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# Chapter

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# 01

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Italian class. The shining highlight of my Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Not because I am any good at Italian (I'm not), or because I like the teacher (I don't). It's because Ryan Halsey sits one row over and two rows up from where I sit, which is absolutely perfect for forty-five minutes of semi-shameless staring.

He's one of those boys that you just can't quite believe is actually real. I know how that sounds, and I don't mean to be all pathetic and ridiculous, but—he's *so beautiful*. At least to me. Maybe not, like, French underwear-model beautiful (although I would certainly enjoy seeing him in said underwear—or, you know, without), but definitely worthy of serious visual appreciation. Of course, he has no romantic interest in me whatsoever; he barely knows I exist at all, in fact. I don't even think he knows my name. I have no

illusions this will ever change. I just like to look at him. And think about him. And dream impossible dreams of our future life together as boyfriend and girlfriend, husband and wife, romantic roommates at the old-age home. But I can't speak to him. I can't even be in the same room with him without turning into a mindless drone of longing. I think if I ever touched him I'd just dissolve into a little pool of liquid bliss on the floor, and someone would call the janitor to come and mop me up and I wouldn't even care, because I'd be too happy. Yeah, it's dumb. I *know*, okay? But my brain just sort of vacates the premises when I'm around him.

Anyway, there's nothing wrong with a little pleasant distraction. A girl needs something to get her through Italian (not to mention junior year) without going crazy.

Annie reaches over and slips a piece of paper onto my desk. It's one of her little drawings: me, in all my stick-figure glory (I can tell because of the wavy shape of the hair bunched into a stick-figure ponytail and because there is a little arrow pointing to it labeled YOU), arms out zombie-style, walking toward a stick figure of Ryan, drool streaming from my mouth. (I can tell the drool is drool because there is an arrow labeled DROOL.) Ryan isn't labeled, but he doesn't have to be—even as a stick figure, he's too beautiful to mistake for anyone else. I have a fluffy thought balloon over my head filled with little hearts.

I tuck the paper into my book before Signor De Luca can catch me with it. Then I glance over at Annie, who is looking innocently forward as if today's vocabulary list is the most interesting thing she's seen in months. *Biblioteca?* Really! Fascinating!

"The drool was a nice touch," I whisper at her. "Very classy."

She doesn't look at me but she can't stop herself from grinning. She loves giving me a hard time about Ryan. It's okay. Someday she will be the one with the hopeless crush, and I will mock her mercilessly. I look forward to this with great anticipation.

When the bell rings, I swing around to punch her in the arm and accidentally knock my notebook onto the floor. Before I can get it, four beautiful yet manly fingers and a perfect thumb reach into view and pick it up for me.

"Yours?" Ryan asks.

I take it mutely. Manage to nod. *Yes. Mine. I love you. Let's get married and have a million babies together, right after we both graduate from Ivy League schools on full scholarship and have fulfilling and exciting careers. You are the most perfect creature ever on God's green earth. Love me. Love me right now. Please.*

He walks away.

Annie explodes in peals of laughter. I'd be mad, except she has the best laugh ever, and it's impossible to be mad at someone who can laugh like that.

"Oh, Cyn," she says, when she can speak again. "It's like you're possessed! Seriously. You couldn't even say anything, you just sat there staring and drooling."

"I was not drooling." Oh, God, tell me I wasn't drooling. I can't help it; I rub the back of my hand against my chin. Perfectly dry and respectable. Annie's a jerk. A sweet jerk, whom I love to death, but still.

She's still laughing when we part ways at the second-floor landing.

I can't wait until it's her turn. That girl is in for a world of pain.

Or at least a whole lot of relentless good-natured teasing. She is my best friend, after all.

Later. I wait by my locker for Annie to work her way over from the other side of the building. Students pass by; slowly, quickly, alone, in groups. And in pairs.

I try not to stare wistfully. It's clearly been way too long since my last boyfriend. And I don't even know if my last boyfriend was technically my boyfriend at all. The whole thing with Billy at the end of the summer was more awkward than anything else. We ended up kissing that time at Sarah's party and then suddenly we just were sort of *together*, but it had never seemed to be a conscious choice on either of our parts. And it wasn't what I wanted, anyway. *He* wasn't what I wanted. Even while it was good, I wanted ... more. Different. *Better*.

