

The Girl
with
the
Wrong
Name

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BARNABAS MILLER



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For H.H.M.

The Girl
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Chapter One

*Notes for My New Documentary Project, Tuesday, September 3rd
(Putting the Wedding Project on hold)*

Possible working titles for new project:

THE LOST BOY

BEAUTIFUL STRANGER

STRANGER AT THE WINDOW

THE BOY AT THE WINDOW

~~WINDOW BOY~~

Window Boy?

Jesus, Theo, you are in serious need of sleep. Just stick with “The Lost Boy” for now—at least you’ve finally given him a name. And the title’s not important; you know that. The only important thing is that you stay still and quiet and calm. You’re an impartial documentarian—a neutral observer trying to make sense of your new subject. A decent cinematographer should at least be able to KEEP HER SUBJECT IN FRAME.

AND STOP YELLING AT YOURSELF IN ALL CAPS.

Stop writing now, because he's at the window again. You need to FOCUS, Theo. Brain and lens. Brain and lens . . .



It's the third time I've seen the Lost Boy at the Harbor Café. My hidden button cam is sewn into my jacket collar, tracking his every move. I wonder if he knows that the freakish girl in the corner secretly films him, scrutinizing his image on her iPhone under the table, fighting to figure out what he has lost. Why does he come here every day at exactly 11:45? And how could anyone be so shamelessly beautiful but so palpably sad?

When I first saw him on Sunday, I was transfixed. Then he saw me. So I was embarrassed for the next twenty minutes—the kind of shame that makes your face glow bright red. I swear I could actually feel my scar burning. I had to turn down to the tabletop when I pictured that morning's *New York Times's* "Weddings and Celebrations" section, page ST15:

Emma J. Renaux, 30, daughter of James and Sally Renaux of Charleston, S.C., will marry Lester A. Wyatt, 30, son of George and Leona Wyatt of Dallas, Tex., on Sunday. The couple officially met as 15-year-old sophomores at New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy, but unknown to Mr. Wyatt, they had in fact met a year earlier.

"We'd shared one dance to R. Kelly's 'I Believe I Can Fly' at the freshman Winter Formal," Ms. Renaux confessed sheepishly, "but my hair was so different that he didn't recognize me. It took me 10 years to admit that I'd watched him across a crowded room for hours before we ever spoke. I knew before I'd even asked him to dance. I knew I was going to marry him."

Yes, I have a near-photographic memory when it comes to *New York Times* wedding announcements. And no, I have no explanation or defense for it. I only know that each and every blurb tends to prove some inevitable fact of life, and my inevitable fact is this: When a beautiful girl watches a beautiful boy across a crowded room, it's a delightful anecdote in the *Sunday Times*. It's an enchanting scene of timeless romance from an Italian foreign language Oscar nominee.

When an ugly girl watches a beautiful boy across a crowded room, it's a disturbing German indie on the Sundance channel about a budding young female serial killer.

To be clear, I am not a budding young female serial killer. I've just looked like one ever since June seventeenth, *The Night in Question*. Or, more specifically, since the early morning of June eighteenth, when I woke up feeling bruised and battered on every inch of my body. When I limped my way to the bathroom and found a four-inch gash running down the side of my jaw.

Now I can feel every woman in the café watching me watching him. I can hear them thinking: *Oh, that poor little teenage demi-troll, all dressed in black. She doesn't know that she's a hideous creature with toilet-paper skin and an involuntary perma-frown. She somehow doesn't see that he is a Glorious Golden God-Prince whose babies will grow up to be congressmen and Fox News anchorwomen and teenage country music divas.*

Well, to them I say, Lower Manhattan Yoga Elites, I know. I know I'm deformed. I know my attempts to hide it are futile—that a ton of concealer and Olay Régénérise under a pile of peekaboo black hair only draws more attention to what I'm hiding. What I *don't* know, you gawking little scone-eaters, is what happened to me on the night of the seventeenth. A horrific accident? A violent assault? Or maybe the boogeyman in my closet just finally lost his cool after years of menacing me silently from behind the laundry hamper?

