them and channel 2 for invasion of privacy and emotional damage to minors.” Spencer pointed out. “Thus establishing that circumstances of our births does not negate our right to live.”

He leaned back in his white captain’s chair, his fingertips touching. “Yes, I’ve heard about you.”

Spencer beamed. “Thanks.”

A few of the grown-ups snickered.

“Sorry, sir,” Vincent said, placing his hand on Spencer’s shoulder and pulling him back from the screen. “He was just born. What he’s trying to say is that some of us are tired of being intimidated. And we want to stay.”

“Easy for you to say,” snapped Maddy Ballato, Lindsay’s mother. “Spencer’s sisters weren’t in the movie.”

“Yes, they were,” Viola insisted.

“Just her voice,” argued Jamia’s aunty Coral. “Funny how she conducted her interviews behind the scenes. It’s like she knew this would blow up in our faces.”

Spencer felt as if a vacuum hose had been attached to his belly button, the dial set to COMPOSE SUCK.

“We only had one camera!” Breezy snapped. “I guess he could have sat on the subject’s lap, or we could have tied it to a pendulum, but don’t you dare say he betrayed us!” Dallon nodded and moved to stand with Spencer and the twins. “Or are you going to say that I was in on it too? Because I was camera woman with Dallon!”

“I think you know,” Coral said. “That one’s been nothing but trouble since the day he was born.”

Spencer sparked.

“Hold up a minute, Carol,” said Cleopatra de Nile, seated comfortably in a club chair.

“It’s Coral.”

“My Sarah wasn’t in the movie either,” she continued. “Are you suggesting she had an ulterior
motive too?"

"Perhaps," Coral pressed.

"Then I have a suggestion for you," Cleopatra said as Sarah appeared by her side.

"Maybe you need to control your niece."

"Buzz off!" Jamia shouted. "I am in control!"

Frank giggled, and Mr. D turned back to face the group.

"Sounds like it," Cleopatra scoffed.

"Oh cut it out mom!" Sarah huffed. "I was just as involved as Spencer and Jon! The three of us were the ones who created the graphics for the show!"

"Well, I’m not taking any chances," Maddy chimed in. "Lindsay and I are going back to Scotland with her father."

"What?" Sarah shouted. And then to her girlfriend, "Why didn’t you tell me?"

"I just found out an hour ago," she whined.

"How long will he be gone?" Sarah asked Mrs. Gorgon.

"As long as it takes," Maddy said firmly. "Normies all over the world now know who we are. We need to be with family—they’re the only ones we can trust."

"That’s not true. There are a lot of normies out there who support us," said Brendon, obviously thinking of Ryan’s family and Pete’s celebrity friends.

"What about marching band?" Sarah asked. "The coach will kick Lindsay off the team if she misses —" She began to cry. "What about me?"

"Thanks to your smart choices to not be in front of the camera, we’re staying right here," Cleopatra declared, even though that’s not what Sarah had meant.

Coral waved her black envelope in the air. "Well, Jamia is going back to her parents in New Jersey."

At that, the sea creature broke into salty sobs. The dry scales on her cheeks glistened beneath her tears. Her aunt’s hushed promises of daily surf sessions and sunset swims along the coast brought Jamia momentary solace, but then the notion of leaving her friends and missing Gerard’s Sassy Sixteen tore her up all over again.

"We’ll send video of the party," Brendon said, trying to console her.

"Excuse me?" said his mother. "We’re not staying."

"What? I can’t just leave. What about school? My music classes? And Ryan?"

"He’s a sweet boy, Brendon, but the least of my concerns right now."

"But mom! He needs my support! His dad’s dying and he’s trying to find his mom!" Brendon yelled.

Fights were breaking out all around Frankie. Parents and kids argued over their futures as Uncle
Vlad pried sim cards from their hands.

Frank was the only one still fixed on the screen. “Does this mean I’m coming to meet you on the yacht, Daddy?” His voice sweetened with hope.

“Frank, I’m running an international empire from this boat. It’s hardly a Disney cruise,” Mr. D explained, in a tone that implied this wasn’t the first time he’d said so. Frank’s face crumpled in.

“That’s fine. We’ll stay here for a bit and then once the Ways are able, we’ll go stay with them.” Linda soothed. “Your bastard of a father isn’t worth your tears, my little bat.” Linda shot her ex-husband a glare over Frank’s head.

“I’m afraid I have another meeting,” he announced. “Maddy, the phones.”

Uncle Vlad emptied the black sack onto the floor. Deuce’s fashionably lithe mother stepped forward. “Eyes closed,” she called, gripping her black Diors. Everyone closed their eyes and she lifted the sunglasses. The room quickly cooled and then warmed as she lowered the lenses back over her eyes. “All clear,” she announced.

Before them sat a stone statue made of their discarded SIM cards, wallets, and IDs— another obscure piece of art to clutter their underground hideaway. The latest tribute to their ongoing struggle.

“Good luck to all of you,” Mr. D said over the sound of sobs. “And remember, hide with pride.”

“Hide with pride,” everyone muttered back. Everyone but the Smiths.

The screen went black, and the monitor ascended toward the ceiling.

From across the room, Aunty Coral, who was still consoling Jamia, fired a round of hate squints at the Smiths.

“We should probably get going,” Vincent said, placing a protective arm around Spencer’s shoulders.

Spencer found it hard to believe his parents were seriously serious about staying. “So that’s it? We’re just heading back to Radcliffe?”

Viola knelt down and took her children’s hands. “That’s it,” her violet eyes steady and sure. “We’ve been doing it our way for centuries, and it hasn’t gotten us very far. So now we’ll try it your way.”

“My way?” Spencer sparked and then pulled back her hand. Imagining him and his sisters as the leaders of a revolution.

“Well slap my ass and call me Enjolras.” Fran joked.

But spoken aloud, those words were heavy, weighted down with responsibility and consequence. And after their many failed attempts as a freedom fighter, he questioned his ability to carry that burden alone. “It’s not like I have a plan or anything.”

“Good.” Vincent snickered, obviously thinking of their track records too. “Because right now all we need to do is stay put and stay safe. Our goal is to continue living our lives. Business as usual. That’s it. Nothing else. Not yet. No plots, no plans, no schemes. Not until we know what and whom we’re dealing with. Got it?”

“Got it,” Spencer agreed, even though he didn’t. Not completely. But he would. As soon as he found Linda at school on Monday and asked—no, demanded—that she cop to her role in this mess. Then,
once he’d dealt with her accordingly, he’d agree to his father’s rule.

Amid tearful good-byes and a few vengeful glances, Vincent led his family toward the old wooden door. Along the way Spencer, the twins, and Viola broke off to hug friends and wish them well.

“You’re really staying?” asked Ms. Urie, reaching under her thick black glasses and dabbing the corner of her eye with a balled-up tissue.

“We are,” Viola said, grinning at Spencer. Spencer grinned back.

“I wish Jackson and I could, but—”

“With all due respect, Vi,” said Maddy Gorgon, cutting Ms. Urie off. “Do you really think staying is in the best interest of your children?”

“Absolutely,” Viola said, her certainty reflected in the lenses of Maddy’s Diors. “They are my children and I will not raise them to be afraid.”

“It was my idea,” Spencer said, rushing to his mother’s defense.

“We’ve learned a lot from them over the last few months.” Viola beamed at her children.

“Our kids are clever. No question about that.” Maddy cupped the back of her yellow-and-green headscarf. “But in times like these, I think it’s wise to let the grown-ups do the teaching.”

“We’re teaching them about life,” said Viola. And then to Spencer and the twins, she added, “And they’re teaching us about living.”

“Well then,” said Maddy with a caustic grin. “Let’s hope they knows what they’re doing.” Ms. Urie sniffed. “You’d better take good care of yourselves. We want you here in one piece in case we come back.”

“I’ll tell Ryan the news,” Spencer said morosely. “God. It’s gonna kill him to lose you so soon after finally getting you.”

“I know. Maybe Ry can have my new number?” Brendon asked. “It’s not like he’s going to tell anyone where we are.”

“Brendon, no!” Ms. Urie snapped. “His parents might be sending him back to California.”

“Bullshit!” Brendon snapped. “The Wentzes have no idea what to do in this senario.”

*In case?* Spencer had never considered that these people might be gone for good. He had been too consumed with his heartache. Too preoccupied with confronting Linda. Too fixated on his parents’ voltage decision to stay.

Ashamed by his thoughtlessness, Spencer adjusted his inner empathy dial and tuned in to the frequency of the room. Sorrow hovered, gray and oppressive as Salem fog.

Parents had formed clusters, discussing their barely baked plans in hushed tones.

Brendon sat in a club chair, leaning forward as if trying not to puke. Frank and Jamia giggle-sobbed as they recorded video messages on each other’s phones.

Sarah’s gold-wrapped arms encircled Lindsay. Soaked false lashes dangled from her eyes like branches trapped at the mouth of a waterfall. If tear salt could calcify, it would have hung from her
lids like stalactites. Could this really be good-bye forever?

Spencer couldn’t imagine school without these people. And he couldn’t imagine them without each other. Now, more than ever, he was determined to make things right. To be the one associated with uniting instead of dividing. To bring meaning to his life and to feel worthy of being called “Daddy’s perfect little boy.” He owed it to his friends, his parents, and his future.

Like Martin Luther King Jr., Spencer dreamed of living in a nation where people would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. The sooner he realized that dream, the sooner he could get started on Katy Perry’s and live the teenage one.
At Your Window

The front door of the Wentz house blew open with urgency. Ryan lifted his throbbing head off the kitchen table and braced herself for a follow-up slam that never came.

“Hullo?” his older sister, Hillary, called out, spitting a pistachio shell across the table at Ryan.

No one answered.

Ryan was hyperventilating. Was that the police coming to take him away to experiment on him?

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck!” Ryan hissed, trying to breathe.

“Whoever’s there! I’m armed!” Pete yelled, racing down the stairs and the sound of Ryan wheezing. Andy followed behind yelling like a wild child.

“Where is he?” cried the intruder.

The familiar high-heeled stabs of Tory Burch hiking boots pocking the wood floors put them at ease.

“Hi, Mom…” Hillary muttered, cracking into another pistachio.

Ryan hit REDIAL on his cell phone for what felt like the zillionth time that night. Once again it went straight to voice mail. He hung up. “I’m telling you, something isn’t right with Brendon.”

Dale Wentz appeared in the doorway of the woodsy kitchen. Her petite frame was wrapped in an unassuming black trench coat, allowing her black curls to take center stage.

“Where’s your father? He should have been home hours ago.”

Ryan shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Oh well, I can’t wait another minute. Let’s hear it,” Dale insisted, rubbing her hands together anxiously.

Ryan’s stomach dipped. There was nothing about this nightmare he wanted to share, especially with him.

“Come on, I didn’t race home from book club to be stared at. Go!”

“Aren’t you going to close the front door?” Ryan asked, unable to look his mother in the eye.

“Really? The door?” Dale untied her trench and joined her children at the table—a glass oval that mocked their rustic home with its I’m-from-Beverly-Hills shine. “That’s all?”

“Yup.” Ryan got up and yanked open the wood-paneled fridge. The cool air was soothing.

“Why so morose?” Dale asked.

Ryan rolled his eyes at the organic fat-free milk.

“Mom, I think the expression is sow more oats,” Hillary said, enunciating carefully. “And I agree. He is totally obsessing over Brendon. Brothah needs to date.”

“Actually,” Dale said, giggling, “I meant morose.” She fixed her green eyes on Ryan. “I don’t
“Lots of reasons.” Ryan shut the fridge and stomped off to slam the front door shut. Could it be that my friends have become the target of a massive monster hunt? He wanted to yell. Or that my boyfriend hasn’t picked up his phone in three hours? Oh no, wait! I know why I’m being so morose. It’s because Sarah’s butler, Manu, might know my real mom! Or maybe it’s my biological father slowly dying! But genealogy was not the priority. Finding Brendon was. So Ryan walked back into the kitchen without saying a word.

“I just assumed you’d be celebrating, that’s all,” Dale explained with a self-pitying shrug.

“Celebrating?” Ryan asked, confused.

“You sister texted the good news from the Teen Vogue shoot.”

“Good news?”

“When I heard you got your singing voice back, I nearly jumped out of my J Brands!”

Hillary cracked another pistachio.

“I haven’t heard that voice since I was 16.” Taylor pointed out. She joined the Wentzes in the kitchen.

“Wait.” Ryan leaned against the counter and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. “You’re talking about my singing?”

Ryan nodded. “Of course. I want to hear it.” She slapped her hands together as if in prayer and mouthed, Ohpleaseohpleaseoh-please. “Do ‘Anything You Can Do’ from Annie Get Yor Gun. Just like you used to. That was always my favorite.”

Hillary burst out laughing.

“Mom, I’m not in the mood right—”

“Babe!” Peter called as he entered the house. “You’re never going to believe it!”

“I know! He got his voice back!” Dale raced to the foyer to greet him. “It’s eight thirty; where have you been?”

“I got a call from Ryan's friend Spencer's parents.” Peter pointed his chin in Ryan’s direction. “Viola was looking into suing channel 2 for endangering minors and invasion of privacy.”

“NUDI power!” Taylor and Hillary shouted, punching their fists in the air.

“What’s a NUDI?” Dale asked over the beeping microwave.

“Normies Uncool with Discriminating Idiots,” Hillary explained. “RyRo, it’s working. Normies want to be RADs! Our message is totally getting through!” She began texting Hayley. “Man, this is gonna look great on my college applications.”

“That’s it! That’s what they’re called—RADs!” Peter said, fanning his steaming quesadilla. “And from what I understand, some of them live on our street!” He sipped some wine that had appeared in front of him thanks to Dale. “Dr. Kramer is dying to spot one, so I invited his family over for dinner on Sunday night. They have two kids your age, so—”
“So what? You’re starting up a side business now?” Ryan snapped. “Come see the weirdos on Radcliffe Way! Dinner included in the cost of admission! Free hunting nets while supplies last.”

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

“Ryan and Pete are RADs.” Taylor said defensively.

“But we aren’t.” Dale pointed out.

“I know I’m adopted.” Ryan pointed out. “And Pete got bitten a year back.” Ryan pushed off of the counter and began to leave the room. “We aren’t circus freaks. Don’t gawk at us like we are!”

**Do you actually hear yourselves?** Ryan was about to shout. But his iPhone started to ring.

**Brendon!**

“Hello?” he blurted, even though the call was coming from a blocked number. A voice whispered on the other end. “Ryan, it’s Grace Urie. I mean, Ms. Urie. Your music teacher. Brendon’s mother.”

Ryan’s mouth dried. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine.” Ms. Urie sighed. “He just refuses to leave without saying good-bye.”

“Leave? Where is he going?” A cyclone of nausea tore through him.

**Who is it?** mouthed Dale.

Ryan dismissed her with a wave and hurried for the privacy of the living room.

“Can you be at Cape Town Café across from McNary Field Airport in forty minutes?”

“Uh-huh,” Ryan managed.

“Good. See you soon. And make sure no one is following you.”

The line went dead.

Ryan checked the side-view mirror one last time—nothing but darkness and streetlights behind them.

“This is it,” he whispered, spotting the only three illuminated letters on the coffee shop’s marquee. “Left at the ‘fé.’ ”

“Ha!” Hillary said to the decrepit sign. “You think Spencer or the twins could make that light back up with just hands hands?”

Ryan didn’t know. And he wasn’t in the mood to guess.

Hillary flicked on her turn signal. “Let’s do this!” As she turned the wheel sharply, the BMW screeched into the Cape Town Café lot.

She parked next to a Tacoma with a window made of duct tape and cardboard. Ryan slumped down
in his seat. “At least turn off the lights.”

“Okay, you really need to relax,” Hillary snapped, obviously tired of Ryan’s nonstop paranoia.

“Tell that to your outfit.”