It would be so nice to have a real boyfriend. Someone who would hold my hand walking down the hallway and not be embarrassed about it. Someone who would text me during the day just to say he was thinking about me. Someone who would be my guaranteed Friday-night date and who couldn't wait to see me and kiss me and introduce me to his parents and do all the cheesy things I would never admit wanting out loud to anyone in a million years. I don't want to be *that* girl, the girl who thinks all she needs to be happy is a boyfriend. And I'm not, not really. I have friends, I have fun, I have varied interests and above-average intelligence and am deeply invested in running the set and backstage crew for this fall's

school musical and rarely spend a weekend night at home if I don't want to. I am far from lonely and miserable. But it sure would be nice. To have someone.

And yes, okay, especially if that someone were Ryan Halsey.

At this moment, of course, ridiculously on cue, he suddenly appears from around the corner, and I swear he's moving in slow motion like some stupid sequence in a bad summer movie, one hand reaching up to run through his perfectly tousled brown hair, head turning to smile at something one of his buddies has just said, the sea of students parting automatically before him, the pigeons outside the windows cooing his personal theme song and the team banners on the wall gently waving in time and the sun shining down in targeted rays to illuminate him in a glorious halo of glowing enchantment.

He's going to walk by me, and I don't know what to do with myself. Smiling and saying hello are, of course, out of the question. I want to turn around and hide in my locker but I think it's too late, it would be too obvious. So I peer farther down the hall, pretending to look for Annie, even though I know she will be coming from the opposite direction, and then when I can't stand it one more second I turn my head and he's right there, passing right in front of me, almost close enough to touch. For one second I think maybe our eyes meet but then it's over and he's gone, passed me by, surrounded by his posse and the swirling invisible whirlwind of my longing, lustful thoughts.

For one crazy moment I am tempted to run forward and just tackle him. My legs are perfectly willing to move at my

command, I feel them ready and waiting, eager, giving me the enthusiastic all clear. *Let us go to him*, they implore me. *Release us to chase our destiny!* My legs are a bit melodramatic, but I hear what they are saying. I could throw him down and take a big juicy bite of his absolute deliciousness. Straddle him right there in the hallway and then, after a long, smoldering look deep into his eyes, lean down slowly and start kissing him in the way I have imagined (in excruciating detail) ever since the first day I saw him in the cafeteria last year. (September 18, 12:03 p.m., third table from the windows, counting from the wall closest to the lunch counter. He was wearing a faded *Glengarry Glen Ross* T-shirt and eating barbecue potato chips. Or so I vaguely recall.) And at first he would be surprised, but then after a moment I would feel his hand come up behind my head and wrap itself in my hair and pull me closer against him, crushing my mouth to his, and —

I stop before I really do start drooling.

Sigh.

Where the hell is Annie? Not that I really wanted her to witness a second helping of my Ryan-induced stupidity today, but she is usually here by now. I turn back to watch the corner that so recently produced the heavenly vision of my dream-boy, and finally it releases Annie into view.

Something is going on.

She's sort of half walking, half twirling. She is often a rather bouncy girl, but this is different. This is like a *Sound of Music* the-hills-are-alive kind of thing. Her face is flushed and her eyes are shiny and kind of, well, strange. Intense. In a very non-Annie kind of way.

I take a step toward her and she grabs my arm and pulls me against her and spins me around to walk back the way she came.

“What — where —?”

She leans her head close to mine as she propels us along. “New. Librarian.” She breathes the words as if they are sacred scripture.

“I’m sorry, what? New *librarian*?”

She nods like this explains everything. I pull her — with some difficulty — to a stop. She turns to me with very uncharacteristic impatience. “Cyn, come on. You have to —” And now her face sort of melts into helpless dreaminess and I start to get it. “You have to see him.”

*Ohhh.*

I feel an evil grin coming on. Maybe Annie’s turn at the hopeless crush is going to come sooner than I thought.

She whips us around the next corner and up the stairs and down the hall toward the library. I suppose I’d heard something about a new librarian being hired, but it’s not like this is an event I would expect to greatly impact my life in some significant way. And if I’d thought about it, I probably would have assumed that the new librarian would be something like the old librarian. Who was a perfectly nice-seeming middle-aged woman who could help you find whatever you needed for your paper or project or weekend reading but was not someone who inspired breathless words or flushed faces or shining eyes. Unless you happened to be the sort who got really excited about primary-source research materials or something, I guess.

We reach the double doors and now Annie stops, releasing me so she can try to smooth her short dark curls a little and peek in her compact mirror.

“Do I look okay? I look okay, right?”

“Yes, sure. Of course. Jeez, Annie. You realize he’s the *librarian*, right?”

