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The Scarf Club

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THE SCARF CLUB

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Chair
John Warner
Jillian Weise

ABSTRACT

A novel comprises this creative thesis, which has been submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in English literature. This manuscript is the story of Lucy Merdock and how two major losses during her senior year of high school change the way she sees herself.

DEDICATION

For Jed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you, Dr. Bennett, for your mentorship.

Halfway through this draft, I had a baby, got really sick, and wound up on bed rest. I would not have completed this book if it hadn't been for my mom. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

Narratives as disparate as Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* give voice to anomalous adolescent female protagonists, characters traditionally deprived of an accepted narrative.

McCullers's Mick Kelly is a tomboy who secretly dreams of music but experiences bewilderment regarding the suicide of her unconventional friend, Mr. Singer, who is an adult deaf-mute. Winterson's narrator in her memoir-like novel centers on the origins of her lesbianism and its subsequent consequences on her family and religious life. Outcasts in their social circles due in part to their limited upbringing, specifically as it has evolved from a particular place / region, both struggle to find a voice within their respective religious and regional confines. *The House on Mango Street*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and *Antigone* by Jean Anouilh also affirm the voice of female adolescents who function as Others within their worlds. How characters evolve from the effects of their physical locales—their values and belief systems, their social hierarchies, and their subsequent relationships—is a fascination of mine, as is the protagonist's relationship with place. These differing narratives taught me to view place not only as a character itself within the novel, but also as the shaping mother from whom these protagonists are born. A Hispanic Chicago neighborhood, Maycomb, Alabama, or ancient Thebes, these bildungsroman settings explore the conflict of identity—both finding and maintaining it in spite of class, gender, and social spheres.

Like these female adolescent narrators, Lucy Merdock struggles to find identity, voice, and affirmation in *The Scarf Club*. Carson McCullers explores similar themes

through sexual dysfunction in her fiction. The social displacement of the Other and the triangles she employs to illustrate Mr. Singer and Miss Amelia's isolation were helpful to me as I wanted to stage the same sense of displacement and Otherness in the characters who are members of The Scarf Club. Merdock, Shoe, and Amanda Lindell; Merdock, Shoe, and Michael; Merdock, Katy Wren, and Michael; Shoe, Michael, and Todd Coleman—all of these changing triangles serve as constellations illuminating the Otherness of the narrator and the attempts she makes to place herself in a social system substituting for the one she has lost with Coach's death, the cross country team.

I also drew on Robert Penn Warren's *Band of Angels*' basic pattern of a female narrator who tells her story and comes to a patch-work sense of self by seeing herself through the lens of the different men in her life. Lucy Merdock also sees herself through the lens of the male characters in her life, particularly Shoe, Michael, and Coach. As she orbits around the men in the novel, Merdock is presented with various senses of self. Warren's more popular novel, *All the King's Men*, utilizes a self-conscious narrative, one in which the narrator's healing can only happen through the telling of another man's history. Both of these elements were crucial beginning points to me as I decided to use an adolescent female narrator who is trying to recover from two major losses which happen during her senior year of high school. Coach's death in the middle of cross country season causes Merdock's displacement in her upper middle class high school and also provides the catalyst for Merdock to join Speech and Debate class where she meets Michael. Michael's suicide produces her incredible sense of guilt. In both of his novels, Warren's narrator carries the plot with a strong voice which enables him to cobble

together a unified story from the many sub-stories his brightly colored cast introduces. I worked to make Merdock's trait of approach-avoidance characteristic of her voice, since the novel focuses on several other strong characters who could threaten to steal her story.

I wanted *The Scarf Club* to have a strong, dominant female voice, but I also wanted that voice to falter in the attempt to tell its story creating a memoir-like texture to the narrative. Salman Rushdie's metafiction affinities in his novel *Midnight's Children* as well as his habit of breaking the fourth wall of the narrative to complain how hard it is to tell a story gave me the permission I needed to do the same. Merdock's struggle to tell the story of Michael is particularly evident in Chapters Six and Twelve.

In both *Falling Man* and *White Noise*, Don Delillo writes the interiority of character development seamlessly. Plot evolves from strong characters. We are privileged witnesses of the thoughts and motivations of his protagonists, and these interior portraits are woven throughout the narrative in an unobtrusive way. I was also intrigued by Delillo's authorial choice to affirm a religious, fundamental terrorist's narrative in *Falling Man*. Why does Hammad, the terrorist responsible for crashing a plane into the north tower, receive much more authorial sympathy from Don Delillo than Keith, the self-absorbed American victim who works there? I felt that Hammad's authenticity, however misguided, had to figure in as a possible answer. This authenticity coupled with the conflict which Hammad wrestles with due to his religious worldview was a characteristic I wanted to explore in the character of Michael.

The Book of Ralph by John McNally captures the humor, awkwardness, and groping for a sense of self which characterizes adolescence. His characters are born from

his very distinct sense of place—in this case, a south suburb of Chicago. This appealed to me because *The Scarf Club* takes place in a northwestern suburb of Chicago. His characters are clearly products of their locales: their colloquialisms, their values, their relationships to other characters are all firmly rooted in the place in which they were born. The hierarchical system of Downers North High School is a force that only Michael seems to be able to resist. The students feel trapped in this upper-middle-class-created caste system, even as they perpetuate its values. The character of Katy Wren illustrates both how devastating and surprisingly freeing a fall from the upper levels of this system can be. The characters seem to know their place within Downers North and find a welcome refuge in The Scarf Club.

Jerry Spinelli's young-adult novel *Stargirl* is a coming-of-age story about an eccentric but compassionate new student to Mica Area High School. Spinelli focuses on the unlikely friendship that develops between Stargirl and the male narrator and the subsequent tension this friendship produces in the narrator. Stargirl served as a prototype for Michael—his oddness and empathy and the questions he raises for Lucy Merdock. Spinelli paints high school as a fragile, cruel, bittersweet place, characteristics I borrowed for Downers North High.

Ron Carlson's short story "Keith" helped solidify the importance of telling the story of Michael as a series of moments. Carlson gets high school right with its allegiances and betrayals. The brilliant moments in "Keith" provided a pattern that I found invaluable when creating moments—"the Girl with the Fantastic Eyes", the Day of Ketchup, meeting the Bum on 75th Street—for Lucy Merdock and Michael.

The character of Michael is a work in progress. Michael proved to be particularly problematic. Why do people commit suicide? Why does a healthy teenager with his whole life ahead of him commit suicide? These were questions for which I had no answers. I am not so much interested in answering these questions in subsequent drafts as in making Michael's death feel more real, more justified, and ultimately more resonant. To do this, I plan to incorporate more scenes with Michael and Lucy Merdock, further developing their relationship.

Although the novel has an adolescent protagonist and narrator and explores themes and issues of particular interest to an adolescent audience, it resists the label young-adult literature for a number of reasons. First, the distinctions between young-adult literature and adult literature have become blurred as they continue to evolve, especially with the popularity of the Harry Potter and Twilight series. As more adults are drawn to "teen" fiction, the language and topic restrictions in these novels will most likely become more difficult to both define and enforce.

The objectionable elements I've included in *The Scarf Club*, which might be considered offensive or inappropriate for a young adult audience, are another reason the novel resists the young-adult label. The profanity in particular was a deliberate inclusion I made in the attempt to construct a realistic high school world. To clean up the characters' language would be to deny the reality of how most high school students speak.

The final reason I see the novel resisting a young-adult novel category is its premise that high school is a miniature of adult life. The pressures, the injustices, the hierarchy—these are issues that adults encounter as well. High school is perhaps a warm-

up for what lies ahead, the novel seems to imply. I also wonder if the anti-nostalgic tone regarding high school and adolescence might be in actuality how most adults remember their formative years. For that reason, I suggest that *The Scarf Club* may have a broader appeal than an adolescent base.

PROLOGUE

People ask me all the time how The Scarf Club started. They think I started it and that I'm a good person for starting it. They think I started it because of what happened to Michael. I wish I could let it be, let it go. But I don't believe in politics, of any kind. And when you stop participating in the thing that makes the world go round, you've got to replace it with something better. This something that fills the vacuum these days requires voice. So this is what I tell them: The Scarf Club started because one day a boy named Shoe and I found the two best dreams in our lives dead: Todd Coleman, the only boy I ever loved, was on the brink of fatherhood with the prettiest girl on the cheerleading squad, and Coach, the only father figure I ever wanted, died with open eyes in a room that smelled like wood.

That's where I stop.

I have to stop there because if I kept going, I would have to talk about Michael. The boy who started The Scarf Club in the first place. The electric thrill that ran through our student body, changing us as he did. But I don't bring up Michael because talking about Michael is . . . well . . . difficult for me. It's difficult for all of us, troubling. It's easier not to think about—not easier, because I think about him all the time. But better—not better—*not better*. It's just one of those silent agreements that everybody commits to—this not speaking about Michael. We agreed not to speak about Michael in the same way we agreed not to speak about Coach.

But Michael, I think, is more troubling. Michael is simultaneous wish and regret—everybody’s, not just mine. The worst kind of regret: the deed half-done. For me, Michael will always be an unfinished thought. The last face I think before sleep and the first I want upon waking. This face that fills everything in between.

I was, in fact, a member of The Scarf Club. A charter member. It was a little ridiculous. Okay, it was completely ridiculous. I wish I could remember what the acronym stood for—Shoe would remember; Shoe’s good like that. Essentially, The Scarf Club was created by Michael as a reaction against an actual, legitimate club called RUFF. RUFF was a club some biology students started to save stray animals from being euthanized. Rescuing Unloved Furry Friends, as I recall. The ridiculous part of this was that while acting under the guise of being a club formed to collect clothing donations for the needy, The Scarf Club actually gained way more members than RUFF ever did. Eventually, Scarf Club chapters formed at high schools all over Illinois, not just at other upper middle class high schools like Downers Grove North High but at all types of high schools in the Chicagoland area, spreading first to Darien, then to Schaumburg and finally spilling over the Indiana border—but I’m getting way ahead of myself. I haven’t even told you what we did at those meetings.

We met once a month before school and discussed a lot of really silly things. For example, we picked an Honorary Scarf Club Member each month. That first month—we chose Abraham Lincoln. Next it was The Grinch. We *passed around pictures* of these honorary members. We also watched clips from movies that had famous scarf wearers.

The club was a lot of fun to be honest. We organized scarf field trips: caroling at a local retirement home and ice skating at Millennium Park. There was an *application* you had to fill out to be in this club. The application asked how many scarves you had and if you could make scarves and what was your favorite thing about scarves. It's funny because Michael actually went through these applications and decided who was in and who was out. I wish I could get my hands on one of those applications because it had some really impertinent questions on it, questions that had nothing to do with scarves. Like what was your most embarrassing moment and have you ever cheated on an AP exam and who you thought was the hottest senior. The club's mission statement was something like "The Scarf Club is an exclusive, high-achieving group for all those with an appreciation for winter apparel." The club objective was "to spread warmth to people in need and also to spread appreciation for an underappreciated winter accessory." We wanted to highlight the fact that we were a.) helping cold people and b.) ending scarf discrimination. Somebody suggested coming up with an interpretive scarf dance. That way we could show off our skills at basketball pep rallies the way the dance team and cheerleading squad did. Scarfdancing would make people ooh and aah over us. Not that we needed peer approval—we were the Downers North eccentric smart, elite in our own right. The only thing we were out to prove was that we had nothing to prove. We were intellectual sophisticates, drinking Earl Grey, smoking expensive cigars, playing chess in the open air. We protested: we wore thrift and abstained from meat and recycled on principle. The average GPA of The Scarf Club was 4.2. We were bright, if

not beautiful, and standardized test scores, pretentious vocabularies, and attempts to buck the system were our drugs of choice.

We had to get a teacher sponsor for this club and also administrative approval. But because we formed just before the holidays and pitched ourselves as a charitable organization, this wasn't a problem for us, as it had been for RUFF, whose club request form got lost for eleven weeks in the bureaucratic nightmare that was Downers Grove North High.

I sometimes take out my senior yearbook and flip to the club pages to see our picture. I try not to read the caption, but I always do. *The Scarf Club, Co-Presidents: Michael D. Wineberger & Lucy Merdock*. And then the members' names: Samuel "Shoe" Golden, Perry Kastle, Carl Vinther, and Katy Wren. For some reason, I always read these names aloud.

We're all there. All in scarves. In that picture, I'm standing between Michael and Shoe. I'm wearing two scarves: the one Shoe bought me for Hanukah and the one Michael made me for Christmas. I look a hundred years younger and happy.

This picture always makes me think of Coach. Because the way I look there was the way he made me feel. Strong and beautiful and enough.

CHAPTER ONE

We were in the middle of cross country season when Coach died. The air was turning chilly and leaves were beginning to fall. It was that awkward time of the school year when people start wearing scarves with flip-flops or boots with shorts. It's always painful to see these people. I always feel sort of embarrassed for them. And scarves are big blinking signs announcing a serious lack of social awareness. The awareness is what's key. Navigating the sociopolitical minefield that is the suburban high school experience requires, above all, a careful consideration of one's place in the great chain of being. And a scarf, of any kind, is just the type of thing that can kill your chances.

So it was cross country season. We'd beaten Argo High and been beaten by Stagg. The dorks started running in their earmuffs. Shoe's earmuffs were red.

I can't remember a time when I didn't know Shoe, just like I can't remember a time when Samuel Eric Golden was not simply Shoe, my best friend. Our mothers attended the same temple, had for years, and I like to think that Shoe and I were destined to be friends since before birth.

Shoe had floppy brown hair and an intelligent nose and large eyes with bushy eyebrows. He was skinny and awkward and tall, and he had the biggest Adam's apple I'd ever seen. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and the same goofy grin with crooked teeth that I still find irresistible. Shoe was not hot by any high school girl's standard, but I thought he was the most beautiful boy in the world because Shoe was the only person in my life not keeping score at the time.

It was great having Shoe for a best friend. While the other girls on the cross country team fought over the usual stuff—boys and ego and boys—I fought with Shoe. We fought over the same things we still fight about: politics—Shoe was a Republican; art—Shoe didn't *believe in* abstract art; money—specifically whose turn it was to pay for Midnight Waffles. Whenever I couldn't sleep, which was at least once a week, I would drag Shoe to Denny's. While our parents slept, we ate waffles and kicked around the Big Questions. Can war ever be just?—Shoe said yes; I said no. Canada or Vietnam?—Shoe said fight; I said run. If man is basically good, what the hell was the Holocaust all about?—Shoe and I agreed here; neither of us wanted to touch this one, especially since Shoe's family lived with his maternal grandmother, a bona-fide Holocaust survivor. He was all the great things about men—blunt and loyal and brave—minus the expectations. His heart was in Texas, where a former Downers North sprinter was majoring in physics at Texas Tech—on scholarship. Her name was Amanda Lindell, and she was everything I was not—tall and blonde and confident. You could tell just by looking at her that Amanda Lindell was going places. It was really hard not to hate her, especially hard because Amanda Lindell made Shoe glad to be alive. Once in an off moment, Shoe had called Amanda Lindell *lovely*, and he blushed when he said it.

So Shoe was minus the expectations, and we were the kind of duo that everybody agrees in theory can happen, but which rarely ever does. We didn't know what we had, so we walked our tightrope with the reckless sincerity that seventeen affords. And maybe it was this innocence which made us unconscious of Us, and maybe it was this unconsciousness which made us unafraid.

We were waiting for Coach and the rest of the team to show up. Shoe sat opposite me, stretching on the dusty linoleum outside Coach's classroom. Just the regular before-school run. With his gray hoodie over his head and his earmuffs over his hood, Shoe didn't need a scarf to announce his lack of social awareness.

I wanted to smack him.

Because even though it was six on a Tuesday morning and I was pretty sure that nobody who counted would be at school yet to see him, *I* saw him. And what I saw when I saw Shoe was myself, this loser I had been all my life trying to lose.

I pulled my left leg behind me and held it. I liked these runs better than the actual meets. It was the competition thing that I—even then—had the aversion to. During summer conditioning, I had to get up every morning at five-thirty and run five miles with the rest of the team. It wasn't bad. I liked the fact that there was no real pressure. The meets were different though. I just wanted them to be over the entire time. I guess I'm not really the athletic type.

