

# THE LEAF READER

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# SEARCH CONTINUES FOR MISSING GIRL

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Police boat teams and divers—along with about a hundred volunteers—continued their search for Andrea Quinley yesterday, scouring the Whitfield River and its surrounding woods.

“We’re working well together and we’re staying positive, but it’s been forty-eight hours now. As time passes, our concern grows,” said Colesbury police chief Robert Swindon during a brief press conference on Thursday afternoon.

The sixteen-year-old girl, a junior at Colesbury High School, has been missing since Tuesday. Andrea’s parents say she was last seen at her home that morning. Andrea complained of a cold and stayed home from school. Her mother left for work at 9 A.M.

The last phone call on Andrea’s cell phone, made at 10:50 A.M., was to her friend and classmate Matthew Cotrell. Matthew was in class and did not pick up. When Andrea’s father returned from work at approximately 3:30 P.M., his daughter was not home.

That evening, Andrea’s blue Toyota Tacoma was found abandoned off Barton’s Notch Road, at one of the Whitfield River scenic areas. Her cell phone was found in the front seat of the truck.

Charles Quinley, Andrea’s father, says Andrea often enjoyed fishing and hiking along the Whitfield, both with her family and friends and on her own.

“It’s possible she felt better later in the day, saw that the snow was starting to melt, and decided to get some fresh air,” Quinley said. “Or, knowing Andy, I suppose she might have been playing hooky.”

Andrea is well known in the community for her impressive performance on the Colesbury girls’ basketball team—the young forward had just begun playing on the area All-Star team, and last year was designated by the *Connecticut Courier* as the state junior varsity MVP.

Authorities fear Andrea may have slipped on the rocks near the river. There are no signs of foul play.

# CHAPTER 1

Back when Andrea Quinley went missing, I never thought it would have much to do with me. Sure, it affected everyone in Colesbury in a *things-like-that-don't-happen-here* sort of way. Andrea was a year ahead of me in school and friendly with me—as she was with just about everyone. And I was, of course, as sorry as anyone else that something terrible might've happened to her.

They feared the worst about the river, but they didn't find her. Andrea's story went national on the sleazy *Martin Report*—not surprising since Mitzie Martin is partial to stories about pretty, missing teenage girls. Then spring came. Mitzie's camera crews left. And then summer stretched and simmered along and no one found anything. The HAVE YOU SEEN ANDREA? signs on all of the shop doors faded and curled at their corners. There were no more vigils or fundraisers. The newspaper articles about her became infrequent, then stopped altogether.

School started again. My junior year. Andrea would've been a senior. But everyone started to think of Andrea Quinley as old news. Sad and disturbing old news, yes—but still old news.

Surely those people who had been close to her still thought about her every hour of every day.

But the rest of us—reluctantly, guiltily—settled into the idea that she was gone.

I know I did.

And I know I never thought she'd appear in my tea leaves.

## CHAPTER 2

*“If you can’t get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.”*

Ms. Platt read this quote to us in English class sometime in the fall of last year, back when I was a sophomore. It’s from George Bernard Shaw.

I loved it. I can relate to the whole skeleton thing.

I don’t have just one skeleton—a single, secret thing I’m ashamed of. I have more like a chorus line of skeletons rattling casually around me, always: Creepy house. Foul-mouthed grandmother/guardian. Absentee mother. My brother’s reputation for “drug issues,” whether that’s deserved or not.

I’m so painfully, obviously not your typical Colesbury material, it’s almost laughable I’d ever tried. I’d learned by sophomore year that I was never going to be embraced as a soccer girl or a student leader. I’d spent most of middle school and ninth grade trying to pretend it was possible—joining clubs I didn’t like and babysitting like a madwoman to try to afford the kind of clothes most of the Colesbury golden children wore. By tenth grade, I was ready to try something new.

I couldn’t pretend anymore. I had to make my skeletons dance. If I was going to have to be creepy, I figured I may as well find a way to make it interesting.

It was around then that I found the book about tea-leaf reading in my grandmother’s dusty shelves. It was a stinking,

yellowing thing from the sixties: *Cosmos in a Cup: A Guide to Tea-Leaf Reading*. On the cover was a girl with hippie hair staring googly-eyed into a teacup while tiny stars swirled above her head. G. Clara claimed it was never hers. She said it came in a box of books she got for a dollar at a tag sale. G. Clara never cops to anything hippie.