Hillary looked down and giggled. Dressed in Dale’s camouflage bird-watching vest and trucker hat with binoculars around her neck and a warbling whistle poking out of the pocket, she was hard to take seriously. But his sister was right. Ryan did need to relax. At least about being followed.

“I don’t see their car. Do you think we missed them? Or what if—” Ryan couldn’t bear to finish the thought. It was one thing if Brendon had left, quite another if he’d been taken.

“Haven’t you ever had to ditch a stalker?”

Ryan shook his head.

“People who are in hiding don’t park in plain view.”

“True,” Ryan admitted, eyeing the dilapidated roadside diner. The shutters were drawn. “What would you do? You know, if your boyfriend was leaving?” Saying the words out loud made his insides squinch up, like being zipped into a jacket several sizes too small.

“And I wasn’t already bored with him?”

“Obviously!”


“How?”

“That’s your job.” Hillary leaned over and patted Ryan on the shoulder. “Mine is to keep watch on stakeout duty.” She pulled the bird whistle from her pocket and blew. It sounded like a woodpecker that had swallowed a squeaky toy. “When you hear that, it means ‘get out as fast as you can.’ Now go before he leaves.”

Leaves? Ryan’s chest zipped even tighter.

Rigged with bells, the door chimed as she opened it. Not even the sweet coffee-and-doughnuts smell could stir his appetite. The Formica counter, silver-and-black stools, and five red booths were predictable. The RENT soundtrack playing on the jukebox, not so much. Was this really the last place he and Brendon would ever kiss? As he stepped inside, Ryan brushed his bangs over his eyes and pulled his hood up. It was the closest thing he had to a hug.

There were only two customers: a balding man in a corduroy blazer hunched over a plate of spaghetti, and a black-haired boy immersed in a copy of Hot Rod magazine. He had a scar across his cheek and wore a T-shirt that said HELLO, MY NAME IS STAN. Ryan’s forehead began to panic-sweat. Brendon was already gone.

“Table for one?” asked the overly bleached blond waitress with a snap of her minty gum. Her age-spotted hands hovered over a stack of menus.

“Ummm,” Ryan stalled. Now what? Go back to the car? Wait? Show the waitress a picture of Brendon? Or maybe Gabe? Ask if he saw one of them? Ryan was bombarded with options, yet none of them seemed worth considering. He was supposed to be here! “Actually, I’m meeting—”
Ping!

Ryan quickly checked his phone.

TO: RR

oct 14, 9:44 PM

BLOCKED: SIT WITH STAN.

He lifted his gaze. Stan lowered his magazine and tried to smile, but a quivering pout was the best he could do.

Yes!

“I’m going to sit with that guy.”

The waitress winked in an I-would-too-if-I-were-twenty-years-younger sort of way.

Up close, there was no mistaking the crackle in Brendon’s eyes. But the black hair? The scar? The Hot Rod mag? And where were his glasses?

“Wait,” Ryan said, sliding into the booth beside him. There were two plates on the table: an untouched slice of Oreo cookie cheesecake and a side salad. “Gabe?”

“No, it’s me,” Brendon said, managing to conceal everything but his kind voice. “I’m in disguise mode. Do I make a good bad boy?”

“The waitress thought you were cute.” Ryan tried to sound upbeat. He reached for his hand and held it to his face, wanting—no, needing—to inhale the familiar floral scent of his flower–stained fingers. But the colors had been replaced with harsh black stains. Hair dye. And now they smelled like public-bathroom soap and coarse paper towels.

“How was the Teen Vogue shoot?” he asked, as if it were any other day.

Ryan tried pretending that it was. “Sarah and I really of bonded, so that was good. I got my singing voice back and performed for three camels named Niles, Humphrey, and Luxor. And this guy, Bob, might know my mom.”

Brendon pushed the cheesecake aside. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Which part?”

“All of it.”

“Believe it,” Ryan said, before sharing the details.

“So this Daniella woman might be your mom?”

“If she is, I don’t know how to forgive her. She left me with George which nearly got me killed.” Ryan pointed out. He quickly reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper. “The lyrics to my song for you and, uh, my number in case Gabe wants to talk.” Ryan jiggled his knee. “You’re not really leaving, are you?”

The tears began to fall. Hot and fast, they slithered down Ryan’s cheeks and off his jaw.

He pulled back and looked Brendon in the eye. “Can’t you tell your mom you want to stay? You could wear this disguise. Switch schools. No one would ever know.”

“I tried. A hundred times, at least. She told me not to bring it up anymore. I promised I wouldn’t if she promised to get you here.”

“Well, try again,” Ryan insisted, wondering if that’s what Hillary had meant by make him stay.

“Fine,” he agreed, with surprising ease. He lifted his eyes to meet his. “One condition: You have to stick around while I talk to her.”

“Why?”

Brendon half-smiled. “Because if she has as much trouble saying no to you as I do, then the flight is as good as canceled.”

Riding the updraft of possibility, Ryan leaned in to kiss him.

“What’s this about a canceled flight?”

Ryan quickly pulled away.

Ms. Urie was hovering above them, her shiny black bob swinging across her jaw and Brendon’s twin older sisters Kara and Kyla. Her signature matte red lipstick had been freshly applied. Kyla smirked.

“Nothing,” Brendon assured her. “Everything is still on schedule.”

“Good.” She slid across the open seat and looked at the wooden bowl of iceberg lettuce as if it were some kind of insult. “I know I promised you alone time, but one more second in that bathroom and I would have contracted the hantavirus.”

Ryan grinned like he completely understood. It was something he found himself doing often with his boyfriend’s-mom-slash-beyond-intellectual-music-teacher.

“Go ahead, ask her,” Brendon whispered, nudging Ryan.

“You,” he whispered back.

“Ask me what?” Ms. Urie asked while signaling the waitress for the check. “This had better not be about staying, because—”

“You can’t leave,” Ryan blurted.

Ms. Urie began blinking, as if genuinely interested in what Ryan had to say.

“Explain.”

“Um, I just think that…” Ryan stammered, the way he often did when talking. But he did know this answer. It was Ms. Urie’s willingness to hear it that he hadn’t expected.

“You’re a teacher…” he began, thinking it best not to center his plea on broken teenage hearts. The woman wouldn’t appreciate being bargained with for her son’s heart
“And a role model. Not only for RADs, but for normies too.”

Ms. Urie nodded in agreement. Ryan could feel Brendon grinning beside him.

“If you leave, it sends a message that when the going gets tough, the tough leave, and—”

The waitress slid the check onto the table, but Ms. Urie’s focus remained fixed on Ryan.

“What about the safety of my son and daughters?”

“Mom, I can—”

Ryan gripped his hand, squeezing him silent. “Keep Brendon in this disguise. Send him to another school. Hide with pride. Isn’t that your motto? But you need to stay at Merston and be an advocate for the RADs who are still here.” Ryan leaned across the table and whispered in Ms. Urie’s ear. “And show Brendon that his mother isn’t afraid to fight.”

Ms. Urie pulled off her Joplin–esque glasses and rubbed her eyes.

Brendon and Ryan held hands under the table, their grip tightening with every passing second.

Putting on her glasses, Ms. Urie turned to her son and said, “You would have to go into hiding.”

“That’s fine.”

“Which means no one, and I mean no one”—she paused to glare at Ryan—“can know where you are.”

“Fine,” they answered together. At least they’d be in the same time zone.

Ms. Urie slapped down a black American Express credit card issued to someone named Rebecca Rose, peeled the protective plastic off a new iPhone, and then began texting.

Brendon pulled his hand away. “What are you doing?”

“Texting the flight crew about my vegan meal.”

Ryan’s heart sank. “But I thought—”

Ms. Urie placed her phone on the paper place mat and met their eyes. “You thought what? That I would let a perfectly good tofu lasagna go to waste?”

“Huh?” Ryan asked.

“I told them to put it in a to-go box. We’ll have to swing by the tarmac so we can pick it up.” She pushed her salad aside. “I’m starving. And it’s going to be a long night.”

Ryan and Brendon exchanged a victorious hug while Ms. Urie signed the check. Make out for hours ranked number one on Ryan’s what-to-do-next list. Instead, he stuck to his word, wished them both luck, and hurried off to meet Hillary.

Nothing about the parking lot had changed, and yet everything about it looked different. The half-lit coffee sign suddenly seemed charming. The duct-taped car was no longer pathetic; it was a survivor. And Hillary wasn’t mocking Ryan’s paranoia with her bird-watching costume—she was being supportive. All because Brendon was staying. And regardless of the promise they had made to Ms. Urie, Kara, and Kyla, he would find a way to stay in touch.
He always did.

“I saw you, I met you, I loved you, I left you in Cape Town.” Ryan mumbled, scribbling it into his notebook.
The Jet Set Life Is Going To Kill You

As she’d suspected, the sudsy nest of hair and soap chips still clogged the shower drain. The hot water didn’t shrink the clump as Gee had hoped. Now, ankle deep in boy scum, she would have to reach into the tepid slough to remove the blockage—something she refused to do without a Hazmat suit. This situation made her miss the comforts of home, and her girly bathroom, even more.

Two nights at the Hideout Inn—the family-owned restaurant and inn that encouraged living offline—Gee was going nuts. Between Ray and Rocky’s hair clogging the shower, the no-phone rule, and Gee forgetting her sketchbook at home, she had nothing going for her. She didn’t even have her laptop so that she could play the newest sims expansion.

Suddenly a bucket of cold water was poured over her head.

“Mom says to stop staring at the shower and come eat dinner!” Matt insisted.

“My eyeliner!” Gee squealed. She whipped around and punched him in the face. Ray squealed and dragged Matt out of the room, slamming the door shut.

Shivering and disgusted, Gee shut off the faucet. “You’re going to pay for this, Keltie,” she muttered, holding her ex-friend responsible as she sidestepped anthills of stubble, clipped nails, and discarded underwear. Appetite-suppressing odors clung to her hair—a condition the perpetually upright toilet seat only made worse. If her friends could see her now… what would they laugh at first? Her matted curls? Chipped nails? The ill-fitting brown HIDEOUT INN souvenir T-shirt from the gift shop? Probably the shirt. But what was she supposed to do? Her clothes were back home… along with her makeup, her privacy, and her life.

Downstairs in the restaurant, everything but the full moon was present and accounted for. The red velvet curtains, which Gee had helped her mother make back when they first opened for business, kept the parking lot from view, giving guests the illusion that they were nestled inside a cozy dining room in the Alps, not a mere ten miles north of Salem just off the freeway. Candles flickered inside sangria-colored votives. The tepee of logs in the stone fireplace was ablaze. Eighteen tables were set but unoccupied. Mom was in the kitchen heating up another batch of rolls. The guys were already eating, seated around a central circular table, deep in conversation and second helpings.

“Hi, Gigi.” Her father’s serious expression quickly melted into one of sticky sweetness. “How’s my precious little pup?”

“Hey, Dad,” she said, kissing the top of his head before sitting. Don Way’s lush black hair and thick eyebrows always made her think of Scott McCall from Teen Wolf. “Do you think we can work on my driving this week? Two more weeks until I’m sixteen.”

“When I get back,” he said. “I’m leaving for a construction job in Beaverton tomorrow. I’ll be gone until Thursday.”

“Anything good?” she asked, hoping for more industrial head nails, metal gates, or marble chunks. Or possibly something unexpected, like the mannequins from that old department store he’d demolished. Not that it really mattered. As long as she could DIY his trash into treasure, her video blog—Where There’s a Wolf, There’s a Way—would keep gaining followers. Her first episode, called “Lip Glass”—in which she’d mounted glass panes on her wall and covered them with colorful lipstick kisses from all her friends—had already brought in seven followers. And her videos with her band got her even more. Everyone said her voice was reminiscent of Janis Joplin and Kurt Cobain.
Before long she’d be fielding calls for her own show on the DIY Network, or to write her own comic book, or even to sign her band. Then she’d move out, buy a massive New York–style loft with Frank, DIY it diva-style, and invite all of her friends (including Anya the waxer) to move in. From that moment on, the only fur lying around would be the fabulous faux kind.

“I’m building a kids’ tree house and jungle gym in some hoitytoity couple’s backyard,” he explained, spooning a mound of sautéed mushrooms onto his plate. “So probably a ton of wood chips.”

“Perfect.” Gee smiled, thinking of how she could experiment with new nail-art designs on the wood chips and then glue them to the outside of her laptop. How blog-able was that?

“Boys,” Don said, chewing, “I’m counting on you to keep your mom, Bandit, and Gigi safe while I’m gone.” He sighed. “At least Rydel is safe at Arrowhead.”

“Wish we could say the same about her roommates,” Ray joked.

The other boys laughed.

“If you really cared about safety, you guys would clean the pit hairs out of the soap and unclog the shower.” Gee complained. “I think Ray’s razor fell in and I can’t see through all the gunk you guys left. Bandit could hurt herself.”

“Not my fault your kid’s accident prone.” Rocky said grumpily. Mikey and Ray kicked him under the table. “OW!”

She was tired of being overprotected and underestimated, especially by a pack of boys who didn’t know how much was too much when it came to squeezing a tube of toothpaste and thought she was an idiot because she had a kid at fifteen. “I don’t understand why we have to share one bathroom when we have the entire inn to ourselves,” she continued.

Overcome by the rich aroma of warm butter and beef, she quickly stabbed the last New York strip with her fork and dropped it onto her plate, beating Mikey by a millisecond.

“Because I want to keep this place clean,” Donna called from the kitchen.

“She’s right,” said Don. “We need to be ready for guests the instant that ALL FULL sign comes down.”

“Baaaaap!” Mikey burped. The boys howled. “I don’t have an ALL FULL sign, because I love Mom’s steak,” he added, swiping the hair from his eyes.

“You’re not the only one, son. Normies go crazy when they can’t get a reservation. They’re addicted to your mother’s cooking.” Don glanced around the empty dining room. “That movie was bad for business. Very bad.”


Gee rolled her eyes. “He means because we have to hide here, so the place is closed.”

Rocky stared at her blankly.

“No money!” she explained, feeding Bandit.

“Yeah,” scoffed Ray. “I wonder whose fault that is.”

Gee quickly flashed her brother a mouthful of chewed meat.
“If you’re not going to finish that, I will,” Mikey offered.

“Ew!” Gee giggled.

“So, Dad,” Ryland said, “remember I told you football scouts were coming to Merston? Well, Coach Donnelly texted. They’ll be there on Monday.”

Don cracked open a beer and took a long swig.

“Coach saw the video and knows I’m a RAD and all, but he’s cool with it,” Ryland went on. “He even said he’ll drive me back after the game. And if I want that scholarship—”

Son slammed down his beer. “You didn’t tell him where we are, did you?”

“Course not. But even if I did, it’d be fine. He’s cool.”

“Does he know the inn is ours? Or that Charlie and Stormie Stewart are made-up owners?”

“No, I swear,” Ryland insisted. “I’ve never told anyone that. And I never would.”

“I read that people are hunting us for rewards,” Matt announced.

“You read?” Gee teased.

“How much are they asking for you?” he wondered.

“You couldn’t afford it, bro.”

“That’s what you think.” Matt reached into the pocket of his jeans and flicked a nickel at Ray. “Keep the change.”

Everyone laughed except their dad, who was considering Ryland’s request, and Ryland, who was waiting to hear his fate.

“I’ll need to talk to the coach.”

“Sure,” Ryland said, offering his phone.

“And you’ll take the car. I don’t want him knowing we’re here.”

Ryland nodded.

“If he’s going back, then I am too!” Gee interrupted. “All of Bandit’s stuff is still at the house. Her clothes, the baby food, her crib, her favorite doll. My clothes.” He listed off. “I can check with Frank about ticket sales, get some fresh clothes, check in with some friends, you know—”

“You don’t think you’re still going to be in that Band thing, do you?” asked Matt in his usual know-it-all way.

“Battle of the Bands. And why not?” She tried dodging them. “It’s two weeks away. This will all be over by then.”

“Yeah, right.” Matt shook his head in disbelief. “Who told you that? The other minorities on this planet?”

