

The Spring

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One

SITTING in his usual lunchtime spot in the shade of one of the big oak trees that sometimes made the campus seem like such an inviting place, Jason didn't notice that his body was draped in a random pattern of light and shadow. The warm sun, now at its highest point in the sky, poured down its light, bathing most of the world in brightness. Even the oak trees, with their new springtime leaves now almost fully formed, couldn't deflect it all, and the sunlight was fragmented into a thousand shards of light, each illuminating a little piece of earth. The sunshine and shade made some blades of grass glow while others remained the same dull green, and insects blinked and sparkled as they buzzed back and forth. The light, both scattered and direct, fell on the clusters of other teenagers eating their lunches in the warm springtime air. Their laughter and conversation created a sense of unity where the sunshine couldn't reach. In this optimistic season, when the rest of the world strove to become as one in the light, Jason alone resisted.

He sat with his back against the wall of the auditorium building. This was his regular spot, chosen because it was in the shade at this hour of the day. The trunk of the oak tree was a few feet in front of him, not close enough to conceal him from his classmates, but near enough to offer him a sense of security and shelter. His backpack that had been

slung over his shoulder was now set beside him. He opened the bag of chips that he had bought from one of the vending machines in the gymnasium and quickly popped a chip in his mouth, fixing his eyes back towards the way he had just come: towards the corner of the auditorium, beyond which stood the flagpole and the entrance to the main school building.

He decided that if Keith wanted to act like a jerk, then so be it. Jason had sat in this spot since his sophomore year and he would do the same today. Nothing would be different except that for the third day in a row, he sat alone. Until recently, he and his best friend Keith had always sat in this same place and ate lunch together. But on Monday, they had an argument that quickly turned bitter, and in response, Keith didn't show up for lunch on Tuesday. He was still on campus, of course (Jason sometimes saw him between classes), but today was Thursday and they hadn't spoken to each other since their argument. Apparently Keith had decided he didn't want to spend his lunch hours with Jason anymore.

They had argued before—and sometimes Keith had stormed off in anger—but Jason couldn't remember a time when they had been apart for this long. Jason thought that Keith was just being stubborn, and Jason knew that if Keith were to return right now, there would be no questions asked and all would be forgiven. A few people came around the corner, either on their way from class or looking for a place outside to sit and eat, but Keith was not among them. Jason ate his chips slowly and continued to watch, and wait, but still there was no Keith. When he finished his bag of chips, Jason got up, threw the bag into the nearest trash can, and returned to his place against the wall. *Fine*, he thought to himself, *if Keith wants to sit somewhere else, that's all right with me.*

Fortunately, Jason had come prepared for this. Opening a pocket in his backpack, he pulled out his mp3 player and his headphones. On Tuesday, he had been caught off guard by Keith's departure and had sat through an entire lunch hour with nothing to do. He didn't want that to happen again, so on Wednesday he had brought his mp3 player to school so he could pass the time listening to music, and today he had brought it again. He put on the headphones and turned the player on. Taking one

last look towards the corner of the auditorium, he saw no one appear, so he pressed "Play" and a voice sang into his ears:

If everyone on Earth died right now

Except me

I'd be the happiest man on Earth.

The voice belonged to a singer named Charley Z. He had been Jason's favorite singer ever since Jason discovered his music two years ago. Since then, no other singer or band had been able to compare. These songs spoke to Jason, like no other songs ever had. He could relate to these lyrics. He understood them. They were about his life and his struggles. These were songs about trying to find a place independent of society and apart from the mindless crowds who needed community and belonging for its own sake. Charley Z taught that independence and self-reliance were the greatest virtues. Jason had learned from Charley Z that the world can be a cruel and lonely place, that the only person he could depend on was himself, and that friendship was fleeting and illusory at best—his recent experience with Keith proved that. And as for love . . . well, that seemed too remote and alien even to consider.

Jason lost himself in reverie but was pulled back to earth when the song came to its slow and somber end:

If everyone on Earth died right now

Except me

I'd be the saddest man on Earth.

Jason smiled. Who needed Keith? This wasn't so bad: listening to Charley Z, sitting in the fresh air, watching the birds fly down from the trees to search for food in the grass. Jason decided he was happy.

In between songs, he heard a familiar voice. He turned his head and saw his friend Jimmy and a boy named Brian walking his way. Jason hadn't known Jimmy for as long as he had known Keith, but right now Jimmy seemed like more of a friend than Keith. Jimmy always sat outside at a nearby table with some other students from the senior class. Jason and Keith had never mixed with Jimmy's circle of friends, but they saw enough of each other to expect each other's presence. As Jimmy approached, he stared at Jason and noticed that, once again, the boy with

the mp3 player was sitting alone. As he and Brian passed, Jimmy stopped, and Jason turned off his music. Jimmy smiled and said, "Hey, Jason, is Keith not gonna show up today?"

Jason looked around him, pretending to notice his solitude for the first time. "It doesn't look like it," he replied.

Jimmy shrugged, still smiling, "Oh well, no big loss." Jimmy and Keith had never really gotten along, although Jason didn't know why. Everyone else seemed to like Jimmy; he was very approachable and always seemed to have a positive attitude about everything. Jason never understood what it was in his two friends' personalities that conflicted.

"Who are you listening to?" Jimmy asked, pointing to Jason's mp3 player.

"Charley Z!" Jason said proudly.

Jimmy's smile turned into a mix of disgust and amusement. Jimmy was no fan of Charley Z, and Jason knew it. "Man, you need to listen to some *real* music for a change."

Brian went on towards their table, and Jimmy started to follow, but then he turned around and said, "Oh, I almost forgot—Emma and I need a ride home this afternoon. Will you wait for us?"

"Sure," Jason said, "I'll wait."

"Thanks."

Jason pressed the "Play" button again and behaved as though he were enjoying his music a little too much. Jimmy just smiled and shook his head. He followed Brian to their table, which was closer to the rear of the auditorium building. The rest of Jimmy's regular circle of friends were there already: Brian, four girls, and one other boy. Jason knew them all by name, but he wasn't friends with any of them, just Jimmy.

As Jason sat and listened to the music, his eyes would settle on Jimmy and his friends from time to time. Jason wondered what he must look like to them as he sat all alone. He probably looked like a loser, like he didn't have any friends at all. Jason knew that wasn't true, but what else could people assume? This part of the campus beside the auditorium wasn't very busy, even though there were a few students having lunch at the other nearby picnic tables or on the lawn. But sometimes students,

on their way from one building to another, or custodians patrolling the campus, would pass by. If Jason didn't know them, then he ignored them, but if he saw someone he knew, he suddenly felt embarrassed. What was worse, no one even looked at him when they walked by. They ignored him, and their disinterest made it seem like there was something in Jason's situation—his isolation—that just wasn't right and seemed strange.

Although he tried to concentrate on his music, Jason's attention was drawn again and again to Jimmy and his friends. They were all laughing now as someone, probably Jimmy, said something funny. After a moment, two members of the group, a guy and a girl, broke away from the others and sat on the lawn a few feet away from the table. After a moment of talking quietly to each other, they began to kiss. As Jason watched them, he decided he wasn't going to spend the rest of his senior year of high school sitting by himself during lunch—that would be like letting Keith win. If Keith wanted to act like a stubborn jerk, then Jason would let him, but he wouldn't let Keith dictate how he spent his lunch periods. Tomorrow would be different.

The lunch hour passed quickly, and finally Charley Z's singing was interrupted by the sound of the bell, summoning the students back to class. Jason turned off his mp3 player and returned it to his backpack. He stood up, brushed the dirt and grass off of his jeans, and followed the other students back indoors.

Two

WHEN school was dismissed that afternoon, Jason was in such a hurry to go home that he didn't bother to visit his locker to check to see if he had any homework. Outside the main doors of the school building, underneath the flagpole, Jason found Emma waiting for him. Emma was Jimmy's younger sister; she was sixteen and a sophomore this year. She looked a lot like Jimmy—the same blonde hair, the same hazel-colored eyes, and the same friendly smile, although her smile wasn't permanently fixed to her face like her brother's seemed to be. With Jimmy, one never knew for certain whether the good attitude he put forth was genuine, but there was a sincerity in Emma's smile that only made her natural kindness and warmth all the more impressive.

Jason and Emma had always gotten along well. Just as Jimmy was popular and well-liked among the senior class, so was Emma very popular among the sophomores, and she never had any trouble selecting a boyfriend from among her many admirers. Jason often recognized her in the hallways, walking hand in hand with her latest boyfriend, but the only times Jason ever spoke to her was when he gave her and her brother rides to and from school.

When Jason approached her, she smiled and said, "Hi! Jimmy will be along in a minute."

Jason just stood by and nodded, watching the doors and the stream of students exiting the building.

Jimmy and Emma didn't ride with Jason everyday. Jimmy had a car, an old clunker that, although in very poor condition, still ran, but when Jimmy's father was out of town on business, Jimmy and Emma rode with Jason. Last year, Jimmy and Emma's mother passed away after a long bout with cancer. Because their father's business obligations required him to travel around the country frequently, Jimmy and Emma were often left to themselves. Whenever their father went out of town, he asked Jimmy not to drive the car except to work or in case of an emergency. Their father was afraid that Jimmy (or Emma, who had recently earned her own driver's license) might get into a serious car accident while he was away. A year ago when Jason and Jimmy had been closer friends than they were now, Jimmy had come to Jason first when looking for a ride to school. Jason agreed, and this arrangement had become a habit. Jason didn't mind, because it guaranteed that he still kept in touch with Jimmy even though they had drifted apart, and it was always nice to see Emma too.

Obviously, the death of their mother had an effect on the siblings. For about a month after his mother's death, Jason had noticed that Jimmy was withdrawn and depressed, but over time his usual cheerfulness returned. Jimmy had always been kind of a clown and quick to laugh and smile, but over the past year, Jason noticed the smiles seemed to have become permanent. As for Emma, Jason had only met her a few times before her mother died. Once she and Jimmy started riding with Jason, and Jason got to know her a little better, he found Emma to be far more mature than her age suggested. After all, with her mother gone, she had a great deal more responsibility heaped upon her shoulders, and she almost became like a parent to Jimmy, especially when their father was away.

Jason and Emma had only been waiting for a minute before Jason heard Emma mutter, "C'mon, Jimmy, hurry up." Her words magically produced their intended effect as Jimmy at last emerged from the main school building. He wasn't alone: a girl was walking by his side and

eagerly listening to him tell a joke. Jason didn't know her name; she looked like a junior. Like his sister, Jimmy was popular with the opposite sex, but it seemed like neither Jimmy nor Emma could ever develop a relationship that lasted longer than a month or two.

Jason could never understand what it was that attracted girls to Jimmy. Maybe it was his smile, or his accessible personality. But all that was superficial, and perhaps his lack of depth was the reason why girls didn't stay with him for very long. Of course, that explanation didn't solve the mystery of Emma's brief relationships since there was substance beneath her exterior, a beauty and warmth that wasn't just a mask. Perhaps, Jason concluded, such brief relationships were all just a part of being a teenager in high school.

Jimmy saw his friend and his sister waiting for him under the flagpole, so he said goodbye to the girl by his side and approached. He didn't stop, but simply walked past them towards the parking lot. He pretended not to see Jason and Emma at first, but then he said with a smile, "Well, c'mon! What are you waiting for?"

Neither Jason nor Emma replied as they followed Jimmy out past the school bus depot and into the students' parking lot. Jimmy quickly realized he didn't know where Jason had parked so he slowed down and let his friend lead the way. The three of them zig-zagged between the cars still parked and those that were trying to leave until they found Jason's car. His was an older model, not quite as old as Jimmy's, but certainly not as impressive as some of the sports cars and SUVs that the wealthier students drove. As Jason unlocked the driver's side door, Jimmy and Emma stood on the other side of the car, waiting patiently and squinting in the bright sunshine. When all the doors were unlocked, Jimmy sat in the front seat and Emma sat in the back. Emma fastened her seat belt, but Jimmy didn't bother.

Jason started the engine and asked, "So how did you guys get to school this morning?"

"Our dad drove us," Jimmy replied. "His flight didn't leave till noon."

"Where is he this week?"

"He's . . . he's . . . I don't remember." Jimmy looked back to Emma for help.

"He's in Los Angeles," she answered.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. L.A."

Before Jason backed out of the parking space, he turned on the air conditioner. Meanwhile, Jimmy started twisting the radio dial, searching for no particular station.

"Wait, Jimmy! I have some music," Emma said, reaching into her backpack and pulling out her own mp3 player.

"So what?" Jimmy teased. "We want to listen to the radio today, right Jason?"

Jason shrugged as he backed out of the parking space.

"But it's my turn today!" Emma insisted. The three students had very different tastes in music, so Jason, in an attempt to maintain peace and order in his car, had decided long ago that they each take turns. It had been three weeks since Emma had last ridden in his car, and Jason was surprised to find that Emma remembered today was her turn.

With her mp3 player turned on and a playlist selected, Emma leaned forward and held out her player in her hand so the boys in the front seat could reach it. "Plug it in," she ordered Jimmy.

"No."

Jason took the player and connected it to the cassette adapter in the tape deck. "It's her day," Jason said, trying to be nice. He looked at her in the rear-view mirror and could see her smiling.

The sound of Emma's music immediately filled the car, but before the band even started singing, Jimmy groaned and said, "Oh God, not again! This is all you've been listening to since last weekend!"

"Well too bad. I like it!"

Jason didn't recognize the song and asked who the band was.

"It's the Suspicious Janitors!" Emma said with pride.

Jimmy groaned again. Jason just smiled; he had heard of the Suspicious Janitors before. They were like so many other garage bands, who, by some amazing stroke of luck, had landed a deal with a record company and were now played on every radio station in the country.

Jason had heard some of their previous singles and thought they were all right, but he couldn't identify with their lyrics.

"Do you like the Janitors?" Emma asked Jason.

"They're OK."

"You wouldn't think so if you had a little sister playing their music all the time," Jimmy said. "I thought they were all right at first too, but I can't stand them anymore."

"Well Jason and I like it," Emma teased, "so you're outnumbered."

"Jason doesn't like it. He only likes Charley Z!"

Jason remained silent; he couldn't argue with the truth.

"I think Charley Z is all right," Emma said, defending her driver.

"But what would you rather listen to, Jimmy? Charley Z or the Suspicious Janitors?"

"If those were my only choices, I think I'd rather walk home."

The first song ended and the second began. The new song had a heavy bass riff and Jason's car trembled noticeably to the sound. Jason and his passengers still weren't out of the school parking lot yet. Traffic was backed up as some five hundred cars tried to leave the campus at the same time. Jason was inching nearer to the exit, though, and he expected they would be off the campus before the end of this song, unless it was really short.

The new song had ushered in a lull in the conversation. Emma sat whispering the lyrics to the song and tapping her foot to the beat. Jimmy looked out of the window to his right. He wanted to roll the window down, it was so hot in the car, but Jason had the air conditioner set on full blast, and it wouldn't help to open a window. Jimmy adjusted the air conditioner vents, trying to get more cold air to come out, but nothing he did worked. Jimmy said to Jason, "You need to do something about this air conditioner. I think it's broken." Then he smiled.

"We'll be all right once we get out of the parking lot," Jason said.

"It works better when the car is in motion."

Jimmy nodded and then looked out the window again. Their car slowly approached the avenue which served as the western border of the

campus, an avenue that was already busy with traffic, and Jason started watching for a chance to turn right. Jimmy, looking at the cars that drove up and down the avenue, saw a blue sports car speed past. "Whoa! Look at that car!" he said, leaning forward.

Jason wanted to look, but he couldn't watch for an opening in the traffic and follow the sports car at the same time so he missed it. Emma saw it, though, and said, "Yeah, that's nice."

Jimmy turned in his seat so he could face his sister as he dreamed, "I want a car like that. I'll bet it's got an air conditioner that works!"

Jason found an opening in the traffic and took advantage of it. He hadn't heard what Jimmy said, but Emma did, and again she defended her driver: "Shut up, Jimmy. Jason'll probably kick you out of the car if you keep insulting him like that."

Jimmy smiled and patted Jason on the shoulder. "I'm just teasing him, and he knows it. This car may be a piece of crap, but it's a better piece of crap than my car. At least I know this car won't fall apart on the way to school."

A third song started. It had a catchy guitar riff that caught Jason's attention. He tried to listen to the song while Jimmy and Emma talked.

"Dad didn't leave us much to eat this time did he?" Jimmy asked.

"No," his sister replied. "But he left some money with me and said I could go to the store if we needed anything."

"We probably will by the end of the weekend. Do you want me to drive you?"

"No, I can handle it. Dad said he'd be back Sunday evening. Maybe I'll fix him dinner on Sunday."

"Suck up."

"I'm not sucking up—I'm just being nice. Dad doesn't get a lot of good meals with Mom gone and all his traveling."

"Well, I'll make a list of the food I want."

"Fine."

They were silent for a moment and Jason listened to the rest of the song without interruption as he drove. When it was over, Jimmy said, "I'm so sick of that song. Their new album wouldn't be so bad if that

song wasn't on it."

Jimmy and Emma's house was closer to the high school than Jason's house was, so their trip didn't take very long. Jason steered through the familiar tree-lined suburban streets until he found his passengers' home. He pulled alongside the curb and parked the car without turning off the engine. Jason unplugged Emma's mp3 player from the car stereo and handed it to her. "Thanks," she said. The brother and sister gathered their belongings and climbed out of the car. Emma said, "And thanks for the ride!" Jason was quick to tell her goodbye.

Jimmy said, "Remember, we need a ride tomorrow morning, too. My dad will be back by Monday, so you don't have to worry about next week."

"Sure, no problem."

"Thanks, Jason." He shut the door before Jason could say goodbye. Jason watched Emma as she unlocked the front door. Jimmy ran up behind her and chased her inside.

As Jason drove away, he thought about his friendship with Jimmy and wondered why it wasn't as close as it had been last year. The high point of their friendship had come last summer when the two of them were almost inseparable, going to the mall or driving around town. But ever since their senior year started, they hadn't seen very much of each other. At times it seemed that if it were not for the fact that Jimmy and Emma needed to catch rides from him from time to time, he probably wouldn't talk to Jimmy at all. The school year was ending and with it their high school careers. In a few months, they would be in college and might never see each other again. Jason realized that if his friendship with Keith really was finished, then that meant Jimmy was now his best friend.

Jason again resolved not to spend his last few weeks of high school sitting alone outside at lunch all by himself. Charley Z taught that one's personal independence from the demands and expectations of others is among the most important things one can achieve. Jason wouldn't let Keith win. Tomorrow he would definitely make a change.

Three

JASON remembered to pick up Jimmy and Emma the next morning. Unlike the previous afternoon, all was quiet in the car as they drove to school under a pale sky. This quiet was nothing unusual, for Jason knew that the brother and sister were never in a mood to talk until they reached the campus. Today was Jason's turn to select the music, and once again, he played Charley Z, but he kept the volume down, and the singer's crooning sounded soft and sentimental as a result:

*And what does she see, that distant star,
When she looks this way at me?
Is there nothing here but emptiness,
Or does my light bridge the void as well?*

Traffic on the streets was always heavier in the mornings than in the afternoons since Jason had to compete with the adults in the city who were on their way to work. In spite of this, their trip to school always took less time because Jason didn't have to fight to get into the parking lot like he had to fight to get out of it in the afternoons. On this day, Jason found that he was running a little earlier than usual even though he had gone out of his way to pick up Jimmy and Emma. The time was almost 7:45, and there were plenty of spaces available in the parking lot. Jason parked in a much better space than where he had parked yesterday.

He stopped the car and turned off the engine. Jimmy and Emma sluggishly gathered their belongings and climbed out of the car. They closed their doors and silently trudged through the parking lot towards the school. But Jason was in a hurry, in such a hurry that he forgot his mp3 player, leaving it locked in the car as he ran to catch up with Jimmy. He grabbed Jimmy's shoulder and said, "Jimmy, wait a second." Jimmy stopped, and Jason stole a glance at Emma, who kept walking. When she was a few feet further away, the two boys started walking again and Jason said, "I guess you're gonna have lunch again with that crowd you hang out with, huh?"

Jimmy smiled for the first time that morning as the loose gravel on the pavement crunched and snapped under their feet. "Yeah, where else would I go?"

"Nowhere. That's cool. But I was just wondering . . . well, do you mind if I hang out with you and your friends today?"

Jimmy hadn't been expecting this, but with the apparent end of Jason and Keith's friendship, it wasn't a complete surprise. He looked in the direction of the table where he and his friends ate lunch, although he couldn't see it from the parking lot. He shrugged, "I don't know. It's fine with me. If you want to be bored out of your mind, go ahead. I don't think anyone will complain."

Jason, who was looking at the ground, almost said that he'd rather be bored with other people than be bored alone, but he caught himself and asked instead, "Is that a Yes?"

Jimmy nodded. They approached the empty bus depot where a few kids loitered in clusters, talking to themselves quietly. Emma had disappeared, and it was here that Jason and Jimmy parted, for Jason usually hung out with Keith in the morning and Jimmy went in search of his other friends. Since Jason wasn't interested in looking for Keith anymore, he considered following Jimmy, but he didn't want to look like some lost puppy so Jason went up to the front of the school doors and stood by himself, patiently waiting for the bell to ring and the doors to open.

Later that day, when the lunch hour started, Jason hurried

through the crowded hallways towards Jimmy's locker. Jason didn't bother to bring his backpack (he still hadn't realized that he left his mp3 player behind in the car). All he had was himself and some change in his pocket with which to buy lunch. Jason caught Jimmy just as he was closing his locker. Jason said hello and found Jimmy in a more sociable mood than he had been that morning. Jimmy asked, "So what's the deal with you and Keith anyway? Why did he ditch you like that?"

Jason shrugged slightly, but Jimmy was looking towards the end of the hall and didn't see the gesture. "We just had an argument. He always thinks he's right about everything. You know how he is—you've met him."

"I guess. So do you guys hate each other now or something?"

Jason shrugged again but again Jimmy didn't see it. "I don't know. I was kind of getting tired of him anyway. All we seem to do anymore is argue. Besides, school will be over soon, and we aren't going to the same university. I guess it had to end sooner or later."

"Where is he eating lunch now?"

"I don't know. Some remote hiding place, I guess."

As they made their way outside, they passed a crowd of girls walking in the opposite direction. Two of the girls, juniors both, said hello to Jimmy. He returned the greeting but didn't stop to talk to them. The boys walked outside where the sun was shining, and Jason could see that Jimmy was smiling. They walked to the gymnasium where there were some vending machines just inside the boys' locker room. It was here that Jimmy and Jason bought their lunches. Jimmy bought some chips and a coke. Jason only purchased chips. "Another healthy lunch!" Jimmy declared with a cynical grin. They also met Brian, the boy Jimmy was walking with yesterday. Brian didn't seem at all surprised to find Jason with Jimmy. Jimmy and Brian said hello to each other and started talking as they walked back outside and headed for the far side of the auditorium.

As they passed the flagpole in front of the auditorium, Jason suddenly felt ignored, but he didn't try to impose himself on the two boys. They turned the corner and passed the spot where Jason had sat

for lunch the day before and where he and Keith had once sat on a regular basis, but Jason didn't look at it. Instead, he felt a small sense of triumph as he approached the table where Jimmy's friends sat. He wished Keith would return today, just so he could see that his plan to punish Jason by leaving him all alone had failed. But Keith didn't return that day, and Jason had to introduce himself to a new set of people.

Three of Jimmy's friends, all girls, were waiting for them. They had already started eating their lunch and they were talking to each other. Their table was a standard picnic table, with a bench on either side. The table had once been painted crimson, one of the school colors, but much of the paint had since peeled and flaked away, leaving behind a greenish-brown wooden surface. The table itself rested on a narrow stretch of grass in between the concrete walkway which surrounded the auditorium and a chain-link fence that separated this part of the campus from the phys. ed. playing fields. Immediately beyond the fence was a baseball field—left field to be exact—but phys. ed. wasn't in session this hour so no one had to worry about getting struck on the head by a home run hit. The table was partly shaded by a tall oak tree at the end of the table closest to the concrete walkway.

Like the boys, the three girls sitting at the table were also members of the senior class. On one side of the table two girls were huddled over an open notebook, working on one of the girls' homework. The blonde-haired girl sitting closest to the tree was named Andrea. She and Jason had gone to the same middle school, and they had shared a couple of classes during their sophomore and junior years of high school, but they didn't know each other very well. Andrea was popular and well-liked among her classmates, though. It was her homework that she and the girl sitting next to her were working on, and neither of them noticed the boys as they approached. The look of frustration on their faces indicated that their attention was directed at Andrea's homework.

The girl who was trying to help Andrea was named Stacey. Jason had never shared a class with Stacey, but he knew exactly who she was. *Everyone* knew Stacey thanks to an ugly rumor that had been circulating about her since their freshman year. Variations on the rumor were many,

and it was possible that none of them were true, but nevertheless she had been cruelly teased and ostracized throughout her high school career, with her harshest tormentors giving her the epithet "Veggie Girl". Jason hadn't heard anyone repeat the story in quite a while, but it had become such common knowledge among the student population that maybe it was no longer necessary to repeat it. Jason had never spoken to Stacey before, or even gotten as physically close to her as he was now, and so he knew little else about her.

Jimmy sat across from Andrea and Brian sat on Jimmy's side of the table. In between them sat the third girl. Her name was April, and she attracted Jason's attention more than any one else at the table, not because they shared classes, but because Jason had had a crush on her in the ninth grade. He was over it now, though; the lyrics of Charley Z had taught him that there are better things to do in life than fawn over girls and make oneself miserable in the process. April just watched with quiet interest as Stacey tried to help Andrea. Jimmy and Brian also watched as they started eating. Jason, who didn't yet feel comfortable as part of the group, simply leaned against the tree at the head of the table and opened his bag of chips.

"I don't know about that," Andrea was saying. "I thought surplus should be below the equilibrium point because it means less people are buying."

Stacey shook her head, upsetting her wavy brown hair that was done up in the latest style. "No, trust me—it's above the point."

"Why?"

"I don't know *why*. I just remember it is."

Andrea stared at her notebook and muttered, "I wish I had brought my economics book to lunch. This homework is due next period." She looked up and seemed to see Jimmy and Brian for the first time. "Do either of you guys know anything about this?"

Jimmy put up his hands and smiled. "Don't ask me. I made a D on my last economics test."

Brian said with surprise, "You made a D on that test? You're not going to be graduating with us if you keep that up."

"Hey, I only know the *important* stuff!"

Andrea returned Jimmy's smile and said, "Jimmy, you don't know anything!"

Stacey tapped Andrea on the arm to return her attention to the business at hand, and said again, "Annie, it's above the point."

"Well, OK . . ." Andrea said as she wrote the answer down on a sheet of notebook paper. "But it's your fault if I get it wrong." She sighed, closed her notebook, and then looked at Brian. "Hi Brian," she said.

Brian had just taken a big bite out of his candy bar and was unable to talk so instead he waved his hand and smiled. Jason didn't really know much about Brian, except that he was a senior, like the rest of them, and he was a friend of Jimmy's. Jimmy mentioned Brian to Jason every once in a while, but only to repeat a joke or something else that Brian had told him. Jason noticed that, as a rule, Jimmy usually didn't talk about his circle of friends. It made Jason doubt that Jimmy had ever mentioned *him* when he spent time with *them*. Brian, in his T-shirt and baseball cap, looked like a typical high school boy. He was shorter than average, though, but when sitting down like this, the difference between his height and, for example, Jimmy's wasn't obvious.

Jason began to feel a little uncomfortable standing against the tree, eating his chips, watching over the table like some statue or figurehead. This was a loneliness even worse than what he felt when he sat by himself, for this was a loneliness *among* people: "*The Loneliness of the Spectator*," to quote the title of one of Charley Z's albums.

Jimmy hadn't said anything to Jason—or even looked at him—since they joined the girls at the table. It was Andrea, no longer distracted by her homework, who finally welcomed Jason to the group.

"Oh, hi," she said. "Sorry, I didn't see you standing there."

"It happens all the time," Jason said, a little nervously. All the faces at the table were turned towards him now. Stacey smiled in amusement. April looked at him for a second and then turned and started talking to Brian.

Andrea spoke again, "Your name is . . . Jason, right?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I remember you. You used to sit over there with that other guy," she gestured in the direction of Jason's old spot against the side of the auditorium. "What was his name?—Keith, that's it."

"Yeah," Jimmy said teasingly. "Keith dumped him or something, so now he wants to hang out with us."

"I wouldn't say 'dumped' . . ." Jason said.

"Well, you can eat lunch with us," Andrea said cheerfully. "Why don't you sit down?"

Jason didn't know where to sit. There was room at the other end of the table, but he'd either have to sit next to Stacey or Brian, and he didn't think he knew either of them well enough to sit next to them. If he was going to sit, he would rather sit next to Jimmy, but Jimmy was on the end. Leaning against the tree was as close as he could get so he chose to remain where he was: "That's OK, I'll stand for now."

Andrea didn't ask him to sit down again, and she looked to her tablemates for a change in the subject of conversation. Brian, having finished his candy bar, said to Andrea, "Are you and Greg going out this weekend?"

April gave Brian a nudge with her elbow which told him that he shouldn't have asked that question, but everyone else at the table was interested in their friend's relationship so they fixed their attention on her and waited for Andrea's reply. She said, "Probably not. We haven't talked at all since last week."

"What happened with you two?" Stacey asked. "A couple of weeks ago you guys were madly in love, and now you barely see each other anymore."

Brian smiled and said to Jimmy, "She almost goes through boyfriends as fast as you go through girlfriends, Jimmy. Speaking of which, where's Brittany anyway?"

"Shut up," Jimmy said, trying to punch his friend in the shoulder, but he couldn't quite reach him with April in his way.

Jason was watching them and missed what Andrea's reply to Stacey's question was. He didn't know anything about Andrea's apparent

relationship with Greg; he wasn't even sure if he knew who Greg was. Had another boy been sitting at this table recently? He couldn't remember.

Some movement in the distance behind Andrea caught Jimmy's eye. "Well," he said, "forget about your heartbreak—here come some real lovebirds."

Everyone turned to look, including Jason. From around the rear of the auditorium came Trey and Rachel, holding hands as they approached. This was the couple that Jason had seen sitting in the grass yesterday.

Out of all of the members of this clique, Jason had known Rachel the longest. They had shared the same fourth grade class years ago, and even then Rachel had always been one of the smartest students. Back then, other kids—especially the boys—were a little intimidated by her intelligence, and the girls sometimes teased her for her glasses and the conservative dresses that she always wore. As she went on to middle school and then high school, she remained enrolled in the advanced placement courses, but she began to shed her nerdy image and her long, beautiful, dark hair caught the eye of more than a few boys in her classes. It wasn't until her sophomore year of high school, however, that someone finally mustered the courage to ask her out on a date. When she said Yes to Trey, their relationship was born.

Perhaps it was because Jason had known Rachel since the fourth grade that he could never quite wrap his mind around the idea of Rachel and Trey as a couple. As far as he was concerned, they were two completely different people. Trey had always been one of the most feared bullies in school (he even picked on Jason a few times), and now that he was a senior, no one was willing to challenge him—even the jocks on the football team knew better than to get in his way. He wasn't popular among the school administration either, with grungy clothes, pierced ears and nose, a small tattoo on his neck, and heavy army surplus boots that declared his presence when he walked down the hall. Once, last year, he even dyed his hair blue, but when the principal saw it Trey was suspended and told not to return until he fixed it. When he did return

two days later, his head was completely shaved, making him look even more intimidating than before.

The unlikely couple sat down at the far end of the table. Rachel sat next to Brian and Trey sat across from her, far to Stacey's left. Trey had few connections with the other people at the table—he only sat here because Rachel was an old friend of Andrea's going back to their middle school days. If the truth were told, he didn't really like any of them very much. Trey thought Jimmy was an airhead, Brian a short little runt, Andrea was too whiny, Stacey—well, everyone knew about the Veggie Girl, and now he saw that Jason, a wimp he used to pick on, had joined the group. In an attempt to restore his sense of his own reputation, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. Smoking wasn't allowed on campus, but that didn't matter to Trey.

Rachel seemed happy and didn't notice the smoke. After she said hello to her friends at the table, she said to Andrea, "Trey and I got tickets for the Mad Devils' concert on the tenth. Are you and Greg going?"

Andrea shook her head and said, "No, Greg's not into that kind of music."

"That's too bad; it's gonna be a cool show." Rachel said, unwrapping a package of bite-size donuts that she had just bought from the vending machines.

Andrea nodded but Brian turned to Rachel and said, "I've got the Devils' last album. It was really loud—I like it a lot."

Rachel looked surprised. "I didn't know you liked the Mad Devils! Are you going to the concert?"

"I wish," he said as he shook his head. "I couldn't get the money for the tickets."

"That's too bad," Rachel said. Trey watched them and blew smoke in Brian's direction, but a breeze caught it before it reached him.

Andrea asked Rachel, "Have you heard from the university yet?"

Rachel said she hadn't. "And I'm dying to find out if I got in. I hope they don't reject me!"

"They won't reject you," Andrea assured her.

"I hope you're right." She turned to her boyfriend. "Have you heard from them yet?"

Trey shook his head and brought his cigarette back to his lips.

"Well, I wish they didn't take so long to decide. It seems like everyone I know has already heard back from at least one school. Maybe we'll hear from them today."

"Yeah," Trey said, without much concern. "We might. Hurry up and eat that so we can go sit in the grass."

"OK."

Rachel hurried, and when she was finished, she and Trey left the table and went to sit in the grass in their usual spot. Almost immediately they became intimate. Trey held Rachel in his arms and they kissed. Then they kissed again—and again. Jason, though the farthest person from them, was standing so that they were directly in his line of sight. He didn't like people who made out in public. To him, it didn't seem polite. Jason looked at the students sitting at the table to see if Trey and Rachel were causing a distraction among them too, but only Brian was stealing glances at the couple in between sips from his soda. Jason wondered whether their kissing made Brian uncomfortable in the same way it was making him. Soon, Jason managed to ignore them altogether.

Instead, his eyes settled on April as she talked to her friends at the table. April wasn't shy, but Jason realized that he had never heard her speak so much before. April talked to everyone, she even said a word to Jason, once or twice, trying to draw him into the group, but Jason just shrugged or said "I guess so" to whatever April had to say and continued to lean against the tree. When he finished eating his chips, he threw the wrapper into a nearby garbage can and continued to stand against the tree, with his hands hidden deep in his pockets.

As he watched April, he noticed that she didn't have a boyfriend among this group. Neither Jimmy, nor Brian, and certainly not Trey, showed that sort of interest in her. Jason considered how easy it would be, if he found a place in this circle of friends, to talk to her, to get to know her, to be her friend and maybe a little bit more. But then he thought about Charley Z, the transience of love, and recalled the tune of

a song called "I Am Stronger Than Love."

Jason played the song in his head while he watched April talk with her friends. She was so close and yet still so far away. At last the bell rang and lunch officially ended. Trey and Rachel got up from the ground and brushed the grass off of each other. Andrea picked up her notebook and began to worry again about her homework. Stacey walked with her back to the school building, assuring her friend that everything would be all right. Jimmy and Brian walked together, talking, and Jason followed a few steps behind them. April was at his side, but neither of them said a word.

Four

EARLY Monday morning, Emma watched her brother as he searched unsuccessfully for his car keys. When his back was turned, she laughed at him.

"Hurry up, Jimmy!" Emma teased. "We're going to be late!"

Jimmy didn't say anything in reply as he rummaged for the third time through the stack of newspapers and magazines that had accumulated on the coffee table while their father had been out of town. Emma would have thrown the pile away, but she knew that her father sometimes liked to read the newspapers when he got back from his business trips. Seeing the stack made Emma uncomfortable, though. Keeping the house clean was a responsibility that she imposed upon herself now that her mother was gone. It was up to her to remind Jimmy, and sometimes even her father, to clean up after themselves. With their father out of town so often, Emma had to take care of her older brother, and she didn't know what he would do without her. His idea of fixing dinner was to order food from a drive-thru on his way home from work. He never made his bed unless his sister reminded him, and without her, he was content to let the whole house deteriorate into a pigsty.

Jimmy came into the kitchen where Emma was waiting and began searching the clean, bare countertops for his keys. Emma said, "I've

already looked in here, Jimmy. Why don't you check your bedroom again?"

"I've checked it three times!" he replied in frustration as he took his search into the dining room.

Emma looked at the clock above the stove and saw that it was almost 7:35. They still had plenty of time, but if they wanted to get a decent parking space on campus they would have to hurry. Emma put her backpack down and went to look in Jimmy's bedroom. Emma did what she could to keep Jimmy's bedroom clean, but Jimmy was the sloppiest person she had ever known. This morning, probably because their father was home, Jimmy had remembered to make his bed, but the rest of the room was a mess. Emma resisted the urge to straighten things up and instead she searched Jimmy's bookshelf, around his bed, on his desk, and in his open bureau drawers for her brother's keys. Jimmy was right, his keys weren't here, or if they were, they weren't anywhere in sight. They might be buried underneath his dirty laundry, but if so, Jimmy and Emma wouldn't be going to school this morning. There were some things that Emma refused to clean—or even touch—and Jimmy's dirty laundry was at the top of that list.

Emma left Jimmy's room and peeked into her father's bedroom. Her father was in the bathroom, shaving his face with his electric razor. Emma quietly and quickly took a look around but couldn't find Jimmy's keys here either. When she returned to the living room, she found her brother searching through the mess on the coffee table for the fourth time. Emma's patience was spent. "Come on, Jimmy," she pleaded. "You drove the car yesterday. Where did you put your keys when you got home? Think!"

Her words triggered the memory cells in Jimmy's brain, and Emma swore she could almost see a light bulb flash above his head. He made a beeline for the television set, looked on top of it, found nothing, then looked on the floor between the television and the wall and finally he found his keys. He picked them up and jingled them on the end of his finger. "Let's go!" he said.

They hurried out the front door, Emma pausing just long enough

to shout, "Bye Dad!" The buzzing of the electric razor stopped and they heard their father wish them a good day at school. Jimmy locked the door behind him and then walked out to the driveway where his sister waited for him to unlock the car. The family had a two-car garage, but Jimmy's car was always left out on the driveway because there was only enough room in the garage for their father's car. The rest of the space was occupied by boxes and old furniture which had collected over the years. Leaving Jimmy's car outside all year round didn't help its condition, and his dad told him that if he wanted to clean out the garage so that there was space for his car, too, he could. Jimmy always said he would get around to it someday, but his procrastination kept his car parked on the driveway.

When Jimmy unlocked the doors, they got in. Jimmy almost always drove when they traveled to school; it was his car after all. A few months ago, when his sister had just earned her driver's license, he gave in to her pleading to be allowed to drive the car to and from school a few times. But as soon as the novelty of the experience wore off, Emma conceded the duty of driving back to her brother.

The liveliness and communicativeness they always showed when riding with Jason was usually absent when Jimmy drove. Unless they had something truly important to say to each other, which wasn't often, they kept silent. The only sounds to be heard that morning, besides the sound of the eighteen-year-old engine straining to make the trip to school one more time, was the car radio, tuned to one of the few stations that the old radio could still receive.

Jimmy took a roundabout route that allowed him to avoid a lot of the heavy traffic that Jason had to navigate when he took them to school. Less traffic gave Jimmy the opportunity to speed through the streets ("speeding," in the case of Jimmy's car, being a relative term). Jimmy told Jason about this alternate route once, but the two boys argued over whether it really was faster than Jason's route. Jason didn't think so, and although Emma agreed with Jimmy that their route really was faster, Jason stubbornly refused to take it.

Jimmy floored the accelerator as he drove, and the poor engine

sputtered in protest. Emma, with her seat belt on, clutched her seat and watched the road ahead with apprehension. Jimmy, as always, didn't bother with his seat belt. He joked that, even when speeding, his car still didn't go fast enough to justify the use of a seatbelt. It was just less than ten minutes till eight when they approached the campus, but they found they had arrived too late: the students' parking lot was full. Mondays were always like that. On Fridays, one could sometimes arrive at 8:00 exactly and still probably find a place on campus to park, but everybody always seemed eager to get to school on time on Mondays.

There was an apartment complex adjacent to the school campus, and it was a favorite place for late-comers like Jimmy to park. The residents of the apartments, many of them already on their way to work by this time, left plenty of empty parking spaces. The management of the apartment complex didn't like students parking on their property, but they rarely cracked down on the trespassers. Most students didn't see a problem with it, for by the time the residents of the apartment complex came home from work late in the afternoon, school was already out and the students and their cars were long gone. Jimmy parked his car, and then he and his sister started the long walk towards the main school building.

It was 7:55 when Jimmy reached the flagpole, and the first familiar face he saw belonged to Jason. The boy was standing alone amid the gathering mass of his schoolmates, leaning against a railing underneath the flagpole, seemingly staring off into space. Jason was actually surveying the noisy crowd with his eyes but not really looking for anyone in particular. He recognized some fellow seniors, but no one he knew particularly well. Keith, of course, was nowhere to be seen. This area, below the flagpole, was where he and Keith used to spend their mornings before the first bell rang. Jason guessed Keith was probably down in the cafeteria, doing his best to remove any trace of himself from Jason's daily routine. Jason tried to imagine what that would be like: changing all of your daily habits just to avoid one person. He wondered how far Keith would be willing to go. They didn't share any classes this semester, but if they did, would Keith go so far as to try to transfer out

of the class into another one? It was a ridiculous idea, but Jason bitterly decided that Keith would be dumb enough to try it.

Moments earlier, Jason had watched as a group of four guys from the school Junior R.O.T.C., one of them carrying the American flag, walked to the flagpole, and solemnly, with great ceremony, proceeded to tie the flag to the pole and raise it up. Jason seemed to be the only one who paid any attention to them, as everyone else had seen these boys do this every morning of the year. Even those students within arm's length of the R.O.T.C. boys appeared oblivious to the action beside them. Jason watched as the flag was hoisted up, slowly, creakingly. Before he could watch it ascend to the very top, though, his eyes darted back down and caught sight of April.

Jason couldn't remember the last time he had seen her here in the mornings, on this side of the campus. She wasn't alone like Jason was; she stood on the other side of the flagpole, right outside the auditorium doors, talking with a few other girls, though not the girls that she sat with during lunch. Jason recognized them as seniors, but he didn't know any of their names. There wasn't any indication that she was aware of Jason watching her; she was too busy talking to her friends, so Jason felt comfortable watching her from afar, feeling safe and anonymous.

Standing there, watching April, Jason had a feeling of *déjà vu*. Three years earlier, when he was a freshman, he remembered April used to stand here every morning, in the same spot where she was now, and wait for school to start. April had been alone most of the time. Sometimes, she would be visited by a friend, but usually not. Jason also had stood alone since his bus brought him to school earlier than Keith's. Ninth grade was a time when Jason was most susceptible to the sort of emotions he now tried to repress. He hadn't discovered Charley Z's music yet and the singer's philosophy of individuality was an unknown concept in his life. So when he noticed this girl named April (although he didn't learn her name until their sophomore year), pretty and likable, waiting for someone, a friend or a stranger, to approach her and say hello, Jason felt an almost uncontrollable urge to be that someone, but for whatever reason—whether a lack of confidence or an uncertainty of

what to say to this girl who was virtually a stranger—he never did.

Since those days in ninth grade, Jason had chalked that experience up as simply a crush, and nothing more. And since he had discovered the music of Charley Z, the entire incident had seemed so trivial and inconsequential. *We always want to do the things we never want to do*, Charley Z sang, and Jason had decided that love, which always threatened heartbreak and rejection and pain, was something he didn't want to do. But now that April was back in his life, as a real presence everyday at lunch, she seemed to represent something more for him—something so compelling and at the same time disturbing, something that competed with the philosophy of Charley Z. In Charley Z, Jason found a system of beliefs and identity that could be understood and articulated; with April there was only a blind confusion, a slow, groping journey towards something mysterious yet irresistible. At first, Jason had thought his feelings were a resurgence of his old crush, or maybe even a sense of true love, but now he didn't think so. If anything, she made Jason long for those more recent days when he and Keith sat together against the side of the auditorium building, far from April's presence.

So for the second time in four years, Jason found his attention captivated by this girl named April. The first time was nothing more than a reaction caused by his teenage hormones; this time her effect on him was far more insidious, something instinctual, something he couldn't define or touch, but something that was as true as anything Charley Z ever sang.

"What's up?" Jimmy suddenly appeared in front of him and blocked his view of April. Jason was glad to see his friend.

"Hey."

"So are you gonna *stand* with us again at lunch today?" Jimmy teased.

"Yeah, I guess, if that's all right."

Jimmy shrugged. "It makes no difference to me. But if you do hang around us you'll have to speak up more. You're gonna creep everybody out if you just stand there and don't say or do anything."

Jason smiled at the thought and said, "I'll try."

They didn't get a chance to talk for very long, for the bell soon rang. Jason and Jimmy entered the building together, and as they did, Jason looked around for April, but she was already lost in the crowd.

On their way to the cafeteria after third period, Stacey said to Andrea, "Did you see my new shoes? My mom and I went to the mall this weekend and I talked her into buying them—and you know how hard that can be!" The blonde-haired girl looked at Stacey's new shoes, but she didn't say anything.

Andrea's mood, which had been happy for most of last week, had apparently soured over the weekend, and Stacey couldn't help but notice it. Normally outgoing, today Andrea was pensive and gloomy. As they walked downstairs to the cafeteria, Stacey asked Andrea, "So how was your weekend?"

The austere expression on Andrea's face remained unchanged. Her reply was a simple, "Fine."

Stacey knew what the problem was: Greg. She also knew that if Andrea had been able to classify her weekend as "Fine" then the expected break-up between the two must not have occurred. Still, things had reached a crisis in the relationship and Stacey knew it. Stacey had never had a boyfriend herself, but based on what she observed from her friends' relationships, she had learned to sense when things were going all right and when they weren't. She suspected Greg wanted to break-up with Andrea, and if he hadn't done it this weekend, then he would soon. Andrea probably knew that too.

The two girls got in the snack bar line, bought their junk food and sodas, and left the cafeteria. They went outside and followed the tree-shaded walkway that linked the cafeteria patio to the front of the school, where the auditorium and their usual table was located.

Once outside, Stacey asked, "Did you talk to Greg this weekend?"

Andrea didn't answer immediately and there was enough time for

a certain amount of suspense to build. Finally she said, "Once, Saturday afternoon. I called him and we talked for a few minutes."

"What did he say?"

Andrea shrugged, "Not much. I asked him if he wanted to go out, but he said he had to work. I suggested Sunday, and he said he couldn't."

Stacey was silent, expecting more.

"We didn't break up, if that's what you want to know."

Stacey was embarrassed but didn't say anything. Andrea, though, was beginning to experience that feeling of hopelessness and despair one always feels when one senses a relationship has come to an unexpected end. Although she and Greg hadn't been going out for very long, they had gone to the prom together two weeks ago, and Andrea felt like there was a special bond between them. She considered him her friend and Andrea was willing to go to any lengths to make her friendships last. This time, however, Andrea wasn't sure what she should do. As they walked in and out of the trees' shadows, in and out of the sunlight, Andrea said, "Maybe I should talk to him today."

"Hasn't he tried to talk to *you*?" Stacey asked.

Andrea shook her head. "I haven't seen him at all. I went by his locker a few times, but he wasn't there. I wish we had a class together. If we're gonna work things out, we'll need to have a long conversation."

A long conversation offered hope for a reconciliation, and Andrea realized that this lunch hour offered the amount of time she would need to get to the root of their problem, whatever it was. Andrea knew where Greg ate lunch: he and a few other guys shared a table back in the cafeteria. All she had to do was decide to go find him, and they could talk.

Perhaps Greg was as worried as she was, and maybe there was a chance they could resolve whatever problems Greg thought they were having. On the other hand, if she did go see him, things might go badly and she might, at last, get dumped. But even if she did get dumped, at least she would have the certainty of knowing where she stood, instead of occupying this emotional limbo for who knows how much longer. Andrea thought the possible embarrassment and pain was worth the

attempt to hold on to someone who was close to her.

Andrea had all but decided to leave her friends for the hour and go find Greg as she and Stacey approached their usual table hidden away on the far side of the auditorium. Andrea saw that most of the group was already there. Jimmy again sat at the corner of the table—that was his regular spot. Brian sat next to him and April sat across the table from Brian. Rachel and Trey hadn't arrived yet, but Andrea noticed that Jason had decided to join the group again; he leaned against the tree as he had last Friday.

Andrea and Stacey were welcomed as they approached, but only Stacey answered their friends' hellos. She politely asked April to move down the table a little bit so that she could sit next to Andrea. As Stacey began to sit, she noticed that Andrea was standing still and looking back the way she came. The direction of her stare made Jason, who was standing in her line of sight, think she was looking at him, but he soon realized she wasn't. Her gaze seemed to be through him and not at him.

"Come sit down, Annie," Stacey said. She reached out a hand and tried to grab her friend by the arm, but Andrea took a step back and stood beyond Stacey's reach. Andrea clutched her lunch absently and continued to stare at the corner of the auditorium as if she expected to see Greg appear. During the last few weeks, Greg would sometimes drop by to say hello, sometimes spending the whole lunch hour with Andrea and her circle, but a week had passed and he had not come by. Things would be so simple if only he would. Stacey repeated, "Sit down!"

Everyone at the table was watching this drama between the two girls, although no one besides Andrea and Stacey really understood what was happening. Andrea said to Stacey, "I know where he is. I think I can find him."

Stacey shook her head emphatically but Andrea wasn't watching. "Not today—not at lunch. Not with all his friends with him. You'll make a fool of yourself. C'mon, sit down."

With their attention focused on Andrea, no one noticed as Rachel and Trey approached the table from the opposite direction. Jason, since he had the best view, saw them first. Stacey, whose eyes were looking at

everyone else's to see if they understood what Andrea was doing or were willing to help, even looked at Jason and saw his gaze was directed elsewhere. Stacey turned her head and saw Rachel who now stood next to the table. Stacey said, "Rachel, make Annie sit down."

Rachel played along, and with a smile on her face, she set her food down on the table and walked over to where Andrea was standing, staring like some sort of zombie. Rachel asked, "What's the matter?"

"She's about to make a fool of herself and we have to stop her."