I placed both palms against Coach's door and pressed forward. Because the PTA had really pushed that summer to change the course description for Shop, the new placard on Coach's door now read "Delmar Frady, Industrial Tech." But nothing had changed. Shoot, the Losers I saw straggling out of Coach's seventh period didn't know how to spell the word *industrial*, much less know what it meant. Coach called them Dumbasses. As in "Get sanding, Dumbasses!" And "Don't lose your rivets, Dumbasses!" He was, I think, a little burned out after twenty-three years of teaching Shop. They'd file out of his classroom, cradling miniature wooden airplanes and checking us out as we stretched in

our running shorts before practice. Coach would stand at the door, watching them watching us. “Don’t even think about it, Dumbasses—my baby-girls are going to college—on scholarship.” He’d shoo them away like the over-testosteroned flies that they were. And they loved him for it.

I imagine they loved him the way I loved him when he bear-hugged me after each meet—whether I’d made good time or not. Good times meant the bear hug and “Nice job, Merdock.” Shitty times meant the bear hug and “Why *the hell* do I keep your sorry ass on this team, Merdock?” Coach did this with all his female runners, just as he had with his daughter, Valerie, an All-Stater from his glory days. Valerie now sold insurance for State Farm, but every once in a while she’d come out to run with the girls. I admit the hugging and pep-talks sound creepy in a child-predator way now that I look back on it, but somehow because of who Coach was, it never came across that way. It was food in a world telling us we were not enough. We were never enough.

Merdock. That’s me. I’m not blonde or cool or a cheerleader. I’m not emo or goth or freak. I wasn’t in any of the school clubs, which was pretty much my greatest high school accomplishment, seeing how my mom’s not only the lead guidance counselor at Downers North, but also president of the PTA. I dropped out of band and dance and chorus back in middle school. This non-participatory attitude, in my family, was a worse sin than my older brother Chris’s rejection of Judaism. Chris converted from non-observant Jew to practicing agnostic shortly after leaving for Cambridge—the one in England—where he earned an MPhil. in Management. I’ve got two older brothers. Chris, the agnostic, works for a Swiss bank in Tokyo. He does something with hedge funds.

And if the birthday presents he buys me are any indication of his income, he'll retire way before either of my parents. Nicholas, whose religion is success, is a biochemistry major with a full ride at Notre Dame. Both Chris and Nicholas graduated from Downers North, winning awards and recognitions enough between them to lock the Merdock legacy in the faculty's hearts forever. And the worst of it is that both Chris and Nicholas are nice, super nice. Nice-as-they-come is what my teachers always say when they find out I'm a Merdock. *The Merdock boys were nice as they come.*

It's enough to make you sick.

Coach was the only teacher who didn't know the greatness that was the Merdock name because he taught Shop, which neither of my brothers ever bothered taking, their schedules always stacked with AP courses. When Coach found out that Chris and Nicholas had graduated from Downers North, he asked me what they did. I gave him the whole Cambridge and Notre Dame spiel, which I had down pat by now, complete with the perfectly timed eye-rolls and self-deprecating humor. He interrupted me two sentences in: "No. What did they *do*?"

What did they do?

"Football? Baseball? Soccer?" he began.

I tried picturing my Lacoste-wearing brothers actually breaking a sweat.

"Basketball? Wrestling?"

I started to laugh.

"God, they weren't *swimmers*, were they?"

I laughed. "No, Coach. Golf. They golfed."

He actually smacked his forehead with his palm. “Well, Merdock,” he sighed. “Your folks lucked out. Least one kid in your family’s got balls. Too bad it wasn’t the pansy brothers.”

And I loved him for it with that clingy love born of gratitude and surprise.

Not that I ever wanted to join cross country or run for Downers Grove North High. I have always run for myself. Running for myself, by myself, just feels right. Maybe it’s the way the sky looks when you’re running alone. Or maybe it’s the clarity that comes when you listen to the sound of only your own steps. I don’t know why I like running for its own sake, but I do know what made me start running. The summer after eighth grade, I went through Something that made me never want to eat again and that made me throw up whenever I did eat and made running something I felt I had to do—all the time. My mother called it a Phase. My father called it, when he called it anything at all, an Eating Disorder. Chris and Nicholas called it Anorexia and Bulimia, respectively. Lynn, my psychiatrist and my mother’s best friend, called it Poor Self Concept. But Lynn had this annoying habit of *hmming* whenever she thought she knew better than you and Lynn had teeth that were too-white and coffee breath. So her vote didn’t count.

Looking back now, I suppose they were right, Lynn most of all, but at the time, I called it falling in love. Todd Coleman had come to town, moved in next door to Shoe, and whenever I thought of Todd, which was pretty much all the time, I didn’t want to eat. Food seemed beside the point. One hazy summer afternoon, Todd and his buddies were tanning around their pool calling out the names of girls who lived in our neighborhood

and assigning the girls numbers based on their looks. When they got to my name, I could hardly breathe. One was butt-ugly, and ten was *hot*. I was a three.

Before I knew what hit me, my mother yanked any alone time out of my schedule by signing me up for a bunch of pointless summer classes. There was nutrition class at Good Sam, the hospital where she used to volunteer until she followed me to Downers North, and deep breathing and anger management classes at the Y. I wasn't sure why I had to go to these classes—especially the anger management one. Until my mother scheduled my summer away, I wasn't even angry.

Lynn convinced my mother that I had a distorted self-image, which is psycho-babble for *Your Daughter Thinks She's A Loser* and suggested sending me to a loser camp in Iowa for girls with self-esteem issues.

God, I hated Lynn.

My mother and I made a deal. Either I'd go to Loser Camp for the rest of the summer, a full five weeks more, or I would finish out my three classes and try out for a team sport during my freshman year at Downers North.

I hated the idea of camp, as I hate all forced fun. I hated the idea of *team*, with all the pointless politics of jockeying for position and meaningless awards. But in the end, I hated the idea of camp more than I hated the idea of team. So I caved and tried out for cross country. I figured I could run alone. There was that. Plus, there was Shoe, who would be trying out, as well.

There was always Shoe.

I sucked it up and got through the classes and made cross country and ran my butt off. By my senior year, I was on varsity and down to seeing Lynn (and throwing up) only once a week.

But I was still in *love* with Todd Coleman.

The thing about Todd Coleman is that he didn't do anything at Downers North. But the main difference between Todd and me was that Todd was so cool he didn't have to do anything; whereas, I didn't do anything out of principle.

The one thing that Todd did do, the thing that we counted on him doing, was to just show up in our lives at 8:15 every morning and let us worship from afar. That's all we asked. Now that I think about it, I don't even know just what made Todd that cool or why we assigned the job of idol to him. He wasn't that hot. He wasn't that smart. He wasn't even funny. He was, in truth, a jerk.

But, of course, that was part of the Todd Coleman package.

We wouldn't have had it any other way.

Now had I been born blonde (Todd only dated blondes), the trajectory of my life would have been completely different. For starters, I would've tried out for and probably made cheerleading (thanks to my mother, I can do cartwheels and roundoffs and flips without touching the ground—I was in gymnastics until fifth grade), which would've helped me win all sorts of competitions—not the stupid running ones that nobody comes to except your mother and, maybe, sometimes-father, but the competitions in high school that really count. Like the competition for Todd Coleman. Had I made cheerleading, I

never would've joined cross country. Had I never joined cross country, I never would've met Coach. Had I never met Coach, we never would've found him dead.

So Todd was at the forefront of my thoughts the day we found Coach. Hell, Todd was *always* at the forefront of my thoughts. But today was different. Today was the day we heard Todd was going to be a dad.

I blew a dust bunny away from my calf as I strained to grab my ankles. Shoe showed off by doing the splits. He caught my eye. "So how'd you find out about Todd?" His large eyes indicated that at least one person at Downers North was anything but sad over Todd's paternity.

Why was he doing the splits? His eyes bulged as he held that unnatural position. I hated this about Shoe. He was such a show. It wasn't enough that his running times were better, that he always outran me, that he was the goddamn *captain*, he still had to pull these stupid little stunts.

"Everybody knows about Todd," I said getting up. "I could've told you this would happen three years ago." I pulled my arms behind me, grabbed my left wrist with my right hand, and leaned forward. Something popped in the middle of my back, which felt good
at six in the morning.

He nodded and held his arms out for balance because he was still doing the splits, his skinny white legs stretched in opposite directions. "I did this for, like, four minutes last night."

And maybe if it hadn't been the day I found out that the boy I loved was having a baby with the prettiest girl on the cheerleading squad and maybe if that girl had been anyone other than Katy Wren, maybe if Todd Coleman hadn't been such a dipshit about the whole baby thing—denying it all when everybody knew that they'd been doing it in the guys locker-room every Wednesday during third period since the first week of school, I wouldn't have said what I said next. Shoe, after all, had been my best friend since forever. If anybody knew what Todd's fatherhood was doing to me, it was Shoe.

“Who cares, Shoe? Who the hell really cares?” I pushed my palms against the grainy wall and extended my right leg. The strain behind my knee felt right. Any pain besides Todd felt right. “So you can do the splits for like four minutes or whatever. So what. You think anyfuckingbody cares?”

Shoe crumpled. Receded out of his splits position and sat hunched over Indian-style. Sitting Indian-style made him feel safe. He told me this once on a long bus trip back from the Indiana Invitational our freshman year. “*I* care, Merdock.” He placed his right hand on his chest and held it there like he was saying the pledge. His earmuffs seemed to puff. “I care, dammit. And if you weren't such a freaking *girl* about Todd Coleman like every other freaking girl in this whole freaking school, you'd care, too.”

He clomped down the hall towards the boy's bathroom and, with a backward glance to make sure I was still watching, disappeared inside. I heard the squeaky faucet and then the sound of running water. Hot and cold on full blast. Shoe always did this when something upset his internal equilibrium. He would lock himself in a bathroom and turn on the water. Something about that sound brought him peace.

I finished stretching and looked at my watch. Six-fourteen. Coach was never late. I wondered if he had arrived earlier than usual and was absorbed in *The Chicago Tribune*. That happened sometimes. I tried the door. Locked. I jumped up to look in the small rectangular window near the top of the door. I hated being short. But as I jumped, I saw surrounded by junk and wood and rusting tools, the back of Coach's head. He was sitting at his desk.

I knocked and then tried the door again, but it was locked, which was weird because Coach always unlocked both doors first thing when he got to school. That way we could leave our books and crap in his room while we took our morning team run.

I knocked and then jumped again to see.

His completely bald head did not move.

That's when I knew that something was wrong.

What I knew was that Coach got to school at five-thirty every morning for cross country practice. Had for twenty-three years. I knew that Coach read the *Trib* religiously, every morning, the moment he got to school, before he did anything else, even run. What I knew now was that Coach was not moving.

Ohgod. Ohgod.

I knocked again. Who would even be around this early before school? Who could I go to for help? A custodian? But custodians are never around when you need them. When kids throw up at Downers North, the vomit is sometimes still there three class periods later. I thought about going to search for Mr. Allen, the assistant principal who arrived early to patrol the bus loop, a weed hot spot. But I didn't want to get Mr. Allen.

Mr. Allen hated Coach because students loved him. And Mr. Allen was weird. I heard my mother telling my father that Mr. Allen tried to sell her his old ties once at the end of the school year when he held this creepy yard sale type thing in his office because he was on the nine-month pay plan instead of the twelve-month one. He also tried to sell her a couple of pilling sweaters for my brothers. Mr. Allen used words like *groovy* when he delivered the morning announcements and Mr. Allen thought he was cool. Mr. Allen was a *douche*. Maybe I knew, deep in a way you don't let yourself know, that Coach was already dead and I didn't want Mr. Allen the Douche to find him that way. Maybe I didn't want to desecrate his memory like that. I don't know.

I thought and listened. The water was running. I must have really pissed Shoe off if he was still bunkered down in a stall.

I half-ran down the hall to the boy's bathroom. "Shoe?"

Shoe ignored me. I thought of Coach. The seconds ticked by. What if he was having a heart attack? My uncle Ralph had had one last summer, and they were able to bring him back to life, but just barely. My mother said it was because my aunt Wilma had acted so fast in getting him to the hospital.

I walked into the boy's bathroom and banged on the stall door. "Goddammit, Shoe, I know you're in there."

"Merdock?"

"Something's wrong. With Coach, and I can't get in."

"Hang on."

I didn't have time to hang on so I ran back down the hall and rummaged through his L.L. Bean bag and then my bag looking for a paperclip or anything with a sharp point. And that's when I remembered Carl. I must have been in panic-mode because Carl's the first person who came to mind. Anybody I know who's ever been in trouble calls Carl when things get panicky.

Carl was the biggest prescription drug dealer at Downers North. He also ran the largest marijuana racket in Downers North history. He was the safest bet if you needed a fix and needed it fast because Carl had every major authority figure in our lives wrapped around his little finger, especially Mr. Allen. Mainly because Carl was four-foot-eight with feathery blonde hair and a smattering of freckles over his tiny, upturned nose. He weighed maybe eighty pounds soaking wet. Carl may have looked like a boy scout, but you didn't want to let that fool you. He'd been hustling since the sixth grade. Carl was the only senior I knew who wasn't worried about scholarships for college. Financially, Carl was *set*.

I didn't have his number, but I knew that Shoe had it on speed dial. Shoe had had a thing for weed last year. His parents were still drug testing him.

Sure enough, Carl's number was in Shoe's Nokia.

Because it was so early, I wondered if Carl would even pick up.

I hit call, and, surprisingly, he did.

"Hey, Carl. It's Merdock. Sorry if I woke you."

"I don't sleep."

That was weird. I would've laughed except Shoe once told me that Carl never joked.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

“I need a favor.”

“Doesn't everybody.”

“I need to get into a classroom that's locked,” I said.

“Oooh—can't help you, there, Sweetheart, but I know somebody who can.”

“Okay.”

“Wait a sec.”

While he put me on hold, I tried the knob again.

“You there?” Carl said.

“I'm here.”

“How bad do you want this?”

“It's a life or death thing.”

“Let's not be dramatic. I'm texting Big C now. He doesn't sleep, either. It's eighty bucks per door and a hundred if the lock was made before ninety-three. You're not a cheerleader, by any chance?”

“No.”

“Oh. I was going to say, in that case, he might do it for free. Big C also digs blondes.”

“I'm not blonde.”

“Too bad for you.”

“What if I don’t have the money right now?”

“Then you’re not getting in.”

I jumped up to the window again and looked at Coach, whose head was still slung forward in that same frozen position. I dug my wallet out of my book bag. Seven bucks. I rifled through Shoe’s bag for his wallet. Shoe sucked. Shoe’s wallet held his license, an expired library card, and one crinkled two dollar bill.

Somebody coughed over my shoulder.

Shoe grabbed his wallet out of my hands with both of his. I listened, and sure enough the sound of running water had stopped. His eyes narrowed. His hoodie was still up, and his earmuffs were still on. “What the *fuck* are you doing with my stuff?”

Shoe was majorly pissed. He only dropped the F-bomb when he felt ravenously insecure or threatened. I’ve heard Shoe say the F-word maybe five times total in all his life. And every single one of those times he was babysitting his little brother Eliot, who’s six. The last time had been a few months before when somehow Eliot ran out in front of this huge, black SUV on their street and almost killed himself on Shoe’s watch. Eliot was always almost killing himself on Shoe’s watch.

I put my hand over the cell and said to Shoe. “Door’s locked, and he’s just sitting in there.”

Shoe tried the handle and looked through the window and wrenched the handle again.

“I didn’t know what to do so I called Carl,” I said and handed him the phone.

I pulled at the door handle with both hands. My stomach flipped.

Shoe said, “Carl, hey there. Shoe. No, I’m good. Thanks. I got this. Later.”

He flipped the cell shut, threw it in his bag, and drew his library card out of his wallet.

It was like watching a master craftsman doing what he loves best. Three breezy slides and a turn of the knob and we were in. I wanted to ask Shoe where he had learned that cool little move, but I was too busy thinking *Ohgod ohgod*. Because as the door whined open, Coach. Did. Not. Move.

We stood in the doorway. Coach sat in his green swivel chair. The empty space seemed to lengthen between us. Fluorescent lights shone down on his bald head. Before I even spoke, I knew we had lost something precious, something irrecoverable. You could feel it in the air and in the way the room, which always smelled like wood, now smelled like death.

“Coach?”