All I can remember is going to sleep that night in the safety of my own bed. Apparently, the “trauma was so acute” that I've “repressed the entire blah blah blah . . .”

Dr. Silver keeps encouraging me to talk about it.

Too bad for him; the damage is already done. It was done long before *The Night in Question*. It was done on the day I was born, the day my parents made the inexplicable decision to name their one and only daughter Theodore.

I've imagined the post-birth conversation so many times:

"Congratulations, Mrs. Lane, it's a girl! What are you going to name her?"

"Well, we'd like her to grow up as socially maladjusted as possible. We'd like little boys to look at her disdainfully and say, 'You've got a boy's name' from the nursery all the way through sixth grade. That way she can get a solid jump-start on her existential alienation."

But Mom and Dad and Dr. Silver and everyone else have made a crucial mistake. They've all failed to understand: I am not Theodore. I am another lighter, airier, prettier girl. I have another lighter, airier, prettier name like Rachel or Hope or Samantha. They are just too blind to see it. *"Theodore will be your name,"* I can hear my cold-blooded mother cooing at the baby version of me. *"And if all goes according to plan, you'll be spending your entire seventeenth summer huddled in the corner of your bedroom, shutting out the world with a pair of scuffed-up Beats headphones, blasting the Beatles' 'Revolution 9' on repeat until your ears begin to chafe and not-so-metaphorically bleed. 'Number nine . . . number nine . . . number nine . . . number—'"*

I shake my head. *Focus, Theo. FOCUS.*

My thoughts tend to attack without warning now. They riddle my head like machine-gun fire and zoom off in a trail of smoke before I can make sense of them. That's why I try to capture as much as I can on video, so I can actually experience my life at some later date when my mind has stopped racing and snacks are more readily available.

I can't lose sight of the Lost Boy—can't, won't—because he is a compelling subject, whether he knows it or not. To be clear, I'm not here to save him. I'm not here to save anyone. I'm a cool, collected observer. I'm a cinematic scientist. I'm blending

invisibly into his natural café habitat so I can observe his natural café habits and behaviors, untainted by—

Shit, he's on the move!

I crane my neck so my button cam can keep him in frame. (My documentarian trick: I run the cable through an incision in my jacket pocket so I can monitor all the shots on my phone.) He drifts past my table. I glance up and catch a glimpse of the blond flecks in his brown stubble and the light sprinkle of freckles on his ski-slope nose. Speed Stick deodorant is slipping out from the mesh side pocket of his overstuffed backpack. There are tiny rips and tears at the bottom of his worn-out white V-neck T-shirt.

I know those jagged little holes are telling me a story, but the only one I can think of is the story of what his chest looks like underneath that shirt.

This has nothing to do with sex! I want to yell at the tittering scone-eaters. *Vulgar Walmart romance is not my motivation, and if you people knew anything about me, you would know that.*

But for the split second that he and I are in the same orbit, I'm a lit cigarette, and I don't even smoke. The feeling is so intense, I can't even tell if it's a good sensation or a bad one. I've heard about the fine line between pleasure and pain, but this is the first time I have the slightest clue what it means.

Then he's past me, and it fades.

I take a few deep breaths and swipe my clammy palms across my jeans, swiveling in my seat to get him back on camera. I need to stay perfectly still. He grabs the last wrinkled copy of the *Times* and settles into his seat at the marble table closest to the door. Of course he chooses the *Times*—it's just one of the twenty-three things we have in common.

Thing Number Nine: he has to be an obsessive like me, because he has repeated this noontime routine with near-clinical precision every single day since Sunday.

It always starts on the café's front lawn. He shows up at the window and plants his black Chuck Taylors firmly in the

manicured grass. There he stands, the Hudson River stretching out behind him. He looks out across the water at the Statue of Liberty. Then he turns to Ellis Island. It's like he's triangulating himself with those two monuments, orienting himself in a specific geographical position on the earth's grid, but I have no idea why. This is *killing* me.