Andrea, oblivious to everyone around her, snapped back into the present when she felt Rachel's hand take her arm. Andrea at last gave in, "OK, OK. I'll sit down."

Rachel's grip guided Andrea until she was sitting in her regular spot across from Jimmy and next to Stacey. Normal conversation resumed again as Andrea started to eat her lunch. Although she listened to her friends as they talked, she didn't join in. She kept thinking about Greg and what she could do or say to him to keep him from breaking up with her. After Rachel and Trey retired to the lawn, it was Jimmy and Stacey who led the conversation with some verbal sparring and bantering. Everyone at the table watched the two of them or took one side or the other. April supported Stacey and Brian was loyal to Jimmy. Only Andrea and Jason did not take an active role in the conversation, one because of her depression, the other because he didn't yet feel like part of the group. Suddenly, a scream from Stacey caught everyone's attention. Although sitting across the table, Jimmy had somehow spilled some of his drink on Stacey's blouse and pants, and she was frantically trying to wipe it off.

"Jimmy!" she shouted, "look what you did to my clothes!"

Jimmy saw, and he and Brian started laughing hysterically. April laughed too, and even Andrea cracked a smile. Jimmy said, "I'm sorry. Really. I didn't mean to do that." But any sincerity in Jimmy's words were betrayed by his laughter, which grew more intense.

"You are *not* sorry," Stacey said. She tried to sound angry, but she too was smiling. She got up from the table so she could get a better view of herself and where the soda had spilled. April pulled a small paper

towel from her bag and handed it to Stacey. The laughter from Jimmy and Brian subsided but then all of a sudden it returned with renewed vigor, and for the first time, Jason joined in their laughter. Jimmy noticed and said, "Hey, I think Jason wants a shower too! Heads up!" Jimmy raised his soda threateningly and Jason jumped away from the tree and moved out of Jimmy's range.

Jimmy turned again to Stacey who continued to clean herself. "You're not doing that right," he said, smiling lasciviously. "Come here and take off your clothes. We'll clean them for you."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" Stacey asked.

"Of course!"

Brian said to Jimmy in a murmur, but loud enough for everyone to hear, "Don't encourage her, Jimmy, she might actually do it!"

"Not even in your dreams!" Stacey said as she sat down again.

Five

EVEN though Rachel's parents were so well off that they had been able to afford a brand new car for their daughter's sixteenth birthday two years ago, Rachel still preferred to ride in the passenger seat of Trey's dented and beaten up ten-year-old Dodge. When they were sophomores, she had offered to drive Trey to school in her new car, but Trey preferred to do the driving himself, and that was fine with Rachel. Riding in the passenger seat proved to be one of those simple pleasures in life that made her feel secure and loved. She never told Trey about that; she didn't think he'd understand. Actions, not words, were what Trey admired most, so Rachel communicated her sense of belonging by smiling whenever he happened to look at her. Here in the car, she would have even liked to hold his hand, but Trey preferred to keep one hand on the wheel and the other on the stick.

It was another warm and sunny Monday afternoon as they drove home from school. Trey aggressively weaved his way through traffic, muttering curses to the slow drivers who didn't get out of his way. He wasn't afraid to tailgate other cars or give the finger to any driver who really irritated him. Rachel always felt safe riding in his car, though. Even though he drove dangerously, he had never had an accident, and Rachel didn't believe that he ever would. Trey wouldn't let an accident happen to

him, and if one did happen, Trey would probably beat the life out of whoever hit his car.

Rachel sat smoking a cigarette and smiling happily as she watched Trey drive. The windows were rolled down (the air conditioner had died last fall) and the smoke from Rachel's cigarette swirled around the inside of the car as fresh air blew in. Trey wanted a cigarette too, but he forgot to light one before he got into his car, and now he was too busy driving to light one of his own. He could have asked Rachel to light another—or he could have borrowed hers, but she looked so beautiful and perfect sitting in the seat beside him, with her dark hair tossed about wildly by the wind and the sunlight bathing her in gold, that he didn't want to disturb her.

As Trey ran a red light, it occurred to him, as it had occurred to him a hundred times before, how truly *perfect* Rachel was. She was hot, smart, and fun to be with, the first and only girl he had ever really loved. They were different in a lot of ways, but their differences complimented each other and, Trey thought, made both of them stronger. Not long after they started going out two years ago, Rachel began adopting Trey's attitude and look. She had traded in her glasses for contact lenses, dressed less conservatively, double- then triple-pierced her ears and pierced her belly button, got a tattoo on the small of her back that her parents still didn't know about, and even took up smoking. Trey thought she was the coolest girl in school, and she was all his.

Rachel's effect on Trey was just as profound. Before he met Rachel, he'd get into fights two or three times a semester. Channeling his energy towards her kept him out of trouble—maybe he'd only kick someone's ass once a year, now. Before, school had just been a waste of time; he didn't see the point. But the opportunity to see Rachel was the only reason he needed to keep attending. Without her, he might have dropped out by now; instead, he was set to graduate in May—but graduation posed a new set of problems for their relationship.

Rachel had applied to Pallas University in the state capital, a school recognized as the best in the state. Trey knew that Rachel could probably get in, but a few months ago, Trey had asked Rachel to apply to

one of the local colleges instead. He was worried that when she got accepted to Pallas, she would have to move away and they wouldn't be together anymore. Rachel sensed Trey's worry, so she devised a plan that would keep them both together. She asked Trey to apply to Pallas University as well, and Rachel did everything in her power to help him. She prepared Trey's application herself, using all her creativity and persuasion to make Trey's academic background more impressive than it really was. She even wrote his 500-word sample essay for him. All Trey had to do was sign his name at the end of the application form, affirming that all the information was true and correct to the best of his knowledge.

Trey really didn't want to go to college. He hated high school, and he guessed college would only be worse. He only went along with Rachel's plan because he was willing to follow Rachel anywhere. What especially bothered Trey was that Pallas was the only school Rachel applied to. Rachel told him that ever since the seventh grade, when she had helped her older brother move to the capital so he could attend the same school, she had set her sights on it as her goal, too. So for both of them, it was Pallas University or bust. As Trey turned a corner at a high rate of speed, the tires screeched and the sun shone right into his eyes. Even with his sunglasses on, he still squinted and had to put down the visor so he could see the road ahead.

For Rachel, though, the day was bright and beautiful, matching her optimistic attitude about the future. She had everything planned. First, she and Trey would both be accepted into Pallas—of that she was certain. They would probably live separately in dormitories for their freshman year while they went to school and worked at part-time jobs. Hopefully, they could save enough money so that at the end of their freshman year they could rent a cozy little one-bedroom apartment and live together. It wouldn't matter if the apartment were run-down or newly furnished; she would be happy living anywhere with Trey. And someday, either before or after they graduated from college (whenever the time was right), they would get married.

When they reached Rachel's house, Trey parked in the driveway and turned off the car. Rachel's father didn't like Trey to park on the

driveway; he complained that Trey's old car left oil stains on the concrete. Trey, however, thought that the reason was really because the guy didn't like him and wanted to keep him and his car as far from his house as possible rather than because of any concern for oil stains. Out of spite, Trey made a point to always park on the driveway.

Neither of Rachel's parents ever got home from work before six, so she and Trey always had the house to themselves for two or three hours. They made it a kind of tradition for Trey to hang out there when neither of them had to go to work. Sometimes they continued their kissing that had started from lunch; other times they just hung out and talked or watched TV or played music. Trey used to love coming over to Rachel's house in the afternoons—it had once been his favorite part of the day. But lately Trey dreaded it because this was the time of year when colleges and universities were notifying applicants of their acceptance or rejection. Many people at school had already received letters, and he knew the letters from Pallas could arrive any day now.

When they got out of the car, Rachel asked Trey to check the mailbox while she went and unlocked the front door of the house. It was almost 3:30 now, and the mailman was due. He didn't always come at the exact same time every day, so the only way to find out whether he had come was to open the mailbox and look inside. Trey stood in front of the box, hesitated, and then opened it. He was relieved to find the box empty, but that only meant that the mailman hadn't come yet. Rachel's family always got some mail everyday, even if it was just junk mail, so an empty box meant that he had to wait and worry for a little while longer.

Trey walked up the sidewalk to the front door. It was open, and Rachel had gone inside, but before Trey could enter the house too, Rachel appeared at the door with two sodas from the refrigerator.

"Any mail yet?" she asked, handing a can to her boyfriend.

Trey shook his head no.

"Well, then let's sit out front and wait," she said happily. She was in a good mood, her face beaming as bright as the sun was shining. She sat down on the top step of the porch, but she was so excited that she couldn't keep still. Trey wished he could reflect her excitement and

happiness, but he just sat calmly beside her.

If they had to sit outside and wait for any length of time, Rachel decided that today was the perfect day for it. There was beauty and life up and down the street in this upper-class neighborhood. All the trees were still and green, and lovely, well-manicured lawns carpeted the properties. Flowers planted around the homes and along the sidewalks and driveways were in bloom and their colors dazzled her eyes. Even the flowers that her parents planted had blossomed into an array of golds and purples, releasing a sweet perfume that hung lazily in the atmosphere around the house and the two eighteen-year-olds. Everything was spring. Everything was new and fresh and full of hope.

As much as Rachel enjoyed sitting outside in the warm, bright sunlight, she would have enjoyed it even more if she already knew the university's response. A watched mailbox is never filled, and Rachel watched hers intently and impatiently, every second feeling like an eternity. The minutes seemed even longer because Trey sat so quietly next to her, sipping his soda and saying nothing. She thought Trey was just as anxious as she was, and in a way, that was true. But Trey wasn't anxious for the same reason. He wanted her letter to be a rejection, because he knew deep down that he was destined for a rejection letter himself. He didn't like the idea of some nerd in some university office in the state capital having the power to separate him from the girl he loved. Rachel loved him, he knew that, but he also knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't say no to an offer to go to her dream school, even if that meant leaving him behind. Trey felt powerless, sitting on that porch step, staring down the street, waiting for the mailman to deliver the message that his relationship with Rachel was over. They could talk about how their love was so strong that a sixty-five mile separation wouldn't change anything, but Trey knew better. As soon as she left town and left Trey behind, it would all be over. Trey wished he could take this moment, here on the porch with Rachel, and extend it forever, so that they would always be together and would not have to face the future that conspired to drive them apart. Trey put his arm around Rachel and held her close to him. Rachel didn't resist, and she rested her head on his

shoulder as she continued to look down the street.

They waited silently. The only sounds to be heard were the birds singing in the trees and the endless tiny explosions of countless bubbles in their soda cans. No more than thirty minutes passed between the time they sat down on the porch until the mailman started up the street, slowly opening, loading, and closing each mailbox. Rachel saw him first, and Trey sat petrified while Rachel broke from Trey's arm and stood up. Then she sat down. Then she stood up again. She wanted to run out to the mailbox and get the mail from the mailman directly, but on the other hand, she didn't want to embarrass herself in her eagerness, so she sat down again and stayed there, her legs and body twitching nervously as the two of them watched the mailman stop in front of Rachel's house, open the box, fill it, close it, and then drive on to the next house.

As the mailman drove away, Rachel couldn't contain herself any longer, and she jumped off the porch step and sprinted to the street. Slowly, Trey stood up and followed her but before he even got halfway there, Rachel returned with a handful of letters. She stood in front of Trey, handing him the junk mail and letters addressed to her parents as she sorted through the stack. At last, she found the letter she had been waiting for.

"Omigod! Here it is!" she exclaimed, her hands trembling. "I can't open it, you do it." She started to hand Trey the letter, but then she took it back, "No, I should look at it . . . no, you . . . no. . . ."

Trey grabbed the letter from her. "I'll read it," he said, and he started to open it roughly.

Rachel panicked, "No! You might rip it!" She pulled it away from him (almost ripping the letter herself) and opened it carefully. Rachel unfolded the letter inside and looked at it, but it took her a moment to remember how to read. In all the excitement, the words on the page might as well have been written in some long-forgotten language.

But all Rachel needed to read was the first paragraph. The letter began by thanking her for her interest in Pallas University. Then, "*After reviewing your admission application and accompanying documents, we are very pleased to offer you admission into our school.*"

Rachel shrieked. Not knowing what the letter said, Trey didn't know whether the news was good or bad, but then Rachel began to jump and leap around and the biggest smile Trey had ever seen appeared on her face. Rachel shouted, "They accepted me! I'm in! I'm in!" and she ran for the house. "C'mon!" she shouted, "I'm in! I'm in!"

Trey followed her inside, with far less enthusiasm than she was showing, and closed the door behind him. He found Rachel in the living room, jumping and dancing to the rhythm of her own ecstasy. Trey sat down on the sofa and watched her. In spite of everything, he couldn't help but smile. Her joy was infectious enough to even penetrate the shell of misery that had surrounded Trey.

Rachel danced closer to Trey and dropped the letter in his lap so he could read it, too. As he read, she danced over to the stereo and turned on the radio, hoping to give some musical foundation to her movements. She didn't know what station the radio was set to, and she didn't care, just so long as music came out of the speakers. Music did come out, but it was music from a radio commercial, a generic form of pop-rock that served as background music while some deep-voiced announcer urged the listening audience to buy potato chips. Every so often, there was a crunching sound, presumably someone biting into and enjoying a chip. Rachel had heard this commercial before and she knew when the crunches would occur. When they did, she arched her back and threw her arms into the air. All the while, she continued to chant in a sing-song voice, "I'm in! I'm in! I'm in!"

Rachel watched Trey as he read the letter slowly. She wanted him to dance with her, but he didn't move from the sofa. At last, Rachel plopped down next to him, just as the commercial break ended and a real song began to play on the radio. Rachel looked at Trey's face, studied it, and tried to guess what he was thinking. She breathed hard, panting after all that jumping and dancing. Finally, she leaned in and kissed Trey quickly on the corner of his mouth, at the point where his lips became his cheek. Trey finally looked at her.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Rachel asked. "I feel so . . . so . . . *relieved*. It's like a weight has been lifted. I've worried about this application all year,

and now I know I'm in! I can finally relax now. I can get through these last few weeks of school without any worry or trouble."

Trey looked at her and envied her. She could relax, but he had a feeling that his worry was just beginning.

"Well," Rachel asked, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said flatly. "I knew you'd get accepted, and you did."

Rachel knew something was wrong and she figured out what it was. She sat up on the sofa and looked Trey right in the eyes. "And *you* will get accepted too. I know you will. I mean, your application was practically identical to mine. Maybe your grades haven't been as good, but I think when the admissions people read that essay I wrote for you, they'll let you in. You know what? I bet your acceptance letter is sitting in your mailbox right now."

That was a thought—not that he would get an acceptance letter, but that he would learn of his rejection on the same day that Rachel learned of her acceptance. "Maybe," he said.

Rachel sighed happily and leaned back, resting her head on Trey's shoulder. She stared up at the ceiling and dreamed. "It's gonna be so much fun. You and me at the university! You know, we won't have to worry about our parents or anyone always asking us where we are or what we've been doing. We can have freedom to do what we want whenever we want. And when we get our own apartment . . . God, the future just seems so wide open . . ."

Trey was watching her while she talked, and as her voice trailed off, her eyes still staring at the blank ceiling above them, Trey whispered in her ear, "I love you."

Rachel lifted her head so she could look at him again. Smiling, the happiest girl in the world gave Trey a kiss on his lips.

Trey drove home recklessly after he left Rachel's house that

afternoon. He felt no concern for his life or safety at all anymore. If he got into an accident or merely caused one, it wouldn't matter. If some cop pulled him over and gave him a ticket—or worse—he wouldn't care. Deep down, Trey *wanted* something to happen, something so terrible that he could use it as an excuse for why he wouldn't be able to go to the university, rather than being denied by some piece of paper. He couldn't stand the thought that his fate was in the hands of strangers. He'd rather swerve head-on into another car and kill himself than let someone tell him that Rachel would be leaving town without him.

Fortunately, Trey made it home all right. Whether by divine guidance or a lack of will on his part to kill himself, the worst injury Trey experienced on his way home was to his ego when another driver gave Trey the finger for cutting him off. Trey parked his car by the curb in front of his house and sat there with the engine still running and the stereo turned up as loud as he could stand it. He sat with his angry eyes staring at the top of the steering wheel. At last he turned off the engine and removed the keys from the ignition. Then he made a fist around the keys and slammed his right hand repeatedly and savagely into the top of the steering wheel. Then with his left hand he pounded the inside of the door of his car.

With his anger somewhat diminished, he climbed out of his car. He left his backpack in the backseat. He couldn't remember if he had homework or not, but even if he did, he wasn't going to do it tonight. *Screw school*, he thought.

The mailbox stood between him and the front door of his home. His parents never got home until around seven, and since it wasn't yet six, he knew the mail was still sitting inside the box, waiting for someone to remove it. Trey decided he'd get it and look to see if his letter from the university had come yet, like Rachel predicted it would. Trey opened the box, pulled out the stack of mail and sifted through it. There was a bill, a couple of letters to his mother, plenty of junk mail, but nothing for Trey. This reprieve only made him feel angrier. He already knew what the decision would be, so why did they take so long to send him a letter? The very fact that Rachel had her response and he didn't seemed to be proof

that he didn't make it. Perhaps they sent the acceptance letters out first and the rejections later.

Trey put the mail back into the box, closed it, and punched the side of the box with his fist, causing a slight indentation. He went inside his house, knowing that when Rachel called him that night to ask whether he got his letter, he would have to tell her no and then listen to her try to reassure him that everything would be all right. But Trey wondered how much Rachel really knew. She had been wrong when she predicted his letter would arrive today; what other predictions of hers would also be proved wrong?

Six

MONDAY had been the first day of April—April Fools' Day—so Stacey had to endure the day with more than her usual dread. Amazingly, early that morning, she didn't even realize what day it was until the end of her first period class when she had to sign her name and write the date at the top of a written assignment that she had to turn in. From that moment on, she presented an outward facade of security and confidence while inside she expected something terrible to happen to her every minute. She always had to put up with teasing and insults at school, but she also expected April Fools' Day to be even worse. On that day everybody had license to play pranks on one another, and what better target than the Veggie Girl?

Her worst April Fools' Day had come during her sophomore year when a boy from her geometry class, a boy whom she secretly liked, approached her in the hall after class and told her he liked her. Then, when he saw that she fell for his trick, he yelled "April Fools!" and laughed in her face. His laughter was echoed in the hall by his friends who had surreptitiously gathered nearby to witness the unexpectedly successful hoax. Word spread quickly that day about the how the Veggie Girl was tricked into thinking that some boy liked her, and the taunts and laughter continued into the evening when Stacey received no less than a

dozen prank calls from various boys who tried to repeat the first boy's success.

But this year, April Fools' Day came and went like any other Monday. Stacey endured the usual ridicule from bullies that she received everyday, of course, but other than that, nothing happened. Perhaps she was the only one who realized it was April Fools' Day, or maybe her classmates were more mature than they had been two years ago. Whatever, Stacey cynically observed that her classmates didn't need a holiday to make fun of her. It was open season on the Veggie Girl all year round.

Now, at least, was Tuesday, the second day of April, and Stacey could relax. As she drove to school that morning she thought about Andrea's recent problems with Greg, but mostly she thought about Jimmy. It hadn't occurred to Stacey until yesterday at lunch that Jimmy was a true friend to her, in spite of their horsing around. He teased her, but she had never known him to make fun of her in any malicious sort of way. When Jimmy and Brian first began spending their lunch hours with Andrea, April, and herself late last year, Stacey didn't want them around. She didn't know either boy very well and she expected they might make fun of her and shun her like all the other boys at school did. Their actions proved her wrong, though, and while they did tease her as they did yesterday, she knew it was all in friendly fun. Still, Stacey found it hard to trust Jimmy completely, and this morning she wondered why that was. Jimmy was funny and nice and cute. Why not give him a chance?

Stacey arrived on campus a little earlier than usual, and she found a great parking space not far from the front of the school. Instead of going to the cafeteria where she usually spent her mornings with Andrea, she walked towards the flagpole where she knew Jimmy liked to wait for school to begin. As a rule, Stacey preferred not to wait for school to start here in front of the main doors. Too many people gathered here and there were too many opportunities for someone to say something rude to her. She couldn't be sure that the laughter and whispering she heard while she waited wasn't directed at her. In the cafeteria, she could at least sit at a table, out of the way, and wait for another miserable day to start.

Stacey wandered around slowly in between the main school building and the auditorium. A lot of people were already gathered there, waiting for the school day to begin, but Jimmy wasn't among them so Stacey stood near the corner of the auditorium and looked back out at the parking lot. She didn't know what kind of car Jimmy drove to school, nor was she even sure that Jimmy drove to school. She thought she remembered Jimmy once say that he sometimes caught a ride from someone. Stacey didn't know if that was still true or not, so she watched every car that parked in the students' parking lot and studied every driver and every passenger.

It wasn't easy. As 8:00 grew nearer, more and more cars streamed into the students' parking lot and it filled up fast. As they arrived, they were forced to park farther and farther away from where Stacey was standing, making it harder for her to see the faces of the boys as they climbed out of their cars. Any boy with blond hair was immediately suspected of being Jimmy, and Stacey watched each blond intently until he came close enough for her to see whether it was the boy she was waiting for. Again and again, however, she was disappointed, and she quickly grew impatient. The lot was almost full, and Stacey hoped Jimmy wouldn't be forced to park off campus.

When Jimmy did finally arrive, Stacey recognized him immediately. Although his car was parked far away, she could sense it was him as soon as he climbed out of the driver's seat. The only trouble was that Jimmy wasn't alone in his car. The passenger door opened and Stacey saw a girl get out. Stacey immediately began to wish and hope that this wasn't Jimmy after all, but as the couple made their way through the crowded parking lot, Stacey could not deny what she saw. Her heart fell, but still she kept her eyes locked on them. The couple talked to each other as they approached, and when they reached the bus depot, they parted. The girl walked in the direction of the cafeteria patio while Jimmy continued on towards the front of the main building where Stacey was standing, but Stacey no longer felt as excited as she had been. She knew she shouldn't be surprised at what she had just seen. Jimmy had many girlfriends, and that girl was probably just his latest. Stacey didn't

recognize her, so she probably wasn't even a senior. Maybe a junior, or even a sophomore. Stacey doubted any sophomore girl could defend against Jimmy's winning smile, nor would any girl even want to try.

The crowd in front of the main doors had swelled by this time, so Jimmy didn't see Stacey until he was just a few feet away from her. When he did finally notice her, he saw that she was looking right at him, so he quickly tried to pretend like he hadn't seen her and passed by. But Stacey, swallowing her pride and risking humiliation, followed him. Jimmy led her away from the main doors and towards the entrance to the gymnasium where a somewhat smaller crowd had gathered. Stacey, anxious to talk to him, ran up from behind and gave him a shove. Jimmy stumbled forward, using the hands that had been stuck indifferently in his jeans' pockets to help him regain his balance. His backpack fell off his shoulder, but he caught it on his elbow. He turned around and said, almost angrily, "Hey, what did you do that for?"

"That's for ignoring me," Stacey answered, forcing a smile on her face—the same sort of smile that came so naturally to Jimmy.

"I didn't ignore you—I just didn't see you," Jimmy lied. He knew that Stacey knew that he had seen her, but he never passed up an opportunity to tease someone.

"You didn't see me, huh?" Stacey asked skeptically.

"No, I mean, who can see you when you're standing over there in front of the auditorium doors, behind that crowd of people."

Stacey smiled, this time for real. "I'll bet your mind was too preoccupied with other things."

"Like what?"

"Like that girl I saw you with just now."

A puzzled expression appeared on Jimmy's face, but Stacey couldn't tell whether it was real or not. "Girl? What girl?"

"You know who I'm talking about, you jerk." She gave him another shove, this time to his chest, and Jimmy pretended to lose his balance and stumble backwards. "That girl who was in your car."

The puzzled expression on Jimmy's face remained while he gazed in the direction of the parking lot. The lot was now full, and students

were forced to find a place to park off campus. "Oh, *that* girl," he said, finally realizing who Stacey meant. "That's just my sister—and I've *never* been preoccupied with her."

Inside, Stacey breathed a sigh of relief, but outwardly, she continued to pretend to be annoyed with Jimmy. "You never told me you had a sister."

"You never asked."

"What's the point? You never tell anybody anything anyway."

"I'm telling you now."

"What's her name?"

"Who?"

"Your sister!" Out of frustration, she tried to push Jimmy again, but he stepped backwards and she only pushed air.

"Emma."

"Really? That's a pretty name."

"Yeah, a lot prettier than 'Stacey'."

"Shut up!"

Jimmy eased up on his teasing, but he still gave Stacey a hard time. She tried to pry more personal information out of him about his relationship with his sister, but Jimmy resisted, subtly, and ultimately he began asking questions about his inquisitor, in an attempt to deflect her questions, but Stacey was only too happy to answer and she gladly told him anything he wanted to know. Jimmy really wasn't interested in what he learned, so when he realized that Stacey didn't mind talking about herself, his interrogation ceased. This left Stacey frustrated, but she wasn't angry with him. She knew he was just being playful, and he was, but not quite in the way Stacey wanted him to be playful.

The sound of a dropped textbook smacking the concrete walkway shattered the moment that Jimmy and Stacey shared. Nearby, a circle of girls giggled loudly. Behind Stacey, some sophomore boy was boasting loudly that his parents were going to buy him a new sports car for his upcoming sixteenth birthday, but the boy's friends, sophomores all, accused him of dreaming. It suddenly occurred to Jimmy that he was standing in front of the whole world talking to Stacey, and he

immediately felt very uncomfortable. He worried that somebody who didn't like him might see Stacey with him and might start spreading some ridiculous rumors. Jimmy looked at his watch and saw that three minutes remained before the first bell of the day rang. Jimmy took a step backwards, putting some space in between him and Stacey. He didn't want to be rude to her, and he hoped she didn't notice, but she did, and she took a step forward. Again Jimmy stepped back, and again Stacey stepped forward. Jimmy tried to step back again, but Stacey reached out and grabbed his arm.

"You big jerk!" she laughed, undaunted by the crowd around her the way Jimmy was. "What are you running away for?"

Jimmy smiled. "I'm not running anywhere. Why are you trying to stand so close?"

"Because you keep stepping back."

"Because you're standing too close."

Stacey, grinning now instead of laughing, reluctantly released Jimmy's arm and took a small step backwards, a compromise to Jimmy's need for space. Jimmy accepted it, although he was still a little too close to Stacey for his own comfort. If only Brian or Andrea—or even *Jason*—were here, then it wouldn't be so uncomfortable. He could tolerate being seen with Stacey if they were both part of a larger group, but standing by themselves, Stacey's presence smothered him.

As for Stacey, she was too excited to even notice that there was anybody else in the world besides Jimmy and herself. She found herself entranced by Jimmy's smile, trying to understand it, trying to see through it. That smile of his prevented everyone from knowing what he was really thinking. Stacey wanted to believe that he considered her his friend, unconditionally and without regard for what other people thought about her. An unconditional acceptance was what Stacey considered to be the sign of true friendship. Jimmy's behavior, which might have been insulting to anyone else, was, for Stacey, a normal part of her life as the biggest outcast in school. What more could she expect?

"So what do you think about Annie and Greg?" Stacey asked. "Do you think they'll break up? They've only been going out for a few

weeks."

"Has it been that long?" Jimmy asked, although his voice conveyed indifference.

Stacey said, "I think Annie's pretty upset about it, but they were a cute couple. And you know it's all Greg's fault. He's probably gone after some bimbo freshman. Only a jerk would dump Annie."

"I wouldn't know," Jimmy said. He did have sympathy for Andrea's situation with Greg, but he didn't want to stand here and gossip about it. Besides, pretending not to be concerned was sure to annoy Stacey, and Jimmy decided that if he was going to be uncomfortable, then he would make Stacey uncomfortable too by not giving her the satisfaction of an enjoyable conversation. Stacey picked up on his apparent indifference, but had a feeling that he was faking it so she decided to call his bluff. She took another step back and turned away in haughty disgust (and to hide the smile that started to form on her face). She said, with false anger, "God, Jimmy, you don't care about anything do you?"

Jimmy was fooled. The tone in Stacey's voice seemed to indicate that she wasn't at all surprised by his attitude. In an attempt to convince Stacey that he really did have concern for what happened to Andrea, but at the same time not wanting to extend the conversation in that direction any longer, he said, simply, "I care."

Stacey had him and she knew it. She purged her smile and replaced it with a frown before she took two steps forward and got into his face and said angrily, "No you don't! You say you do, but you don't! Life is just a big joke for you, and people are just toys for you to manipulate and make fun of! You don't care about anybody!" She worried that she might have sounded too melodramatic, but Jimmy bought it all and believed that Stacey really meant what she said. Jimmy was dumbfounded. He wondered if that was really how Stacey saw him. He didn't want to be thought of in that way, but before he could defend himself Stacey attacked again: "You know, Annie considers you her friend, but I guess you're really not. She and Greg are having a hard time and you won't even give her a little sympathy. You always—"

She was interrupted by the bell which beckoned to the students outside to come to class. As the doors opened and students slowly marched inside, Stacey and Jimmy stood silently, staring at each other. Jimmy mumbled, "I really do care."

Stacey suddenly laughed and said, "I know, Jimmy. See you later, OK? Bye!" She quickly turned and hurried off to class before Jimmy could react.

Again Jimmy was caught off guard. He quickly realized that Stacey had only been kidding with him, but still he worried that someone might get the impression that he didn't care, so as he walked to class, he smiled again, said hello to his friends as he passed them in the hallways. He promised himself that he would show more compassion towards Andrea from now on. For the first half of the school day, thoughts of Andrea occupied his mind.

Today was the second day of April, the day after April Fools' Day, and Andrea spent the morning wishing the joke was on her.

Like Stacey, Andrea hadn't even realized it had been April Fools' Day until late yesterday afternoon when she was already home from school watching television. Then, on one of the celebrity and entertainment gossip programs that she liked to watch, it was mentioned. At first, Andrea was a little surprised that she hadn't seen any pranks pulled at school on Monday. To her knowledge, there was nothing done to take advantage of the one day of the year it was acceptable to play tricks. But Andrea knew she was a senior in high school—practically an adult—and her classmates were probably more interested in behaving as maturely as possible. April Fools' Day pranks were OK in elementary school and maybe in middle school, but high school? No way. People had more important things to worry about, things like jobs and cars and getting into college. No one cared about childish holidays anymore.

But Andrea would have thought it all right if one particular prank

was pulled on her, and when she realized it was April Fools' Day, she spent the rest of the evening hoping it would happen. She hoped that Greg would give her a call, or drop by her house, and tell her that their recent problems, their estrangement, was not what it had seemed. It had all been an illusion, a misunderstanding, and now he was going to make things up to her. Then they could laugh about the heartache and worry, the pain and the fear that Andrea had experienced.

But Greg never appeared to shout "April Fools' Day!" in his cheery voice that she loved. He didn't appear at all. Andrea knew she couldn't blame it on Greg's "maturity", because the last couple of weeks were evidence that he lacked it. This wasn't a joke and it wasn't a game; it was real and it was happening.

So the next day, Andrea resigned herself to reality and abandoned the hope she had carried with her to this point. She wouldn't be looking for Greg today; she wouldn't consider going to his table and begging to speak with him. She would try to let him go. It was the hardest thing in the world for Andrea to do, this letting go, but she had no other choice. The love and friendship she thought they shared, the compassion and the caring, all the emotions she had experienced were dried up, she thought, like a wilted flower. She wished that Greg would have spoken to her, though. She didn't know if it would be easier to have him say goodbye to her face, but at least there would be a little dignity—and hopefully some closure.

On Tuesday, Andrea made sure to avoid all the places in the school where she knew she would find Greg: his locker, his usual routes to and from classes, and as they went to the snack bar line for lunch, Andrea goaded Stacey along, telling her to hurry and buy something so they could get out of the cafeteria before she saw Greg. She didn't want to see him talking to his friends when he used to talk to her, walking with other girls when he used to walk with her. She would set him free and make herself miserable, but she would make it up to her other friends. She might have lost Greg, but she was going to make sure she didn't lose anyone else.

Andrea and Stacey hurried out of the cafeteria and walked quickly

towards the auditorium. Stacey really didn't know what the rush was all about, but she silently guessed that it had something to do with Greg. Stacey noticed that Andrea didn't seem angry or depressed or in any way upset like she had been yesterday. She was smiling and talking freely, and Stacey didn't understand why. Still, she encouraged Andrea, and listened while Andrea did most of the talking.

"God, it's another pretty day! There's not a cloud in the sky. Don't you like days like this?"

"Sure, I guess," Stacey said, playing along.

"Well, I do. This is the reason why I like to eat lunch outside—days like this! I wish we didn't have to have classes this afternoon. Why can't they just cancel the rest of the day and let us stay out here?"

"So how has your day been?" Stacey asked, though she had a feeling she knew the answer already.

"It's been great! I feel great. And guess what, I got my economics homework back yesterday—you know, the stuff that I was working on last week?"

Stacey nodded.

"I made an A! Finally, I make an A in that class! I didn't answer all the questions right but all the ones you helped me with I got right. You know, I think if I make a good a grade on the next test, I'll owe it to you."

Stacey objected. "You won't owe it to me. Just study and you'll be all right."

"Yeah, but you helped me study."

"All I did was teach you the relation between equilibrium and supply and demand—and I remember you didn't understand what I was saying."

"Oh, I understood it—eventually. Before I turned the homework in I looked it over, and I thought about what you had said. And suddenly it made sense! If you hadn't helped me, I still wouldn't understand it. I owe you one. If you ever need a favor, just ask."

Stacey just smiled politely, amused by the way her friend was overreacting. When they came within view of their table, they saw it was

deserted.

"I guess we're the first ones here," Andrea said.

"And no wonder, considering how you were in such a rush to get through the snack bar line," Stacey replied happily. "At least we can enjoy a moment of peace before Jimmy arrives."

"You two were all over each other yesterday. What's going on?" Andrea asked as the girls sat down in their usual places at the table.

Stacey blushed and said, "Nothing. He's just a jerk sometimes and I try to give him a taste of his own medicine."

Andrea took a bite out of her candy bar, chewed it, and said, "Yeah, I guess he does deserve it. Here he comes—get ready for round two!" She smiled.

Stacey watched as Jimmy, Brian, and Jason approached the table and sat down. April joined them a minute later.

Andrea watched as Jason took his usual position—leaning against the tree that provided shelter for the table. She asked him, "Why do you always stand there like that? Sit down—there's plenty of room."

Jason looked nervously at the group of friends smiling at him. Jimmy was the first to second Andrea's invitation. "Yeah," he said. "Sit down. You look stupid standing there like that."

"C'mon!" Stacey joined.

Brian pounded the empty spot next to him with his fist and said, "Here's a place for you. Have a seat."

April just giggled.

But Jason was reluctant. "No, thanks," he said. "I like to stand during lunch."

That was a lie, of course, but only Jimmy knew Jason well enough to see through it. Jimmy said, "You never used to stand when you hung out with Keith. There's probably a permanent dent in the ground over there where you two parked your butts everyday."

"Sit down!" the group began to shout, but Jason still resisted so Andrea got up from the table and grabbed Jason's arm, just as Rachel had grabbed her arm yesterday. Andrea realized now that this was where she belonged, and she wanted Jason to feel that same sense of belonging. If

nothing else, Jason certainly felt the strength of Andrea's grip and her determination to make him sit at the table so he allowed himself to be dragged around to the other side where he was set next to Brian. "There," Andrea declared. "You're one of us now."

Jason didn't feel like one of them, though, nor did he want to. He felt more uncomfortable than ever, even more than when he sat alone against the side of the auditorium with only his mp3 player to keep him company. He now sat directly across from April. He could see her steal glances at him while she ate and talked to her friends. Of all the places to spend lunch on campus, why did she have to spend her lunch hours at this particular table? She was popular and had lots of friends, so why couldn't she find another clique to eat lunch with? Jason's distress was interrupted by the clinking of metal boot buckles and he looked up to see Trey and Rachel approach. He hoped this lunch hour wouldn't get any worse than it already was.

Seven

RACHEL could barely contain her excitement as she and Trey walked to the table. Had she not been holding Trey's hand, she would have run ahead of him, and since Trey was lagging behind, she looked like she was pulling Trey forward. She wanted to let his hand go and run on ahead, but Trey gripped her hand strongly and refused to release her. She guessed Trey was teasing her because he knew how eager she was to tell her friends the good news about her acceptance letter. The night before, after Trey went home, she called some of her relatives, including her older brother, and told them about the letter, but she wanted to wait and tell Andrea and her other friends at lunch in person. Her patience was stretched past its limit, and with her friends in sight she could hold back no longer. "Hurry up—what are you waiting for?" she asked Trey as she dragged him along.

Trey knew that he was about to witness another explosion of joy and celebration from Rachel. He had never seen her as happy as she had been in the last twenty-four hours, and he was surprised at how lonely her happiness was making him. When they reached the table, Trey let her hand go and started to take a seat at the end of the table, but today he found that loser Jason, who had started hanging out with them, was no longer leaning against the tree but was sitting next to Brian. Trey didn't

want to sit next to him, so he stepped away from the table and sat down on the lawn by himself, facing away from the table while still able to hear all of Rachel's exclamations.

"Hey everybody!" the dark-haired girl said excitedly. "Guess what happened to me yesterday!"

Her friends at the table could tell she was happy about something, but no one could immediately guess why. Then all of a sudden, it occurred to Andrea:

"Omigod! You got accepted?!"

Rachel's face looked like it was going to burst with joy as the word "Yes!" squeaked out of her mouth.

Immediately, all the girls at the table screamed and jumped up, each wanting to be the first to embrace her friend. The three boys remained sitting and just watched. Jimmy shook his head and laughed at how the girls were reacting. He wondered how they could get so excited over something like an acceptance letter. Nobody screamed and hugged *him* when he got accepted—not that he wanted them to. Jason watched with a gaze of indifference. He could understand how they might be so excited, but it really wasn't any of his business. He was just happy that April left her place at the table to give her friend a hug. Only Brian seemed to really care about this happy news. He watched Rachel with a big grin on his face. He wished he could hug Rachel too, but with Trey sitting a few feet away he didn't dare. Instead, he stayed seated, and when Andrea, Stacey, and April parted from their elated friend and sat back down again, he said, "Congratulations, Rachel!"

She heard him as she sat down at the end of the table and replied, "Thanks. I'm *so* happy!"

"I knew you could do it!" Andrea said. "Pallas is such a hard school to get into, but I knew that they'd accept you. They'd never let *me* in, that's for sure."

Trey just sat on the lawn, drinking his soda. Except for Rachel, he suddenly hated the whole lot of them. They were just a bunch of freaks and losers; he wished Rachel wouldn't spend her lunch hours with them. For the last couple of years he had endured it silently, because he loved

Rachel and would rather sit among these dorks *with* her than among his own friends *without* her. Now, though, he felt completely alone.

Trey turned around and stared at Rachel, refusing to take his eyes off her. The hot sun's rays that he felt bearing down couldn't match the angry heat that had been swelling within him all morning. As he drove her to school, and as they walked together in the hallways, her plans for next fall were the only things she wanted to talk about. Every "Congratulations!" she received from her classmates and friends felt to Trey like another punch in his gut. He couldn't stand it anymore and he wanted to release his anger somehow, but all he could do was stare at her and her friends at the table, and wait for her to come back to him.

His wait was longer than he thought it would be. Nearly twenty minutes passed before she finally left the table and sat down with Trey in the grass. She hadn't even opened the package of miniature donuts she bought for lunch from the vending machine. Trey, of course, had long since finished eating and now sat smoking a cigarette. Rachel opened her package of donuts, popped the first one into her mouth, chewed it, swallowed, and asked, "You've been quiet today—what's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Are you worried about whether you're going to be accepted or not?"

Trey didn't answer.

Rachel smiled and took Trey's hand into her own. He didn't want to let her hold him, but her grip was just as strong as his was twenty minutes ago. "Don't worry. I believe in you. We're both going to be accepted—you'll see."

"What if I'm not? I mean, what if I get rejected—"

"They won't reject you."

"—But *what if*? Then what? What'll happen to us?"

Rachel popped another donut into her mouth and thought about Trey's question as she chewed. When she swallowed, she replied, "You'll get in. I can feel it."

Trey simply did not share her optimism, and feeling frustrated, he sat and moped for the remainder of the lunch hour. Rachel sat silently

next to him, confused about Trey's attitude. She really believed that Trey would be accepted. All of her future plans, which she envisioned so clearly, depended on it. She hoped Trey's letter would come today. She needed to see it almost as much as she had needed to see her own letter so that she wouldn't have anything more to worry about.

But today, worry wasn't Rachel's dominant emotion. When the bell rang, ending lunch, Rachel was happy again, and looked forward to sharing her good news with her few friends and acquaintances who still hadn't heard. As she and Trey stood up from their place on the lawn, Stacey came over to give Rachel another hug.

"I bet you're thrilled to get out of this crappy town," Stacey said to Rachel. "Won't it be fun to start all over somewhere else?"

Trey wanted to tell Stacey to go to hell. He accompanied Rachel only as far as the main building, where the two of them entered through the main doors on their way to their lockers. But as soon as they were inside, Trey wanted to get away from Rachel before he heard anyone else congratulate her. He said goodbye to her and lost himself in the crowd at the first available opportunity. Rachel let him go, sensing how upset he was. She wished there was something she could say to make him feel better.

That afternoon, Trey dropped Rachel off at her house and declined her invitation to come inside. Rachel got out of the car but before she closed the door, she reminded him to call her if he got a letter from the university. "Whether it's good news or bad," she said. Trey grunted in reply and drove off.

As he traveled the two miles which separated his neighborhood from Rachel's, he had a feeling that his letter was in the mailbox waiting for him. It just had to be. And even though it now sat there unopened, in that hot, black box, Trey already knew what it said. He parked his car in front of his house, calmly removed himself and his backpack from the car and walked to the mailbox. He opened it. There was a lot of mail today. As usual, most of it was junk mail, but within the stack, he found one letter which was addressed to him, in the same kind of envelope with the same return address printed in the same blue ink as Rachel's

acceptance letter. He put the rest of the mail back into the mailbox and carried the single letter in and his backpack up the steps to the front door. He unlocked the door slowly and went inside, dropping his backpack on the floor right inside the door, in the same spot where his mother had yelled at him a thousand times not to leave it.

Inside, he tossed the letter on the couch in the living room and went to the kitchen to get something to eat. After a moment of indecision he finally chose a soda and nothing else. He took it to the living room where he sat down on the couch next to the letter. On a small table next to the couch he found the remote control for the television, and he used it to surf the channels. All the while, his thoughts were on the letter. He knew what it was and what it said, so he didn't feel any desire to open it. What was the point? He believed it would be the death blow to his relationship with Rachel, and by ignoring the letter, letting it sit unanswered on the couch beside him, he could let their relationship last for just a little bit longer. Trey finally settled on MTV and watched a stupid reality show for about twenty minutes. The girls on the show had gone to a club and were dancing to the latest pop hits. Trey watched the girls dance, especially one girl who looked a lot like Rachel, but Rachel was much better looking. At 4:00 exactly, the telephone rang. Trey knew it was Rachel, calling him to ask whether his letter had arrived or not. *Yeah*, he would say, *it's here. No, he didn't know whether he was accepted or rejected. Because he hadn't opened the letter yet. He didn't know why he hadn't opened it.* It would have been a dumb conversation, so Trey didn't move from the couch. After fourteen rings, the caller gave up.

When Trey was sure the phone had stopped ringing, he picked up the letter next to him and, without actually looking at it, ripped it open. Inside, there was only a single piece of paper. Trey unfolded it, looked at it, and read it:

"Thank you for applying . . ." it began. Trey knew he was rejected.

"Each year, we receive tens of thousands of applications . . ." There was no doubt about it.

"After carefully considering your application, we regret that we cannot admit you at this time." So that was that.

Trey turned off the television and got up from the couch. He carried the letter and its torn envelope back to his room. He turned on his stereo and found the latest Mad Devils CD already in the machine. He pressed "Play" and turned the volume up, even louder than he usually played it. Then he took a few steps backwards and collapsed on his bed, leaving the letter and its torn envelope to rest on his chest. In a very small sense, he was relieved. He really didn't want to go to college and face four or five more years of school. He gave up on high school long ago, and with only two months left before graduation, he was glad that it was almost over. But he might have endured another few years of stupid classes and stupid teachers and stupid tests if Rachel would be there with him. It wasn't meant to be, though. Rachel was moving on with her life, moving to another city. Trey would be stuck here—in this crappy town, as Stacey called it.

The Mad Devils' screaming lyrics and their roaring guitars, those things which held them in common with every other punk band, were more intense with the volume turned up, and they amplified Trey's feelings of anger and disappointment. This music was just what he wanted right now. These songs of alienation and meaningless fury never rang more true than now, but had anyone looked into his bedroom, one would think that the music wasn't having an effect on the boy at all. He still lay on his bed, face up and motionless. Not even his feet moved to the rhythm of the music. Underneath it all, though, Trey was not calm. Underneath the indifferent exterior his muscles were stiff, his jaw was clenched, and both rows of teeth were pressed hard together. His eyes stared straight up at the ceiling and stared hard at the plaster. He breathed rapidly; the air flowing in and out of his nostrils might have been heard had the music not been so loud. Underneath his facade was rage: repressed and restrained for as long as he had loved Rachel. Now Trey lay on his bed trying to think of a reason why he should continue to hold it in. He wanted to let it all out, but instead he embraced the fury that he had shunned these past three years and enjoyed the sensation. As each minute passed, his rage multiplied, and Trey felt a peculiar sense of freedom that he had not felt in a long time. Song after song of the Mad

Devils' album came and went but Trey continued to lie on the bed, his body motionless, except for the beads of sweat that were starting to roll down his forehead and temples.

The last song on the CD ended, and when silence returned to the bedroom, Trey slowly got up from his bed and started to walk over to his stereo, as if to change the CD or perhaps play it again. But Trey never made it as far as the stereo. A wooden chair stood in his way, and for that offense, Trey grabbed it, picked it up over his head, and threw it violently down onto the floor, breaking one of the rear legs instantly. It felt good to release some of the anger inside him, but he didn't stop there—he didn't want to. Next he attacked his desk and brushed off the lamp, a clock, his telephone, and a few papers with phone numbers and other notes that had been collecting there for months. These all fell to the floor in a crash and a flutter. There was a window nearby so he reached for the blinds and tried to rip them off, but he couldn't get a good grip, and all he did was bend and break a few of the individual panels. He ran back to his bed and kicked it, sending the mattress sliding off the bed and onto the floor, then he gave the box spring a good kick, but it was solid enough to resist him and didn't go very far. He ran to his closet and here he found a wealth of damage waiting to be done. He started by tearing his clothes off the hangers and throwing them to the floor, then he grabbed things off of the shelves and threw them out into his bedroom. When all the shelves were cleared, he charged back into his bedroom and began to beat on his dresser and his desk. He kicked the walls and broke through the plaster in a couple of places. At last, when his energy and his emotions were finally spent, he sunk to the floor, helpless and afraid, and curled up into a ball. He cried for the first time in years.

Trey suffered the usual wrath from his parents once they discovered what he had done to his room. Their tirade and shouting, even the hard slap his mother delivered across his face wasn't anything he

hadn't experienced before. He also thought his father would beat him too, but to his surprise, the old guy restrained himself; it was a good thing, Trey thought later, because for once, he might have been in the mood to fight back, and then things would have really escalated out of control. Trey half expected them to throw him out of the house, but instead, they said that he would pay for all of the damages himself and sent him away to what was left of his room without dinner. Trey shrugged off his obligation to pay for the damage, and as far as dinner was concerned, all he had to do to feed his hunger was slip out of his bedroom window and walk a quarter of a mile to a nearby fast food restaurant.

His parents didn't even ask him *why* he had done what he had done. That probably hurt more than his mother's slap. Trey had thrown many such tantrums when he was younger, before he met Rachel, so many that his parents didn't care what his reasons were anymore. There was nothing they could do about it anyway; beatings, groundings, punishments of all sorts never worked on Trey, so all they could do was make him pay for the damage he caused. As Trey sat alone in a half-empty fast food restaurant eating a hamburger and drinking a coke, he regretted one thing about not going to Pallas: it meant he couldn't easily get away from his parents. He was looking forward to moving out after he graduated and hoping to somehow move in with Rachel, but that didn't seem possible anymore.

When he came back home that evening, around 8:00, he slipped back into his window in time to hear the phone ring elsewhere in the house. His own phone still lay silently on the floor of his bedroom, the cord torn from the jack. Trey stood still and listened as his father answered the phone and told the caller that Trey could not come to the phone tonight. Trey knew it was Rachel calling, and he smiled at the irony that his father, in an attempt to punish Trey further, had actually done Trey a favor by not letting him talk to her. Trey rebuilt his bed and lay down, almost in the same position he has been in a few hours earlier before he erupted. No, he didn't want to talk to Rachel. He was through with her now. Perhaps they could go on pretending to be together for the

rest of the spring and all summer, but next fall, when Rachel left for Pallas, it would all be over. It would be easier just to end it now, and begin to forget about her. He thought a lot about his future that evening, and Rachel was no longer a part of it.

The next morning, before Trey left for school, he crept into the kitchen while his parents were getting ready to go to work and dialed Rachel's cell phone number. She must have been waiting right beside it, perhaps still expecting Trey to call, because she answered her phone almost immediately. In an eager voice, she asked, "Hello, Trey?"

"Yeah, it's me," he said quickly, not wanting to hear Rachel's voice any more than was necessary. "Listen, I can't pick you up this morning, all right? You'll have to drive your own car today."

"Well, OK," Rachel said slowly. "What happened, did your car break down again? Should I come get you?"

"No, don't worry about me," Trey replied, impatiently. "I just can't pick you up this morning. I gotta go. Bye." He hung up the telephone before Rachel could say another word, then he picked up his backpack on his way out the door and got into his car.