“Maybe,” Gee said.
“You mean the ones who have been fighting for equal rights for, I dunno, about five thousand years?”

The other brothers snickered.

“Yeah, I bet they’re working overtime to have this whole racism thing wrapped up by your geek thing—I mean your Battle of the Bands.”

“That’s enough!” snapped Don, coming to his daughter’s rescue.

“Thank you, Daddy,” Gee cooed. “I was just hoping to check on the house and pick up a few things. It’s not like I’m going to school or anything.”

“No way,” her dad said. “You’re staying here with your brothers, where it’s safe.”

What? Why? Frustration formed in the pit of Gee’s stomach. Gathering strength, it swirled toward her heart and up through her throat. If she let it out, it would sound like, What a massive double standard! This is so unfair! I’m running away to live with the Kardashians!

But it was clear from the dark circles under her father’s eyes, his rounded shoulders, and his shredded fingernails that this was a bad time to fight for equal rights. Knowing he would be away on a construction job and unable to protect them was obviously stressing him out big-time. Why make things worse? Instead, Gee wiped her mouth on a napkin like a good little girl. Just like everyone expected her to.

Later that night, she woke to the sound of wheels crunching over gravel. Confused by gauzy remnants of sleep, she tried to place her surroundings. Darkness. Blankets that smelled like wet dog instead of breezy-clean fabric softener. This was definitely not her bedroom on Radcliffe Way.

Something began to rustle, like a body squirming against a leather seat. It was breathing. Gee’s heartbeat began to accelerate. Adrenaline pumped her awake.

Oof! A shoe slammed on top of her ribs. A second one quickly followed. Then something lighter. She bit her lower lip and refused to move.

“I know you’re back there,” said Ryland.

Oops.

Gee bicycle-kicked the stinky blanket off her body. “How?” she asked, hoisting herself off the car floor and onto the backseat.

“You started snoring the minute we hit the highway.”

“And you let me stay?” she asked, never failing to be surprised by her older brother. “What if Dad finds out?”

“I’ll say I didn’t know you were here.”

“What if something happens to me?” she teased.

He turned around to face her. “I won’t let it.”
“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I know sometimes they don’t treat you fairly,” Ryland admitted.

Gee smiled. Finally, someone understands.

“What are Mom and Dad going to say when they wake up and you’re gone?” Ryland tested her.

“Dad is taking off for Beaverton at, like, four in the morning, and Mom is driving to the Seattle Marketplace to stock up on food. She leaves before we wake up and won’t be home until Monday after dinner. As long as we head back after your game, we’ll beat her.”

“And the brothers?”

“You slipped a note under their door promising to buy them a Wii for Christmas if they keep quiet.”

“I did?”

Gee giggled. “Don’t worry, I’ll pay you back as soon as Mikey’s and my band takes off. Now can we please get out of this car and go home? I’m going to start shedding if I don’t take off these gift shop clothes.”

“Wait! We have to be careful,” Ryland insisted, opening the door. “I parked three blocks from the house to avoid suspicion. Let’s take the ravine.”

“The streets are better. People will be looking for us in the ravine. But if we just walk normally, no one will suspect a thing.”

“That’s ridiculous. We’re just asking to get caught.” Ryland gently shut the door.

Gee opened hers. “No. If we take the ravine, we’re asking to get caught.”

“My road trip, my plan,” Ryland insisted.

“Forget it. You go your way, and I’ll go mine.” Gee wasn’t sure what she was fighting for anymore, but she refused to back down.

“I’m not just going to leave you,” he huffed.

“Then come with me on the street,” Gee said, stepping onto the curb.

She began walking down Glacier Road feeling naked and exposed. Alive and in charge. Afraid and energized. Indisputably independent. She liked it.

“Wait!” whispered Ryland, scrambling to catch up.

They walked half the block in silence, senses attuned, hackles up.

Her brother finally broke the silence. “Why are you always trying to be the alpha?”

“I’m not trying,” Gee whispered. “I am.”

“Very funny.” Ryland chuckled.

But somehow, someday, Gee would find a way to prove it. And once she did, the last laugh would be hers.
Chapter 56

If they could see me now…

Hayley imagined the Richter levels of envy that would quake through the guys and girls at school if they knew she was spending her Sunday naked in Pete Wentz’ bedroom. And that it smelled a little like pot (which Ryan and Spencer often reeked of lately), blueberry (Pete stole what seemed to be candles from Ryan’s witch shrine), and a little like spaghetti. Not that she would ever brag. That was très déclassé. Besides, it wasn’t even like that. She, Hillary, and Pete would have preferred to hang at Whole Latte Love, but there were only so many times (fourteen and counting) they could crack up at the invisible-girl-sneaking-bites-of-people’s-scones routine before wanting to have an actual conversation. And Hillary said she didn’t want people to think she was talking to herself. But she had been doing exactly that for the past twenty minutes, anyway, so what was the big deal? But, hey, if Hayley understood other girls, she wouldn’t have spent the entire night journaling about—

“… are you even listening?” Hillary snapped, pacing back and forth in front of her frilly pink girl bed. “Wait, you didn’t leave, did you?” She splayed her arms as if feeling her way around in a dark closet. “Hayley?”

It was the perfect opportunity to tie the laces of her brown riding boots together, but pranks were for the lighthearted, and she was feeling anything but.

“I’m still here,” she said, pacing alongside her. Curling up on the canopy bed would have been preferable but impolite, considering her bare-bottomed state.

“Oh, good,” Hillary said, then continued her story. “So, Ali thinks I should give her my ticket now that she and Vanessa made up, because she claims it was bought for her and only given to me to make her jealous, which, by the way, Danice says is total BS, because she was there when Vanessa was making her E-vite list. So now Ali is giving me attitude, when this is really about her and Vanessa… I think. Nate Garrett says she’s just threatened because I’m a three-temperature girl—hot, cool, and warm—and she’s just plain frigid. Which, by the way, I told her. And now she’s really pissed at me. Not that I care. She’s the one who said RADs should have their own school. I told you that, right? I mean, it doesn’t get more un-NUDI than that. So I say see ya later, Ali-hater…”

“Good for you,” Hayley said, distracted. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about Hillary’s latest drama. Or that she didn’t appreciate her mischievous sense of humor, trendsetting style, or magnificence. Because she did. She adored their budding friendship, just as much as she enjoyed talking to Pete about Patrick’s weird habits; wouldn’t have had it any other way. Her mind was just somewhere else. Which made concentrating feel like riding a bucking bronco. After a second or two, she was thrown. The lull in Hillary’s speaking and Pete’s metallica cd allowed Hayley to hear guitar playing and sad, soft singing coming from Ryan’s room.

“Not to interrupt but what’s wrong with Ryan?” Hayley asked.

“Dad was flailing his hands and triggered Ryan. He plays that song everytime he remembers something.” Pete said softly.

“Your turn,” Hillary said, sitting on the edge of her bed, crossing her gray legging-clad legs under her ivory slip dress. “I’m listening,” she said, cocking her head.

“What?” Hayley asked defensively.
“Do you seriously think I made up that story about Ali just to hear myself talk?”

“Huh?”

“You’re obviously bummed about something. You haven’t done one funny thing since you got here.” She grinned, pleased with her detective work. Anyone else would have seemed smug. But Hillary radiated eighteen-karat charm. “I opened with an emotional crisis; now it’s your turn.”

“No fair! Yours was fake.” She finally smiled.

She sighed, shaking her head like a disappointed guidance counselor. “It’s Spencer, isn’t it?”

The mention of his name turned a winch in Hayley’s stomach. “Now that Linda’s out of the picture, I thought maybe I’d have a chance.”

“Yayyyyy!” Pete and Hillary squealed. “Fix-up time!”

“No,” Hayley said, knocking her head against the pewter rod of her canopy bed. “That’s the problem. He’s not going to want me, for the same reasons you didn’t want to meet at Whole Latte Love.”

Hillary opened her mouth to protest but stopped herself. She was right. Not even she could argue with that.

“I’m not even registered at Merston,” she admitted for the first time. “Ms. Urie is the only teacher who knows I exist. I just go to hang out with you guys and learn.”

“But Spencer knows you exist,” Hillary tried. “You’re one of his closest f—”

“Don’t say it,” she insisted, dreading the F-word. Being his friend was like using a spoon to cut steak. It scratched the surface but would never go deep. “It doesn’t matter, anyway. He deserves more than a girl who can’t wear clothes.”

“Why?” Pete asked.

“Because he’s a respectable young man who—”

“No.” Pete rolled. “Why don’t you wear clothes?”

The question startled Hayley. It had been six years since someone asked her that. Even longer since she’d asked herself.

When she first started disappearing, strategically placed garments were enough to conceal her missing parts. A glove on the invisible hand. A Band-Aid over a clear eyebrow. A scarf wrapped around a see-through neck. But the holes eventually spread, expanding and connecting like puddles, until everything was covered. At that point, fading out seemed like the only option.

But that was before her parents introduced her to the alliance. Before she met the others. Before she knew Spencer. Before Pete and Hillary reminded her that she had options.

“I guess I could wear clothes if I wanted to,” she mused. “But what about my face, my hair, my…”

“My gawd, Hayley! This depressing town has one season: overcast! And yet check out my arms.” She held them out. They were the color of peanut butter. “Looks like I just made out with the sun, doesn’t it?”
She nodded.

“It’s called a spray tan. My dad’s hair is black, not gray, because of something called hair dye. And my lashes are visible from the moon because of mascara. Repeat after me, mass-care-ahhh.”

“What’s your point?” She percolated with hope.

“Let’s take the ail out of Hayley and put some color on those cheeks… the face ones.”

She launched herself off the bed and stood with renewed purpose. “I suggest a makeover. Then a takeover. Who’s with me?” Pete immediately ran to his desk and wrote something on his notebook.

Hayley considered this. If anything, it would be a fun distraction. And she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t curious to see what she looked like after all these years. “You’re right. It’s time to show Spencer what he’s been missing.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Hillary said, slinging a silver handbag over her shoulder. “Let’s shop!” She made a move toward her bedroom door and fell flat on her fluffy sheepskin rug. Oof!

Hayley burst out laughing.

“My laces!” she cackled, discovering the knots.

“I had to,” she said. “One last hurrah, for old times’ sake.”
The forty-five-minute drive to Bridgeport Village had been worth it. Buying a new phone online couldn’t possibly have compared to the experience of walking into an Apple Store for the first time. Sleek technology eager to be touched. Built by geniuses. Charged by electricity. Brought to life with the swipe of a fingertip. Fran considered changing her name to iSmith and moving in.

Viola feigned interest in the laptops with a tight-lipped smile and semi-curious nod. “It’s nice to leave Salem every now and then,” she said, keeping her daughter close, just in case.

“I agree,” Fran said, indulging her mother, even though she knew Viola’s comment was about more than spending Sunday afternoon phone shopping in Portland. It meant not having to wonder if a shop owner would check their IDs before allowing them into the store. Not mistaking the wind for the sound of someone coming to take them away. Not checking the Internet for slanderous posts. Not dodging suspicious glances from the driver of a passing car. Not questioning their decision to stay and fight what seemed like a losing battle.

“Do you have the gift card?” Viola asked, her mismatched eyes void of their usual spark.

Fran snapped open her teddy bear decorated black backpack-slash-portable-amp-machine, feeling a sudden sense of superiority over the displayed electronics. Unlike them, she could go for days without a power cord—something they, in their fancy minimalist world, could only dream of.

“Can I browse?” she asked, handing over the envelope from Vlad.

Viola scanned the perimeter with the side-eyed subtlety of a Secret Service agent. Kids played interactive games at a low circular table, an older couple held a salesman hostage with questions about Macs versus PCs, hipsters grazed, and three bleached blonds in futuristic outfits hovered over the latest iPad. “Fine. But don’t wander off. I won’t be long.” Normally Fran would have mocked her mother for being overprotective, but considering the circumstances, she promised to stay close, and then hurried away before she changed her mind.

Intrigued by the blonds’ fascination with whatever they were watching, Fran inched toward them.

The sound was unmistakable. Fearless. Empowered. Revolutionary. The world premiere of the A Star Is Born trailer! To avoid sparking, she stuffed her hands into the pockets of her skinny military cargoes and asked if she could watch it with them.

They didn’t dare turn away from Gaga to respond, but a girl wearing a Bubble Wrap scarf made room. Just as Fran snagged a decent view, the video ended.

“Best one ever!” declared the blond wearing ice-cream-sprinkle-covered sunglasses on top of her head.

“You say that after every one,” said the girl with crime-scene tape tied around her leggings.

“Wait until the concert,” said Bubble Wrap.

Fran gasped. “You’re going to her concert?”

“Thirteen more days!” Sprinkle Glasses beamed.

“You?” asked Crime Scene, unaware of the red lipstick smudge on her front tooth.
“I wish.” Fran sighed. “It’s impossible to get tickets without a connection.”

“Not true,” declared Bubble Wrap, putting her arms around Crime Scene and Sprinkle Glasses. “We camped.”

Fran, feeling an instant bond through their mutual love of Gaga, confessed, “I’ve been a little monster since the day I was born. A few weeks ago, I put white streaks in my hair and…”

“Francine Elizabeth Smith!”

Suddenly, Viola grabbed Frankie by the back of her black-and-pink-striped turtleneck and yanked her out of the store.

“What? Mom, what are you doing? Did you get the phones?”

“No talking until we’re in the car!” Viola insisted. “Not a single word.”

Something must have happened with the gift card. Something embarrassing.

Viola slammed the Volvo door, turned up the radio—in case someone is listening?—and seethed. “What were you thinking?”

“Me?” Fran sparked. “What did I do?”

Viola jammed the key into the ignition. “Don’t give me that innocent routine. How could you, Francine? After everything that’s happened to your brother and sister? How?”

Fran giggled nervously. “Mom, what did I do?”

“Telling those strangers you were born a monster?” She turned off the ignition and lowered her head into her hands. “It’s one thing to put yourself in danger—again!—but that term? It’s so derogatory. What has happened to you?”

Fran burst out laughing.

“Mom! That’s what Lady Gaga calls her fans! We’re her little monsters!” Fran cackled. “I wasn’t telling them I’m a RAD. Don’t worry mom. I’ll explain at home where Spencer and Vicky can help me.” Fran went wide eyed. “Do you think Pete could get us tickets to Lady Gaga’s Portland show?”

“Us?” Viola asked. Fran nodded.

“I never do anything fun with you!” Fran complained. “Spencer got to go with you to get Dylan and Vicky went with you on take your kid to work day. And I know you like Lady Gaga as much as I do!”

A smile, gradual as the rising sun, brightened Viola’s face. The spark in her mismatched green and blue eyes returned. “What a relief.” She pulled Fran in for a gardenia-scented hug and then burst into a mix of laughter and tears.

“I’m sure.” Fran giggled again. “Now, did you get the phones fixed?”

“Got ’em.”

Once they were on the highway, Viola said, “Looks like you’re coping with this a lot better than I am.” Drops of rain spotted the windshield.
“Not really,” Fran admitted.

Viola glanced at her daughter with concern.

“I should be thinking of ways to unite everyone, but every time I try, my mind goes back to what happened to Spencer and Ryan.” Frankie sighed. “I still can’t believe Linda used Spencer like that.” Saying it out loud made her chest tighten. “And I can’t believe Keltie was so petty as to destroy her own community to get back at Ryden for liking each other.”

“I can only imagine how painful that is.” Viola rested her hand on Fran’s shoulder. The truth was, not having Linda in her life anymore sucked more than the borderline stalker part. But her rational mother would never see the logic in that. How can you possibly miss someone who caused your brother pain? Viola would ask. Fran would respond with a beats me shrug and would end up feeling more pathetic than she already did.

“Maybe there’s a lesson here,” Viola offered, forever the professor.

Fran gazed out at the whooshing cars. She didn’t want a lesson. She wanted to fix things between Linda and Spencer.