Once he comes inside, he never orders anything. He just grabs the *Times*, drops down at his table, and begins what I call his "forlorn gazing." Every time the door swings open, his head darts up. He scans each new patron like an abandoned puppy tied to a hydrant, hopelessly spot-checking every pair of shoes and eyes for signs of his master.

Who are you looking for, Lost Boy?

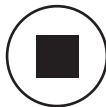
I need to know. Did you miss your rendezvous with the mother ship? Are you part of some nomadic species of J.Crew model, wandering helplessly through Battery Park City in search of your Nantucket beach house? Or maybe you spent your last dime on a bus ticket to New York with dreams of becoming a hip-hop dancer, only to find yourself in an underground dance-crew battle where you got viciously and irreparably "served"?

I wish it could be that. I wish it could be something laughable and absurd, but I know it's not. I know something terrible has happened to him.

I turn away for just a moment and scrawl these notes in my production book: *What really happened to him? What kind of tragedy? What can I do to save*

I give myself a swift bop to the head, hoping no one has noticed.

IMPARTIAL, I scrawl, breaking my all-caps rule again. *You are here to document the truth. You're not a part of his story; you're not even going to tell his story. You're going to let him tell his own story. That's the movie.*



Chapter Two

I would have shot the Lost Boy for another hour if it hadn't been for Max's fifth text:

MAXCELL: WTF? Please tell me you didn't decide to drop out of school on the first day of senior year. We discussed this in last night's session. It's 12:30 in the afternoon. Where ARE you? Lou and I are at the Trout talking about you. If you want to know what we're saying, you'll have to come back to school like the rest of the senior class.

It was a brilliant play on Max's part. I mean, relatively brilliant for a basketball stool. (That would be Max-Lou-Theo shorthand for stupid fool.) Even after all this time apart, he knows I seek the truth above all else. He knows it's not that I want to know what they're saying about me; it's that I *need* to know what they're saying about me—at the exact moment they're saying it.

Mostly it's a brilliant play because no one at Sherman Prep has seen me since *The Night in Question*—not even Max and Lou.

If you truly want to know whether you've changed over the summer, you need to see yourself reflected in their eyes. You can try to see the pretty version in the mirror, but their eyes will tell you the whole truth—their eyes are the only mirrors

that count. Yes, I hate mirrors more than anything in the world now, but I'm no different than any other girl: I still need to look.

That being said, the second I walked into the Trout, I knew it was a huge mistake.

THE DINER TWO BLOCKS from school is actually called Le Burger Place. But when you open the door, you're bitch-slapped by a foul odor. Think of a trout that ate a whole roasted garlic clove for breakfast, played four hours of racquetball, and then skipped his shower to meet up with his trout coworkers for a Coors Light. So Max, Lou, and I renamed Le Burger Place "the Sweaty Trout," which we shortened to just "the Trout."

I only made it halfway through the door when the first wave of nausea attacked. It wasn't the stink; five years at the Trout had left me immune. It was this:

Lou was sitting in Mike DeMonaco's lap.

Once or twice, I've heard Lou accuse Max of "smelling like sex," and I've thought to myself: *That's disgusting. Not to mention impossible.* "What could sex possibly smell like?" I'd ask. "Cigarettes and cheap vodka? Latex and Axe body spray? Prom corsages and shame?" But now I swore I could actually smell it. Like sarin gas permeating the entire room. Toxic and sticky. Acrid and humid. Warm, pubescent bodies in a can.

So let me just repeat the image: Louise Cho—my best female friend in the world, fellow A/V aficionado at the Sherman News Studio (was that an *orchid* in her hair?), violin virtuoso, early acceptance to the Oberlin Conservatory—was superglued (was that a *minidress*?) via her ass to the crotch of Mike "Me Like" DeMonaco, linebacker for the Sherman Sharks, future secretary of the Date Rapists of America, President and CEO of all things stool.

What in God's name is happening here? I should have howled.