He just sat there in the same sloping angle.

“Shit.”

Shoe’s eyes went big and devoured me. “Is this some sort of *joke*?”

“What the fuck, Shoe? You think I’d *joke* about this?” Something hot and stingy filled my eyes. I took a baby step forward and swallowed. “Coach?”

My stomach stopped flipping and tightened. I felt my heart cracking open and everything I had ever felt for Coach spilling out. “Coach?”

Shoe leaned against the door, holding his stomach, his long arms around his middle.

“You going to help me here or what?” I said.

Shoe looked at me like I was a baby-killer from outer-space. “Help with what?”

“I don’t know. You think I know what the shit I’m doing?”

“He’s dead, Dumbass.” As soon as he said it, Shoe’s nostrils flared. His eyes went big and started looking wet. “He’s dead already,” he whispered.

I’ll tell you it’s an eerie feeling being in a room with a dead guy, especially a dead teacher, especially a dead teacher you love.

“Maybe not,” I said for Shoe’s sake. He was hunched over, still holding his stomach. Tears dripping on his shoes. Shoe was captain.

He slid to the floor and sat Indian-style. “God, can you just get it over with?” He choked out.

“*You* want to make sure?” It was mean, but I couldn’t help it. Shoe was never any help in times like this. When Eliot who seriously hears voices and probably sees dead people and won’t go anywhere without his imaginary friend, Wolfie, split his head open once trying to jump down fourteen stairs in a running leap on Shoe’s watch, who do you think held the washcloth over the spurting gash while Shoe locked himself in the bathroom with both faucets on?

“God, no.” Shoe covered his mouth with both hands.

I shuffled forward and that’s when I saw it.

The Chicago Tribune lay in Coach’s lap. It was still folded in half, unopened.

Coach hadn’t read the paper, yet.

That’s when I knew he was really, truly, never-coming-back dead.

At Coach's funeral, people said the same old shit about his being an inspiration and the best father and teacher and all that crap. Our entire team, except for Stephanie Rogers, who was getting her wisdom teeth removed that morning, showed. We wore our running shorts and the t-shirts we'd bought for the Wendy's Invitational that said, "We Haul Ours To Kick Yours." The shirts looked great. Coach would've wanted to take a team picture, had he been there. Most of the girls had snots running from their noses and mascara smeared all over their cheeks. The guys looked older, tired. Everybody was thinking about the rest of the season. What Downers North would do without Coach, who we'd be.

But Shoe and I didn't cry or look old and tired. Shoe and I weren't thinking about the rest of the season or who we'd be.

What Shoe and I were thinking about was the look on Coach's face when we finally made our way across the room to him. Shoe had taken my hand, my right hand, the hand I never let anybody hold. The hand with the callous on my forefinger from three years of sticking it down my own throat. We were thinking of the staleness of his skin and his empty, open eyes. We were seeing his well-worn Asics and his knee-high socks and his too-short shorts. The disbelief on his face, all over his face, forever his face.

We sat without emotion. We sat numb.

People die all the time. They get shot at, run over, cut up. Kidneys go out. Lungs give up. Hearts fail us. They fall in supermarkets, in traffic, in church. Death happens all the time. We just never thought it would happen to us. We just never thought it would happen to Coach.

It was a broken, fallen world, and we were the damaged, shuffling empty through space.

We were the people in scarves. We were the losers. Some of us couldn't worry about social survival anymore. Some of us were already dead.

CHAPTER TWO

The first thing I noticed about him was that he was wearing all black, which might've been normal had he been emo or a goth throwback. In Speech and Debate class, I picked up pretty quickly, emos and goth throwbacks were standard. The second thing was that he had on this weird cape-like thing. The third thing is that for the two months I was in class with him, he always wore turtlenecks, *always*. No matter how hot it was outside or how sweaty we got from doing Suzuiki, he always wore a turtleneck. And the thing was he was surprisingly in shape, he could do these insane acrobatic flips. He said that he had a trampoline in his backyard and that he had taught himself how to do these tricks.

He also spoke with a British accent. And everybody thought that he actually had a Southern one, but he tried really hard to hide it with the British one because you could hear a soft twang in between all the pronounced t's and dropped r's. The story goes that the Speech and Debate teacher called him out on it the second week of school and asked him to speak normally, and he got really upset and stood up and said very quietly and deliberately and looking her square in the eye that he *didn't know how*.

He also really liked The Phantom of the Opera and Edgar Allan Poe. His favorite speech category for Speech and Debate was Dramatic Interpretation. And the piece that won him first place at Nationals was a Poe short story. I can't remember the name of it, but it was the one with the heart beating in the floor. Anyway, he got really into it, and it was scary, especially scary from the boy in the cape.

This was Michael.

I remember I had to call and interview him for a completely pointless getting-to-know-you assignment for Speech and Debate class. The idea was that if you had a rudimentary knowledge of your classmates (i.e. favorite color, birthday, number of siblings), you'd be less likely to act like an asshole in class. It was important to the Speech and Debate teacher to try to stifle the asshole-like behavior because the class was performance-based, and it was fucking scary to get up in front of your peers and act like something you weren't, although now that I think about it, we were all doing this all the time, anyway.

Michael's mom picked up when I called for the assignment and had this really thick Alabaman accent, so thick that I lost every third word or so. She also kept calling me honey. When she finally handed off the phone to Michael, he answered, "Hallo?" like he was Sherlock Holmes—Sherlock Holmes from Montgomery, Alabama, not London, England. It was off-putting to say the least.

Another off-putting thing about Michael was the way he seemed to do the exact opposite of what was expected. It was like he did this on purpose. Like he was trying too hard to prove something, though none of us cared enough to guess what that could be. For example, the story goes that earlier that semester, before I joined the class, you had to give an original speech about a person you admired. While most kids talked about sports figures or Martin Luther King Jr. or their boyfriends, Michael talked about the Bum Who Lives at the Bus Stop on 75th Street. He talked about how he admired the tenacity of the homeless and the courage which this particular bum exhibited every day by facing a world that ignored his very existence. He said that he chatted with the Bum every

morning before school and had a snack with him most afternoons. He said that he *had invited the Bum over* to his house on a number of occasions. That he found conversations with the Bum stimulating and that the Bum was, contrary to neighborhood opinion, engaging and, when he wasn't actually smashed, *charming*.

Michael was the only senior at Downers North who rode a bike to school. It was yellow with a banana seat and those pom-pom things flowing from the handlebars.

Michael listed going to the dentist, public transportation, and waiting in line as three of his favorite things during our pointless phone interview.

After we found Coach dead and Mr. Allen the Douche took over as interim coach for the rest of the season because he had, as he told us, run *track* back in college, I dropped out. My mother was furious—my parents had deluded themselves into thinking my running was somehow going to score them some type of scholarship the way Amanda Lindell's had. My mother commanded me to join another team sport. I refused. So she messed with my schedule simply because she could and was mean like that. She cut my senior study hall and assigned me to Speech and Debate, a loser elective for theater wannabes.

The Speech and Debate dorks competed every Saturday morning against other Speech and Debate dorks from local high schools. They gave speeches, debated, and acted. You could identify these kids by their half-lost look and the way they moved their lips in unguarded moments, silently rehearsing their lines. They were Losers with a capital L, and my mother had abandoned me to them.

This is how I met Michael.

I sat in the empty desk next to Dracula, who was not sitting on his cape. (Michael later informed me that sitting on one's cape was considered *uncouth*.) He smiled at me while carefully arranging the skirt of the cape over the back of his chair. It skimmed the gray-speckled linoleum.

I tried not to stare. I'm really good at not staring at weird people. Maybe because I'm sort of a magnet for them. My mother instilled in me an unfailing sense of politeness that I've never quite been able to shake. Weird people often mistake this politeness for friendship, thus my magnetism. I found myself wondering if the cape was some sort of costume. I mean, we were in a theater class or something like it. I didn't wonder about the turtleneck because although it was an unusually warm October, like I said before, people were wearing all sorts of out-of-season clothes. It was just that time of year.

The teacher sent around a sign-up list for Saturday's competition. Dracula passed it to me and smiled again. The smile said I Want To Be Your Friend. This time I made sure not to smile back.

I glanced over the categories: Duet Acting, Dramatic Interpretation, Original Oratory, Humorous Interpretation, Oral Interpretation of Poetry, Debate, Extemporaneous Speech, and Extemporaneous Acting. They all looked pretty daunting, and what the hell did *extemporaneous* even mean?

I noticed that Michael had signed his name in every category, except Duet Acting and Debate. I assumed it was because nobody wanted to be his partner for either. His signature was gorgeous, large and clear. I also noticed that unlike any of the other

names on the sign-up list, Michael had listed his middle initial in each signature. Every single time.

Under Extemporaneous Acting, he had written, “Michael D. Wineberger & The Girl with the Fantastic Eyes.”

It was not until Friday night when Michael showed up at my front door in his black turtleneck and cape that I realized that The Girl with the Fantastic Eyes was me.

CHAPTER THREE

“Most people who talk about the Masons, quite simply, don’t know what they’re talking about,” he said. And he smiled when he said it.

We were in Michael’s basement three weeks after Extemporaneous Acting. I’d fulfilled the three competitions requirement to secure an A in Speech and Debate. I had survived being Michael D. Wineberger’s acting partner, and I had a large golden extemporaneous acting trophy in my bedroom to prove it.

Sometimes I find myself in situations that feel like a really bad B-movie. Sitting in Michael’s basement with all the lights off, except for three mood candles on top of the T.V. was one of those times.

I’d dragged Shoe along who had dragged Eliot along who brought Wolfie, his imaginary friend. Eliot sat on the couch, his six-year-old legs dangling over the yellow shag carpet, playing Battleship with Wolfie.

Michael’s breath was on the back of my neck. Why was he behind me? “People like to think they know something about Masons for the same reason they join fraternities and country clubs. We like the thrill of exclusivity. The excitement of holding other people’s secrets.”

Why it was necessary for Shoe and me to sit on the floor while Michael circled us with hands clasped behind his back I didn’t know. Why it was necessary for him to whisper in our ears I didn’t know. But for once in my life, this was a club that I wanted to be a part of. I had to know what made Michael such a freak.

Shoe sat Indian-style across from me, trying to feel safe, his eyes getting bigger and bigger and saying all the things I knew I should be listening to. Shoe and I could carry on entire conversations with our eyes alone. Just now Shoe's eyes were saying we should get the fuck out. Their threatened look told me he was actually using the F-word.

Michael whipped his cape around him vampire-style and settled onto the yellow shag. We sat in a triangle.

It was the cue for somebody to pull out a ouija board.

But if I'd learned anything by this time, it was that Michael didn't act according to cues, social or otherwise. And Michael definitely was not a part of a B-movie. He was the best actor I'd ever seen, the reason for the trophy on my bookshelf in my bedroom. And Michael always acted *extemporaneously*.

Extemporaneous acting is just a fancy way of saying improv. Acting off the top of your head or in the moment. In Speech and Debate, this is the category of acting where two people are given a scene on a small piece of paper. They get two minutes to plan, and then they perform the scene.

When Michael had shown up at my house that Friday night to practice, he assured me that I could play the straight man, which in theater-speak means you aren't the one doing the crazy stuff. He would do it all. I didn't even have to act he said. "Leave everything to me. All you've got to do is be yourself." That would be enough.

I thought it would be hard. But all I had to do, just like Michael had said, was be myself. So mostly I just stood around rolling my eyes and reacting to the loser that Michael was.

After Michael left my house, my mother freaked.

“Do you need a costume, too?” she asked as Michael pedaled away, his cape flapping behind him.

“Nobody needs a costume,” I said, watching T.V.

Her voice arched. “Then—Lucy, please look at me when I’m speaking to you—why was your friend wearing a cape?”

“First of all, he’s not my friend. Second, he wears it all the time.”

She bit her lip. She opened her mouth and then thought better of it and bit her lip again. She was trying not to judge. But being judgmental is just part of who my mother is, who she’s always been. Before she could diagnose Michael or warn me to stay away from him, I said, “It’s just part of who he is, okay? Just one of the many losers in that class you dropped me in.”

The cape is important. Why did Michael wear it in the first place? I didn’t know. But the next morning, at the forensics competition, I noticed a lot of other kids in capes, too. Mostly girls—freshmen. But there were guys wearing them, too. Some wore the cheap Halloween kind, and some had homemade ones on. A few looked pretty expensive, woolish.

I met Michael in front of B209 just like he’d told me to. He was leaning against the wall with one foot planted against it and his arms folded across his chest. Standing there like that with a couple girls in capes flirting around him, he looked almost normal. It surprised me how normal he looked. When he saw me, his eyes came alive the way Shoe’s did when he talked about Amanda Lindell.

I don't remember what the scene prompt was. But I do remember how I felt standing up there in front of all those people. I said, maybe, two words tops. Michael just went with it. He played off of my fear and somehow made it look motivated; he made my vulnerability look good. He acted extemporaneously and won.

I left after the awards ceremony. I drove to Downers South, where Shoe's meet was going on. I walked and then jogged to the three-quarter mark where I was pretty sure Shoe would be about then and sat in the grass and waited a long time for Shoe to pass. I thought about acting and Michael and my life and how for the first time in a long time I didn't want to run away from it. I thought about the trophy and the cape and Todd's baby. I wondered why Michael had picked me. He was unlike anybody I'd ever met in that Michael just didn't give a damn.

When Shoe passed, I jumped up and down and clapped and screamed, "Shoe! Shooooe!"

As he ran, he clasped his hands above his head and pumped them, a victory sign.

That night after showering when I looked in the mirror, something was different. My hair was still brown. My nose still big. My feet were still ugly. The padding still in all the wrong places: I was lumpy where I should have been flat and flat where I should have been curves. I was what I had always been—angly and awkward and inadequate. My teeth still looked off, in spite of a middle school of braces.

But in my face, I saw—to my complete surprise—he was right.

Maybe not fantastic, but okay.

My eyes.

So instead of throwing up, part of my usual Saturday before-bed routine, I let my dinner stay.

I wanted in to the secret club that was Michael D. Wineberger more than I had ever wanted anything, except maybe Todd Coleman. I wanted to know what made him tick. What made him put on the cape.

We sat in a triangle and talked about the Masons. We talked about what it would mean to start our own club. A club that told the world who we were and who we wanted it to be for us. We said these words aloud, as if by uttering mere sounds we could make them come true.

And then we named ourselves The Scarf Club.

CHAPTER FOUR

Even now, it's hard for me to talk about Michael. I can't really say the words out loud, but I think them all the time. In the stray moments when I don't even know I'm thinking about anything, I think about him. Like *all the time* I think about him. I remember how he threw his head back when he laughed. I remember his trampoline. I remember poetry.

I miss him more than I can say.

It's hard because when the words stop, the feelings just keep coming, keep right on piling on top of each other. They spill, slosh over the edge and down your cheeks in those off moments when you didn't even know you were feeling anything at all.

Michael, my puzzle. I try to rearrange the pieces to make sense of it all, but it never makes any sense. I never make a picture with the pieces in my hands.

When I think about Michael, I think about Coach. Someone running next to me, saying everything I needed my father to say. Everything my father never said. *Doing great!* and *Looking good!* and even *Shake out those arms!* Inevitably, when I think about Coach, I think about Shoe.

So it is never just Michael and me. It's all of us in there, wandering the hate maze, bumping into each other, trying to figure our way out. It's confusing. *I want you to run comfortably hard. Keep your chest open. Pace yourself.* The poetry is in there, too. Snarled and tangled, a kite line caught in naked limbs. Michael called them The Darlings. They were the two oldest oaks in Downers Grove, and we used to visit them sometimes. Michael liked to fly kites down Main Street, and The Darlings always devoured his line.

Sometimes, I'd tag along, jog the street following Michael's attempt at flight, wonder what he was trying to prove anyway.

Shoe never talked to trees; Shoe would think that was gay.