She looks at me, her eyes still bright with — something. “Uh-huh,” she says. And again she sounds nothing like the Annie I know. The Annie whose previous semi-romantic interests have been nerdy science guys and various unattainable boyish celebrities and whose yearning has always been sort of cute and fluffy and innocent. This Annie in front of me is way more ... carnal. And it’s not like I don’t get it; I mean, was I not just daydreaming about taking an almost-literal bite out of my own fantasy crush? It’s just so not like her. It’s almost alarming, except I can’t wait to tease her to the full extent of my ability. She *so* has it coming.

She takes a deep breath and then pulls open the library doors. Together, we step inside.

I have been in the library plenty of times. Shelves of books, rows of computers, a bunch of wooden study tables, the shiny modern circulation desk that got a makeover during holiday break our freshman year. It has inspired occasional feelings of resignation, or indifference, or maybe panic, when I’ve waited too long to start a project, and sometimes even a modicum of pleasure when I’m actually there to find something to read for fun. It has never made me feel anything like what I feel right now. The air, usually quiet and still and slightly dusty with the



smell of books, is now charged with some strange energy. It's like walking into some otherworldly combination of old church and late-night dance club, where the music happens to be silent and pulsing and all of the dancers are invisible.

I stop, confused, trying to figure out where this feeling is coming from. Shapes seem to flicker at the corner of my vision, but when I turn my head, there's nothing there. It's the same library it has always been, nothing has changed ... and yet everything is very, very different.

Annie seems to have forgotten me. She steps forward, slowly, one step at a time, and again I find myself thinking of an old church, some sacred ritual where a young girl proceeds slowly and significantly toward some life-altering event. I feel like I should be scattering rose petals in her wake. I want to speak, to break this weird sensation of being somewhere else, but it feels wrong and I can't. It's crazy—it's the high-school library, for Pete's sake—but I feel like an outsider, meant to quietly observe and not interfere.

There is a sound from behind a row of bookshelves and Annie lights up.

"Mr. Gabriel?" she calls softly.

Footsteps, and for a second I want to turn and run. My breath catches and I am suddenly terrified, for absolutely no reason except that Annie is being so weird and the library feels so strange and I don't seem to belong here. I want to grab Annie and pull her away and tear down the hall and down the stairs and outside into the sunny afternoon and not look back.

And then he appears, and I feel ridiculous.

He's just a man. A young and, yes, okay, very attractive man. *Of course he is*, my brain says patiently, as if speaking to a small and not very bright child. *What on earth did you think he would be?* And I don't know what to say to that. I guess, for a moment, I did think he would be something else. Something — terrible. But that seems very silly now. He's just a nice-looking guy in dark jeans and a white button-down shirt. He could almost pass for a student; he must be right out of library college, or wherever young librarians go to learn about library things.

"Annie? Back so soon?" His voice is deep and low and sort of gently amused, and the sound of it instantly makes me amazed that I ever thought he could pass for a high-school boy. His words carry a weight of age and experience that seem way beyond his apparent years. Those library-school courses must really be something.

"Hi, Mr. Gabriel," Annie says, breathless again. "I'm sorry. I hope I'm not bothering you. I just wanted to introduce my friend Cynthia."

He steps closer to her and looks down kindly. "Of course you're not bothering me, Annie. You are always welcome here." Then he turns his gaze to me. His eyes are a startling dark color, maybe gray, maybe black, maybe even a sort of very deep violet. I have to struggle to blink; part of me seems to want to stand there staring into them for as long as it might take to figure out exactly how to describe them.

"Cynthia. How nice to meet you. I guess Annie has told you I'll be the new librarian." He reaches out his hand, smiling,

like I'm a colleague instead of some random student who interrupted his book organizing or whatever he was doing back there in the stacks.

I reach out to take it, and as his fingers close around mine I feel a kind of — spark. Like the kind you get from static electricity sometimes, only different in some fundamental way that I can't really explain. I fumble for a second but then it's gone, whatever it was, and I shake his hand firmly. "It's nice to meet you, too, Mr. Gabriel."

He looks at me for a second, like he's expecting me to say something else. "Um, welcome to our school," I add, and after another second he releases my hand and smiles again. For a moment, though, he looked — odd. Surprised, maybe. Or something.

"Well, I guess we should get going," I say finally. "Come on, Annie."