Thank God I'd doubled up on my Lexapro. The earth was clearly spinning in the wrong direction. I'd somehow traveled

through a wormhole to an alternate universe. Had I ever seen a more ludicrous pairing? Yes, maybe I had, in the *New York Times* “Weddings and Celebrations” section from Sunday, October 10, 2010, page ST12:

Sylvie Rifka Birnbaum, daughter of Saul and Ruthie Birnbaum, was married Saturday to Aidan O’Flaherty, son of Seamus and Molly O’Flaherty. Miss Birnbaum, 56, is a professional matchmaker for widowed Jewish seniors. Mr. O’Flaherty, 23, is a ghost hunter and Irish step dancer at Walt Disney World’s Epcot Center. The ceremony was held at Disney’s Enchanted Tiki Room amidst the tropical serenades of mechanical parrots and seabirds. Ordained Universal Life Minister and Def Poet “Da’ T.R.U.T.H.” officiated, with Rabbi Gunter Hirschberg taking part.

Lou would have razed me for remembering the wedding announcement verbatim, but Lou was nowhere to be found. She’d been replaced by that sparkle-faced doppelgänger sitting in Mike’s lap.

“Theo!” Max yelled.

I relaxed when I heard his voice. But then I remembered. My fingertips instinctively jumped to my cheek, making sure my gel-hardened hair curtain was pasted to my chin. I wobbled to his booth in the corner and ducked in across from him.

“Okay, what the hell is going on with Lou?” I whispered.

“I’m fine, thanks,” Max said flatly.

I dug into the last of his soggy fries, trying to ignore the amount of time that had passed between us, deflecting it. Max had grown. The kid had at least three days of stubble going. Shrouded in his gray hoodie, dark curls sneaking out on all sides, his eyes popping like neon-blue saucers . . . I think he was going for *Game of Thrones* chic, but it was coming across more Jewish android.

He leaned in closer, playing the mortifying Get Theo to Look Me in the Eye game. “Um, where the hell have you been since eight this morning?”

The strange thing was, I knew that was going to be his first question. But when he actually asked it, I found myself fighting back tears. It was a few more seconds before I even understood. They were tears of relief.

This was Max’s first opportunity to make an official statement about my face. I’d kept my relationship with him and Lou “phone only” since June. But God bless Max Fenton, he didn’t even flinch for that (almost) imperceptible second like the men who’d come before him: namely my doorman Emilio, and Todd, my complete simp of a stepstool. No, Max just said what he would have said if there had been no scar, if I had not hidden myself away for two months.

PLOTWISE, MY AND MAX’S friendship had gone down almost exactly like the standard teen flick. Step 1) Cool Jock needs to pass Algebra II to stay on the team. Step 2) Teacher forces Geek Girl to tutor Cool Jock even though they’re from vastly different social circles. Step 3) Cool Jock and Geek Girl discover all their hidden commonalities and become unexpectedly close, etc.

But there were a few key differences between our story and the cliché. For one thing, Cool Jock actually got tutored by *two* Geek Girls (me and Louise). Secondly, and most importantly, nobody fell in love in any way, shape, or form—so that thirdly, there were no shocking last-minute betrayals at “the big dance” or “the big game,” requiring any grand gestures like running through the rain or having surprise gospel choruses sing “our” song. Instead, we all just stayed friends, reasonably drama free.

Point being: I don’t know where I’d be without Max and our late-night phone sessions. A girl can only play *Dark Side of the Moon* so many times without wanting to kill herself or go on

a funnel cake bender. I am more grateful for Maximus than I could have possibly expressed—so, of course, I didn't.

"You answer my question, and I'll answer yours," I said as I chewed on his fries.

"What was your question?" he asked.

"What the hell is going on with Lou?"

"Oh, that." Max nodded with a knowing laugh. "Yeah, that is some classic A.B.O. right there."

"Classic what?"

"A.B.O. You know, all bets are off."

"What bets? Who's betting?"