“Maybe, you know, until normies become more tolerant, you and your siblings could get to know some of the RAD kids a little better. Those Wolf brothers are cute.”

“Oh gawd mom!” Fran snorted. “The only one close in age to me is Mikey and he’s been trailing after that Kristen girl.”

“Well maybe Pete…”

“He’s got eyes for Patrick.”

“Luke?”

“Went back to Australia.”

“Huh. You have zero luck with boys.”

Fran laughed.

“That’s cause I don’t like boys mama.” Fran giggled. “Z-berg’s pretty great though.”

“Little Elizabeth?” Viola asked. “The one who was in a girl band?”

“Yup!” Fran smiled. “Both of us bonded over being Ryan’s friends.”
“I like your song.” Taylor piped from the doorway. “It’s very you.”

“It’s a therapy thing.” Ryan mumbled. “Mom says that song writing is the best way to deal with my inner turmoil.”

“Thinking about your dad again?” She asked.

“My mom this time.” Ryan admitted. “I don’t know what her name is and I’m just so scared Dale and Peter don’t know who my mom is.”

“That or they do and you’re angsting yourself to an early grave over nothing.” Taylor pointed out.

“Ha ha.” Ryan said dully.

“I’m serious.” Taylor protested. “I’ve heard about musicians as talented as you dying young because they internalized their problems.”

“Hillary!” Dale called, padding down the hallway. “Please tell me you have my white silk tunic and it’s clean.”

Ryan rolled his eyes, grateful for the lock on his door. Must be nice when a missing tunic is your biggest problem.

“I thought Dad was packing for you,” Ryan heard Hillary say. “Isn’t that part of your anniversary tradition thingy?”

“Technically, yes, but last year he packed a tablecloth instead of a sarong, and I’m not taking another chance. I’m bringing an extra purse full of essentials.” She lowered her voice. “Let’s keep this between us, shall we?”

Typical.

“I dunno,” Hillary stalled. She had obviously lost the tunic, stained it, or sold it. “Dad’s surprising you with this whole vacation, and part of it is packing for you. I think it’s romantic. You should just go with it, Mom. Forget the tunic. Surrender.”

“She dyed it.” Ryan and Taylor said at the same time.

“SHHHHH!”

“Hillary, this is not the time for games,” his mother insisted. “He’ll be home any minute and—”

“Daaaaalllee,” called Peter, opening the front door. “Daaaaalllee!”

“Find it,” she hissed, before calling out, “I’m up here.”

His boots scuffed along the worn wooden steps as he climbed upstairs. “You’re not going to believe it,” he said with a sigh. “The Hideout Inn is closed for some private function!”

“What? Are you sure?” Dale gasped. “The Kramers will be here in less than an hour. What am I supposed to serve?”
Ryan’s insides dipped. He’d totally forgotten that the lawyer and his family were coming for dinner.

“I tried Aegean Blue and Barakat’s, but they were boarded up. So I got Mandarin Palace.”

“Ew,” Hillary grumbled.

“I bet it has to do with that TV show,” Dale stated.

“What? You think the restaurants were owned by RADs?” Peter asked. The word sounded awkward coming from him. Like when he said “awesome” or “text me.”

“Well, last I heard, the Nestors left because of the special.” Pete yelled from his room. “And Jamia’s family owns Aegan Blue.”

“The Barakats left too.” Hillary pointed out.

“Aren’t you being a little dramatic?” Peter asked.

A prickly rush of anxiety passed through Ryan. Brendon had come so close to leaving. What if I hadn’t been able to stop him?

“…A few of the gals at the salon got to talking today, and some elderly woman getting a perm said RADs should be forced to live on a barge in the middle of the Pacific. She’s still haunted by the movie Frankenstein, and she said to this day people with square-shaped heads give her panic attacks. The poor thing can’t even look at Arnold Schwarzenegger without collapsing. Her words.”

“Maybe she should live on a barge,” Pete said.

“The Nestors left because of the special,” Pete said.

Ryan couldn’t help giggling. Even in the darkest times, his brother could always lighten the mood.

“Personally, I don’t see what the big deal is,” Dale added. “As long as these RADs don’t affect my life, I don’t care what they do—unless they clip their fingernails in public. I can’t stand when anyone does that. It’s vile. Okay, I’d better get that food into some Pyrex before my cover is blown.” Ryan rolled his eyes.

“I can help!” Taylor rushed out and bolted to go help.

“Pete, tell Ryan it’s time to stop writing. Dinner is in a half hour. He needs to shower.”

“Did ya hear that?” Pete asked, knocking on Ryan’s door. “Mom thinks you’re dirty.” Ryan reluctantly got up and opened the door.

“It smells like depression in here,” Pete said, barging in. “What’s up?” His hair was brushed over one eye; his eyeliner screamed punk rocker. “Brendon didn’t change his mind and bail, did he?”

Ryan shook his head.

“Did your hairbrush?”

Ryan stood there, ignoring the jab. His knees were sore, and his butt was tingling. How long had he been sitting on the floor, anyway? “Can I ask you something?”

Pete looked down at his chest. “Yes, they’re real.”

“Come on, this is important.” The words, sticky with emotion, barely made it past Ryan’s throat.
Pete leaned against the far wall and folded his arms across his blue hoodie. “Ask away.”

Swallowing his trepidation, Ryan blurted, “Remember I asked you if you had ever heard of someone named Daniella?”

Pete nodded a little too hard. He loved making his fringe swing.

“Well, I asked because when we were at the Teen Vogue shoot and I sang to those camels, Bob told me my voice sounded exactly like my mother, Daniella. When I told him I never knew my mom, he looked like he didn’t believe me. Until he remembered that Daniella’s oldest son had a nose that looked like camel humps.”

Ryan grabbed a handful of photos out of his keepsake box and held them out in front of him. “And look… humps!”

“So ask Mom,” Pete suggested, as if they were talking about a second serving of pie.

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

Ryan shrugged. How could he explain to his fearless brother that he was afraid of being disappointed? That he’d rather live in uncertainty than know he was abandoned by his mother with George. That—

“Maaaah-mmmm,” Pete called.

“What are you doing?”

Pete called again.

“What?” Dale called from the kitchen.

“Can you come up here for a sec? Ryro has something important to ask you and Dad!”

Ryan’s jaw hung slack. Shock gripped his speeding heart and squeezed. He wanted to pummel his brother. Beat him into a frothy mousse. Jam his hair in the fan and watch it tangle.

“Is everything okay?” Dale asked, pushing the door open. She was wearing YSL oven mitts (a gift from an A-list chef she had consulted back in Beverly Hills).

“What’s up?” Peter asked, peeking in behind her. “Why aren’t you dressed, Ryan? The Kramers will be here any minute.”

“Ask them,” Pete urged. And then he left.

His parents’ expression was a mix of concern and impatience.

“Um.” Ryan inhaled deeply. *When I can’t hold my breath any longer, I’ll ask.*

His chest began to tighten.

His head started to throb.
He became light-headed.

His body was aching.


“Who?” Dale asked.

“Daniella? Do you know a woman named Daniella?” Ryan spoke more slowly.

“No.” Dale shook her head.

“Someone from a long time ago, maybe?”

“Never heard of her. Why?”

“What’s this about?” Peter interjected.

Relief coated Ryan’s insides. His shoulders relaxed back into their sockets. His heart slowed. Bob was wrong!

Having the answer to the million-dollar question, he could have highlight-deleted the topic and moved on. After all, there was plenty of Brendon drama to focus on.

But the billion-dollar question had yet to be answered, and according to the movie The Social Network, billion was the new million. So it needed to be asked.

“Did you know my mother?”

“I’m sorry, but no. We only ever knew your father.” Dale admitted.

“George said my mom was a lounge singer.” Ryan said softly. “But I looked into lounge singers that were on maternity leave anywhere from October 2002 to August 2003 and the only one is a Daniella. August 30th, 2003, she gave birth to a boy. Is she my mother?”

Dale looked down.

“Are you kidding me?” Ryan shouted.

“We can explain,” Dale began. “As soon as dinner is over, we’ll sit down and—”

“I’m not hungry!”

Ryan needed air. Sliding on a pair of flip-flops and reaching for the nearest hoodie and his guitar, he pushed past his parents and hurried down the steps.

“Where are you going?” Peter called. “The Kramers will be here in ten minutes. They want to meet the family.”

“Then I guess you won’t be needing me!” Ryan yelled, stopping long enough to grab Hobo and Dottie’s leashes and slammed the front door shut behind him.
This Wolf was getting hoarse.

*If I leave one more message, I’ll be talking like Harvey Fierstein,* Gerard thought as he tossed his iPhone onto his bed. Where is everyone? Why am I getting sent to voicemail? And why isn’t anyone calling me back? If it hadn’t been for the email for the battle of the band, he’d be doubting his divalisciousness in a major way.

Anxious to visit his friends and get some answers, Gerard peeked through his bedroom window for what felt like the trillionth time. It wouldn’t be long now….

The normie gawkers were finally packing up their cameras and heading home. A dead-end street inhabited mostly by “monsters” was obviously not where they wanted to be now that the sun was setting. Which suited Gerard just fine. He had been hiding out in his bedroom all day, subjected to the clang and clatter of Ryland’s free weights on the other side of the wall. Forbidden to poke his nose outside and sniff the crisp fall air. Banned from playing music, turning on lights, or walking near windows—anything that might alert people that they were back. If only he had been allowed to go online. He’d have updated his Facebook status to *Rapunzel*.

Confinement, however, hadn’t been a total waste. After sleeping until noon, Gerard spent fifty minutes in a fur-free shower with his fruit-scented products and a fresh Gillette Venus. He jammed his oversized Hideout Inn gift shop clothes in the back of Ray’s closet and slid on a black david bowie t-shirt, his favorite black hoodie, and his own pants. He painted pastel-toned rainbows on his nails and packed a roller bag of toiletries and clothing essentials to take back to the inn.

Gerard dialed Spencer, Frank, Jamia, Debbie, Hayley, Sarah, Brendon, and even Lindsay. Still, he got nothing but voice mails. Fur real?

Suddenly, a thought more alarming than ADT rang through his mind. What if they’d been forced to leave too? The silky black hair on the back of his neck shot up. They couldn’t! His party was two weeks away.

There were playlists to discuss, centerpieces to build, dresses to alter, makeup to test, hairstyles to try, kiss wish-lists to craft, and Keltie’s un-vitation to draft.

*Hhh-ugh!*

His headboard—a chain-link fence he and Mikey’d spray-painted gold—rattled as Ryland grunt-dropped his weights.

“Enough, already!” he shouted, banging on the wall. “It’s dark out. The normies are gone. Let’s gooooo!”

The sticky rip of Velcro separating meant he was taking off his gloves. *Awoooo!* Five minutes in the shower, and big bro was finally ready. Gerard slipped on his black combat boots and grabbed his suitcase, video camera, sewing kit, glue gun, glitter paints, Bandit’s things, and the black and grey marching band outfit he’d been working on, in case they had to make another run for it. Preparing for the worst wasn’t something he’d ordinarily do, but two days in gift shop garb will do that to a person.

“Let me go first,” Ryland said, holding back his sibling with a freshly pumped-up forearm. Sandalwood-scented aftershave, along with strands of brown hair, clung to his blazer. He reached for
the brass doorknob with the shaky apprehension of a horror-film actor.

Gerard giggled. “A little dramatic, don’tcha think?”

“Says the kid with the luggage.”

Gerard pushed past him and opened the door herself. The night breeze, a cool kiss on the cheek, was refreshing compared to the stale air of an abandoned house.

Something about the neighborhood was different—borderline eerie. Avoiding the streetlamps, they trespassed from one neighbor’s lawn to the next. Peering inside windows and rapping lightly on panes with their fingernails.

Signs of life were everywhere: recycle bins left curbside, kitchen lights on, dinner tables set, food in serving dishes. TVs tuned to Channel Two, muddy sneakers by front doors, bicycles in driveways…. The only things missing were the lives themselves.

“Where is everyone?” Gerard asked, tapping the mermaid knocker on Jamia’s side door. The dolphin fountains in the yard were still spurting water, and the jets in the black-bottomed pools were whipping up frothy bubbles. “It’s like everyone… vanished.”

“Have you tried calling?”

Gerard shot him a did-you-honestly-just-ask-me-such-a-stupid-question? glare.

The bloodred leaves of a Japanese maple rustled overhead. Ryland lifted a finger to his lips and held his sibling by the sleeve.

“Relax,” Gerard muttered, heart thumping. “It’s just the wind.”

“No,” he insisted, cocking his ear toward the street. “I hear footsteps.”

Gerars knew better than to argue with his brother about his keen sense of hearing. It was even better than his. He peered past his shoulder.

“It’s a boy. He’s running… wearing sneakers… sniffing… sick… no, not sick… crying… mumbling about deadbeat moms? Stand back!” He forced him against the cold glass exterior of Aunt Coral’s house.

Just then Ryan Ross ran past the yard with two dogs in tow. Gerard’s chest inflated with joy.

“Ry—” he began to yelp. Ryland covered his mouth.

“Are you crazy?”

Gerard licked his salty palm until he removed it. “Why do you think he was crying? Maybe he knows something. We should find him and…”

“He’s a normie. We can’t trust him. Besides, what’s he gonna know?”

Gerard considered reminding him that Ryan was dating Brendon. That he was on their side. And that being a normie didn’t automatically make someone an enemy. He had twenty-seven yes RSVPs to prove it. Plus Ryan was already a confirmed RAD. But Ryland seemed too rattled to listen to reason. Funny, since their father had put him in charge.

“Well, we can’t give up yet.”
“Fine. One more house. How about…” He paused as if contemplating and then casually suggested Frank’s.

Zigzagging up the block, they walked in what felt like an endless W. Up the side of one house, down the next, up one, down the next, with Gerard dragging his suitcase over uncut grass.

Finally, the old Victorian was next. Hidden under a canopy of branches and maple leaves, Frank’s house was the best concealed on the block. The inside was always dark, but the flicker from Uncle Vlad and Linda’s candelabras usually filled it with life. Tonight there were no flickers. There was no sign of life.

Car lights shone at the top of the block. “Follow me,” Ryland hissed, disappearing under the trees.

Gerard tried, but the wheels of his suitcase kept jamming. He yanked. “I’m trying.”

The lights were getting closer. Ryland doubled back, lifted the suitcase with one hand, and dragged his sibling behind a maple tree with the other. Seconds later, a BMW sedan with the license plate KRAMER 1 rolled by slowly, as if searching for something… or someone.

“We have to get out of here,” Ryland insisted.

“What about Frank?”

“He’s obviously not home,” he said, tilting his head toward the still house.

“Let’s try the underground. Maybe they’re hiding there.”

“Might as well.” Ryland smacked a falling leaf. “It’s not like we can go home now.”

The eight-block drive to the Riverfront was postapocalyptic. Salem was lifeless, ghostly.

“I’m glad we’re here,” Gerard said, glancing at Ryland’s profile as he gripped the wheel. His facial features were perfectly proportioned. His eyes weren’t close together like Rocky’s. His nose wasn’t as wide as Matt’s. And his lips were full, but not puffy like Mikey’s. Even Ryland’s cheekbones were the perfect height. Compared to Ray’s, they were like bunk beds next to a California king.

“Admit it, you’re glad I came.”

“That depends,” he said, refusing to take his eyes off the barren road ahead.

“What?”

“On whether I get you home safely.”

“Ryland, I’m barely a year younger than you. You can stop worrying about me,” he insisted. But he knew his concern went deeper than that. Worrying about women was instinctive for the Way pack. The males were stronger. Their hearing was better. They ran faster. Those were the accepted facts. Didn’t matter that Gerard was neither boy, nor girl. Gerard was simply counted as Bandit’s parent and thus needed to be protected. Still, bravery and brains counted for something, and Gerard had come fully loaded with those.

Once inside the RADs’ headquarters at RIP, the siblings stood and stared at the stone pile of credit cards and cell phones and sim cards.