Trey didn't go directly to school. He really didn't want to go at all, so he drove around the neighborhood and considered skipping school for the day. The only problem was, he didn't know what he would do or where he would go if he did skip class. He was so used to planning his activities with the idea that Rachel would be with him. Now that she wasn't, he felt lost. So at five minutes before 8:00, he decided he'd go to school, and with any luck, he would be able to avoid Rachel. Although he didn't care about being tardy, he drove quickly, speeding in and out of lanes as he maneuvered through the traffic. He knew the students' parking lot would be full by this time so he parked in the lot of a bank which was located just across the street from the school campus. There he encountered other students who were genuinely in a hurry to get to school. Trey was cut off from a parking space by a sophomore, who, acting totally without malice towards Trey, had simply been able to get to the spot before the senior. But Trey was looking for any excuse to bully or terrify anyone who crossed his path, so Trey quickly parked his car,

and with his engine still running, he jumped out and ran to the sophomore who was just getting out. Trey grabbed him and threw him roughly against the side of the boy's car. Trey yelled at him with a flurry of curses and a furious tone of voice before Trey punched the kid hard in the chest. Then he released his grip and the unlucky boy grabbed his books and ran for the school. Trey just laughed as he walked back to his car. That had cheered him up. He turned off his car, but left his backpack inside. He wasn't going to school to learn anymore, so he didn't think it was necessary to bring his books. While the other late-comers scurried across the busy avenue, in a futile attempt to avoid being tardy, Trey took his time, and when he finally walked through the door of his classroom, he was already ten minutes late.

He sat at his desk in the back of the class and put his head down. He didn't bother to listen to the teacher lecture like the rest of the class, and the teacher didn't do anything about Trey's behavior since it was late in the school year and all of Trey's teachers understood that some days he was willing to work and other days he wasn't. There was no point in nagging him to pay attention since that would only make him cause trouble among the other students, so his teachers just let him alone. This teacher had thirty-five other students in the class to teach and didn't have the time to worry about just one.

Silent, with his head down on the desk, Trey didn't cause any distraction so he disappeared from the consciousness of the rest of the class. There were always boys who also sat in the back who tried to get on Trey's good side by being friendly or imitating Trey's indifferent attitude towards school. Trey was a rebel, a guy who had been able to defy the institution of public education by participating in it as little as possible. He wasn't actually liked by everyone, he wasn't popular; students either feared him or envied the fear that he inspired from others. Trey wasn't afraid of anyone, so if his classmates weren't trying to get on his good side, they just left him alone. Today, Trey's body language made it very clear that he wanted to be left alone, so he was, by the teacher and the rest of the class.

When the bell rang, ending the first period of the day, Trey

hesitated, and continued to sit with his head in his folded arms. Depressed and tired, his body loathed to move, so he remained like he was for a moment longer. As the rest of the class left the room, Trey slowly picked his head up and watched them. Finally, he too got up, and since he hadn't brought any books with him to class, he just walked right out.

But once he was outside in the crowded hallway, he wished he had moved faster because Rachel was standing right outside the door waiting for him. Trey suddenly regretted having come to school. He should have known Rachel would find him, but since he couldn't hide from her forever, he would have to tell her everything right now, even though it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do. He gave her a look and walked past her, joining the crowd of students that moved sluggishly through the halls.

Rachel followed him and said, "I didn't know if you were coming to school today or not. You didn't say much on the phone this morning." She waited for Trey to say something in reply, but he didn't so she went on, "I drove my car this morning. It's been a long time since I've been in the driver's seat. You always drive me everywhere I need to go." She smiled at him appreciatively, but Trey ignored her.

Rachel could see that he wasn't in a good mood this morning and naturally she wanted to know why. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing's the matter."

"*Something's* the matter. Did you and your parents have another fight last night? I tried to call but your dad said that you couldn't come to the phone."

Trey shrugged, "Yeah, he's like that."

The flow of students came to a standstill as all the classes emptied and the student body filled the halls. Their faces looked sleepy and mindless, their mouths shut, but elsewhere in the halls, dozens of voices could be heard, creating a din which wrapped around Trey. The hallway was congested and a little too claustrophobic, so he pushed his way past the other students. Rachel followed close behind in his wake.

"I was calling to ask you whether or not you got your letter from

the university, but I guess you didn't." She still believed that Trey was going to be accepted, and since he was in such a glum mood, he must not have gotten the letter yet. She was surprised when she heard Trey say, over the noise in the hallway, "Yeah, I got it." The congestion started to clear and suddenly, there was plenty of room for Trey to walk without having to shove an underclassman out of his way. He wasn't really sure where he was going. He passed by the door to his second period classroom without going inside. He wanted to get rid of Rachel. He suddenly felt annoyed with the way she was following him through the hall, asking questions. He knew that she'd follow him almost anywhere, even into his next class, until she was finished talking to him.

"You did?! Well did you get accepted?"

"No."

Trey's answer took a few seconds to register in Rachel's brain. Her first instinct was to suspect that Trey was just kidding, that either he hadn't gotten his letter yet, or that he had gotten it and had been accepted but was just teasing her. But she quickly realized that Trey wasn't kidding—and a rejection *would* explain his bad mood.

"Are you serious?" she said at last. "Those sons of—!" Trey started to move away, but she grabbed his arm and tried to get him to stop. The best she could do, though, was only slow him down a little bit. "Wait a minute!" she said, her voice desperate. "What are you going to do? What are *we* going to do?"

Trey growled, "I can tell you what *we're* gonna to do. *You* are gonna go to college, and *I* am gonna stay here." At the same time, Trey finally found an escape from his pursuer: as they passed the boys' restroom, Trey broke free from Rachel's grip and hurried inside, and just to make sure Rachel wouldn't stand outside and wait for him, Trey remained behind the door for almost fifteen minutes after the bell rang announcing the start of the second period of the day.

Rachel left Trey alone until lunchtime, when she hoped he would be in a better mood. They routinely met at Rachel's locker before they went to buy lunch, but when Rachel didn't find Trey waiting for her, she went looking for him. She checked his locker, and then walked around

the halls for a few minutes as students hurried to the cafeteria or outside. She had had two hours to think about this terrible situation that they were now in, and Rachel wanted to tell Trey that everything was all right, that they would find some solution that could accommodate them both. She wanted to be sympathetic, to give Trey a hug and a kiss and try to make him feel better, but Trey was nowhere to be found. She wasn't even certain that he was still at school. For all she knew he might have left after that first period and gone home. She thought about calling him on her cell phone, but she remembered that she hadn't been able to contact him yesterday, and he may not want to answer the phone now.

So for the first time since tenth grade, Rachel went to lunch alone. She didn't bother to go to the snack bar, she just walked out the front doors of the school and around the corner of the auditorium, keeping her eyes open for Trey. She hoped to see him at the table, but she was disappointed. All of her old friends were already there, though. Jimmy and Stacey were talking and laughing across the table. Brian and April were arguing playfully. Jason, once again standing against the tree after spending one day at the table, was staring blankly at the group seated before him. Amid them all sat Andrea, quietly eating her lunch.

Andrea was the first to see Rachel, but Andrea almost didn't recognize her friend without Trey by her side. The two had been linked for so long in her imagination that they had become Rachel-and-Trey, Trey-and-Rachel. Now it was just Rachel, and Andrea wanted to find out why. When Rachel sat down at the end of the table, next to Brian, Andrea asked, over the noise of the others, "Where's Trey?"

The others at the table, now noticing Trey's absence too, became quiet and looked at Rachel who smiled, as though his absence were no big deal, and said, "Oh, he's somewhere. He's just depressed today and wants to be by himself."

"Why? What happened?" Andrea asked.

Rachel shrugged, "He got his letter from the university yesterday. They rejected him."

The news had a sobering effect on her friends. It was true that not everyone could honestly say they liked Trey, but they all felt genuine

sympathy at his plight. They had all suffered the same agonizing wait for colleges to either accept or reject them in the last few weeks. They had each been accepted somewhere by this point, but they knew it could just as easily have gone the other way, and any of them could be in Trey's shoes now, with a future even more uncertain than ever. Getting rejected might not be the end of the world, but it's pretty bad.

Andrea was the first to actually say something, "Jeez, Rachel, I'm sorry. What are you two going to do?"

Rachel looked down at the table and said, "I don't know, but I'm not worried. We'll work something out. It's OK."

"That's right," Andrea agreed, trying to match Rachel's feigned optimism. "Maybe he can apply for the spring semester . . ."

"Or get admitted conditionally," Jimmy helped.

"Or go to a junior college," Stacey said. "Pallas isn't the only college in the capital."

Everyone sitting at the table began to consider the possibilities. Even Jason had a word to say. Rachel started to feel a little better, but she wished Trey were present to hear this. He needed to be cheered up more than she did. Rachel wondered where he was and when she'd be able to talk to him again.

Eight

THAT Wednesday afternoon, Andrea came home to find her little brother gone. A hastily scribbled—almost illegible—note on the refrigerator revealed that her little brother had gone over to a friend's house. This left Andrea in the quiet and empty house by herself where every move seemed magnified and every sound seemed amplified. Her mother, divorced now for almost ten years, was at work and wouldn't be home until six. The empty house made Andrea feel lonely, so instead of remaining in the kitchen or watching TV in the living room, she just went straight to her bedroom. But here she found even more reminders of loneliness, such as the photographs of herself with her friends tacked to her bedroom wall. Greg was in several of these pictures, and it was his image that she was looking at. She hadn't taken down any of his pictures because she still had hope that their problems, whatever they were, could be fixed. She reached out and touched a picture that her mother had taken of her and Greg on prom night. They both looked so perfect that she couldn't imagine that she could ever replace it with another, happier picture. She didn't want to imagine that her relationship with Greg had come to an end.

Andrea sat down on her bed for a moment, but she couldn't stand the silence that filled the room so she got up and turned on her

stereo. She tuned the radio to the first random station she came to, but she didn't turn the volume up. She didn't want to hear the music just for the sake of listening to it; she just wanted something to chase away the silence, and the country music she heard accomplished that, although it did nothing to brighten her mood.

Andrea started thinking about Rachel and the absence of Trey from the group. It occurred to her that she didn't really know Trey. He had been going out with one of Andrea's best friends for most of their high school career, and yet Andrea never got to know him very well. Of course, Trey wasn't a very sociable person, and Andrea got the feeling that he never really felt too comfortable spending his lunch hour with Rachel's other friends. Nevertheless, Andrea had always considered him a part of her own circle of friends, and the concern she felt for his absence that day was combined with her sympathy for Rachel, causing her to feel depressed.

She felt sorry that Trey had received a rejection letter, and she felt sorry that he and Rachel would not be going to Pallas University together next fall. Andrea thought they made a good couple, Rachel and Trey, even though in many ways they were different from each other. But Andrea firmly believed that even opposites attract, and in the case of those two, they both seemed to offer what the other one lacked. Rachel had intelligence and understanding; Trey had strength and passion. Andrea decided that it would be a real shame, for both of them, if they broke up.

Her sympathy was interrupted by her cell phone's ringtone. Andrea always expected to get phone calls in the evening from her friends. Sometimes she would get five or six different calls in one night. She never wanted anyone to feel neglected so she tried to give equal time to everybody who called her, even if they didn't have much to say besides "Hello." Andrea didn't want to keep the caller waiting past the second ring, so in a quick succession of movements, she turned off her stereo and answered the phone. She was still feeling a little down after thinking about Rachel's problems with Trey so her voice sounded a little flat when she asked, "Hello?"

There was a short pause on the other end of the line before Andrea heard a male voice say, "Annie?"

It was Greg—Andrea recognized his voice immediately. All of a sudden she felt nervous and uneasy. She had wanted to talk to Greg so badly these last few days, but now that she had him on the telephone, she found that she didn't know what to say. Her only reply was, "Yeah, it's me. Hi Greg."

Greg sounded just as nervous as Andrea was at that moment. "I guess you're a little surprised to hear me call."

Andrea shrugged and smiled, not caring that Greg couldn't see her. "Yeah. Long time, no hear."

"I'm sorry about that. I guess it wasn't very nice of me to be avoiding you lately."

So, he really had been avoiding her. That didn't bode well, nor did his apparent willingness to admit it. Andrea thought that if he did still care, he could at least make up some excuse for why he hadn't seen or talked to her all week.

"I suppose I should have called you," he said, the nervousness in his voice growing stronger with every word.

"You could have talked to me at school," Andrea said. As she remembered the last few days she had spent in misery and worry, she began to get a little angry, but she suppressed it, in the distant hope that maybe Greg was calling to make amends.

"I know, and like I said, I'm sorry about that. Actually, you know, it's kind of funny in a way because there is something that I've been needing to tell you all week."

Andrea became frightened, and what little hope she had fled her. Greg *was* going to break up with her; it was certain. Hoping to stall, she interrupted him, "Oh! and I've got something to tell you too."

Greg almost sounded relieved to be interrupted, but he was a little irritated too, "OK. What's that?"

"Well, do you remember Rachel?"

"Your friend Rachel? Yeah I remember her. What about her?"

"Well, she found out a couple of days ago that she's been

accepted to Pallas University."

"That's good news," Greg said, doing his best to sound interested. He really wasn't, and in fact Andrea wasn't eager to discuss this subject with him either, but it was fresh on her mind. Greg added, "It's supposed to be a hard school to get into."

"Yeah, it is, but that's not all. You know her boyfriend, 'Trey?'"

"Yeah, I know him. He's in one of my classes."

"Well he applied to Pallas too, but he got rejected. He's been real upset about it. He didn't even join Rachel for lunch today." Greg didn't reply, so Andrea continued. "I don't know what's going to happen with them. I hope they don't break up. I always thought they were a cute couple. . . ." Andrea trailed off, distracted by her own words. There was silence on both ends of the line for a moment as Andrea and Greg considered what to say next.

"Annie—"

"Greg—"

"—What?"

"—Huh?"

"You were about to say something, go ahead."

"Oh . . . well," Andrea mumbled. "I was just thinking for a minute about our first date. Do you remember that?"

"Of course, it wasn't really very long ago."

"No, I guess not," Andrea said. "But remember how it started out so perfect? We got all dressed up and you took me to that nice restaurant—no one has ever done that for me before. The food was delicious, the whole mood was romantic, and then when dinner was over and we left the restaurant, neither of us could remember where we parked the car!"

On the other end of the line, Andrea heard Greg laugh. It was the first time he had sounded loose and comfortable during the call, and it made Andrea feel better too, like things could be the way they were before. It was all so easy; if they both put a little bit of effort into it, everything could be just like before. She spoke up with renewed confidence and continued, "Remember how we parked on the third level of that downtown parking garage but we thought we had parked on the

second level? We couldn't find your car and you thought it was stolen. Then we ran back to the restaurant and told everybody we could find what had happened and you kept asking for a phone so you could call the police. I was almost ready to cry because I felt so bad for you. And then it finally occurred to you that maybe we hadn't looked on the right level, so we went back and there was the car, right where we had left it. We were both so embarrassed!"

Greg hadn't said a word while Andrea retold the story, and Andrea didn't know for sure whether Greg was even listening, but his reply gave her a reason to be optimistic. "Yeah, that was pretty embarrassing," Greg said. "That definitely wasn't my finest hour." Andrea could sense that he was smiling on his end.

"But everything turned out all right," Andrea suggested.

"Yeah. And do you know what else? That night I saw for myself what a good friend you can be. You stood by me and helped me the whole time, and when we found the car you didn't laugh at me or make fun of me."

"Oh, I wouldn't have done that," Andrea said modestly. "It was a simple mistake, and besides, I thought it was on the second level too."

"But you were still a good friend," Greg insisted, "and that's why I feel like a jerk for avoiding you these last few days—and for why I called you."

Andrea grimaced. Her best attempt to delay the inevitable had failed. Greg was still determined to tell her, but Andrea wasn't about to help him. She played dumb and asked, "What did you want to tell me?"

"Well . . ." Greg was obviously struggling with his words, and it made Andrea feel a little better to know that this wasn't coming easy for him. "Annie—Andrea, I don't . . . I don't think we should date each other anymore."

"Oh."

"Look, don't take it personally," Greg hurried to say. "I really like you a lot, but I just don't think we're right for each other. I just wanted to call and let you know—I mean, I felt bad about avoiding you lately. You don't deserve to be treated like that."

"I understand," Andrea said, without understanding what she was saying. She suddenly felt numb. She could still hear Greg's voice, but he sounded like he was a million miles away.

"Are you sure?" Now that Greg said what he had called to say, he was searching for the fastest way to say goodbye and hang up the phone. It had been almost as unpleasant an experience for him as it was for Andrea, but he still tried to sound positive. "Look, we can still be friends. We'll still see each other at school and in the halls. There's no reason why we can't still say hello and talk sometimes, you know?"

As earnest as Greg tried to make his words sound, he didn't believe them, and Andrea, listening to him on the other end of the line could hear the insincerity in his voice. But whether Greg really meant what he said about them still being friends was irrelevant. She had a lot of friends and she had seen couples break up before—that's high school, it happens all the time. But even when people parted on good terms, it usually meant the end of their friendship. Pride and ego too often got mixed into the formula, and since breaking up is such an embarrassing ordeal, the easiest thing to do is just to ignore the other person when they meet. Andrea knew she would certainly see Greg again, eventually, and when they met, they would probably pretend like they had never even known each other. But Andrea didn't tell Greg any of this; she didn't feel like delivering a speech, so she just said, "Yeah, sure. We can still be friends."

There was a pause in the conversation that was painful and seemed to last forever, but it was finally broken by Greg, "Well, I gotta go. I'll talk to you later. Goodbye, Andrea."

Andrea didn't say goodbye, it was the one thing she never wanted to say to anyone. She heard a click which told her Greg had hung up the phone, and then came the dial tone pronouncing the death of her relationship with Greg. As Andrea hung up, she suddenly began to wonder about all her other friends and acquaintances she had made in high school. Would those relationships all end up like her relationship with Greg? Two weeks ago, Andrea might have called Greg her best friend, and she felt closer to him than to anyone else. Now, just a few

days later, it was all over. If this relationship, this friendship, was so fragile, what did that say about her other friendships with Rachel and Jimmy and Stacey and the rest? Were they going to end like this too? She felt frightened as she realized just how close to losing all of them she really was. In two months they would be graduating, and next fall they would all be going off to different colleges either here or out of town, and she would lose touch with them; one by one they would call her on the phone and say goodbye to her like Greg just did, maybe not parting out of ill will or because of any insurmountable differences, but because that was a natural phase of life. Her childhood was at an end, and swept away with her younger years would be all of those friendships she cherished. Andrea couldn't help but cry. She wanted so badly to hold on to them all, to just a few, or even to only one.

There was a tension between Brian and Jimmy on Thursday as the two boys left their lockers and went to lunch. Brian was in a hurry to get to the table, in so much of a hurry, in fact, that he was even willing to forgo eating lunch that day so he wouldn't waste any time wandering to the gym to get something to eat. He communicated none of this to Jimmy, however, and Jimmy didn't suspect anything was the matter with his friend. Jimmy, not in any hurry himself, took his time, much to Brian's distress. Brian might have just abandoned him, and hurried on ahead, excusing himself with a friendly, "See you at the table!" so that Jimmy's feelings wouldn't be hurt by a rude departure, except that Jimmy was intent on talking to Brian as they walked to the gym. Brian couldn't simply walk away from his friend in the middle of a conversation for what seemed to be no good reason. With his mind focused solely on getting to the table as quickly as possible, Brian didn't really pay attention to what Jimmy said, offering a "Yeah" or an "Uh huh" every once in a while. Just inside the entrance to the gymnasium building, Jimmy stood for a minute in front of the snack machine, making his selection before

putting his money in and pressing the buttons. A bag of chips fell to the bottom of the machine and Jimmy pulled it out. As soon as Jimmy had his lunch, Brian started to leave, but Jimmy stood where he was. His patience stretched to the limit, Brian asked, "C'mon, Jimmy, what are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for Jason."

"Why?"

"Why not?" Jimmy replied with a smile, stepping slowly to a wall and leaning against it. "We haven't been waiting for him lately."

Brian wondered why he had to pick today to start being nice to the guy who wasn't really a part of their group at all. "Why does he sit with us everyday?"

"He doesn't always sit with us," Jimmy replied with a smile. "Sometimes he leans against the tree."

Brian really didn't like Jason. As Jimmy said, the guy just leaned against the tree instead of sitting down at the table, creeping them all out. Only occasionally did he ever say anything, and if he did it was usually directed towards Jimmy. Brian decided he wasn't going to wait long for Jason. If the guy didn't show up in exactly thirty seconds, Brian would go on alone and let Jimmy wait for his buddy Jason all by himself. Silently, he started counting.

Brian was disappointed when he saw Jason enter the gym before Brian reached thirty. Now he had to wait as Jason bought his own lunch from the vending machines before the three of them could go on to the table. When they left the gym, Jason and Jimmy lagged behind, talking to each other while Brian, walking faster, gained distance from them. When he turned the corner of the auditorium, he was disappointed to find only April and Stacey sitting at the table. Rachel wasn't there yet.

As the three boys approached, they noticed the two girls were looking unusually solemn today. As the boys took their places (Jimmy and Brian at the table, Jason against the tree), Jimmy asked, "What happened, did somebody die?"

"Haven't you heard about Annie yet?" Stacey asked.

Jimmy and Brian looked at each other. Jimmy said, "I haven't

seen her this morning." Brian hadn't either. Jason looked on and listened.

"Well," Stacey explained, bitterness and indignation sneaking into her voice, "Greg called Annie yesterday and he dumped her. Can you believe it? He didn't even have the guts to tell her to her face!" For Stacey, this was yet another display of the inherent cruelty of humanity, another in a long list of such displays that she had witnessed in the last few years.

Jimmy stared down at the table and tried to appear as solemn as the girls had been. He wasn't particularly angry or upset, though, for he had dumped many girls before—and a few had even dumped him. But he guessed it must always be harder on girls than it is for guys, so he did have some sympathy for his friend Andrea. Jason, being the newcomer, wasn't as attached as the others were to Andrea, so the news didn't hit him very hard. He was, however, reminded of some Charley Z lyrics that seemed pertinent to this situation:

I've been wanting to tell you a secret I have:

You've seen it in the distance I've put in between us.

Jason wondered why anyone would want to put themselves in a vulnerable position of being in love when they knew how much pain it might cause.

Brian was full of compassion, but most of it was directed towards Rachel. Brian thought it must be humiliating for someone to face her friends once they know they have been dumped. He wondered if that was how Rachel felt, and if so, he wanted to help. He watched the corner of the auditorium closely, and he was the first to spot Andrea and Rachel, walking together. "Here she comes," he said.

Both girls looked dejected. Andrea's usual cheerful demeanor was replaced with downcast eyes and a frown, but while everyone else kept their attention on Andrea, Brian's gaze drifted to Rachel. She was dressed very casually today, wearing tennis shoes and jeans and a green T-shirt. Her hair was tied in a loose tail and she was wearing thick-rimmed glasses. Brian couldn't remember the last time he had seen Rachel wear her glasses.

The two girls stood at the head of the table, next to Jason

(making him clearly uncomfortable). Andrea looked at her friends and saw the sympathy on their faces. "I guess you've heard," she said.

Stacey stood up and said, "Yeah, we've heard. Why don't you come sit over here, Annie." She and April made some room in between themselves for Andrea who sat down while Rachel went to the end of the table and sat next to Brian. Rachel let her right arm support her head as she looked in Andrea's direction. She noticed Brian was staring at her.

"What?" she asked him.

Brian smiled and tapped his right temple with his finger.

"Oh, my glasses?" She pulled them off her face so she could look at them. They were old and ugly and Rachel wondered what she was thinking when she had picked out the frames. "I don't know. I didn't feel like wearing my contacts this morning."

"That's cool," Brian said. "You look good in glasses."

"Really?" she asked, putting the glasses back on her face with a skeptical smile. "I do not. I look like a geek. But who cares, right?"

Brian detected some listlessness in her voice. He guessed that she was still depressed about Trey. Brian was dying to learn what their status was, but he didn't dare ask her. He thought that if he didn't say anything about Trey, then maybe Rachel wouldn't think about him.

Meanwhile, the others at the table were fawning over Andrea, trying to make her feel better. Andrea really didn't want to talk to anybody today, not even her friends. She didn't like answering the questions they asked, questions that must be asked to satisfy the group's curiosity: What exactly had Greg said to her? What did she say to him? Had she seen him since yesterday? Was she really through with him forever? Was there anything that her friends could do? She would have preferred they leave her alone, but deep down she was touched by the attention they were showing her.

Andrea decided she had the sweetest friends in the world, even if they were a little nosy. Eventually, they were even able to make her smile.

Nine

ON WEDNESDAY and Thursday, Stacey hoped to lure Jimmy into another round of banter and playful teasing like they had shared on Tuesday. To her disappointment, she was unsuccessful, so unsuccessful that she never even exchanged one word with him.

Wednesday morning, Stacey waited in the same spot in front of the auditorium where she had stood on Tuesday. Now that she knew what Jimmy's car looked like, she didn't have to strain her eyes examining every driver and passenger of every car. But knowing which car was Jimmy's only made her feel impatient. On Tuesday, every car had offered the chance for hope. On Wednesday, every car that was not Jimmy's only left Stacey whispering, "Where are you, Jimmy?"

Minutes ticked by and the parking lot slowly filled to its capacity. Jimmy wasn't as early as he had been Tuesday, and his car didn't pull into the parking lot until ten minutes till 8:00. Then Jimmy walked so slowly through the maze of cars that two or three more minutes passed before he reached the bus depot. By that time, his sister had already gone on to the cafeteria.

Jimmy started to join the crowd in front of the main doors like he usually did, but when he got as far as the flagpole he stopped, turned around, and started walking the other way. Stacey watched as he

wandered in the direction of the cafeteria patio. Curious to know where he was going, and eager to talk to him again, Stacey followed him. As she struggled through the dense crowd of students waiting for the day to begin, she felt a sense of urgency. Time was slipping away, and if she didn't catch up to him, she wouldn't have a chance to talk to him before school started.

Stacey saw no sign that Jimmy knew she was following him. He never looked back, but as Stacey quickened her pace to catch up to him, he also began walking faster. Jimmy led her down to the patio where she thought he would enter the cafeteria. *Perhaps he's looking for me*, she hoped. But instead of entering the cafeteria, he walked past the doors and went around the other side of the building where he followed another concrete walkway that led him back to the front of the school. Stacey walked faster and tried to catch up, but she never came within twenty feet of him. Then the bell rang and Stacey lost him in the crowd as he entered the main building and went to class.

Thursday morning, Stacey again waited near the auditorium and watched the cars arrive, one by one. Her determination went unrewarded, however, when the last of the spaces in the students' lot was taken and Jimmy's car had not yet arrived. Stacey continued to wait and watch until she finally saw Jimmy and his sister who had been forced to park off campus. Stacey still had hope that she might talk to him, but before Jimmy even reached the bus depot, the bell rang, and Stacey had to go to class.

Stacey still saw Jimmy at lunchtime, but her midday encounters were much less exciting than her experience of Tuesday morning. At lunch, Stacey was forced to share Jimmy with Brian and Andrea. Stacey wanted to be alone with him so she could have his full attention.

She was frustrated, and she started to realize that she couldn't count on Jimmy to make anything happen. If anybody was going to act, it would have to be her, and Thursday was as excellent an opportunity as any. Sunday was Easter, which meant Friday was a day off. Easter weekend was the last big holiday on the school calendar before graduation. The school year was coming to a close, and Stacey believed

that Jimmy might be her last opportunity for some sort of normalcy and happiness before she left high school forever.

Rachel's problems with Trey, and Greg's dumping of Andrea also weighed heavily on Stacey's mind. She never thought she would see the day when both Andrea and Rachel would be without boyfriends. They were both well-liked, pretty, smart, and had good reputations, but now they were alone. Stacey, who never believed she would have a boyfriend in high school, now saw an opportunity to move up the social ladder even as her two friends were on the way down. Wouldn't it be something if, for just one day at least, she could have a boyfriend while Andrea and Rachel went without? The thought inspired Stacey, and by the end of the day she decided that she would do something she thought she would never dare to do—or even be able to do—until she left high school.

When the final bell rang at 3:00 and school was dismissed, Stacey could be seen moving swiftly, through the crowded hallways. She never strode proudly or tried to attract attention to herself. Doing so would only invite taunts, insults, or knowing stares from her classmates. It was always better just to try to blend into the crowd and not be noticed. She didn't always succeed, but sometimes she did. After making a quick stop at her locker for her homework, Stacey hurried to Jimmy's locker. She knew exactly where it was although she had never spent any time in front of it. Sometimes, as she traveled from one class to another, she would see him there, talking to one of his girlfriends or to Brian. Before, she had never taken much notice of Jimmy, but things had changed, and all week long, Stacey had made a point to walk past Jimmy's locker as often as she could, just to see if he was there.

To Stacey's delight, she found Jimmy at his locker, and what's more, he was alone. Jimmy exchanged the books he didn't need for those he did, and when everything was in order, he slammed the locker door shut, slung his backpack over his shoulder, and turned to see Stacey approaching him. Stacey hadn't been nervous about confronting Jimmy this afternoon, but when she saw him looking at her, she began to second-guess herself. She realized that the next few minutes would not be at all like the friendly teasing and flirting she had engaged in this week.

Stacey was about to put her emotions on the line, and that made her afraid. After years of verbal abuse from her classmates, Stacey had almost gotten used to all the mean things that teenagers can say and do, but she didn't know how she would handle a rejection from this boy, whom she considered more than a friend.

Jimmy had no idea what was about to happen. He thought Stacey was a pretty girl, and if she wasn't so ostracized, having her around so much wouldn't be so bad, but he felt uncomfortable being seen with her in front of so many of his peers. Luckily, his classmates were in a rush to get started on their three-day holiday weekend, and the crowded hallways emptied quickly. Jimmy had always promised himself that he would never let Stacey know how he felt about her and try to treat her with respect without revealing the discomfort that she sometimes caused him. Perhaps he was too successful in his efforts.

Jimmy guessed Stacey was coming to tease him some more, so he launched a preemptive strike: "Oh no, it's you! Go away!" Jimmy put up his hands as if to shield himself from her, but through his hands Stacey could see his smile, so she wasn't offended.

"Cut it out, Jimmy. I just want to talk to you."

"What about?" the boy asked. Stacey smiled inwardly and wondered how Jimmy could be so naive sometimes. If only he knew what she wanted. Both of them started walking towards the main doors of the school, but they walked very slowly. Stacey wanted to prolong this conversation for as long as possible so she could build up her confidence to ask the question that now echoed in her mind. As for Jimmy, he walked slowly because he would rather talk to Stacey in this emptying hallway than outside where the entire student body could see them together.

Stacey began, "Didn't you tell me once that you had Mr. Thomas for geology class last year?"

"Probably," Jimmy said. "At any rate, it's true. I made a C in that class. I didn't like it."

"Well I've got him for physics this year," Stacey said. "And he is *so* bizarre! When you were in his class, would he go off on weird tangents

all the time?"

Jimmy smiled at the memory. Several instances of Mr. Thomas living up to his legendary reputation as a teacher incapable of staying focused on one train of thought for more than five minutes came to Jimmy's mind. "Yeah, I remember. Is he still like that this year?"

"He's even worse! I just came from his class where we spent the last hour talking about the different movies that have been released this spring."

Jimmy laughed, "A whole hour?"

"Yes! I couldn't believe it! And the worst part is my class takes advantage of him so easily."

"What happened?"

"Well, Mr. Thomas was taking roll, and you know how he likes to call everybody's name out and make them say 'Here'? Well, he started calling names like he usually does, and when he got to Billy Green's name, Kevin West suddenly asked Mr. Thomas if he had seen the new movie starring *Jeremy* Green. And it all started from there."

Still smiling, Jimmy said with approval, "Kevin's pretty quick. I wouldn't have thought of that."

"Yeah, Mr. Thomas wouldn't even have finished calling roll if the girl who collects the attendance slips for the final period hadn't knocked on the door. Anyway, Mr. Thomas had seen the movie last weekend and so he started to tell us all about it." Nervously, Stacey clutched the straps of her backpack as she paused, not so much to let Jimmy respond, but because she was planning what she was going to say next.

Jimmy took advantage of her silence. They weren't very far from the main doors, and he could hear the voices of several hundred students on the other side. "Wow," he sighed, shaking his head, and with a tone of voice that he hoped would indicate to Stacey that their conversation was at an end, he said, "So you ended up doing nothing at all in class today. That's funny."

Stacey picked up on what Jimmy's voice was trying to communicate, so she walked even more slowly and said, "So, have you seen that new *Jeremy* Green movie? I think it's called *The Road To*

Nowhere."

Jimmy shook his head. "No, not yet. I want to though. It looks good."

"I want to see it too." She swallowed. "You know, if you aren't doing anything tonight, maybe we can go see it together."

Jimmy thought Stacey was kidding. "Sure," he said with a wide grin, "let's go!"

Stacey's heart leapt, but she realized that Jimmy hadn't taken her seriously. She took two quick steps forward until she was standing right in front of Jimmy, facing him. They both stopped walking and Stacey said, "I mean it, Jimmy. I'd like to go see the movie with you."

Jimmy could see now that she was serious, and he also turned serious. He looked around nervously to see if anyone had overheard them, but by now the hallway was virtually deserted. Only a handful of students were still on their way outside, and none of them seemed interested in the two seniors. "Why do you want to go with *me*?" Jimmy whispered.

Stacey struggled to find an answer to his question that wouldn't give everything away. She could see that Jimmy was obviously uncomfortable; she told herself that was just because Jimmy probably wasn't used to being asked out by girls. He seemed to be the type who did all the asking himself. Stacey replied with a bashful shrug, a glance at the floor, a quiver in her voice, and an understatement: "Just because you're my friend—it'll be purely platonic if that's what you're worried about—you don't even have to call it a *date*."

Jimmy could see that Stacey was afraid he'd say No, but Jimmy was afraid of saying Yes. How could he go out with Stacey? If people around school found out, he'd be a laughingstock: the guy who went out with the Veggie Girl—he could hear the jeering already. Jimmy wanted to say No, but when he saw the desperation and the nervousness on Stacey's face he caved in. "OK. We'll go. I guess I'm not doing anything tonight anyway."

Stacey wanted to give Jimmy a hug, she was so happy. "Great!" she said as they started walking again and pushed through the main doors

of the school. "I'll call you this afternoon when I get home and we'll make plans."

Jimmy just nodded now that they were outside and it was much more crowded. The big, yellow school buses were still lined up in the depot, their cargoes of freshmen and sophomores eager to go home. The students' parking lot was a traffic nightmare, as always. Dozens of students still loitered around the flagpole as they waited for buses that had not yet arrived, or for cars to come pick them up. Jimmy saw Emma waiting impatiently for him. He made his way through the crowd with Stacey happily at his heels. Even though she was only a sophomore, Emma had heard the rumors about Stacey, but she also knew that Stacey was one of the girls her brother sat with during lunch, so she wasn't surprised to see them together. "It's about time," she said. "We're never going to get out of here with all the traffic."

Stacey tapped Jimmy on the shoulder and reminded him, "I'll call you later!"

"Bye," Jimmy mumbled, not knowing whether she heard him or not. She didn't seem to notice anyway as she held her head high and made her way through the crowd of students towards the parking lot. As Jimmy and Emma started their long trek to the apartment complex next to the school campus, Jimmy worried about what he had done, and what would happen tonight.

"Jimmy, I'm so proud of you," Emma said, poking her head through the door of the bathroom as Jimmy plugged in his electric razor. He gave his sister a confused look and then turned on the razor. It buzzed, and as Jimmy ran it along his cheeks and his neck, he could see Emma, still watching him with an expression of genuine pride shining from her face. Neither of them said a word to each other until Jimmy finished shaving and tuned off the razor. Then he asked, "Why?"

"Because of what you're doing."

"Shaving? I do that every day. Or at least every *other* day," Jimmy said with a smile.

"I don't mean that. I mean taking your friend Stacey out on a date."

Jimmy winced at the word "date" but he tried not to let Emma see the discomfort that the word caused. Jimmy had tried to keep his engagement with Stacey a secret. When they got home from school, he told her that he planned to go hang out with Brian and some other guys that night, and Emma believed him until the phone rang and she answered it. It was Stacey, calling Jimmy about the date. Emma gave the phone to her brother and then listened in on his half of the conversation. Emma heard enough to figure out that he was actually going to take Stacey to see a movie. "It's not really a date," Jimmy said.

"Then what is it?"

"It's just two people going to see a movie and then getting something to eat afterwards."

"Sounds like a date to me."

Jimmy picked up his toothbrush and applied a dab of blue toothpaste. There was another pause as Jimmy brushed his teeth. Although he tried to look only at his own reflection in the mirror, he couldn't help but notice Emma's reflection too as she continued to stare fondly at him.

When he had finished brushing and had rinsed his mouth with water, he added, "Besides, *she's* the one who asked *me* out, so it's not like I'm interested in her or anything."

He left the bathroom, and walked down the hallway to his bedroom so he could change his clothes. Emma followed her brother and would have accompanied him into his bedroom had he not shut the door in her face as soon as he was inside. It was a few minutes past 5:00 in the evening now. Stacey had called an hour earlier and they had decided that Jimmy would pick her up at 5:45. *The Road To Nowhere* started at 6:20. Emma waited outside the door and said, "But the point is, when she asked you, you said Yes. I'll bet there isn't anyone else at school who would have told her Yes."

"Sure there is," Jimmy said from the other side of the door as he

put on a nice shirt. Now that he was out of Emma's sight, he could let his guard down a little bit. There was no smile, no look of ease and contentment on his face now, only worry and regret. "Stacey gets asked out all the time," he lied.

"No she doesn't," Emma said. "I know who Stacey is. *Everybody's* heard the story. You're probably the closest thing she's got to a boyfriend, and I think it's sweet of you to take her out. You really are a true friend, Jimmy."

Jimmy wished she'd go away and leave him alone. "I'm just being nice," he replied.

"This night may not mean much to you," Emma said, "but I'll bet it means a lot to her. When was the last time she went out on a date?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, when did that story about her start?"

"I don't know. Ninth grade maybe? I didn't know her back then."

"Jeez, that long ago? Maybe you're her *first* date."

Jimmy surprised his sister by suddenly opening the door. He looked at her and said forcefully, emphasizing every word, "This. Isn't. A. Date. All right? Now leave me alone."

Emma smiled at him, having lost none of her pride. "OK," she said, "I'll leave you alone." But before she left she quickly gave her big brother a kiss on the cheek.

Jimmy shut the door and leaned against it. If he could just get through this night all right, he promised himself he would never let Stacey do this to him again. No matter how many times she asked, no matter how much she begged, he would never, *ever* go out with her again.

When he was dressed and ready to go, he opened his bedroom door. He expected to see Emma still hanging around in the hall, but she had left him alone as he had asked. He found her in the living room, watching television. Emma heard him come out of his room and she turned around to take a look at him. She said, "Oooh Jimmy, Stacey's gonna be all over you tonight!" Then she erupted into giggles. Jimmy just rolled his eyes and didn't try to argue with her again. He grabbed his car keys and went out the front door.

As he drove to Stacey's house, Jimmy reviewed his plan for this evening. After he had agreed to go out with her earlier that afternoon, Jimmy had felt dread and doom, but when he got home from school, a simple solution to his problem occurred to him. They lived in a pretty big city and obviously there was more than one movie theater. Jimmy and most of his classmates from school usually went to a recently built sixteen screen multiplex not far from where he lived. It was a popular spot on weekends and Jimmy had taken countless dates there. But he knew that if he took Stacey there, everybody from school would see him with Stacey out on a "date". If he couldn't convince his own sister that this trip to the movies wasn't really a date, then he'd never be able to convince anyone else next Monday when the teasing began.

But all Jimmy had to do was take Stacey to *another* movie theater, one which wasn't frequented by his classmates and friends. The solution was so simple; both he and Stacey would get what they want: Stacey could see the movie with him, and he would not have to worry about his reputation. Jimmy smiled at the brilliance of his plan.

T e n

AS STACEY searched through her closet for just the right dress, she felt more nervous than she had ever felt before—but she also thought it was the best feeling she had experienced in a very long time. The *anticipation* of the date—her first *real* date—was a wonderful feeling. Last week, the only positive thing she had been looking forward to in her life was her graduation from high school so that she might finally get away from the places and the people that had been so cruel to her. But now that Jimmy had said Yes to her invitation to go out, she felt happy and hopeful about herself. She felt like she was fourteen again—the last time she had felt this optimistic everyday. It almost made her regret that her time in high school was ending. If this date with Jimmy was possible, what other things might she still have time to do?

Ever since she got home from school, Stacey had been dying to call her friends and tell them that she and Jimmy were going out tonight. In an incredible demonstration of self-control, however, she did not. She decided it would be better to wait until tomorrow morning, after the date was completed, to call Andrea and April. Hopefully, by then she would have something really exciting to tell. She wondered if Jimmy had told Brian, or one of his other friends, but she supposed he hadn't. Boys probably don't call each other and talk about their dates like that, she

decided, not unless they *score*. Stacey kept her wonderful news to herself, and she spent most of her first hour home from school in her closet, trying to decide which outfit to wear. She had so many dresses, many of which had only been worn two or three times, that she found her decision impossible. At about 4:00, after she had narrowed the choices in her wardrobe down to five dresses, the phone rang. Stacey answered it and found Andrea on the other end of the line.

"Hi," Andrea said, "I'm just sitting here on a Thursday afternoon with nothing to do, bored out of my mind. I thought I'd just call and say hey. Hey."

"Hey," Stacey giggled.

"So do you wanna come over tonight? We can order a pizza or make popcorn or something and watch a movie. I was gonna call April and invite her over too. My mom and brother will be here, but they'll stay out of our way . . . or at least my mom will."

"Sounds like fun, but I can't," Stacey said, unable to contain her excitement. "I've got plans tonight!"

"Plans? What kind of plans?"

"I've got a date!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!!"

"Yes!!"

"Who with? Do I know him?" Andrea was shocked but happy for her friend. Stacey could be kidding, but the excitement in her voice suggested that she wasn't.

"You sure do—it's Jimmy!"

"*Our* Jimmy?" Andrea asked. Stacey and Jimmy? She didn't believe it; Stacey had to be kidding.

"It's true! I asked him today if he wanted to go see *The Road To Nowhere* with me, and he said Yes."

"You guys are really going out on a date? A *date* date?" Andrea still found it hard to accept. She tried to imagine Jimmy and Stacey at the theater together but the image seemed so strange.

"I swear to God it's true! You can call him up and ask him yourself if you don't believe me."

"I believe you, and I think it's great. It sounds like you're gonna have a better time tonight than I will."

As Stacey stared at the five dresses laid out on her bed, still trying to decide which one to wear, she said, "I'm getting real nervous, though. How should I act? How do you think he'll act? Have you ever heard him talk about me? Recently, I mean."

"Well, let me think," Andrea said. ". . . I don't know. Maybe, but just about the only times I've seen him lately have been at lunch, when you're around. Besides, I've been real distracted lately anyway. For all I know, Brian and April are going out tonight too."

"It's just that Jimmy's sometimes hard to read, you know?" Stacey said as she picked up one of her dresses and carried it back to her closet, having decided that she would not wear it. It was red and the skirt was too short. She didn't want to look like a slut. "I mean, I asked him out today, and obviously he said Yes, and it seems like he wants to go, but . . . I guess what I'm asking is, do you think he likes me?"

Andrea paused; the whole situation suddenly made a lot more sense. "Stacey, do you have a crush on Jimmy?" she asked. Andrea had no idea that her friend had felt this way about Jimmy. Sure, they often teased and flirted with each other at lunch, but Andrea thought they were just being playful. She had never suspected that there might be something more besides an innocent friendship. How long had this been going on?

Stacey blushed at Andrea's question. "No . . . well . . . I don't know. I mean, I don't want to do anything if I don't think he feels the same way—and if he doesn't that's OK. I mean, I'll understand, considering what everyone else thinks about me." Suddenly, the other four dresses on the bed didn't look right either. Maybe she should just call Jimmy and tell him to forget about their date.

Andrea said, "Look, he said Yes, so go on the date and have fun. Don't worry about what he thinks about you. If something is going to happen, it'll happen. You can't force it."

"Thanks. You're right. I should just try to have fun."

The girls said goodbye to each other after Andrea made Stacey promise to call her tomorrow morning and tell her everything that happened. Stacey, her mood brightening, hung up the telephone and took another look at the dresses. She decided that the blue dress she bought last fall would be perfect.

A few minutes later, she called Jimmy so that they could arrange the details for this evening. Jimmy suggested he would pick her up at about 5:45. At 5:00, when both her parents came home, Stacey didn't hesitate to tell them everything that had happened that afternoon, altering only one detail: she claimed it was Jimmy who had asked her out, rather than she asking him. Her parents were both aware of their daughter's unpopularity at school and the taunting that her classmates inflicted on her, despite Stacey's best efforts to shield them from that knowledge, and she wanted her parents to believe that there was someone at school who was sincerely interested in her. Naturally, they were very happy about their daughter's date and pledged to help in any way they could.

Stacey's mother helped her get dressed, prepare her hair, and apply her make-up. She even let her daughter borrow some of her more expensive perfume. Stacey worried that she might be overdoing it; after all, she and Jimmy were only going to a movie and getting something to eat afterwards—this wasn't like the prom or anything. But her mother said that her first date was important and she should look her best, and deep down, Stacey agreed.

Jimmy arrived at Stacey's house at a quarter till six. He parked the car against the curb, and waited a few minutes, hoping that Stacey would see his car and come outside to meet him. When she didn't, he groaned and got out of his car, walking hesitantly towards the front door, glancing at the windows of the nearby houses for spectators. He was feeling more than a little paranoid tonight and very nervous—something which was unusual for him. He had been on so many dates in the last few years that the whole process had become routine, especially something basic like going to see a movie. But tonight he felt like he was reliving his first date

all over again, worried about everything that could possibly go wrong. This was certainly his riskiest date ever. Going out in public with Stacey was dangerous, but he was determined to go through with it. Jimmy couldn't help but feel sorry for Stacey because she really was a nice girl. Emma was right: this was a noble act, but Jimmy didn't feel very noble.

He rang the doorbell and waited. When the door opened, Jimmy met Stacey's father, who wore a wide grin on his face. Jimmy matched the grin, inch for inch.

"Hello there!" Stacey's father said, shaking Jimmy's hand. "You must be Jimmy. Come in!"

Jimmy thanked the man and took a few steps into the house but refused to go any further. He was already afraid that Stacey might get the wrong idea about him, and now he worried that Stacey's parents might get the wrong idea, too.

"Stacey's still getting ready—you know how girls are before a date."

Jimmy nodded and smiled. Stacey's father tried to make small talk, to try and get to know the young man who was taking his daughter out on her first date, but Jimmy wasn't in the mood to talk, so he said very little. At last, Stacey, followed by her mother, met Jimmy in the foyer.

"I'm ready!" she said.

"You look beautiful, honey," her father said.

"Yeah," Jimmy agreed, politely. "You look great. Are you ready to go?"

"Sure!" Stacey replied, grabbing her purse. "Let's go."

Before they could escape out the door, though, Stacey's mother said to her husband, "Is there any time when they should be home? We don't want her staying out all night."

"*Mom!*" Stacey squealed, embarrassed.

Stacey's father, who had never had to assign his daughter a curfew for a date, thought about it. "Well, they're both eighteen . . . I don't know—maybe midnight?"

"*Dad!*"

"No problem," Jimmy said quickly, and the teenagers were out the door.

As they walked to the car parked out front, Stacey apologized for her parents' behavior. Jimmy unlocked the passenger door to his car and opened it for Stacey. It was all part of the routine. When he walked around to his side of the car and opened the door, he took a quick look back at Stacey's house and could see her parents trying not to be seen as they peeked through the blinds. Jimmy sighed, rolled his eyes, and got in the car.

"I don't think I've ever been in your car," Stacey said as Jimmy started the engine. She was looking at everything with earnest curiosity, as if she had never seen the inside of a car before.

"Well, it's not much, but it gets me where I need to go," Jimmy said flatly. "Most of the time."

"Yeah, I guess that's all that's important." Stacey looked at Jimmy, but her date kept his eyes on the road. "You look nice tonight," she said.

"Thanks." He looked at her, knowing that he should return the compliment. "And you look . . . ready for a night on the town."

"Is it too much?" Stacey asked, adjusting her dress and feeling self-conscious.

Jimmy shrugged, "Well, if nothing else, you'll be the best dressed girl at the movies tonight." He noticed how she kept looking down at her dress and he saw that she was nervous, so he said, "Don't worry about it. You look all right."

As they drove out of the cluster of houses that was Stacey's neighborhood, Jimmy took a right on an avenue which would have led them directly to their local movie theater. However, to get to the theater, Jimmy should have taken a left.

Stacey noticed the wrong turn immediately. "What are you doing?" she asked. "The theater is back that way." She pointed behind them and turned halfway around in her seat.

"We're going to the Cineplex 12," Jimmy explained.

"Cineplex 12?" Stacey asked, confused. "But why? That's halfway across town!"

"I know, but that's where I usually go on dates," Jimmy lied. "The other theater is always too crowded."

"Oh," Stacey said. It really didn't matter to her which theater they went to, but she still thought it was strange that Jimmy would go so far out of his way. She didn't say anything else about it and let Jimmy drive.

In order to get to the Cineplex 12, they had to take the freeway, and it was here that Jimmy's car best displayed its age. His car could handle streets where the speed limit was only forty-five miles per hour or less, but on the freeway, where one had to drive sixty or sixty-five just to keep from blocking traffic, Jimmy's little car had trouble. The engine strained to match the speed limit, and the sound of the engine drowned out most other sounds from inside and outside the car. The engine's groaning and grinding wasn't a particularly healthy sound, and Jimmy hated to hear it so he turned on the radio and turned the volume up, hoping that the music might distract their attention from the sound of the engine.

In spite of the evening rush-hour traffic they encountered on the freeway, they arrived at the Cineplex 12 at ten minutes after six. It was still daylight out, with the sun just beginning its descent below the horizon. Jimmy didn't like the light, he would have preferred the darkness which could further conceal him and Stacey. He didn't think there would be anyone at this theater that either he or Stacey knew, but the protection of night would have made him feel better anyway. They found a parking space, got out of the car, and proceeded to the ticket booth.

The theater was busy; a long line of people waited to buy tickets, far more than Jimmy expected there would be. He hoped that *The Road To Nowhere* wasn't sold out. If it were, would Stacey then insist they go back to their neighborhood theater and see it there? He looked around nervously at the other people in line, searching for familiar faces. He didn't recognize anybody, and that made him feel better. Meanwhile, Stacey was having a wonderful time. Here she was, on a date with an attractive boy like Jimmy for all the world to see. She stood straight and tall, but always close to Jimmy, so that anyone who cared could clearly

see that they were a couple. When they got to the front of the line, and Jimmy asked for two tickets for *The Road To Nowhere*, Stacey's heart leapt. They *were* a couple; they were on a *date*.