She comes obediently, looking back at him the whole time we are moving toward the doors. I look back, too, just once, to try to see what she is seeing. He is very attractive, there's no question about that. And for a moment, when I felt that weird spark, he seemed beyond just attractive: movie-star gorgeous, almost breathtaking, like I was suddenly seeing him on his best hair day ever in the most flattering light possible. But then it passed and he was just a regular cute guy again. But Annie and I never had quite the same taste in men. I guess she just sees something in him that I don't. Which is good, probably. It would suck if we ever both fell for the same guy. I like that we seem to fall in different directions.

She leans her head against my shoulder as we move down the hall. "Isn't he something?" she asks dreamily.

I reach up and pat her hair gently. "Yes, Annie. He sure is. I bet you're going to be doing lots and lots of reading this year, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh," she says again in that strange, breathless voice, and again I'm struck by the heat underneath her words, so different from the Annie that I know and love. But lust changes you, I get that. And she deserves her chance to drool helplessly over a guy who makes her heart and loins heat up and dance around like they're on fire.

I feel my evil grin coming back. This is going to be a lot of fun.

Over the weekend we don't talk about the new librarian much. Maybe Annie's already feeling a little foolish about her total swooniness on Friday. I don't push it; I suspect I will have plenty of time to enjoy her enthrallment. I want to savor every moment. And so I wait, and we do our normal weekend things: movies; mall; ice cream; more telephone conversations than are strictly necessary, talking about everything and nothing. I dedicate a few solo hours to trying to save the fall musical set from lame last-minute replacement parts that will completely destroy the show as far as I am concerned. (Operative word: *trying*. As in, not yet succeeding. But I'm on it. I will figure it out. *I have to* figure it out. Somehow.) A pretty average weekend all around.

On Monday morning, Annie rings my doorbell a full half hour earlier than normal. I go to the door, still holding my half-eaten bowl of cereal, and raise my eyebrows at her. She

just stands there, bouncing lightly on her toes.

“Hello, early,” I say. I open the door to let her in.

Her face falls a little. “Oh, you’re not ready? I thought — I thought maybe we could go in a little early today. I want to stop by the library before homeroom.”

And so it begins.

“Sorry, still eating.” I raise my bowl significantly. She is strange again, like she was on Friday. It’s less fun today. But maybe that’s just because I’m not exactly a morning person.

She comes in but stops a few feet inside the entryway. “How much longer do you think you’ll be?”

“About a half hour. Like always. I didn’t know it was go-to-school-early-to-gawk-at-the-librarian day, Annie. Sorry.”

She nods but still stands there, bouncing.

I roll my eyes. “Go on without me. I’ll see you in English.”

“Okay, bye!” She’s gone before I can say another word.

I shake my head and walk back to the kitchen with my Lucky Charms. She’s got it worse than I ever did. Sure, I could sit and watch Ryan for hours at a time if I had the chance, but you certainly wouldn’t catch me getting up early to do it. There are limits.

Okay, *maybe* if he were going to be naked.

But I am pretty sure Mr. Gabriel will be fully clothed, and that he will look pretty much the same at lunchtime as he would at 7:30 a.m. I can’t see why Annie couldn’t just wait until later to stand around and stare at him.

Now I won’t even get to make fun of her, since I won’t be there to watch. Oh, well. That wouldn’t have been worth getting up early for either.

I wait for Annie outside the door to English, but she doesn't show up by the time the bell rings. I linger another few seconds, but then Principal Morse walks by and gives me one of his waggly-eyebrow expressions that somehow always manage to simultaneously make you want to laugh at him a little (because he is not even close to being the stern, scary type) and instantly stop doing whatever you're not supposed to be doing (mostly because you just don't want to hurt his feelings). He's pretty nice for a principal. I go inside the classroom and sit down but keep watching the door. It's a full five more minutes before she finally shows up, handing a late pass to Mrs. McKenna. She catches my eye as she slides into her seat, shrugging sheepishly and mouthing the word "library."

She sits three rows over, tricky for note-passing, so I have to wait until after class to talk to her. As soon as the bell rings she comes over to my desk.

"I know," she says before I can open my mouth. "I know. I'm obsessed. I admit it."

"Hey, it's no fun if you don't deny it." I pick up my bag and we head for the door. "But yes, since you mention it, you're right. You are. Completely obsessed. Did you spend all morning in there, peeking out at him from behind the books? You're going to give the poor man a complex."

"No, it's not like that," she says. "I mean, yeah, I was in there for a while — he gave me a pass to get out of first period."

"You skipped class to make eyes at the new librarian?"

"Well, we were talking, and time sort of got away from me, I guess."

“Talking about what?”