“That would explain the unanswered phone calls,” Gerard mumbled.
Ryland was too stunned to respond. They walked back to the car in silence.

Had his friends really left town? An entire community wiped out by a TV show? Where was their courage? Their pride? Their etiquette? Didn’t they know it was rude to bail on a function after signing up?

“My Sassy is so not happening,” Gerard sobbed on the drive home.

Ryland looked at her incredulously. “That’s what you’re worried about? Your party?”

“What do you want me to do?!” Gerard yelled. “Mourn lost friendships? Pray to god my daughter won’t have to ever endure this? Shut down like you? Well get over yourself Ryland! I’m allowed to be upset! My life has always been dictated by you, Dad, and the triplets! My life now is all about my daughter! I’m sorry I wanted one night where I wasn’t a Bandit’s or Ryland Lynch-Way’s weird little brother!”

Ryland stared at him.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be the weird kid!” Gerard said shakily. “To anyone that isn’t my friends, I’m this weird novelty. I’m the hairy kid that always sits in the back during art. I’m just saying, we have to find everyone. We have to bring them back and make things normal again.”

“If by we you mean two other people, then I agree. Because you’re heading back tonight. Our instincts to hide were right. It’s obviously not safe, or everyone would still be here.”

“What about you?”

“Coach said I could stay with him tonight.” Out of habit, Ryland turned onto Radcliffe Way. He quickly reversed and headed for their new spot three blocks over. “I’m picking up my uniform, then I’m taking you back to the inn.”

“Well, if you’re staying, I’m staying.”

“Over my hairy body,” Ryland said, turning off the car. “I’m not taking responsibility for you anymore. It’s too much pressure. I have to focus on football and…”

In an act of desperation, Gerard pulled the keys out of the ignition, jumped out of the car, and chucked them into the ravine.

“Looks like we’re both staying now.”

Ryland hurried to the edge of the brush but knew it was too dark. Exasperated, he grabbed fistfuls of his own hair and pulled.

“Are you insane?”

Thrumming with adrenaline, Gerard began making his way back home. Insane was probably the right word, but he preferred determined.
Spencer and Sarah stood frozen in disbelief at the head of the concrete path that led to the mustard-yellow building. The lawn was abuzz with demonstrations. If a March on Washington were to take place on Halloween, it would look like Merston High that Monday morning.

To the left, a smattering of RAD supporters wore monster costumes and chanted, “Don’t hate, to-ler-ate! It’s un-NUDI to discriminate!” Spencer could see Taylor and Hillary among the ten girls on their side. Hillary had cut holes in a rhinestone-studded sleep mask and wore a normie-flesh-toned bodysuit with the word NUDI written in fuchsia lipstick where bikini tops usually go. Two of her friends were raising a skull-and-crossbones flag up the flagpole.

“What do pirates have to do with this?” Sarah asked.

“Ayyyyye dunno,” Spencer tried in his best pirate voice. “But it’s pretty voltage! They’re taking our side. I wish Frank, Jamia, and Gee were around to see this.”

“Yeah, all ten of them are taking our side. Golden,” Sarah hissed, and then began making her way up the path, purposely trying to stay a few steps ahead of Spencer.

But what did Spencer expect? They’d only walked to school together because no one else was around. All they had in common was a fear of being exposed.

Spencer was the new kid. A product of modern technology; a hint of things to come. Sarah, on the other hand, was ancient royalty. Her handbag held priceless gems. Spencer’s backpack? Batteries. The amber-scented princess was wearing gold wedges, army-green jeggings, a long camel-colored tank, an ivory faux-fur vest, and sleeves of jingling, mismatched bangles. Her outfit was red carpet, while Spencer’s turtleneck and blazer was more like wall-to-wall. But he didn’t have the luxury of obsessing over the superficial. Not today.

To their right, a group of sixty-plus parents and students, led by normie Jac Vanek and traitor rad Keltie Knight, chanted, “Keep us all safe from harm, send the monsters to a farm!” The wack-tivist even tried comedy: “Did you hear about the Steins’ hockey game? There was a face-off in the corner!” Their followers cheered her on, jabbing MONSTER HIGH signs through the thinning morning fog, looking pleased with themselves. As if their wannabe-clever trick—rearranging the letters in their school’s name—was Pulitzer-worthy. Spencer couldn’t help wondering what side of the lawn Linda would choose. Today was the day he’d find out. He managed to slip his fingers inside the sleeves of his sweater right before they sparked.

“Is that normie fur real?” Sarah asked, borrowing Gerard’s favorite expression. Spencer shot the maenad with Jac a dark and evil glare. She flipped him off.

Spencer was glad the twins had gone to school an hour earlier to set it up with Ms. Urie to find them a new band member to replace Keltie.

“You’re not going to believe it,” said Hayley, suddenly joining them.

“Ahhh!” yelped Spencer, startled.

“Shane and Audrey are giving people monster tests by the sophomore lockers.”

“Go onnn,” muttered Sarah, like a spy.
“Yeah, what’s a monster test?” Spencer asked, directing the question at Sarah instead of the Starburst-scented air, in case anyone was watching. He knew they were safe for now—their identities hadn’t been revealed on TV—but this was hardly the day to get caught with an invisible friend.

“They’re checking mouths for fangs, pulling off sunglasses… that kind of thing.”

Spencer went pale.

“Has anyone warned Ryan?” Spencer asked.

“He’s not here. Hillary said his dad died last night.” Hayley confided.

“Thank Geb I wasn’t on camera,” Sarah said, twirling a chunky blond highlight around her self-righteous fingers.

“Speaking of which,” Hayley said, gripping the bottom of Spencer’s chin and angling it toward the parking lot. Dallon Weekes was getting out of his sister’s blue Prius. Linda, who always rode with them, was not. “Look who decided to skip school today. Told you she was guilty.”

Spencer’s heart space clenched. Did Hayley have to sound so amped about it?

“Dallon!” he called, taking off without saying good-bye.

He turned. “Oh, hey.” He smiled, relieved. His eyes darted across the lawn. “Y-you okay?” he asked quietly.

“Fine, you?”

He nodded, then thumb-flicked a white Tums into his mouth, obviously trying to keep his fire-burps under control.

“Is this freaky or what?” he asked, jerking a thumb at the demonstrators. “Guess I’m lucky I was working the camera, or I would have been exposed too.”

“Where’s Linda?”

Dallon pulled him toward the Prius, refusing to answer until he was out of earshot.

“Have you seen her?” Spencer tried again.

He bit into another chalky tablet and then shook his head. “Not since…”

“Do you think she set us up?”

Rolling his eyes, he said, “My sister does. She never liked her. But I don’t think so.”

“Have you tried calling her?”

“Voice mail every time. You?”

“Frank’s dad made me hand over my sim card which means new number and I had to wipe my phone…” Spencer stopped himself, wondering if the excuse sounded as silly to him as it had to Spencer himself. After all, he was made of synthetic body parts. Fueled by electricity. Kept alive by a rockin’ backpack. If technology was capable of all that, shouldn’t he be able to track down a cell?
Dallon thumbed through his mobile and then sighed. “I hope she’s okay.”

Okay?

Never once had Spencer considered the possibility that Linda might be in danger. Not that he wanted her to be hurt. But if she was, that would mean she hadn’t betrayed him. She and Jac would not be in cahoots with Hollywood. His mother would be wrong about “sticking to his own kind.” And he would be free to crush on her again, to save her the way she’d saved him. A dam burst inside Spencer. Hope surged toward his heart space.

Dallon rattled off Linda number just as the first bell rang. Protesters tucked their signs under their arms and began racing up the steps.

“Let me know if you hear anything,” said the tall brunette, flipping up his green hood and hurrying toward the entrance.

Spencer stayed by the Prius. Once his fingers stopped sparking, he began composing his text.

U OK?

(Delete.) He sounded too concerned. What if Linda had betrayed him?

DALLON IS WORRIED ABOUT U. PLS CALL.

(Delete.) She might call Dallon and not him.

I DESERVE AN EXPLANATION, DON’TCHA THINK?

(Delete.) Too angry. What if she’s in trouble?

KNOCK ONCE FOR DANGER. TWICE FOR BETRAYAL.

(Delete.) Too glib.

LOVE TO HEAR UR SIDE OF THE STORY.

The final bell rang. Spencer’s thumb hovered over the SEND button. Was this the one? He read it one last time. The tone seemed free of judgment, curious in case she was innocent, yet firm in case she wasn’t.

He hit SEND and waited… and waited… and waited….

Checking his phone every forty-five seconds didn’t pay off until the end of third period, when Linda finally wrote back.

Starving, Spencer devoured the white conversation bubble in a single glance.

LINDA: CAN’T TALK TO ANYONE. LEAVE ME ALONE.

Limp with disappointment, Spencer couldn’t bring himself to respond. There was nothing more to say.
Kick Me Like A Stray

Ryan woke to the sound of the Shower sting from Psycho. Eyes stinging, insides weighted with sorrow. Something distressing had happened the night before. His body remembered, but his mind was too hazy to recall the details.

*Ba! Ba! Ba! Ba! Ba!* That grating noise had to go. He buried his head under his pillow. And then, in a flash of clarity, he recognized his own ringtone. *Please be Brendon.* He fumbled around his red sheets and found his iPhone. “Hullo?”

“Where are you?”

Ryan flopped back down and closed his eyes. “Hey, Hillary.” He peered outside to gauge the hour. The view was darkened by the caramel-colored tint on the pane. “What time is it?”

“One thirty. Peee-em! Haven’t you been reading your texts?”

Ryan glanced at his phone and saw that Hillary and Taylor had been blowing up his phone as well as four messages from Spencer, Jon, and Z telling him not to come to school because Shane and Audrey were going around doing monster tests on unsuspecting students.

“Ry,” Hillary continued. “Do I need to have you examined? I’ll call a doctor if you want. Just don’t die while Mom and Dad are away. They’ll never leave me in charge again.”

“I’m fine,” Ryan grumbled. A bird feather—dark red and black, with a golden tip—landed on his thigh. He was still wearing the Narnia pajamas. The ones he wore last night… when he ran out on dinner….Suddenly, the details came rushing back.

The knowing glance his parents had exchanged when he asked if Dale knew his birth mother… the probability that he was adopted… skipping out on the Kramers… seeing Gerard and his brother getting into a car… hiding in the bushes because he didn’t want them to see him cry (which must explain the bird feather)… playing his guitar outside until the Kramers left… stomping past his parents and heading straight for bed… insisting they leave, even though they offered to cancel their trip… the phone call telling him his father had passed away… pretending to be asleep when they kissed him good-bye at four thirty AM before heading to the airport… ignoring Pete and Hillary when they came in to wake him up for school….

The fifth-period bell bwooped in the background. “Gotta go,” Hillary said into the phone.

“Oh, by the way, you owe me big for leaving us with those Kramers. Either they didn’t think the ‘Mia Rosen’s face-plant off the high dive’ was a funny story, or they rode the Botox bus to Cannotsmile Station. I swear, it was like eating at Madame Tussauds.” The bell bwooped again. “Hillary out.”

After a much-needed shower, Ryan contemplated his next move over a bowl of Cap’n Crunch’s Crunch Berries.

What would Brendon do? (Crunch, crunch, crunch.) What would Brendon do? (Crunch, crunch, crunch.) What would Brendon do? (Crunch, crunch, crunch.) A valid question, since Ms. Urie had kept the truth from him too, simply never bothering to mention that he was a RAD who was sharing a body with Gabe Saporta. Yet he had handled the situation with bravery and grace. He’d sought the answers, accepted them, and then adapted. Seek, accept, adapt… three principles Ryan had resisted his entire life that he can remember. Typically, he sat back and hoped things would change because
they were unjust. Bullies, liars, snobs… the universe would even the score eventually. When it
didn’t, he would become cynical and angry. Then withdrawn. Never once had he considered
changing things himself. Until now.

Until Brendon.

Light-headed from his day of sleeping—or was it his night of crying?—Ryan put Dottie’s leash on
her and stepped out onto the sun-soaked street in search of answers. He had traded his pajamas for a
maroon blazer (thanks, Pete!), faded yellow thrift-shop skinny jeans, black Converse, and a look of
determination. His brown hair was slicked back in a no nonsense style, and his large brown eyes
were dry. He could practically hear Brendon cheering him on.

Regal and stoic, 32 Radcliffe Way seemed more intimidating than usual. It had taken on the
appearance of a sprawling, three-story vault. Dutifully guarding the person who held the secrets of
his long forgotten past. Finger trembling, Ryan pressed the doorbell and took a step back. Soft bells
 chimed on the other side. A security camera lens was the first to greet him. The blond, stoic man he
had come to see was second. Lips pursed, he smiled. Had he been expecting him?

“Ryan, right?” he asked, with a mild Chicago accent.

He nodded.

“Sarah’s at school.” He paused. “That is why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“Actually, I’m here to see you this time.” He stepped inside the dimly lit anteroom. A second door,
the one that opened into the house, was shut. Upholstered benches offered a respite for those not
welcomed inside.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to a bench. He smoothed the front of his white shirt, sat across from
him, and waited for him to speak.

“So, um, I’ve been thinking about what you said, you know, at the photo shoot last week….” Ryan’s
mouth dried. “You know, about Daniella.”

“Ah, yes.” He smacked his thigh playfully. “Daniella. The woman who is possibly not your mother.”

“Well, that’s just it. It turns out she might be—”

The front door clicked open. Amber-scented perfume seeped in. Sarah followed.

“Ryan?” She dropped her gold metallic tote on the reed carpet. Her ivory faux-fur vest and jingling
bangles were proof that she was not lying low like the other RADs. “Hey, why weren’t you at
school today?” asked the princess, tossing her black-and-gold-streaked hair.

“George died last night, plus Spencer and Z-Berg were blowing up my phone telling me not to show
up because some kids were doing monster tests.”

“Maybe some fresh air will do you both good,” Bob suggested.

Sarah rolled her kohl-lined eyes, kissed his head, and giggled. “I swear, you sound like Mother.”

Bob stood and placed his arm around Cleo’s shoulder and gave her a loving squeeze. “I have helped
raise you since you were born,” he said. And then to Ryan: “You know, a person doesn’t have to be
biologically linked to a child to be a parent. At the same time, biological parents aren’t always the
best ones to raise us. Families come in many forms. What’s important is that we feel loved and—”
“All right, all right, wrap it up,” Sarah joked, like someone who had heard this many times before.

“But wait,” Ryan said urgently. “What if that person who is being raised by nonbiological parents wants to know more? You know, about his mother.”

“Oh.” Sarah realized what was happening. “I think I’ll take your advice Bob.” She walked outside.

“I looked into who my mom could possibly be and the only Daniella who had a baby the day I was born in Summerlin, Nevada was a Daniella Selemene Ross.” Ryan said softly.

“That would be the Daniella I meant.” Bob said.

“What- what do you know about her?” Ryan asked.

“Daniella. She was my best friend when she met George. George was this shy little thing who frequented the cabaret where Daniella sang. Daniella thought he was sweet. She would always wander over to the side of the stage where he would sit and sing directly to him. They fell in love and moved to the outskirts of Las Vegas and after you were born, George started drinking and got violent.”

“I know this part.” Ryan said softly. “Before he died, he told me he was so sorry for ever hurting mom and for hurting me.”

“Daniella was pregnant when she left him.” Bob said softly. “Said she couldn’t put you through what her mother did.”

“So she left me with George to save the baby?” Ryan said bitterly.

“To protect you.” Bob said. “Her mother had taken away her free will. She didn’t want that to happen to you.”

All of a sudden, a familiar female voice blasted through the neighborhood. “HERE WE HAVE THE HOUSE WHERE DRACULA’S SPAWN RESIDES….”

Ryan bolted outside.

Jac Vanek and Keltie Knight were standing on Frank’s mossy front lawn, clutching a bullhorn each and posing with six girls while their sidekick, Audrey, took their picture. Jac’s scene girl hair had been wrestled into pigtails, and her usual skin tight clothing had been replaced with a pair of sensible black slacks and a white blouse. She looked like a nun on casual Friday.