Tea-leaf reading is a kind of fortune-telling, I learned from the book's introduction:

*The art of tea-leaf reading—or tasseomancy—is an ancient one. The practice spread from the Orient to Europe with the trade and consumption of tea.*

*Of course, it borrows much from other ancient forms of divination. Throughout human history, people have sought out patterns or signs to help them forecast the future: in sand, bird formations, stars, entrails.*

*Tea-leaf reading has become less commonplace since the invention of the teabag. Still, it is one of the easiest and most accessible forms of prophecy. All that is required is a teacup, water, loose tea, and an open mind.*

After you drink a cup of tea—with loose tea, not a teabag—you leave the last bit of liquid and tea leaves at the bottom of the cup. Then you flip the cup over on its saucer and turn it around three times counterclockwise, concentrating your thoughts on the cup. When you turn the cup right-side up again, you look at the images formed by the clumps of tea leaves. It's a little like spotting pictures in the clouds. Someone might see a penguin where someone else might see an ironing board.

*Cosmos in a Cup* had a long "Symbol Key" toward the end, arranged alphabetically:

*Wagon: A positive change is coming.*

*Wall: Resistance or misunderstanding. Also: a physical or mental barrier.*

*Wheel: A journey with a positive outcome. Often a metaphorical journey of discovery.*

*Window: Consider looking at things from a different perspective. Also: psychic ability.*

*Wolf: Envy, within oneself or from one's associates. Can also signify a greedy or vicious adversary.*

*Wreath: Sometimes signifies a ceremony to come—a wedding, a graduation, a funeral. Also: a symbol of loss, grief, or death.*

I started studying the symbols sometimes before bed. I found it weirdly relaxing. And it seemed related to another interest I'd had for a long time: dream interpretation. I'd always liked the idea that your brain—or maybe the universe—could be trying to tell you secrets with little signs or symbols here and there. Tea-leaf reading allowed for that possibility when you were awake, too. Why not give it a shot?

Then I started to try some readings on my friend Carson at the Clover Café, the downtown coffee shop.

"I THINK I SEE a goat, Carson. A goat can mean you've got hidden guilt about something."

Carson didn't look up from his homework. "If you think I'm going to bite that easily, you're wrong."

I squinted at a blob of tea leaves at the very bottom of his cup. A few larger leaves had clumped into a lopsided sort of U-shape, with a few smaller leaves poking out of one end (feathers?) and a single pointy one sticking out the other (a beak?). "But I also see a rooster. A rooster means arrogance."

"Wow, Marnie. Tell me how you *really* feel. You know, it sounds like I've got a barnyard sort of cup this time. Do you also see a pitchfork? A manure pile?"

"No." I tried not to sound exasperated. "I see an archway. I don't remember ever seeing that in my book, but if I had to guess, I'd say it means a new beginning."

Carson tried to meet my gaze over his laptop, but I couldn't quite see his eyes through his overgrown black bangs. Lately he'd been experimenting with hair growth—on both his head and his face.

"Unfortunately, I don't believe in new beginnings," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay. How about it's the entranceway to the campus of an Ivy League university?"

"Perfect." Carson began to type again. "The tea leaves are probably telling me to get back to work. Maybe they're trying to tell you the same thing?"

"I don't have much homework today," I grumbled. "I'm going to do it after dinner."

I was about to get my jacket on and abandon Carson then and there, but Leah Perry and Morgan Gorse came up to our table. They were two drama nerds who hung out at the Clover Café sometimes.

"What're you guys doing?" Morgan wanted to know.

"I was reading Carson's tea leaves," I admitted.

Carson blushed, but Morgan and Leah wanted their own readings.

IT PROBABLY WOULD'VE ENDED there if I hadn't seen an image of a boat in Leah Perry's teacup. A boat usually symbolizes a big windfall, and I'd told her so. Three days later, she won a huge scholarship from a national essay contest. I was as surprised as Leah was. Had I gotten lucky, or had I sensed a real sign in her cup? I wasn't sure. Meanwhile, Leah told everybody I'd made a spookily accurate prediction, and then all of her drama friends wanted a reading.