She shrugs again. “I don’t know. Just things.” She looks up at me, beaming. “He’s going to let me be a library monitor instead of going to gym.”

I’m getting that uneasy feeling again, like I did on Friday. “Can he do that? Just give you permission not to take gym? Besides, I thought you liked gym!”

“I do, but — oh, Cyn, he’s so amazing. I don’t just mean to look at, I mean to talk to. He’s so smart, and there’s all these things he knows about...”

She’d been slowing down as she walked, and now she stops and leans her head against the wall. “I’ve never felt this way about someone before,” she says. “It’s not like any of those times I thought I liked a boy. This is different. *He’s* different.”

Alarm bells are going off all over the inside of my brain. “Annie, you’re freaking me out a little bit. He’s a teacher, or as good as. He’s got to be, like, twelve years older than you. At least. And it’s probably illegal for him to date a student. And you don’t even know him! Do you hear what you sound like?”

She blushes, but not in her usual cute Annie way. She looks angry. And so *strange*. Like she’s suddenly become someone I’ve never met before. “Yeah, I know just what I sound like. Have you ever heard yourself talking about Ryan?”

“That’s different! He’s a student, and I’ve known him for longer —”

Annie huffs a mean little laugh. “Known him? You don’t know him. You’ve never even spoken to him! Have you ever said one word to him? Ever? At least John and I have had a conversation!”

“John? You call him *John*? Annie —”

And suddenly her face changes, and she looks like my best friend again. She also looks confused. “That is weird, isn’t it? I didn’t — it didn’t seem weird before, but now...”

She looks away and then back up at me. “I skipped class. I never skip class.”

“It’s okay. You were just —” I have to search for a word here. *Crazy* comes to mind, but that doesn’t seem like the most diplomatic choice. “You were just excited. I mean, he’s super cute, and smart, and I guess he just kind of dazzled you, huh?”

“Yeah.” She smiles weakly. “Yeah, I guess that’s what happened. It’s still weird, though. I wouldn’t have thought...” She shakes her head. “Oh, well. Whatever, right? No real harm done, I guess.”

We start walking again. I’m still feeling a little freaked out.

The bell rings for third period; we’re both going to be late.

We hurry around the corner and suddenly Mr. Gabriel is standing there in front of us. I almost scream. Right there in the hallway. For a second I am filled with terror like I was on Friday when I first heard the sound of his shoes on the library floor. But then it passes, again, and he’s just the attractive new librarian.

“Oh, hi, J — Mr. Gabriel,” Annie says.

“Now, Annie,” he says mock-sternly, “I thought I asked you to call me John.”

“Yes, you did, but —” She looks at me and I try to radiate encouragement. “It just feels weird. I’m sorry.”

He nods. Glances at me. Looks back at Annie. “I see. Of



course. Well, I certainly don't want you to feel uncomfortable, Annie." He reaches out and touches her arm.

The hallway shifts suddenly beneath me. At least, that's what it seems like. I'm dizzy and there's that church/night-club feeling again, and I feel like invisible people are shoving me from twenty different directions. And then it's gone, and everything is normal again.

Except that Annie's face has gone all strange and slack and dreamy. Again.

"Why don't you come by at the end of the day and we'll talk more about the library monitor position," Mr. Gabriel says, like nothing crazy just happened.

"Sure. Okay," Annie says in that breathless voice from Friday. She turns toward her chem class without looking at me. "Bye, Cyn." And then she is gone.

I stand there, in the hallway, staring after her. Then I turn and look at Mr. Gabriel.

He is looking at me, too.

"Why don't you come along, too, Cynthia?"

I feel like a mouse locking eyes with a snake. My legs are itching to move, my brain is shrieking at me: *Run! Run away!* But I don't. Can't.

"No, thanks," I say. "I don't think so."

We stand there another few seconds looking at each other. And then he reaches out to touch my arm like he did Annie's. I see his hand extending and I want to shrink back from it but I seem to be frozen in place. It comes closer and I feel as I might if a very large spider were reaching out to touch me

instead of a cute twenty-something high-school librarian. Like I might scream. Or faint. Or die.

His fingers brush my flesh and there's that weird spark feeling again and I wait for something else to happen, but then — nothing.

We both look at his hand for a minute.

"Hm," he says. "Well. Good-bye, Cynthia."

He turns and walks back down the hall.

"What the hell?" I say out loud to myself, staring at his retreating back. "I mean, seriously, what the hell?"

A late student jogs by and gives me a very strange look.

I can't even bring myself to feel embarrassed.

Something is seriously messed up here.