“Help yourself to a souvenir from the property,” she offered. “For an extra five dollars, Audrey will photograph your treasure in front of the house to prove authenticity—which you’ll need if you want to sell it on eBay.”

The girls scoured the grounds for the perfect keepsake.

“This is total ka!” Sarah hissed.

Ryan had no idea what ka meant, but he was just as vexed.

“You’re trespassing!” Sarah called, stomping across the street. “Get off Frank’s property or I’m calling the police.”

The girls froze and looked to their tour guide for further instruction.
“Look who it is.” Jac tapped her nails on the bullhorn. “Ignore her,” she called to the six girls. “Taking pictures is not a crime.”

“Trespassing is.” Ryan called, joining Sarah.

Sarah placed her hand on her hip. “And, murder is, and I’m going to kill you if you don’t get out of here.”

“I have a permit,” Jac announced. She snapped her fingers at Audrey. “Show them.”

“Show them what?”

“The permit,” Jac insisted. “I put it in there when we left the courthouse. Re-mem-ber?” She gritted her teeth.

“Oh yeah,” Audrey said, adjusting her hot pink cat-eye glasses. The ostentatious sidekick began riffling through her hot pink handbag. Meanwhile, behind them, the girls were hard at work. One tucked Frank’s black doormat under her arm while another began unscrewing the house numbers with a metal nail file. She yanked the 3 loose and quickly went to work on the 7.

“Leave before I call the cops!” Ryan yelled. “Trespassing’s a felony and so is theft and I doubt any of you wants to risk a felony just to steal from and harass honest, kind people!” An image of Brendon hiding out in some damp, dark basement—alone, without cell service, without him—made his insides lurch. “GET OUT OF HERE!” He bellowed.

Birds launched off Frank’s maple and flapped away. Oddly enough, Jac, Audrey, Keltie, and their six-pack followed, scampering up the street like frightened deer.

“Holy shit! Did your allure finally manifest?!” Sarah asked excitedly.

“I guess,” Ryan admitted as a feather—shimmering muted reds and blacks, with a golden tip—drifted onto his shoulder. Absentmindedly, he brushed it to the ground.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked, picking it up and holding it to the sunlight. “This thing is awesome.”

“Yeah,” Ryan mumbled, his thoughts drifting back to his mother and sirens.

“What bird is this from?”

Ryan shrugged.

Sarah held it against her collarbone. “How royal would this look as a necklace?” As a second feather landed on Ryan’s arm, Sarah quickly snatched it up. She lifted the pair to her head. “Or earrings?”

Ryan nodded.

“Can I have them?” Sarah asked, walking backward as she crossed the street to her house.

Ryan stayed put. He wanted to be alone. Needed to process. Needed more clarity. “Go for it.”

“MONSTERS!” Jac shouted one last time from the top of the block. “Just wait! I’m gonna prove it!”
“Let me know when you do!” Ryan yelled back, sarcastically.
While normie kids were enjoying after-school snacks and updating their twitters, tumblrs, and Instagrams to the smell of dinner cooking, Gerard was on all fours, searching the ravine for the Jetta keys. Keys she had tossed the night before because she didn’t want Ryland to take her back to the inn. Which, after five hours in a twiggy, leafy, ant-infested, deer poo–peppered gully, no longer seemed like such a bad idea. Compared to this, the inn had been upgraded to spa status. Hopefully, Ryland would return from his football game with good news. If not, the whole we-have-to-run-back-to-the-inn-and-then-return-with-the-spare-keys news might not sit so well.

*Focus*, Gerard thought, blinking away her negativity. *Clear your mind and become one with the keys. Focus. Look. Feel…* A mosquito pierced the back of her ear. (Smack!) The bugs were loving her new black-currant body wash. The latest buy for the battle of the bands, the signature scent would help ring in a new year and maybe attract a guy… or ten. But who knew if her chance to perform would even happen now? Her parents seemed to think it was over, but she refused to—

“We’ll head back tomorrow, free of charge,” said a girl in the distance.

Gerard’s supersensitive ears perked up.

“Bring bikinis. We’ll hit up Jamia’s house and go for a swim.”

Jamia’s house? Who is going to Jamia’s house? Is she back?

After a round of yays, thank yous, and smoochy sounds, the group—which sounded no larger than nine—separated. Most continued up the street while three, two wearing some seriously unattractive-sounding footwear, one wearing very familiar sounding heels, rounded the corner toward Gerard. She crouched behind a tree and peered up at the sidewalk. Still, they were too far away for her to identify.

“Mark the time and day,” insisted the girl speedily, her voice getting louder, closer. “I’m officially going on the record saying those two are hiding something. Something big.”

Gerard finally got a visual. It was Jac Vanek, dictating her thoughts to her equally as self centered and arguably more annoying friend Audrey.

“And I’m going to expose it,” Jac said. “They think they scared us just now, but it’s them that should be scared.”

“Who,” Keltie said.

“Sarah and Ryan,” Jac snapped.

*Sarah is here?* Gerard wondered.

“No, I mean it’s them who should be scared. Not them that should be scared.”

Gerard began to growl under her breath. No one threatened her friends and got away with it—especially not those vengeful normies and traitorous maenad.

“I bet they’re still standing in the middle of their street laughing. But we’ll have the last laugh when…”
Standing in the middle of their street? Omigod! Gerard fought every urge to jump from the ravine, scratch Jac’s white blouse to ribbons, and charge into the street. She had to warn her friends. Had to stop the hellsprite trio. Had to find the keys. Had to…

“Look,” said Audrey, pointing at the tree. Gerard held her breath, sucked in her stomach, and squeezed her eyes shut. She wasn’t afraid of being captured.

Outrunning them would be simple. It was their camera she feared. A shot of “werewolf girl” lurking in the ravine would make proving her harmlessness even more difficult. The damage to her performance could be irreparable. Her black currant would have been wasted on the mosquitoes….

Footsteps crunched toward her. The girls were getting closer. She could hear their beating hearts. One thumped genuine curiosity—babumbabumbabum; the other two, revenge—ba-bum ba-bum ba-bum. The pair approached the tree. Leaned closer. Paused. The anticipation made Gerard squirm. Something was crawling up the side of her neck. It was gearing up to bite her. She let it. It itched. She imagined scratching it. It still itched. She imagined scratching it with a rake. She wondered how fast she’d have to run to become invisible.

Jac shook a branch. Dried leaves rained down around her. “Come to mama,” she cooed, clearly delighting in the thrill of intimidation. They’ve found me! Now what? “Don’t be afraid. Come on.” Kissy sounds popped off Jac’s thin lips like she was calling a dog. This girl was more frightening than a monster could ever be.

Keltie clapped her hands together. “Got ’em!”

Gerard’s ears tensed. The sound of two metal objects being rubbed together filled her with panic. Are they knives? Silver bullets?

“Looks like they belong to that Jetta.”

The keys!

“Where are you going?” asked Jac.

“To put them on top of the car. Someone obviously lost them. Should we leave a note?”

“Gimme those,” Jac insisted.

No!

“That’s the Wolfs’ car.” She threw the keys. They landed on Gerard’s toes. “Ha! Let’s see them escape now.”

Once Jac and her lackies were gone, Gerard scooped up the keys and hurried through the ravine, on her way to find Sarah.


Gerard stood in the flower beds beneath Sarah’s bedroom window, howling their secret wolf-calling-a-cat call. They’d used it to summon each other back in elementary school, before they got cells. That heap of stone phones at RIP told her it was probably wise to revive it.

All of a sudden someone sneaked up and grabbed her from behind. The assailant smelled like amber.

“For the love of Geb, where have you been?” Sarah asked, beaming. “You’ve completely fallen off the grid! Wait, don’t tell me you’re still out of service at the Hideout.”

Gerard embraced Sarah.

“You didn’t leave! Oh thank god!”

“Only because I wasn’t on screen.” She pointed out. “Where’s the baby?”

“Bandit’s with Mikey.” Gerard said quickly. “Where is everyone?”

“Long story short, Frank’s dad made everyone scatter to the wind.” Sarah said. “The only ones still here are me, the Weekes, Breezy, Ryan, Pete, Jon, Z, and the Smith kids.”

“So everyone left? Where did they go?”

“Lyn-z went to Scotland on one of Mr. D’s private jets. Saying good-bye in front of my mom was double unsatisfying and triple awkward.”

“Did Brendon leave too? Is that why Ryan was running around in his pajamas crying the other night?”

“No, that was because his dad died.” Sarah said. “That birdie has some serious sass-appeal. You should have seen him scare off the demon three. It was actually kind of cool,” Sarah said, her turquoise bangles jingling. “Speaking of, can you believe Lindsay is gone?”

“So is my Battle of the Bands if this whole thing doesn’t get fixed soon.”

“We promised to be exclusive, even when she’s in Europe, but I can’t help thinking she’s met someone else. Why else wouldn’t she call?”

Gerard speed-scratched her neck bites. “Where did Frank and Jamia go? And what about Brendon? Do you think they’ll come back for my birthday?”

“I’ll tell you one thing.” Sarah stopped strolling to look Gerard in the eye. The late-afternoon sun reflected off her caramel-colored streaks and brightened her topaz eyes. She might be high maintenance, but there was no denying she was beautiful. “If I don’t hear from her by then, I’ll be making the rounds like Grey’s Anatomy. Exclusivity pledge or not.” Sarah began strolling again and sighed. “This whole thing is a major pain in the Aswan.”

“$10 says her parents confiscated her phone.” Gerard said. “Luna knows her parents are finicky about her safety after the Perseus thing.”

Gerard sighed. Having a typical free-for-all chat with Sarah felt better than a hot shower in a boy-free bathroom. It didn’t matter that they weren’t actually having a conversation; all that mattered was that they were together.

“We’ve got to go!” Ryland shouted, sprinting up Sarah’s lawn. He was still in his green-and-yellow football uniform, helmet under his arm. “Did you find the keys?”

Gerard tossed them to him.

“What keys?” Sarah asked, hating to not know the details.
“Come on, let’s move,” he insisted, pulling his sibling by the arm. His palm was sweaty. His cheeks were flushed. He smelt like duct tape and sweat. “We have to get back to the inn.”

“How?” she whined. Now that she had Sarah back, it was even harder to leave than before.

“Coach Donnelly set me up. He was trying to trap me. A few of the guys on the team warned me before the game, so I took off. He’s looking for me.”

Gerard speed-scratched her neck again. “But we haven’t even talked about centerpieces or—”

“Go! I’ll handle the party stuff.”

“Gigi, we have to go!” Ryland lifted her over his shoulder and began running.

“Wait!” Sarah called.

Gerard began hitting her brother’s back. “Put me down! I want to stay!”

“We’re a pack,” he said, panting. “We stick together.”

“I don’t want to be a pack. I wanna be a lone wolf.”

He set her down beside the Jetta, opened the doors, and forced her inside.

“Normies are invading Jamia’s house. Ours could be next!” Gerard tried.

“It’s just a house,” he said, slamming her door. He hurried to the driver’s side, put the key in the ignition, and peeled away from the curb.

“What about my friends? My life is here.”

“If it’s life you want, we need to get out of here. Fast!”

Ryland sped toward the inn, with Gerard strapped into the seat next to him.

Playing it safe. Just like always.
It was Tuesday after school, and Hayley stood in a wood-framed tub wearing nothing but Hillary’s purple-and-white-striped Victoria’s Secret boy shorts and the matching bra. Which on her fit more like bootie shorts.

“Stop looking,” Hayley said, cheeks burning.

Hillary giggled. “I’m a professional.”

“Forget it.” Hayley stepped onto the cold lip of the tub. “I can’t do this.” Not even Spencer Smith was worth this kind of humiliation.

“Come on! So far, so good. Don’t you want to see what the rest of you looks like?”

Pete gently pushed her back into the tub.

“Not as much as you do,” Hayley snapped.

He looked at Hillary and Pete for a moment. Even in a baggy pair of old scrubs, wearing snowboard goggles and a shower cap, the duo was flawless. Not that flawless was her thing—she was more of a stitches-and-bolts kind of girl. But she admired Hillary’s beauty and envied her confidence, especially now, moments before discovering her own potential. What if invisible was her best option?

“Remember; arms out, mouth closed, eyes closed. Only breathe when the machine is off.” Pete lowered the goggles over his eyes as Hillary stuffed a few errant blond strands under her plastic cap, and Pete lifted what looked like a portable vacuum cleaner. “Inhale, exhale, and…”

He aimed the hose at her chest, depressed the silver handle, and unleashed the tanning solution. “Arctic blast!”

Cold spray coated her chest. Hayley wanted to scream, but she wasn’t allowed to breathe. Thankfully, the only mirrors in the Wentz’ upstairs bathroom were two small rectangles above the wood-paneled vanity: one over each basin. The tub was outside their range.

“The tan takes six hours to appear, but there’s bronzer in the mixture so we can see immediate results.” Hillary stated.

Pete turned off the hose. “Breathe.”

Hayley exhaled. “How does it look?”

“Like someone’s been doing her crunches,” Pete said, impressed. “Mouth closed, eyes closed, only breathe when the machine is off, and here we go again.”

Next he painted his legs, applying the spray in gentle brushstrokes, contouring and defining with the precision of a true artist. After a while Hayley got used to the chilly blasts and even started to enjoy them. Each invigorating shot woke a different part of her body, yanked it off the bench, and forced it into the game.

Pete snapped off the hose, lifted his goggles, and took a step back. “Done.”

His expression gave nothing away.
“Well?”

“Hmm.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Shh. Be quiet. I’m in the zone.” He tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Let’s dye your hair next, put in the contacts, and then get you dressed.”

The following hour was a dizzying mix of chemical smells, Rihanna and Katy Perry tracks, and contemplative mmmms from the eldest Wentz children. Finally, she was done.

Hillary’s warm hand covered her eyes. She guided her, stumbling, into her bedroom.

“Ready?” she asked, stopping before her full-length mirror.

“Ready,” she answered, lying. The instant she moved her hand, Hayley’s life would never be the same. She’d never be able to blame his lack of dates on anything but himself. Never get to pretend he was a beautiful goddess cursed to a life of loneliness. Never be able to eavesdrop or be the gossip go-to girl. She’d be fallible. Excuse-free. Normal.

“One… two… three…” Hillary removed her hand. “Invisible out!”

Hayley looked into her full-length mirror and gasped.

And for the first time in years, her reflection gasped back.
Spencer helped Vicky drape gray muslin curtains around the glass cage. Sewed five mini beanbags out of jewel-toned fabric samples and filled them with uncooked couscous. Brightened up the sawdust by mixing in some orange and fuchsia flower petals. And winterized the lab rats’ coats by replacing their summery multicolored glitter with shimmering coal-colored flecks. The Glitterati’s Extreme Home Makeover was complete.

Now what?

His homework was done. His room was clean and decorated to his tastes. Tomorrow’s outfit had been selected. If he didn’t come up with another distraction—fast—his thoughts would wander back to Linda. Her absences from school… dismissive text… heartless betrayal… honey-brown eyes… STOP! If only he had someone to talk to. But Sarah spent most of her time with Debby and their normie friends, Ryan was a no-show for the second day in a row, and Hayley wasn’t an option—at least not in public, Pete was a definite no because he was practicing with his band, now dubbed Fall Out Boy. Not that missing the girl who had crushed him was something he wanted to advertise. But Spencer watched Gossip Girl with The twins. He knew that others, even rich normies, missed heartbreakers too.

Something rapped lightly against his window. Rain again? Soft knocks followed. Linda? Spencer approached slowly, hoping it might be her. Then he pinched his arm for hoping. The sharp nip was less painful than the stab of disappointment.

Something—a stick of gum?—was pressed against the frosted pane. He looked up and squinted. His fingertips tingled. Did it say…

Gaga?