They got their tickets and went into the lobby. Jimmy asked Stacey if she wanted something from the snack bar, but Stacey modestly said no. She was a little hungry, but she decided to save her appetite for their dinner after the movie. They went straight into the theater and found that the previews were already playing. The flashes of light from the screen only intermittently illuminating the darkened auditorium, along with the roaring music and sound blasting out of stereo speakers in the wall, made their experience of searching for a place to sit akin to navigating through a thunderstorm at night. There were a lot of people already in the theater, so it took them a moment to find a good pair of seats. At last they sat down, and in a few minutes, the movie began.

The Road To Nowhere had been marketed as a love story (although there was far more action and violence in the film than romance) and many people considered it a good "date movie." Thus the theater that evening was filled with couples who were mostly either in their teens or their twenties. One couple in particular caught Stacey's attention as her eyes adjusted to the dim light in the theater. They were sitting a little to Stacey and Jimmy's right, about two rows in front of them. As the movie started, the boy put his arm around the girl, and throughout the movie they snuggled and kissed and whispered to each other. They weren't making out, but it was clear to Stacey, and to whomever else might have been watching, that they were very much in love. Stacey stared at them and wished Jimmy would put his arm around her. She didn't expect him to start kissing her too—it was only their first date, after all—but it would have felt so good to feel Jimmy's arm around her shoulders. She sat through the whole movie hoping and waiting for him to make some sort of move, but he never did. He just sat in his seat and watched the film.

Jimmy felt miserable and cramped as he sat there, afraid to make any sort of movement lest Stacey misinterpret it as something more than simply shifting in his seat. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye

from time to time, and she always had her gaze directed towards the screen. But Jimmy had been on enough dates in his life to know that the girl wasn't really focused on the movie. She was like him: waiting, wondering, and watching.

When the movie ended and they left the theater, their moods were still conflicting. The evening hadn't quite gone the way Stacey had hoped, but she didn't complain; she was still having a good time. Jimmy, however, privately decided this was his worst date ever. He felt restrained and nervous, all because he had agreed to go out with a girl he never wanted to go out with, a girl *nobody* wanted to go out with. Unfortunately for Jimmy, the evening was only half over, and he knew that the last ninety minutes spent in a darkened movie theater was going to be heaven compared to their dinner. As a rule, Jimmy never took a first date to a really nice restaurant, unless he definitely liked the girl. He never had much money to spend, and he wasn't eager to blow what little he had on a girl he hardly knew. In the case of Stacey, he certainly didn't plan to take her to a nice restaurant, since, again, he didn't want to give Stacey the wrong idea. Stacey, of course, while she expected a lot from this date with Jimmy, was too inexperienced to complain when she learned that Jimmy was only going to spring for dinner at a fast food restaurant. There were a number of restaurants across the street from the Cineplex 12, offering everything from tacos to hamburgers to chicken. Jimmy asked Stacey where she wanted to eat, but Stacey insisted the decision was up to him, so Jimmy picked the closest restaurant and they ran across the street.

The place was packed this Thursday night before the three-day Easter weekend. The other customers were mostly teenage couples on dates or teenagers hanging out with friends. Inside, among these bright lights and this crowd of people, Jimmy began to feel a little uneasy, but as he examined the crowd, he reminded himself that it was very unlikely anyone he knew would be at this restaurant in this part of town. They stood in line and waited for their turn to order. Stacey, who hadn't had a bite to eat since she had gotten home from school that afternoon, was famished, and she ordered a full meal. Jimmy paid for everything and

carried the food on a tiny tray.

They found a small table with two chairs next to the wall. Stacey wanted to be alone with Jimmy so she could talk to him, and Jimmy wanted to be alone with Stacey so that he wouldn't be seen, but there wasn't a single table in the restaurant that wasn't surrounded by people so when they sat down and started eating, both of them were quiet and reserved. Stacey remarked to her date that this certainly wasn't like lunch at school. "Is this what eating in the cafeteria is like?" she asked, referring to the crowd.

"Haven't you ever eaten in the cafeteria?" Jimmy asked. Before he and Brian joined Andrea's friends the year before, they sometimes sat in the cafeteria, but he couldn't ever remember seeing Stacey in the cafeteria too.

"I used to, when I was a freshman, but I didn't stay there very long. It was too easy for people to say things . . . you know?" Neither Stacey nor Jimmy wanted to talk about *that*, and both of them were a little embarrassed that the subject had even been brought up.

Stacey quickly began another topic, and she spoke with her earlier enthusiasm. Jimmy only half listened to her, though, for he had an odd feeling that someone was watching him. At first, he thought it was just his paranoia again, and he told himself that he was safe here. From where Jimmy was sitting, he could see most of the restaurant and the other people who were eating. He looked around nervously, but found no one who cared to look back. He heard Stacey stop talking and saw her sucking on the straw in her soda. Her eyes were on him and he could tell she was happy. Jimmy picked up his hamburger and took a big bite.

"You're quiet tonight," Stacey observed after a moment.

Jimmy shrugged. "I'm just thinking."

"About what?"

Jimmy thought and then replied, "About the movie."

"Of course, the movie!" Stacey exclaimed. "We haven't even talked about it since we left the theater! What did you like best about it?"

Jimmy didn't know what to say. He bought some time by taking another bite out of his hamburger, and then he answered, "The acting

was good."

His date was quick to agree. "Oh, I think so too. Especially that Jeremy Green. God, he's cute."

"Well, I wouldn't know anything about that," Jimmy smiled.

Stacey just laughed, at Jimmy and at herself. She was having so much fun. For anyone else, their date so far might have been boring, and certainly awkward, but for Stacey it was a dream come true.

Jimmy might have started to loosen up, but a feeling of panic suddenly gripped him when he noticed a young couple, who had also just come over from the theater across the street, enter the restaurant. Jimmy didn't recognize the guy, who was tall, neatly dressed, and looked like he might be old enough to be in college, but Jimmy did recognize the girl. He remembered her from his tenth grade English class. He didn't know her name, but she had red hair and he often saw her in the hallways between classes. The girl didn't see Jimmy or Stacey upon entering, the seated couple were too far away from them and the girl and her date immediately stepped up to the counter to order their dinner, their eyes on the menu suspended above them.

Jimmy continued to watch his classmate, while at the same time feigning interest in what Stacey was saying, for she was still talking about the movie. He took another big bite out of his hamburger, hoping they could finish their dinner and get out of this place before the girl who had just come in saw them. He knew he could finish his meal in just a couple of minutes, but Stacey hadn't eaten very much because she had been doing most of the talking. In fact, Stacey was enjoying herself so much that she purposefully ate slowly, just to make this evening last a little bit longer.

Jimmy, meanwhile, was trying not to panic. *What is she doing here, on the other side of town?* Jimmy asked himself, as if the answer to that question could somehow make the situation all right. He looked at the girl several times to make sure that this really was the girl he remembered from school. He decided there was no doubt about it, and Jimmy feared what she might do or say, not just here, tonight, but at school next Monday, if she saw Jimmy and the Veggie Girl on what appeared to be a

date. Jimmy didn't like the idea of anyone thinking that he and Stacey were on a date; even the "knowing" stares from strangers here and in the movie theater had made him uncomfortable. Now it was possible that everyone at school might find out about this evening, and he couldn't bear that to happen.

He watched the girl and her boyfriend nervously as they left the counter with their food. They made a stop to pick up napkins and straws and then looked out over the whole restaurant for a place to sit. Large numbers of people had been coming in and out of here ever since Jimmy and Stacey had arrived. Although the room looked crowded, many of the tables were actually unoccupied, but because previous diners had left their trash behind there were very few clean tables available. Jimmy bowed his head hoping the girl wouldn't be able to see his face. Stacey had her back to them, so they couldn't see her. Jimmy didn't raise his head again until he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the couple begin to move. If only they would sit at a table on the other side of the restaurant, there might be enough of a crowd in between them to obstruct their view of each other. Unfortunately, the couple made their way around tables and chairs, over outstretched feet and purses, and past rowdy teenagers who emphasized everything they said with wild gestures of their arms to a table in the middle of the room. They weren't exactly in the same area that Jimmy and Stacey were, but they were close enough so that a mere turn of the head in their direction would be enough to clearly see the couple by the window. Jimmy held his head in his hand in a desperate attempt to hide himself.

Stacey, who was still talking all the while that Jimmy was engaged in this crisis, couldn't help but notice Jimmy acting strangely. She didn't catch his furtive glances in the direction of the back of the restaurant, so she didn't realize what was causing Jimmy's odd behavior. "Are you all right?" she asked, at last.

"What?"

"I asked if you're all right. You look sick."

"No, I'm fine," he answered, taking another big bite out of his hamburger. One more bite and he'd be finished. "Don't you like the

food?" he asked her when he swallowed, hoping to pressure her into eating faster too.

"Yeah, it's fine," Stacey replied.

"Well, you haven't eaten very much of it."

"That's just because I've been talking too much, I guess." She took a small bite out of her hamburger and asked, "Is that's what's bothering you, all my talking?"

"No, that doesn't bother me." Jimmy, in spite of his efforts to hide his face from the view of the red-haired girl from school, couldn't help but keep looking in her direction. Stacey wouldn't eat fast enough for them to get out in time, and Jimmy knew it was inevitable that the girl would see and recognize them eventually. And then, finally, she did.

She had laughed at something her date had said to her, and in laughing, she turned her head in Jimmy and Stacey's direction. Her eyes glanced at them for only a split second and then she looked back at her date. Seconds later, her eyes came back for a second look, and then a third look. Jimmy knew it was all over. The girl leaned forward over the table and whispered something to her boyfriend. She made a subtle gesture in Jimmy and Stacey's direction and the boyfriend was then looking at them, too. The girl continued to whisper and suddenly they both grinned.

Jimmy, thankfully, didn't see them smile or else he would have completely lost what little cool he had left. He had stopped looking in the girl's direction when she began pointing at them. He knew she recognized them. Jimmy felt miserable as he imagined her on Monday telling her friends at school what she had seen last Thursday night.

"Stacey," Jimmy said, in little more than a whisper, as if he were trying to conceal his voice from the other couple, and looking in their direction between breaths, "what do you say we get out of here. Maybe we can just drive around for a while."

"But I'm not finished eating," Stacey objected.

"Who cares?" Jimmy said, letting the frustration and embarrassment slip into his voice. "We can go somewhere else to eat. Let's just *leave*."

Stacey could see Jimmy was distracted by something else in the restaurant, and for the first time, she looked in the direction he had been looking. Stacey also knew the girl at the other table. Like Jimmy, Stacey didn't know her name either, but she recognized her face. Suddenly, it all became clear to her: Jimmy was ashamed to be seen here with her.

Neither Jimmy nor Stacey knew what to say, so Stacey took action. She got up from the table quickly and walked straight to the nearest exit. "Stacey, wait!" Jimmy said as Stacey left, and he looked back towards the red-haired girl. Her boyfriend was taking a drink and pretending not to see what was happening. The girl, though, was staring at him and smiling. Jimmy got up from the table and followed Stacey out of the restaurant.

As soon as she got outside, Stacey began to run back towards the movie theater across the street. She didn't get far, though, because too much traffic was speeding past for her to cross. Had she been a little bolder, or a little more upset, the speeding traffic might have offered her an escape from this all too familiar feeling of humiliation. The sense of hope and happiness that she experienced earlier had vanished like a mirage.

Stacey turned around and saw Jimmy coming after her, so she started running along the side of the street. Jimmy quickly caught up with her and grabbed her by the arm. She turned and looked Jimmy in the face; the sky was dark but the street lights, the headlights from the cars, and the glowing restaurant signs above them provided enough light for Jimmy to see that she was crying.

"Let go of me!" she screamed. "You're just like everybody else!"

"Come back," Jimmy pleaded. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going home! I'll walk if I have to."

"You can't walk home—we're too far from your house."

"And you planned it that way, didn't you? You didn't want anyone to see us together, did you? You're embarrassed to be seen with me!"

Jimmy tried to say something but failed.

"I thought you were different! I thought you were enough of a

friend to be above that! But you're not—you're just like everybody else!"

"I'm sorry."

Stacey broke away from him and started walking quickly down the street. Jimmy followed her as she declared, "I've got some money. I'll ride the bus home. You probably wouldn't want anyone to see me in your car!"

"That's not true. I'll take you home—if that's where you want to go."

Stacey nodded, crying and refusing to look at Jimmy.

They walked to a corner where they could more easily cross the street. Stacey cried the whole time while Jimmy walked silently beside her. They returned to the parking lot of the movie theater and found Jimmy's car.

Several times during the drive, Jimmy tried to get Stacey to talk to him. He apologized repeatedly and took the blame for everything. Stacey seemed not to hear him; she just stared out the passenger side window. She had stopped crying, but her silence was more disturbing than her crying. When he stopped in front of her house, she didn't give Jimmy a last chance to apologize. She quickly opened the door to the car and got out. Jimmy tried to say good night, but she slammed the door on him and ran to her house. He watched her go inside, and after a moment of sitting idle, he drove home.

Stacey, when she entered her house, put on a smile and tried her best to dodge her parents who wanted to know how her date went. She said something incoherent and then went straight to her bedroom, where she closed the door behind her, fell on her bed, and cried herself to sleep.

Eleven

ANDREA and Rachel had been friends since middle school, but that time seemed so distant now, so innocent. Gone were the days when they were two awkward and gawky thirteen-year-old best friends who used to share lockers, hang out at the mall together, and talk for hours with each other on the phone. Now they were both eighteen—young women past the worst stages of adolescence—and their memories of their earlier lives seemed so far removed from their recent troubles and experiences.

Rachel had met Trey in high school, and Andrea had only started dating Greg this year. These boys, plus a couple of others that Andrea dated during her junior year of high school, had gotten in the way of the girls' friendship, causing them to drift apart somewhat. Neither of them wanted to lose the friendship which had been years in the making, though, and it was for that reason that Rachel had always insisted on sitting with or near Andrea during lunch, even though there had been times when Rachel had very much wanted to be alone with Trey in a more secluded location on the school campus. Andrea had noticed Rachel's desire to stay close and it meant a lot to her. Days might have passed during which the two girls barely even spoke to each other, but the bond of their friendship was never in danger of being severed.

Now that Greg had finally dumped Andrea, and Trey was avoiding Rachel, the two girls suddenly had a lot more time to spend with each other. In this emotional time, each had become the other's source of comfort and confidence. When Trey left Rachel, Andrea had stood by her dark-haired friend, and when Rachel learned about Andrea's break-up, she returned all of Andrea's previous sympathy and compassion. They not only started spending more time together at school, but they called each other much more on the phone, and Friday night, the two girls talked for four hours straight, something they had not done since the ninth grade. Both of them enjoyed it and they promised each other that they would try to spend some more time together during these final days of high school.

Monday morning, before school started, Andrea and Rachel were together again in the school cafeteria. The cafeteria was the only part of the school that was open to students before the first bell. Students were free to enter through the patio doors and sit at the tables. The school kitchen was closed, but there were several vending machines ready to sell hungry students a candy bar or a soft drink for breakfast. Most students, though, were just here to hang out with their friends before the school day started. The majority of those in the cafeteria in the morning were seniors, and it was something of a tradition that seniors occupy the cafeteria before school. Of course, not everyone in the senior class was here. Some, like Jason and Jimmy, preferred to wait in front of the main doors to the school, and there were plenty of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors who thought they were good enough to hang out in the cafeteria too.

Andrea and Rachel sat alone at a table far from the entrance of the cafeteria. This was Andrea's choice, for she wasn't eager to see Greg—who also liked to spend his mornings in the cafeteria—so soon after they had broken up. Rachel would have preferred a table that was more out in the open, hoping to see Trey, but she respected Andrea's wishes, and when she entered the cafeteria that morning and found Andrea sitting all by herself in a corner, she didn't complain, but instead sat down with Andrea and said good morning.

Andrea smiled, "I see you're wearing your glasses again."

"Yeah," Rachel said, adjusting them with her right hand, "they're ugly, but I don't care. I'm tired of wearing contacts all the time."

"Has anyone noticed the change?"

"Are you kidding? *Everyone* has noticed. A lot of people in the AP classes forgot that I used to wear glasses and they're all like, 'What happened!? Why are you wearing glasses?' Everybody's cool about it though. Last week, even Brian said he liked them."

"I think they look good, too," Andrea said.

"Maybe, but contacts aren't the only thing I've given up. Take a look." Rachel put her bag on the table, and opened it so Andrea could look inside. Andrea leaned over and looked, but she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Andrea gave Rachel a confused expression.

"My cigarettes," Rachel finally explained. "They're gone."

"Oh!" Andrea exclaimed, looking again and finding that they really were gone; her lighter, too.

Rachel closed her bag and said proudly, "Yeah, I've given up smoking!"

"What, just like that?"

"Of course. It's not like I was addicted to them or anything. I only smoked when I was with Trey. But I don't want to pick smoking up as a habit. I don't want to spend the rest of my life smelling like an ashtray."

"Good for you!" Andrea said. There was a pause, and then the blonde-haired girl asked her friend, "Have you talked to him lately?"

"Trey?"

"Yeah."

Rachel looked down at the table and said "No. Not since Tuesday. I really don't think he wants to break up with me, though. I think he's just mad and needs some time alone. I thought about calling him last night, but at the last second I changed my mind and called you instead. Did you know that you and Trey share the same first four digits of your phone numbers? Anyway, I'm glad I called you instead of him. You're a better conversationalist than Trey is."

"Well, thank you," Andrea said with an amused expression. "I feel so honored."

"You're welcome," Rachel replied playfully.

Andrea suddenly remembered something. "I had a dream last night about him."

"About Trey?"

"Yeah," and she quickly added, "but it's not what you're thinking! You were in the dream too. In fact, come to think of it, everybody from lunch was in the dream. You, April, Jimmy, even Jimmy's friend who likes to lean against the tree."

"So what was your dream about?"

Andrea thought and then said bashfully, "Oh, it was nothing. My dreams never make sense."

"Tell me."

"Well, we were all sitting at our table for lunch, but the table, instead of being next to the auditorium like it always is, was on some grassy hill overlooking the school. It was really weird—but you know how dreams are."

Rachel nodded, listening attentively.

Andrea shrugged, "There's really not much to say. We were all there and eating lunch together. It was very peaceful and happy. And Stacey and Jimmy were sitting next to each other holding hands."

Rachel looked surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah, and then we all started singing."

Rachel laughed out loud. "No way! What were we singing?"

Andrea shook her head, blushing. "I can't remember—it might not have even been a real song, but we were all singing, even Trey."

Rachel laughed even harder. "Oh, I wish I could have had that dream! I'd pay money to hear Trey sing! I'll bet you woke up laughing."

Andrea shrugged softly and ran the tips of her fingers back and forth across the surface of the table. "But it was a nice dream," she whispered.

Rachel calmed down and stopped laughing. Both girls stared down at the table and finally Rachel said with a smile, "Look at us, aren't

we stupid?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you and me, upset about Greg and Trey. We're getting all depressed over them just because they act like little babies. Didn't we once promise each other that we'd never act like this with boys?"

Andrea remembered. "But we were in the seventh grade then. We were just teenagers."

"Technically, we're still teenagers."

"Yeah, but it's different now. We're older. We're practically adults!"

"And this is how adults act? Letting other people influence the way they feel about themselves?"

Andrea shrugged. "Everybody needs somebody. Nobody wants to spend their lives all alone. Don't you feel better when you're with somebody else?"

"I guess," Rachel said. "Maybe it's just that we've matured and the boys haven't."

"That must be it!" Andrea giggled.

The girls were suddenly interrupted by the sound of laughter. They turned their heads and saw Trey and some of his friends sitting at a table some distance away. Neither girl could tell what was so hilariously funny, but the boys' loud laughter was attracting a lot of attention from the surrounding tables. Nobody was laughing with them; they just stared. The boys seemed to be aware of all the attention, and so they laughed louder, as if they were putting on a show of some sort. Rachel turned away from them and muttered to Andrea, "Nope. They certainly haven't."

The laughter began to die down somewhat, and Andrea whispered to her friend, "I think you should talk to him."

One of the boys at the other table (it wasn't Trey) shouted to someone across the cafeteria, and once again, eyes from every direction focused on the boys. Rachel didn't look; she simply tried to ignore them.

"You should talk to him," Andrea repeated, this time with greater confidence. "Just look at what happened with me and Greg when we

didn't talk for a few days. If I've learned anything, it's that the longer two people stay apart, the harder it is for them to get back together again."

"I guess . . ." Rachel said, staring at the table.

"I'm only telling you what to do because you're my friend," Andrea said. "And because I think you and Trey are perfect for each other."

Rachel looked amused, "We are?"

"Sure! I'll admit I didn't think so when you two first started dating, but over time you two really bonded. Now when I see you two apart, it doesn't look right. It isn't natural."

The bell rang and cut short the girls' conversation. As the rest of the students in the cafeteria got up to leave, Rachel said, "Thanks. And maybe I will talk to Trey soon."

Actually, Rachel still believed that the best strategy was to let Trey cool off and let him come back to her. She didn't think their relationship was in jeopardy the way Andrea and Greg's had been. Andrea and Greg hadn't been together nearly as long as she and Trey. Her relationship of almost three years was surely strong enough to survive Trey's disappointment about his rejection letter.

Or so she thought. Her faith in their love was called into question later that morning, in the halls between their second and third period classes. Rachel was at her locker when Trey approached her. Rachel was happy to see him and thought maybe this would be the beginning of their reconciliation. Trey would apologize, they would make up, and everything would return to normal. Instead, though, Trey took a pair of concert tickets out of his pocket and put them in Rachel's hand. They were the Mad Devils tickets which they had bought last week. Trey had been holding on to them until the concert, that Wednesday night.

"Why are you giving these to me?" Rachel asked, meekly.

"Because I'm not going, and I thought maybe you'd want them." Trey thought he was being noble by giving the tickets to Rachel. He knew he certainly couldn't go to the concert with Rachel, and although he really wanted to see the Mad Devils on stage, he wouldn't feel right going without her. Besides, he had already asked some of his friends if

they wanted to go to the concert, but they didn't share his enthusiasm about the band.

"You aren't going to go? We're not going together?" Rachel really hadn't thought about the concert since Trey began avoiding her. For an instant she hoped that maybe this concert could be used as an opportunity for the two of them to get back together. Rachel insisted he take the tickets, but Trey refused, putting his hands in his pockets to ensure that Rachel kept them.

"Why don't you want to go?" Rachel asked.

Trey shrugged and said, "I just don't feel like it. You can use them if you want, or sell them, or get a refund—I don't really care what you do." Trey looked uncomfortable standing there with her. It was the first time Rachel had ever seen Trey look really uncomfortable anywhere. He had always put on an appearance of control and courage, even when it was only a facade. "Anyway I've got to go," he said, and before Rachel could say another word, Trey had turned and left.

Jimmy tried to call Stacey Friday morning hoping to apologize to her again. Stacey's father answered the phone, and when Jimmy asked if he could speak to Stacey, he was informed that Stacey did not want to talk to anybody. Jimmy hung up and didn't try to call again for the rest of the weekend, although there were times when he wanted to. He needed to hear from her that she understood (though not necessarily accepted) that Jimmy only liked her as a friend, and nothing more. If their classmate at the restaurant started telling people that he and Stacey had been on a date, he knew his final days in high school would be a nightmare. He wanted to get their stories straight so that if anyone did start teasing them they could both affirm that they were only friends and that their "date" was not a date at all. One thing that Jimmy hadn't considered was that Stacey might have told other people that she and Jimmy were going out.

In the meantime, Stacey spent a miserable weekend alone in her bedroom, not accepting any phone calls from anyone—not even Andrea who had called Friday to ask how Thursday night went. The only time she left the house was to attend Easter services at church with her parents, and that only made her feel even worse. All the talk about the Resurrection and a new life of eternal joy rang hollow in Stacey's ears. How could she believe in the promise of a miraculous resurrection to rescue her from the gloomy prospect of death when she was powerless to restore even a portion of the simple happiness and contentment in life that she lost years ago?

Stacey considered skipping school on Monday but she went anyway. She didn't want to see Jimmy, though, and she tried her best to avoid him. She felt like he had humiliated and betrayed her. She believed everything he had said to her, all of the nice things, the friendly smiles, and the apparent interest in her, but obviously it was one huge deception, and the cruelest part had come when he had agreed to go out with her to the movies. Stacey wondered if Jimmy hadn't simply gone out on the date just so he could make fun of her. All she knew for sure was that she could never trust him, or consider him a friend, ever again.

As for Jimmy, he still wanted to apologize to her, but after being unable to find her in the morning he guessed his best chance to see her was at lunch. Luckily, no one had said anything to him that morning, but Jimmy thought that maybe the word hadn't spread yet. Jimmy hadn't told Brian or Jason about his date, so he didn't want to discuss last Friday with Stacey openly in front of the group. He hoped that they would remain civil with each other until the end of lunch when Jimmy could apologize to Stacey in relative privacy as the two of them walked back to class from the table. As Jimmy turned the corner of the auditorium with Brian and Jason at his side, he expected to see Stacey sitting at the table, maybe with an angry expression on her face, but Jimmy found only Andrea, Rachel, and April waiting. The boys took their usual places and began eating.

Jimmy sat with his back facing the direction that Stacey would come—if she even showed up at all. Whenever he heard footsteps

approaching from behind him, he turned around anxiously, but he saw only other students. He also watched his friends nervously, wondering if any of them had heard about his "date" with Stacey.

Andrea was the only one whom Stacey had told, but she still didn't know what happened Thursday night. Even though Stacey had promised to call Andrea and share all of the details of the date, Andrea had not heard a word from Stacey. She knew that didn't bode well, and although she was dying of curiosity to know what happened, or to tell April and Rachel, she had decided to wait until she could talk to Stacey in person. Watching Jimmy, she could tell that he was troubled about something. Andrea leaned across the table and whispered to Jimmy with a knowing smile, "How did it go?"

Jimmy didn't understand, "How did what go?"

"You know—you and Stacey?" Andrea whispered.

Jimmy turned red and in an instant re-experienced the embarrassment, anger, and panic that he had felt last Thursday night. How did Andrea find out about that? he wondered. Obviously, Stacey had told her, but when? Had she told a lot of other people too? Did all his friends at the table know? His reply to Andrea's curiosity was a mumbled whisper that he didn't want to talk about it. At that very instant, Andrea looked up and saw Stacey come around the corner of the auditorium, but then Stacey stopped, stared, turned around, and went back the way she came. Andrea looked at Jimmy and said, in a much louder tone of voice, "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing!" Jimmy said, also raising his voice. "Nothing happened, all right?"

Their exchange attracted the attention of everyone sitting at the table. Brian asked, "Did I miss something?"

Andrea said to Jimmy, "I just saw Stacey poke her head around the corner, and when she saw you she turned around and ran off." Everyone at the table, except for Jimmy, turned and looked in the direction Andrea indicated, but of course, Stacey was already gone.

"What's happening, Jimmy?" Brian asked. Jimmy didn't answer him so Brian looked to Jason, who only shrugged. It was left to Andrea

to fill everybody in.

"Jimmy and Stacey went out on a date Thursday night," she said.

"It wasn't a date!" yelled an exasperated Jimmy. "It was just a very big misunderstanding!" Humiliated, Jimmy got up from the table and carried his lunch a few feet away, sitting down in almost the same spot where Rachel and Trey had once spent their lunch hours.

"Well, if you won't tell us what happened, I'll go talk to Stacey myself," Andrea declared. She got up from the table and hurried around the corner of the auditorium, hoping to catch up with Stacey. She was moving so fast that she nearly collided with Stacey when she found her friend hiding just around the corner, near the auditorium doors. Stacey was trying to decide where she could spend her lunch hour, but when Andrea appeared, Stacey started to walk away.

"Stacey—wait!" Andrea began.

"I don't want to talk about it, OK?" said Stacey, maintaining a good distance between herself and Andrea.

"What did he do to you?"

Stacey stopped walking and turned to face Andrea. "He didn't do anything. I did it all to myself. I'm so stupid! I thought I could trust him—I thought he was my friend."

"Tell me what happened," Andrea pleaded. "Let me help." She really did want to help. She didn't want to see her friends upset with each another, and if she could do anything to resolve their problems, she would.

"If you want to help, make Jimmy leave our table," Stacey demanded.

"I can't do that," Andrea replied. "He has as much right to be there as I do."

"Fine, then *I'll* stay away," said a resolved Stacey. "Either he leaves, or I do. I'm never going anywhere near him again! You decide."

But Andrea would not decide. She wouldn't choose between either of her friends. She liked them both, in spite of their faults, and she wanted them both to be friends again. She said, "I'll talk to Jimmy and see what I can do."

Stacey pretended not to care and leaned against the brick wall of the auditorium. She tried to make herself comfortable, expecting to be here for the rest of the hour. Andrea left her and went back to the table.

She found her friends talking quietly among themselves about what had just happened, trying to make sense of it all and waiting for someone to fill them in. Jimmy refused to give them any explanations or information, so they could only guess at what he had done to make Stacey angry or why they had even gone out in the first place. It was Jason who first noticed Andrea returning, and he announced to the others, "She's back."

Everyone, including Jimmy, looked and expected to see Stacey, but instead they saw only Andrea, alone, wearing an angry expression on her face. Rather than sitting back down at the table, she marched over to Jimmy and demanded, loudly, "What did you do to her Thursday night?"

"Nothing! What did she tell you?"

"She wouldn't tell me anything. She's just as stubborn as you are."

"They're a perfect match!" Brian joked from the table. April and Rachel giggled, and Jason smiled, but Jimmy and Andrea ignored them. Jimmy was relieved to hear that Stacey hadn't wanted to tell Andrea anything about the date. If she wouldn't even confide to Andrea, it meant that she wasn't telling anyone else what had happened either. Jimmy thought that the very worst thing Stacey could do, if she really wanted to take revenge on him, would be to start telling everyone that they were in love, or having sex, or something like that. At least she was being silent.

"Well, whatever you did, I want you to go apologize to her right now," Andrea said.

"I already tried apologizing, but it didn't make any difference," Jimmy argued.

"Go try again."

Jimmy swallowed the rest of his soda and got up from the grass. "Fine, I'll try again. Where is she?"

"She's right around the corner—and say it like you mean it!"

Jimmy didn't reply as he walked back in the direction Andrea had just come. Sitting down at the table again, Andrea was pressed for

information from those who had been watching this episode. All of them wanted to know what was going on, but Andrea became just as reticent as Jimmy and Stacey. At last she said, "It's between them. I think we should just stay out of it." Obviously, nobody was satisfied with that, and even Andrea didn't intend to follow that advice. If anything could be done to bring Stacey back, she would do it, but for now, it was all up to Jimmy.

After Jimmy disappeared around the corner, Rachel turned to Brian and removed the Mad Devils tickets from her purse. She showed them to Brian and asked, "Do you want to go to the Mad Devils concert Wednesday?" If she wasn't going to go with Trey, she decided she wouldn't go at all. She remembered that Brian said he liked the Mad Devils too, and she was willing to give the tickets to him if he wanted them.

Brian knew these were the tickets that Rachel and Trey had bought so they could go to the concert together. He had forgotten about the concert, but supposed that Rachel and Trey wouldn't be going together after all. Caught by surprise, Brian misinterpreted Rachel's question. "With you?" he asked, hopefully.

"No. Trey gave me these tickets this morning because he says he doesn't really want to go, and I'm not in the mood for the concert either. If you want them, you can have them. Don't you know somebody you could take?"

Brian started to say something, but then he shook his head. "Most of my friends aren't into their music." Brian looked at the tickets again and said regretfully, "It might be fun to see the concert, but I don't want to go alone. You keep them. Maybe you'll change your mind."

With a look of disappointment, Rachel put the tickets away. At the same time, Jimmy returned from the other side of the auditorium. He wore an "I told you so" expression on his face, and as he approached, he threw up his hands in failure.

"Well?" Andrea asked.

"She completely ignored me, she wouldn't even look at me. I apologized to her—*again*—but she won't have anything to do with me. If

she wants to spend lunch by herself for the rest of the semester, then I say let her!"

The three girls at the table told Jimmy to go back and try again, but Brian spoke up and took Jimmy's defense: "If she won't forgive him, there's no point in him trying. We should just leave her alone. She'll come back eventually. Where else is she going to go?"

Jimmy sat down at his usual spot at the table, and lunch continued. Nobody else talked about Stacey's departure from the group, though it was clear that it was on everybody's mind. When the bell rang and lunch ended, Brian and Jimmy walked back to the main building together. Jason followed a few paces behind and heard Brian when the shorter boy asked, "What really happened last week?" Then, in a whisper, Jimmy described his version of the story. Jason was curious to learn too, but he couldn't hear what Jimmy said. When they turned the corner of the auditorium, they found that Stacey had already gone to class.

Twelve

TREY and Rachel gradually began to see more and more of each other around campus. He no longer went out of his way to avoid her, but while their paths often crossed in the hallways, Trey never spoke to Rachel or did anything to acknowledge her existence. As far as Trey was concerned, they were now total strangers, and the last three years were simply erased, forgotten like last night's dreams.

The simple fact that Trey and Rachel's relationship had lasted for as long as it had gave the couple a kind of celebrity status among their peers. Almost everybody in the senior class knew about Trey and Rachel, whether they liked them or not, so it was only natural that their apparent break-up would also catch the attention of their peers. The rumors and gossip surrounding them came as a much-needed distraction at this time of the year as summer approached and school—for the graduating seniors especially—felt like a pointless chore.

Their classmates' opinions on the split varied. Those who harbored a secret jealousy for a couple who had been able to enjoy a true relationship for so long said that the break-up was for the best. A few admired Rachel for not letting the break-up affect her concentration on her studies, which hadn't really suffered before, but which *seemed* more important to her now that she was wearing her glasses again. Few people

were really close to Trey, so nobody dared to ask how he was feeling inside, but everybody knew enough to steer clear of him when they saw him in the halls. He had always been considered a dangerous individual, but now, more than ever, he seemed to be someone to avoid. The consensus among their classmates was that the famous relationship was over for good. There just wasn't enough time left in the school year for them to get past their pride and resolve their troubles.

Now that he had left Rachel's friends at lunch, Trey returned to his old friends who liked to spend their lunch hours in the cafeteria. This was the same rowdy bunch that Rachel and Andrea had observed earlier that Monday morning. They weren't the sorts of losers that Rachel hung out with, and so Trey felt more comfortable with them. They welcomed Trey back to their table unconditionally. Even though all of them knew about his break-up with Rachel, none of them were eager to bring it up. They always let Trey take the lead on that subject, and Trey, trying to preserve his tough-guy reputation, never had anything nice to say about Rachel in their presence. In agreement, the other boys at the table would add an insult or two about her as well, but Trey didn't like that. Hearing himself talk badly about Rachel was one thing because, deep down, he knew he really didn't mean it, but when he heard his own words echoed in the mouths of his friends he got angry. They soon learned to just try to avoid the subject altogether.

Trey's friends could be categorized as among those who were jealous of Trey and Rachel's relationship. These guys had gone out with girls before, but none of them had dated a girl nearly as long as Trey and Rachel had been together. The girls at this school, they all agreed, weren't good enough for them, or at least that was the kind of thinking they used to comfort themselves when their own attempts at relationships inevitably fell apart. They were also resentful of the way Trey had simply left them when he and Rachel had started dating. Early in the relationship, Trey sometimes brought Rachel to sit with them for lunch, but Rachel always preferred the company of Andrea, Stacey, and April. Although nobody said anything, now that Trey was back, they felt like they had won a victory. These guys were the only ones Trey could truly

depend on, not some girl who would abandon him by going away to some fancy college.

This circle of friends, though loyal to one another, really wasn't closely knit. Most of them had connections with other cliques in the cafeteria, and some days some of them would spend their lunch hour elsewhere, so the number of boys who shared their common table in the cafeteria fluctuated daily. On Monday, there were only three: Trey, of course, and two seniors named Eric and Kurt. All of them were keenly aware, as they ate their food and talked, that their usual table, which could seat eight people if all the seats were taken, looked empty with only three people sitting there. Of course, the cafeteria was less populated at this time of the year when the grass outside is green, the sun is shining, and the air is warm. As the spring went on, an increasing number of students were choosing to eat outdoors, like Rachel and her friends, rather than spend yet another hour of their day inside the main school building. The three boys at the table started to feel like a bunch of losers, with few friends at their table, so when they finished eating, they got up and went outside.

At first, they simply walked slowly around campus, making sure, for Trey's benefit, to avoid the area around the auditorium. The three of them walked side by side by side, with Trey in the middle. They didn't say much, but occasionally one of them might see something through one of the windows of the school, and as he stared, they would all stop to look. Or maybe they found a penny lying on the ground, and after one of the boys had kicked it a few times, the other two would take turns kicking it.

After almost ten minutes of wandering around silently, Eric spoke and suggested they sneak behind the phys. ed. building and smoke some cigarettes. The other boys thought that was a good idea, but none of them had any cigarettes. Trey had left his in his locker because he hadn't expected to leave the cafeteria today. They were disappointed—a smoke was just the thing they needed to relax. They began to look for another form of release and their search took them back to the patio outside the cafeteria.

There were a number of tables on the patio, and on this spring

day all were occupied by students. The boys surveyed the area and looked closely at each table, searching for either friends or potential enemies. Kurt spotted somebody he knew they could have fun with and pointed his victim out to his friends. Sitting alone, at a table on the far side of the patio, was a boy working on his homework. He wore glasses and was totally oblivious to the world around him. Such a sight was all the motivation Trey and Eric needed so they hurried across the patio to torment the boy. For the first time that lunch hour, they were all happy and smiling.

Since Kurt had discovered the boy, he was allowed the honor of teasing him first. "Hey!" he shouted, slamming his fists down on the boy's table to get his attention. "You're that guy I wanted to beat up last year."

The nerd looked up, startled by the sudden interruption and threat. He seemed to recognize Kurt, but he looked nervously at the other two boys, whom he didn't know.

"Why would you want to beat him up?" Eric asked, playing along. "He's such a wimp it wouldn't be much of a fight."

Trey jumped up on the table, stepped on the boy's notebook, and jumped to the ground behind where the boy was sitting. Then, he grabbed the boy by the shoulders and said, "Here, I'll hold him while you punch him."

"Leave me alone!" the boy cried, struggling to free himself from Trey's grasp.

"We oughtta kick his ass just for sitting at our table," Eric said. "You do know this is *our* table, don't you?"

"This isn't your table."

"Sure it is," Trey sneered. "So get lost."

But the boy didn't get lost. Instead, he surprised them all by boldly challenging their claim. "Actually," he said, "this table doesn't belong to any of us. It belongs to the school district—or to the taxpayers who paid for it." The boy thought he had made a clever point, but Trey and his friends weren't looking for a rational discussion.

"What's your name, wussie?" Trey asked.

The boy didn't reply so Kurt said, "His name is Pat."

"Pat!" Trey exclaimed. He and Eric started laughing. "That's a girl's name!"

Eric sat down on the table and rested his feet to the left of Pat. He picked up the textbook that was open on the table and looked at it.

"What the hell is this?" he asked. He closed the book and read its title. "Trigonometry? You're in trig? What grade are you in?"

"Eleventh," Pat said, with a trace of pride in his voice.

"This guy was in my algebra class last year," Kurt said. "He was always making A's." Trey and Eric knew that Kurt had flunked his second year of algebra and was taking it again this year so he could graduate.

Trey released his grip on Pat and swiped the book away from Eric. Rachel had taken trig last semester, and that class was probably one of the things that helped her get accepted to Pallas. "Hey, you know what? This book is also the property of the taxpayers. And I bet they'd be pretty pissed off if somebody started ripping out all the pages." Trey opened the book and grabbed a handful of pages and made like he was going to rip them out.

"Don't!" Pat shouted, getting up and trying to take the book back. But Trey was too quick for him and he threw the book to Kurt who made a clumsy catch. The boys hoped Pat would try to run after the book while they kept it away from him, but Pat wouldn't let himself be humiliated. Instead, he stood near Trey to prevent him from getting the book again. He feared Trey really was going to rip the pages out of it, and, in truth, Trey probably would. He was in that kind of a mood.

"Give me back my book!" Pat demanded.

"You want it? Go get it." Kurt tossed it into a nearby trash can. The can was almost empty so the book made a loud thud in the bottom. Pat ran to retrieve it and had to lean deep inside to reach it. The activities of Trey and his friends had caught the attention of a number of the other students who sat at nearby tables. Some of this audience laughed at Pat's predicament while most simply stared silently. Of course, no one offered to help.

When Pat had retrieved his book, he found that the bullies had sat down at his table. Pat hurried back and evacuated his books and belongings. The three boys let him leave, although they made it difficult for him by grabbing at things. As Pat scurried away, Eric shouted, "We told you this was our table!" The other two laughed and hurled a few last insults at him, but it was Trey who played the trump card. When Pat was gone, Trey unfolded a piece of paper that he had been hiding from view. It was the homework that Pat had been working on. To Eric and Kurt's delight, Trey ripped up the paper and scattered the pieces in the breeze. They laughed as they watched the little white leaves fall to the concrete below.

Thirteen

ON TUESDAY, as Jimmy and Jason took their turns at the snack machines in the gymnasium, Jimmy let his friend know that his father might be going out of town later that week, although he wasn't certain of it. Jason assured him that if he and his sister needed a ride, his car doors were always open to them. Jimmy still hadn't told Jason anything about his date with Stacey, or why she was so angry with him. It bothered Jason that Jimmy didn't seem to be as willing to confide in him as he was to confide in Brian.

Brian wasn't with them. Jason guessed that Brian was already at the table, waiting for Rachel. Ever since Trey began sitting elsewhere during lunch, Jason noticed that Brian and Rachel had become closer. Perhaps they had already been close friends for a long time; Jason didn't know for sure because he didn't know either of them very well.

As the two boys walked from the gym to the far side of the auditorium, both were quiet. With the events of yesterday still on their minds, both boys were waiting to see if Stacey was going to spend another day in her self-imposed exile from Jimmy and the rest of her friends. Their walk from the gym took them past the front of the auditorium, and sure enough, Stacey was there, although today she had moved to a bench underneath the flagpole. She sat quietly, stubbornly,

without any lunch or any books to pass the hour. As the boys approached her, all three seniors were aware of one another, but Stacey and Jimmy pretended to ignore each other. Only Jason had the courage to look, and he stared at Stacey as he walked past.

When they turned the corner, and were out of Stacey's presence, Jimmy relaxed and for the first time that day, Jason saw him smile. He began talking again, as though nothing had just happened, but Jason only half listened. Ahead, he saw that the rest of Jimmy's friends were at the table. None of the girls said anything to Jimmy as he sat down, and Brian was too busy talking to Rachel to welcome his friend to lunch. With the exception of Brian and Rachel, the group was quiet as they started to eat their food.

Jason, leaning against the tree, was the quietest of all; he couldn't stop thinking about Stacey. A Charley Z song had been stuck in his head all morning. One of the singer's earliest, it was about a girl who felt that she was all alone in the world. It occurred to Jason that the song seemed to describe Stacey's situation perfectly—especially now. Jason didn't know all of the details of what happened on Jimmy and Stacey's date last week, nor did he know what exactly had made Stacey so upset that she felt like she had to leave her friends just to get away from Jimmy, but he did understand what she must be feeling now. Only a couple of weeks ago, Jason was in her position, spending the lunch hour alone after his fight with Keith. Jason knew how humiliated she must feel to be sitting all alone as people she knew passed by her without saying so much as a "Hello." Yet, there was also a kind of heroism in her exile that Jason had not known in the three days he sat by himself against the wall of the auditorium. Stacey had chosen to leave; nobody left her like Keith had left Jason. And today, when Stacey knew that she was going to spend another lunch hour by herself, she again did not bring anything—not a book, nor music, nor her homework—to pass the time. Jason, when he was alone, was not able to bear the solitude without something to distract him and occupy his time. Without realizing it, Stacey had apparently achieved that which Jason had sought through the poetry of his favorite singer: a comfort and confidence in defiantly facing life alone. Everyone

is alone, Jason thought, the only difference is that some people face this fact while the rest of the world pretends to deny it by forming friendships and acquaintances which ultimately are insubstantial. Jason had only to consider his split from Keith, the recent separations of Andrea and Greg, Rachel and Trey, and now this episode with Stacey and Jimmy. What happened to these friendships? Were they ever real to begin with?

And here he stood, leaning against this tree, in the company of people whom he barely knew. Jason took a moment to watch them. The awkward silence that had begun the lunch hour had finally ended and all of them were now talking to each other, as usual, pretending that their friendships actually meant something. Jason hadn't felt totally comfortable with them from the beginning, but today, after seeing Stacey by herself, Jason absolutely hated it here. *What are you doing?* he asked himself. *You should be the one sitting alone under the flagpole instead of Stacey!*

A laugh interrupted his train of thought. It was April who had laughed, at something that somebody had just said. The rest of the table was smiling. Apparently, in reference to the remark, Brian took hold of the sleeve of Rachel's T-shirt. "And Rachel's wearing black too!" Brian exclaimed. Everyone laughed again, and Rachel, also smiling, stood up and spread out her arms so everyone could see the color of her shirt which matched her long, dark hair.

They were still laughing, and Jason caught himself smiling in an unconscious attempt to fit in. He stopped smiling and looked at April again. She was laughing harder than any of her friends at the table and was beginning to turn red. The joke that the others were making was apparently about her.

But Jason thought that if they should be laughing at anybody, they should be laughing at him. Watching April, he knew for certain that he had to leave—and soon. The longer he stayed, the more likely it was that he would fall in love with her, if he hadn't already. If Stacey could leave the group, then why couldn't he? Jason was resolved to go, but out of respect for this shrinking circle of friends, who had allowed him to join them when Jason had nowhere else to go, he remained standing

against the tree for the rest of Tuesday's lunch hour. He paid attention to what the others said, listened to them, and hoped he would be strong enough not to return here again, even if it meant spending the rest of the school year alone.

Thoughts of Stacey followed Jason home, and instead of doing his homework, Jason sat in his bedroom and listened to a few of his Charley Z CDs. He listened to the lyrics carefully, as if he were listening to the songs for the first time, and considered whether the themes expressed suited him or Stacey better. Slowly, Jason began to believe that he understood exactly what Stacey was feeling. He was sure that she took pride in her stubborn stand against Jimmy, and that she was capable of remaining alone for the rest of the school year if that was what she decided to do. He was certain that she represented the ideal of what he wanted to be: independent, and confident in that independence.

Before school began Wednesday morning, Jason hoped he might see Stacey, but in her effort to continue avoiding Jimmy, she was no longer waiting outside the front of the school where Jason had noticed she had been waiting lately. Jason did see Jimmy though, and his friend talked to him long enough to tell him that his father wouldn't be going out of town later that week after all.

Jason didn't tell Jimmy that he planned to sit by himself today during lunch because he didn't want to burn his bridges entirely. He wanted to try to spend the lunch hour alone without anything to distract him or occupy his attention, as Stacey had been doing. After his third period class, while the rest of the student body made their way to the cafeteria, or outside, Jason wandered aimlessly around the corridors of the school for a few minutes, hoping that when he did finally go outside, Jimmy and the others would be settled at their table and he would not encounter any of them. He further tried to avoid them by buying his lunch from the cafeteria snack bar, instead of the vending machines in

the gym. But when Jason walked downstairs to the cafeteria and got in line, he saw Andrea and Rachel leaving the snack bar with sodas and junk food in their hands. Jason turned his head and tried to look inconspicuous. The two girls were busy talking to each other and didn't notice Jason as they passed him.

After Jason bought his lunch, he walked outside to the patio. He thought he might sit at one of the tables here, but his earlier delaying meant that other students had already claimed all of the tables. There was no place for him to sit, so he began to walk leisurely towards the front of the school. He wasn't about to go near the auditorium, that much was certain, but there were other places to spend the hour besides the area around the auditorium. He found a number of people gathered around the flagpole, as if waiting for the morning bell to ring in the middle of the day. These people were clustered into their little cliques of friends, and only one person among them sat alone. It was Stacey.

Once again, she had brought nothing to distract her, no homework or music. She had only her lunch which she ate slowly and with care. Jason decided to keep his distance from her, and, for lack of any better place to spend his lunch, he leaned against a metal pole which supported the aluminum roof that covered the patio between the main school building and the auditorium. When it rained, the primary function of the roof was evident, but on a sunny day like today, the roof provided some welcome shade from the hot sun.

As Jason stood there, he wondered if Jimmy and April and the rest had noticed his absence today. He wondered if they even cared. From where he stood, he could still see Stacey, but there was no indication that she had noticed him. He knew that Stacey's friends did miss her, and that was what made her exile seem so heroic. She was alone when she could be with others. Jason was alone because he had no others.

Jason thought about sitting down on the patio and making himself comfortable by leaning his back against the metal support, but for the moment he remained standing. He looked around at the flowerbeds that had been planted against the walls of the main school

building. The aluminum roof didn't protect them from the sunlight, or the rain, or whatever else might fall from the sky, but the flowers didn't seem to mind as they stretched upwards, trying to take in as much sunlight as they could. Winter had been very cold and wet, and so far, the spring had been mostly warm and dry, but even the sunniest spring has its rainy days. He remembered that the TV weatherman had forecast rain later this week. Jason thought it funny that flowers could thrive while exposed to both the sunshine and the rain, while most people preferred only the sunlight.

Again and again, though, Jason's gaze kept returning to Stacey. She had finished her lunch and sat on the bench with her legs crossed, her hand supporting her head, staring off into space and trying not to look bored. What was she thinking as she sat there by herself? Was she really content to spend her lunch hours there or did she secretly desire to return to her friends? Jason wanted to know what she was thinking, but from this distance it was impossible. The more he watched her and the more he thought about her, the more yesterday's resolution to spend the rest of the school year alone was betrayed. When Jason finished his lunch, he carried his trash to a garbage can not far from where Stacey sat. Then in a move that to Jason seemed only half-conscious, he kept walking in her direction and didn't stop until he was standing in front of her.

"Hi," he said.