And it went from there. They even paid me . . . Well, sort of. A latte or a cocoa for a reading. I don't actually like tea that much. Besides, if I'm drinking something else, it keeps people from asking me to read my own cup in front of them. Ever since Leah and her friends graduated, though, I'd had only a few regular "clients."



“DON’T YOU FEEL LIKE a little bit of a fraud?” Carson once sniffed at me. “I mean, don’t you feel like you’re pretending?”

I *did* feel like I was pretending, at least at the start. I admit that. But whenever you start on something, it always feels a little like pretending, right? If you let that stop you, you might never try anything new.

And maybe Carson could stand to loosen up and try something new himself. From the time I met him, when he moved to my neighborhood in the seventh grade, all he’s ever cared about is getting into Yale. Most of the time he talks and acts like he’s already there. Twice a week he drives down to New Haven and does his homework in one of the coffee shops there. Now that we’re juniors—now that his grades are more important than ever and he has to start thinking about his application next year—he’s becoming a monster.

I don’t see him as much as I used to, but that’s okay. I’m happy with my decent-enough grades and my tea readings and my pretending.





## CHAPTER 3

*October 6*

“For this reading, I want to focus on relationships,” Cecilia announced as she flipped over her cup. “*Only* relationships.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. Cecilia never wanted to do a reading about anything else, but I decided it was best not to point that out. “Relationships” for her means guys, even if she doesn’t know them.

“There’s a guy I was way into last year,” Cecilia said, rotating her cup in its saucer. “I’m still sort of interested. But after this one party I was at a few months ago, he didn’t really want to talk to me anymore.”

*Both seeker and diviner should be relaxed and mindful when the seeker drinks his cup of tea. The diviner’s job is not simply to interpret symbols from a book. Both seeker and diviner are responsible for capturing a glimpse of the future in the energy of the present moment.*

*The diviner should consider his role to resemble that of a photographer. He is patient, waiting for the right moment, the right glimpse of the seeker’s self and energy. If both seeker and diviner are appropriately attentive, the “snapshot” produced in the cup can be remarkably clear and remarkably accurate.*

I’m not sure if Cecilia and I are the sort of people the author of *Cosmos in a Cup* had in mind when she wrote about

“seekers” and “diviners.” But in any case, Cecilia is both my most regular and most unlikely “seeker.” She and I were dissection partners in biology last year. We didn’t have anything in common and never talked about much besides flatworms and starfish guts. Until she got wind of my readings. She told me that her late great-aunt used to give her tarot card readings. We started meeting at the Clover Café nearly every Monday afternoon.

“I’m not sure if I should keep bothering with him. Maybe I just don’t have a chance.” Cecilia handed me her cup and I looked inside.

*It’s important to take a moment to examine the whole cup, to look first and get a feel for what’s in front of you, before announcing anything to the seeker. Some of the formations might require a little bit of studying before they become recognizable to you. Some might be recognizable right away. Nonetheless, the diviner should always consider what he sees before he speaks.*

“Hmm,” I said. “Well, in the present I’m seeing what looks like a fence. So there might be some kind of barrier. Something getting in the way of the relationship—or the kind of relationship—you want to have.”

Cecilia was meticulous about never revealing her mystery crush, although in the past, the crush changed nearly every week. If I dug deep enough, I could probably determine who it was from the other details. They were usually football or basketball players. But it seemed to me, lately, that she kept coming back to this one particular guy who wasn’t into her at all.

“Well, the fence is running almost to the middle of the cup,” I continued. “So whatever the problem is with this guy, I don’t think it’s going away soon. You may want to ask yourself why he didn’t want to talk to you after that one party. Did something happen at the party? Or was it *around* then that you guys stopped connecting somehow?”

Cecilia leaned forward and widened her eyes. Sometimes her face reminded me of a Disney princess, all eyes and pointy chin.

“Oh, *something* happened at the party,” she said gravely, then nibbled at the enormous blueberry scone she’d bought along with her tea.

Cecilia has a talent for making every story seem dark and dramatic, even something dumb, like a person being insensitive about someone else’s hair, or when someone gets mad at a friend for throwing up in her car.

“What?” I asked. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure if I can explain it very well, without saying stuff that’s not really for *me* to share.”

Cecilia likes to tease me with her bits of gossip. I try not to care too much. The popular kids used to be more interesting to me back when I used to worry about how I might become popular myself. But when you get this far into high school and it hasn’t happened yet, you kind of learn to cut your losses.