But Shoe was the boy who built me a treefort. It was this completely unsafe hunting stand type of thing in a tree on the edge of his grandmother's property. She actually owns three lots, each full of ginormous, ancient trees. Shoe's grandmother is a millionaire because of these lots. I'm not kidding. She never lived that way because her equity was tied up in those lots which she would never in a million years sell, although she did want to cut down the trees wreaking havoc with her plumbing. Shoe's father was a mailman (something Shoe never quite forgave him for), and Shoe's family moved in with Shoe's grandmother to help her after she had her first stroke. Anyway, when we were in like sixth grade, Shoe got sick of bugging his dad to build us a fort so he dragged a bunch of two-by-fours from under my deck and built us this quasi-treefort, which actually is just a platform with some wooden slats forming half walls. This was when my parents still somewhat cared, that is to say when they were still fighting, before my father started taking solo sailing trips and all of those other pathetic shenanigans. This was the summer Shoe's aunt and uncle and snotty cousins from New Trier High stayed with Shoe while their new house was being built in Winnetka. We had to get away from our families. Find a spot on the edge of the world all our own. Build a place to just be. Shoe has always talked about putting a roof on it, but we both know that Shoe couldn't put a roof on the Treefort if his life depended on it, because he's completely clumsy for one

and entirely unhandy for another. That was the miracle of the Treefort—that it actually held up all these years, having been built by a sixth grader—that sixth grader being Shoe.

From Shoe's grandmother's house, the Treefort is hidden from view, and because of this, we always felt like we were invisible inside it. Which came in pretty handy when Shoe decided that he wanted to smoke expensive cigars like his New Trier cousins did while playing chess outside. Being invisible came in handy for lots of other things, too. Like as a spot for Shoe to indulge his little predilection for weed for the short time that that lasted or as a spot to bunker down in when Amanda Lindell was applying her signature pressure. I liked being invisible, even though my addictions were of a different nature: Todd Coleman and the subsequent self-loathing that he produced, namely the eating disorder. But after Shoe discovered the budding callous on my right forefinger our junior year, he got scared, made me promise not to indulge myself in the Treefort. "Look," he told me. "Please don't puke here. You know how I am. Plus, it makes the place kinda gross if you're upchucking over the sides."

I promised him I wouldn't. Shoe is a germaphobe. He gets queasy at the mention of blood. And when runners threw up at meets, Shoe would sanitize his hands with the mini bottle of Purell that he carried with him at all times. It was a deal, I countered, if he promised that Amanda Lindell wouldn't be hanging around. I didn't want to show up one day and see her long legs dangling from the Treefort. We shook on it, a gentlemen's agreement. And that was that. The Treefort is where we did our growing up. Where we hurt each other and healed each other and in general spent most of our time alone. There are decade-old games of tic-tac-toe forever etched in the oak's base and badly drawn

hearts with L.M. + T.C. scrawled in its branches. Beneath the oak lies Ricky, Shoe's dead cat. We buried her together in seventh grade. Shoe was right; the Treefort was holy, in a way only a couple of nerdy Jewish kids could understand.

I liked the Treefort best in winter because it was then you could see stars. In summer, the leaves obscured the night sky. Shoe wasn't interested in stars; he complained all the time about his freezing ass. But stars, cold and far away and untouchable, have always held an odd appeal for me. And when I think of Shoe, I think of the Treefort, and when I think of our Treefort, I always see stars.

I've been homesick all my life, and the Treefort is the closest I've come to how home is supposed to feel. Shoe built me a treefort. He still hasn't grown into his shoulders and he still smells like sweat and grape gum and something else I never can quite name. And I always sort of wished—*God, how I wished it*—I could just put Shoe in my pocket for always. You know, just touch him periodically for reassurance, like a goodluck penny. Shoe was something, familiar and precious, to believe in when I couldn't believe in myself.

But I was telling you about Michael.

Shoe never liked Michael, didn't trust him. For one, Shoe swore up and down that Michael was gay, in spite of my fantastic eyes. "And that's another thing," Shoe said, "What's the deal with your eyes, anyway? They look the same to me."

This was how Shoe ended up wearing his dad's plaid scarf and smelling of mothballs the winter of our senior year.

I don't know if Shoe will ever forgive me for Michael. What I mean is I don't know if Shoe will ever see Michael as a part of me needing forgiveness. Because Michael is a part of me, too. And Shoe accepts me, with all my ugly, unresolved parts, unconditionally. Shoe's never actually forgiven me for anything, because he's never seen the need. This is Shoe.

Michael was addicted to Wheel-of-Fortune. He loved museums. He read the obituaries and the advice columns and the horoscopes. Every day he read them. He collected knock-knock jokes like baseball cards and gave his baseball cards away. He had pet names for trees and he visited them. Michael wrote a haiku each night before bed, a hygienic habit like brushing your teeth. And when it snowed seven inches in late March surprising everyone including Mr. Davis, Community High School District 99's superintendent, who shut school down for the entire day, a rarity in our Chicago suburban experience, Michael was the one who said, "I didn't take the snow for granted." And he didn't. We made angels all over town.

Shoe called Michael gay.

But I knew Michael wasn't gay from the way he looked at me. Michael's eyes told me that he was as heterosexual as they come. I could tell Michael wasn't gay from the sound his voice made when he said my name. That sound between yearning and worship. Michael called me Lucy, not Merdock. He was the only person besides my mother I allowed to do this.

And anyway, Shoe was in love with Amanda Lindell. And Amanda Lindell was *going places*. You could see it in the leanness of her body, in her tallish confidence, in

her honeyed atmosphere of hair. Even her *hair* had atmosphere. Amanda Lindell was going places—she was everything I was not—and Shoe was along for the ride. The more I saw this, the more our tightrope began to wobble. It was the wobbliness which made me all drippy inside, because it made me acknowledge, for the first time, that Shoe was a boy and I was a girl and Amanda Lindell was God.

This was why Shoe applied to Texas Tech when he didn't know what the hell he wanted out of life.

Shoe wanted Amanda Lindell.

It was hard to forgive Shoe for this. I could forgive him for everything else, the red earmuffs, the awkward elbows, the corny jokes. I could even forgive his insistence on being punctual for everything and the attendant annoying tone he took to get us there. I could forgive Shoe everything but Amanda Lindell.

Shoe forgave me for anything, everything without even knowing it. He couldn't imagine my ever needing his forgiveness for anything. This was Shoe. My best friend. Shoe.

CHAPTER FIVE

Shoe was the one who taught me how to spit. Like a boy so your saliva doesn't hang in strings from your mouth and slow you down. Shoe taught me to double-knot my shoes and how to stretch the right way. Running against traffic, Shoe always jogged in front of me. Running with traffic, he always jogged on the street side, so the car would hit him and not me, just in case. He's old-fashioned that way, opening doors and whatnot. And even though I bossed him to high heaven and even though he always obeyed me, we both knew that Shoe was the one choosing our course and setting the pace. The one jogging in front.

We always started slow because Shoe's asthmatic, and starting slow is not only good for your muscles and your heart but also for your breathing. Starting slow, Coach always told us, is what gets you across the finish line. It opens up your lungs and keeps them open. We always started slow. Shoe wouldn't have it any other way.

I heard the four raps on the window and raised the blinds. Shoe crouched on the window ledge, his large eyes behind all that glass blinking back. I held up one finger and lowered the blinds. I heard him jump from the overhang and land on the porch.

Every Sunday night at seven Shoe showed up on my front porch to run. He had been doing this since the summer before our freshman year at Downers North. Shoe refused to ring my doorbell because he's afraid of my mother, the way everybody is at Downers North, but even more. So he waited for me on the porch. If it was rainy or hot or if he was in a particular hurry, he'd shove the white wicker chair by the door and use it as

a step up to climb onto the overhang over our front door. My bedroom window is right there. He'd rap on the window three times with his knuckles and then a fourth with his balled up hand. I've seen him knock like this on other people's doors. It's weird because he always knocks this knuckled-three-taps-and-then-a-balled up-fist pattern knock. My mother hated this. It was the worst possible thing that Shoe could do to offend her since she's obsessive compulsive about streak-free windows. My window always had Shoe's knuckle prints all over it. And my mother was forever hanging out of it, Windexing Shoe's leftover presence away.

So after that first Sunday when Shoe showed up to train me for tryouts, he just kept it up all these years. Even after he and Amanda Lindell started dating our sophomore year, he kept showing up. Even after I quit cross country. By the time I changed into my shorts and Asics, Shoe had finished stretching and was practicing the splits, counting aloud. He was up to two-hundred-and-fifty-three by the time I banged out the door onto the porch.

"Ready," I said.

"Two hundred-fifty-four. Two-hundred-fifty—"

His eyeballs were bulging. I stretched while waiting for him to finish.

"Six, two hundred-fifty-seven," Shoe said all in one breath, and then rolled over and lay on the wooden boards arms outstretched, like a crucifix.

I stood over him, looking down.

"Your cue, Merdock."

I rolled my eyes.

“This freaking, bulging hulk of strength and agility has just set another record of incomparable human flexibility. And that’s what you do? Roll your eyes?”

“You’re an idiot.”

He got up and dusted himself off. Yanked on his ankle socks, pulled on his ears—
Shoe always did this before we started. I never did figure out why.

We never talked at the start of a run. Usually about the time we got to the Trash Hill, where Shoe’s dad used to take us sledding, he’d kick off the conversation. Always a question. Always unanswerable. Always having to do with life and death, usually in the wilderness, usually involving fending off bears or other hungry carnivores.

“Okay, you’re in the Sahara, and you run out of water. No water for miles. What do you do?”

“Suck roots for moisture.”

“All plant life is dead.”

“Find shade and—”

“There is no shade and don’t even think about drinking your own sweat.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Or urine.”

“Shoe—”

“I’m serious.”

“Whatever.”

“Just want to make sure you know that’s not an option.”

“I would find shade and—”

“This is the desert. There is no shade.”

“I would crawl up underneath the wreckage of my crashed airplane.”

“No assumptions about how you got there. There is no wreckage.”

“Then how did I get there?”

“That’s not relevant.”

“Of course it’s relevant. It’s extremely relevant. Events don’t happen in a vacuum.”

“This is a survival scenario, not an existential inquiry. You don’t need context.”

“So what?—I just open my eyes and—boom—I’m just in the middle of African desert for no reason?”

These conversations would invariably lead to squabbles over pointless (though I would argue relevant) minutia.

“Okay, fine. I grab a rock. Do I get a rock?”

“Yeah. You can have a rock. Singular.”

“Easy, then. I’d build a solar still.”

“What the hell’s a solar still?”

“A solar still allows you to get and purify water.”

“Dammit, Merdock,” he said and pumped his elbows while running ahead.

By the time we hit Belmont, Shoe had forgiven my knowledge of solar stills. He slowed down enough for me to catch up and then we had to talk about why the solar still wouldn’t actually work anyway.

“Quit crowding,” he said as I jogged next to him. I had a habit of steering into Shoe when we talked while running, bumping against his elbows and slowly pushing him towards the street. He hated this.

This was my favorite stretch of our run. The railroad tracks running parallel to us. Sometimes if we were lucky, we’d get a train. I always counted it as an omen. Shoe always counted the cars. He moved his lips while numbering them in his head.

I wanted a train that day. I needed a train. I wanted to tell Shoe about eating Thanksgiving dinner at Michael’s. But I knew to wait until we got to that part of our run. Shoe was a man of habit. It would go better if we played by his rules. Running Belmont, we always talked about Shoe’s woes.

“So my fricking grandma won’t let it go,” he said breathing in rhythm. “And now the whole street’s against us.”

Shoe’s grandmother was on Downers Grove’s county council and had recently proposed a new ordinance to overturn the decades-old ban on cutting down trees with a trunk circumference of over six feet. She’d proposed this amendment because her house had developed a severe plumbing clogage due to the beautiful, ancient oaks on her three lots. Shoe’s gay Asian neighbors, Sun and Clap, lobbied hard to prohibit tree-damaging behavior of any kind. They didn’t believe in burning leaves or even raking them. They were eco-warriors who didn’t know enough to leave a Holocaust survivor alone. Saving trees and making hell for Shoe’s grandmother, and by extension for Shoe, was what they did best.

“And I think Sun took my picture the other day,” he said.

Sun and Clap were making another documentary, on what we didn't know. This was their job—to make documentaries. Their last one was about the albino deer which lived in the forest preserve near Argonne National Laboratory. They shot their cameras almost as well as their mouths.

“What do you mean took your picture?”

“Like he pushed the fricking button on his fricking camera when I wasn't looking.” He pantomimed this.

“Sun took your picture without your consent. With a camera. This is what you're telling me?”

“Sun took my picture with his digital camera without my consent, yeah.”

“At least it wasn't the camcorder. At least you're not in the documentary.”

“Why would he take my picture in the first place? Without my consent? This is about the tree thing. I know it.”

“Your neighbors are such freaks. Well, except Todd.”

Todd Coleman's family lived on the other side of Shoe.

Now it was my turn. We passed the post office, and I started right in. “I went to Michael's for Thanksgiving since you were MIA.”

Shoe ate turkey at Amanda Lindell's that year. Amanda had flown in for the long holiday weekend. I had agreed to eat with Michael's family only because my father was out of the country on business, and neither of my brothers would be home for the holiday. My mother wanted me to eat turkey with her and Lynn. Michael's family had seemed a better alternative. But this was before I actually met them.

Shoe raised his bushy eyebrows.

“It was awful,” I continued. “His mother is *crazy*. She kept patting me and calling me honey and I couldn’t understand half the stuff she said because of her accent. And—you’re not going to believe this—but the accent is real. His dad’s from Liverpool.”

Shoe just nodded, elbows out, like he’d expected as much. Shoe didn’t like to talk while running this middle stretch. Main Street, from the post office to the bank, was my turn to talk. Mostly, my questions were about people. Humanity and how the world ran. How absurd it all seemed to me. And how I could never quite catch on to the weird way life worked. Main Street was Shoe’s turn to listen. Shoe’s a great listener because he listens with his eyes, not just his ears. People abuse Shoe because he’s such a good listener. Coach used to drive Shoe crazy, talking about nothing for miles.

I wanted to tell Shoe about Michael’s family. I wanted to tell him everything. “And they’re super religious. I mean, they prayed and everything. To Jesus.”

Shoe’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yeah, and June Bell—that’s his mom’s name—invited me over for *Christmas*.”

“Do they not know that you’re Jewish?”

“Apparently not, and Michael, Michael was just too happy. You know what I mean?”

Shoe nodded.

“He actually grabbed my hand during the prayer.”

“You prayed?”

“I bowed my head.”

“You shut your eyes?”

“Well, yes.”

“And that’s when he grabbed your hand?”

“I told you he did.”

“Your right one?” Shoe cracked his neck on both sides while continuing to run. He waited for my response. When I didn’t give it, he said, “Merdock, I’m telling you, he’s gay.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Trust me. You’re pushing me into the street again.”

We chugged up the hilly spot near Perry’s house. Perry is twenty and just hangs out at Downers North High because he is always trying to date one or another of the artsy girls, which I’m pretty sure is against the law. Perry is creepy and pathetic and sort of sad because all of his artistic ventures always fail. He started this really awful band called Broken Baby Dolls a couple years back with a girl named Noel who really could sing. She played the guitar a little too, but when Noel went off to Northern Illinois, Perry found himself without a band and without a girl. I remember when Noel dumped Perry because it was the day Shoe and I went downtown for Venetian Night to see the fireworks and the boats and Perry appeared out of nowhere and during the grand finale asked if he could hold my hand because he missed Noel really bad.

Perry was one weird dude.

I told him no, and next thing I heard was that he had written a book of godawful poetry titled *I Spy A Suicide*, which he had self-published and was trying to sell on eBay.

Nobody I know remembers how they actually met Perry. He just always showed up at random times, trying to assimilate into whatever was supposed to be cool at the time.

We could hear him in his garage hashing it out on an out-of-tune guitar. We kept moving.

“And after that and seeing all that food—weird food that nobody up here eats—I passed out.”

“You fainted?”

“Everything just went black.”

Shoe smirked.

“Next thing I knew I was in Michael’s bed—”

“In?”

“His parents were there. In his room. Everybody was, even his creepster uncle with the fake mustache. Why do people wear fake mustaches? It’s so easy to tell.”

“*In* his bed?”

“I woke up and thought I was dying or something.”

“You woke up *in* his bed?”

“Yes.”

“Christ. Maybe he’s *not* gay.”

“It wasn’t like that. I don’t even know how it happened. It was awful, Shoe. Just awful.”

“And?”

“I don’t know. I got up and went home.”

Shoe cracked his knuckles, fully extending his arms, and shook them out. A truck pulled out in front of us. We jogged in place. He half-looked at me and said, “And then?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Did you pass out because of the food thing or because of the family thing?”