Stacey responded by ignoring him completely. She recognized Jason as one of Jimmy's friends, and since he wasn't really friends with anyone else from the table other than Jimmy, she guessed he was Jimmy's representative, come to apologize once again and beg her to return to the group. She thought that if she ignored him, he would just go away, like she had made Jimmy go away the other day when he tried to apologize.

Jason nervously waited for any kind of response, but since none came, he asked, "Do you mind if I sit here with you?" Again Stacey said nothing. Jason would have simply sat down if he could, but the bench was short and Stacey was sitting right in the center so there wasn't any room for him.

"Or maybe I'll just stand . . ." he said.

Stacey suddenly looked up and broke her stubborn silence. "What do you want?" she asked haughtily. "If the others sent you here to convince me to come back, you can forget it." She paused and looked at Jason again and said with a smirk, "I guess they must be getting pretty desperate if they sent *you*."

"Nobody sent me," Jason replied. "I just decided that I don't want to spend lunch with them anymore, and I was hoping that you didn't want to either." Stacey looked puzzled, so Jason quickly added, "I mean—if you don't want to go back, then it's none of my business."

"Well . . . you can get lost anyway," Stacey said, turning her face away from Jason. "You're still Jimmy's friend, and any friend of Jimmy is *not* a friend of mine."

Something in Jason wanted to do as she asked and leave, but something else made him hold his ground. "Jimmy means well, but sometimes he doesn't say very nice things. He even makes fun of me sometimes."

"Then why do you hang around him?" Stacey asked.

Jason shrugged. "Why did you?"

Stacey started to say something but hesitated. Finally she answered, "I don't—not anymore."

"Well, neither do I."

Stacey smiled, only for a second, and looked up at Jason. Then, in a movement that was almost too subtle to notice, she scooted a couple of inches to her right. Jason saw it and knew what it meant. He sat down next to her on the bench.

"Did Jimmy tell you what happened last Thursday?" Stacey asked.

Jason shook his head. "He hasn't said anything to me about it—but then again, I'm always the last to know. Whatever he did, though, he certainly seems sorry."

"Good," Stacey muttered.

Jason wasn't really interested anymore in what Jimmy had done. He was now more interested in Stacey, what she was feeling, and what her motives were for staying away from her friends for so long. He took

a breath and then ventured a slight change in the subject. "You know, Charley Z once said—"

"Who?"

"Charley Z—he's a singer—have you ever heard of him?" Jason hoped that she had.

"I've heard of him . . . but I've never . . ." and suddenly she began to laugh. "Oh!—*you're* the guy who always listens to Charley Z! Jimmy's mentioned you before, but until now, I didn't realize that *you* were the guy."

"What did he say about me?" Jason asked, with genuine curiosity.

"He just said that you always listen to that music—and that he can't stand it." Stacey suddenly realized she was talking about Jimmy without any trace of anger. To make up for the lapse in her hatred, she became serious again and stared down at the ground. She paused and then asked, "Isn't that Charley Z guy dead?"

Jason grimaced, and said, with great reluctance, "Yeah." The singer's death over a decade ago was something that Jason didn't like to think about. As far as he was concerned, the singer was alive whenever anyone listened to his music. Like some shunned, but not forgotten, martyr, Charley Z's message still survived even though the messenger didn't, and it was the message that mattered most to Jason.

He was a little surprised to learn that Stacey wasn't familiar with Charley Z's songs. They seemed so perfect for her. Jason wasn't disappointed in her, though. Actually, the fact that she didn't know much about the singer other than the fact of his death, only increased Jason's admiration of her. The ease with which she had separated herself from her friends was done without the comfort of any sort of philosophy. Jason wished it could be as easy for him. "Anyway," he said, "Charley Z once sang, *They never do know what we're really about.*"

"What does that mean?" Stacey asked.

Jason had hoped that Stacey would be able to deduce the lyric's meaning for herself. But even though she didn't, Jason was still more than happy to explain it to her: "It means that you—that we—that any of us, don't need people who are mean and insulting."

"I agree with that!" Stacey said with a smile.

Jason felt he was on a roll, so he continued. "Maybe Jimmy just doesn't understand people and how they're different, and that's, like, why he needs to make fun of people. It's his way of understanding them."

Stacey laughed. "Are you going to be a psychology major in college or something?"

Jason smiled. "No, I doubt it. I don't know what I'm going to study."

"You probably should," Stacey said, only half joking. "You're always hanging around us and listening to everything we say. You don't talk much."

"I'm talking now."

"That's true."

Jason thought the future might be an enlightening topic of discussion, so he asked, "What are you going to do? After high school and college, I mean."

Stacey shrugged. "I don't know for sure. I haven't decided yet. I guess I'll decide when I get to college."

"Me too."

Stacey then seemed to want to say something, and she struggled with her next few sentences. "I want to go to college just to . . . well, I mean, I'm tired of high school—and these people. I just want to get out of here, y'know?"

Jason didn't know, and the look on his face told Stacey of his confusion. She quickly waved her hand in the air, as if she were erasing the words she had spoken, and said, "Never mind. Let's talk about something else."

They were both silent for a moment as they suddenly realized they didn't know each other well enough to know what they should change the subject to. So Stacey rephrased the question she asked Jason a few minutes before, only this time it lacked her earlier defensiveness: "So, what are you doing here? I mean, we've never really spoken much to each other, and we're not friends. . . ." (Stacey wanted to add the word "yet" but she held her tongue.) "Do you just walk around and randomly hang

out with people you barely know?" The notion seemed silly, and she smiled at the thought, but then she wondered if that wasn't how Jason had met Jimmy and had come to sit with him and the others for lunch.

Jason stared at the ground, thinking about how he should phrase his response. He didn't feel comfortable yet telling Stacey the true reason why he had come here, but he didn't want to lie to her either. At last, he said awkwardly, "I just thought—well, yesterday when I saw you sitting alone, I just wondered whether you needed somebody to be with. . . ." Jason knew he had phrased his words poorly, but for the moment he didn't know how else to say it without sounding like a freak.

But Stacey was touched and surprised to think that someone else, someone she barely knew, could think about her with such sympathy and was willing to spend lunch with her, in public, apparently without regard for the rumors and stories that surrounded her. It almost gave her hope that her faith in humanity might be restored. She replied, "You know, a couple weeks ago, when you were sitting by yourself, I remember seeing you and kind of feeling sorry for you. It's too bad that I didn't know then what I know now."

They both felt embarrassed for a moment, having revealed such private thoughts when they had, for all intents and purposes, only just met. Awkwardly, they both avoided eye contact, casting their glances instead at the ground, the sky, the flagpole, the other teenagers nearby—everywhere except at the person sitting beside them. But although their eyes didn't meet, each felt like a bond had been formed.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the auditorium, nobody said anything about Jason's absence, but the five remaining friends all noticed it. The tree that spread its boughs over their table, shading them from the noontime sun, seemed "empty" today, as if some spirit that had resided within its trunk had abandoned it. Each member of the group privately recalled seeing Jason at some point earlier in the morning, and each had

expected him to join them for lunch as had become his habit. Each of them, in turn, wondered how long it took to buy food from the vending machines, or the snack bar line in the cafeteria. How long did it take to walk from the cafeteria or the gymnasium to this table behind the auditorium? Neither Jason nor Stacey was discussed openly; the group talked and gossiped as they usually did, but lunch didn't seem quite the same.

Fourteen

THURSDAY morning, the city awoke to find dark, stormy skies threatening. The clouds that had been seen over the city from time to time during the last few days now all seemed to have returned and converged overhead, preparing to spill rain onto the city. But as of the morning commute, the earth was still dry, and no rain had fallen. The gray clouds, which rumbled softly with distant thunder, teased the earth and the great mass of humanity. Many students who drove to school turned their headlights on, and as the student body stood outside the doors before the bell rang, most people carried umbrellas, though for now they were all closed.

The clouds did not release their torrents until about 9:00 that morning, and even students in classrooms that didn't have access to windows could sense that the rain had finally come. In classrooms where there were windows, students were distracted from their teachers and their lessons and watched the storm outside. It was a violent storm, with sheets of water spilling from the sky and splattering on everything: buildings, windows, pavement, grass, bare earth. The force of the rain set off car alarms, but the chorus of sirens was mostly drowned out by the noise of the rain. The trees appeared to take the brunt of the storm, and many students who watched the campus trees almost felt sorry for them

as their branches and limbs were rocked mercilessly by the water and the wind. The storm also threatened to rob the school of power, and during second period the lights in the classrooms fluttered on and off a few times. By the third period of the day, the rain was a leading topic of conversation among the students. With their usual hyperbole, everyone claimed that they had never seen it rain as hard as it was raining now.

For teachers, the rain was just one more competitor against which they fought for their students' attention. The more creative teachers in the school were able to incorporate this morning's meteorological events into their daily lectures. Certain disciplines, like science, were able to do this quite easily, while others, like English and history, had a trickier time. In Stacey's third period civics class, the teacher talked about how weather can play a role in determining the outcome of elections, how voters prefer to stay at home rather than venture out into bad weather to cast ballots. Stacey, however, was too distracted to pay much attention to her teacher. Sitting near a window, she watched the rain outside as it soaked the earth. Little ponds and streams had started to form where the ground couldn't absorb any more water. The teacher's parking lot, visible from the window, looked like a gray, rectangular lake, the cars resembling boats lined up in a marina. Every now and then, a sheet of rain would splash against the window, and Stacey, startled, would worry.

She didn't know what she would do for lunch that day. In the past, when it had rained, she, Andrea, Jimmy, and the others would take shelter in the lobby of the auditorium with other students who normally sat outside but didn't want to fight for space in the crowded cafeteria. Stacey wouldn't be able to do that today. She almost wanted to return to her friends, but she was still angry at Jimmy and didn't want to spend the lunch hour near him. She also couldn't simply sit apart from them in the lobby because the space was so small that even if she and Jimmy were on opposite sides of the room, they would still be less than thirty feet apart. That was too close for Stacey.

But Stacey also worried what this rain would mean for her new-born friendship with Jason. Yesterday had been a pleasant day for her, and her memories of the half hour she spent with Jason grew happier

and brighter the more she dwelt on them. She hoped she would see Jason again today, but this awful rain put that hope in jeopardy. Where would he go to find shelter from the rain? Would he go back to Jimmy and the others, or would he spend the hour in the cafeteria? He certainly wouldn't be waiting for Stacey, underneath the flagpole, in this rain.

Stacey felt frustrated. This rain threatened to destroy her new and unexpected friendship with Jason before it even began. Jason really seemed to be a nice guy; he was a little strange, but overall he seemed OK. Certainly he was nicer than Jimmy. More than once, Stacey imagined what it might be like if Jason were her boyfriend, but Stacey didn't want to think about that—not yet, anyway. Her experience with Jimmy made it difficult for her to trust anyone right now. If Jason would just be her friend, then that would be enough, and maybe something else could come later. But because of this rain, nothing might come at all.

When the bell rang, dismissing the school for lunch, Stacey hurried to her locker to put away her books so she could get outside as quickly as possible. Once outside, she stood underneath the covered walkway that connected the main building with the gym. There were almost no other students visible, as the rain was still coming down steadily, and even though Stacey stood beneath shelter, her feet and ankles were getting wet from the tiny water droplets that ricocheted in her direction after hitting the ground. At one point, Jimmy and Brian, having just bought their lunch, walked past Stacey, but they all ignored each other and the boys quickly disappeared into the auditorium lobby as expected. Stacey had been able to deal with the solitude of spending lunch by herself on Monday and Tuesday, even though she hadn't particularly enjoyed it, but now she hated the loneliness more than ever, and she seriously considered going back to Andrea and Jimmy and the others.

But then she saw Jason, and she smiled. Walking out of the main building, he looked first towards the spot beneath the flagpole where Stacey had sat yesterday. Stacey knew he was looking for her, and it made her even happier. Because Stacey was the only other individual not indoors, it didn't take Jason long to find her. He walked up to her and

said, "It's an ugly day, isn't it?"

Stacey smiled and nodded, and then she said, "Everything's wet. The tables, the benches . . ."

"Where did everybody go?" Jason asked, referring to Jimmy and the others. Obviously they couldn't sit outside today. As he looked around, he also wondered about all the other students who usually sat outside, for the school now seemed utterly deserted, as if this were a holiday.

Stacey answered, "They're probably in the auditorium, that's where we used to go when it rained, or if it was too cold outside."

"You don't want to go there today?"

Stacey shook her head, and Jason was silently glad. Stacey asked, "Where did you and your friend go when it rained? I don't think you sat in the auditorium with us," and then she added apologetically, "or if you did, I didn't notice."

"Keith and I usually went to the cafeteria," Jason said.

"Is that where you're going today?" Stacey asked cautiously. Deep down, she was afraid that Jason wouldn't want to spend another lunch with her. She didn't want to be alone, not on a dreary day like today, and she was afraid he might go someplace where she couldn't follow, or where she wasn't wanted.

Jason replied with a shrug and said, "We could [Stacey thrilled at the word *we*], but the cafeteria always gets so crowded when it rains. Most of the time Keith and I would wind up sitting on the floor against the wall because there wasn't any other place to sit." Jason wondered where Keith was now. Was he sitting in the cafeteria? Jason partly wanted to go to the cafeteria just so he could find out what had become of his former friend, but a greater part of him wanted to avoid the cafeteria altogether. He'd rather spend the hour alone with Stacey, trying to get to know her better. He hadn't learned very much yesterday, except that she didn't listen to Charley Z, and in spite of that she seemed comfortable being on her own. Except for the rain, which was soaking their shoes, standing outside beneath the colonnade seemed perfect: it was private and—despite the rain—quiet. The rest of the world was out of sight and out of

consciousness. This was where Jason wanted to be, but did Stacey want to be here? Was she brave enough, self-confident enough, to spend the hour out here, alone except for Jason and the rain? If he had gone to the cafeteria instead of coming outside, would she continue to stand out here by herself? He suggested, "We could just stay out here. There's some better shelter over there." Jason pointed towards the entrance to the boys' gym, where, indeed, there was enough shelter from the rain to protect their feet and legs from the splattering raindrops.

Stacey was all for the idea. She really didn't care where she was, so long as Jason was with her. The two of them moved and stood underneath the exact center of the aluminum roof. It was dry and cool and safe. The two students proceeded to eat their lunch, silently, looking at each other from time to time, and also looking at the rain which stubbornly refused to stop falling. For a moment, the sound of the rain was the only thing that either of them heard, and then Stacey asked, "What's your last name?"

Jason looked surprised, clearly not expecting her to ask something as simple as that, but Stacey laughed and explained, "It's just that I don't know anything about you, except for your first name . . . I think. It's Jason, right?"

Jason smiled. "That's right," and he proceeded to tell her his first, middle, and last name, hoping to totally satisfy Stacey's curiosity.

In response to his overreaction, Stacey replied, "Well, I'm Stacey. Nice to meet you, Jason."

"And it's nice to meet you too."

The only thing left for them to do was shake hands and bow, so they did, and then they laughed some more and continued eating.

"We've never had any classes together have we?"

Jason shook his head no.

"I didn't think so." For an instant she hoped that maybe he didn't know anything about her or about the rumors and stories everyone told about her. But then she realized that if Jason had gone to this school for four years, then he *must* have heard the stories. This was one of the things which fascinated her about him: that he was willing to stand here, with

her, for all the world to see, and not care if all the world *did* see. There wasn't the nervousness she had seen in Jimmy last week at the restaurant, nor the shying away from her as many of her classmates did when she was assigned to a desk next to someone. Jason didn't seem to care what anyone else thought, or if he did, he was doing a wonderful job hiding it. The only other people at school who behaved as he did were Andrea, April, and Rachel, and that was because all three of them had known Stacey and had been her friends before the rumors about her began. Since the rumors, Jason was the only other person who seemed totally comfortable in her presence.

"I don't think I've ever heard your name mentioned around school," Stacey said, "except when Jimmy talked about you."

Jason felt a mixture of pride and embarrassment at the thought of not being known around school. He shrugged and said, "I guess most people just don't know who I am."

"What's that like?" Stacey said the words before she realized what she was asking, and once the question was out, she wished she could take it back again. She was trying not to say or do anything to remind Jason about the vicious rumors that plagued her, but the very notion of being anonymous was something totally unfamiliar to her. Whenever she walked the halls in between classes, she always knew that somebody, somewhere, was saying something rude about her. Sometimes she actually heard what was said, other times she could only imagine it, but never did she doubt it was happening. This sometimes inspired paranoia, but it was a paranoia that had become a natural part of her life.

Jason considered the question for a moment and then replied, "It's not too bad. I guess it all depends on what kind of a person you are. I don't think Jimmy would be able to handle it."

Stacey laughed. "No, he'd die if he wasn't the center of attention. I think Annie is sort of like that too."

"Some people always have to be in the spotlight."

"I guess so—but not me! Just for once I'd like to be unknown. I want to go some place where nobody knows who I am. I'm hoping that's what college will be like."

"Where are you going to school?"

"Out of state," Stacey answered, her eyes bright with hope. "To the biggest and farthest school I was able to get into. The farther away I go, the less chance there will be that I'll run into somebody from this school. I bet you're going to stay in town and go to college here, right?"

She was right, and Jason asked, "How did you know?"

"Because you're anonymous. You could stay in this city your entire life and every day would always seem like a fresh start."

As Jason thought about that and wondered if it were true, Stacey muttered, "But I hate this school, and this city, and the sooner I leave, the better. I want to start over in a new place. I haven't . . ." her voice trailed off and she looked away from Jason, hoping instead to find her words among the falling raindrops. "Do you ever feel like you aren't the person you're supposed to be? That you could be a different person—and have a better life—if things had been just a little different?"

Jason immediately thought about his own life, and his current struggle to be a true individual. "Sometimes," he replied.

"Well, that's how I feel. If people—if other people weren't so mean, it would all be different. I know it would."

"'Everybody Can Be Cruel,'" Jason said, quoting the title of a Charley Z song and silently pleased with himself for being able to work Charley Z's own words into his half of the conversation, even if Stacey missed the allusion. He also quoted the last line of the song: "*That is something we all have to live with.*"

"But why should *I* live with it—all the time?" Stacey asked, not just Jason, but everybody who had ever made fun of her. "Why should I have to suffer just because I— . . . When people look at me, all they see is what they heard about from their friends. No one really knows anything about me or what I'm like—nobody. Sometimes I don't think even Annie knows and we've been friends a long time. Sometimes—sometimes even I don't know who I am. But I know if I stay in this city I'll never find out. That's why I have to leave: so maybe I can learn who I am."

Jason understood her problem although he didn't necessarily

agree with her solution. In his mind he thought it would be more noble, more heroic, to face life at its very worst and realize at the same time how meaningless it all is. But even Jason knew that was a lot to ask. Charley Z might be able to do it, but Jason didn't know if he could, and obviously it would be hard for Stacey.

Stacey seemed to be embarrassed about confiding so much to Jason. "I'm sorry," she said, trying to smile. "You probably don't want to hear me whine about my life. The day is miserable enough as it is."

Jason smiled in return, "I don't mind."

They heard a door open and saw a pair of boys exiting the main building. Jason wondered if the lunch hour had ended, and they just hadn't heard the bell over the noise from the rain, but upon looking at his watch he saw the hour was only half over. The two boys—who appeared to be juniors—had probably come from the cafeteria and had decided to take a short cut through the main building rather than walk through the rain. They had been talking to each other, but, when they saw Jason and Stacey standing by themselves, they became silent. They passed the two seniors and went into the boys' gym, but just before they went inside, Jason saw one of the boys turn his head back in their direction and then whisper something to his friend. The other boy then turned his head too and laughed.

Jason looked quickly at Stacey to see if she had seen what the boys had done. Stacey wasn't looking in their direction, but the expression on her face told Jason that she knew. Stacey had a kind of sixth sense that alerted her whenever anyone made fun of her behind her back. She felt ashamed and embarrassed, and she would not have blamed Jason if he left her immediately, or suggested that they go somewhere even more secluded than where they were standing, just so other chance passers-by wouldn't see them together and make fun of them. Instead, Jason stood where he was and finished his chips while he waited for the two boys to reappear from the gym, guessing that the only reason the boys had gone in the gym was to buy something from the snack machines there. Sure enough, a minute later, the two boys reappeared with candy bars in their hands. This time, though, they were a little more

aggressive in their attempt to intimidate Stacey and the guy standing with her. They stared at them and smirked as they walked by, but Jason responded by staring right back. The boys were surprised by this and it was they who looked away first, but before they re-entered the main building, one of them turned and shouted, "Hey, dude, is that your *girlfriend?*" and then they both hurried inside, laughing.

Stacey looked at Jason. It was one thing for people to make fun of her—at least *she* was used to it—but people rarely made fun of those she was with. This was probably because Stacey usually hung out with Andrea, April, and sometimes Rachel, and those three girls were well liked and had good reputations independent of their friendship with Stacey. Stacey knew she could trust them, and even if somebody said something mean to them, they would always stand by her. But how would Jason react to this? His face was expressionless as he stared at the doors into which the two boys had vanished. Then he smiled proudly and turned to Stacey, "Like I was saying: I don't mind."

Fifteen

THE CAFETERIA was crowded that day, as it usually was when it rained. Trey's table, which had been nearly empty earlier in the week, was now almost full as Trey's friends—Kurt, Eric, and three other guys—were sitting together. Their number meant that Trey didn't have to feel like a loser sitting at an almost empty table, but it did mean that he had to listen to Mike.

Mike wasn't really one of Trey's friends, but he was friends with the other guys at the table. Trey didn't like him very much, but he didn't say anything about it. In the past, when he sat with Rachel, he hardly ever saw Mike. Now that he had rejoined his old friends, he saw Mike—and was forced to listen to him—at least every other day. Mike was telling his friends about a party he crashed last weekend and, in particular, the hot girl that he met there. They ended up hanging out together most of the night and getting high. Apparently, she went to another high school, and they were going to go out together this weekend. What bugged Trey was that Mike had told this same story on Tuesday, and again on Wednesday. Trey was absolutely sick of hearing about that dumb party and that stupid girl.

Miserable, Trey stared out a nearby window and watched the rain as it fell. He found himself missing Rachel's company. She never told him

the same stories over and over again, and she always seemed interested in him whenever he had something to say. After he broke up with her, he had tried to convince everyone that he didn't care about Rachel anymore and that their break-up wasn't a big deal. He had fooled his friends, and he almost had fooled himself, but the longer he went without speaking to her—or some days without even seeing her—the worse he felt. Her reassuring smile and the sound of her voice always gave him a boost, a reason to face each day and all the crap that came with it. She gave him a sense of purpose, something he sorely lacked now that he wasn't going to college and his future after high school seemed uncertain. Without Rachel, his life—at school and in general—seemed empty. He had thought that returning to his old friends would help fill the void, but it didn't. They were OK (except for Mike), but they couldn't replace Rachel.

He wondered: if he were to apologize to Rachel, would she want to take him back? Was she angry with him because of how abruptly he had broken up with her? The only way to find out, of course, was to talk to her. As the bell rang, and the students in the cafeteria started back to their classes, he had an urge to seek her out. Maybe just seeing Rachel would be enough to lift his spirits to get him through the rest of the day.

The lobby of the high school auditorium was a mostly empty room. Two sets of glass doors led to the outside and opposite these were two more sets of metal doors leading into the auditorium itself. Above these latter doors, which were kept locked when the auditorium wasn't in use, was the school's name, its logo, and a picture of its mascot in an angry pose, all of which were intended to inspire a sense of school pride. On either side of the lobby were staircases that led to the second floor balcony. Since nothing of any value was ever stored in the lobby, the glass doors leading from the outside were often kept unlocked. The students knew this, and on days when it was cold, or when it rained,

those who usually ate outside would use it as shelter from the weather. Today was no different and the floor of the lobby was occupied by about thirty students eating lunch and clustered in their usual cliques. A few of them sat on the stairs, towards the top, hoping for a little more privacy in the crowded lobby. Underneath one of the staircases, Jimmy, Andrea, Rachel, Brian and April sat in a circle. Despite their missing friends, their clique was among the largest, so when one of them said something funny, or if a heated argument began, their laughter or shouts dominated over the other conversations nearby.

As involved as Brian was in his friends' conversations, Rachel was really the only person that he wished to talk to. Even when he wasn't talking to Rachel specifically, when he was making fun of Jimmy, or arguing with April, his eyes kept glancing towards Rachel sitting next to him. Everyone in the group could see that Brian's interest in Rachel had increased ever since Trey began spending his lunch hours elsewhere and Rachel began spending more time with her friends, but they couldn't be sure that this wasn't simply an act of kindness, an attempt to cheer up a friend in the wake of her break-up. All of his lunchtime discussions with the dark-haired girl had been public and open and their relationship had not progressed beyond anything other than simple conversation.

Rachel, however, had the feeling that there was something more going on, but she couldn't be absolutely sure, since she didn't know Brian as well as April and Andrea. She could see and hear in Brian's language and his gestures that same eagerness—almost a giddiness—that she had observed in Trey in the beginning of their relationship. When she talked to Brian, she felt like she was reliving a part of her life over again, and she privately wondered whether Brian was simply a nice guy like this with everybody, or whether some deeper emotion lay beneath his words and smiles.

Still, the attention she received from Brian might not have been enough to spark Rachel's suspicions were it not for the fact that she had noticed the same increase in attention from other boys at school recently. In fact, now that everyone knew she was no longer Trey's girlfriend, she found that many of her classmates' attitudes towards her had also

changed. A few girls who admired in Trey the same powerful strength that Rachel had loved now gave her a haughty "I told you so" attitude. Other girls, who were not the type to fall for someone as crude and rough as Trey, and who had disapproved of her relationship with him, now behaved friendlier to her. These girls were mostly in Rachel's AP classes. Rachel had gotten along well with them in middle school, but when she began dating Trey—and started mimicking Trey's outward appearance and attitude—they ignored her during class and kept away from her. But now that Rachel was wearing her glasses again, was dressing a little more normally, and made it known that she had been accepted to Pallas, as some of them had been, they were friendlier to her and realized that inside, she was still a lot like them.

But the most obvious change in Rachel's classmates' attitudes came from the boys. Trey had been the first and only boy to ever ask her out or show any serious interest in her at all. Throughout her high school career, most boys didn't even talk to her, or if they did, they made it clear from their distance, both personal and physical, that they weren't interested in her in any way other than as a fellow student. Such boys were barely even considered friends, and, if someone six months ago had asked Rachel to list all of the boys in her school whom she considered her friends, Rachel probably would have listed only Trey, Jimmy, and Brian. All this had changed since her break-up. Now it seemed like she was meeting and talking to boys everywhere she went. They talked to her in class, said hello to her in the halls, and those who were still too shy to talk to her made their regards known by staring at her and smiling. Rachel had to wonder if this newly expressed attention had been suppressed merely by Trey's reputation. Had she been "off-limits" in some way? If she and Trey had never dated, would she have received this sort of attention from boys sooner? Rachel didn't know.

She was flattered by all of the attention she was receiving, though, and she certainly enjoyed it, but she didn't want to do anything to encourage any of the boys who appeared to be interested in her. She still didn't know whether her split from Trey was permanent or not. If only she could talk to him for a few minutes she might learn the status of their

relationship, if it still existed, but ever since Pallas rejected Trey, he hadn't wanted to speak to her and had successfully avoided her. She knew that their break-up had occurred in the aftermath of his rejection and that it was possible that he didn't want their relationship to come to an end. That definitely wasn't what Rachel wanted, and if he would only talk to her and ask for her forgiveness, she would take him back in an instant. So she waited, buried herself in her schoolwork, and spent more time with Andrea, April, and her other friends.

Besides, it wasn't like there was much of an opportunity to start a new relationship anyway. School was almost over, and come August, she would be leaving this city for the state capital. Unless some perfect guy came along and swept her off her feet, trying to start a brand new relationship seemed like a wasted effort. With her three-year relationship with Trey as her only experience to draw upon, Rachel believed that only a long-term relationship was fulfilling. All she had to do was look at Jimmy and the long string of girls he had dated only once or twice before dumping them, or Andrea's awful experience with Greg, to see that a short-term relationship was neither rewarding nor satisfying. So if Trey was serious about their relationship being over, then Rachel decided she would use the time between now and August to rest and recover before starting fresh in college. Her response to Brian's peculiar behavior, then, was to just be cordial with him, get to know him, enjoy his friendship, but draw the line between simple friendship and something more.

But if Rachel only knew what Brian's true feelings were, she would undoubtedly be alarmed. Brian had decided to make some sort of move, and let Rachel know how he felt about her. Ever since last year, when he and Jimmy had begun sitting with Rachel's friends for lunch, he had had a crush on her. He didn't know how the crush had started, or when. Maybe it was a result of seeing her kissing Trey every day. Maybe it was because he didn't think Trey was the right guy for her; Brian thought she deserved someone better. Perhaps he wasn't perfect for her either, but he thought he came closer to being her ideal match than Trey.

Before Rachel's break-up with Trey, Brian's infatuation with Rachel was a purely physical one. He didn't really know much about her

interests or her personality at all. Most of what he had learned about her came from the experiences that Andrea, April, and Stacey shared from time to time. But once Trey left the group, and Rachel began spending her time at the table with her friends instead of on the lawn with her boyfriend, Brian was able to learn first-hand the kind of person that Rachel was, and he wasn't disappointed. He was pleased to learn that despite the intimidating appearance that she had cultivated after spending so much time with Trey, on the inside she was smart and gentle and compassionate. It wasn't long before his crush transformed into a much stronger emotion.

He wanted to ask her out, but he found that wanting to ask a girl out and actually asking her were two very different things. Brian had never been particularly shy around girls before. Besides Andrea, April, and Stacey, he had other female friends at school, and he had even dated a couple of girls during his high school career, but the potential of a relationship with Rachel was something different. Perhaps it was because for so long Rachel was unattainable; as long as she remained with Trey, there was no hope of him ever being able to ask her out. Or maybe it was because Rachel seemed to be everything he wanted in a girlfriend that to ask her out would be too much too fast. Whatever the case, doubt, fear, and procrastination conspired to prevent him from taking that giant step towards greater intimacy with Rachel, but these were countered by that most powerful of all incentives—time. Time was running out. The end of the school year—the end of high school—was at hand. Brian knew that if he didn't establish something with Rachel now, he wouldn't be able to see her during the summer because he didn't think that he knew her well enough now to call her on the phone and ask her on a date if they hadn't already set a precedent for that during the school year. It didn't worry him that he wasn't going to the same university as Rachel, and what few months they had before she left might be all the time allowed for a relationship. A few months was better than letting this opportunity pass him by completely. Besides, Brian secretly hoped that if he could get her to feel the same way about him as he felt about her, then even the distance between his university and hers would not be too far for their

love to span. He had only to take the first step and make his feelings known.

The bell rang and Thursday's lunch hour came to an end. The students clustered inside the auditorium lobby picked themselves up off the floor and slowly walked outside. They found it was still raining, the overcast skies still imposing an atmosphere of gloom upon the school day. The five friends left the auditorium together, but once inside the main building, they split up and went to their own lockers to get their books for their next classes. Rachel used to let Trey accompany her to her locker, sometimes even letting him open it for her, but for the last week she had been entering her locker combination with her own fingers, and walking to class by herself. Today, though, was different, for Brian caught up to her from behind and started walking by her side.

"Hello again," he said.

"Hey! Is your locker on this floor?"

"Yeah, it's over there," Brian gestured vaguely. He was trembling slightly but did his best not to show it. In this crowded hallway, the mass of other bodies around them disguised his nervousness and Rachel didn't notice a thing. Brian had decided back in the auditorium that he would ask Rachel out. Assuming she wasn't doing anything on Friday or Saturday, they might go out to eat, or see a movie, or perhaps go dancing at a club. They were both eighteen, and there were several clubs downtown that would let them in—some might even sell them alcohol. Whatever Rachel wanted to do was fine with him, but first he had to ask her, to see if she were at all interested, and that was the hard part. He didn't want to ask her in the auditorium, in front of their friends, and risk humiliation if she said No. Ironically, here in the hallway, surrounded by dozens of strangers, it seemed much more private. If Rachel rejected him here, no one would care about it except Rachel and himself.

"I almost forgot to tell you," he said, prefacing his question with some irrelevant conversation, "I made an A on that chemistry test I took Monday."

"Wow! Congratulations."

"Yeah, I used that technique you taught me for memorizing the

elements on the periodic table. Where did you learn that anyway? Did they teach you that in your AP chemistry class last year?"

Rachel smiled. "I wasn't in an 'AP' chemistry. It was just an ordinary class like what you're in. Aren't there any juniors in your class?"

"Yeah, there are—sorry." He was a little thrown off by this misstep. They arrived at Rachel's locker and there was silence between them as Rachel entered her combination.

As she opened the door and began pulling out her books for the next class, Rachel said, "I'm glad you made an A." She saw that he was still standing beside her and she asked innocently, "Is there something else?"

Brian had been staring at the floor preparing his next utterance, which would have been the offer to take her out "as a way to thank you for your help" as he planned to say. But when Brian's face, full of hope and courage, looked up, his eyes caught sight of something beyond Rachel, just down the hall, which Rachel didn't see as the dark-haired girl, with her books in hand, closed her locker and turned to face Brian. Instead of asking his question, Brian lost his nerve and simply said, "Well, thanks again. I guess I owe you one," and he turned to leave.

"Wait a minute," Rachel said, starting after him. "I just remembered a trick my teacher taught me last year for solving your equations faster. It's kind of advanced, though, and your teacher might not have told your class. Would you like to hear it?"

Rachel and Brian disappeared into the crowd of students, and Trey, who had been standing a few feet away, could no longer see them. His imposing form, leaning against the wall of lockers with his arms folded over his chest, had been the distraction that prevented Brian from asking Rachel out. After he had left the cafeteria, he went straight to Rachel's locker, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, and maybe even talk to her. But when he got there, he found Brian was with her, so he decided to have some fun by trying to intimidate the little creep. He almost started laughing when Brian's eyes met his and he saw the look of surprise and fear on the shorter boy's face. Trey wondered if the little runt was trying to hone in on his girlfriend, but he wasn't afraid of the

competition. Trey knew Rachel better than anyone and he knew that she would never go for somebody like Brian. However, as he left the scene and walked towards his own locker, Trey mused that Brian's puny body did have one advantage: since it didn't offer a serious challenge for Rachel's affections, Trey was content to just stare threateningly at him—instead of coming over and kicking his ass.

Rachel's last class of the day was her AP English class. As she entered the classroom and took her assigned seat, she found herself still thinking about Brian, and trying to decide whether he was interested in her or not. She didn't know what she would do if he was. Brian wasn't like so many of the other boys who had suddenly shown an interest in her this last week and a half. Those boys were practically strangers; she knew them only because she shared classes with them. Brian was different; Rachel considered him a friend. She couldn't simply ignore him or easily tell him No if he were to ask her out. It occurred to her, an hour earlier, as she sat in her fifth period economics class, that Brian might have had some sort of ulterior motive when he followed her back to her locker after lunch, but nothing unusual had happened, and Rachel didn't know for sure. *Maybe I'm just imagining things*, she said to herself, and she wished that the school year would hurry up and end so that these temptations would go away, or that Trey would come back to her and remove the temptations himself.

She was so lost in thought that she almost didn't hear the "Hi," directed towards her from the boy who sat in the desk beside her. The boy was named Dan, and if anyone at school represented the opposite of Trey, it had to be Dan. He was smart, outgoing, and involved in all of the extra-curricular activities that Trey would never dare be associated with: the Debate Club, the Spanish Club, the Drama Club, and in their junior year he had been elected to the Student Council. He was very popular, not just among the AP students, but among the rest of the senior class.

Most of the girls liked him and Rachel had sometimes seen him on dates when she and Trey used to go out. What's more, his own application to Pallas University had been accepted.

"Hi," Rachel replied. She had never really given Dan much thought before, even though he was one of a small handful of boys who had tried to befriend her before her break-up with Trey. But Rachel had so absorbed Trey's anti-social attitude, especially when it came to other AP students, that she rarely responded to Dan's overtures with anything more than a curt "Hello" or "No." But with Trey absent from her life, her outlook had begun to change and she saw Dan in a new light. He wasn't a bad guy, and Rachel felt a little guilty about treating him so rudely before when he was only trying to be friendly.

"Have you finished reading the book?" Dan asked. Their class had been reading *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

"Almost," Rachel replied as she pulled her copy of the novel and her notebook out of her backpack. "I still have five chapters left to read."

"Oh, well, I won't spoil the ending for you then," Dan said, and Rachel sensed that he had wanted to talk to her about the book. Rachel didn't know if Dan was interested in her the way other boys seemed to be lately, but she assumed the best in him and guessed that he wasn't.

"So how are you today?" she asked, returning Dan's polite conversation.

"I'm fine," the boy replied. "I just can't believe how close we are to graduation. Only six more weeks left and then it will all be over. The year has gone by so fast."

"I don't think so," Rachel said. "For me it can't end fast enough."

"I know what you mean. I can't wait to get out of here, either. I keep thinking about college next year, and where I'll be next fall."

"Me too."

"You're going to Pallas too, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Have you chosen a dorm yet?"

Rachel shook her head as the bell rang. Class didn't start immediately so she turned to Dan and asked, "Have you? When do we

get to do that?"

"As soon as possible. The dorms are all owned and operated by different companies and they'll send you stuff in the mail advertising the best they have to offer. But whatever you do, just don't get a room in the main freshman dorm."

"Why not?"

"Because it's seventy years old, and most of the rooms don't have air conditioning. I think I'm gonna to try to get into Jackson Hall. It's a boys' dorm and it's farther from campus, but at least it's only twenty years old—and there's an air conditioner in every room. A friend of mine and I are gonna room together."

"I don't know where I'm going to live," Rachel said, and their discussion was cut short by their teacher who began her lecture for the day. She talked about the novel for a little while and then reminded the class that their presentations on the book would be due on Monday. This was the first the class had heard about the reports, but it was no big deal. For every book or group of short stories they had read that year they also had to deliver a brief presentation analyzing a character or a theme or some other particular element in the story. To save time, and build on their ability to work in teams, they were expected to work in groups of two or three. Rachel usually just paired up with whomever did not already have a partner chosen, but this time, as the teacher was still talking, Dan tapped her on the arm. When she turned to look, he pointed to her and then to himself, suggesting that they work on their project together. Rachel agreed by nodding her head.

After school, Rachel ran into Dan as she left the building and they walked to the parking lot together. The rain had stopped, for the moment, but the sky was still dark and threatening. Dan ventured, "What is Trey going to do now that you are about to go to college? Is he going to follow you to the capital? Maybe you can live with him instead of in the dorms."

Didn't he know? Rachel said, "Trey and I aren't really . . . together anymore. Haven't you heard? I thought everybody knew about it by now."

Dan shrugged and admitted, "Well, I heard *rumors*, but that's all I thought they were—rumors."

"Well, for once, a high school rumor is true," Rachel said. "I haven't talked to Trey since last week."

"I'm sorry."

"It's OK," Rachel said with a smile, pretending like it was all no big deal. "Besides, we may get back together before the school year ends. Trey can be stubborn sometimes, and maybe he's just being stubborn now."

Dan changed the subject as they walked through the parking lot. "Well, I guess we should get started working on our report. Can I call you tonight so we can exchange some ideas?"

"Sure, that sounds good. And I'll make sure I've finished reading the book."

"That would help," Dan said with a grin.

They reached Rachel's car, and as she got her keys out, she said, "Well, goodbye."

"You forgot something."

"What?"

"I don't know your phone number."

"Oh!" Rachel said with a laugh. "Do you have something to write with?"

Dan quickly pulled a pen and piece of paper out of his backpack and Rachel's scribbled down her cell phone number. Dan then promised to call later and they said goodbye. Rachel unlocked her car and got inside, watching nervously as raindrops began to fall on her windshield. She turned on the ignition and used the windshield wipers to clear the window, but the worry remained for the inexperienced driver.

While Dan and Rachel walked through the parking lot, neither of them realized that they were being watched from afar by Trey. Leaving the school by way of the cafeteria, he wasn't trying to find Rachel, but now, by chance, he saw her with another guy. At first, he thought it was Brian again, but when he saw that it wasn't, that it was one of the AP nerds, he became concerned. Just how many other guys were hitting on

her anyway? He never thought Rachel could inspire the same interest in so many other guys as she had inspired in him. Seeing Dan and Rachel together only made Trey want Rachel back even more, but it also provoked a bit of anger in him. Is this how Rachel responded to their break-up? By encouraging every guy with enough guts to talk to her? When he saw the couple laughing and smiling, and then when he saw them exchange what appeared to be phone numbers, Trey thought his own worst suspicions were confirmed. He might have called Rachel later that night and apologized, but now he bitterly suspected that Rachel would be waiting for a call from this nerd instead. Angrily, he set off across the street to his own car. Thunder grumbled in the distance and the sky grew darker.

Besides Trey, another person had been watching Dan and Rachel with much interest. Brian, having regained his composure and his determination over the three hours since lunch, had decided again to ask Rachel out, with or without Trey present. In a way, he almost hoped Trey would be nearby to hear him ask Rachel out, and to hear her answer him with a Yes. But just as he lost his nerve in front of Rachel's locker after lunch when he saw Trey, so too did he lose his nerve when he saw Dan accompanying Rachel to her car. Was he trying to ask her out too? Brian feared the worst, and when he saw the two of them laughing, he could see what his procrastination had cost him. The one opportunity for which he had been waiting for almost a year had slipped by, squandered, and not likely to return. As Brian walked out to his own car, he felt raindrops, big and wet, begin to fall again. They landed on his body, on his head, and on his face.

Sixteen

WITH HER hands at ten and two, Rachel drove carefully out of the campus parking lot. Movement was slow as the usual rush of students trying to get off campus prevented anyone from going very fast or very far. Rachel didn't mind, though. She didn't have to go to work this afternoon, and even if she did, she still wouldn't drive faster than she felt was comfortable for her. She already didn't like being behind the wheel, and in this rain and on these slick streets she had no confidence in her ability to operate an automobile. Moments like these made Rachel wish that she and Trey were still together. Trey was never afraid to drive, no matter what the road conditions were, and Rachel had always felt safe with him.

But she tried not to think about Trey, or anybody else, at this moment. Instead, she kept her mind on the road and thought only about how she could get safely home. Her headlights and windshield wipers were on as she navigated out of the parking lot. The rain was picking up force again. In another few minutes, she might find herself driving home in a downpour.

Just relax, she told herself, *you got to school all right this morning, and you'll make it home all right too!* As she pulled out of the parking lot and began traveling south down the avenue, she kept her speed at twenty or

less even though it was a forty-five miles per hour zone. She was apparently too slow for the cars behind her, most of which were driven by her schoolmates who were eager to get home and were not as intimidated by the rain. Their headlights flashed brightly in Rachel's rear view mirror, but she ignored them for fear of being dazzled by the light. Most of the cars passed her on the left, and some of the more impatient and intolerant drivers honked their horns as they passed by. One rude driver stuck his hand out into the rain long enough to give Rachel the finger, and the dark-haired girl suddenly realized what it felt like to be on the receiving end of such hostility. When Trey was rude to other drivers and made the same gesture to them, Rachel had always thought it funny, but now she didn't think it was very nice.

As she traveled along the busy avenue, Rachel gradually gave in to peer pressure and accelerated to a speed closer to forty-five. She was still very nervous, and she leaned forward in her seat and increased the speed of the windshield wipers so that as little rain as possible would interfere with her vision. When the drivers in front of her pumped their brakes, she too stepped on her brake peddle, more than she had to, but enough to give her a buffer between her car and the one in front of her, a buffer which didn't last long as more aggressive drivers from the other lanes cut in front of her. To prevent any distractions, her radio was turned off, the only sounds being those of the engine, the wipers scraping across the windshield, and the rain bouncing off her car. Her heart pounded in her chest and her fingers gripped the steering wheel so tightly that they began to feel cramped and sore.

At last she came to the street which would lead her to her own neighborhood. She activated the right blinker and followed the car in front of her, which was apparently making the same maneuver. As it turned the corner, Rachel expected the car to accelerate and proceed down the street, so Rachel also accelerated as she came out of the turn. But suddenly, the other car's break lights lit up and the car seemed to come to a dead stop. With a scream, Rachel stood on her brake pedal, but her car was brought to a stop only when it had collided into the rear of the other car.

Somehow (later, Rachel wouldn't remember how), she was able to contain her sense of panic and dread until she pulled into the parking lot of a mini-mall, the one that the driver of the other car had slowed down to turn into just before the accident. Rachel parked her car and turned off the engine. She got out, ignoring the rain that quickly began to soak her clothes and hair, and hurried to inspect the damage. The driver of the other car, an older man in his thirties, was already out of his car, under the protection of an umbrella, and began to yell at Rachel, but he was silenced by the expression of shock, fear, and regret on the teenager's face. Neither driver was hurt, and they might have simply exchanged insurance information and went their separate ways, but an older woman with a shopping bag and umbrella in one hand and a cell phone in the other quickly approached them and told them that she had witnessed the accident and called the police for them, so they had to stay where they were and wait.

Rachel, more conscious now of what had happened and where she was, retrieved her own umbrella out of her car and began inspecting the damage. The man's car survived the encounter remarkably well, most of the harm being to the rear bumper, but Rachel's car was not so fortunate. Both her headlights were smashed and the grill was gnarled. Afraid to talk to the man for fear he might yell at her again, and equally afraid of the imminent police officer, and what he might say or do to her, Rachel stared at the busy avenue and the flow of traffic that rushed past through the steady rain. None of the other motorists noticed the accident, since it wasn't severe enough to attract the attention of anyone who just happened to be driving by. Rachel suddenly felt very lonely, a feeling she hadn't felt in a long time. Trey wasn't here with her, nor were her parents nor any of her friends from school. What would she have done if this accident had occurred six months from now when she was in the state capital? And who was to say that it wouldn't, as inexperienced as she was at driving? She wanted to promise herself that she would never again get behind the wheel of a car unless there were blue skies and a shining sun overhead, but who would she turn to when the rain fell? It was an awful feeling, this loneliness, and the cars on the avenue drove on,

their drivers unheeding and uncaring.

Except for the driver of one of the cars. As he passed that same mini-mall, he saw a girl who looked a lot like Rachel standing in the rain next to a car that looked a lot like the car Rachel had left the campus in. The boy didn't know for sure if it really was Rachel or not, but on the chance that it was, he moved into the left turn lane and made a U-turn as soon as the traffic allowed him. Then he drove back to the intersection and got into the left turn lane again. As he waited for the light to change so he could turn, he got a better look at the girl standing in the parking lot. It was definitely Rachel, and the boy could now see that she had been in some sort of car accident. His immediate concern was whether Rachel was OK. Since she was standing and holding an umbrella, he concluded that she must be physically all right, but how was she emotionally?

The light turned green and Brian made a left turn onto the street that Rachel had tried to turn on immediately before her accident. Brian entered the parking lot and parked a few spaces away from Rachel's car. Rachel didn't recognize his car, and she kept staring out at the avenue. So eager was he to find out if Rachel was all right and to offer his help if she needed it, that he didn't even bother to bring his umbrella with him. He ran to her through the rain and asked, "Are you all right?"

Rachel jumped, startled, and she turned to look at him with complete surprise, as if he had just appeared out of thin air. "Y-yeah," she stuttered, "I'm fine, but my car isn't."

"What happened?"

Rachel proceeded to tell Brian exactly what had happened, not noticing that the other driver had stepped closer to eavesdrop on this part of the conversation, to get a preview of what she was likely to tell the officer if and when one showed up. Brian watched the man and wondered if he thought that Brian was her boyfriend. Just as Rachel finished her tale, a police car entered the parking lot, and with the usual, unhurried pace of law enforcement, the officer parked his car and got out. The older man spoke to the officer first, and then Rachel, following his lead, introduced herself as the driver who had caused the accident. The officer looked at Brian, dripping wet and obviously concerned.

"Who are you?" the officer asked, "One of the passengers?"

"No."

"A witness?"

"No, I just got here. I'm a friend of hers."

As the police officer continued to ask questions and take information, Rachel noticed that Brian didn't have any protection from the rain. She offered to share her umbrella with him and Brian accepted by standing underneath it. It wasn't large enough to protect them both but it offered another kind of security. Brian liked the feeling of being so close to Rachel, of sharing this single umbrella against the forces of nature. Here was a feeling of intimacy that was unexpected but certainly welcome. Rachel was thankful for Brian's presence and drew strength from it. This experience was embarrassing and frightening for her, but Brian made it tolerable and she was able to get through it.

The police officer didn't explicitly place the blame on anyone for the accident, but from his tone of voice it was clear that he viewed Rachel as the driver who was most at fault, even though, if she had to do it all over again, she didn't think that she could have reacted any differently immediately before the accident occurred. The officer said that he would file a report at the station and that it would be available to their insurance companies, and then he left. The other man, remembering that he had business to conduct in one of the stores, left his car where it was and without saying a word to the girl who had dented his bumper, went on his way. Rachel turned to Brian who was still underneath her umbrella and said, "Could you do me a favor?"

"Of course, anything."

"Could you . . ." and she smiled timidly, embarrassed about what she planned to ask her friend. "Could you follow me home in your car? I was really nervous about driving before the accident, and now I'm absolutely terrified to get back in that car. Could you just follow me and make sure I don't have another accident? I don't live very far from here."

Brian smiled in return and said, "Sure, I'll follow you. It's no problem. Are you sure your car is all right to drive?" They looked at her car again, and since there didn't appear to be any damage that would

prevent it from going from one place to another, they decided to leave. As he got back into his own car, soaked, a little chilled, but excited, Brian almost wished that the damage to the car had been a little more severe—not to the point that Rachel would have been hurt or in any physical danger, but enough so that the car would require a wrecker to tow the car away and Brian would need to drive her home. The passenger seat next to him never looked as empty as it did right now. He watched Rachel start her car and leave the parking lot, and he followed close behind her, not so close as to tailgate her, but close enough to let her know he was with her. Brian felt like this was always how it had been between them: she, separate, distant, leading the way while he followed behind. Because Brian didn't know exactly where Rachel lived, he savored every second as he followed her car home, not knowing when she would pull into the driveway of some house he had never seen, and wave him away. When she did finally turn into the driveway of a large, expensive-looking home, Brian was disappointed that this experience had to end. He parked his car on the street, blocking her driveway, partially rolled down the window and waited. Rachel, with her backpack and her umbrella, got out of her car and hurried down the driveway towards Brian.