"Oh, come on, Thee, this is a well-documented senior year phenomenon." He lowered his voice. "We've all been slaves to the same social structure since at least junior high, right? Mike could never hook up with a girl like Lou because the Sharks would have given him shit. Same for Lou. Imagine what the entire first violin section would have done to her—imagine what *you* would have done to her if she'd ever confessed her scorching pelvic desire for a dude who endorses butt chugging."

"Okay, ew."

Max laughed. "All I'm saying is, none of it matters now. We don't have to pay the price for our secret interspecific crushes anymore, because we're never coming back here again. We're in uncharted territory. Black is white, and white is black. All bets are off. A.B.O."

When he said it again, I was struck by a vivid sequence: *A bite-sized version of me is sledding down the Lost Boy's freckly ski-slope nose. I've somehow gotten caught in a snowstorm on his face. I shut my eyes and brace for death, but his gigantic thumb and forefinger snatch me from certain doom. I slowly morph into Snuggle the Bear. He cups me in his hands and scratches my furry brown head and under-chin like a treasured pet—like Lennie from Of Mice and Men.*

How sick is that? What did it even mean?

Max snapped his fingers in my face. "Theo? Come on. Please don't make me say, 'Earth to Theo'; we're better than that."

“What?”

“I said it’s your turn.”

“For what?”

“I answered your question; now you have to answer mine. Where the hell have you been since eight o’clock this morning?”

“Asleep,” I said. “I just overslept. What’s the big?”

Max smiled. “At least you haven’t gotten any better at lying.”

I smiled back. “That’s why you trust me.”

Chapter Three

Lost Boy Project Notes, Wednesday, September 4th

He's BACK. Fourth day in a row.

What am I doing? Why am I scribbling project notes when I should be . . .



[REC]

Nothing but pixels and jitters as my shaky button cam warms to life. I can't get myself still today. I'm a mess—everything's off.

The second the lunch bell rang, I raced down to my Trek 7500 hybrid and pedaled my ass off to make it here by 11:45, but some mall-haired Real Housewife of New Jersey tried to run me over on Water Street. “Hey, Dragon Tattoo! Get a frikkin’ haircut!” Now I’m fifteen minutes late and covered in a sticky coat of bike sweat, and I’ve missed the Lost Boy’s first act at the window.

He’s already grabbed his *Times* and is well into the forlorn gazing stage.

Some yoga mom with a stroller the size of a space shuttle has taken my spot. She leaves me no choice but to grab a seat

much closer to him than I want to be. I don't even know how to position my collar for a shot from this table. I keep shifting around in my seat, leaning my head left and right, looking like a ten-year-old with ADHD on her first day of Chicken McNugget detox. I'm drawing too much attention.

When I finally get him in frame, all I can see is a blurry mess of a man. Boy? Man? It's one of the most compelling things about him: he looks like a man from one angle and a boy from another—it really depends on how you shoot him. I don't think he could be much older than nineteen, but I can't say for sure. His face is a blur on my screen, like it's been rendered by a French Impressionist or a toddler with a tray of runny watercolors. The door swings open, and his head darts up.

A girl's voice shouts from somewhere off camera. "Oh my God, it's you!"

The paper falls from his hands. He lifts his head. It's the first time I've seen his veil of sadness drop away. Now I can see what his face really looks like—what it's supposed to look like. Now he's the boy and not the man.

He peers at the mystery girl. I tilt my chair back on its heels to get her into frame, feeling my heart rate spike.

Steady, Theo, steady.

I finally get her in the shot. She's skinny and blonde with huge boobs. Of course she is. She's the perfect vessel for his golden angel babies, and so chipper that I have to squint to look at her. Okay, *cringe* is the better word.

"I'm at the Harbor Café," she squeaks. "Where the hell have you been, girl?"

Why is she calling him "girl"? Is the Lost Boy transitioning?

I think he and I realize it at the exact same moment. She's not talking to him. She has dragged us into a little game that Max dubbed "Bluetooth or Psycho?" (It's a fun game, because it's so hard to tell the difference in New York, given the uncommon number of both raving lunatics and assholes on hands-free calls—and that they both tend to wear huge, flowy

scarves.) I lift my head from the screen and watch him turn back to his paper.