“Both, I guess.”

“So he doesn’t know you’re Jewish?”

“Apparently not.”

“Well, Christmas is going to be awkward.” Shoe said and shook out his arms again.

Shoe was no help. I was ready to change the subject. “How was the Girlfriend?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t end up in her bed, if that’s what you’re asking.”

We rounded the cul-de-sac where Patel lives. His house appeared deserted as always. Patel’s family owns Indian Palace which is Michael’s favorite place to eat. Michael is the one who introduced me to Indian food. He took me to this Indian thing downtown which I thought was an awareness type of event. Turns out we were the only non-Indians there. It was an ethnic get-together, kind of like this huge family reunion just for Indian people. Michael was the only one who didn’t seem to notice we were the only non-brown people there.

Patel worked part-time at Indian Palace as the most attractive waiter there. By day he was the official leader of RUFF and nemesis to Michael. Patel hated Michael because that was his job. People like Michael have to have a nemesis—it comes with the role, and Patel took it upon himself to play the bad guy part. High school is hell. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. The reasons Patel hated Michael were twofold: 1. Michael went to Indian Palace at least once a week, and Patel resented the fact that he had to wait on one of his peers. Also, I think Patel was ashamed. At Downers North High most of the cool kids don't hold after-school jobs, their allowance being large enough to cover incidentals. So I don't think Patel really wanted people being reminded of the fact that while their parents were doctors and lawyers, his parents owned a restaurant. 2. Patel's mom taught a yoga class at the park district where I spent the majority of my summer between eighth and ninth grade. Michael was the only male in her yoga class. When Downers North found this out, it was too good to pass up. Kids teased Patel (and Michael) endlessly about the supposed relationship between Patel's mom and Michael. Like, "Patel, we heard your mom taught Michael a new move on the yoga mat." Or, "Patel, we heard Michael taught your mom a new move on the yoga mat."

Patel lay on a towel near the top of his long driveway sun-tanning his already brown body which surprised me it being Thanksgiving weekend. It was sunny but still chilly. He didn't lift his head as we passed, but we knew he knew it was us because he lifted his arm up high enough so we could see his raised middle finger.

Shoe elbowed me. "I can't believe you said that guy was hot."

"Attractive, Shoe, the word I used was attractive."

“Whatever.”

My lungs were tired. “Not attractive anymore.”

“Because he hates Michael?”

“Because he’s an asshole.” I shook out my arms. This last part of the run was the hardest. All uphill past the old people’s houses with their mismatched lawn ornaments and tacky folding chairs. At the end of this stretch is where Shoe and his family live with his grandmother in her falling-apart bungalow. Shoe’s grandmother is an Orthodox Jew, and it’s always chaotic over there because she likes to swear in Yiddish and spit at people. We never laughed at her when she did this though because Shoe’s grandmother is a Holocaust survivor. And she’s got the tattoo to prove it.

I couldn’t breathe, but I had to ask. If he could talk about Michael, then I could talk about Amanda Lindell. So I said, “Lovely as ever?”

“You have no idea,” he said, and his eyes grew soft as he said it.

We ran. We kept running. Shoe shut his eyes, listening, counting the sound of our steps. Shoe liked to do this. It brought him peace. I shut my eyes and tried to listen, too. But I was afraid of tripping and I was afraid of not knowing where we were going and I was afraid of what was up ahead. So I opened my eyes and kept them open.

Sometimes, Shoe would keep going right on past his grandmother’s house. This was his way of saying we were doing a 10k, not a fiver. I hated when he did this, but I knew it was necessary. Shoe never inflicted unnecessary pain. When we did the 10k run, we would stop at the park district building to get a drink of water from the outdoor water fountain. Shoe knew I needed this break, besides he liked to put his face under the water

and soak his hair. While he raked his fingers through his drenched hair, I asked, “Is she, you know, afraid of anything?”

“What?” Water dripped from his eyelids, his chin.

“Amanda. I mean, does she have any secret fears? Spiders or anything?”

He frowned. His eyebrows looked heavier wet. “Not that I know of.”

“That’s good.”

We sat on the edge of the parking lot on a cement log, staring at endless asphalt.

“What about Dracula?” he asked after a minute or so. “I’d bet money that guy’s got some serious fears. Seriously.”

“Who, Michael? I have no idea.”

He picked up a rock and threw it. Shoe was terrible at skipping rocks. “Still scared of my grandma?”

“A little.”

“Yeah, me too.”

We threw rocks for a time. Too long. It got dark—it always got dark too early during cross country season.

I tried skipping a stone. “Still scared of my mother?”

Shoe tried to skip one, and it did not skip at all. “Hell, no. I never was.”

I smiled.

“Still scared of Mr. Allen?” he said.

“You bastard. You know I never was.”

The goofy grin with the crooked teeth. They looked more crooked than usual.
Irresistible.

We stopped skipping stones. We didn't do anything at all. Out of words, we sat breathing in the dark. This was my favorite part of our run, the exhausted silence, and the complete comfort with which we inhabited that space. We sat and breathed and thought our solitary thoughts. And then we jogged home.

CHAPTER SIX

This is the part where I should tell you about The Scarf Club, like I said I would. This is where I should list the charter members' names. This is where I should talk about Michael.

But I don't want to talk about Michael. Talking about Michael is difficult for me, troubling. Sometimes I freak out in the middle of the night, shoot up in bed because I feel like I'm falling. I'm falling and I can't breathe, like I'm drowning only worse. I wonder, sometimes, if I'm drowning in all the tears I didn't cry for Michael. And these are the lucky nights when I can actually sleep. I worry I'm forgetting his face.

I hope I'm not because it was such a nice face, and it would be a shame to forget a face like that. Michael was soft. Soft and sensitive and sweet. And this is what you saw in his face. The softness. In everything, the softness. He had blue, blue eyes and a corny-looking nose—it looked cartoonish. You could tell just by looking at his nose that he was the knock-knock joke type. Because Michael shaved every other day, he had a perpetual five o'clock shadow, which was very nice to look at. He had long eyelashes and the beginnings of wrinkles in his forehead, and when he smiled, his eye lines got crinkly.

When I first met Michael and thought he was Dracula, he didn't strike me as all that good-looking. But on nights I can't sleep and feel I'm losing the look of him, I know deep, in a way your bones remember, that he was soft and sweet and very, very nice to look at.

This is where I should talk about how Michael made me feel (like the world was this quirky, funny game which really didn't make any sense at all but that I still wanted to play) and how he colored my world happy and how he made me see myself in a new and better way.

Of course, this is where I should tell you that we were the Michael and Lucy of the infamous sign plastered on the Downers Grove water tower. You know the one—"Michael loves Lucy." The one that just appeared after Valentine's? Yeah, that's us—all 500 square feet of Us. They still haven't figured out how to get it down. I have no idea how he got it up there.

And this is where I should tell you about the super awkward conversation my mother sprung on me the day Michael took me to the Museum of Science and Industry. The conversation called There Are Boys You Date And Boys You Don't. Michael, of course, was part of the You Don't group because he was soft and Gentle and everything my mother was not.

I should tell you about Christmas or my birthday. My God, I should tell you about my birthday. How he celebrated my existence.

But those things are bottled, too, with the tears. And I really don't want to get into them, anyway. I want to tell you about Shoe.

But we've heard enough about Shoe, you'll say. We got Shoe. Less Shoe, more Michael!

But Shoe was the eventual place I went after they cut Michael down. And Shoe is where I went when they burned Michael into nothingness. Shoe is where I went when the

food thing got really bad and the sleeping thing got impossible. In all my heavy darkness, Shoe is where I went at night.

I would climb an ancient oak near his bedroom window—Shoe always left the window cracked no matter what the weather. He liked the feel of air circulating around his dreams. I'd pop the screen, slide the window, and crawl inside. The first night I did this Shoe freaked. I can't remember his exact words but they were loud and obscene and I half-expected his grandmother to come in and finish the job of scaring me to death.

“What the hell, Merdock?” he said after the initial outburst.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry.” And I didn't know I was crying until I started choking.

“Hey there. Hey,” said Shoe. He gave me an awkward pat on the elbow and then a couple more. He sat down on edge of the bed.

I sat down, too.

I don't know how long we sat there like that, me snuffling and snorting and Shoe every once in a while patting my elbow, but it seemed like a long time.

“I'm sorry, Shoe,” I said again.

“Godammit to hell, Merdock. You just scared me, that's all.” And then he went and grabbed a long trail of toilet paper and wadded it up and put it in my hand. He took his pillow and threw it on the floor and lay down to sleep.

And I *slept*. In Shoe's bed, sleep was clean and restful without dreams or other miracles, and I could have slept a hundred years, if Shoe hadn't woke me up by shaking me a couple hours later.

I heard an alarm clock going off down the hall and his grandmother downstairs grinding coffee beans. Shoe pointed at the open window. I understood.

The second night I scared Shoe again who apparently had forgotten we'd gone through the same exact scenario the night before. "You gotta give me some warning," he complained as he grabbed the pillow and tossed it on the carpet.

The third night, I didn't feel right about taking Shoe's bed. Shoe looked haggard and resentful. But as I said, Shoe was a gentleman. A haggard, sleep-deprived, passive-aggressive gentleman, but a gentleman nonetheless. So he hit the floor, and I collapsed into the bed that smelled like sweat and grape gum and something else I couldn't quite name.

On the fourth night, Shoe didn't even get out of bed. He slept through the screen-popping and window-sliding and crawling in. On his paint-chipped bedside table, a note in Shoe's scrawl read, "I can't do this anymore. I need rest. My running times are getting worse. Sleeping bag in closet."

He'd put a guest pillow in there, as well.

This is how we worked it when Michael was gone and Shoe was leaving and I was going nowhere fast.

"Sometimes I hear music when there isn't any," Michael told me once.

But Shoe was Michael's opposite; Shoe didn't hear music at all even when the music was all around us, even when the music was the very air we breathed.

Wolfie, Eliot once told me, is not imaginary at all. Wolfie is Eliot's Best Friend—brave and good and a real pain in the butt sometimes. But he's always there. Eliot isn't right in the head. What I mean by that is that there's something developmentally wrong with Eliot, something abnormal, although the doctors never did agree on what that is. Wolfie exists solely to provide some measure of security for Eliot so he can face the world the way normal people do, whatever that means.

After they cut Michael down and made him disappear, I wondered—all the time I wondered—was Shoe my Wolfie?

And this is why I've got to tell you about Shoe. Because to understand Michael at all, to appreciate him in all his weirdish glory, first you've got to know Shoe, to know who Shoe was and what he meant to me.

And maybe then it will make sense to you, as it never will to me, why I betrayed the boy who built me a Treefort. And why he loved me anyway.

CHAPTER SEVEN

If you ever want to know about civilization, that is, if you ever want to know about man, his essence and nature, you don't need to go on some extravagant archeological dig and sift dirt for leftover meaning. You don't need to go anywhere far at all. If you want to know about man, that is, if you want to know about yourself, go visit your local high school around lunchtime.

Go to the cafeteria and watch society separate, organize itself into identity. If you go to Downers North, you'll see entire rows of forest—kids in camo bused in from the trailers over in Plainfield. These kids want nothing more than to escape to the southern part of the state, disappear in cornfields and John Deere paraphernalia. You'll see the goths and the emos and the freaks. The preps and the jocks. The skaters, the band kids, the speech and debate nerds. Of course, you'll see the robotics team, a handful of techies communicating with their laptops. The artsy kids segregate from Student Council and Student Council segregates from the pimps and the druggies and the stoners. The FCA kids will be eating outside, you know, the kids holding hands around the flagpole, singing Kumbaya. Then there will be those kids who don't fit in anywhere at all. The kids just trying to make it through another day.

High school is hell and never forget it. This is the place you get your wounds. The wounds that never quite heal.

If you don't believe me, ask my mother. She'll tell you how many parent-teacher conferences she's had to attend about kids eating lunch in bathroom stalls and all the other pathetic things we did to avoid the cafeteria.

But I was okay with the cafeteria because I had Shoe.

It was the first Friday of December the day everything went down between Patel and Michael. I remember this because it was supposed to be pizza day, but instead the lunch ladies were serving us this pseudo-Spam. (District 99 was in a budget crisis—the first thing to go was new textbooks; the second pizza.) Shoe and I sat down at a table next to Michael near the bus loop exit, near Mr. Allen. Or rather Mr. Allen sat near us. Our assistant principal had his eye on Michael. Michael was just the type of kid Mr. Allen loved to harass because Michael was sensitive and artsy and kind. Mr. Allen was a *douche*. Carl sat next to Mr. Allen chatting him up while waiting for his next customer.

Michael had taken off the cape by now and wore a blue, homemade, cable knit scarf over the black turtleneck. It flowed down his back, just like the cape. Already several of the freshman girls were sporting scarves which looked curiously similar to Michael's. Michael had made his scarf himself. I know this because I watched him knit it during Speech and Debate class. These were the same girls who had been wearing capes when Michael wore one. By now, I understood what this was all about. Michael was some sort of subculture icon in the Speech and Debate community, a subculture, itself, which celebrated being dorky and weird.

Shoe wore an old scarf of his dad's. The scarf was navy blue with thin tan and red plaid lines. Shoe, hot, uncomfortable, annoyed, looked as if the scarf were choking him.

He and Michael and I sat sweltering in our scarves when Perry showed up, sporting a yellow wool scarf. Shoe gave me a knowing look, and Michael winked. We weren't quite sure what Perry was doing in a scarf since it was really warm out that day. Downers North always kept the heat going full blast, regardless of the temperature, so it was doubly warm indoors. Was Perry already trying to identify with us? I hoped not.

Perry nudged me with his shoulder. "Merdock, baby, been a while."

"Hey Perry."

"Shoe," Perry nodded. "Amanda sends her regards." He lifted a fry from Shoe's plate and dropped it in his mouth.

Shoe didn't stop chewing, but his eyes widened, almost imperceptibly.

"Facebook," Perry explained, self-consciously fingering the fringes of his scarf.

"Dude, where's the ketchup?"

Shoe ate another fry.

"Mr. Allen the Douche banned ketchup," I said. "Because kids were, you know, sticking open packs on toilet seats and lacing handrails with it. He said we'd get it back when we learned to use it responsibly."

Perry nodded again and eyed the artsy girls sketching pictures of fairies and unicorns near the vending machines. "Back in my day, we twisted the packets so all the ketchup was on one side and then put them on people's seats. They'd sit down and kablooeey. God, I miss Noel. She loved ketchup."

I put my hands in my pockets, just in case.

Michael got a squeeze ketchup bottle from the Weenie Wagon and handed it across the table to Perry. “Lucy and I are going to the Art Institute tomorrow. You should come.”

Perry’s brow furrowed. “Lucy who?”

“Lucy me,” I said.

“Merdock, baby, you never told me.” Perry put the ketchup bottle down without using it and regarded me. “Lucy, huh?”

“Yeah. Lucy.”

Michael offered the ketchup bottle to Shoe, who shook his head no. “Lucy and I want to see some of the more abstract stuff.”

“Noel loved abstract stuff. God, I wish she were here.”

Shoe got up and threw out the rest of the fries, even though Perry was still eating them. Shoe was pissed because he didn’t believe in what Michael was taking me to the Art Institute to see. Also, he was probably pissed that Perry had Facebooked Amanda.

Michael spoke to Perry, but looked at me. “Becoming Edvard Munch opens tomorrow.”

Perry lifted his head out of his hands and said, “No shit? Noel loved that guy. The Scream, right?”

Michael nodded, still making eyes at me. It was awkward how Michael zoned in on me even when talking to other people. It made me feel self-conscious, like there was something stuck in my front teeth. I checked them with my tongue.

Shoe sat down again on my other side.

Perry asked, "You going too, dude?"

Shoe shook his head, his eyes fixated on an imaginary spot on the far wall ahead of him.

"Amanda doesn't let you two hang anymore, huh?" Perry gestured toward Shoe and me with the ketchup bottle. "Noel was like that, jealous."

Shoe gave him a dirty look, grabbed his book bag, and said, "Fuck off, Perry." He headed towards the men's restroom.

Perry said, "What's his deal?"

"His family," I said.

"What? His parents, too? God, everybody's parents are splitting. Noel's, mine. Doesn't anybody believe in staying married, anymore?"