"Thank you!" she said. "For everything. I would invite you in, but I've got to call my parents and let them know what happened—you understand."

"Yeah, that's OK," Brian replied, coolly. "I've got to get home too. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course, goodbye!" and she hurried through the rain to the front door of her house, unlocking it quickly and going inside before Brian even released his foot from its hold on the brake pedal or rolled up the window.

When Brian got home from school that afternoon, he realized that he had missed yet another opportunity: Rachel probably wouldn't be driving to school tomorrow. She had been so upset after the accident that she had needed him to follow her so she could just get home, and if the streets were wet tomorrow morning, Brian knew Rachel wouldn't want to try to drive to school by herself—assuming her car wasn't already

sent to a mechanic for repairs. He should have offered to drive her to school. It was an opportunity missed, but maybe there was still time to ask. He remembered that Rachel had once given him her cell phone number, although he had never used it. Frantically, he searched his desk and drawers in this bedroom until he found an old piece of paper with several names and phone numbers on it. He found the one that belonged to Rachel and dialed it on his phone, but he got a busy signal. He tried again and again over the course of the evening but kept getting the same result. At 9:00 he tried one last time and finally got through. He heard Rachel's voice greet him on the other end of the line: "Hello?"

"Rachel? This is Brian."

"Oh, hello! Are you calling to check on me?"

"Sort of. What's the word on your car?"

"It's still wrecked," Rachel joked. Brian was glad to hear her giggle and it put him at ease. "My dad says that we'll take it in to get it fixed on Monday."

"That's good. I hope it doesn't cost too much to fix."

"Same here, especially since I'll probably have to pay for it. Until it's fixed, though, I'm not going to drive it. Maybe I won't even drive it after it's fixed!"

"Hmm, well, that's sort of what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, um, if you need a ride or anything tomorrow morning. I'd be happy to give you a lift."

"Oh that's very sweet," Rachel said with regret, "but I've already got a ride tomorrow morning—with somebody else."

"Oh."

Rachel hoped Brian wouldn't ask her who she was getting a ride from and just assume it was somebody like Andrea or April. In fact, Rachel was getting a ride from Dan. He had called earlier that evening, like he promised he would, so that they could compare notes and start work on their presentation for next Monday. Rachel, too upset over her accident, hadn't even touched her book or thought about their report, and so she was taken by surprise when she answered the phone and

heard Dan's voice on the line. She apologized for not being ready to work and explained to him what had happened just minutes after they said goodbye to each other in the campus parking lot. Dan was supportive and hadn't hesitated to offer her a ride to school tomorrow if she needed one. Rachel had already decided that she would not drive her car to school and had arranged for her mother to take her, but she appreciated Dan's offer so she immediately said Yes. Now she almost regretted it because Brian had been so nice to her lately, especially that afternoon, and she felt like she should repay his kindness. She guessed that his offer to take her to school was the reason why he had called her this evening.

"I'm sorry," Rachel said. "But thanks anyway. And thanks again for helping me this afternoon."

"Well, that's what friends are for. I guess I'll see you tomorrow, at school."

"Absolutely. I'll talk to you then."

"Goodbye."

"Bye."

Seventeen

THE FOLLOWING morning, storm clouds again threatened to drench the city with rain. The weather forecasts on the local early-morning news shows predicted another round of showers throughout the day, but no rain was falling as adults went to work and kids went to school. In fact, it turned out that no rain whatsoever would fall on Friday, but in the morning people still dressed in anticipation of bad weather, wearing shoes that could suffer journeys through puddles and mud, clothes that could survive a little exposure to water, and umbrellas were once again in fashion.

Joining the umbrella-bearing multitude was Jason. He had arrived early after anticipating bad weather during his drive to school. As he approached the flagpole, he noticed a familiar face among the mass of students. It was Stacey, who had also left for school early, though not because she wanted to avoid rain and traffic but because she was eager to see Jason again. She smiled when she saw him approach and greeted him with a cheerful, "Good morning!"

"Hi," Jason replied. "You don't have an umbrella today?"

Stacey wasn't carrying one. The reason was that she simply forgot to bring it with her when she left home that morning—she had been in such a hurry. It was still sitting in her family's garage, where she left it

yesterday when she got home from school. Instead of telling Jason the truth, though, she decided to tease him. She said, "No, I probably won't need one today. It doesn't look like it's gonna rain."

Jason looked up at the sky and wondered how Stacey could reach that conclusion. The dark clouds overhead looked so threatening. "It looks like rain to me."

Stacey shook her head, declaring, "No, the clouds look different today. They're brighter—you know, more whiter. The storm clouds yesterday were a lot darker. You just watch, this afternoon when school lets out, the sun will be shining and there will be blue skies instead of this ugly gray."

"I heard that it's supposed to rain through the weekend."

Stacey couldn't help laughing. "God, Jason, you're such a pessimist!"

Jason shrugged. Tired of this conversation, and never realizing that Stacey had only been joking with him, he said, "I brought something for you today."

Stacey wore an expression of pleasant surprise and eager expectancy as she watched Jason open his backpack and dig around for whatever it was he had for her. Surely this was a good sign: he had thought about her at home yesterday and had decided to bring her a gift.

Jason pulled out a slim CD jewel case with a CD inside and handed it to Stacey. "I burned a few of Charley Z's best songs to a CD yesterday. You can listen to them this weekend if you want."

Stacey was touched. "Thanks," she said as she held the jewel case in her hand. Jason had even included a list of the songs on the CD. As she read the list, she found she didn't recognize any of the titles, but she enjoyed seeing them written in Jason's own hand. Had he gone to all this trouble to make a mix CD just for her? She knew how much Charley Z meant to her new friend and was honored that he would want to share his music with her. "Thanks," she said again, looking up at Jason, "I promise I'll listen to it."

The bell rang, the school doors opened, and the students gathered around the doors slowly entered the building. As the two

seniors joined the mass of bodies, backpacks, and umbrellas, Jason heard Stacey ask him, almost timidly, "Will I see you again at lunch today?"

Jason nodded. "Of course."

That same morning, at about twenty minutes till eight, having followed the directions Rachel gave him last night to her house, Dan pulled into Rachel's driveway and turned off his car's engine. As he waited for Rachel to appear outside her house, Dan got out of his car and looked at the damage Rachel's car had suffered. He had been expecting worse than what he found. Last night, Dan sensed in Rachel's voice that she was very upset over her accident. Dan imagined she had been involved in a major collision, not a minor fender-bender. Rachel also said that her own car had been more damaged than the other car, and if that were so, then Dan didn't understand what the big deal was. Still, he had never been in an accident himself, so maybe the experience was more traumatic than he supposed.

He heard the front door of Rachel's house open, and the dark-haired girl stepped outside, closing and locking the front door behind her. She carried an umbrella in her hand and started to open it but stopped when she discovered it wasn't raining.

"I was just checking out the damage," Dan said, referring to the car. "When are you gonna get it fixed?"

"Next Monday," Rachel replied. "My dad said it might take them three or four days to fix it."

"Really?" Dan asked, incredulous. "It looks to me like all they'd have to do is replace the bumper and the headlights." He looked again. "And the grill."

Rachel shrugged, "That's what my dad said."

"Well, are you ready to go?"

"Yeah." They both got into Dan's car. The boy, taking a hint from Rachel's experience yesterday, decided to drive carefully to school.

The streets were still slick in some places from the rain that had fallen overnight. He didn't want the same thing to happen to him, and he didn't want Rachel to be party to a second traffic accident in less than twenty-four hours.

"I thought of some ideas for our report," Dan said as he drove. "I wrote them down, but they're in my backpack right now." He gestured to his backpack that sat in the back seat of the car. "You can look at them when we get to school and decide which is the best."

"Thanks," Rachel said. "You don't have to do so much of the work, you know. I can pull my own weight too."

"I know—I can see that now. But last night I didn't know how bad your accident was, or how upset you were. I figured I'd better do as much as I could, just in case."

Rachel smiled, "I guess I sounded a little out of it last night, huh?"

"Sort of," Dan said, not wanting to put her down in any way. "But it's understandable. Was that the first accident you've ever been in?"

"Yeah, and it's really freaked me out too. I don't have a lot of driving experience. Trey used to drive me wherever I needed to go. He'd even drive me to and from work sometimes."

"Do you miss him?" Dan bit his tongue and regretted the question as soon as it left his lips. It was awkward and Dan worried that she might not appreciate his butting into her personal life. *Of course she misses him*, he said to himself. *Duh!*

But Rachel answered him honestly without sounding like she was completely heartbroken: "Yeah. We were together for three years. It's hard to lose somebody like that so suddenly."

"Especially at times like this—you know, when you wreck your car."

Rachel agreed. "I wasn't crazy about driving before my accident. Now I don't even want to think about getting behind a steering wheel ever again. People at school always make a big deal about getting their driver's license and a car. I think that sometimes it's nice just being in the passenger's seat."

They were quiet for a while, as Dan drove down the busy avenue towards school. They were early enough that they could get a good parking space in the students' lot. As he parked his car, Dan said, "Maybe we could work on our report later today, you know, like at lunch? You can look over my ideas for the report and tell me which you like best."

Rachel looked at him and wished she could know whether Dan was just thinking about their report or whether he was thinking about her too. She knew that they really didn't need much time to prepare the report. It was so late in the year and Rachel had done so many of these reports already that she knew exactly what their teacher expected. Their phone conversation last night would have been enough to plan and prepare their report, if only Rachel had been in the mood to work, or she could do it by herself this weekend if she wanted. She didn't want to lead Dan on, or give him the opportunity to lead himself on so she decided to keep their relationship "professional" rather than personal. She replied, "No, I really don't like to study during the lunch hour." She didn't know whether that was a lie or not. She had spent the last three years with Trey during lunch, and neither of them had ever brought homework or books outside.

"OK," the boy said, disappointment creeping into his voice, as they grabbed their belongings and climbed out of the car. Dan asked, "Well, do you need me to give you a ride home this afternoon? It's not a problem, really." Rachel could hear his desperation and desire. She felt guilty and didn't want to look at him as she answered, "No . . . I've already made arrangements with somebody else."

Ever since his disastrous date with Stacey last Thursday, Jimmy had been thinking of some way of redeeming himself, not necessarily in the eyes of his peers, but in his own mind. He counted himself lucky that no one had apparently heard about last week's date, and to finally put the matter to rest once and for all, Jimmy was eager to be seen again in

public later that night in the company of a girl no one could find fault with.

He made his first attempt early in the morning. In his first period class was a girl named Kelly with whom Jimmy had been talking and flirting recently. He flirted with her a little more today, getting her to smile and making her laugh, even at the risk of both of them suffering a reprimand from their teacher. But no reprimand came, and when class ended, Jimmy caught up with her in the hallway and asked her if she wanted to go see a movie later that night.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Jimmy," Kelly sighed. She showed such disappointment in her face that Jimmy suspected it was faked. "I've got other plans tonight."

Kelly didn't elaborate any more than that, and Jimmy didn't inquire further. He just smiled as he usually did and pretended that it was no big deal. He said goodbye to her and they went their separate ways to their second period classes.

Jimmy's second period class didn't offer many possibilities. All the girls who sat near him either already had boyfriends or didn't seem to have much dating potential. Of course, Jimmy wasn't looking for a girl so he could start a relationship; he just needed to be seen with a girl this evening—a girl that everyone knew and everyone liked.

His third period class at first appeared to offer even fewer opportunities than his second period class. This was chemistry class and it contained a mix of seniors, several juniors, and a couple of sophomores. Most of the seniors—and Jimmy was no exception—were taking this class merely because it was required for graduation, and they had delayed taking it until now. Jimmy liked it well enough, but like Brian, who was also in this class, he didn't like doing the equations, and equations were what his class was working on today. They had a big lab scheduled next week and today they were preparing for the lab by trying to predict the results of the various chemicals and substances that they would later combine. Their teacher, after helping the class get started and answering questions, let them work with their lab partners so they could get their work done faster, with less chance of making errors.

Naturally, Jimmy and Brian were lab partners, but even though both were working on the same project, they were riding two very different trains of thought. Brian was putting to use the advice that Rachel had shared with him yesterday concerning chemistry equations and he was having a lot of success, completing the equations faster, and with greater accuracy than he had before. As for Jimmy, he kept glancing up from his desk and looking at the girls in the room and considering each of them in turn. The two sophomore girls were pretty, and no doubt they would love to go out with a senior, but Jimmy preferred a senior, or at worst, a junior. His goal was to be recognized among his peers tonight, and since those peers who mattered most to him were also seniors, he was looking for someone closer to his own age and familiar among the senior class. Only three junior girls were in his chemistry class, and they were seated on the other side of the room. The senior girls offered interesting possibilities, but Jimmy either didn't know them well enough or he knew them too well. Jimmy started to wonder whether he would be able to find a date for that evening.

"What are you staring at, Jimmy?" a girl's voice asked.

Jimmy snapped out of his trance and saw a pair of girls who sat in the row of desks to his right. One of the girls was turned around in her desk so she could work with the other girl—her lab partner—who sat behind her. It was the first girl who had spoken to him. Her partner turned her head around to look at Jimmy, too.

"What?" he asked.

The two girls laughed, and the first girl repeated, "I said, what are you staring at? You look like you're hypnotized or something."

The girl was named Stephanie, and she was one of the girls who Jimmy decided he knew too well to ask out on a date. The reason was because he had actually gone out with her a couple of times last year. Their first date had been a mere whim, as most of Jimmy's first dates were, but Jimmy had been so struck by the novelty of Stephanie's uncanny ability to see through his many disguises and facades that he asked her out for a second date. However, on their second date the novelty wore off, and he found her ability to analyze him too disturbing

so he decided they weren't right for each other and he ended their relationship before it even began. They were still friendly and familiar with each other, though, and their classmates who witnessed their teasing and talking thought that they were close friends.

"Nothing," Jimmy replied with a slight smile. "I was just thinking."

"Yeah, right," Stephanie said as she reflected Jimmy's smile.

"It's true," Jimmy lied. "I was thinking about the formulas for this lab. What happens to the hydrogen in your first formula?"

"The hydrogen?" Stephanie's lab partner asked. "The hydrogen doesn't change. If you don't know that, you're really screwed up."

Brian looked up from his calculations. He was a bit more knowledgeable than Jimmy when it came to chemistry, and the hydrogen in his equations remained as constant as the girls' hydrogen. But the boy also knew Jimmy well enough to know that Jimmy was more interested in flirting with the girls than in figuring out what happens to hydrogen in a chemistry equation, so he did his best to ignore their conversation and not make a fool of himself by playing along with whatever Jimmy was up to.

"Really? Nothing happens to it? That's amazing!" Jimmy stared at his equations in astonishment as the two girls looked at him and giggled.

Stephanie's lab partner shook her head and went back to work, but Stephanie said, "Jimmy, you don't know what you're doing."

"I know," he admitted with a smile, "but that's why I've got Brian as a lab partner. He understands all this better than I do."

Stephanie looked exasperated and asked, "How are you going to graduate with that kind of an attitude? You'll probably be back here again next year while the rest of us are in college."

"I know enough to get by. I haven't failed any tests this semester."

"But you aren't learning enough. You need to know how to solve these equations."

"No I don't. Listen, years from now if you catch me solving chemistry problems, then you'll know something's gone terribly wrong

with my life."

"Yeah, you'll have learned something and become a success."

Jimmy smiled, and the two of them continued their bantering for the rest of the period, though Stephanie continued to work on her equations while Jimmy forgot all about his. When class ended, Jimmy followed Stephanie out the door and decided to take a chance in asking her out for that evening. She seemed like the perfect choice: she was pretty and well-liked among the senior class. And best of all, Jimmy wouldn't have to woo her or fawn over her the way he usually did on dates because they both knew that a relationship wasn't likely to begin between them.

As he walked beside her in the hallway, he asked, "Would you like to go see a movie tonight?"

Stephanie stopped in the middle of the hallway, to the inconvenience of those students walking behind them who now had to maneuver around this added obstacle in an already packed corridor. She gave Jimmy a look which expressed a combination of surprise, skepticism, and interest. "With you?" she asked.

"Of course with me," Jimmy replied, then he hastily added, "Listen, it doesn't have to be like a *real* date—you don't have to put out or anything—"

"Oh, don't worry about that!" Stephanie said with a laugh.

Jimmy laughed too. "We can just go as friends—if you've got nothing else planned tonight. If you're busy, then that's OK."

Stephanie thought about it. At last she asked, "Which movie would we see?"

Jimmy shrugged and said, "It doesn't matter. How about . . . how about that Jeremy Green movie—*The Road To Nowhere*?"

"OK, I'll go—as a friend."

"That's all I ask."

Eighteen

JIMMY called Stephanie after school that day and they agreed that he would pick her up at 6:15. As he pulled up in front of her house, he wasn't in any hurry—the next showing of *The Road To Nowhere* was at 6:45—but Jimmy still bounded from his car and ran up the steps to Stephanie's front door. He couldn't wait for the evening to begin. He felt reborn, like he was returning again to the person he was before his date with Stacey. The repercussions of that disaster, real and imagined, had haunted him during the week between then and now. Having angered Stacey's friends because of his treatment of her, and having lived in fear that people at school might tease him about the "date," Jimmy regretted that the whole episode had ever happened. Tonight, he hoped he could bury those regrets once and for all. The movie theater would be swarming with teenagers, as it always was on Friday nights, and Jimmy would be able to stand before them, with Stephanie by his side, without any feelings of shame or guilt. His self-image would be restored, and he could finally get on with the remainder of the school year. As he rang the doorbell to Stephanie's house, he thought that he might even apologize again to Stacey on Monday, and try to make amends on that front. Jimmy believed that everything would be all right after tonight.

Stephanie answered the door and let herself out, shouting a quick

goodbye to her unseen parents as she closed the door behind her. She was dressed casually; since this wasn't really a "date" she hadn't gone out of her way to get all made up. As she and Jimmy walked to the car, she teased, "Well, I guess this beats spending the evening watching TV."

Jimmy, pretending to be annoyed by her remark, replied, "Hey, don't get *too* excited. We wouldn't want to give people the wrong idea about us."

Stephanie grinned, betraying the outward appearance of displeasure with which she hoped she could tease Jimmy throughout their evening. Below the surface, though, she wasn't at all opposed to their "date." It was Jimmy, and not Stephanie, who had terminated their dating relationship last year before it had a chance to run its course. If Jimmy had asked her out on a third date last year instead of stuttering through a phony explanation of why they shouldn't date anymore, she would have said Yes before he even got his question out. But Jimmy's sudden retreat from her life, as well as the year which had passed since then, gave her a different perspective on the boy. When she went out with him last year, she had no trouble detecting the pretenses and poses he presented to her. By attempting to fool Stephanie into believing his illusions, Stephanie was able to imagine, through some simple deduction, what Jimmy was really like on the inside: he was a far more private and frightened boy than the fun-loving, extroverted guy that all the other girls at school saw. She learned never to take Jimmy at face value and so she knew that there was something more happening tonight than just two "friends" going to see a movie. She knew that Jimmy wasn't trying to resurrect their failed relationship, so there had to be another option, some other reason why Jimmy would ask her out tonight, but Stephanie didn't know what it could be.

When they were both seated in Jimmy's dilapidated car and on their way to the neighborhood theater, Stephanie asked, "So, Jimmy, what have you been up to lately? You know, we really haven't talked to each other since last year."

"What do you mean? We talk all the time in chemistry class."

"That's not talking, that's just playing around and joking."

"What's the difference?"

Stephanie knew that from Jimmy's perspective there was no difference, so she didn't argue with him. Instead, she asked, "Did you go to the prom this year?"

"Of course, didn't you see me?"

Stephanie shook her head. "Sorry. Who did you go with?"

"Brittany Kaufman. Who did you go with?"

"Jerry Neeson."

Jimmy laughed, and Stephanie quickly defended herself, "I know—Jerry's not the ideal guy you'd want to date, but he was the first guy who asked me and so I said Yes. I guess I was afraid nobody else would ask. But, of course, the very next day Tony Cruz asked me to go with him. I was *so* close to saying Yes and dumping Jerry, but I didn't."

"Why not?" Jimmy asked with a smile.

"Because I'm not like *you*. I can just imagine you saying Yes and then ditching Jerry the minute somebody better comes along."

"That's not true—for one thing *I* would never have said Yes to Jerry Neeson. He's not my type."

Stephanie giggled and then she said, "Are you and Brittany still dating?"

Jimmy shook his head, "Nah, we just went to the prom together. I haven't even talked to her in over a week."

So much, it seemed, for the "rebound theory" Stephanie was considering as a possible explanation for tonight's trip to the movies, but she decided to press the issue one question further: "Have you gone out with anyone else lately?"

Jimmy hesitated before he answered, and then he said, "Yeah, just one."

"Who was it?"

"I'd . . . rather not say."

"C'mon, tell me."

"No."

"Yes!" and Stephanie grabbed Jimmy's right arm, causing him to lose his hold on the steering wheel and the car swerved gently across the

lane.

"Hey, watch it!" he warned.

"Tell me who you went out with."

"Kristi Campbell—are you happy now?"

"Kristi Campbell! You went out with *Kristi Campbell*!?" Stephanie was amazed; she thought Jimmy had better sense than that. Maybe he was desperate for dates. That might explain why he was going out with a former girlfriend tonight.

"She's not as bad as you think," Jimmy said, defending himself. "She has a nice personality."

"Yeah, right," Stephanie said, skeptically, while staring at Jimmy and purposefully making him uncomfortable. "Did you two, um . . . you know . . ."

"No—she doesn't do that with *everybody*. Besides, we only went out on one date."

"Well, with Kristi, one date is all you need."

They arrived at the movie theater and Jimmy pulled into the parking lot. It was crowded; the threat of rain did little to scare away any would-be movie-goers on this Friday night. Jimmy drove around the parking lot for a moment until he found a reasonably good space. They parked and as they walked towards the theater, Stephanie saw how Jimmy seemed to almost be in a hurry to get to the theater even though they still had plenty of time before their movie began. She could sense Jimmy's excitement and happiness, and she wondered if maybe Jimmy was expecting something to happen here tonight, and had brought her along just so he could have an excuse to be present. Jimmy's motives behind this evening were still confusing, but Stephanie felt like she was getting closer to the answer.

As for Jimmy, he really was happy. The sun was setting behind him, and ahead he could see the bright glow of the sunlight reflecting off of the white and yellow theater building. The golden flashing lights of the theater, creating an artificial atmosphere of glamour and extravagance, beckoned to him, promising a wonderful evening. There was at least a score of people standing in front of the ticket windows waiting for their

turn and Jimmy felt like he was one of them, like he belonged here. Most of them were teenagers, out with their friends or out on dates, but Jimmy didn't recognize any faces yet. Still, it felt good just to be *seen*.

Stephanie stepped closer to him and whispered, "I can pay my own way in, Jimmy, if you'd like. I mean, if this isn't *really* a 'date' date, I don't expect you to spend money on me the way you would for a girlfriend."

"No, no, I'll pay—I insist!" Jimmy replied in a whisper.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh yeah—I've got plenty of money for both of us."

Stephanie didn't argue any further and let Jimmy play the chivalrous role. He really could be a gentleman at times, and here was an example. They got in line and waited their turn. By now Jimmy was almost beaming with delight and Stephanie noticed that he looked very relaxed. This authentic smile of his was contagious and Stephanie couldn't help but return Jimmy's big smile every time she looked at him. Had anyone else in the crowd taken the time to observe this pair, one would think that they were in love, or at least on their first date together, hopeful of positive things to come.

Some more moviegoers arrived and joined Jimmy and Stephanie in line. Jimmy saw a few familiar faces among these new arrivals and he made sure they saw him with Stephanie. With every glance in his direction, Jimmy felt his own personal sense of reputation restored more and more. As far as he was concerned, the evening was already a success.

When they reached the front of the line, Stephanie stood by and watched Jimmy purchase two tickets for *The Road To Nowhere*. Then, still holding the tickets, Jimmy led Stephanie into the theater and handed the tickets to the usher so that they could be torn in half. In the lobby, Jimmy saw still more faces from school waiting in line to buy snacks and drinks. Not wanting to miss any opportunity to show the world that Stephanie was his date tonight before they disappeared into the obscurity of the darkened movie theater, Jimmy asked her if she wanted anything to eat or drink before the movie started. At first, Stephanie modestly replied that all she wanted was a small diet soda, but when they got in

line at the snack bar she changed her mind and asked for a small popcorn too. As they waited their turn, Stephanie met a friend of hers—a girl named Jenny, and her date, Jacob. Both of them were seniors like Jimmy and Stephanie. Jimmy didn't know either of them very well, but he didn't mind when Stephanie started talking to them.

Jenny and Jacob were there to see the new comedy called *Undeniably Chairs*. Jimmy wondered if he should have taken Stephanie to that movie instead. *The Road To Nowhere* was in its third week of release, so most people had seen it already. When Jimmy bought the popcorn and sodas, he and Stephanie said goodbye to their classmates and made their way into the theater. With five minutes left before the trailers began, he found less than twenty other people in the large auditorium. *Yes*, he thought to himself, *I should have picked a different movie*. But what was done was done and Jimmy sat down with Stephanie and waited for the movie to start. Stephanie began munching on her popcorn and looked at Jimmy. In spite of everything, he was still smiling.

Jimmy enjoyed the movie. In fact, this experience of watching a movie with Stephanie was unlike any other date he had ever been on. Often, when on a date, the movie itself was one of the last things on Jimmy's mind. He was usually more concerned about whether he should make a move on the girl he was with, how he should do it, and when. It was a lot like dancing, where all the moves have to be made in just the right rhythm and in just the right time. And then there were dates like his date with Stacey last week, where the girl he was with made him so uncomfortable that he couldn't focus on the movie and he certainly couldn't enjoy it. But with Stephanie it was completely different. He didn't have to make any moves on her and she didn't expect him to. They had agreed that it would not be *that kind* of a date, so all Jimmy had to do was munch on his popcorn and watch the movie. There was no pressure, no discomfort, and no anxiety. At certain moments during the movie he even forgot that Stephanie was sitting beside him. When the movie ended and the couple left the auditorium, Jimmy thought to himself, *That movie was a lot better the second time!*

Things were going so well that Jimmy didn't want their evening to

end just yet. As he and Stephanie walked out into the lobby, Jimmy asked her if she wanted to go get some coffee from the shop down the street. Stephanie was in a good mood too so she agreed. She wasn't surprised that Jimmy hadn't tried to make any sort of move on her in the theater like he done last year when they went out. Again, she was reminded that something was definitely different about Jimmy tonight, but she still didn't know what. Jimmy had promised that they would only go to the movies tonight as friends, and so far he had kept his promise, remaining a perfect gentleman the whole time. If he had been any other guy from school, Stephanie would have been very impressed, but this was Jimmy and Stephanie knew there was something behind all this. She let herself enjoy the treatment she was receiving, but kept a vigilant eye on Jimmy's behavior.

When they walked out the doors of the theater and into the night, they were both dazzled for an instant by the bright, flashing lights. There were a number of people standing outside, some buying tickets for later shows, others, like Jimmy and Stephanie, had just left the theater and had paused to decide where to go next. Jimmy searched the faces among the crowd, ever watchful for anyone who might recognize him. Most of the faces belonged to strangers, but Jimmy thought he saw one face that he knew very well—but it couldn't be! Jimmy closed his eyes for a second and then opened them again. The lights didn't bother him as much now, and he could clearly see his friend Andrea standing alone amid the crowd, not looking in his direction. "What is she doing here?" Jimmy mumbled.

"What?" asked Stephanie, thinking Jimmy was talking to her.

"Hey! Annie!" Jimmy shouted, and Andrea heard Jimmy's voice. She saw Jimmy with a girl named Stephanie who she knew from school. She waved but seemed reluctant to approach them, so they walked over to her. Jimmy asked, "What's up? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here with my family," Andrea replied, a little embarrassed about it, especially since everybody else in the crowd seemed to be on a date while she stood by herself, dressed casually in jeans and a pink polo shirt. "I didn't really feel like seeing a movie but . . . you know."

It was true: had she been given a choice, she would have preferred to stay home. But her twelve-year-old brother, old enough to enjoy the society of the movies on weekends, but not old enough to feel embarrassed about being seen with his mother or big sister, had begged his mother to take him to the movies. She agreed, on the condition that Andrea come along too. Andrea's mother had seen how melancholy her daughter had been ever since the break-up with Greg, and she thought that it would be better for her to go out than spend another evening languishing in her bedroom. Andrea refused to go at first, but gave in after several entreaties by her mother and her brother. She hadn't enjoyed the movie and all she wanted to do now was go home.

"Where's everybody now?" Jimmy asked.

"My mom went to use the bathroom. I think my brother is inside playing a video game."

Stephanie suddenly had an idea: "Say, we're about to go to the coffeehouse down the street. Why don't you come along?"

Andrea looked at both of them and said with some hesitation, "I—I don't know. I mean, I don't want to be a third wheel or anything."

Stephanie laughed, "Oh don't worry—Jimmy and I aren't on a date. We just went to see a movie. Come with us; it'll be fun."

"Yeah, come on," Jimmy said. "It's my treat."

"Well . . . OK," Andrea decided. "Let me just tell my mom."

They waited outside the theater for another minute until Andrea's mother appeared with Andrea's brother in tow. The boy was begging his mother to give him another quarter so that he could play just one more game, but his mother refused. Andrea ran up to them and asked if she could go with her friends. Jimmy and Stephanie, standing a few yards away, watched as Andrea pointed to them so her mother could see who she was going with. Apparently, her mother approved and Andrea skipped happily back to Jimmy and Stephanie. "Let's go!" she exclaimed.

The three of them walked out into the nighttime air, which had turned soggy and misty, towards Jimmy's parked car. Jimmy was pleased at how well this evening had turned out—far better than he had hoped. He was all aglow in his own sense of triumph and accomplishment that it

wasn't until they reached the car that he realized the girls were talking to each other. As he unlocked the doors he noted their familiarity and wondered whether they weren't already friends. Jimmy never heard Andrea talk about Stephanie or vice-versa. Stephanie offered the front passenger seat to Andrea, but Andrea insisted on sitting in the back. She was still a little worried about interrupting their evening together, even if it really wasn't a romantic date as the couple claimed.

When they were in the car and on their way to the coffeehouse, Jimmy asked the girls, "Do you two share a class at school?"

Stephanie looked back at Andrea and said, "No—not this year, I don't think, right?"

Andrea agreed, "No, but we both shared a lot of classes when we were sophomores."

"A *lot* of classes," Stephanie emphasized. "God, it was like we had the same schedule or something."

"Yeah, I think the only classes we didn't share were geometry, phys. ed., and . . . English?"

"No, we were in the same English class."

"We were? In Mrs. Schultz's class?"

"Yeah, remember? I sat near the back on the other side of the class."

"Oh yeah, I remember!" Andrea laughed. "God, she'd never let us change desks from where she assigned us at the beginning of the year!"

"I know, and your desk was up front next to hers!"

"Don't remind me. That was the worst class ever! I couldn't do anything or talk to anyone without Mrs. Schultz knowing about it."

Jimmy, with both hands on the steering wheel and a smile on his face, listened to the girls with amused interest. He finally joined in with, "She probably put you there to keep you out of trouble."

"Shut up, Jimmy," Andrea said with mock anger. "You're the only one anybody needs to keep an eye on."

"What about geography class?" Stephanie asked. "That was fun."

"Yeah, we had a lot of friends in there," Andrea replied. "But I remember you didn't like art class very much."

"Well . . . the class was all right, I guess, but I only took it for an elective because I wanted to work with clay, but we only did that for about a month. Mostly we just painted, and I don't like painting."

They arrived at the coffeehouse, located in a mini-mall down the street from the movie theater and not far from the busy avenue that led to their high school. The shop itself was situated in between a hair salon and a comic book store, both of which were closed at this hour of the evening, but the shop was lit up brightly and there was plenty of activity within. Jimmy looked at it with anticipation. He hadn't realized that it might be busy on a Friday night and considered it an unexpected opportunity to be seen. As he parked the car and opened the door to get out, the girls were still talking about their sophomore art class.

"Remember that weird guy, Carl Durkowitz?" Stephanie asked.

"You mean the guy who was always hitting on us?"

"Us? God, it wasn't just us; he was after every girl in that class!"

"He was such a creep," Andrea said slamming her door behind her. "What happened to him? I haven't had him in any of my classes since then—thank God!"

"I think his family moved out of town after our sophomore year."

"Oh," and for an instant Andrea felt a tinge of loss for a boy whom she always wished would go away. He finally had, but Andrea almost wouldn't mind putting up with his lewd innuendos for one more day, now that she knew that she would never see him again. All this reminiscing was starting to depress her.

They entered the coffeehouse, Jimmy again playing the role of gentleman by holding the door open for the girls as they entered. He was pleased to find the place packed with teenagers, some of whom he recognized from school. As they entered, all eyes were turned towards them and Jimmy immediately felt the pride that any eighteen-year-old boy would feel walking into a public place accompanied by two attractive girls. As he strutted to the counter, Jimmy asked Stephanie and Andrea (loud enough for most of the other customers to hear) what they wanted to order. The girls, either unaware of the ego boost Jimmy was receiving, or unwilling to contribute to it, did not answer. Instead, they looked up at

the menu hanging on the wall. After a moment, Stephanie asked for a milkshake, Andrea ordered an iced tea, and Jimmy got a frappé; he also bought some cookies for them all to share. When they had their food, they turned from the counter and looked for a place to sit.

Jimmy would have preferred to sit at one of the tables that lined the wall opposite the counter, since they would be the most visible tables in the room, but all of these were occupied by other customers so they had to sit at one of the small tables towards the back. The table was round, with four small chairs surrounding it. Jimmy tried to sit with a girl on each side of him, just to further show anyone who might happen to care that they were both with *him*. But the table was so small that there really wasn't any real gap between Stephanie and Andrea that Jimmy had to bridge. Their table might as well have been in the shape of a triangle.

They sat down and started eating. In between a bite of a cookie and a sip of his frappé, Jimmy asked Andrea, "So what movie did you see tonight?"

"*Dark Lights*," Andrea replied.

"That doesn't sound like your kind of movie."

"It's not. My brother wanted to see it. I don't think my mom liked it either. Actually," Andrea paused as she picked up a cookie and looked at it, "this has been the best part of the evening."

"Well, I'm glad we saved it for you," Jimmy said kindly.

The corners of Stephanie's lips rose steadily as she listened and watched Jimmy and Andrea talk. "When did you and Jimmy first meet?" she wanted to know. "Did you two go to the same middle school together?"

Jimmy wasn't sure. "I don't know," he said to Andrea, "did we?"

"No," Andrea said. "We didn't meet until . . . jeez, I don't think we met until the tenth grade. Wow, *everything* happened in our sophomore year!"

"Yeah, I remember now," Jimmy said. "It was in Mrs. Kilenny's geometry class."

Stephanie giggled, "Jeez, Andrea, when you weren't in one of my classes you were in Jimmy's."

"Yeah," Andrea said, remembering. She reminded Jimmy, "April was in that class too. She thought you were hitting on her at first."

"When?" Jimmy asked. This was news to him.

"When you first started talking to us. I think it was when you got your car." She said to Stephanie, "You should have seen him back then—he wouldn't shut up about his car. He had to brag to everybody about it. It was like no one else at school had a car or something."

"Hey, I was proud of that car," Jimmy said.

"Oh come on, Jimmy," Andrea teased. "We've been in your car. It isn't much to be proud of."

"Maybe, but why did April think I was hitting on her?"

"I don't know. I guess because you kept talking to her about it, like you were trying to impress her or were getting up the nerve to ask her out."

"But I was talking to you just as much as I was talking to her."

Andrea shrugged, "That's just what she thought."

"Did she *like* me?"

"God, Jimmy!" Andrea and Stephanie cried out at once.

"Unbelievable!" Andrea exclaimed.

"The male ego at work!" Stephanie added.

"What?!" Jimmy asked, surprised by the girls' reaction to what he thought was a simple question.

"All you can think about is yourself," Andrea said with a laugh. "Yes, Jimmy, she wanted you, and she still wants you—*bad*!" The girls laughed out loud and attracted some stares from the other customers. "No, she wasn't interested in you at all," Andrea finally explained. "In fact, when you and Brian first came to spend lunch with us last year she didn't want you guys to stay."

Jimmy was surprised. "But she never said anything."

"Well, I wouldn't let her—I thought it would be too rude to tell you guys to get lost. I thought you were nice enough."

"Boy were you wrong!" Stephanie teased.

Andrea just smiled and looked at her iced tea.

A pause, and then Stephanie said to Jimmy, "I didn't know you

and Andrea used to spend your lunches together. How long did that last?"

Jimmy smiled, "We still sit together."

Stephanie thought Jimmy was joking but Andrea nodded her head in agreement. Stephanie said, "I didn't know that."

"That's because you never leave the cafeteria during lunch," Jimmy said. "You should get out and explore the world more often."

"Maybe I should. So who else do you two hang out with at lunch?"

"It's mostly her friends," Jimmy said. "My friend Brian—from chemistry class—is there, and so is April, and Rachel—the girl who just broke up with Trey."

"Yeah, I heard about that," Stephanie said.

"Trey used to sit with us too," Andrea added, "but they're not together anymore. It's too bad, too, because I thought they were a nice couple."

"Rachel seems to be handling it pretty good, though," Jimmy said.

"That's just what she wants everybody to think," Andrea replied. "I know she's hurting inside. She won't admit it but she is. If we weren't so close to graduation, I would have bet that they would get back together, but now I don't know. It's really sad to think that school will end and they'll never see each other again."

"That's gonna happen to a lot of people," Stephanie observed, without glancing at either Andrea or Jimmy. She stirred her milkshake with her straw and said, "After we graduate and go to college, most of us will probably never see each other again."

"I don't want that to happen to me," Andrea said resolutely. "I don't want to lose any of my friends."

Stephanie thought that was a nice thing to say and she looked up from her cup to give Andrea a sympathetic smile, but she noticed Andrea wasn't looking at her at all. Her attention was on Jimmy, and her eyes shifted from the almost empty glass in her hands to Jimmy's face. Jimmy didn't notice her as he had started eating another cookie.

The three seniors talked a little while longer until ten o'clock

when the crowd in the coffeehouse began to thin out as the other teenagers gathered there went elsewhere to find something to do. The bright lights of the shop and its growing emptiness caused Jimmy and the girls to feel tired so they decided to leave. Outside in the parking lot, Stephanie again offered Andrea her seat in the front, and this time, Andrea accepted. Stephanie sat in the back as Jimmy drove the girls home. Andrea's house was closest so he took her home first. Stephanie sat and listened to Jimmy and Andrea talk. They spoke quietly, comfortably, not as classmates, but as close friends. Andrea whispered secrets to him and Jimmy smiled in reply. Stephanie watched them closely and wondered if there was more to their friendship than just *friendship*.

When they arrived at Andrea's house, the girl in the front seat gave Jimmy a sweet "Good night, Jimmy," before she got out of the car. Stephanie got out too and moved to the front seat. As they drove on, they were silent for a moment, and then Stephanie said, "I think she likes you, Jimmy."

Jimmy didn't understand who or what Stephanie meant and he shifted his gaze back and forth between her and the road until he figured it out. "You mean Annie?"

Stephanie nodded her head. "It was pretty obvious at times. Didn't you see it?"

He hadn't. It wasn't something he was looking for. Back in the tenth grade, he considered asking Andrea out, but he was too inexperienced with girls, and at the time there were other girls who interested him more, so he and Andrea just became friends. This was the first time in a long time that he had even considered the possibility of himself and Andrea.

"I don't think so," he said.

Stephanie shrugged. "Well, I may be wrong, but I'll bet I'm not. There was something about the way she was acting around you tonight."

"Annie?" He asked again.

There was another silence as Jimmy turned the corner onto Stephanie's street. When he pulled up in front of her house, Stephanie

opened her door and said. "Whatever you do, Jimmy, don't break her heart. She's a nice girl. Good night!"

"Bye," Jimmy replied as Stephanie shut the door behind her and ran to the front door of her house. Jimmy sat in his car for a moment, thinking. Finally, he drove away from Stephanie's house and went home.

Nineteen

STACEY spent most of her weekend lying face-up on her bed in her room, staring at the ceiling, lost in reverie.

Friday night, she listened to Jason's Charley Z CD as she promised she would. She listened to the songs eagerly, and with an open mind, for here was an opportunity to learn about Jason by experiencing something that was apparently very personal to him. Stacey had never really listened to Charley Z before. She hadn't downloaded any of his songs, and none of the titles listed on Jason's CD were familiar to her. She didn't have a stereo in her bedroom so she played the CD on her computer instead.

She thought the first song on the CD was just OK. The second song was good. The third song was better still, but it wasn't until the fourth song that she began to pay attention to the lyrics rather than the music. The fourth song was titled "Her Second Attempt" and when she heard Charley Z sing:

The world is full of contempt

And hatred for youth

she began to see what she thought Jason heard in these songs. As she listened to the lyrics, she too began to fall in love with them.

These songs spoke to her, like no other songs ever had. She could

relate to these lyrics. She understood them. They were about her life and her dreams. These were songs about struggling to find a place in society, about standing on the outside in misery and looking in at happiness, wanting more than anything to achieve that same happiness in community.

So Stacey spent the whole weekend playing these songs over and over again. She even chose not to go out shopping with her mother, as they usually did on Saturdays, lest she should be separated from this wonderful music and poetry that Jason had shared with her. Her mind spinning ecstatically as she lay on her bed, there were times when her very soul agreed with the lyrics and she couldn't help but sing along:

*Try to find the exit,
It's coming back to me:
Lost it in the garden,
Found it by the sea.*

Jason *did* understand her. He had to. How else could he have known to share these songs with her? And what was more important, she already knew how much *he* liked Charley Z which only meant that he must feel the same way about life as she did. Stacey couldn't wait to see Jason again on Monday.

Jason was just as eager to see Stacey as he stood in front of the school building Monday morning. So anxious was he to learn what she thought about Charley Z that he had arrived at school fifteen minutes earlier than usual, hoping to find Stacey as soon as possible. Of course, she wasn't yet there when Jason arrived, very few students were, so the price he paid for his impatience was an extended period of intolerable suspense as he looked out over the parking lot at the cars arriving, watching for Stacey's.

Not since Jason had discovered Charley Z's music some two or three years ago had he felt as excited about the singer as he did now. For

the first time, he had an opportunity to share the music with someone he believed could really relate to Charley Z's message. His former friend Keith was a fan of Charley Z too, but Jason didn't think that Keith really knew what Charley Z was trying to say. Jason was a little surprised by this excitement he was feeling. He hadn't realized until now just how much he had longed to share this music with someone else, someone who might understand it as he did.

Just as Jason began to worry that he and Stacey wouldn't have a chance to talk about the songs until lunch, he finally saw Stacey's car arrive. He watched her get out and make her way through the maze of automobiles towards the school. When Stacey reached the flagpole, she saw Jason standing by himself in the crowd and approached him. "Hey!" she said.

"Hi, did you listen to my CD this weekend?" Jason asked, wasting no time getting to the point.

"Yes I did," she replied. "I liked it."

"Really?"

"You know, at first, I really didn't know what to think because I've never really listened to any of Charley Z's songs before, but the more I listened to them, the more I liked them."

She didn't really answer Jason's implied question which was "*Did you understand it?*" Jason wanted to ask the question, and was on the verge of doing so, but it seemed like such an unusual question to ask, and he didn't know how he would explain it if she didn't know exactly what he meant. Stacey, in the meantime, wanted so much to tell Jason that she knew why he had given her the CD and that she understood precisely what Charley Z was expressing in his songs, but she was waiting for Jason to bring up the subject himself. As a result, the two of them continued to talk about the music, but neither of them said what they really wanted to say, and before long, the first bell of the day rang.

They went on to class and agreed to see each other again at lunch. As Stacey sat in her morning classes and looked forward to that hour, though, she began to consider rejoining Andrea, April, and the others. She saw now that it had been kind of silly to run away like that in the first

place, and she was afraid she was hurting her closest friends' feelings by avoiding them. Of course, she also wanted Jason to return to the group with her. Stacey wanted to show Jimmy that there was at least one boy in the world who wasn't ashamed to be seen with her, and she also wanted to show Andrea, Rachel, and April just how sweet a guy Jason was.

When her third period class ended, Stacey hurried outside. She didn't know what she wanted to do first: find Jason or rejoin her friends. Jason wasn't anywhere in sight, so she walked quickly around the corner of the auditorium but found the picnic table deserted. She approached it and found that the ground surrounding the table was muddy. It hadn't rained earlier that morning, but it had rained last night. Stacey guessed her friends were sitting in the auditorium as usual after a rain shower, and as Stacey returned to the front of the auditorium, she was just in time to see Andrea and April disappear inside the auditorium doors. Stacey looked up and down the breezeway, but Jason still hadn't come outside, so Stacey took a breath and went in the auditorium.

Andrea and April were the only people in the lobby, sitting at the group's usual spot underneath a staircase. Stacey didn't know what she was going to say to them. Should she apologize? Should she pretend like she had never left? Luckily, when her two friends saw her, no explanations were needed.

"Stacey!" Andrea exclaimed. "Are you back?"

Stacey nodded and said, "Yes, I'm sorry I acted like a jerk last week."

Andrea got up and gave her friend a hug. "It's all right. And don't worry about Jimmy. If he says anything, *I'll* take care of him."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Stacey said. "I'm over it."

The girls sat down and Andrea said, "I don't think Jimmy meant to hurt your feelings. He just doesn't know what he's doing sometimes. I think he'll be glad you're back."

Andrea was about to tell Stacey that she saw Jimmy at the movie theater last Friday when Jimmy and Brian came through the doors. "What's up?" Jimmy asked, but when he saw Stacey, his smile disappeared and was replaced with an expression of remorse. "Stacey . . ."

Stacey interrupted him, "Just sit down, Jimmy. We don't want to see you make an even bigger fool of yourself by trying to apologize again."

"Sure we do!" said Brian. "I'll bet Jimmy insults you before he can even get an apology out!"

"I won't bet against that!" Andrea laughed, overjoyed to see her friends together again.

Jimmy sat down without saying a word to Stacey, although he did try to sustain his penitent demeanor. Stacey replied with her own look of absolution. As far as she was concerned, it was now all in the past.

Brian noticed they were the only ones in the lobby, and he had seen that there were several students sitting outside for lunch. "I'm guessing the table is still muddy?"

Stacey answered, "Yeah. I checked it when I came outside."

"Yeah, it rained pretty hard last night" Andrea added.

"It did? I didn't know that," Jimmy said.

"How could you miss it? There was even some thunder and lightning!" Andrea exclaimed.

"I must have been partying too hard," Jimmy said with a smile. "When I crank up the dance music—look out!"

"You had a party last night, huh?" Andrea asked, pretending to believe Jimmy's story. "On a Sunday night?"

"It's funny you didn't invite any of us," Brian said with a sly grin.

"Oh, it got started way past your bedtime."

Everyone laughed.

"And why didn't you invite me?" Andrea asked.

"It was too wild for you." Then he suddenly started shaking his body in some sort of mock dance. As his body swayed in rhythm to the unheard music, his friends started laughing again. Even Stacey couldn't hold back. At last Andrea grabbed him and told him to sit still.

"When Jimmy's determined to make a fool of himself, there's no stopping him," Brian said.

"So is Rachel sick today or what?" Andrea wondered. "I haven't seen her all morning."

Andrea's question caused Stacey to look through the glass doors at the world outside. She suddenly remembered Jason. Was he out there looking for her? He had no idea that she had decided to return to her friends today. Stacey quickly got up and told the others that she'd return in a minute.

"Hurry back!" Andrea called as Stacey went out the doors.

Outside, Stacey found Jason standing in front of the doors to the boy's gym, a bag of chips in his hand and a lonely look on his face. Stacey almost ran to him, sorry to have left him by himself.

Jason's excitement to see Stacey and talk to her about Charley Z had only increased since their brief conversation earlier that morning, but events seemed to be conspiring against him. In his third period class, his teacher was in a bad mood, and, out of spite, she had not allowed the class to leave when the bell rang for lunch. Instead, his teacher made the class wait, silently, for a few minutes. When they were finally dismissed, the class emptied into a nearly deserted hallway as they hurried to lunch. Once outside, Jason found many students sitting outdoors again after the rains of late last week, but Stacey was not among them. It never occurred to him that she might have gone back to her friends.

He bought his lunch from the vending machines in the boys' gym, assumed that Stacey had been delayed as well, and leaned against a pole and waited. This was where Stacey found him. He didn't see her exit the auditorium, so her sudden appearance took him by surprise. All morning long, Jason had thought about different ways of bringing up the subject of Charley Z during lunch, but after the episode with his teacher and his confusion at not being able to find Stacey when he finally came outside, he had forgotten them all, and it was Stacey who spoke first.

She grabbed Jason by the wrist and pulled him. "Come on!" she said.

"What? Where are we going?"

"To the auditorium!" she announced, happily.

The auditorium? Jason wondered why they would be going there, but he saw how most of the usual outdoor crowd no longer needed the shelter of the auditorium to protect them from the elements and so Jason

imagined the auditorium was vacant. The idea of staying *outside* the auditorium while everyone was *inside* it, and then going *inside* the auditorium while everyone was *outside* seemed perfect. To his way of thinking it was proof that he and Stacey were a lot alike. Jason followed Stacey willingly as they walked through the auditorium doors together, but he was startled to see Stacey's old circle of friends sitting on the floor. They were almost as surprised to see him, but he was welcomed.

"Hi, Jason!" Andrea said.

"What are you doing here?" Jimmy asked. "I thought you went back to Keith or something."

Stacey, with a broad smile on her face sat down on the floor with her friends. "He's with me!" she said. Jason continued to stand for a second, looking confused and uncertain what to do. Unfortunately, there was no tree here for him to lean against. He looked at Stacey who had left a space between herself and Brian, and she beckoned for Jason to sit down beside her. He did.

As unexpected as Jason and Stacey's return to the group was, it was nothing compared to the surprise they got when the door opened next. Rachel entered the building, and Andrea, who saw her first, gasped and covered her mouth. Jimmy turned around, looked, and said, "Oh my God. . . ." Stacey cried out, "You didn't!" while Jason only sat and stared. Brian was dumbfounded, his mouth agape. April looked on with a tiny smile.