“Unless you think it somehow got in the way of possible romance between you and . . . you and, uh, the guy, there’s probably no reason for us to talk about it,” I offered.

Cecilia sighed. “I guess you’re right. But I’ve started to wonder. I think maybe he’s embarrassed that I know about it, and it’s ruining my chances.”

“Embarrassed?” I repeated.

Had a drunken football player peed his pants or something? I tried to shake off my curiosity. I didn’t want to be the sort of person who wanted to *know* whether or not a football player peed his pants.

“It was a prank. Oh, never mind. He probably isn’t interested, and I guess I’m just looking for another way to explain it. Kind of pathetic, right?”

I gazed into the cup for a moment. There were two little blobs attached to each other by just a couple of specks in the middle; the lower blob was slightly smaller than the one above it. A vase or an hourglass.

I bit my lip and thought about what my book had said about each symbol:

*Vase: Good health or fertility. Alternatively, a secret admirer.*

*Hourglass: Time might be running out for you to finish a particular project or endeavor. Alternatively: Imminent peril.*

“Deeper in the cup, near the bottom, is a vase,” I said. “Maybe we should focus on that.”

Cecilia sighed. She had done this enough times to know that the images deeper in the cup indicate stuff that’s going to happen further in the future, while the edge of the cup is closer to the present. “What’s a vase mean?”

“An admirer,” I said. “A secret admirer.”

Cecilia looked skeptical, folding her thin, freckled arms.

“Now, I’d be worried about this if it were near any negative symbols. But near it is a little round thing that looks to me like a balloon. A balloon is a pretty positive thing. It usually means good times. Or taking worthwhile risks. So I think this secret admirer is going to be someone you never considered before, someone outside of your circle. But you’ll probably be happy you gave him a chance.”

Cecilia tapped her nicely manicured nails on the tabletop. “Hmm.”

That balloon could’ve easily been a horseshoe crab or a wineglass or nothing at all. But I figured, why not keep things fun and float this secret admirer idea? Now, sometime around Christmas, maybe some poor sap who liked Cecilia Daly would be given an unlikely chance.

“Hey, Cecilia,” I heard someone say behind me.

I whipped around. Matt Cotrell was standing there, wearing his famous Hello Kitty T-shirt, tight over his chest. It seemed to me he wore that shirt more since Andrea had disappeared. I wondered if it had been a gift from her or something.

Tall, dark-haired, and cute despite his overgrown eyebrows and sleepy expression, Matt was a senior basketball player who’d been on my school bus back in the old days—in middle school, when Colesbury’s golden children are too young to have cars or

even have friends with cars. I was sure he didn't know my name anymore, if he ever had.

"Oh. Hi, Marnie," he said. His voice was a little tired, like his mind was somewhere else. *On Andrea, always?* I wondered.

"Matt . . . you're here!" Cecilia exclaimed. She turned to me. "I told him about you, Marnie." She glanced back up at him. "Do you want to join us and see what it's like? You don't mind, do you, Marnie? Matt, get yourself a chair."

"Well, I don't know . . ." I began.

"I do want to," Matt said, dragging over a chair. "Cecilia's told me about this thing you do. Do you charge anything?"

"Uh . . ." I glanced at Cecilia, suddenly tongue-tied.

"Of course she doesn't, Matt. Look, if you really want a reading, you go up and order some kind of black tea, like Earl Grey or Darjeeling. No flavored teas with little fruit chunks in the teabag. Stuff like that can mess up the reading. And make sure they give you a round white cappuccino cup, not a mug. And they'll give you the hot water in a separate little pot if you ask. That helps."

Matt turned to me, scratching at a tiny hole in the shoulder of his T-shirt. I wondered if this shirt would make the cut when he packed for college next year.

"Is that right?" he said.

"Yes," I said, staring self-consciously into Cecilia's teacup.

When Matt returned to our table with his steaming water and white cup, Cecilia said, "I'll let Marnie tell you the next part. I have to pee."

Before either of us could say anything else, Cecilia had disappeared into the back area of the coffee shop. Matt stared at me, waiting.