Spencer dragged over the stepladder, climbed up, and pushed the window open. The mysterious object fell to the ground. Hanging out the window, he looked closer. Was it really? A ticket to the sold-out Lady Gaga concert Fran and mom wanted to go to?

OmiGaga!

He extended his arm, but the ticket moved beyond his reach. Spencer shimmied out the window and tried a second time. It moved again. He scanned the cul-de-sac for an explanation.

The leaves were still; the orange-and-navy sky, clear. It couldn’t have been the wind. She bent down, and the ticket slithered away. Is this some kind of joke? Or worse? What if it’s a trap? Earlier that day Sarah mentioned that Coach Donnelly had tried to trick Ryland. What if the coach knew about his disguise?

Am I next on his hit list?

Summoning every last ounce of willpower, Spencer turned away from the ticket and raced for the house.

“Wait!” called a familiar voice. “Spencer, it’s me.”

Hayley?

He stopped and turned.
But the girl walking toward him, dragging the ticket by a piece of fishing wire, was sooo not Hayley. For one thing, he could see her. For two things, she wasn’t nakie. And for three things, she looked like a hot topic model from planet Hot! One step closer and his normie-colored makeup would melt.

Backing away, he noted her ability to turn a simple rose-colored tee, black and red striped Tripps, and authentic 70s doc martens into the best Linda distraction of the day. Her wavy hair, the vivid red Hayley had once described, thick-but-not-Brooke-Shields-thick brows, and almond-shaped eyes were hazel with flecks of blue. Her toned arms were the color of caramel; her teeth were whipped-cream white. Tempting, steamy, and out of his league, she could have been added to the menu at Starbucks. Still, Spencer continued to back away.

“Stop moving, will ya?” she said, her kind voice unmistakably Hayley-like.

“But how—?”

“The Wentzes helped me,” she said, leaning against the concrete exterior of her house. The sun was dipping below the horizon. It cast a warm orange glow on the neighborhood and lit her like art. She folded her arms across her chest and smiled shyly. “So, what do you think?”

“Good.” He giggled nervously.

“Good?”

Spencer sparked.

“I mean, voltage.” Spencer blushed, suddenly too shy to make eye contact. Why was he wearing old pink sweats and UGGs? And why did he care? This was Hayley. His best friend. Only she looked more like an actor who might play Hayley if their lives ever became a movie. But she was still the same girl, and that girl didn’t care what he was wearing. She never had. Why should he?

“So, are you going to register for school now?” he asked, trying to make things feel normal.

“Hmmm,” she said, with a sexy half-smile. “I never thought about that.” She pulled a roll of Starburst out of her pocket and offered him one. It happened to be green.

They giggled.

“So, what’s it like to have a place to store things?” He asked, chewing the lime-flavored candy.

“Great,” she said, unwrapping a pink square. “I have all kinds of things in here.” She reached into her back pocket and pulled out another ticket. “What are you doing October thirtieth?”

“They’re real?”

She nodded.

“Really?”

Hayley nodded again.

“Mint!” Spencer yelled, pulling her in for a hug. She hugged him back with every muscle in her arms. “I love that you’re not nakie anymore.”

“Me too,” she said softly. Her breath smelled like sweet strawberries.

He squeezed tighter and grinned. It was easy to stick to his own kind when his own kind looked like
this.
Ryan snapped open his locker for the first time all week. He had been living for music ever since he said good-bye to Brendon at Cape Town. Seeing Ms. Urie would help him feel connected to her. Maybe Brendon’s mom would deliver a secret love note from him. Or invite Ryan to meet them for another clandestine meeting, or—

“I like to be fashionably late, but you’re, like, on couture time,” Sarah joked, the red-and-black bird feathers dangling from her ears.

“Those feathers actually look cute,” Ryan said, slamming his locker shut.

“No trade backs,” Sarah joked as they merged into hallway traffic. It seemed lighter than usual. There was an overall malaise in the students they passed. Usually, the halls buzzed between classes, but today they hummed. Last week everyone bustled; now they meandered. The energy dial had been turned way down. It was life unplugged. Everything felt acoustic. “Are you seriously just getting here? It’s last period on Wednesday!”

“I know,” Ryan sighed. “My parents are away, and it’s been kind of a weird week, so…”

“Bob told me.”

“He did?”

“Yes, he wanted me to make sure you were okay and to find a subtle way of letting you know that families are messy and that love matters more than blood… unless, of course, you’re you-know-who.” She made finger-fangs and wiggled them playfully. “Ka! I miss that boy.”

Nausea wave-pooled through Ryan’s insides. Why would Bob blab my secret to a big gossip? “You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

Sarah drew an imaginary crown on her green-and-yellow sweater dress. “Crown my heart and hope to rot! Besides…” She put an amber-scented arm around Ryan and pulled her close. Gold bangles jabbed into Melody’s shoulder blade. “I’ve had mummy issues for 5,842 years. It’s the last thing I want to talk about.”

“What is?” Fran asked, Spencer following close behind her, appearing beside them. “Come on, tell me. I have some voltage Hayley gossip. I’ll trade you.”

Ryan noted that Fran’s green skin was hidden under a turtleneck sweater, black skinny jeans, and knee-high motor-cycle boots, but her long-lost curves had definitely been found. Did she always look like the number 8? Why suddenly show off her shape? Maybe she found someone.

“Mum’s the word,” Sarah said, giggling at her pun. “If RyRo wants to talk about it, he can. I swore I wouldn’t.”

“Sar-ah!” Ryan snapped. He could have been mad, should have been mad, but these three had trusted him with their lives. Why not trust them back?

“Please,” Spencer begged. His smile was electric and impossible to resist.

On the way to class, Ryan filled them in on Danielle. He told them about his old camel-hump nose and the unsettling glance between his parents when he asked about Danielle.
When he was done, a memory of skinny-dipping with Pete at the Four Seasons Maui flashed through his mind. Just like that risqué plunge, this admission left him feeling both exhilarated and exposed.

“You’re not upset, are you?” Fran asked, as if Ryan had been mourning a chipped nail.

“Of course I am,” Darab snapped. “Lindsay is my girlfriend. She should have called by now.”

Fran giggled. “I’m talking about the mama drama.”

“Of course I’m upset,” Ryan said. “My parents have been lying to me. And now I have no idea who I am or where I fully came from. It’s creepy.”

“More creepy than sleeping in a laboratory with wires clamped to your neck?” Spencer mumbled from the side of his mouth.

“Or being locked in a sarcophagus for millennia by a vengeful sister?”

“Um…” Ryan had no idea how to respond without offending them.

“We all have freaky parents, and we all come from freaky places,” Sarah said while checking out the passing students. “Get over it.”

“I think she meant your parents love you and that’s all that matters,” Spencer tried, flashing his contagiously perky smile.

Ryan couldn’t help smiling back. “Yeah, I’m sure that’s exactly what she meant.”

“Okay, ready for my Hayley gossip?” Fran asked.

“Ka!” Sarah pulled down a poster that had been taped to the cinder-block wall. It announced “sudden openings” on the school’s football, basketball, and swim teams and urged students of “all fitness levels” to try out. “All the cool people are gone.”

“Present company excluded, right?” Fran asked.

Ignoring her, Sarah took a wad of pink gum from her mouth and stuck it onto a locker. “There are anti-RAD rallies every morning and monster jokes written in the bathroom stalls. Classes are half empty.”

“Oh, and you should see the cafeteria,” Spencer said to Ryan. “You know the lunchtime playlist? ‘Imagine’ was on it. You know, by John Legend.”

“You mean John Lennon?” Ryan giggled.

“Sarah!” Spencer swatted her on the arm. “You told me his last name was Legend.”


“Anyway,” Fran continued, “the list was all peace songs.”

“So some people have been supportive?” Ryan asked as they climbed the stairs to the second floor.

“Yeah, but not enough,” Sarah said as two overly buff twelfth-grade guys started down the steps wearing matching T-shirts. RAD was spray-painted across the front in black letters, but the R was crossed out and replaced with a B.
Spencer rolled his periwinkle-blue eyes. “Real clever.”

“What did you expect?” Ryan muttered. “A smart idiot?”

Suddenly, three girls wearing pirate masks and wielding prop swords appeared behind them, pushing past students, knocking over books. Ryan recognized his sister.

“Seize them!” Hillary called. Some students reached out to grab the guys; others stepped aside and let them pass. Casually, Sarah stuck out her foot. The boys tripped down the last two steps but quickly righted themselves and made a move for the first-floor hallway.

“Stop!” Ryan ordered.

The two boys halted, like a video being paused.

Cool!

“Golden,” Sarah exclaimed.
“Mint!” Spencer added.

Ryan felt as if everyone in the stairwell was staring at him.

“Attack!” Hillary shouted. Her fellow pirates pounced on the guys like spider monkeys and began slicing off their shirts with dull sabers.

“Looks like your you know wha is getting stronger”

Thankfully, Principal Weekes broke up the skirmish before Ryan could answer. Not that he didn’t want to. He just didn’t know how.

Ms. Urie was late for class. Her chair was one of six left empty in the music room. Despite the restless chatter and bursts of laughter, those who were missing stood out the most. Spencer leaned forward and whispered, “Have you seen Hayley?”

“Is that supposed to be funny?” Sarah asked, not bothering to turn around.

Ryan giggled.

“No, I’m serious,” Spencer said. “This is what I’ve been trying to tell you. Ryan’s siblings gave him a makeover. He’s megawatt hot.”

“I was wondering what Hayley and the disaster duo were doing in the bathroom for so long,” Ryan said, checking the door for Ms. Urie.

“He’s taking me to see Lady Gaga,” Spencer said, beaming.

“Does this mean you’re over Linda?” Ryan asked.

“Who?”

“Linda.”

“Who?” Spencer smiled.
And then Fran squealed, “Ah!” Rubbing the back of her neck, she turned to face Jac—and the red barrel of a squirt gun. “What was that for?” Fran asked.

“Science experiment. They say water and electricity don’t mix, but you seem just fine—Francine Stein.”

Her snooty friends giggled. Ryan couldn’t imagine how Fran was dealing with the assault and was too mortified to check. Instead, he picked his cuticles and prayed for Ms. Urie to show up soon.

_Thomp._ A clove of garlic hit the side of Ryan’s head and bounced to the floor. Muffled snickers followed.

“Looks like we can cross vampire off the list,” Jac called from the back of the room. Dressed in a red and pink flower-print dress, she appeared deceptively sweet as she sat on her desk, swinging her legs.

Audrey dutifully drew a line through something in her pink composition notebook.

Next, Sarah got whacked in the cheek with a brown biscuit. “Ow!” She picked up the biscuit and whipped it back.

“No dog would turn down a Milk-Bone,” Jac said. “Cross off werewolf.”

Audrey did.

“Werewolves are not dogs!” Sarah stood and began unclipping her earrings.

“Ignore her,” Spencer muttered.

Sarah set the feathers on her desk and told Ryan, “They’re yours if anything happens to me.”

Is she really going to fight? Because the last thing RADs needed was normie blood on their hands.

“Sit,” Ryan insisted.

Sarah did.

“Ha! Good trick.” Jac clapped her hands. “Looks like she is a dog, after all.”

More laughter from the back of the room.

“You’re the dog,” Sarah said. “That’s why Linda dumped you for Spencer.”

The room was silent. Jac and Spencer were probably on the verge of tears. After all, Linda had left them both.

“Are you really so desperate that you’d side with the gay kid and the freaks?” Audrey snapped

Ryan’s heartbeat sped up. He could handle being called the gay kid but those little demons needed to leave them alone.

Ryan stood too and approached Jac and Audrey. They were so close that Ryan could smell the cheap wine on Jac and overpowering stink of Audrey’s perfume. “Why don’t you just admit it?”

“Admit what?” Jac asked, blinking.

“That you’re a monster.”
“Me?” Jac scoffed.

“Yeah, a green-eyed monster!” Fran giggled, completing Ryan’s thought.

“Ha! Golden!” Sarah lifted her palm. The four teens high-fived. A tiny spark passed between them. Spencer quickly stuffed his hands back into his jeans pockets.

Jac rolled her eyes. “And who would I be jealous of, Ryan? You? Because you’re dating some schizophrenic guy who’s allergic to his own sweat?”

“No. You’re jealous of Spencer, and you’re making everyone suffer because of it,” Ryan said. “This whole monster hunt is about your bruised ego.” he turned to Audrey and the ever silent Keltie. “And you two are jealous Brendon and I are happy together, Two BOYS happily together instead of with you two pathetic demons.”

“ ‘Scuse me?” Jac retorted, hands on her hips.

“You need someone to blame because Linda doesn’t like you at all. So you’re going after innocent people.” Ryan shook with conviction. “Just admit it.”

Jac’s blinking eyes darkened to the color of summer storm clouds. “Fine, I admit it.”

Sarah smacked her desk. “Nice!”

Confused glances shot up and down the rows.

_Huh?

“I knew it!” Fran said.

“Do that again,” Sarah urged Ryan.

Ryan swallowed hard and then asked, “Jac, do you have any proof that the RADs are dangerous? Have you ever seen them hurt anyone?”

Jac blinked again. “Yes, me! I was hurt when the green boy kissed Linda.” Her pasty cheeks flushed, and her eyes teared.

“I mean physically,” Ryan demanded.

Jac shook her head.

“Are you kidding me?” Audrey called, tearing a page out of her notebook and crumpling it up.

“Of course I am,” Jac said, managing a smile.

“Are you?” Ryan pressed.

Jac lowered her head. “No.”

_How is it so strong already?

“Do you know where Linda is?” Spencer tried.

Jac leaned against an empty desk and folded her arms. “Of course I do.”

Spencer stood, his hands deep in his pockets. “Tell me.”
“She doesn’t want you to know. She only wants me to know.”

“So you’ve been talking to her?” Spencer asked.

Jac twirled her J charm necklace. “Yup.”

“Do you really know where Linda is?” Ryan pressed.

Jac sighed. “No.”

“Have you been talking to her?”

“No.”

“Case dismissed!”

Murmurs built to mumbles. Jac hurried back toward her friends to appeal.

“Wait, I have one more question,” Ryan announced.

Everyone stopped talking.

“This one is for Keltie.”

The dancer pushed her oversized sunglasses up her nose and then nodded that she was ready.

“Why do you let Jac boss you around?”

The defendant’s brown eyes shifted from her old master to the new one.

“Kel-teeee,” Jac warned. “Don’t answer.”

“You have to,” Ryan insisted.

Keltie began blinking.

“Tell me,” Ryan said.

“Because I like you and I don’t like that Brendon won you over so easily.”

“Audrey. Dump out the contracts.” Ryan demanded.

Audrey lifted the pink case over her head and turned it upside down. Contracts fell like paratroopers jumping to freedom. Kayla, Lorna, Delanie, and Samantha ripped their way to happiness.

“You’re all dead to me!” Jac shouted. She gathered her things and stomped toward the door amid mounting chaos. On the way out, she collided with a grape-shaped woman wearing a paisley-print sweater set and navy slacks. “And where are you going?” asked the stranger, righting the Whole Foods tote bag that had slipped off her shoulder.

“To a normal school!” Jac barked before taking off down the hall.

Everyone began applauding. Fran joy-kicked the back of Ryan chair while the grape worked to restore order.

Sarah leaned across the row and whispered, “Spill. How are you doing that?”
Ryan searched for an answer but came up short. “I just ask and—”

“No,” Sarah said, plucking a red, black, and gold feather from Ryan’s hair. She twirled it between her fingers, admiring its iridescent sheen. “Where are these coming from? I could design a whole jewelry collection around them.” She held it to her collarbone. “Perfect with my earrings, right?”

Ryan reached out his hand, testing his power of persuasion on the most stubborn subject of all. “Kiss it good-bye and give it to me.”

Sarah blinked, kissed the feather, and tucked it behind Ryan’s ear.

“Earrings too.”

Without hesitation, Sarah did what she’d been told.