"Shoe's parents aren't getting divorced," I said.

"If Noel ever takes me back...if we ever get back together, I'm never gonna let her go. Never."

And the way he said it, we believed him.

A moment passed.

"Shoe's neighbors hate his grandmother," I began.

Perry tapped the table with his fingers, snaring the drums. "Todd's family? The Coleman's?"

"No. His other neighbors. Blue house. The gay Asian couple. Sun and Clap."

Michael said, "Sun and Clap have started a petition to keep the tree ordinance in place."

Recognition registered on Perry's face. "The flower people are still on the tree kick?"

"Yeah," I said. "They're making hell for Shoe's family because his grandmother is gunning for an amendment so she can cut down some trees and fix her plumbing. The whole street hates Shoe's grandmother now. Sun called her a tree-killer. To her face."

"Damn," Perry said. "I think I signed that."

"What the hell, Perry?"

"I never read those things. You know, people come to my door and I buy the cookies or magazines or whatever."

"You suck, Perry. You really, really suck," I said.

"You think I should go to Sun's house and white it out?"

"I think you should read the small print before you sign on the dotted line."

Michael offered me a piece of his tangerine. "It's exceptionally sweet."

"What about me?" said Perry and flicked the ketchup like Spin the Bottle.

I gave my piece to Perry. Michael pulled another for me. His eyes lit up while he watched me chew it. This was getting ridiculous. We needed to talk. Michael had a staring problem, and it needed to stop.

About that time, Patel came over to our table. He stood directly in front of Michael who was still watching me chew. The tangerine was sweet, exceptionally.

"Regards, Mother-Fucker," Patel said.

"Hey Patel," said Perry.

Patel's gorgeous black eyes narrowed. "Not you."

Michael's eyes, still happy, watched me chew. "Patel. Please. There's a lady."

Patel laughed his inky laugh and said, "Sorry, Mother-Fucker. I didn't see a lady. Unless you mean Mullet Boy. Is that who you mean, Mother-Fucker?"

Perry's hand flew to the nape of his neck. He was extraordinarily proud of his rat tail—he'd been growing it out since graduating from Downers North three years ago.

Michael said, "Let's go, Lucy."

I slung my book bag over my shoulder. Michael offered his arm, but I didn't take it. Perry stood, too, holding the ketchup bottle and twirling his mullet.

Patel said, "Stay away from my family, Mother-Fucker." This was to Michael, and then to Perry, he said, "Nice ponytail. Way to gay it up."

Perry aimed the ketchup at Patel's face and squeezed it with both hands. Patel stood frozen. Everything just stopped. A second clicked on the oversized Coca-Cola cafeteria clock, but you couldn't hear the ticking sound. It was like we were all underwater, in slow motion. Another second passed. Perry set the ketchup back down on the cafeteria table, slowly. His hand went to his mullet, and he said very softly, as if in a trance, "Go back to Bollywood."

Michael cupped my elbow and steered me towards the vending machines. He eased my book bag from me and put it on his free shoulder. He said in a far away voice, "You're going to be late."

Patel wiped his eyes with his long brown fingers. Michael kept hurrying me forward. I could hear Perry scuffling to catch up to us. And still Patel waited. He waited until we were halfway to the vending area, until our backs were turned and we were

almost out of the cafeteria, and then in a hiss, he called, “Stay away from my family, you mother-fucking fags!”

Michael turned around first, his mouth open, started to say something. I was half-facing Patel when something red stung my left pupil. Out of my right eye, I saw Patel baring his teeth and aiming the ketchup bottle at Michael. I swear he was growling. Then someone was shoving a bottle in my hand, and there was Shoe with two ketchup bottles, one in each hand. We shot ketchup in Patel’s general direction while running full-force at him. And then Perry and Michael ran to the Weenie Wagon. And then we lynched Patel with ketchup unaware of all the sticky consequences.

Ketchup spurting everywhere. Kids raiding the Weenie Wagon. And when the twenty or so bottles were claimed as weapons, students spraying water bottles, soft drinks, Capri Suns. Drowning ourselves in anarchy. Some of us laughed. Some of us cursed.

That was the day, the only day I know of in the history of Downers North, that they served the pseudo-Spam patties. They looked like Spam, but they tasted like puke. Somebody discovered that they stuck to the walls if you hurled them at just the right angle with enough force. The velocity was key. Thus pseudo-Spam took flight. When we ran out of patties, we frisbeed our paper plates and then our cheap plastic trays. Michael’s hand pulled me through the busy air. Perry and Shoe followed.

But the weird thing, the thing I remember most was what Michael said after it was all over. We stood outside my Calculus class, happy, out-of-breath-elated. Michael

looked like the absolute best thing that could ever happen to him just did. Shoe slid down the wall to an Indian-style position on the floor. He was worried about getting suspended. Shoe's grandmother would kill him if he got suspended. Literally.

Michael grinned, "Patel holds a lot of anger. I'm sure he didn't mean anything."

It was hard to believe him with ketchup smeared, like war paint, all over his face.

He clapped Perry on the shoulder. "It's nothing personal. He's just mad because I'm in his mom's yoga class. And because I've started my own club since he wouldn't accept me into RUFF."

"Wait. You're starting a club?" asked Perry. "I'm so totally in."

"The Scarf Club," I said.

Shoe rolled his eyes.

Michael said to Perry, "Of course, you can be a member. And you can still come to see The Scream if you'd like to."

Perry twisted his mullet. "Maybe another time. Maybe by then Noel and I will be back together again." He said it like he wasn't even aware he was speaking, like he said it to himself.

And then to us, "And it was personal," he said. "The hair thing was *very* personal."

But none of this is the thing that sticks in my mind.

The thing that sticks in my mind is what Michael said in my hair after he deposited me in my seat and placed my bookbag on the floor next to my desk. He drew a brand new, sharpened pencil from his back pocket. He held it like a wand between his

forefinger and thumb, held it like magic, and then offered it to me. There was fire in his eyes and ketchup on his cheek. “You can chew on the eraser if you want to.”

A pause. And then leaning down into my hair, he whispered, “I’d kinda prefer it if you did.”

He smelled like...ketchup. He smelled sweet.

The kid behind me snickered. Said, “Where’s your cape, Count Dracula?”

I adjusted my scarf and turned around. “Fuck off.”

Halfway through my test, I tasted eraser crumbs on my tongue. They were springy and rubbery and a little like burnt toast. It was a habit I didn’t know I had, this eating of erasers.

On Monday I saw it. Then them. Both of them. Laminated. They were the same size and made of the same cardstock. They hung side by side, at precisely the same level. They hung even, like they were daring each other to reach higher.

Michael’s poster said, “The Scarf Club. An exclusive new club for losers. Now accepting applications for a limited number of spots. Michael D. Wineberger #361-0592.”

The other poster, Patel’s, said, “RUFF, Rescuing Unloved Furry Friends. First Meeting Dec. 14th @ 4 p.m. in C108. Be a Voice for the Voiceless.”

During B Lunch, Michael and I stood looking at the signs. I pointed at RUFF, at Patel’s sign, and said, “We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

Michael’s eyes flashed. “It’s even better than I hoped.”

I could still smell the ketchup and taste the eraser crumbs. They tasted like love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

By the time The Scarf Club had its first meeting, Shoe was scarfless.

The meeting took place in B209 the Friday before school let out for Christmas break. This is who showed: Michael, Shoe and me, Perry, and Katy Wren. Katy Wren surprised me. I mean, her presence surprised me, although it probably shouldn't have. A foggy memory returned of seeing Michael eating with her every once in a blue moon during A Lunch before I really knew him. Katy Wren was in Michael's yoga class, the one Patel's mom taught. Even so, it was a mild shock to see her sitting in a front desk in B209 when Shoe and I shuffled in. Michael sat on a desk as they chatted. He winked at me when we came in.

Shoe sat in the desk closest to the door. I opened my mouth to tell him to move a couple desks up, but changed my mind. It was pulling teeth to get Shoe to come, and I wanted him to stay. I owed Michael that much.

Perry wandered in after a bit, slid in the desk next to Katy. Perry wore the same scarf he wore the Day of Ketchup. Katy was in a chartreuse one, much like Michael's. I wondered if he had made it for her. I guessed he had.

Nobody had called Michael for an application for the club, so I was kind of surprised to see Perry and Katy there. I assumed it would only be the three of us, provided I could keep Shoe's butt in his chair. Michael waited a good fifteen minutes after the start time listed on the Scarf Club posters I'd helped him hang all over school. At four-fifteen, he officially began the meeting.

He stood behind the lectern and grinned like an idiot at me. “Friends, welcome.” He waved a window-washer wave at Shoe.

“Our first item of business is to take roll. Lucy, would you mind?”

I didn’t mean to, but I looked around like *Who me?* I didn’t even have a pencil on me, much less paper. Shoe sighed and loudly ripped a page from his spiral notebook. He pulled a pen from his bookbag and handed it to me with a flourish like he’d saved my life and found a cure for cancer both in that same deliberate act.

Michael said, “Lucy, dear, if you’ll just take down everybody’s names for the records.”

I did. And yes, he called me *dear*.

Michael continued, “Welcome to The Scarf Club, Downers North’s first official club for losers.”

Katy shifted in her seat. Perry put his hand on the back of her chair. Katy glanced at his hand and then at Perry.

“I imagine we’ll be the first of many Scarf Clubs. I envision chapters forming in other schools in neighboring districts. I’d like to plan activities with these forthcoming chapters. And so I welcome you, charter members, with all my heart.”

Here Michael actually paused, both hands on his heart, allowing time for the sentiment to settle.

“I’m sure you’re all curious about the types of things we’ll be doing and ready to create a mission statement and all the other initial acts of starting an official club, but first I’d like to speak a word about, for lack of a better word, our exclusivity.”

Shoe jabbed me in the ribs with his elbow. “I.e. low attendance.”

Michael pretended not to hear this, although I was pretty sure he did. “I want to keep our little club small. At least in its formative stages. This way we’ll have the chance to really get to know one another. I want us to be like family.”

I felt a pair of eyes on my left cheek. Shoe’s. My face grew hot. He was smirking at me.

About this time, we heard a low scratching on the door, like a dog or cat scratching to come in. Michael ambled down the aisle to open the door. (All Downers North doors lock from the inside when you shut them—a safety precaution that my mother championed when she was first nominated President of the P.T.A.)

Michael held the door, and in walked Carl. He raised his eyebrows in surprise and said, “This is it?”

“Yes,” Michael said as if he were wishing Carl a happy birthday. “Yes, we,” he gestured widely with both hands. “are The Scarf Club.”

“Well, you’ll do, I guess. I already crashed three other club meetings.”

Michael walked deliberately back to the front of the room and stood behind the lectern. Carl stayed where he was, standing.

“Look. I’ll shoot straight with you, not because I like you, but because of him.” Carl thumbed at Shoe.

“I’m not here because I want to join your loser club. Can’t wear scarves anyway, allergic. Break out in hives. It’s not pretty.”

Michael pursed his lips. Katy turned around and gave Carl the stink eye.

“I’m here because school clubs, even loser clubs like Beta and National Honors Society and Speech and Debate and well, now you guys, are good business. Some of my best clients are in school clubs. So don’t get any ideas about me joining. Like I said, I view this as more or less a networking opportunity.”

With that, Carl took off his black leather coat and sat in a desk on the other side of Shoe.

Michael said, “We welcome you anyway, Carl. And we hope you might change your mind about us.”

“Not gonna happen,” Carl said.

Perry raised his hand, the hand not resting on the back of Katy’s chair, and said, “I vote our first item of business is to make a scarf for Katy’s baby.”

Katy’s hand touched her stomach and then her cheek, which was turning a magnificent pink and then went back inside her jacket pocket. She looked like she wanted to run, as she shifted in her chair.

Michael nodded. “Lucy will make note of that. We can discuss that perhaps at our next meeting.”

Shoe said, without raising his hand, “You really think putting a wool noose around a baby’s neck is a good idea?”

The room got very quiet. Somebody coughed. I wanted to kick him.

At length Michael looked at me—his eyes getting soft—and he said, “Duly noted, Shoe. We appreciate your concern. But to continue, I think maybe it would be wise to start with suggestions for a club mascot.”

Carl looked at Shoe like *Is he joking?* Shoe smirked again and raised his hand.

Michael's forehead wrinkled. "Shoe, I'm sorry, was there something else?"

"Uh, yeah. I want to know what exactly constitutes a scarf?"

Perry nodded.

Katy turned around to glare at us, and then Perry did, too. She wasn't showing exactly, but I could tell she'd put on a little weight in her face. Not much, but still. I thought of Todd, and my eyes went ice.

"Well, um. What accessory is exactly in question? It might help for you to bring in the clothing article. That way we could put it to a vote."

Carl snorted. Shoe grinned at him.

Katy said to Michael, not to us, in a very quiet voice, so quiet I barely caught the last string of words and had to repeat it to myself to see if it made sense. "I vote it doesn't matter. And I vote that if somebody has a question, he should just look it up on his own and not weigh down the meeting with inane questions."

Even though I couldn't see her eyes, I knew they were sparkling. God, I hated girls with sparkly eyes.

Michael looked all gratitude. And that is when I knew it. I knew it like I knew that my brothers were perfect and like I knew that Shoe's grandmother was better than the rest of us and like I knew that Mr. Allen was a Douchebag. I knew it instinctually. I knew it in my heart.

Shoe glanced my way. "And what will you do when it's Spring? When the weather gets warm, what will you do then?"

The forehead lines snuck back out, and Michael blinked several times in quick succession. He ducked his head as he realized how flustered he must look. He clasped his hands.

There was something in all this that you could see was not right. Off. Michael was off. It wasn't normal embarrassment. It was the hunger that gave him away. The starving look of a wild animal. You could see this in the way he was different from the other kids, not just because of the crazy way he dressed—you know, the cape and the turtlenecks and now the scarf. But something wrong deep down in a way that makes you think and feel and act different than everybody else. Like he was hardwired different. Like he had to try really hard to make up for this.

And it reminded me in that moment of those purple nights with Shoe when we were in elementary school and would run to the end of my block to the patch of grass, an empty house lot really, which we called the Cricket Patch. We called it that because of the sound it made and because it was the best place to catch crickets at dusk. We would bring these treasures to my front porch where my mother's bug zapper in its neon frenzy was busy killing lightning bugs. And I remember one night we'd caught a lot of crickets and were having fun stuffing them into bug cages to bring indoors and try to scare my brothers, and it all at once occurred to me that what we were doing was no better than what the neon oblong hanging electric thing was doing to those pitiful things of light.

And then I was one of the little bugs with wings flying straight into the neon, expecting ecstasy and light and experiencing pain and eternal darkness, though I couldn't

have phrased it that way at the time. But I knew enough to realize that the bugs expected one thing and got a-tragic-nother.

So I looked up at Michael, who was suddenly very nice to look at, and saw the worry lines in his forehead and the care with which he addressed Katy and the softness in his eyes which kept darting at me, and in all this I saw that wild animal hunger. And I knew two things. Number One: There was a lot to Michael. There was just a-fucking-lot there. And Number Two: I was one of those neon bugs, and Michael was the light that was not good for me, but into which I was flying anyways.

And this is where I should have gotten up and walked out. There's always that moment—that ephemeral moment when you should have and could have turned back, but you didn't. If there was ever a moment in my life for turning back, this was it. But instead, I found myself standing up and a voice which was mine but at the same time which wasn't mine saying, "She's right, you know. Everybody knows what a fucking scarf is. And, Shoe, if you don't shut up, you can just get the hell out. And that goes for you, too, Carl. And Perry—this isn't going to be cool so you can get out now if you want. FYI—this will never be cool. This is a fucking club for fucking losers to wear fucking scarves, and anybody who isn't a fucking loser can just get the hell out."

The silence lengthened in a way which left me feeling like a very tiny person at the end of a long corridor. My voice which a moment ago had sounded loud and powerful was now mouse-like inside of me bunkered down in the place where I knew Michael was not right, off.

So I sat back down.

Michael stared at me, and his eyes said, if ever eyes spoke, You are beautiful.
You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

So I put my head in the crook of my arm and leaned forward on the desk and cried into my elbows.