"Um, so, you want to tear open your teabag and pour about a half teaspoon of the leaves into your cup, and then pour the water over it." I was talking too fast, as if what I was saying embarrassed me. Maybe it did. "Much more than that and it just forms a big clump and you can't get much of a reading out of it."

“Can I put sugar in?” Matt asked, flicking a sugar packet against his palm.

“If you feel like you have to,” I said. “But go easy on it. Stir it in good so it dissolves. And then you’ll have to wait for longer for the leaves to settle. After a minute or two, when most of the leaves settle at the bottom, you can drink it. All but the last little bit at the end.”

Matt raised his eyebrows, then shoved the sugar packet in his jacket pocket. I could tell he found me amusing, maybe not in a good way.

As Matt sipped his tea, I explained to him the basics.

“When you look inside a teacup, you’re supposed to think of the handle as symbolizing the person whose reading you’re doing. Images that appear close to the handle are especially important. They signify emotions or events that will affect the subject very deeply or directly.”

Matt nodded, so I continued. “Then, looking at the rest of the cup, you can do a little fortune-telling. You think of the outer rim as the present or the very near future—the next day or so. Further down the sides of the cup is a bit further into the future—maybe a couple of weeks, give or take. The images at the bottom of the ‘bowl’ of the cup are the furthest in the future: several weeks or maybe much longer.”

I could feel Matt’s eyes on me, but his mouth was hidden by the cup as he drank. I had no idea what he thought of all this.

“This isn’t the only way to read the leaves,” I said. “There are different ways to do it. I’m not strict about the timing part of it. It helps me to read a little more . . . freely, I guess.”

Matt sipped his tea. “Is it true you learned this from your grandma?”

If Matt didn’t know my grandmother, this might lend my readings an air of legitimacy—an inherited, time-honored art. But no. G. Clara teaches at Colesbury High, and everyone knows she is not a Wiccan or a gypsy or anything exotic.

“Uh, not exactly. I found a book about it on her bookshelf.”

I didn't explain that G. Clara is a mild hoarder, which is why we could have such a thing lying around our house for years without any of us being aware of its existence or its contents.

Matt took a couple more sips. Just when the silence was about to become unbearable, Cecilia came bounding back to our table.

"How're you two doing?" she asked.

"Great," Matt said. He gulped down most of the remainder of his tea so fast I was afraid he'd slurp down all of the leaves and leave me with nothing to read.

"I left just a little, like you said," Matt told me.

"Okay. So you see the leaves floating at the very bottom?"

He nodded.

"Then you can swirl that little bit around a few times. Then put the cup facedown on the saucer."

Matt did as I asked.

"And rotate it around three times counterclockwise," Cecilia added before I could. "This is the part where you're supposed to concentrate on the questions you have for the reading."

Matt nodded and turned his cup, which made three long, shrill squeaks against his saucer.

"Now you tap the cup three times," I said. "And then you pick it up. You can look at it first before you give it to me, if you want."

Matt glanced at it momentarily, and then handed it to me. I looked inside and stared at the teacup for a while. Most of the cup was overwhelmed by a single image—a sort of animal whose tail started at the edge of the right side of the cup, and whose body curled around into the bottom. Its pointy ears could've been interpreted as a Doberman's, perhaps. But the length of the figure and the bumps on its back made me think it was maybe something else: a dragon.

I remembered the wording of the tea-leaf guide on this symbol because it was so stark and offered only a single interpretation.

*Dragon: Self-delusion. A dragon appears powerful, but breathes smoke and fire into its path, clouding its own vision and judgment.*

"This is really interesting," I said slowly. "I think I see a dragon here. Well—a dog or a dragon. But I'm leaning toward a dragon."

"Where?"

I pointed into the cup.

"See the head here? With the mouth open? And then the body all along here? I'm thinking it's probably too long to be a dog."

"Unless it's a wiener dog," Matt said. "I love those little wiener dogs. But . . . is a dragon bad?"

"Umm . . ." I glanced into the cup, trying to decide how to explain. "It doesn't have to be. It's something you can, uh, learn from."

"You know what?" Cecilia said. "I told my mom I'd call her if I was going to be late. I'm gonna go outside for a sec."

We both watched her flit out of the Clover Café's front door.

"So what does a dragon mean?" Matt sounded impatient.

"It represents self-delusion," I admitted.

Matt sat back in his chair. "Oh."