Rachel had cut her hair off. The long, black mane that was her most distinguishing physical feature, that had been the envy of half the girls in the senior class, was gone and replaced by a thin, grayish-black stubble short enough that her scalp was clearly visible. Rachel stood before them, with a triumphant smile on her face. She even bowed her head so the six pairs of eyes that were staring at her could see her haircut better.

Rachel had been hoping to surprise her friends all at once like this and she had gone out of her way to avoid them that morning. Although she had no regrets about her decision to cut her hair, today she had worn a hat to school, not wanting to attract too much attention. She had

hurried from class to class, not taking time to linger in the halls as she usually might or taking a chance that one of her friends from lunch might see her. After third period, she left her hat with her books in her locker, then she went to the girls' bathroom where she waited for a few minutes, giving her friends an opportunity to buy their lunches and assemble together. When she left the bathroom, she went to the cafeteria, where the long line for the snack bar allowed her to stall for a little more time. She had wanted to make a grand entrance and shock everyone. She was happy to discover that she had succeeded.

Grinning broadly, she sat down on the floor in between Brian and Jimmy. Her friends continued to stare at her. Rachel looked like a totally different person now. Her face—even her body—seemed different. Her voice and her giggles were still familiar, but they seemed unreal, as if transmitting from a body that both was and was not Rachel. She could have been a complete stranger who had come in and sat down among them.

"Why did you keep it a secret from us this morning? Is that why I couldn't find you before school? I wondered where you were . . ." Andrea babbled, still in shock.

"I wanted to surprise you," Rachel confessed.

"Even if you did see her," Stacey said, "you probably wouldn't have recognized her. I don't think I would have."

"I think I could have recognized her," Andrea said with confidence, "but I'm amazed you were able to keep it a secret from all of us."

"Well, it wasn't a secret from *everybody*," Rachel said slyly, looking at April.

"You knew?! And you didn't say anything?" Andrea demanded, giving April a friendly slap on the shoulder. April just smiled and nodded.

"She drove me to school this morning," Rachel explained, "so I had to let her in on the surprise. But I made her swear not to say anything to any of you this morning."

Jimmy's hand crept up behind Rachel's back when she wasn't looking and quickly settled on her head. He asked, "Hey, if I rub your

head, will I get good luck?"

Rachel responded by elbowing Jimmy in the ribs. "Ow!" he cried, pulling his hand away from her. "I guess not."

Rachel turned to Brian, who had not said anything about her haircut yet. "And what do *you* think?" she asked.

He could hardly believe that this was the girl he had been in love with. She seemed so different to him now, but was she really? Brian looked into Rachel's eyes, ignoring the physical changes she had undergone, and he discovered she was still the same person as ever. "I think it looks it pretty cool," he said.

Twenty

WHILE Rachel's friends at lunch supported her decision to cut her hair, support was not what she sought from the rest of her classmates. All day long, she felt their stares and could sense they were judging her strange new hairstyle disapprovingly. No other girls in the school, not even the most rebellious girls, had ever dared to cut their hair so short. Rachel received a lot of attention, but she wasn't trying to be a trendsetter. She hoped that no one would want imitate her, that people would be repulsed by her haircut—especially the boys.

And her plan worked. The guys who for the past two weeks had been trying to talk to her in class and in the halls now seemed to want nothing to do with her, even behaving as if they had never had any interest in her at all. A few boys still looked at her curiously, but no one dared to talk to her since her bizarre haircut threatened not only her social reputation but the reputation of anyone who got too close to her. None of the guys in her morning classes were confident enough to defy the opinion of their classmates and risk their reputations by being seen with the weird girl who cut her hair off. She was left alone.

But she knew Brian and Dan would be different. Rachel sensed that Brian had a big crush on her, and although she liked Brian a lot, she wasn't in love with him. Rachel didn't necessarily want to scare Brian

away, but she hoped her haircut would cause him to back off a little and make him rethink his emotions. Even though Brian told her at lunch that he thought her haircut looked "pretty cool" she detected some hesitancy in his voice, and that was what she wanted to hear. Graduation was inching closer as each day passed and Rachel knew that if she could just keep Brian second-guessing his feelings about her, then she might get through the rest of the school year without having to go through the pain of rejecting him.

With Dan, Rachel didn't know what to expect. She didn't know him as well as Brian, but she did know that he was very intelligent and not likely to judge a person based solely on her outward appearance. Rachel was afraid that he might actually possess the confidence to continue pursuing her in spite of her haircut. Dan had called her Sunday evening, on the pretense of talking about the report that was due Monday. Rachel was happy to discuss the report, but Dan kept getting off the subject, asking questions and making conversation that suggested he was trying to "get to know" her. By this time, she had already gotten her haircut, but she didn't tell Dan about it because she was afraid it might weaken the shock if he *heard* about her haircut twenty-four hours before he *saw* it.

Rachel didn't meet Dan in the hallways between classes Monday morning, and this only made her trip to English class in the afternoon all the more suspenseful. Prior to lunch, she had worn a hat when changing classes, but the positive response from her friends at lunch had given her the confidence to take her hat off and keep it off. She took her time getting to English class so that she could be certain that Dan would be there waiting for him when she arrived. Sure enough, when the bell rang and Rachel stepped inside the classroom, she found Dan already seated at his desk, as were most of Rachel's classmates. Everyone stared at her as she entered, even those who had already seen her new look earlier in the day, but it was only Dan's reaction that Rachel cared about. She looked right at him when she entered the room, but he only replied with an expressionless face. His seeming indifference to her haircut worried her, but Dan's indifference was due to the fact that he didn't recognize Rachel

without her hair. He had wanted to see and talk to her earlier that morning, but as he combed the hallways he had been looking for a girl with long dark hair, not a girl who was virtually bald.

Rachel continued to watch him as she walked down the row towards her desk. Suddenly, she saw his expression change as he finally recognized her. She couldn't tell by his expression just what his thoughts were at this moment, but he didn't seem pleased. When she sat down in the desk next to his, she felt Dan staring at the top of her head. At last, he tore his eyes from her and glanced down at his own desk. He opened his notebook and fumbled awkwardly through his notes. "Are you, um, I mean, are you ready for the presen—uh, report?"

"Yep!" Rachel said confidently. With all of her other experiences today, Rachel really hadn't given much thought to their report, but she was prepared and eager to get it over with. She looked at Dan, hoping he might say something about her hair, but he didn't.

Their teacher took roll and then let the class present their reports. When she asked for volunteers to begin, several hands went up, including Rachel's, but unfortunately, Rachel and Dan were not chosen. As they waited their turn, they sat quietly in their desks, listening to the other presentations. Rachel noticed that Dan was almost treating her like she was a stranger. He didn't look at her, speak to her, or acknowledge her in any way. He didn't even ask her *why* she had cut her hair, a question that so many other people had asked her during the day. He just sat and pretended to ignore his partner. As far as he was concerned, this was not the same Rachel who had sat beside him in English class all year long. This was not the same girl he had teamed up with to give his report today. This was not the same girl he had talked to on the phone this past weekend, nor had he driven this girl to school last Thursday. And this was not the girl whom he had planned to ask out on a date today once class was over.

When Rachel and Dan were finally chosen to give their presentation, Rachel felt the stares from her classmates as she walked to the front of the class. They didn't make her nervous, though; in fact, they were a relief because Rachel knew that her classmates would be too busy

staring at her head to listen to what came out of her mouth. Dan lagged behind and didn't seem to want to stand in front of the class with her. She saw his face turn slightly red and he kept a distance of several feet in between them as they spoke to the class. Dan kept his part of the report succinct and to the point, letting Rachel do most of the talking. When they were done, the only question posed to them came from their teacher who asked the otherwise bright girl why she had done *that* to her hair. Rachel replied with the same answer she had given throughout the day to those who asked about her haircut: that she had just done it on a whim because she thought it might be fun. The teacher just nodded slowly and stared. Rachel turned to look at Dan but found he had already crept back to his desk, so she sat down too.

Rachel and Dan sat silently for the next half hour as the rest of the class finished presenting their reports. Not a word was spoken, not a glance was exchanged, and Rachel felt an enormous sense of relief. When the bell rang, Dan was put to the final test. Rachel sat and watched as Dan quickly gathered his books and belongings, got up without saying a word to Rachel, and left the classroom ahead of her. Rachel couldn't help but laugh.

Trey had waited all weekend long to talk to Rachel. He could have called her on the phone, but he wanted to see her in person. He wasn't sure what he wanted to say to her, only that he just had an urge to speak to her, even for a minute, and look into her eyes and hear her voice again. On Monday, he searched everywhere for Rachel but couldn't find her. He looked for her in the halls, at her locker, and he even walked past each of her classrooms hoping to run into her—all without any luck. He guessed she must be sick or had to miss school for some reason.

But Trey *had* seen Rachel, and like Dan, he just didn't recognize her. Once, when he walked past her locker in between the fourth and fifth periods, he saw a short-haired girl very close to Rachel's locker (at

first he mistook her for a boy, with her hair cut so short and her androgynous overalls, but when he noticed the person's smaller build and the girl's hat that she held in one hand, he decided that it was a girl). With her back turned to him, though, Trey couldn't see her face, and for an instant he even wondered why he had never noticed this strange-looking person before in all the time that he had spent with Rachel at her locker. But Trey didn't dwell on this mystery girl's existence for very long because he was more interested in trying to find Rachel in the crowded hallway. Once he saw that she wasn't at her locker, he went on his way.

At home that afternoon, Trey got a call from his friend Eric.

"Hey, dude, what do you think about your ex-girlfriend?" Eric asked with laughter in his voice.

"Huh?"

"Rachel—she's, like, turned gay or something, man!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Didn't you see her today?"

"No."

"Aw man! You gotta see her! She cut off all her hair! She's gone totally butch!"

Suddenly, Trey made the connection between the short-haired girl he saw near Rachel's locker that day and Rachel herself. He tried to remember exactly what she had looked like, but his memory was fuzzy. Just how short did she cut her hair? He couldn't remember. This revelation only increased his desire to talk to Rachel, and after he finished talking to Eric, he dialed the first six digits of Rachel's phone number before he hung up the phone. No, he still wanted to see Rachel in person, especially if it were true what Eric had said about her. Such an extreme change in her physical appearance probably wouldn't change how he felt about her, but then again, it might.

Early Tuesday morning, Trey got to school twenty minutes before the first bell—he couldn't remember the last time he had gotten to school so early. He went straight to the cafeteria eager to see Rachel and her new haircut for himself. He wanted to know whether her haircut would have any effect on his feelings before he recommitted himself to

apologizing to her. When he entered the cafeteria, he found only a couple dozen people there besides him. He sat down at a table in the far corner of the cafeteria directly opposite from the doors to the patio through which he and all of the other students were permitted access before school began. He tried to look inconspicuous, but he never took his eyes off the door. He examined every small-framed, short-haired student who walked through the doors, and found himself staring a bit too long at more than one freshman boy. From the distant table where he sat, and because he imagined that Rachel would look totally different with her new haircut, Trey really had to examine everyone who came in.

When Trey finally saw Rachel, he recognized her immediately, but only because she was accompanied by her friend April. Neither of the girls noticed Trey, and they sat down at the first available table they found. Rachel did look different with her new haircut. Very different. In the three years they had been dating, Trey had never seen her long dark hair cut shorter than shoulder length. Was it really her?

Of course it was, and the longer Trey stared at her, the more he noticed other things about her, things that only someone who had spent so much time with her would notice. He saw the way she sat on her hands as she talked. He saw that same funny face she always made when she laughed. Even from this distance, and in this increasingly populated room, Trey could still distinguish her voice from all the rest. It was Rachel. As he considered what was left of her hair, he thought it looked a little dull. Maybe if she dyed it purple or green—that would look badass.

Trey was again resolved to talk with her today and make up. He even had an urge to get up right now and talk to her, but April's presence scared him off. He wanted to be alone with her, and besides, he had to think of something good to say. He decided that he would wait until school let out that afternoon. Trey knew Rachel always visited her locker after sixth period to be sure that she wasn't leaving any homework behind, so he would talk to her then.

Trey showed up to all of his classes that day, but his mind was focused on more important things than math or economics. All day long he tried to formulate a speech that would communicate not only an

apology for treating Rachel badly a couple of weeks ago, but would also tell her how much he loved her. It was a difficult assignment because he knew she was in the AP English program and probably wouldn't be impressed by something stupid. While he sat in his own second period English class, Trey browsed through his literature textbook, looking for some romantic speeches or love letters or something of that sort, but the best he could find were some cheesy love poems written by men long dead that Trey knew he could never recite with a straight face. In frustration, he closed his literature book and decided that whatever he said, it would have to come from his own heart. Hopefully, that would be enough.

After sixth period, Trey went directly to Rachel's locker. She wasn't there yet, so Trey leaned against the opposite wall and waited, hastily trying to formulate a speech while the crowded hallway steadily emptied as students raced to leave school. Minutes passed and Trey grew impatient when Rachel didn't appear. After a moment, he pushed himself off the wall and headed in the direction of Rachel's English class, still trying to think of the right thing to say. As he turned the corner, though, he ran smack into Rachel. The collision knocked them both backwards a step, and Rachel's backpack slipped off her shoulder and fell to the floor. Rachel was about to apologize to the other person and Trey was about to shove whoever had hit him out of the way when they both suddenly recognized each other.

For an instant, they just stood and stared. Trey took in Rachel's new look. Seeing it up close like this, he decided that he definitely liked it—he thought it made her look tough. In the past, he had urged her to adopt a more rebellious and potentially disruptive appearance. She had gotten rid of her glasses and sometimes imitated Trey's style of dress, but she had never been willing to do something crazy with her hair. Looking at her now, all of his feelings for her had returned. He was still angry—but angry at himself for ever leaving her. He was still frustrated—but frustrated at himself for taking so long to make up. He still loved her. He knew he ought to say something, but he still didn't know what words to say.

"Um, hi," was the extent of his vocabulary.

"Hi," Rachel said in a restrained voice as she started to bend down to pick up her backpack. She wasn't sure what she should say to him—if she should say anything at all.

Trey hurried to bend down. He picked up her backpack and handed it to her. Rachel thanked him quickly and tried to step past him, her eyes lowered, and then she continued on towards her locker. Trey watched her pass silently, but before she got very far, he called out, "Hey!"

She turned around quickly and looked back at her ex-boyfriend. "Your new haircut—it looks pretty cool," Trey said, and then he disappeared out of her sight around the corner.

Rachel just stood where she was for an instant and then took a step forward in the direction Trey had gone, but her better judgment prevailed over her impulses. She turned around and hurried to her locker.

Twenty - One

"HEY, guess what I bought!" Stacey said with a smile.

That same Tuesday morning, while Trey was searching for Rachel, Jason and Stacey were again standing near the front of the school. Jason was still trying to figure Stacey out. After she had told him how much she had enjoyed the songs he had shared with her over the weekend, he had thought she was like him, with a much more independent attitude about life than the rest of their classmates, so he had been surprised yesterday when she returned to her old friends at lunch after leaving them with such resolution only a few days ago. Of course, Jason didn't expect Stacey to sever all her ties completely and never speak to any of them again, but he also didn't think she would be so quick to return to them. She had also made a point to bring him back into the fold as well, and he wasn't sure if he should be flattered or wary of her eagerness for them both to return.

"What do you think?" Stacey asked, kicking up one of her feet.

Jason didn't know what she was talking about so Stacey laughed as she explained, "I went to the mall yesterday, and look: I bought some new shoes!"

"Oh," Jason said, taking another look at her feet. "They, uh, look nice." He didn't know what else to say.

"And guess what else I bought," she said with a sly grin. She took off her backpack, opened it, reached in among the books and loose papers and pulled out a Charley Z CD.

Jason's face lit up. "Cool! I've got that one too. Actually, it was the second Charley Z CD I ever bought."

"Yeah, well, I didn't know which one was his best so I got this one because it had more songs on it than any of his other CDs in the store."

"That's a good CD," Jason said. "That one, and his first one, and his last one are the best—at least that's what I think. Have you listened to it yet?"

"Of course! I played it straight through three times in a row last night. The CD player in my computer has been seeing a lot of action lately."

As Stacey went on to talk about her shopping trip yesterday, Jason stood proudly and listened. What further proof did he need? Stacey liked Charley Z—apparently quite a lot. Of course she understood his music. Perhaps she didn't idolize the singer as much as Jason did, but how could he expect her to after listening to him for only a few days? In time, she would probably understand and appreciate Charley Z's message almost as much as he did. Stacey was a lot like him; he was certain of that now.

Stacey and Jason again joined Jimmy and the others for lunch that day. Since the sun had been out yesterday and this morning, the earth had dried sufficiently so the group could once again eat lunch at their table outside. Jason was tempted to lean against the tree as usual, but Stacey insisted that he sit at the table next to her, so he did—but he made sure to sit at the opposite end of the table from Jimmy and the rest of the group.

During lunch, Jimmy mostly talked to Andrea who was sitting

across from him. Last Friday night was on his mind, and so was Stephanie's assurance that Andrea's interest in him was something more than mere friendship. He still wondered if that were true, and as he talked to Andrea he tried to detect whether or not she had any interest in him, whether Andrea's friendliness indicated something else. As he observed her, he thought she behaved like she had always behaved, but maybe she had had some sort of crush on him for a long time. Jimmy just couldn't tell.

Now that Jason had rejoined the group, Jimmy had planned to ask him for a ride home from school. His father had dropped him and his sister off this morning on his way to the airport to catch a flight out of town. Jimmy hadn't talked to Jason yet, but as he sat across from Andrea, he wondered if maybe he shouldn't ask *her* for a lift. It would offer him another opportunity to observe her further, to see if Stephanie's hunch was correct.

Jimmy waited until the bell rang to ask her, and as they got up from the table to throw their trash away before going back inside, he said to Andrea, "Hey, could you give me and my sister a ride home from school today?"

Andrea looked surprised. "Why? What happened to your car?"

"Nothing, but my dad left town today and he always wants us to catch a ride with somebody else—not like that would be any safer or anything, but you know."

Andrea already knew of Jimmy's need to catch a ride whenever his father was out of town, but he had never asked *her* for a lift home. Andrea wasn't about to disappoint one of her friends, though, so she said, "Sure, I'll drive you home." They agreed to meet in front of the main building after school.

Later that afternoon, Emma found herself standing alone beneath the flagpole. Jimmy hadn't had a chance to tell her that Andrea was giving them a ride home, so she was watching the crowd for Jason. Jason usually appeared before Jimmy, so she was surprised when she saw Jimmy appear, accompanied by a girl and smiling. At first, Emma thought maybe Jimmy had found a new girlfriend, but then she

recognized that this was only Jimmy's friend Andrea.

Emma had spoken to Andrea once or twice in the past, but they didn't know each other very well. Since one girl was a sophomore and the other a senior, their paths didn't cross very often and they didn't have any classes together. Jimmy had talked about seeing Andrea when he went on a date last Friday, so Emma wasn't completely surprised to see Andrea now.

As Jimmy and Andrea approached Emma, the sixteen-year-old asked, "Where's Jason? Did you forget to ask him for a ride?"

"Annie's gonna give us a ride home," Jimmy explained, and then he said to the older girl, "This is my sister, Emma."

"Hi," Emma said with a wave.

Andrea smiled and said, "Yeah, I think we've met before, haven't we? Or at least I know who you are. I see you in the halls sometimes, but I always forget that you're Jimmy's sister. I see you and think, 'I know her—but who is she?'"

"Yeah, she's pretty forgettable," Jimmy teased.

"Shut up, Jimmy!"

"Are we ready to leave?" Andrea asked.

"Yeah! Let's go!" Jimmy said.

They walked out into the students' parking lot, through the rows of cars still parked and the lines of cars trying to get out. Since they were running a little late already, and since Andrea's blue, two-door car was blocked by cars whose drivers were already in line to leave the campus, they killed some time by opening both of the doors of Andrea's car and allowing the hot air to escape. It was a warm day and the inside of the car felt like an oven.

After a few minutes, they got into the car. Jimmy sat up front and Emma squeezed into the narrow backseat.

"I'm sorry there's not a lot of room back there," Andrea apologized.

"That's OK!" Emma said cheerfully.

Andrea started the car and Jimmy began fiddling with the radio. He proceeded to skip from one station to another as Andrea made her

way out of the parking lot. They listened to portions of no less than twenty songs in the ten minutes it took them to enter the busy avenue that took them away from the high school. When Jimmy wasn't displaying his fickleness, he was talking to Andrea about classes and their friends, or giving his driver directions to his home. Jimmy seemed a little surprised that Andrea did not know where he lived, but of the group that he sat with for lunch everyday, only Jason and Brian had ever visited Jimmy's house.

As Jimmy helped Andrea navigate through the shady suburban streets, he asked her, "Do you have to work today?"

Andrea thought and said, "No . . . I don't think so. No, not today. Do you?"

Jimmy shook his head, "No, I only work on weekends."

At last, they arrived at Jimmy and Emma's house. Jimmy pointed it out to Andrea, and she pulled up next to the curb, ready to say goodbye. Jimmy and Emma gathered up their belongings; Emma was ready to get out of the car before Jimmy was, but because Andrea's car only had two doors, she couldn't leave until her brother did, and he was taking his time.

"Say," he said to Andrea, as if the thought had suddenly occurred to him. "Do you want to come inside for a while?"

Andrea was surprised by the unexpected invitation. She thought for a moment and then said, "Well, OK, for a few minutes, I guess."

She turned off the engine quickly and pulled the key out of the ignition. Jimmy was out of the car by this time and Emma squirmed out of the back seat. She gave her brother a look that asked, *What are you up to?* but she didn't say anything. She had the key to their house so she walked up to the front door and unlocked it.

Andrea left her backpack in her car and followed Jimmy into the house. "Does this mean I get to see your bedroom?" she giggled.

"Hey, you're the only girl in school who hasn't!" Jimmy said.

Emma yelled out a sarcastic "Ha!" as she went straight to the living room and crashed on the sofa in front of the TV. She found the remote and turned the TV on.

Jimmy gave Andrea a quick tour of the house, starting with his bedroom. Andrea took her time here, looking at all the posters on his walls, the various knick-knacks on his shelves, and the stack of CDs next to his stereo. She had never before imagined what Jimmy's bedroom would look like, but now that she was here her curiosity was insatiable. She felt like she was getting to know Jimmy all over again, and she was trying hard to take in everything.

Jimmy then showed her the rest of the house, including his dad's bedroom and Emma's bedroom. When they entered his sister's room, Jimmy yelled out, loud enough for the girl in the living room to hear, "And this is my sister Emma's room! Isn't it weird?!" Andrea laughed, but he got no reaction from Emma, so they didn't remain there long.

Jimmy asked his guest, "Do you want something to eat? I think we've got some food in the kitchen."

"Well, all right, but I really shouldn't stay too long," Andrea replied.

Ninety minutes later, Andrea was sitting next to Jimmy on the living room sofa, watching television. They had just wasted an hour watching reality shows on MTV and now Jimmy was using the remote to surf through the channels as they looked for something else that was interesting. Emma was in the kitchen, washing out three glasses that had been filled with soda over an hour ago. She also folded a half-empty bag of chips and put it in the cupboard.

His sister's housecleaning was annoying Jimmy. "C'mon Em, you don't have to clean the whole house."

The water in the sink was shut off and Emma walked back into the living room. "Somebody around here has to." She sat down on the sofa next to Andrea, and Jimmy continued to scan the channels.

Andrea, who was no longer in any hurry to leave, watched the TV screen as Jimmy switched channels every two or three seconds. At last she cried out, "Wait! Go back one."

Jimmy did as she asked and found himself watching the local news. A reporter was on the screen holding a microphone in her hand and looking directly at the camera as she spoke. She was standing

outside, in what looked like a park, and in the background, one could see large tents set up with people milling around, many of them waving at the camera or making faces as they passed by. There was also music playing in the background, and occasionally a festive cheer from people off screen. They caught the reporter in mid-sentence: "—here at the first day of the Spring Carnival downtown in the city park. As you can see, there are already a lot of people here ready to have fun tonight. The Carnival will run every night this week from five until midnight, and on Saturday from noon until midnight. Every year the Spring Carnival attracts more and more party-goers, not just from around the city, but from around the country as well!" The camera zoomed out and Jimmy saw that the reporter was standing next to a middle-aged couple looking stiff and awkward, knowing that they were on television. The reporter asked, "Where are you from, sir?" and she held the microphone in front of the man's face.

"Denver," he said, enunciating carefully as though he were answering a question on a game show.

"Wow!" the reporter replied with mock amazement. "And you came all the way from Denver for the Spring Carnival?" She held the microphone in front of the woman now.

"Oh yes," the woman said, speaking as awkwardly as her husband. "We're here visiting my daughter's family, and they brought us out here. We love the games and the music."

"That's amazing!" the reporter said as the camera focused on her again, and the couple side-stepped clumsily out of the frame. Jimmy rolled his eyes and he heard his sister giggle. The camera began to pan around, trying to give the viewing audience a better idea of the scope of the Carnival, but the camera mostly just captured the crowd waving and shouting. The reporter continued, "As you can see, there is already a lot going on downtown. We've got food, music—in fact this year there will be two concert stages with dozens of local bands playing all week long—and a lot of other fun things to do. The Carnival will have its official opening in less than an hour so if you're planning to come down here tonight, you'd better hurry and get some good parking. Back to you in

the studio."

The anchorwoman continued to talk about the Spring Carnival before she moved on to the other newsworthy events of the day, but Jimmy had already turned his attention from the TV and looked at Andrea. He could see inspiration in her eyes as she turned to look at him. She asked Jimmy, "Did you go to the Carnival last year?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah, it was a lot of fun. But I went with Emma so that kind of put a damper on things."

"Jimmy, you're so mean," Andrea said.

"Actually, Jimmy and I didn't see much of each other," Emma said. "Our dad went with us last year but as soon as the three of us entered the park, Jimmy disappeared into the crowd. We didn't see him again until midnight."

"Where did you go?" Andrea asked.

"I just went off to have a good time on my own," Jimmy said with a coy smile.

"And he found it too," Emma said. "When Dad and I ran into him again he had a beer in his hand and he was kissing some girl he met there."

"Yeah," Jimmy said with mock wistfulness, "I never did see that girl again—I don't even remember her name. I guess I should have got her phone number."

"You didn't have a chance," Emma chuckled, "considering how fast dad grabbed you and dragged you out of the park." She said to Andrea, "He was grounded for a month!"

"It was worth it," Jimmy said.

"Well, I didn't go last year," Andrea admitted. "In fact, I haven't been to the Carnival since ninth grade."

"Why not?" Jimmy asked.

"I don't know. I just haven't had the chance I guess."

All three were silent for a second and then Andrea said, "We should go to the Carnival this year."

"You and me?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah—and everybody else too: April, Brian, Stacey. It'll be fun!"

Jimmy nodded, "Yeah, maybe we should. That would be cool. When should we go?"

"I don't know . . . Friday or Saturday—unless it's too crowded."

"It'll probably be crowded whenever we go, but let's go Friday."

Emma interrupted their plans. "But Jimmy, Dad won't be back until Sunday morning, and I don't think he would want you going downtown, even with a bunch of friends."

Jimmy and Andrea looked at Emma and Jimmy said, "You're not gonna tell on me are you?"

Emma smiled mischievously and said, "Maybe . . . maybe not."

Jimmy knew his sister had an idea of her own, so he took the bait, "All right. What do I have to do?"

"Oh, nothing much . . . just let me go too!"

Jimmy and Andrea laughed. "Deal!" they both replied.

Twenty - Two

LATE Friday afternoon, as the sun was just starting to descend in the west, Brian turned the corner onto Jimmy's street and parked his car in front of Jimmy's house. It appeared that he was the first to arrive, with no other cars visible except Jimmy's beat up old car parked in the driveway. He got out of his car and walked to the front door. As he rang the doorbell, he could hear two voices shouting from inside.

"Get the door! Somebody's here, Jimmy!"

"You get it, I don't have my shoes on yet!"

Brian laughed, and when Jimmy's sister Emma opened the front door, she found a wide grin on Brian's face.

"Hey, Brian. Long time no see!" the girl said, cheerfully.

"Hi, Emma. Is Jimmy having problems with his shoes?"

"Yeah, he's still learning how to tie them." She opened up the front door wide and invited Brian in.

"So you're coming with us too?" Brian asked Emma.

"Yep!" she replied, as she stood near a window, watching for the rest of Jimmy's friends to arrive. "And I've even got a date tonight—unlike Jimmy."

"Anyone I know?" Brian asked.

"Probably not, he's a sophomore. His name is Josh."

"Is he gonna pick you up?"

"No, he doesn't have a car yet," she said weakly.

"Ah, to be sixteen again!" Jimmy muttered with sarcasm as he emerged from the hall, his shoes now on his feet.

"I told Josh we would stop by and pick him up on our way downtown," Emma explained. "Is that OK?"

Brian shrugged. "That's fine with me. Are you guys gonna ride home with us too?"

"No, I've already got that covered. We're gonna meet some friends down there tonight. One of them has a car and we'll get a ride back home with them."

"I wonder how many cars we'll need to take downtown," Brian said, looking at Jimmy.

"We can all just pile into yours," Jimmy joked.

"I don't think so."

"Well, here comes another car," Emma said, looking out the window.

They all looked and saw Stacey's car parking against the curb behind Brian's car. Rachel and Andrea were her passengers. April had wanted to come too, but she and her parents were leaving town for the weekend, visiting the university she was going to attend next fall and scouting dormitories and apartments.

"The ladies have arrived!" Jimmy declared.

They went out the front door so they could greet the girls on the porch. As they watched the three of them climb out of the car, they noted the differences in their dress. Stacey had on a red and white dress, not too formal for a trip to the bustling and rowdy Carnival, but not completely casual either. Andrea looked more appropriately dressed for the event, and Jimmy silently observed that she was wearing the exact same outfit that she had worn a week ago when he ran into her at the movie theater. Brian's attention, though, was mostly directed towards Rachel. She wore dark blue denim overalls with a purple T-shirt underneath. She had Doc Martens on her feet and a blue and black hat on her head that concealed her new hairstyle.

"Hi," Rachel said to Brian as she stepped up onto the porch.

"Hey. You look nice."

"Thanks."

Andrea overhead them and said, "Yeah, Rachel looks good, but will you guys look at Stacey! I can't believe it. She's wearing a *brand-new* dress. She bought it yesterday. Stace, what were you *thinking*? Like you don't have enough clothes in your wardrobe already. I swear to God, she has more clothes than me and Rachel put together."

"No I don't!"

"Oh, yes you do."

"Well, I just wanted to look nice tonight."

"I think she looks good," Emma said, joining the seniors' conversation.

Jimmy explained to Stacey and Rachel, "Emma's going downtown with us tonight."

"Well, are we ready to go?" Rachel asked.

"Jason isn't here yet," Stacey said.

"Oh, that's all right, he can catch up with us downtown," Jimmy teased.

Stacey was about to protest, but she was interrupted by the sound of a car turning the corner. They all looked and found Jason arriving just in the nick of time. On Wednesday, after Andrea had invited Stacey to go with the group to the Carnival, Stacey invited Jason. Of course, he had been reluctant to spend an evening among crowds of people. He told Stacey that he hadn't been to the Carnival since elementary school, and he wasn't eager to return. But after some urging and pleading from Stacey, Jason finally agreed to go. Jason parked his car in front of Brian's and turned off the engine.

Jimmy closed the front door to his house and locked it. He asked Emma, "Do you have a key?"

"Of course I do!"

The group of teenagers stepped off the porch and met Jason halfway between the house and the parked cars.

"It's about time!" Stacey said happily, greeting Jason. She stood

close to him and said, "We were about to leave without you!"

Rachel asked, "Are we going to take all three cars or just two?"

Brian thought about it and said, "I don't know. Parking downtown is gonna be a bitch tonight. Finding spaces for just two cars will be hard enough. I remember last year I had to drive around for half an hour before I found a good place—we'll try to park there tonight, but there's gonna be a lot of people downtown."

"Well, how many of us are there?" Andrea asked "Seven?"

"Eight," Emma said. "We have to go pick up a friend of mine on the way there."

"Well, we can all fit into two cars."

"OK, Jason and I will drive," Brian said. "So who's riding with who?"

"I'll ride with Jason!" Stacey volunteered.

They worked it out so that Stacey and Emma rode with Jason, leaving a seat in the back for Emma's boyfriend. Everybody else climbed into Brian's car.

Stacey was eager to ride with Jason. As she climbed into the front passenger seat, she noticed that his car wasn't as new as her own, but it was clean inside and it was comfortable. After Jason started the engine, he plugged his mp3 player into the stereo.

"Let me guess . . ." Stacey said with a grin as Charley Z's voice began crooning out of the stereo speakers:

. . . And their eyes always look the same.

Without looking closer no one can tell

How different they really are . . .

Stacey turned around in her seat and asked Emma, "Do you like Charley Z?"

"Yeah, I like some of his songs," the sophomore replied. "Of course, I get to hear him every time Jason gives Jimmy and I rides to school. That's all Jason ever plays."

"Well, it's all right with me. I think he's cool," Stacey replied.

Taking directions from Emma, Jason drove to Josh's house as Brian's car followed close behind. When they arrived, Emma jumped out

of the car and ran up the lawn to the front door. In a moment, she returned with a tall, skinny, well-dressed sixteen-year-old boy.

When they climbed into the car, Emma introduced everybody.

"Josh, this is Jason and Stacey, they're friends of my brother."

"How's it going?" Josh asked, in a surprisingly deep voice.

"Hey," "Hi," came the responses from the two seniors up front.

Jason waved to Brian in the car behind them, and Brian's car pulled out from the curb. Brian was leading the way now and Jason followed.

Brian led them out of the subdivision and onto a crowded avenue. From there, they made their way to the freeway that would take them downtown. Traffic was heavy, so Jason had to stay close to Brian's car to keep from being separated from him by the other lane-changing drivers. Jason wondered if all these people in all these cars were on their way to the Carnival too. It was certainly possible, and it made Jason feel uneasy. He hated crowds, and if the Carnival was as packed with people as Brian had suggested, Jason doubted whether he would have a good time tonight.

In Brian's car, further ahead, Jason could see a lot of activity through the rear window. Jimmy and Andrea were sitting in the back seat, laughing loudly and horsing around. At one point, Jimmy and Andrea both turned around and looked back at Jason's car following them. Stacey was quietly staring out the side window of the car, facing the setting sun, so she didn't see as Jimmy and Andrea began waving at Jason. Then Jimmy started making silly faces, hoping to make Jason smile. Andrea watched Jimmy for a moment, laughed, and then joined in the fun with some silly faces of her own. Jason forced himself to refrain from laughing, or even smiling, and his stoic facade only prompted a kind of mock anger from the passengers in the car ahead of them. Jimmy began to gesture threateningly, he shook his fist, he even made an obscene gesture or two, but Jason knew Jimmy was only kidding. Then, in one final attempt, Jimmy pointed first at Jason, then at Stacey, and he puckered his lips and made a kissing gesture with the tips of his index fingers. Jimmy laughed and Andrea looked on with a smile, but the only

reaction they got from Jason was a very slight smile, which couldn't be seen at all from the car in front of him. At last, Jimmy and Andrea got bored with trying to tease Jason and they faced forward again. Jason looked at Stacey from the corner of his eye to see if she had observed any of Jimmy's antics, but apparently she hadn't, as she continued to stare out of the side window.

The freeway made a gradual turn to the left, putting the setting sun directly behind them. The bright rays were reflected in the rear-view mirror, creating an almost hypnotic effect. As Jason glanced into the mirror, he could see Emma and Josh whispering and giggling, unaware of anyone else in the car besides them. From where Jason sat, though, the last rays of sunlight cast them in shadow. Their figures almost seemed unreal, as if they weren't just two teenagers, but were the very pattern or model for young lovers everywhere. As Jason continued at glance at them in his mirror, he found something unmistakably tempting in the intimacy that they shared.

As he drove on towards the center of the city, traffic on the freeway slowed to a crawl and Jason took a moment to admire the beauty in the sky before him which was turning from its daytime blue to a shade of dark purple. No moon or stars were visible yet, but Jason guessed that in another half hour or so, the sun would be down, and the sky would turn to black. Before him, the city's skyscrapers loomed, the lights from offices clearly visible. Some of the other cars on the freeway, both coming and going, had turned their headlights on, and the road in front of him was filled with bright red taillights for as far as he could see. All at once, the towering lampposts placed every fifty yards or so were turned on, another acknowledgment that night was fast approaching.

Brian's car changed lanes and prepared to exit the freeway. Jason followed and they joined a long stream of cars that were apparently on their way to the Carnival as well. Traffic soon slowed to a full stop, now that they had to deal with stop lights and police officers assigned to direct the flow of cars.

"Maybe we should have left earlier," Stacey said, speaking for the first time since they got on the freeway.

Emma and Josh also raised their voices and spoke to the seniors up front. "Look at how many people there are!" Emma said. "I hope Brian is right about that good parking spot."

Josh was less optimistic, "There's no way we're gonna find a good place with this many cars around."

Brian's car seemed to be following the crowd, but at one intersection, where the traffic turned left, Brian continued to drive straight ahead. Jason did not hesitate to follow him, and immediately, they found themselves relatively alone driving past skyscrapers and parking garages that announced with signs their unavailability for use by the Carnival revelers. At last, Brian pulled into a small lot that was unmarked and vacant except for half a dozen or so other cars.

"This is it?" Stacey asked.

Jason parked next to Brian's car and everybody got out.

"Is this great parking or what?" Jimmy asked, sarcastically. "We're only about five miles away from the Carnival."

"Hey, you'll thank me later tonight, when we try to go home," Brian said, defending himself. "Did you see that parking garage the police were trying to lead us into? They may be closer to the Carnival, but those people are going to have a terrible time getting back on the freeway later tonight."

"Right now, I'd just like to know *where* the Carnival is," Jimmy said.

"We're not that far," Brian said. "C'mon, it's this way."

Brian led the group forward, and, out of a sense of obligation to the other driver, he said to Jason, "When you leave tonight, all you have to do is follow 8th Street three blocks in that direction, then take a left, and that will take you right back to the freeway. And the best part is, you'll be able to enter the freeway without fighting any traffic at all. Trust me."

Jason just nodded.

The group walked together down the sidewalk, in the shadow of the cold gray buildings, their path illuminated by the twilight in the sky and the streetlights at every corner. The moon was visible now,

beginning its journey across the night sky. No one spoke, and the only sound was their footsteps, the occasional car that drove past, and the distant sounds of the Carnival—sounds that grew louder with every step they took.

They turned a corner and ahead of them they could see the city park, now given over to all the pomp and pageantry of a celebration. It almost seemed surreal to see the flashing lights and to hear the pulsing rhythms of music in the center of the city with its dull, anonymous skyscrapers. Streams of other people flowed into the park as well, and as there was no admission fee, there were no gates, and people were free to come and go as they pleased.

With their goal in sight, the eight teenagers walked faster until they were absorbed into the crowd of people entering the park. The smell of food and the sounds of excited laughter and live music permeated the air. The whole atmosphere was delightfully intoxicating. Drawn into the current of people flowing into the park, the mass of revelers threatened to separate the friends from each other, so when they found a small opening in the crowd, they stopped and gathered together.

"I guess we'll be going, Jimmy," Emma said, holding Josh's hand.

"OK, have fun."

"We will," Emma said, and with excited laughter she added, "Don't wait up for me!" Hand in hand, Emma and Josh disappeared into the crowd and were gone.

"They're so cute," Andrea said.

Jimmy said to his friends, "I guess in this crowd, we'll all split up eventually, but before we do, we need something to get us in the mood."

Only Brian appeared to understand what Jimmy meant, and he said, "Do you know where he is?"

"Yeah, I saw the booth when we came in. You guys wait here. Brian and I will be back in a second." They turned around and went back the way they came.

Twenty - Three

LEFT alone with the three girls, Jason stood by and let them talk to each other. All three of them were excited; the reserve and formality that they sometimes demonstrated at school was completely vanished in this atmosphere of jubilation, and they started speaking all at once.

"—So what are you guys gonna do first?—"

"—I didn't think it would be this crowded—"

"—Look at that girl over there—look at what she's wearing!—"

"—I want to go on some of the rides—"

"—How are we supposed to do anything in this crowd? There's too many people here—"

"—If we get lost we'll never find each other again—"

"—Have you seen anybody from school?—"

"—Where's the stage? I can hear music, but I can't tell where it's coming from—"

And on it went. Jason started to feel uncomfortable and awkward, but he didn't have to wait too long for Jimmy and Brian to return. He was the first to see them make their way back through the crowd. "Look, here they come," Jason said. The girls looked and saw both boys smiling mischievously. In their hands, each was carefully carrying three plastic cups. They handed one to each of their friends.

"Here you go," Jimmy said. "A little refreshment before the fun starts."

Andrea took a sip. When she realized what she was drinking, she asked, "How did you guys get this?"

"I know a guy who knows a guy," Jimmy said with a smile.

Jason took a sip and realized he was drinking beer. He looked at Stacey who took a large gulp. She looked back at him and smiled so he took another drink.

"No, seriously," Rachel wanted to know.

Brian explained, "My cousin's working one of the refreshment booths this year. It's the one over there with the green and white stripes. If you want another beer—no questions asked—just go over there. He's the guy in the black T-shirt. Tell him I sent you."

As they drank, they moved slowly through the crowd, trying to decide where to go and what to do first. Suddenly, a small pack of middle school-aged boys ran past them screaming and laughing. Andrea, who was walking next to Jimmy, just groaned and said, "God, I'm glad my mom didn't ask me to take my brother with us tonight. I'd hate to have to babysit him all night long."

"Hey, on the bright side, maybe he would run away with the carnival or something."

"Yeah, he is kind of a freak—he'd probably fit right in." Andrea didn't really mean what she said though. Sure, her little brother was often a pain, but she couldn't imagine her life at home without him.

"So what do you want to do first?" Jimmy asked.

"Well, I don't know about you guys, but I'm hungry!" Her comment was directed towards all of her friends, not just Jimmy, but when she turned around to hear their replies, she discovered that only Jimmy was still standing with her. Rachel and Brian and Stacey and Jason were nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, where did they go?!"

The band Dumb Angel were nearing the end of their set. Their specialty seemed to be a ballad-heavy, mostly inoffensive brand of indie rock. It wasn't the kind of music that Rachel usually listened to, but as she sat in the cool grass, among the crowd of spectators, she found herself enthralled. She couldn't take her eyes off of the drummer. The two guitarists and the bass player stood pretty much in the same place on stage, apparently unmoved by the music they were playing. The keyboard player had yet to take a glance at the large audience gathered before him, and the lead singer, with his sunglasses and hat, stood like a cardboard-cutout. His frozen body contrasted with his quirky, high-pitched voice.

But the drummer was different. He was animated, his movements sometimes over-exaggerated as though he were a parody of himself. When his strong arms pounded the drums, he seemed to put the full force of his body into it. When he smashed a cymbal, Rachel feared it might snap off of its stem. He ended each song with a theatrical flourish, and Rachel wondered whether he even belonged with this low-key band. He was the only one worth watching, and Rachel was completely mesmerized by him. By the end of Dumb Angel's set, he had worked up a sweat, even in the cool night air, but he still appeared to be full of energy.

"This band's pretty good, huh?" Rachel heard a voice ask.

She had forgotten about Brian who was sitting beside her. "Yeah, they're pretty good," she answered. Dumb Angel ended their set, the drummer offering the audience—and Rachel—one last flourish, then the lead singer thanked his audience who replied with polite, if not quite excited, applause. As the band gathered their equipment and started to make their way offstage, the next band came on and began to set up.

Some people in the crowd used the intermission to leave and go enjoy the other attractions of the Carnival. Rachel didn't feel ready to leave just yet, and when Brian suggested that they move closer to the stage, she stood up and followed him. The stage was constructed at the foot of a grassy slope which served as a natural amphitheater for the audience. Brian and Rachel moved as close to the stage as they could get, and then they sat down again. Rachel looked for the drummer of Dumb

Angel, but he was gone, and his battered drum set was being disassembled and carried off by two members of the stage crew.

Brian said something to Rachel, but the noise of the crowd and the activity onstage distracted her. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked, turning her head slightly in her friend's direction, but keeping her eyes focused on the stage.

"I said, are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Maybe later."

A moment passed. Brian absent-mindedly picked at the grass in front of him. Rachel continued to watch the stage. She hadn't been to a concert in a while, but whenever she went to one she was always fascinated by not only the performance itself, but all of the action backstage too. She tried to calculate how much time and effort went into a performance like this. She was always impressed that, despite the sheer number of technical variables and people involved, most concerts seemed to go off smoothly. If even one power cord was left unplugged, or if one musician had a really bad night, the whole concert might be a disaster. It was amazing how even something minor and insignificant could affect an entire system and change everything. The butterfly effect—as her physics teacher called it.

"So what other bands do you like?" Brian asked.

"Huh?"

"What other bands do you like? I know you listen to the Mad Devils, and you've mentioned some other punk bands before, but what else do you listen to? Is it just punk rock?"

"Oh no. I listen to all kinds of stuff." She turned to face Brian. "There's this one band called Radiation. Have you ever heard of them?"

Brian shook his head.

"I guess not too many people have. . . . Anyway, they're kind of a retro new wave rock band. They've only released one album, but they're pretty good. I'd like to see them play live, but they haven't come to town." She was about to add that it was Trey who introduced her to

Radiation, but she decided to leave that detail out. "Who is your favorite band?" she asked.

"I've been listening to a lot of Some Kind of Fool lately. They're kind of like the band that was just onstage, but they're a little bit better."

"Yeah, I've heard of them." She leaned back and stretched out her legs in front of her. Brian tried to get comfortable too.

He continued: "They actually have two drummers in their band. I've never seen them live, so I don't know how that works onstage. I think they only had one drummer on their first album . . ."

Brian kept talking, but Rachel only listened with one ear. She turned the rest of her attention back towards the stage and watched as the new band and their crew finished setting up for their show.

The next band was called Jupiter. Once they were ready, they introduced themselves to the crowd which had grown in size once more since Dumb Angel left the stage. As soon as they launched into their first song, it was clear that Jupiter's music contrasted sharply with Dumb Angel's. Jupiter played a more upbeat, happier power pop, and the musicians were a lot more animated as they performed. The lead singer encouraged the audience to get up and dance, and many people did. Brian, sensing an opportunity, got up too and held out his hand to Rachel. "C'mon, let's dance!"

Rachel smiled bashfully and said, "Uh, no, that's OK."

"C'mon!" Brian urged. "Don't make me dance by myself. Just one song."

Still smiling, Rachel gave in and took Brian's hand. She was still hesitant as she stood up. She clapped her hands to the beat and swayed slightly back and forth. She thought about all the times she had wanted to dance with Trey, when they went to concerts or were just hanging out at Rachel's house after school. Sometimes, when Trey was in the right mood, he would dance with her. But more often, she was left to dance alone. Dancing with Brian wasn't an unwelcome experience, therefore—and she discovered Brian was actually pretty good. Shaking and jumping, he seemed to challenge Rachel to dance more vigorously. When she didn't, he started to exaggerate his movements, which Rachel thought

only made him look silly. Grinning and giggling, Rachel answered his challenge with some goofy moves of her own. Brian imitated her and exaggerated them too. It wasn't long before the two of them were dancing and laughing together.

A girl was led away from the front of the line for the Ferris wheel by a couple of burly security officers. Moments earlier, just as she had gotten into one of the cars, she announced that she would jump out of it once she reached the top of the 100-foot-high wheel. Jason and Stacey, waiting in line for their turn to get into a car, watched as the girl was escorted past. "I was just kidding!" the girl shouted. "This isn't fair!" Stacey smiled at Jason and whispered conspiratorially, "Say nothing!" Indeed, as the line began to move forward again, and the two high school seniors approached the front of the line, they kept their mouths shut, afraid that anything they say might be used as an excuse to keep them off the ride, rendering the thirty minutes they had just spent in line wasted.

The Ferris wheel cars were capable of carrying up to three people, but since most of the passengers were couples, only a few cars carried that many. Stacey and Jason, therefore, got a car all to themselves. The cars were open—the passengers locked in by only a metal bar that pressed against their laps. The wheel then revolved slowly and Stacey and Jason were lifted forwards and upwards until the wheel stopped again so that passengers could get into the empty car behind them. Jason was glad to finally be on the ride and out of the line. The wait had been frustrating.

"This had better be good," Jason muttered.

"I know how we can make it more exciting," Stacey said with a grin, and she began to try to rock the car back and forth. Many of the other passengers in the other cars were doing the same thing.

Jason didn't understand what she was doing so Stacey explained, "What you have to do is let the wheel turn, and then when it stops, try to

force the car forward in the direction that the wheel was going. That way you can really make it swing!"

They waited for the wheel to start up again, and when it stopped to let passengers in the next car, Stacey and Jason threw their bodies forward, then backward, then forward again, but the car swayed only slightly. "Maybe we need to be moving faster?" Stacey wondered.

"I don't know," Jason replied. "Maybe the car is too big to swing."

They tried again the next time the wheel turned, but they had the same result. The wheel was taking them higher now, well above the bright lights and music. Below them, Jason could see the Carnival stretched out in every direction. The midway to their left, the concert grounds behind them, and the other rides, with their long lines of eager thrill-seekers, scattered before them and to their right. Surrounding the Carnival grounds was a ring of trees and the rest of the park, made eerily dark in contrast to the wild lights from the Carnival. Beyond the park, the downtown skyscrapers loomed, a few lights dotting their enormous black surfaces.

Stacey, though, had turned her attention even farther upwards, towards the pitch black sky where only a half moon was visible. "I wish we weren't downtown," Stacey said. "What's the point of riding in a Ferris wheel at night if you can't see the stars?"

Then, suddenly, the wheel started moving faster and didn't stop. With all of the passengers loaded, the ride was finally underway. The cars were launched upward into the sky before they were brought gracefully back down again towards the earth. It turned out to be more exciting than Jason expected it to be.

As the wheel turned, and their car again approached the top, Stacey took a moment to appreciate the view and marveled at how many people were crowded among the rides and tents. "God, look at all of the people," Stacey said, astonished.

Unfortunately, Jason had already noticed them, and he wasn't impressed. "Yeah," was all he could say.