Blue wool was in my mouth and up my nose because Michael was squatting next to me, mopping my face with the end of his scarf. And Shoe was looking like he'd just thrown up all over himself and looking every apology I'd ever heard him say, all of them and the feeling of having thrown up all over himself on his face.

Katy Wren still hadn't turned around, but one of Perry's fingers rested on her shoulder blade.

Carl rolled his eyes and said, "So like Shoe said, what happens when the weather heats up?"

That was how it began. And this is the story of The Scarf Club. A fucking club for fucking losers to wear their fucking scarves.

It was everything Michael dreamed it would be and more.

CHAPTER NINE

In my defense, first off I have to say, it's hard to keep resisting somebody intent on worshipping you. It's hard to tell them to stop staring, when maybe that's what makes your heart sing. And second, Michael was a good person. He was fun and funny and wonderful in every way. And all those weird things were tantalizing clues. Who was this Michael D. Wineberger? I wanted to find out.

And then there was the offness, the abnormal soul. The freak. Michael needed fixing. Maybe I was the one to fix him.

Which is ridiculous because if Michael needed fixing, then I was hardly the person to fix him. I was barely functional myself.

What started it? This headlong fall into Michael?

Maybe it was pity. I knew what it felt like to retreat inside yourself and want to stay there. Or maybe it all happened simply because Michael was an insomniac, like me. Probably it was that—because night is the worst. And Shoe can sleep through almost anything. I blamed it on end-of-the-semester projects and exams and big cross country meets, but I think I knew in the back of my heart what was making Shoe sleep so much.

Michael.

So Underground, High-stakes, After-hours Bingo replaced Midnight Waffles.

I wanted to wear cowboy boots and square-dance and plunk down shiny red chips. I wanted to feel Michael's nose in my hair and to come home smelling smoky and

unwholesome and know inside myself in a way my mother never could that everything between Michael and me was beautiful and pure.

Because by this time, I believed in Michael. And found, believing in Michael, that I could somehow approach believing in myself.

But maybe, probably, it wasn't the pity or even the insomnia. I think it was the trains. Saturdays we took them downtown. We'd hop a train and go wherever they took us.

On the train, Michael sat with his legs crossed like a girl, and I didn't know how I felt about this. On the one hand, I liked it because it reminded me of my older brothers, their polished presence. On the other hand, it seemed a little, well, *gay*. Michael also said words like *shall*, as in "Shall we go to lunch, Lucy?" or "Shall I take you home, Lucy?" Michael said my name constantly, like saying my name made him happy. And I liked that. Actually, I liked it a lot.

I want those days to come back again so badly it hurts. I want to go see some abstract art, and I want to take a train to get there.

Michael introduced me to Anselm Kiefer and Arshile Gorky and Francis Bacon. Bacon was my favorite. He's pretty twisted though, all about anger, pain, and self-loathing. I think he was a genius. Gorky, I liked, too. He held a lot of despair. He hung himself. Kiefer, I didn't know what to think of—he was really into the Holocaust, which made me think of Shoe's grandmother, which made me think of Shoe.

But I was telling you about Michael.

The last time Michael and I took a train to The Art Institute, there was a special screening of a documentary called *Ancient Souls: The Trees of Downers Grove*. It was, of course, Sun and Clap's film. About half-an-hour into it, there was a tall, skinny loser-looking kid warming up. He stretched against a giant oak with large strips of bark missing from its trunk. The kid looked oblivious. The kid looked like Shoe.

I turned to Michael in the darkness and found him staring at the screen, his eyes popping.

The voiceover told us that the boy's grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, was attempting to pass an amendment to the tree ordinance in Downers Grove, IL. The voice, furthermore, told us that the long scrape marks on the trees (here they showed a close-up of Shoe) were the results of sterilized squirrels fleeing the Nature Glen Forest Preserve which bordered Downers Grove. The overall thrust of the film was to paint Shoe's grandmother as this bitter old lady who wanted to kill the already-damaged trees, which Downers Grove was named after, and who didn't care about making the sterilized squirrels homeless yet again.

Nowhere did it mention Shoe's grandmother's plumbing problem, which I knew from personal experience was severe.

There was also this part about feral cats and how nobody did anything to hinder their reproduction because they preyed on squirrels. Here there was a close-up of Shoe's grandmother feeding eight or so cats on her front porch. Three of the cats licked her hands. Then there was a photograph of an old-looking guy in a lab coat. The voiceover talked about how inhumane the squirrel sterilization process actually was, and then it said

that the man who championed it initially was the old cat lady's late husband. I was in shock. It was Shoe's dead grandfather. Shoe's grandfather used to work at Argonne National Laboratory, the place that sterilizes the squirrels. I know this is true because Shoe told me he'd kill me if I ever told anybody. Every Downers North junior goes on a mandatory field trip to Argonne National Laboratory to learn about the squirrel sterilization process as part of Illinois history week. How had Sun and Clap found out that Shoe's dead grandfather had sterilized squirrels?

Michael didn't say anything when the lights came back on. He just quickly led me to the nearest exit.

"What complete bullshit."

Michael frowned.

"Seriously. How can they get away with this? Wait till I tell Shoe—he was right, you know. God, Shoe knew all along. He told me Sun or Clap, I forget which one, took his picture without his permission. He had no idea they were videotaping him, too."

"Lucy," Michael said.

"Shoe is going to go through the roof. Wait until the shit hits the fan. His grandmother will eat those two faux-liberal, pseudo-intellectual, snit-Koreans alive. She won't take this lying down. You don't know Shoe's grandmother like I do. She'll kill them."

"Lucy."

“And that part about Eliot was way below the belt. Eliot isn’t autistic. Don’t you think we’d know by now if he was *autistic*? How can you publicly label some random little kid autistic when he’s never been diagnosed?”

“Lucy,” Michael said and touched my shoulder with his nose.

“What?”

“It won’t do any good,” Michael said. “It never does.”

“What they did was wrong. Shoe can never, never see this. You know what it would do to him if he saw that shot of his dad delivering mail? He’d die. He’d just absolutely lie down and die.”

Michael shook his head.

“You know they were wrong. You do think they were wrong, don’t you?”

“Of course they were wrong. It was just sensational, titillating trash. But getting yourself in a dither won’t do anybody any good and will actually do a lot of harm.”

“Don’t you care what they said about Shoe?”

“I don’t remember the film saying anything about Shoe.”

“Well, no. Not about him in particular. But about his family. It’s the same thing.”

“It’s not the same thing.” He stroked my hair above my forehead with his thumb.

“You are not your family.”

“Me? How did I come into this?”

“Isn’t that what this is about?” he said.

“This is about Shoe. Shoe and his family.”

Michael shrugged and crossed his arms. “Well, maybe I’m wrong. But sometimes I wonder.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I wish you were happy.”

“You wish I was what?”

“Happy. I wish you were happy.”

“God, Michael. How does it feel? How does it feel to be up there above the rest of us? Does it feel good? Or does it feel lonely? Because from where I’m standing, way down here, you look pretty damn lonely to me.”

Michael uncrossed his arms and took my hands in his, both of them. “I am lonely, Lucy. We all are. It’s the human condition. Don’t you know that, yet?”

The words sputtered. Fell spinning back down my throat. I twisted my hands out of his. “God, Michael. You judge and judge. You’re not human at all.”

You could see the hurt in the way he hung his head and re-crossed his arms. You could see it in the way his long eyelashes batted several times in quick succession, surprised and in the way he pressed his lips together.

You could hear it in the silence.

Michael was soft. Michael was not-right, off. Michael was too-good-to-be-true. But Michael was, of all things, human.

We had reached the train by now and sat on the hard, plastic seats, maintaining a dignified distance. After a while, Michael said, “Lucy, believe me, I know about families. I know what it feels like to not fit in with your own family. To be ashamed.”

I looked up, but he was talking to the floor.

“We moved here from Alabama, that part is true. But before Alabama, we lived in South Africa. My parents were missionaries. I grew up there.”

“You mean your dad was a minister?”

He folded his hands in his lap. “Something like that. They wanted to stay longer. But they couldn’t. We had to come back to the States.”

He cracked his knuckles. “We had to come back because of me. I did something. Not wrong or bad, but something that really worried everybody. I hurt myself. My parents thought it would be best for us to move back. Try to be normal again.” And here he grinned, although you could tell he didn’t really think it was funny.

I nodded, like No Big Deal, like I hear these types of things every day. But I wanted to ask hurt yourself *how*?

Michael patted my leg. “It’s okay. I’m better now.”

I didn’t know what to say. But it all started to click into place. The praying before the meal at Thanksgiving. The differentness. Even the weird way he dressed.

I looked up, and Michael was watching me. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” he said. “Besides, it was all very ironic. Death by hanging, even if it’s only attempted, is actually a good omen.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever heard of The Hanged Man?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s a tarot card. It represents letting go or inner harmony. When you look at it, it looks like this guy hanging by his foot from a tree. But if you look more closely, it’s hard tell which is upside down—the man or the rest of the world.” He shrugged. “I didn’t know any of this then though. So I guess it wasn’t truly ironic at the time.”

I took his hand and said, “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me, too.”

What kind of a person wants to take their own life? What kind of a person wants to hurt himself like that? Because I knew somewhere deep inside, in the place where you don’t let yourself in, that suicide was what we were talking about. But it wasn’t the suicide thing that bothered me. Not really. I knew lots of kids at Downers North who had serious problems. My mother dealt with kids who cut themselves and whatnot every day.

It was the tarot card comment. Like killing yourself was something you did to make a statement. And it was the calmness, the evenness, with which he said it. Like No Big Deal. Like I’m Over It.

But I knew he wasn’t over it, because if you hurt that much inside to consider killing yourself, how do you ever get over it?

It reminded me of the kind of person who shoved her finger down her own throat, of a girl who, even now, hated the way she looked because of something stupid that Todd Coleman said years ago. A girl with brown hair, not blonde, who ran and didn’t cheer. What Michael said reminded me in some vague way of someone I’d been all my life trying to forget. It reminded me of me.

CHAPTER TEN

As soon as Michael dropped me off at home, I headed for Shoe's. His mother told me he was out playing. It always struck me as odd that Shoe's mom still called whatever we did playing. Shoe was two months shy of his eighteenth birthday and busy perfecting his lone college application, the one for Texas Tech, but still she said he was out playing.

When I got to the Treefort, I saw Shoe's big feet dangling over the edge and rings of smoke floating away from the platform.

"Second-hand smoke is the leading cause of cancer, you know," I called up to him.

Shoe's face appeared. "Oh. It's only you."

"Good to see you, too," I said and climbed up.

Shoe continued smoking his Arturo Fuente (a gift from Carl I guessed since there was no way Shoe could afford that good of a cigar), morosely puffing rings through his nose and in general stinking up the crisp December air. We sat in silence while he sorted out the knots.

After a while, I said, "I believe you...about Sun and Clap."

"It's about time," said Shoe. "They've been at it for weeks."

"You mean taking your picture?"

"Yeah," Shoe spat, "and shooting footage of me for their film."

"So you know about that?"

Shoe just looked at me. "Who doesn't?"

I let this sink in. He blew his cigar smoke in my general direction and bit down.

“How’s your grandmother taking it?”

“My fricking grandma is taking it to court.”

“No shit?”

Shoe nodded.

“Wow, Shoe. Like I said, I had no idea.”

“Yeah, well there’s a lot you don’t know about me these days.”

I let this sink in, too. “So tell me.”

“For one, Amanda wants to take things to the next level.”

I sat up. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Shoe said in a patronizing tone as he spat bits of cigar over the platform to the ground, “she wants a ring.”

“Like an engagement ring?”

He spit again. “A fricking diamond.”

“Doesn’t she know you’re just a kid?”

“I know it.” Shoe said. “You know it, and I know it. Apparently, Amanda’s the only person who doesn’t know it.”

“What a douche.”

“You know what? You can just get out of my…tree.”

“Technically, it’s your grandmother’s tree. And it’s my wood, my two-by-fours.”

“Well, take your damn two-by-fours. Take them with you. I’ll help you pull them down.”

“Shoe,” I reached out and touched his arm. “What’s wrong? I mean, what’s really wrong?”

“And you can take your stupid touchy-feely crap and just shove it. Maybe that sort of Oprah voo-doo works on Michael, but not on me. You forget, Merdock. I know you. I made you.”

“You *made* me?”

Shoe narrowed his eyes to slits. “I *made* you.”

I pressed my lips together, but didn’t say a word.

I heard somebody starting their lawn mower, and it sounded weird in December to hear that. Shoe just sat there staring at me with his beady eyes. He looked ridiculous. He looked like a cartoon weasel.

“I’m sick of Sun and Clap making me the star of their sick little film and I’m sick of my grandma making trees into some kind of protest issue and I’m sick of drama queens. Why can’t people be like me? Why can’t they just live quietly like I do and leave me alone? I’m sick of my mailman father and worrying all the time about money. I’m sick of worrying about running scholarships and college. And you know what I’m sick to death of? I’m sick to fricking death of wearing an effing scarf all the time. They’re hot and sweaty and my neck feels scratchy. I can’t tell you how *sick* I am of scarves.” He pulled at the scarf around his neck.

I nodded.

“Her roommate just got engaged, so now she has to, too.”

“We’re just kids, Shoe.” I broke a small branch and let it drop to the ground.

“What the hell does she expect, anyway?”

Shoe jammed his cigar into the tree trunk. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

I wanted to tell him what a loser Amanda was. I wanted to say that being beautiful doesn’t entitle you to a fricking diamond and that Shoe was just a kid and didn’t have money for anything stupid like a ring right now. I wanted to tell her how hard he was running just to get to go to college. Her stupid college.

I thought about Michael and how screwed up his life was and how he looked at me. I wondered what he saw through his eyes. I wondered very badly what he saw. I wished Shoe could see it. It would be easier to believe if Shoe saw it, too.

Shoe lit another cigar and started puffing again. I wanted to leave because too much cigar smoke turns my stomach, but I stuck it out. I stayed because I wanted to show Shoe that not all girls were self-involved ring-hunters. And I stayed because I didn’t want him to feel alone.

The lawn mower went on and on. The night got purple and then gray. The crickets, what were left of them anyway, started singing. I told Shoe to buck up, and then when I saw he was down to his last cigar, I shimmied my way back down the tree and headed home.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was after Valentine's when the trophies began arriving. And if the trains hadn't worked, then the trophies would have finished the job.

At first, it was like a game. I would come down on Sunday morning and find sitting on top of the *Chicago Tribune*, fat with sales, a trophy glinting in the sun. All kinds. Bowling, tennis, go-cart, even a small T-ball one.

The first had this inscription: "Lucy Merdock, First Place in the Fantastic Eyes category."

My mother thought it was some sort of sick joke. "Why is he doing this, Lucy?"

She said this after the bowling trophy came.

And after the horse trophy the week after that, my father said, "What's this one say? All-State for Wonderfulness." He chuckled to himself like it was a really good joke.

You could tell Michael had paid somebody to engrave new nameplates, and then had soldered the new nameplates over the old ones.

My favorite was a red deer. The whole deer was red and it had huge antlers and looked like it was grinning. "Calculus Champ." I hung my necklaces off of it.

I arranged the trophies around the debate one, and when my mother came into my room to say goodnight, she would look at all the gaudiness over my bed and sigh.

Sometimes, she'd actually shake her head and give me a long sad look before leaving.

But at night, it made me feel better to be surrounded by accolades, even if they were only from Michael and I hadn't actually won any of them. I liked to look at them in the dark and imagine the applause.

It was right after I got the silver piranha fish trophy (my father's favorite) the first Sunday in April that I ran into Katy Wren in the girl's bathroom at school. It was during the big pep rally when all the spring athletes are recognized. Mr. Allen, as usual, had the microphone and abused his power by using the time for his own stand-up routine. For one whole hour, the entire student body was held captive, locked in the stuffy gym listening to his drivel.

I hate pep rallies. The only thing about pep rallies that is semi-tolerable is the fights. Usually the ghetto kids start dancing or crowd-surfing to the loud music piped over the PA. From there, somebody gets touched or pushed, and then you've got a full-out confrontation on your hands. Inevitably, the school resource officer is rounded up to escort a handful of sweaty pimps out of the gym.

At the last pep rally, one of the robotics team members smuggled in water balloons. But after that, Mr. Allen outlawed book bags, so then you had to drop your junk off in your locker before they even let you in the gym.