I let him process that for a moment.

"Well, that's kind of a relief," he said with a little smile. "I thought you were going to say it stood for death and disease. Or failure."

I smiled back, unsure if this was supposed to be a joke. "No, the dragon almost always means that one thing."

"What would a dog mean?"

"Usually a dog represents a friend."

"A friend?" Matt stared at me. *Uh-oh*, I thought. Why did I admit that? Of course his mind would immediately go to Andrea. But as Cecilia knew, or at least I hoped she knew, tea-leaf readings were supposed to be for fun. I never tried to make predictions about really serious things.

"It can be literal, too," I hurried to say. "It can really mean



a dog. A dog is one of a handful of symbols that can be taken literally *or* symbolically. But I think this is a dragon. Now, it's interesting that the dragon stops before the middle of the cup. Are you doing early decision for college? Maybe it has something to do with your college applications?"

"Like I'm deluding myself that I can get into Dartmouth?"

I laughed, then hesitated, again unsure if he was kidding. "Um, are you applying to Dartmouth?"

Matt shrugged. "I'm not sure yet. My dad wants me to. But I wouldn't say I have any delusions about it. I don't really want to go there."

"It's probably something you're not even thinking of," I said. "Something that won't occur to you until it reveals itself to you in a month or two. That's how self-delusion works, right?"

"So you shouldn't worry about it too much. This is just for fun, you know?"

Matt slumped back in his chair and nibbled his thumbnail.

"Would you like to know what else I see?" I said, trying to lift the mood. "That dragon—dog—whatever—isn't the only thing in the cup."

"Okay." Matt stretched in his chair, then absently rubbed the sparkly hearts on his chest.

"I see an oblong shape . . . that can mean a letter . . . like, an important communication. News of some sort."

Matt perked up. "A letter?"

"Um, yeah. But letters are quite common in cups. Almost any oblong figure can be a letter. It's small, though. Maybe not something terribly important."

The image was really fuzzy and could've been anything, but I was desperate to steer the reading away from anything that could be interpreted as relating to Andrea. Leaning hard on the college thing was the only way I could think of, since I didn't know much else about Matt besides basketball.

"I think it must have to do with college," I suggested.

"Is it good or bad, though?" he wanted to know.

“Oh. Um, I see a small flower near it, so it’s probably good.” I gripped the handle of the cup and stared in again, looking for something else to talk about. That stupid dragon-dog was all I could see, really. I was staring at it so hard that I didn’t notice Cecilia had come back inside.

“You guys? I have to go,” she announced apologetically. “My mom needs me to watch my little sister while she runs out for something.”

“See you later, then,” Matt said. I gave her a little wave. “You see anything else?”

As he shifted in his chair, another image did pop out at me. The dragon was curled around something. At first it looked shapeless, but now I saw it was a fox. It was so close to the dragon’s mouth, it looked as if the dragon were about to swallow it whole.

“A fox,” I said.

Matt laughed. “None of this is sounding very good. Cecilia didn’t tell me how harsh your readings are. She’s always been kinda sunny about it.”

I wondered exactly what Cecilia had said to Matt about my readings. Hadn’t he observed that Cecilia is kind of sunny about *everything*? Or maybe it was wishful thinking on Matt’s part? Maybe he just wanted me to say something encouraging about Andrea.

“A fox can mean trickery,” I said, hoping this wouldn’t relate too directly to Andrea. “But I think in this case, it means a trickster. A sneaky person.”

“What makes you say so?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “Just the way he was hiding in there. I almost didn’t see him.” I handed the cup back to him. “Usually a tea-leaf reading isn’t for deep into the future. Usually a few weeks. You probably just have some rough weeks ahead. I wouldn’t worry too much about it.”

Matt put his cup into his saucer and sighed. “I appreciate your honesty.”

“Any time,” I mumbled.

“Can I ask you kind of a random question?” Matt asked.

“Yeah?”

“Isn’t your brother Noah a friend of Jimmy Harmon’s?”

I tried not to look surprised. Thanks to his little “problem” last year, people usually avoided talking about Noah with me; even Carson never mentioned him. But Jimmy Harmon . . . that startled me. Jimmy Harmon, who used to spend hours and hours at our house. Who played Magic cards with my brother in middle school. Who said the word *pussy* at the table one time when G. Clara let him stay for dinner. Jimmy Harmon whom we didn’t really know anymore. I hadn’t thought about him in years. He dropped out of Colesbury High in tenth grade.