"Seeing all these people," Stacey confessed, "realizing how big

this city is, kind of makes me sad that I'm going to leave." As the wheel descended, she tried to pick out familiar faces in the crowd, but she didn't see anyone that she recognized. "I haven't seen anyone from school all night. I thought we'd run into at least some people that we know, but I haven't seen anyone. Have you?"

"No."

"They're all strangers," Stacey murmured. "They don't know anything about me."

Jason shook his head. "No, they're all the same," he declared. "All of them. They might be strangers, but deep down they're just like the people you know at school. They all think the same way, believe the same things, have the same dreams. That's their problem. They think they're living their own, unique lives, but their lives are no different from anyone else's." Jason watched as the mass of bodies flowed and swirled beneath them like currents in a river. "They just follow the crowd."

"Well, if everybody's the same, what makes you think you're any different?" Stacey challenged.

Jason shrugged slightly. "I guess because I know that they're the same." He looked at Stacey and said confidently, "You know it too. That's what makes us better than they are."

"Better?"

"We're not lost in the crowd. We're—on the *outside*, and because of that we can see them for what they really are. They just blindly do what everyone else does. When people make fun of you, they aren't making a free decision. They're just doing what other people do. All those people down there," Jason made a sweeping, dismissive gesture with his hand, "they may not know who you are, but I bet any one of them would make fun of you if they did. They may be strangers, but they're also people. And if you give them a chance, people will always act cruelly."

"I don't believe that. Not everyone I know makes fun of me."

"Who doesn't?"

"My friends."

"Like Jimmy?" Jason asked, wryly.

"Like Andrea and April and Rachel."

"But what if they weren't your friends? If April was just another girl at school—if you had never been friends with her—don't you think she would make fun of you like everyone else?"

Stacey thought about it. "I don't know. Maybe . . . but I remember when I was in ninth grade—not long after those stupid rumors started—I remember April stood up for me. She was in my English class and some guys started calling me names and April stood up to them and told them to shut up. I'll never forget that—it meant a lot to me." Stacey paused as she thought about it a little more. "Maybe you're right. If she wasn't already my friend maybe she wouldn't have stood up for me, but she was my friend then, and she's still my friend now. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Do you think it does?"

"When I leave this town, there's a lot of things I won't miss about this place, but I'll miss my friends. . . ." She was about to add that she would miss Jason, too, but perhaps he wouldn't be out of her life completely, even if he were planning to stay behind in this city that she was so anxious to leave.

Suddenly, they felt the wheel slow to a stop. At first they thought something was wrong, but then they realized that the ride was over. It had ended much too quickly for either of them. Arguing with Jason, Stacey didn't have a chance to really enjoy the ride. Jason had been glad for the reprieve from the crowd, and as their car slowly descended to the ground where they would have to get off, he wasn't looking forward to joining it again. But Stacey was with him, and he found that that fact alone almost made it all right.

Clunk—

"Damn!" Jimmy watched with frustration as yet another basketball bounced off the rim. This was the second time that he had

played this game. For two dollars, he got the chance to shoot ten basketballs. If he made five or more shots he would win a prize. The first time he played the game, he missed all ten shots. This time, he had already missed his first three.

Andrea, standing just behind him, was smiling. She wondered what Jimmy would do with one of the prizes if he did win. They were mostly stuffed animals. Andrea imagined Jimmy walking around with a pink teddy bear and laughed. She guessed Jimmy's determination to beat the game was just another male pride thing. Before the first game, Jimmy bragged about how well he could shoot a basketball. Having missed all thirteen of his tries so far surely couldn't be doing wonders for his ego.

Clunk—

"I think the rim is too tight," Jimmy said, trying to offer some explanation for his streak of missed shots. "Do you see how flat the ball bounces off the rim? It shouldn't do that."

"Maybe you're just not very good," Andrea teased.

Jimmy took another shot.

Clunk—

"Hey, I'm a great shot. I should have tried out for the school basketball team. I wouldn't be the tallest guy on the team, but maybe I could play point guard or something."

Swish—

Jimmy finally made a basket, and Andrea clapped her hands. "Yay! Maybe your luck is changing . . ."

Clunk—Clunk—Clunk—

". . . or maybe not."

Clunk—

"That's it—I'm done," Jimmy declared. "This game sucks." He and Andrea wandered away from the basketball booth and back into the crowd. "So what do you want to do?" he asked. "Want to go get another beer?"

"Sure. Where do you think everyone else went? I haven't seen Rachel or Stacey since we got here."

Jimmy shrugged. "We'll probably run into them eventually."

Although maybe Brian and Rachel don't want to be found—if you know what I mean."

They pushed their way through a crowd of people watching the dunk tank game. "Do you really think Brian likes Rachel?" Andrea asked.

"Maybe. He hasn't said anything to me about it, but ever since Trey dumped her, he's been hanging around her every chance he gets. I'll bet they're together somewhere right now."

Suddenly, Andrea came to a dead stop. Jimmy turned around and asked, "What?"

"It's Greg!" Andrea whispered, indicating to their left with a nod of her head.

Jimmy looked and saw Andrea's ex-boyfriend in the crowd, holding hands with a pretty brunette. Jimmy didn't recognize the girl, but he wondered if she were the real reason why Greg broke up with Andrea. They hadn't yet spotted Jimmy or Andrea, but Jimmy was about to change that.

"C'mon," Jimmy said with a smile. "Let's go say 'Hi!'"

"What?! No way!"

"C'mon. Just play along."

Andrea was reluctant as Jimmy put his right arm around her back and urged her in Greg's direction. She didn't want a confrontation with Greg, and she definitely didn't want to meet his new girlfriend.

Greg and the girl still hadn't noticed Jimmy or Andrea, so as Jimmy approached, he called out in a friendly voice, "Hey, Greg! What's up?"

Greg and his date turned. When Greg saw Andrea, a shocked expression crossed his face. His hand let go of the girl next to him, a movement that his date noticed.

"Oh, hi. Are you guys here together?" Greg asked, trying to be polite but not wanting to give any indication to his date that he had once gone out with Andrea.

"Yeah. Annie and I have been going out for a few days," Jimmy declared.

"Cool." Greg tried not to look Andrea in the eyes.

"So who is this?" Jimmy asked, indicating Greg's date.

"Oh, this is, umm—Katie. She goes to another high school."

"So you aren't going out with Michelle anymore?"

"What?" Greg asked. Andrea was about to ask the same thing. She didn't know what Jimmy was talking about. Who was Michelle?

"Michelle—you know, that tenth grader that you took to the prom."

"But I . . ." Greg was about to say that he went to the prom with Andrea, but he didn't want to bring that up in front of Katie. He didn't know what to say.

Jimmy turned to Katie and said, as though confidentially, "Greg and Michelle have been all over each other these last couple of months—making out with each other during lunch, holding hands in the halls . . ." He turned back to Greg, "I would have thought that you'd be taking Michelle out tonight."

Katie kept looking at both boys, not sure who to trust. She didn't know Jimmy and had no reason to believe what he was saying, but ever since Jimmy and Andrea had approached them, Greg had started acting strange, like he had something to hide. She finally spoke up and asked Greg, "Who's Michelle?"

"I don't know any girl named Michelle!"

"Good thing Michelle's not around to hear you say that," Jimmy observed.

"Dude, shut up!" Then to Katie: "C'mon, let's get out of here." Greg took his date's hand and he led her into the crowd, eager to get away from Jimmy. Katie went willingly, but looked back at Jimmy with a confused frown on her face. Within seconds, they were out of sight.

Andrea looked at Jimmy and gave him a big smile. "That was *awesome!*" she said.

"No problem," Jimmy said modestly.

"Do you think she believed what you were saying?"

"Who cares? C'mon, let's go get some beer."

As midnight approached and the Carnival started to wind down, Brian and Rachel left together early. "So we can be sure to beat the traffic on the freeway," Brian explained. As they approached the small parking lot where Brian had left his car, they found the lot dimly lit by two tall streetlights. Brian and Jason's cars were still parked next to each other, but no one else was around.

"Maybe we should wait for Andrea and Jimmy?" Rachel suggested.

"Jason's car is still here. They can get a ride with him." Brian was in a hurry to leave, and he didn't want to take on any other passengers for the trip home. He wanted to be alone with Rachel. This was the moment, he decided. He would finally tell Rachel how he really felt about her. He got the sense that she already knew, but they had been dancing around the subject for almost three weeks. Brian needed to know how she felt about him, and the only way he could learn that was by bringing the issue out into the open, so they could both talk about it.

Brian unlocked his car and they climbed inside. He started the engine and they were quickly on their way. As he drove through the dark, empty streets towards the freeway that would take them home, Brian asked Rachel, "Did you have a good time tonight?"

"Yeah, it was a lot of fun! The other day, when Andrea asked me if I wanted to go, I wasn't sure if I did, but I'm glad I went. I may not have a chance to go next year."

"That's right. I hadn't thought about that. You'll be halfway across the state. There's a lot to do in the capital, though."

"Definitely. I can't wait."

As he merged with the traffic on the freeway, Brian turned on the radio and scanned the dial for some music that fit the mood—something romantic. Nothing he heard sounded right, though, and the radio only distracted him as he gathered his thoughts and decided what he would say to the girl sitting next to him, so he turned the radio off. Rachel was quiet. Brian wondered if she were tired or lost in thought or maybe she knew what Brian was planning to tell her. She had been hard to read all night. Their time at the Carnival had not gone quite as well as Brian had

expected. He had hoped it would be a chance for Rachel and him to spend some time together—like a date, but not quite. And while they did have a good time, Brian felt like he didn't quite make the kind of connection with her that he wanted to make.

Brian remembered the way to Rachel's house from when he had escorted her home after her car accident, but Rachel spoke up and helped guide him through the darkened streets. When they pulled up in front of her house, Brian put the car in park and before the girl could say good night, he said nervously, "Rachel, can I talk to you? There's something that I need to say."

"Brian—I—"

"I love you."

A silence followed. Here in the car, where there was very little light, the words had seemed so easy to say, but now as the silence lingered, Brian wished he could see Rachel's face and know what she was thinking. Rachel didn't move at all in the seat next to him. She sat staring straight ahead, perhaps trying to think of some way to respond. The porch light of her house cast its light through the passenger side window, leaving Rachel's profile in shadow. Brian couldn't see her features or the expression on her face. All he could see was her form.

Her silence wasn't a good sign, and Brian felt like his opportunity was slipping away. He spoke again, desperation gradually creeping into his voice: "Look, I know maybe you think that this has just happened suddenly, or that this all started when Trey left, but it didn't. I've loved you for a long time—ever since last year. I might not have ever said anything before, but I wanted to. Some days I wanted to tell you more than anything else in the world. You're the one person that I always look forward to seeing at school. Sometimes, if I'm feeling bad, just being with you is enough to cheer me up. I know that school is about to end, and I know that we're both going away to different schools next fall, but none of that matters to me. I love you and I always will."

"Brian—" In just those two syllables, Brian could hear a quiver in Rachel's voice, and the sadness behind it. Brian could hear the rejection coming. He panicked.

"I know you're probably still in love with Trey, but listen—he's not going to come back. He broke up with you!"

"Brian—"

"He doesn't love you anymore. I do."

Rachel cried out, "Stop!" She turned her head to face him, and Brian thought he saw a tear on her cheek, even through the darkness. She said quietly, nervously, "Listen, maybe you're right about Trey. Maybe he doesn't want anything to do with me anymore. But that doesn't mean that I want to date someone else—I don't. I'm not . . . it's nothing against you. You're my friend—you've always been a good friend to me. And that's all I want."

Another silence followed. Rachel finally said, "I'm sorry."

She opened the door and climbed out of the car. She wanted to say something else—Good night, Goodbye, See you Monday—but really there was nothing left to say. She felt awful and she knew Brian felt awful, too. She closed the car door gently and turned away, walking quickly up the steps to the porch where she unlocked the front door of her house and disappeared inside. She didn't even look back.

Brian sat in the car for a moment longer, listening to the motor running. At last, he pulled away from the curb and started his drive home through the quiet, empty streets.

Twenty - Four

AT MIDNIGHT, the Carnival came to an end. The bands on stage played their final songs, the booths closed shop, the rides were shut down and slowly, reluctantly, the crowds of revelers made their way out of the park. Among them were Jason and Stacey, tired but still in a good mood. As they left the park, Jason thought the whole scene seemed a little surreal. Away from the Carnival's dazzling lights, the night sky now loomed dark and empty overhead. The streetlights surrounding the park appeared dimmer and the atmosphere felt noticeably calm. In the distance and in every direction, Jason could still hear laughter and conversation, but among the people in the crowd closest to him, he heard nothing but footsteps on grass and concrete, and he read only blank expressions on their faces. They looked like sleepwalkers or zombies, like they were in the world but not really a part of it.

Once outside of the park, Jason and Stacey parted from the crowd and began their journey down lonelier streets to the car. The silence and darkness was more intense here, even a little frightening. As they walked, Jason suddenly felt Stacey's hand slide into his. Jason guessed she was a little scared, and maybe he was too, but there was also something very tranquil in the solitude of the empty sidewalk in the middle of the night. He let Stacey's hand remain where it was, but she

held him more than he held her.

As they approached the lot where they had parked the cars several hours before, they could hear voices. Giddy, giggling utterances, teasing phrases and playful laughter lured Jason and Stacey closer. When they came within view of the parking lot, they saw Jimmy and Andrea sitting on the hood of Jason's car. Neither of them saw Jason and Stacey at first, their attention was focused exclusively on each other. Jimmy was trying to grab at something that Andrea held in her hand.

"Give it back!" Jimmy laughed.

"No!" Andrea teased, "It's mine. I found it."

"You found it in my pocket!"

"So what? Finders keepers!"

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'll just keep it. If I have your key, you'll have to sleep outside tonight!"

"Until my sister comes home. She's probably there now. I'll tell her to let me in."

"Well, then you don't need your key!"

Jason and Stacey stood in front of them, and the couple on the car both noticed their friends at the same time. Jimmy jumped off the hood of the car, stumbled, regained his balance, stumbled again, and then demanded, "What took you guys so long? We've been waiting here *forever!*"

Andrea giggled, "Yeah, a whole five minutes!"

"That's right! Where've you been?"

"Oh, we were just having too much fun," Stacey said with a smile. She noticed that Brian's car was gone. "When did Brian and Rachel leave?"

"I don't know," Jimmy said. "A while ago, I guess. Their car was gone before we got here."

Andrea giggled some more.

"Are you guys drunk?" Jason demanded.

"Of course not!" Jimmy said, feigning offense.

"Maybe just a little," Andrea said with a laugh.

Jason just shook his head as he unlocked the doors to his car. The others climbed inside, Jimmy and Andrea sitting in the back, Stacey sitting up front with Jason. Jimmy said, "We better keep the windows rolled down, just in case I need to throw up." He and Andrea giggled, and Jimmy made a vomiting sound. Andrea did the same and then they started laughing harder.

Jason started the car. He followed the directions Brian had given him earlier that evening and he discovered that Brian had been right: they didn't meet any of the traffic from the Carnival as they made their way onto the freeway—only one brief red light slowed them down. In just minutes they were on the freeway and on their way home. Here, they ran into some traffic, but not as much as Jason would have expected.

Andrea and Jimmy remained rowdy during the drive home, so Stacey tried to make Jason's job as chauffeur easier by talking to the couple in the backseat and urging them to settle down. Andrea and Jimmy's silliness only proved to be contagious, though, and in a few minutes, Stacey was laughing along with them. She had never seen either of them intoxicated before and she thought the whole situation was rather funny.

In spite of the distractions, Jason delivered them all safely back to Jimmy's house. He half expected to find Brian and Rachel parked out front waiting for them, but they weren't. Only Stacey's car, and Jimmy's car parked in its usual place in the driveway, were to be found in front of the dark house.

Jimmy looked at his house and said, "Maybe my sister isn't back yet. It doesn't look like anybody's home."

"Well, let's go find out!" Andrea suggested as she got out of the car. She said to Jason and Stacey, "C'mon!" and then she ran to the front door, carrying Jimmy's key.

Jason was hesitant. He thought once he dropped the group off, they would say good night, Stacey would take Andrea home, and that would be the end of the evening, but Stacey echoed Andrea's, "C'mon!" so Jason put the car in park and turned off the engine.

Jimmy caught up with Andrea who was standing at the front

door, having trouble with the lock and key. Jimmy tried to pry the key out of her hands but Andrea screamed, "No! I'll open the door! Let *me*!" Finally, she figured it out and the two of them burst into the house.

Jimmy shouted, "Honey? I'm home!" but the house was dark and quiet. Andrea started giggling uncontrollably again, and then she started coughing.

"Whoa! I almost threw up," she said in a moment of sober lucidity. "I think I need to use the bathroom."

Jason and Stacey, coming through the door behind them, found a light switch and turned on the lights in the living room.

Jimmy bounded off in search of his sister. Sleeping or not, Jimmy would make his presence known to her. Andrea went to the bathroom, and Stacey took a seat on the living room sofa. Jason just stood at the threshold between the foyer and the living room. He suddenly felt sleepy and wanted to go home, but before he could say or do anything, Jimmy returned.

"She's not here," he announced.

Stacey asked, "Do you think she was able to get a ride home? Maybe she and her boyfriend got left behind."

Jimmy shrugged, "Doesn't matter. She can take care of herself. That means the house is ours! Party!"

"You're too drunk to party," Stacey said.

"Hey, the night's still young!"

They heard a toilet flush and saw Andrea return. She whispered, "Be quiet Jimmy—you'll wake your sister."

"She's not here—that means we can party!"

"Cool!" Andrea said as she sat down in a large recliner opposite Stacey.

Jimmy said, "My dad might have some beer in the fridge. Anybody want some?"

"No!" Jason replied, sitting down on the sofa next to Stacey, but not too close.

"We've had enough, Jimmy," Andrea said. "Or at least I have!"

Jimmy went to the kitchen anyway, and after fumbling around in

the refrigerator he came back empty-handed. "I guess my dad got rid of it before he left."

"Sit down, Jimmy," Stacey said.

"OK," the intoxicated boy replied, and he stumbled into the living room and collapsed in the recliner with Andrea who started giggling again as the two of them fought for space in the chair. They finally got comfortable, but they were pressed close together.

Stacey watched them and smiled. She said, "I guess you two had a lot of fun tonight."

"It was perfect!" Andrea said. "The music, the food, the rides, the games . . ."

"The beer," Jimmy added.

"And the beer! But you know what was the best part? When Jimmy made Greg look like an idiot."

"You saw Greg tonight?" Stacey asked. Neither she nor Jason had recognized anyone from school at the Carnival.

"Yeah, he was there with some slut from another school," Andrea explained. "They talked to us, and Jimmy acted like Greg had a girlfriend at our school that he was cheating on."

"It was the least I could do," Jimmy said. "Besides, I never liked Greg anyway."

"But I thought it was so funny—the look on this face. That was such a great thing you did for me," Andrea said softly, looking at Jimmy, whose face was only inches away from her own. Suddenly, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"Hey!" Jimmy said, with pleasant surprise. "Wow, if that's my reward, maybe I should pick on Greg at school."

Andrea kissed him again.

"Yeah, Greg's a moron. I heard he almost flunked English last year." Another kiss. "I saw his car, and now I don't feel so bad about mine." Another. "He's uglier than my sister." Another, but this time, Jimmy turned his face toward hers and met her lips with his own. Andrea, though taken by surprise, didn't break off the kiss. Instead, half a minute elapsed before their lips finally parted.

As they kissed, Jason looked at Stacey who was staring at the couple in the recliner. Jason couldn't tell what she was thinking. She simply stared, watching from afar, as a spectator to others' happiness just as she had been for the last few years. As for Jason, if Jimmy and Andrea were going to start making out, he would leave. That wasn't something he needed to witness.

But Jimmy and Andrea had no intention of putting on a show. They both knew that they weren't alone, so Jimmy whispered something to Andrea, and she smiled. They wrestled their way out of the chair and Jimmy said to Jason, "I'm gonna go show Annie the rest of the house. She's never been here before." Jimmy and Andrea laughed.

"Yeah, let's go listen to some of your music," Andrea giggled.

"You guys can stay here as long as you want," Jimmy said to the speechless couple on the sofa, "and you don't have to lock the door when you leave. Emma will probably be home soon."

"But hopefully not *too* soon," Andrea said.

They hurried off towards the bedrooms. Jason and Stacey just stared in their direction and listened as the other two bumped and staggered their way down the dark hall. Jimmy said something and Andrea giggled loudly. A door opened, was slammed shut, and then all was silent.

Jason continued to stare in their direction, almost expecting them to return. When they didn't, he turned to Stacey, and found her staring at him with a smile on her face.

They both sat silently, sharing an awkward feeling. Neither one was sure what to do next. Stacey's eyes looked about nervously, but kept returning to Jason. He looked sleepy as he just sat there staring straight ahead. Finally, Stacey said, "What a night! I haven't had this much fun in a long time."

Jason simply said, "Yeah, it was fun."

Another silence, then Stacey jumped up from the sofa and said, "I'm thirsty. Do you want anything to drink?"

Jason shook his head no and Stacey went to the kitchen. With hands trembling slightly, she poured herself a coke. After taking a deep

breath, she returned to the living room, sat down on the sofa next to Jason, sipped her drink nervously, and thought about what she would say next.

As for Jason, he just wanted to go home, and in his mind he considered ways in which he might gracefully make an exit. But Stacey didn't seem ready to call it a night just yet. Stacey, pretending to hear something, suddenly turned her head in the direction of the hallway down which Jimmy and Andrea had disappeared a moment earlier. She asked Jason with a coy smile, "What do you think they're doing back there?"

Jason shrugged. He actually had a pretty good idea what Jimmy and Andrea were doing, but he was trying not to imagine it. Jason remembered that he and Andrea had once shared a class in sixth grade, and he found it hard to reconcile his memory of Andrea's younger self with the more recent memory of her half-drunk in the back seat of his car, or the thought of her in Jimmy's bedroom right now. He was glad he hadn't gotten drunk tonight. He had read old interviews in which Charley Z had made statements against taking drugs or drinking excessively and then doing things you wouldn't likely do under normal circumstances. Jason had always agreed with that philosophy, but tonight he was learning that in the real world those ideals were much harder to live up to. He noticed that Stacey was now staring intently at him, and he wondered if she wanted to make out, too. All he knew for sure was that wasn't what he wanted from her. He had a growing sense that he needed to leave—immediately.

Stacey, her confidence building by the second, asked Jason, carefully, "Have you ever kissed someone? I mean, have you ever gone out with a girl and then kissed her—just to see what it was like?"

"No," Jason said, hoping his lack of experience with the opposite sex might discourage Stacey.

It didn't. In fact, it actually seemed to explain Jason's reserved demeanor. Stacey thought that maybe he was just too shy to make the first move. If she could just get him to relax and loosen up they would be all right. Stacey tried to make him feel more comfortable by confessing,

"Well, I've never kissed a guy before. I've never . . . I've never been this close to someone I really care about."

Jason turned his head to look at her and found only a few inches separating them. Stacey looked right into Jason's eyes and thought she saw what she had been waiting for—an invitation, a sign that he was in love with her too. Stacey leaned over, traversing the few inches that lay in between them. She closed her eyes and they kissed.

And then, like a school bell catching a class unexpectedly, Jason was suddenly startled back to reality, gripped by an overwhelming sense of anxiety and terror and possessed by urge to run away as fast as he could. Jason broke away from Stacey and stood up from the sofa. Stacey, flushed and confused, just stared at him with an unspoken question in her eyes. Jason looked around the room, as if he wasn't sure where he was, then, without saying a word, he started for the front door. Stacey realized he was leaving, and she scrambled up off of the sofa. "Wait!" she cried out. "I'm sorry, Jason—I thought you wanted to!" But the boy was already out the door and racing across the lawn towards his car.

Stacey followed him outside, yelling, "Jason, come back! I'm sorry! Let's talk about it, OK?"

Jason didn't reply, he just unlocked his car, climbed inside, started the engine, and left Stacey behind on the front porch of Jimmy's house, alone, confused, and afraid. Jason's mp3 player was still plugged in to the car stereo, and as Jason drove home, he turned the volume up as loud as he could stand it, wishing that Charley Z's music and lyrics could drown out everything he was feeling inside.

Twenty-Five

AT A FEW minutes past 8:00 early Saturday morning, Jason sat cross-legged on his bed, trying not to look out the window at the bright, sunny day outside. He hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, suffering one bad dream after another. Now that he was awake, Stacey was on his mind. He regretted running away from her last night. He should have handled the situation better, but he had panicked and he wasn't sure what else he could have done under those circumstances. Perhaps he should have stayed and explained everything to Stacey. He had thought that she was like him, that she had understood the world the same way he did. Maybe he was wrong.

A few more minutes passed, and then he heard the sound of a car pulling up in front of his house. He looked out his bedroom window and saw Jimmy's car come to a stop. The poor, overworked engine was mercifully turned off, but the driver made no immediate movement to get out. Jason jumped off of his bed and put on some clothes so he could meet his friend downstairs.

Outside, Jimmy sat in his car and rubbed his forehead and temples with his fingers, and then he replaced the sunglasses over his eyes. He looked at Jason's house for a moment; it was calm and quiet. Jimmy didn't know whether anyone inside was awake yet. It was still

rather early and Jimmy didn't want to wake Jason's family if they were still asleep, but he needed to talk to Jason. He had met Jason's parents before and they seemed to like him well enough, so he hoped they wouldn't be too upset if he disturbed them so early in the morning. Jimmy got out of his car, and as he paced slowly up the front walk, he found evidence that those inside had not yet stirred: the morning paper was resting on the green lawn, waiting for someone to retrieve it and bring it inside. Jimmy picked it up and carried it with him to the porch, hoping to present it as a peace offering if he received a sleepy rebuke from whomever answered the door.

Jimmy climbed the steps of the porch and stood in front of the door. He hesitated for an instant, and then reached out to ring the bell. Before he did, though, he heard the door unlock from inside and watched as it swung open. Jason was standing there, looking like he hadn't gotten much sleep either. They stared at each other for a few seconds and then Jimmy held out the newspaper. "Here," he said.

"Thanks," Jason took the paper and set it down just inside the front door.

Jimmy explained his presence. "I, um, I just dropped Annie off, and I thought I'd come by and say 'Hey.' Can you talk?"

Jason nodded, and then he stepped out onto the porch and closed the front door behind him. "I think my parents are still asleep," he said.

Jimmy understood and backed up a little until he was standing in the shadow cast by one of the stone columns holding up the little roof over the porch. The morning sun seemed exceptionally bright to him, and even in the shade he was forced to squint. He was dressed in a T-shirt, jeans, and no shoes; his hair was uncombed and his skin pale. His left hand repeatedly rubbed his temples, trying to soothe the pain he felt in his head.

"Hangover?" Jason asked.

"Yeah, a bad one too. I didn't think I had that much to drink to cause this much pain." Jason didn't say anything in reply, but he did take a step to the side so that he would be in the shadows too, and Jimmy

wouldn't have to squint in order to look at him. Jimmy said, "Did you and Stacey stay long after we got back to my house last night?"

Jason didn't know how long Stacey had stayed after he left, but he figured it wasn't too long, "No, not really. We—we both kind of decided to call it a night." Jason didn't want to say anything else about Stacey to Jimmy. He wasn't even sure what he could say.

"Well, Annie—Andrea—and I didn't exactly call it a night, at least, not from what I remember." Jimmy tried to smile, but his head hurt too much, and besides, maybe last night wasn't something he should appear to take lightly. "I guess we ended up falling asleep. We were both pretty surprised when we woke up this morning in the same bed . . . but not as surprised as Emma was when she came in and found us."

Jimmy paused, waiting for some kind of reaction from Jason. Jason didn't want to react. He really didn't want to hear about any of this, but he had to say something so he asked, "What time did Emma get home last night?"

Jimmy shrugged, "I have no idea. But she was up early this morning, about to make breakfast like she always does when she poked her head into my room."

Jimmy paused again but Jason didn't say anything so he continued. "She didn't really say much, but I know she's freaked out—she gave me this weird look when me and Andrea left the house a while ago. I don't think she'll tell our dad when he gets home. I dropped Andrea off at her house and drove over here."

Again there was a silent pause, so Jimmy got to his point: "I just want to say I'm sorry about last night. I don't remember how I acted, but it probably wasn't very fun putting up with us on the ride back."

"That's all right," Jason said. "We got back OK."

"Yeah, well, sorry anyway. And, um . . ." Jimmy tried to look at his car parked at the curb, but even the sunlight reflecting off the dull chrome was too bright for him to handle. "And could you, like, you know, not say anything to anyone about what happened with Annie and me last night? We didn't talk much this morning—we mostly just got dressed so I could take her home, but I don't think she would want the

whole world to know what happened, you know?"

"I won't say anything."

"Thanks. And could you tell Stacey too, if you talk to her before Monday? I'd call her myself but you seem to get along better with her."

"Yeah, I'll tell her."

"Thanks," Jimmy said, closing his eyes completely before he stepped back out into the sunlight. He used his sense of touch to find his way off the porch, and then he walked gingerly back to his car. "I'll see you Monday."

"Bye," Jason said quietly as he turned around and walked back through the front door.

Jason went straight to his room. He wished he could stay here forever, locked away and separated from the rest of the world by these four walls around him. But soon he heard movement downstairs as the rest of his family awoke and called him to breakfast. Jason didn't hesitate to join them, but he said very little when his parents asked him about the Carnival and whether he had a good time with his friends last night.

After breakfast, Jason just wandered around the house as if he were in a daze. In the early afternoon, his parents went out shopping so Jason had a little more privacy in the house. He turned on the television in the living room and after channel surfing for a few minutes, he found a music video marathon already underway. Jason watched the videos mindlessly, listening to the songs, some of which he had never heard before, but none of which he really cared about.

Then, much to his surprise and his pleasure, an old Charley Z video came on. Jason sat up and took notice as he rarely ever saw one of Charley Z's videos played—and almost never a video as old as this one. It was the video for one of the dead singer's earliest singles, a song called "Lucky." Jason had never seen the video before and he watched with great interest. When the video ended and the network went to commercial, the song's familiar guitar riff still echoed in Jason's mind and he wondered what Charley Z would do if he were in his place right now. Would he apologize to Stacey and try to set everything right again? Jason decided he should call Stacey and explain everything to her. Maybe if she

heard his reasons for running away last night, everything would be forgiven, and they could at least be friends again.

Jason searched for her number in the phone book, but it wasn't easy because there were several families with the same last name as Stacey's and obviously Stacey's name wasn't listed. Jason didn't know what her parents' names were so he had to guess which number was hers. After a couple of wrong numbers, Jason asked a woman who answered the phone, "Is Stacey there?"

"Yes she is," the woman replied. "May I ask who's calling?"

Jason didn't know if Stacey would want to speak with him if she knew he was calling, but he didn't want to lie and give out some other name because he knew Stacey might think it was a prank call and not accept it. Since he was calling to tell her the whole truth, he decided he should be up front from the very beginning, "Tell her it's Jason."

He waited while Stacey's mother went to get her daughter. A long moment of silence passed during which Jason considered what he was going to say. He had never made a speech like the one he had planned, so he wasn't sure how he would phrase all of the ideas and philosophies running around in his head. Whatever he intended to say, though, evaporated when he heard Stacey's voice.

"Hello?" She sounded neither angry nor pleased, though she was glad that Jason had called. She had considered calling him herself all morning long, but she had been too afraid, worried that Jason might still be upset. She felt ashamed about last night and hoped it wouldn't ruin any chance she had with him.

"Hello, it's me, Jason."

"I know."

"I thought I should call."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry about last night." Her apology took Jason by surprise. If anyone needed to apologize, he thought it should be him. Stacey went on, "I guess I wasn't myself last night, and I tried to force you into something that you didn't want to do."

"Well, that's OK, I mean, I'm not angry or anything. Actually, I wanted to apologize to you because I think this whole thing is my fault."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I don't think you really understood what my intentions were—from the beginning, I mean."

"I guess not," Stacey said slowly.

Jason tried to explain. "You remember that first day when you were sitting alone and I came to sit with you? Well, I wasn't, like, trying to hit on you or anything like that. Actually, I was kind of trying to be like you. I mean, I saw you sitting by yourself earlier that week and I kept asking myself why I couldn't do that too. You know, I never really belonged with the rest of your friends and when you left them I thought I should do that too. Does that kind of make sense?"

"Kind of," Stacey replied. Actually she didn't understand at all what Jason was trying to say, but she could hear in his voice his struggle and uncertainty.

"For me, it all goes back to Charley Z. He's the most independent person I've ever known, and I kind of want to be like that. Charley Z lived his whole adult life in isolation—I mean, he was a rock star of course so he couldn't be isolated from the whole world all the time, but he separated himself from people as much as he could. He believed—and you can hear it in his songs—that everybody should be more independent and not always rely so much on other people. You've heard his songs; you know what they're about. . . ."

"I guess," Stacey said, but she really didn't know what he meant. Was that really what the songs were about? She supposed a couple of songs on her new CD could be interpreted in that way, but surely not all of them. But, of course, Jason had been listening to the music a lot longer than she had; maybe he heard something more in it.

"Anyway, when I saw you sitting by yourself, and not wanting to be with anyone else, I thought maybe you had that same kind of independence that Charley Z has—and that I have. Especially with—I mean, with how most people at school treat you and all, I thought that you were kind of a living embodiment of everything that Charley Z stands for. That's the reason why I approached you that day—to see if I was right. I guess maybe you're not, and if I led you to think something

else about me, then I'm sorry—it's not what I intended."

"Jason—" Stacey didn't know what to say to all this, but she felt like she had to respond somehow. The boy on the phone, however, wouldn't let her get a word in.

Jason felt inspired. Hearing himself explain his beliefs to someone else was a strange new feeling, and it felt good to express himself. "I don't want any sort of relationship—with anybody, not just with you. I want to live like Charley Z lived—apart from the world and society. I'm not like most people who wander through life not knowing who they are or anything; I know exactly who I want to be and how I want to live my life. Don't take this personally, but I think last night was kind of a test for me. I think that if I had stayed with you, then I would have failed. But I didn't, I turned away from all that, and for the first time I really felt like I was my own—"

Stacey hung up her phone. If Jason wanted to be by himself, then she was more than willing to accommodate him. She went upstairs to her room and lay down on her bed. She just felt exhausted—too tired to get angry and too tired to cry. She wondered whether or not the entire human race was really as twisted and messed up as it seemed to be. Would she ever find someone willing to love her for herself? One thing was for sure: there was no one for her here.

Meanwhile, Jason wasn't offended by Stacey's abrupt termination of his call. He took it as proof that she really wasn't the person he thought she was. He returned to his bedroom and put on a Charley Z CD. He knew he had done the right thing and his confidence in who he was and who he wanted to be was restored. He had no doubt that he was on the right track, and that with time and effort, he could live the life that his favorite singer had lived. It seemed more possible now than ever.

Twenty-Six

IT COULD have been a very tense and awkward lunch hour on Monday. Andrea and Jimmy, though still friendly with each other, were both still trying to make sense of the enormous change in their relationship. Neither of them had talked about what happened Friday night, but it was very much on their minds. Rachel and Brian barely spoke to each other at all. Rachel hoped that she hadn't lost a friend in Brian, but she also understood that he was hurt and that he needed some space. Stacey and Jason were ignoring each other, and Jason had returned to his spot against the tree. Stacey wasn't necessarily angry with Jason, just disappointed. Only April, who had missed the trip to the Carnival, was her usual lively self. With few voices to compete with her, she found herself the center of attention, doing most of the talking while her friends mostly just listened, ate their lunches, and were pre-occupied with their own thoughts.

And the seven of them might have spent the lunch hour like this beneath the beautifully blue spring sky and the partial shade of the tall oak tree, had they not been joined by an eighth person. Trey appeared from around the corner of the auditorium and walked confidently towards the table.

Trey was finally ready to return. When he woke up that morning,

he could no longer think of any reason why he and Rachel should be apart for one more day. Even the idea of apologizing to her in front of her friends—which before had been a reason to stay away—no longer seemed to matter. Let them make fun, if they wanted. All that mattered to Trey was the chance to be with Rachel again.

And Rachel was the one who saw him first. She seemed to know, as soon as he turned the corner, why he was here. Nervously, but without any hesitation, she stood up and left the table so she could meet Trey halfway and let him know that everything was forgiven, that she wanted to be with him too.

As they approached each other, Trey wanted to tell her that he was sorry. Whatever happened next fall, wherever they might end up, whether in different cities or together in the capital, he wanted Rachel to know that he didn't want to be without her. He wanted to tell Rachel that he loved her, that he had loved her ever since they first met, and that he would always love her. He wanted to tell her that she was the most important thing in the world to him—more important than his family or his friends—and definitely more important than school. Whatever the future had in store for him, he didn't want to face it without her. There was so much to say, but when at last they stood face to face with nothing left to separate them, all he could do was take her in his arms and kiss her.

The other girls at the table, who had watched this scene unfold in front of them, squealed with delight and cheered. Jimmy rolled his eyes and tried to pretend it was no big deal, and Jason took a step away from the tree in surprise. No one noticed as Brian stood up from the table and started approaching Trey with fists clinched. Brian himself was only half conscious of his movements, and he wasn't completely sure what he would do when he reached Trey, but he knew he couldn't let this happen. Trey broke up with Rachel; he couldn't just come back and claim her again—Brian wouldn't let it happen.

Trey watched as Brian approached. Trey had been in his share of fights before, and he knew when someone was getting ready to hit him. Brian had that same angry look in his eyes, so when Brian got close

enough, Trey struck first. His fist lashed out and caught Brian square in the face. A loud smacking sound was heard and Brian was knocked back, his arms flailing as he fell to the ground.

Immediately, the three girls at the table shrieked and rushed to help Brian. Jimmy stood up but didn't step away from the table. His instinct was to defend his friend, but he wasn't stupid enough to try to fight Trey. Rachel grabbed her boyfriend by the arm and pulled him away from Brian, shouting, "What are you doing?!"

Trey looked about him wildly. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," was all he could say, over and over, apologizing to Rachel, and even to Brian, who slowly sat up with the girls' help, holding his bleeding nose. "I'm sorry," he said again as Rachel held him back.

In all the excitement, no one noticed as Jason slipped away. He felt like he didn't belong there anymore, if he ever did. His obsession with April, the recent episode with Stacey, and now the spectacle of Brian and Trey fighting was more than he could take. While the others were attending to Brian, and Rachel was scolding Trey, Jason quietly and quickly left the tree and the table and disappeared around the front of the auditorium. Once he was out of their sight, he paused and sighed. Finally, he was alone. After four weeks of uncertainty and indecision about how best to spend the remainder of the school year, Jason felt ready to isolate himself from his classmates and finally begin to live as a free and separate individual. He felt relieved and finally liberated from them all, or in the words of Charley Z:

It's not quite the life I thought it would be—

I'm not quite the man I know I should be.

Now that he was on his own, what was he to do? He hadn't brought any books or his mp3 player to lunch with him—but that was OK because he knew he could keep himself occupied no matter what. There weren't very many places to sit as students had claimed all of the available benches and tables—but that was all right because the sun was shining, the air was warm, and he could wander around freely, openly flaunting his independence before the rest of student body as they carried on with their empty, indistinguishable lives. He looked at his watch and

saw that almost half an hour remained before the next bell rang—but that was good because it gave him plenty of time to revel in this new chapter of his life.

After leaning against the doors of the auditorium for a moment, Jason began to wander aimlessly around campus, scouting locations where he might spend his lunch tomorrow. Everywhere he looked, though, he found people—in front of the main doors, in front of the entrances to the boys' and girls' gyms, on the lawn in front of the school, or sitting on the concrete walkway that led to the industrial building. There were people everywhere, in groups of twos and threes and fours, talking to their friends, laughing, sharing stories and smiling. Jason looked at them all with a sense of disgust. Why did they have to be with other people? Didn't they understand the transience of such relationships—especially here in high school? What was the point of spending hour after hour with other people that one barely knew when one should really be trying to understand oneself and all of the things that make one an individual? Jason wondered if any of these people would ever have the chance to really experience their own potential for uniqueness, or if they would just continue to hide within crowds, believing the lies of their daily existence. He almost wished there wasn't a lunch hour at all, that people could get through the day without eating anything. He could then just go to school, go to class, and then go home again and not waste his time in such meaningless social activities as "lunch".

Finding no satisfactory place where he could spend the remainder of the hour on this side of the campus, he walked towards the cafeteria patio, just in case there was an option there that he hadn't considered. As he walked, he looked up at the sky hoping to see some storm clouds among the white, puffy, cotton balls that floated lazily in the blue sky above. Dark skies and rain were what he needed to drive everyone back inside and leave him alone. When he and Stacey had stood in the rain by themselves, he had enjoyed it. There he felt like he could actually be himself. Out here with people, it was all posturing and attitude. Alas, he could see no signs of stormy weather on the horizon.

When he reached the patio, everything was as Jason expected it to

be: crowded. He didn't bother to go in the cafeteria, because through the windows he could see that all the tables were occupied. Instead, Jason walked around the border of the patio, looking, hoping for some refuge, but every table had been claimed by students enjoying the pleasant spring day.

Among this mix of familiar and unfamiliar faces, there was one face in particular which caught Jason's attention. It was none other than Keith—his former lunchmate and friend. Although Jason had seen him in the halls between classes on several occasions during this past month while they had been apart, he had never seen Keith during lunch. The great mystery as to where his former friend had gone appeared to be solved as Keith sat at one of the patio tables exposed to the sunshine, his half-eaten lunch at one hand and an open notebook at the other.

Keith was alone. Jason had hoped for nothing less, wanting to take some sort of revenge against him, but realistically, Jason had expected to find Keith with some friends. True, Keith wasn't any more popular than Jason was, but Keith never had any trouble making friends when he needed to. Yet, here he was, all by himself and perfectly content to remain that way for the rest of the hour, if necessary. Jason approached him, but Keith was too busy working on his homework to notice. Jason stood on the other side of the table and said, "Hey."

Keith looked up and appeared surprised to find Jason standing before him. He replied with his own simple, "Hey."

Jason just stood there for a moment, not sure what to say. He hadn't expected to see or talk to Keith today—or ever again, for that matter. After some hesitation, Jason said, "Did you watch TV Saturday afternoon?"

Keith shook his head, "No, I didn't have time. I was at the library working on a paper for civics class." He pointed to his notebook to indicate that he was working on it even now. "It's due tomorrow," he added.

Jason's expression became livelier as he hastened to share what Keith had missed: "Well, they played a Charley Z video. It was the video for his song 'Lucky'."

Keith knew the song. Though not as big a fan of Charley Z as Jason was, Keith did have all of the singer's albums on his computer at home. Like Jason, Keith had never seen the video for "Lucky" before, and, naturally, he was curious. "Was it any good?" he asked.

Jason nodded and said, "I thought it was, though the camera was on him most of the time. There wasn't a lot of weird imagery like you get in other people's videos, but I guess there isn't much a director could do with that song."

Keith agreed, "Yeah, most of the action in the song is internal . . . but the director could have done what the director for Starlight's video for 'The Night Watch' did. Have you ever seen that one?"

Jason said, "Yeah, you mean with the fire at the end?"

"Yeah, that's it—the action in that song is all internal too, but the director used images of smoke and fire to represent internal feelings and all that."

Jason nodded and said, "I suppose that could work with 'Lucky' too, but it would have to be all clouds instead of smoke—and no fire."

Keith thought about it and then smiled, "Yeah, I guess so."

There was a pause, and in the silence, it suddenly occurred to both boys that they were talking to each other again, just as they had a month ago. The rupture in their friendship now seemed like such a trivial, foolish thing. They had forgiven each other, and, as if to put a final point on it, Jason sat down at the table across from Keith and asked, "So, do you want any help with your paper?"

Epilogue

AT FIRST, I thought Brian had been knocked out, like when you see people get punched on TV, but when Stacey and I reached him, his eyes were open and he was conscious. I guess he was just caught off guard, as we all were, by Trey's sudden attack. Brian's nose was bleeding, and I was afraid that it might be broken. Annie, standing off to the side, was completely freaking out. She kept telling Brian to lie still and not move (I guess maybe she thought he had broken his neck or something) but after a few seconds, he started to sit up. I placed my hand behind his back to help support him. Stacey suggested that he go see the school nurse, but Brian didn't want to do that. He did want to stand up, though, so Stacey and I helped him get to his feet.

He walked slowly back to the table and sat down in the same spot where he had been sitting just a minute earlier, only this time, he sat with his back to the table. Annie rummaged through her backpack until she found some tissue paper, and Brian used it to clean his face as he tried to stop the bleeding by pinching his nose shut. I noticed that Brian kept glancing again and again at Rachel and Trey who were now standing a few yards away. Rachel scolded Trey angrily while Trey just kept mumbling something (I couldn't hear what) in reply. I put my hand on Brian's shoulder and whispered to him that everything would be all right.

I guess he panicked when he saw Trey return. He had a crush on Rachel, everyone had noticed it these last few weeks, but I'm not sure what he was trying to accomplish by fighting Trey. Maybe he wasn't sure either. Guys—you never know what they're thinking!

I knew all along that his crush on Rachel would end badly. She didn't feel the same way about him, but she was too afraid to tell him and hurt his feelings. She just let him keep fawning over her and making a fool of himself, which I don't think is any better. That morning when I drove Rachel to school after she cut her hair, she told me that a lot of guys had been talking to her and hitting on her ever since she broke up with Trey. That was why she cut her hair—to try to scare the guys away. She didn't say anything to me about Brian, but I knew that he was a big reason why she had taken such an extreme step. I told her she should just tell those guys that she wasn't interested, but Rachel didn't know how to do that. Trey is the only boyfriend that she's ever had, and while they were together, no other guys had shown any interest in her. She hadn't learned how to reject guys when they came on too strong. Now she had two guys, both her friends, actually fighting each other over her.

Brian's nose stopped bleeding after a minute. Stacey still urged him to go to the nurse, but he said he was OK. Jimmy reached across the table, patted Brian on the back, and tried to joke about what had happened, but no one laughed. Seconds later, Trey, accompanied by Rachel, approached Brian. I was about to scoot to the side, worried that Trey might attack Brian again. I didn't want to get hit, but then I thought that if I stayed close to Brian, maybe Trey would be less likely to try to hit him, so, nervously, I sat fixed in place. Instead of throwing a fist, though, Trey held out his hand for Brian to shake. He told Brian that he was sorry he had hit him and hoped there were no hard feelings. Trey sounded embarrassed, but I don't know if he was embarrassed about hitting Brian or if he was embarrassed because he was apologizing to him. Brian, reluctantly, and with some dried blood still smeared on his fingers, shook Trey's hand. Rachel looked happy, and she probably thought that everything was going to be rainbows and sunshine between those two, but I could see in Brian's eyes as he looked at Rachel that it

wasn't. He won't be over her for a while. He turned around and faced the table.

Rachel brought Trey around to the other side of the table and they sat down, too. Trey looked a little uncomfortable, but he took a seat and then apologized to the rest of the group. Annie seemed to be the most conflicted by Trey's return. On the one hand, you could tell that she was definitely happy that Trey and Rachel were back together, but I think she thought that enthusiastically welcoming Trey back would be like betraying Brian somehow. She wore a smile and tried to make Trey feel welcome and everyone else feel comfortable, but things just seemed even more awkward than before. Everybody had already been acting bizarre before Trey returned. I guessed something happened at the Carnival last Friday, but I didn't know what. I decided I'd ask Annie about it later.

And then suddenly, just as we had all settled down, the weirdest thing happened. As I sat listening to my friends talk, I felt a tickle on the back of my hand. I looked down, and as I did I could hear Annie across the table gasp as she saw the same thing I did: a small butterfly with bright yellow wings and black and white markings had landed on my hand and was starting to crawl up my finger, slowly flapping its wings open and shut. Annie's gasp had drawn the attention of the rest of the table so she pointed at my hand, afraid to speak. I tried to hold my hand as steady as I could, and for a minute, we were all silent as we watched the insect just sit there, the only sound being the gentle rustling of the leaves in the tree above us and a bird singing in the distance. The event didn't last long, though, and very soon the butterfly took flight again and was gone.

Everyone at the table remained silent until Rachel spoke up and said that was pretty cool. Then everyone started talking at once, even Brian and Trey. Annie said that she wished her little brother could have seen it. She said that when her brother was younger, he used to try to catch butterflies all the time. The idea that a butterfly would just land on someone's hand would drive him nuts. Jimmy tried to make a joke that maybe I ought to wash my hands more often so that I don't attract insects, but Stacey jumped in and laughingly told Jimmy that he was the

one who had flies buzzing around him all the time. Everyone wondered why it had landed on my hand, and they looked to me for some kind of explanation. I had no idea.

For an instant, it seemed as if the ugly events of just a few minutes ago were forgotten, and everything seemed like it was back to normal, back to the way it was before Trey left and Jason joined us. I looked around and saw, then, that Jason was gone. I'm not sure when he left exactly, but it must have been right after the fight. I don't know if it was the fight that scared him off or what, but I didn't see him again at all that day. It's just as well, I guess, since Jimmy and Stacey were the only people he ever wanted to talk to. I tried to talk to him a few times, but he never had much to say. He's kind of a loner, I guess, so maybe it was better that he left.

For a while, back when we were in the ninth grade, I thought that he liked me. In the mornings before school, as I waited for the first bell to ring so we could go to class, he used to stand nearby and flirt with me. Or at least I think he was flirting. He'd keep glancing my way, looking at me but at the same time pretending not to. It was kind of funny, really. Once or twice, I stared back at him. I guess if he really did like me, he would have said something or made a move. Back then, I probably would have thought he was cool the way he didn't seem to care about anyone else. I'd forgotten all about him in the three years since then, but when he started spending lunch with us, he brought back those memories of that time in ninth grade, especially when I caught him looking my way sometimes as he leaned against the tree.

Jimmy started bragging about himself again, and as Stacey and I tried to bring him back down to earth I felt glad that it was now just the seven of us, like it had been a month ago. It's funny that no matter how much some things seem to change, there's always something that remains constant that you can return to again and again. For me, it was these people who I was sitting with, my friends. They're like the spring itself; no matter what happened in the past, no matter what might happen in the future, they're something that I can always depend on, something real that I can always hold on to.