*It really was stronger.*

“Sorry I’m late. I was in a meeting with Principal Weekes,” announced the grape. “My name is Mrs. Stern-Figgus. I’ll be taking over for Ms. Urie.”

Ryan stomach lurched.

“Where is she?” asked Delanie.

The round woman turned to the blackboard and began writing her name. “I wasn’t given that information.”

*Of course you were.* “Where is Ms. Urie?” Ryan tried.

“She was forced to resign,” said Mrs. Stern-Figgus.

Several students gasped.

“By Principal Weekes?” Ryan pressed.

“School board.”

“Why?”

The teacher turned around. “Harboring a RAD.” She blinked.

*Not just a RAD! Her son! What’s wrong with these people?*

“Where is she now?” asked Ryan, voice quaking.

Mrs. Stern-Figgus shrugged. Of course she didn’t know. Ryan didn’t even know, and Brendon was his boyfriend. Were they leaving? Were they gone? Was there time to stop them? All this time wasted in class, toying with the demon three, when he could have been out looking for them.

“The notes left for me show that you all had an assignment. Choose a song to perform and do so.” Mrs. Stern-Figgus said. “And it says George Ross and Jon Walker are up first.”

Ryan stood and nodded to Jon.

“Fine. I’m doing super trooper, so whoever knows the musical accompaniment, come join me.” He grabbed the accoustic guitar in the corner and sat at the front stool. Jon sat at the piano and two boys
grabbed a bass guitar and dragged out the xylophone. Spencer sprinted for the drums and nodded to Ryan. Ryan inhaled and sang.

“I was sick and tired of everything
When I called you last night from Glasgow
All I do is eat and sleep and sing
Wishing every show was the last show

So imagine I was glad to hear you're coming
Suddenly I feel all right
And it's gonna be so different
When I'm on the stage tonight” His voice was clear, high, and not the least bit hindered by his asthma.

Vicky, Z-Berg, and Fran jumped up. The looked at each other and sang.

“Tonight the Super Trouper lights are gonna find me
Shining like the sun
Smiling, having fun
Feeling like a number one”

Sarah rolled her eyes and stood up. On the other side of the room, a boy wearing a bright hawaiian shirt jumped up.

“Tonight the Super Trouper beams are gonna blind me
But I won't feel blue
Like I always do
'Cause somewhere in the crowd there's you” Sarah pointed at Ryan and everyone else fell silent again.

“Facing twenty thousand of your friends
How can anyone be so lonely
Part of a success that never ends
Still I'm thinking about you only” Jon and Spencer began singing with Ryan.

“There are moments when I think I'm going crazy
But it's gonna be alright
Everything will be so different
When I'm on the stage tonight

Tonight the Super Trouper lights are gonna find me
Shining like the sun
Smiling, having fun
Feeling like a number one

Tonight the Super Trouper beams are gonna blind me
But I won't feel blue
Like I always do
Cause somewhere in the crowd there's you

So I'll be there when you arrive
The sight of you will prove to me I'm still alive
And when you take me in your arms, and hold me tight
I know it's gonna mean so much tonight

Tonight the Super Trouper lights are gonna find me
Shining like the sun
Smiling, having fun
Feeling like a number one

Tonight the Super Trouper beams are gonna blind me
But I won't feel blue
Like I always do
Cause somewhere in the crowd there's you

Super Trouper lights are gonna find me” By the end of the song, the whole class was singing along.

“That was fun!” Sarah giggled as Ryan sat back down.

“I haven’t done that in years!” Ryan gushed. “I forgot how fun it was!” Jon high fived him on his way back to his seat and Spencer was practically vibrating out of his skin.

“That was megawatts more fun than singing in that Storage space Brendon was renting for us!” Spencer breathed.
Bless the normie who invented outdoor shopping centers, thought Deadbora Ryan as she slapped a SPECIAL VEHICLE sticker on her cherry covered vespa. Gone were the days of window shopping in the same window while her friends made the wounds. The metallic gold sticker—a permit for those with special transportation needs—was her license to drive through the Salem Hills Mall. The upgraded engine, however, was her license to zoom.

<Hold on!> She called in zombie, twisting the throttle.

Josh, Debby’s dreamed up comic-book love come to life, wrapped his arms around her fuzzy pink sweater. His arms felt like a lasso made of muscle. Yee-ha!

Debby imagined herself as a queen riding through her kingdom; a kingdom flush with fruit scented soap shops and trendy boutique, food courts and Sunglasses Huts. Bag toting villagers sipping lattes. Perfectly styled mannequins advising her on fashion, and street performers entertaining her for pennies. The salem hills mall was the first place Debby’s parents had let her go without them. And unless her well-rehearsed scheme worked, it would also be the last.

She gave the scooter more gas and it lurched forward, gag-reflexing with speed. Josh’s energy drink sprang from the cup holder and crashed to the ground.

He groaned. Debby laughed. He flicked the back of her head. She stopped in front of build-a-bear to let him regroup.

<Sorry dude!> She giggled at the fizzing red puddle on his jeans.

<Liar!> he said with a knowing half smile.

He was right. Debby wasn’t sorry. She loved injecting a little, tolerable for him, unpredictability into the anxious teen’s life. It helped him relax around her.

Usually, her pranks made them laugh. Their laughter would end in prolonged dreamy eye contact. But not today. Romance was a time suck, and time was the one thing they didn’t have.

The Ryans were almost finished packing. Compared to other RADs, they were slow, but fear of being exposed made them move more quickly than usual. Debby’s parents had begun loading the U-Haul when she left that morning, and claimed they’d be done in twelve hours. Which usually meant forty-eight, but even that was too soon. Forty-eight hours and life would be over. For real this time. Her family was moving to Tombstone, Arizona. And Debby and Josh would be hugging goodbye—forever.

<Over my undead body!> she yelled to the wind, and revved the engine. Latte-sipping normies scattered the hot-pretzel cart and turned onto Mall street. The courtyard was full of ghosts. Not the fun ones who used to go to monster high— the ones who haunted her thoughts with memories of better days.

<Take a picture of the fountain!> she called to Josh as they zipped past. Click! <Last summer Jamia jumped in, and all these kids followed. It was so hot their moms didn’t even care. We had a huge water before security came. It was in the paper and everything. The headline said “Fountain of Youth”>

Pointing at a red-and-yellow kiosk, Debby added, <Oh, take that one of the popcorn guy.> Click!
Josh took another picture. <One time, Sarah’s linen unraveled, and he almost saw some skin. Now he gives her a free bag of the Naked flavor just to mess with her.>

She could sense Josh smiling behind her, even though if was a you-had-to-be-there story. <oh, and see that red paint smudge by the Justice window?>

He squeezed yes.

<That’s where Frank beat the crap out of a PETA activist who spray painted Gerard. He was insistent she was wearing real fur.> Debby smiled. <Which it is, I know, but he still sprayed Gerard while her, at the time, newborn daughter was in her arms.> She paused unable to go on, and slowed the scooter to a stop as her words were smothered by the landslide of depression in her throat. The future no longer contained viciously supporting her friends or going to parties with them. It was a lonely white page with an impatient cursor that taunted her with every blink.

Sadness, thick as mango smoothie, dripped down from the top of her vivid red hair to the tips of her shiny, poison apple red platform boots. It ached like a fever. She removed her cat-eye frames and blotted her purple lashes. Josh pulled her toward him, and Debby leaned back into a hug and breathed in the oceany smell of his deodorant.

<This is going to work,> he said.

She sighed

He leaned forward, taking both of their bodies with him. <Let’s go.> He twisted the throttle, and they shot through the crowd.

Debby’s pink fedora flew off into the fountain. <Wait!>

<Payback,> he murmured in her ear. The slimy sadness evaporated.

And it didn’t return when they stopped in front of the movie theater.

As planned, Dallon and Breezy were waiting in front of the box office with digital cameras. A shock of sapphire black hair spilled out from under Breezy’s pink hoodie. Debby scanned the empty benches and storefronts.

**To: Dallon**

Oct 21, 4:48 pm

**DEBBY:** EVERYTHING READY? WHERE ARE THE BACKUP DANCERS?

Dallon only knew basic zombie, some sometimes it was easier to text him with complicated communications.

<Guys hiding behind big tree things.> Dallon said in zombie, rubbing blackberry chapstick across his lips. <They think it’s a prank for Linda monster movie.>

**To: Dallon**

Oct 21, 4:49 PM
“When Michael Jackson sings ‘You’re out of time’ they come out of their hiding places and start doing the zombie dance from ‘Thriller,’ right?” Dallon confirmed, having given up on speaking in zombie.

Debby nodded and pulled him in for a slow hug.

He smacked his camera case. “I even brought extra flashlights, just in case.”

“Fllllllrrrrrg?” Asked Josh, pulling his pleather costume from the Vespa’s compact trunk.

Dallon nodded proudly. “I don’t think they’ll read on camera for at least”— he shielded his eyes as Breezy shook her head.—“At least five more hours. When it’s dark. But it’s always good to have extras.”

<Flashlights?> Debby asked, frustrated. Not that she didn’t appreciate Dallon and Breezy’s help. She was. She just didn’t need him jumping in and changing the plan--

“Oh, maybe because it’s a flashmob.” Dallon said in a very Duh sort of way.

“Dallon, I’ve told you already. A flash mob is when you gather in a public place and perform to get a message across.” Breezy groaned.

Dallon looked at her. <Why?>

Debby wanted to pull her hair out and yell “I explained in my ten page email!” but she didn’t want to piss him off. Without him, their message wouldn’t go viral. And if it didn’t go viral, she wouldn’t be going anywhere with Josh ever again.

To: Heath

Oct 21, 4:51 PM

DEBBY: WHEN OUR SHOW IS OVER, NORMIES WILL BE CLAPPING AND CHEERING FOR US. OUR RAD FRIENDS WHO LEFT WOULD SEE HOW SAFE IT IS HERE, AND THEY’LL COME HOME. THEN I WON’T HAVE TO LEAVE. GOT IT?

Dallon nodded like he did.

To: Dallon

Oct 21, 4:52 PM

DEBBY: I RECORDED A SUPER SLOW VERSION OF THE SONG SO WE CAN KEEP UP. JUST SPEED IT UP WHEN YOU EDIT IT, OKAY?

Then she pulled a Bluetooth speaker out of her bag.

“You’re still treating us to Subway later right?”
Debby had promised, so she nodded and then checked the time on her phone. “The movie crowd should be out in three minutes. Positions!” Then she tapped her watch and pointed for Dallon’s benefit.

Dallon pinched the lens cap off of his camera and stuffed it in the pocket of his jacket. Josh had painstakingly put on the black and red pleather Michael Jackson costume he had rented. He looked great. Debby was ready to go in her denim capris and jean jacket. They were dressed like the characters in the video.

Hearts pounding, they stood in the center of Mall Street and waited patiently for their cue.

Josh winked at Debby. It’s going to be okay.

She winked back. I’d rather die than leave you.

A sudden sound, like a giant stapler, echoed though the courtyard. The theater doors pumped open and movie goers spilled out. Dazed and squinting, they lingered under the marquee while their eyes adjusted to the milky midday light.

“Nooooooow!” Debby groaned to Dallon.

A dead-slow version of Thriller began to play

“It’s

Close

To

Mid-

Nigh

T…”

People began to gather. They exchanged curious glances and nervous giggles as Josh lip-synced the lyrics to Debby. The spectators inched closer, waving their friends towards them, pulling out cellphones. Debby did her best to stay in character as Michael Jackson’s scared girlfriend, but it was hard not to sneak peeks at her growing fan base. Still, she managed to hold her focus on Josh until the second chorus. And then her curiosity won out.

How many spectators were there? Hundreds? Thousands? Had the news crews been tipped off? What about career bloggers? She was dying twice to get a read on the crowd before the zombie dancers jumped out and things really blew up. But that would be unprofessional and unflash-mob like. Still, she couldn’t resist.

With a slight turn of her neck, Debby glanced toward the display tent out side L.L. Bean. Three middle school girls stood giggling into their palms. What are they laughing at? Debby turned her head a bit more. No one else was there. Except the ticket teller. The iron streetlamps were on, and fluorescent lights beamed from L.L.Bean and Abercrombie.

<Where did everyone go?> Had she really just been gazing into Josh’s eyes for 5 hours? Were normies right? Did time really fly where you were having fun?

<Everyone?> repeated Josh, abandoning the lyrics for the first time. <We’ve been alone for hours.>
Debby shivered. <Why didn’t you say something?>

<I didn’t want to ruin the video.> he responded with a dead cute grin.

<Maybe if we skip to the dance portion.>

<I think the zombie dancers left.> Zombie lover said, pointing over his shoulder at a snoozing Dallon and texting Breezy.

<Oh.> Debby’s shoulders slumped. She resisted the urge to kick her phone and storm off to Cold Stone’s and drown her sorrows in cotton candy ice cream.

<Maybe we should take a break.>

<And do what?> Debby snapped. A tsunami of tears crashed over her purple mascaraed lashes<Help my parents pack?>

<We could cuddle.>

<Huh?> she said, wondering if she heard him correctly.

And then his hand found hers. He guided her to the display tent and eased her through the flap. They snuggled together, his strong arms wrapped around her. He slowly kissed her forehead and tip of her nose. It was more romantic than anything she had seen in a BoyCrush comic. And that made her cry harder. The smell of rubber, the green canvas walls, their feet poking out-- it was a favorite memory in the making. Another one to haunt her.

Tears seasoned her lips with the salty taste of heartache. It didn’t matter how fast her flash mob video spread. Or how powerful her scooter’s engine was. Tim would pull ahead. It would always win.

“We are the ninety-nine percent!” A voice cried.

I hear that. Debby though. An outcast among outcasts. Doomed to narrow escapes and tearful goodbyes.

“Krysta! Katie!” continued the stranger. “It’s on! Text Ziggy and Hannah. I’ll post the location and grab tents from the prius!”

The stranger’s exuberance annoyed Deby.


“Occ-u-py! Occ-u-py! Occ-u-py! Occ-u-py!” It was a chant now. Coming from not one but several voices. Distorted normie shadows undulated across the green canvas walls of the tent. Were they being attacked? Debby pulled away. <What’s going on out there?>

Josh tried to hold her back but she just slipped under his arm. A mass of people had gathered in the courtyard. They covered the cobblestone with their tents and pierced the sky with their signs. Signs that read I’M HERE FOR MY GRANDKIDS, BUY LOCAL, and EAT HOMEMADE!

It was one of those occupy protests Debby had seen online. Where regular people told the rich where to stick their opinions and that they were sick of being overlooked.

<Why couldn’t we get a crowd like this?> she asked, stepping fully out of the tent.

Instead of an answer, Debby got a round of applause.
“That’s the girl that started this one!” shouted a familiar voice. It was the guy who’d been calling Krysta and Katie to rally. He was college age with huge glasses and looked kind scruffy.

“Occ-i-pie! Occ-u-pie!”

The crowd moved toward Debby and joined in.

“Heeeeeeey!” Josh groaned, stepping forward to come to her defense.

<It’s okay.> Debby whispered. Then to the guy she gave the sign for What?

“It takes one tent to start the event.” he said, pointing to the identical phrase on his T-shirt. “And you two were the first.” He handed her a slice of apple pie.

Zombie Lover leaned into Debby’s eat. <Told you we should take a break.>

Debby stood up, giggling, and kissed the cheek of the only boy who ever occupied her heart. <Wake heath. I’ll make signs.>

Thirty minutes later, Debby was riding her scooter through the crowd. As always, Josh was behind her. Only this time, instead of an energy drink, he held a sign that said RADS! WE ARE THE THIRTY ONE PERCENT. OCCUPY MALL STREET! Dallon and Breezy were filming, and they would edit it to look like the entire protest was held by normies in support of RADs. It would go viral and prove to her parents that there was no reason to run.

It didn’t have the appeal of a flash mob. Or the legitimacy of a real protest. But it would make a difference the way Debby always made a difference.

One.

Slow.

Step.

At.

A.

Time.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!