“Um. Well, they were friends when they were kids. They haven’t been close in the past few years.”

“Why’s that?” Matt wanted to know.

I shrugged. “You know, Jimmy got kinda messed up—”

The second I said it, I was sorry. Sorry for bringing up *messed up* at all.

*Noah’s kinda messed up, too*, would be a fair response. Jimmy was a dropout, rare for Colesbury, but Noah’s overdose and resulting stint in the hospital made him pretty scandalous as well.

Matt didn’t go there, thankfully. He just twisted his sugar packet in his hands, looking thoughtful. Maybe, because of Andrea, he understood a little about *messed up*. In some form or another.

“When’s the last time you or your brother saw him, anyhow?” Matt asked.

“Oh . . . I don’t know,” I said. “Quite a while, probably.”

“Have you seen him in the last, say, six months? Has your brother?”

I didn’t want to admit how little my brother and I actually spoke to each other these days.

“No,” I said firmly. I wanted to end this conversation. And it was the truth. I hadn’t seen Jimmy and I doubted my brother

had. Since rehab, Noah barely left the house or talked to anyone. He was taking a couple of community college classes, but only on G. Clara's firm insistence.

"Why do you ask?" I said.

"Just curious." Matt shrugged. "He sort of disappeared, didn't he?"

"I guess. He never liked Colesbury."

"People say he went up to Lyndham . . ." Matt pulled on his black athletic jacket, yanking its neon yellow zipper tight over his chest. "Do you want a ride home?" he asked, surprising me. "It's raining."

"No," I said automatically, then corrected myself. "No thanks. I like the walk. It's, like, the only exercise I get."

It was partially true. The real reason was that I don't like people to see where I live, if I can help it. Probably most people know anyway, but it's best not to remind them.

"I've got my umbrella," I added. "And I like the smell of rain."

Matt shrugged and let it go.

The peeling paint and general disrepair of the house was embarrassing enough. The weird spray-paint art my brother put on the toolshed this summer made things even worse. The house screams *trashy* from the outside.

I can't say that the inside is much better, really.

WHEN I ARRIVED I saw that Noah had added a new bucket to our fireplace to catch the leaking rain. Actually, it was a red plastic dollar-store mixing bowl. Since G. Clara doesn't cook, it was a good choice for this purpose. The living room had its usual chill. Noah was on the couch, watching some Animal Planet thing about snakes and flipping through a textbook. He was wearing an old Red Sox sweatshirt over his T-shirt and sweater. Our house requires a little extra layering, even in the early fall.

"You walked home?" Noah asked.

I was surprised by the question. It was almost a greeting, which was rare for Noah these days.

“Yeah. It wasn’t too bad, though.”

“From the coffee shop?” Noah looked up from the television, actually appearing a bit interested. “A reading?”

“Yeah.”

Noah tossed the textbook on the couch. “Do you really like doing those?”

I was tongue-tied for a moment. Noah had never asked me about my readings before. I’d always assumed he thought that it was a lame thing to do and therefore not worth discussing. But he’d never said as much.

“Sometimes,” I said. “How was your class?”

He shrugged. “Community college is like high school, except with a few old ladies in every class. Not for you. I’d recommend you aim a little higher.”

I decided not to remind him of my plan to attend college far away from here. That might offend him and shut him down.

“When’s the last time you saw Jimmy Harmon?” I asked instead.

Noah returned his gaze to the television. “What?”

“Jimmy. Jimmy Harmon. When’s the last time you—”

“He doesn’t live in Colesbury anymore, Marnie. Why would I have seen him?”

“Where does he live now?”

“Last I heard, Lyndham. With his cousin, or something. Why are you asking?”

“Just wondering.”

The fleeting trace of warmth was gone from Noah’s face now, replaced by the same blank mask that had become familiar to me over the summer.

“We’re not friends. We haven’t been in a long time. That’d be like me asking you about Amy Swanson.”

Amy Swanson was the girl I did cartwheels with in third grade. We both had the same discounted pink jacket from Marshall’s. We thought we were the coolest, and we were inseparable until middle school. Then she joined the junior marching

band. The Colesbury Marching Band is the closest thing our high school has to a cult, so we don't talk anymore.