Wait.

Did I see a tear on his cheek?

I tell myself that I can't be sure. I even consider rewinding and looking back through the footage to confirm, but I've learned the hard way that I can never look back through the raw footage until it is time to edit. I just end up all-capsing the crap out of myself for the shots I've missed and the scenes I've lost forever.

I don't need to see the footage. Not really. I know what I saw; I just don't want to face it. The problem is this: I suffer from a disease I call Self-Mutilating Empathy.

That is to say, when I see a man crying, I literally want to marry him. At least for the next fifteen to twenty minutes. Usually I can overcome it, but the Lost Boy is different. Watching him hurt in turn hurts *me*, and it has since the moment I laid eyes on him. He ducks his head down. He's trying to pass off the tear as an itch. He doesn't want anyone to see his face. I know that feeling so well that it turns my throat bone dry—I can't make myself swallow. I flip open my notebook and start scrawling rapidly.

IMPARTIAL IMPARTIAL IMPARTIAL IMPARTIAL

But it's useless. It's a fight I can't win. Despite everything I know and everything I am, the pen falls from my hand, and I stand up out of my chair, stashing the phone in my jacket pocket. My fingers rise to my face, checking to be sure my hair is a curtain over my scarred cheek, and I begin what feels like the longest walk anyone has ever taken in an eight-hundred-square-foot café.

Just go to the left and out the door, I keep telling myself. You have to leave. Left, and out the door. Left, and out the door.

"ARE YOU OKAY?"

I've startled him half to death. That was not the plan—I didn't even have a plan. The plan was to leave, but I didn't.

Now he looks confounded and maybe embarrassed, I'm not sure. Either way, he is staring at me, not answering, and I've run out of things to say. Mostly because, God help me, he's even more remarkable up close. The camera is still recording in my pocket, but a camera can't do what my eyes can do.

How can I explain it? He has no idea that he's the star of my movie, yet this is the first time I've truly seen the star up close. It's like that thing where you see a famous person on the street and you realize why they call them "stars." They actually do shine a little brighter than normal people. It's the shift from two-dimensional to three. Everything is crisper—his golds are golder; his angles are more angular; his skin is that much more, I don't know, succulent? Ew, no, that is *not* what I mean.

And then there's that tear. I can still see its faint trace on his cheek.

Self-Mutilating Empathy kicks in, and my scar suddenly feels like it's roasting. I'm dying to scratch it. It's as if I'm sitting too close to a campfire. I panic about my concealer—it's going to melt away, and he'll see me in all my repulsive glory. What have I done? This is New York. People don't just walk up to you and ask if you're okay. Even if you've just been shot, they tend to stand on the curb, craning their necks curiously, waiting to see if someone *else* will ask if you're okay.

"I'm sorry." I take a deep breath. "I didn't mean to . . ." I whirl around.

"Wait," he says.

I freeze, then turn back. There's a slight quaver in his voice. His accent is southern or western—maybe both. Texan? I think of the *New York Times* "Weddings and Celebrations" section, Sunday, June 3, 2012, page ST14:

Elana T. Silverman, a daughter of John and Miriam Silverman of New Brunswick, N.J., was married Saturday to Brick Colton, the son of Ford and Louanne Colton of Temple, Tex. The Rev. Rudy B. Pickins (known fondly to

parishioners as “Rev. Rudy”) officiated. Mrs. Colton, 22, was a graduate student in Political Science at New York University, but has opted to forego her academic career and join Mr. Colton, 27, on his sustainable sheep farm in Texas.

“Ever since I met Brick, all I really care about is sheep,” Mrs. Colton said.

“Yeah, I call her my little sheep,” Mr. Colton added.

“To be honest,” Mrs. Colton said, “I was so in love with him, I would have raised Tibetan yaks with him.”

“You just saw a grown man crying, didn’t you?” the Lost Boy asks.