"Aren't you curious, though?" I asked Noah.

"Marnie." Noah yawned and stretched. I couldn't tell if he was bored or just trying to look bored. "You're gonna learn next year, after you graduate. There will be a lot of people you'll probably never see again. And you won't care. Or at least, you shouldn't care."

He sounded like an old man, as if he had been out of high school for decades, rather than a recent graduate. And I was using the term "graduate" loosely, since after OD'ing in April, Noah had gone to the hospital for a while, then had to make up his final credits in summer school.

"I'll take that under advisement," I said, and went to my room.

I opened my laptop and clicked onto Facebook. Carson was on there all the time, probably stalking his rivals for valedictorian or something. I don't ask a lot of questions, because I don't want to know. But I knew he'd message me if he saw I was on, too.

*What's up?* he wrote, within a minute.

*Not much. Just did another reading with Cecilia. Things got weird, though. Matt Cotrell showed up and she made me give him a reading, too.*

Carson's response took longer than usual.

*Uh-oh. I'd be careful what you say to him. Did he ask you about Andrea?*

Carson used to talk about Andrea Quinley all the time. He had a big crush on her, I think, although he'd never admit it. He acts like crushes are beneath him, for now. He says that when he gets to Yale, he'll "pursue accomplished and career-driven women."

Lots of people had crushes on Andrea. Not just boys. She wasn't exactly what you'd call pretty. You'd maybe call her handsome. Or maybe something more neutral, like *attractive*. She was big and bulky like a guy but with a sweet porcelain face.

She was super polite to the lunch ladies and chewed tobacco. For real. And she was always smiling—half laughing at something or other, even though she wasn't very funny herself.

She was a sort of puzzle. If you liked her, did you like girls or guys? It was hard to say. Maybe a little of both. I'd never mentioned this to Carson, though. He was smart enough to see it. If he wanted to see it.

*I tried not to let the conversation get too serious, I typed. I don't know if I succeeded.*

*I'm sure you did the best you could. Under duress.*

Carson is much nicer over a computer than in person. If I didn't know him over Facebook and Snapchat, I probably wouldn't be able to stand him anymore.

*Thanks. I should go. G. Clara left me a Tuna Helper I'm supposed to cook.*

*So rogue! Enjoy.*

Carson and I call G. Clara a “rogue” since she's nothing like what a home-ec teacher is supposed to be. She's taught home ec at Colesbury practically since the dawn of time. “Family and Consumer Science” is what they're supposed to call it now, but since they called it home ec when G. Clara started, she still calls it that. She doesn't cook or clean much in her real life; she orders a lot of takeout and brings the occasional box of junk to the Salvation Army to make more room for new tag sale finds she'll recycle out a couple of years later. She says “shit” a lot in class and gives answers during tests—which she wrote sometime during the Reagan administration and hasn't edited since—if kids ask nicely enough. But she has tenure and home ec teachers can be hard to find these days, so the Colesbury High administration doesn't seem to care. Only slackers and special-ed kids—and the occasional girlie girl like Cecilia—take home ec anymore, anyway.

The no-cooking, no-cleaning thing isn't because G. Clara doesn't care about us. It's that she didn't expect to practically raise and support her grandkids like her own. She wanted to be retired by now. She gets pretty tired by the end of the day.

If I were a better granddaughter I'd probably do more housecleaning. I used to do a ton—back in those middle school days when I was desperate to be like everyone else. But then, early on in ninth grade, I was cleaning the bathroom and found a small mushroom growing out of the space between the tub and the loosening linoleum floor. I sat for a long time staring at that mushroom, so small and yellow and delicate, and then cried.

After I'd picked it and tossed it outside, I concluded that none of us could really keep up with the house. It's full of mildew and spiders and mushy spots on the ceiling where old, wet leaves are stuck up on the roof. It is quickly and inevitably sinking back into the earth. We're all just hoping it holds on till Noah and I get jobs or go away to college, when G. Clara can sell it (or at least the lot it's standing on) and move into a sensible little condo like other single ladies her age.

In the meantime, I do the dishes and laundry but leave the bathroom spiders and the kitchen moths alone, like G. Clara and Noah do. Homework and fortune-telling are probably more productive uses of my time, anyhow.