I stiffen, and my hair becomes a blockade between my eyes and his. “What? No, I didn’t see any—”

“It’s okay. You saw what you saw,” he says. “And I’m not. I’m not okay.”

Well then, I’ll marry you, I barely manage not to say. I’ll marry you, and we can fly back to Texas and raise a host of farm animals—pigs, cows, sheep, whatever—and slowly but surely, I’ll help you recover from whatever has happened to you. I already have the dress, which is vintage and kind of funky.

I say none of that. All I actually say is (again): “I’m sorry.” The two emptiest, most meaningless words in history.

“Don’t be,” he replies, his voice quiet. “I don’t even know how long I’ve been sitting here. You’re the first person that’s talked to me.”

“New Yorkers,” I say with a pathetic excuse for a laugh. “I mean, I assume you’re not from New—”

“Oh, *hell*, no.” He laughs. His laugh is warm and real. Not like my uncomfortable mouth farts. “I’m from Austin.”

Texas. I knew it.

“Austin, Texas,” he clarifies, perhaps reacting to my slack jaw.

“No, I know; I’m just—”

“I’m Andrew,” he says, putting out his hand. “Andrew Reese.”

I look at his outstretched hand and go numb. The last thing I want to do is hurt Andrew any more than he's hurting, but I can't bring myself to shake.

IT'S NOT THAT I'M afraid to touch Andrew Reese. Not exactly. It's because of my father.

I have only two memories of the man who brought me into this world. One is of him wrapping a blanket around my shoulders by a fire in some gray, snowy campsite, whispering, "Don't be afraid, darlin'. Don't you ever, ever be afraid." The other is of him gripping the lapels of my navy peacoat, shaking me too roughly, saying, "Don't talk to strangers, darlin'. Don't you ever, ever talk to strangers."

Yeah, thanks for the super-consistent advice, Pops. Not like you'll turn me into a walking manic-depressive contradiction for the rest of my life or anything.

The point is, while Andrew Reese waits five seconds too long for a simple handshake, I'm forced to face the harsh reality: he is a complete and total stranger. My inner five-year-old squeals at me to shut my mouth and run. But I slide down cautiously into the seat across from him, keeping my arms tightly crossed.

"Theo," I finally respond. "Theo Lane."

WHY DID YOU JUST give him your real name?

I jump at any opportunity to give myself a fake name. Doling out fake normal names is one of my few remaining pleasures in life, and Starbucks is usually my only outlet. Now I've given him the only Google tool he needs to find my address and plan my murder. Then again, sixty seconds ago, I was prepared to offer him my hand in marriage.

He pulls his hand back under the table. "Theo," he says, trying to move on from the awkwardness. "That's a cool name."

"No, it's not. It's not even a name, it's an address."

"What?" More than ever, he looks capital-L Lost.

"As in, 'Driver, take me to Number Nine Theo Lane.'"

“Oh, right.” He nods with a forced smile. “Right.” His eyes drift back toward the window, and my heart sinks. This isn’t the first conversation I wanted with him. Not even close.

“Andrew, I’m sorry. I really just wanted to make sure you were—”

“Andy,” he says. “All my friends call me Andy.”

“Oh. Well, Andy—not that I saw you crying, but . . . why were you crying?”

His smile disappears. The silence lasts long enough to make me regret having asked. “I’m waiting for someone,” he finally says.

“Who?”

“A girl.”

Of course it’s a girl. Deep down, didn’t I know that already? Hadn’t I put it all together? Besides, what’s to put together? He’s a boy, and he’s sad. Why is he sad? Because of a girl.

“Her name’s Sarah,” he says.

Of course her name is Sarah.

“Well, where is she?” I ask. I wish I hadn’t. The look on his face . . .

“I don’t know. She was supposed to meet me here at eleven forty-five.”

“Well, come on, she’s not even an hour late. I’m assuming she’s a ‘Pretty Girl’?”

“She *is* pretty.” He frowns at my air quotes.

“An hour late is nothing in Pretty Girl time. That’s, like, ten minutes.”

He almost smiles again. “Well, it’s been longer than an hour,” he says. “She was supposed to meet me at eleven forty-five on Sunday.”

This is the part where I feign surprise. “You’ve been waiting here for four days?”

“Oh, man, has it been four days?”

I bite my lip, feeling a little bewildered. “I don’t understand. Is Sarah your girlfriend or—?”

He lets out a single, joyless laugh. “I guess not. I don’t know. What do you think, Theo? Can someone be your girlfriend if you’ve only known her for a day?”

I’m not qualified to answer that question, so I don’t.

“I was just bumming around New York before school. I was supposed to head back to Austin on Saturday morning to start at UT. I met her as I was walking out of here. She was sitting right at this table. She’d just come from helping her friend plan a wedding at some place near here where they do weddings. Battery Green or Battery—”

“Battery Gardens,” I say. “Yeah, I know it.” This didn’t seem like the best time to tell him about a) my wedding announcement obsession or b) how I’d been coming here all summer to shoot footage of the newlyweds walking in and out of Battery Gardens’ forbidding ivy gates. Besides, that project is a thing of the past. He’s been my new project for exactly four days. My star. Not that he needs to know that, either.

“Yeah, that’s it!” He smiles, truly and fully, for the first time. *Star*, I think again; the smile is that bright. “Battery Gardens. Anyway, we just hit it off, you know—it was just one of those things. We talked, and we talked some more, and then we walked, and we walked some more till we were up in, like, Harlem or something, and we just ended up spending the whole day together. And Theo, believe me, I know how corny this sounds, I do, but we just . . .” He turns away and shakes his head.

“You just *what?*” I press.

“We fell in love; we just did. Love at first sight. It’s real, you know? And she asked me to stay in town another week and be her date to her friend’s wedding next Sunday, and I was like, *hell, yeah*. Then we went out that night till whenever, and she told me to meet her back here for brunch the next day at eleven forty-five. I got here at exactly eleven forty-five, and she just . . . didn’t. She never showed. And being the total fool I am, I never got her number—I never even got her *last name*.” He shoots me a glance, probably regretting sharing so much with a stranger.

“So I just keep coming back. Hoping she’ll be here this time. All I know is, this is her favorite café.”

“It’s a good place,” I say, not even sure what I mean.

“She said she liked to watch all the newlyweds coming out of Battery Gardens—you know, just starting the rest of their lives together, just beginning like we were. Like I thought we were. And I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, ‘Hey, Dumbass, she’s just not that into you.’ But you want to know what I think?”

I nod. “I do.”

“I think something happened to her. Something really bad. Something, you know, terrible. I got nothing to prove it—I got nothing to tell it’s so; I just know it. If she could have been here by eleven forty-five, then she would have been here no matter what.”

I nod again.

He suddenly locks eyes with mine. “Do you believe me?”

I’m not ready for the question. What do I believe? Did I just sit down next to a creepy stalker who can’t get the hint? My head and my heart start beating the crap out of each other as he stares at me, waiting for my answer. What do I believe? I don’t know what I believe, but I know what I feel: Jealous. Jealous that a guy could fall so deeply in love with a girl in just one day. So much so that he’d be willing to look for her each and every day after.

“Your silence speaks volumes,” he cracks, his drawl coming through.

“I believe you,” I hear myself say.

“You do?”

“I do.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“So will you help?”

I shake my head in confusion.

His eyes drop. “I’m sorry. Forget that. Forget I said that. It was just, when you walked over here, I thought—”

“No, it’s not—I mean, I don’t even know what I could do to . . .” *Don’t talk to strangers, darlin’*. I glance at the clock. “God, is it . . . ? I’m supposed to be back at school. I didn’t even realize what time it was.”

He nods and looks down at his hands. “I didn’t mean to keep you.”

“No, you didn’t keep me. It’s not—”

Don’t you ever, ever talk to strangers.

“You should go,” he says. He flips to the next page of his paper.

I don’t know what else to say. I only know that I’ll be back tomorrow morning.