Usually, I hid in the girl's bathroom during these forced-fun events. My mother couldn't understand this. She was the one who participated in the relay races and stick-your-partner-to-the-wall-with-duck tape competitions. She's the type who dresses in school colors every Friday and decks herself out during Spirit Week, you know, cowgirl for Western day, hippie for Decade day, etc., etc. My mother is one of the only people at

Downers North who actually clashes on Clash day. The only thing my mother and Michael had in common was their school spirit. Spirit Week was the last week of April, and on the last day of Spirit Week during half-time of the varsity basketball game, Downers North always named a Mr. North, a faux-competition for the student who supposedly had the most school spirit. Michael had already confided in me that he intended to run.

“It doesn’t work that way,” I explained. “They don’t actually care about school spirit or whatever.”

Michael just looked at me, incredulous.

“It’s just a popularity contest. It’s stupid, really. Todd will probably win.”

He cocked his head back and winked. “Not this year.”

Michael *loved* pep rallies. I don’t know if it was because he’d been homeschooled and never experienced anything similar to that kind of organized chaos in Alabama or South Africa, but he actually made posters announcing his school spirit in bubble letters and waved them while Mr. Allen droned on and on.

But getting back to Katy Wren and the bathroom, I had locked myself in the last stall as usual. I had already thrown up (it was better throwing up at school than at home under my mother’s watchful eye) and was halfway through my Calculus homework when I heard somebody shuffle into the stall nearest the faucet. From there, I heard sobbing and retching and then the muffled sounds of heartbreak.

I hate getting stuck in situations like this. I mean, what do you do? If you come out, you run the risk of the person in that stall coming out to wash their hands at the same

time you're reaching for the soap, and then you're stuck in what you know is going to be either a supremely awkward conversation or else you try very hard not to make eye contact with that other person, not even in the mirror.

Usually, I just try to wait the person out. But I could tell from the muffledness that whoever it was was going to be a long time.

I finished my Calculus homework and looked at my watch. Five more minutes until seventh period, five more minutes until the pep rally ended.

The sobbing started back up. I heard the toilet flush and then the faucet and automatic hand dryer. I didn't hear anybody leave, but I figured all the noise from the hand dryer covered it up, so I came out.

And that's when I saw her, huddled against the wall. Her belly prevented her head from resting on her knees. She held her face in her palms, and tears dripped through her fingers onto the floor.

She looked up at me and kinda rolled her eyes and then put her head back down.

As I washed my hands, I noticed that the sobbing had stopped. In the mirror, I saw Katy rubbing her red, puffy eyes with the end of her scarf.

I didn't want to ask, but I couldn't help it. Maybe it was because she was Michael's friend. Maybe it was because she was, after all, a member of The Scarf Club, and I'd seen her at least once a month since December. Maybe it was because she was the only female on earth who had ever possibly loved Todd as much as I had.

"You okay?"

She looked up at me and really did roll her eyes this time. "What do you think?"

I didn't know what to say so I just dried my hands and grabbed my bag.

"I was supposed to be in there." She nodded towards the gym. "I've been subsisting on rice and Jello for the past seven months because anything else makes me throw up. The biggest bastard in the universe is the father of my child. And I," Here she started crying again. "I was supposed to be in *there*."

I handed her some toilet paper.

The bell rang.

I didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

"Nobody's more sorry than me."

What do you say to that? It was hard to see what Michael saw in her.

I was about to leave when she said, "But thanks."

I grabbed a brown stiff paper towel and used it to grab the door handle; Shoe had taught me this little trick. Most of the kids at Downers North don't wash their hands, and Shoe credited his not having the flu once in his entire high school career to his refusal to touch doorknobs barehanded. Then I changed my mind and said, "Look. You're right. Todd's a douche. And I'm sorry you're pregnant and can't eat and aren't in there with all the other cheerleaders, doing flips or whatever." I took out a pen and scribbled my phone number on the paper towel. "Call me if you ever need anything."

I shoved the paper towel into her hand and used the end of my scarf to grab the door handle.

Michael was in the hall waiting for me. It was our routine. He had his poster folded in half under his arm. "You missed a *great* rally."

I smiled and took his arm. The goodness and the oddness and the wonderfulness all mixed up in one person. It was a good feeling to hold on to.

I saw Katy only a couple times outside of Downers North before she had the baby. Once was at Patel's mom's yoga class, the one she and Michael took together. Michael had dragged me there, telling me it would help with the stress. I told him I wasn't stressed. He kissed my forehead. "My, how you can lie."

This is how it went:

Patel's mom turns on this ambient, new-age music and then says, "Imagine your body moving through space and the shapes that it makes. You have to be outwardly observing yourself."

And then, "The atmosphere is so thick you can't push through it."

And then, "You're in a cloud. You're moving through a cloud."

It gets really awkward, especially when you're moving through space. It's really uncomfortable, and I don't like it. I don't want to do it. We continue to do weird stuff like this exercise called "Being There." You have to go sit in the middle of a circle, and everybody has to stare at you. You have to sit there for a minute. I guess a minute isn't that long, but it seems really long, especially when you're just sitting there with eight or so people you don't know staring at you. They have to stare. Not staring isn't allowed. When it's my turn, I just pick a point on the ground and stare at it, so I can't feel the full brunt of all those eyeballs.

I tell this to Michael, afterwards, that I don't like it and that I'm not going back.

“Okay,” he says. “I just wanted you to experience what it feels like for once to just be.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I say.

“I want you to know how it feels to just *be*.”

“You think I feel like I need to prove myself all the time or something? Because I don’t, you know.”

Michael says, “I think you want to prove a lot. I hope you know you don’t have to prove anything.”

Katy is there, her belly even bigger in her yoga stretch pants. She and Michael are yoga partners, and I feel like odd man out, even though Michael and I are, after all, the Michael and Lucy of water tower fame.

I don’t like it, and I don’t go back. But it’s important, this bit about Katy Wren. Katy Wren is important because after Michael is gone, I need another person to hold in my mind’s eye who knows how wonderful he was. And Katy Wren is who I see there. Katy Wren knew. She knew it so well she named her baby Michael.

CHAPTER TWELVE

And so by now you know. This isn't a story at all. I'm a horrible storyteller. I get sidetracked too easily. My brothers tell great stories. They don't get sidetracked at all. To tell a great story you have to have a good sense of timing, an essential that I lack. And I can never get the plot points right. I want to focus on the details. I get caught up in the characters.

I'm doing a horrible job of telling you about The Scarf Club. Aside from an arguably non-existent plot, an unsympathetic foil to Shoe, and a really confusing timeline, this isn't a love story or even a misguided memoir about grief. No. This isn't a story at all.

This, then, is my confession. This is the way it plays out in my head when I try to sleep. This is what I should say, but can't, to Lynne during our appointments. By now you know. Of course, you know.

I killed Michael.

We all killed him I want to say.

Nobody killed him my mother says.

She says this because she's heard it from Lynne. Lynne scripts my mother's part, these days. My father has simply stopped talking. My brothers, both of them, say it is nobody's fault. It was beyond anybody's, including Michael's, control.

They say these things because they must say them. These are the things you say when you don't know what to say.

Shoe says Michael died because of everything and everybody. You know, the perfect storm. The squirrels plus the documentary plus Spirit Week. Spirit Week is enough pressure in and of itself. All forced fun is. Sun and Clap, the campaign to become Mr. North—something Michael could never really be anyway—it all blew up in our faces. Nobody could've known says Shoe. Nobody could've predicted it.

Nobody could've known. Nobody could've predicted it.

But me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Jared “Small Fry” O’Conner delivered his valedictorian address at last year’s graduation, he thanked Coach, God, and his parents. In that order.

When Bug Martin gave his valedictorian speech the year before that, he only thanked Coach.

And the year before that, Jenny Bean, with tears streaming down her cheeks, thanked Coach. Then she thanked herself.

Before he died, Coach began taking off every third Wednesday of the month. We didn’t know why, and we didn’t ask. But Carley Richardson’s mother, who worked at the ClipNCurl, said she would tear up every time she saw his Buick La Sabre pull into the parking lot. She said she’d cry as she watched Coach run around the car to help his wife out of the passenger’s seat.

Turns out, Coach’s wife had cancer.

When somebody you love dies, all the people you have loved and lost die all over again. When we found Michael, I lost Coach a second time. Death begets death. But in a weird way, Coach came back to life, too. Because when Shoe and I found him dead, the meaning was sucked out of my world. But when Michael died, I understood that life touches life and that in some invisible over-arching narrative, pain precedes meaning. Coach’s death wiped out my belief in meaning to the world, but Michael’s death brought it back. So in losing Michael, I somehow got Coach back, if that makes any sense.

At first I thought all Coach cared about was running because he was the winningest coach in Downers North history and also because I'd heard all the crazy stories about him. You know, like how back in the day, he'd had this rule that all runners had to be in bed at eight the night before a meet and how he'd check up on them by calling their houses at eight-thirty to see who answered the phone. I'd heard how you couldn't get a uniform until you ran your first meet without walking. But I soon figured out that what Coach cared about was runners. He ran with me, setting the pace that he thought was right for me. Sometimes he would say encouraging things while we ran, but mostly, he just blew snot-rockets and cracked corny jokes. He wanted us to be the best we could be, though, and this was clear when you would hear his footsteps coming up behind you. "This is how you're gonna feel in a race. You got to run comfortably hard. It ain't easy." He told us stories about past teams who had won the state championship. I had Yearbook class during 4th period my junior year, and there were lots of days when we really didn't do anything so I would go down to Coach's shop and just talk to him during his lunch break. He'd show me grainy pictures of former runners and tell me about them. My sophomore year, I got hurt halfway through the season and was unable to run in a bunch of races, including the state championship. I was devastated, but Coach didn't cut me any slack. He sent me over to the Senior Center every day to ride the stationary bike while the rest of the team practiced. If we ever ran a really, really good race, he would give us a kiss on the head, and if you got this, you knew you had done well. He only did this with the girls. I think we reminded him of his daughter Valerie. I finally did get my

chance to run in the state meet, junior year, and we won the race. I will never forget how I felt when Coach put the medal around my neck and kissed the top of my head.

He was the type of coach who would hold your hair back if you threw up.

It was at the Palatine meet. And I was only a freshman, not anywhere near the top seven. Pretty dehydrated at the time from routinely throwing up, I finished the race and stumbled over to a ditch away from the mayhem of screaming moms. I felt a tickling sensation as somebody pulled my hair back out of my face and held it away from me while I finished vomiting.

“Cut the Cheetos for breakfast. Got me Merdock?”

“Yeah, Coach.”

He gestured towards the puke. “I mean it. You’re ripping your guts to shreds.”

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and nodded.

He held my hair back until I got out a pony tail holder. Then he patted me on the back and gave me a stick of Doublemint. He gave me a team, a small place to belong in the world. At the end of the day, you knew there was one guy who had believed in you.

I hear his voice every time I run.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Running for Mr. North is harder than it seems. You have to pull votes from every pocket of Downers North's constituency. You have to win over the jocks and the skinheads, the skaters and the potheads. You have to appeal to the cheerleaders and the Quiz team alike. And you have to be sort of vanilla to do this. You can't feel too strongly or look too different. If you've got anything that draws too much attention to yourself, the wrong kind of attention, a hick-accent for example or an unsightly birthmark, you can kiss your chances goodbye.

When Michael announced his candidacy, Carl actually laughed out loud. He continued laughing through Perry's volunteering to come up with a theme song (with Noel's help, of course) and Katy Wren's suggesting we give away scarves as a promo.

This is how Shoe found himself handing out homemade baby blue scarves in April.

Michael said, "Why shouldn't I run?"

"Because you won't win," Shoe said. "It doesn't work that way."

And Shoe was right. But Michael was right, too. Who the hell were we to tell him don't even try?

"So tell me," Michael asked me later. "How does it work?"

"Mr. North has nothing to do with Downers North, just like Spirit Week has nothing to do with school spirit. The winner gets a cheapo, plastic crown with a ruby

rhinestone on it. It's something to hold in your hands to remind yourself of how cool you once were."

"So like you said, it's essentially a popularity contest." Michael said, nodding.

"Todd will most likely win." I imagine Todd never imagined not being Mr. North.

It was in his stars.

Patel and RUFF would back Todd.

"Has anybody unpopular ever won?"

"No."

"Has anybody like me ever won?"

"Never."

"Wonderful," Michael said, and he smiled as he said it.

"My grandma said to resolve the squirrel problem this weekend," Shoe said during our last Scarf meeting, the Friday afternoon before Spirit Week.

Michael looked at me. I looked at Shoe. Carl rubbed his hands. Katy put her hand over her mouth.

"You mean...kill them?" she said, blinking.

"I mean blow them up," Shoe said, blinking back.

"How?" asked Perry.

Shoe pulled a crinkled magazine ad from his jacket pocket. He smoothed it out on the desk.

Katy read aloud over his shoulder. “The Rodenator Pro pumps propane and oxygen into squirrel tunnels, and then sends an electric spark that causes an explosion. The shock waves kill the squirrels and collapse their tunnels, but in a humane way.”

“You’re joking,” Michael said.

Shoe shrugged his shoulders. “I only wish I were.”

“She’s detonating them?” Katy said.

“Blowing them up,” said Shoe. “underground.”

“But in a humane way,” Carl said.

“Look, I just need one or two volunteers to help me operate this thing come Saturday,” Shoe said.

“Why, Shoe? Really, really, really *why*?” Katy said.

“I’m not asking for opinions. I just need an extra pair of hands to help with the machine.”

“Aside from the inhumanity of it all, we’ve got a lot to get done before Monday,” Katy said.

Monday marked the beginning of Spirit Week.

Perry said, “A family member of mine shoots squirrels and poses them in funny little outfits or with funny props.”

Katy flipped her hair over her shoulder and snorted.

“The timing here is what’s crucial,” said Carl. “You’ve got to get this done before they start reproducing.”

Perry glanced at Katy and then said, “I mean, it is humane, right? They don’t actually, you know, feel anything, do they?”

Shoe said, “How should I know? All I know is that the cats and gas bombs didn’t work, and Grandma is raising hell about what they’re doing to her trees.”

Katy sucked in. “Gas bombs? Your grandma used *gas bombs* on squirrels?”

“I’m not saying it’s a perfect solution, only that it’s way better than poison or over-sized mousetraps. Or Dynamite down a hole or whatever.” He looked at Katy. “It’s way more humane.”

Perry interjected, “I like sneaking up on a squirrel in front of the garage door and then using the remote control to open it. They jump a couple of feet in the air.”

“I have a really bad feeling about this,” Michael said.

“Me, too,” said Katy.

Carl said, “We had a bunch of flying squirrels inside the house once. There were only a couple at first, but we found a bunch more in the attic. I got out my pellet gun and thought I’d gotten rid of them all, so I went into my bedroom to go to bed, and there was one running across the top of the bed rail. Didn’t know at the time the little bastards were the flying kind. I trapped it in the bathroom and threw a towel over it, but it flew in my face. Finally got him outside with a broom. That night I discovered a hole in my closet that ran up to the attic. There were fifteen squirrels nested up there in the Christmas ornaments. I took my gun up and shot all of them. One fell behind my bedroom wall. The smell was fucking unbelievable.”

Perry looked at Katy who was giving Carl a dirty look and said, “We had an albino squirrel in my neighborhood when I was little. She would come to our back door like a stray cat or something. We named her Crystal.”

Everybody looked at Perry. Then he said, “Also, one of my friends got a collar and put it on a baby squirrel and made it his pet and walked around the block with it. I taught it to eat Fritos.”

Katy started to say something, but Perry interrupted her. “Get this: Romeo and Juliet squirrels. On Valentine's Day my senior year, Noel told me she saw a squirrel run across the road and get smashed. The squirrel's girlfriend ran out to her dead love and got smashed, too. Also, I knew a guy who got stood up by a girl who said she couldn't make it to the movie because she was petting a squirrel.”

Nobody knew what to say.

Perry said, “It wasn't me though.”

Finally, Carl stood up and said to Shoe, “I'll give you a hand if business is slow. I'm expecting it to be slow because last week was Red Ribbon Week.”

I guess business was slow Saturday because Sun and Clap caught Carl and Shoe on tape using the Rodenator Pro. Caught the explosion noises which sounded like gun shots. They even caught Shoe's grandmother saying “tree rats” in reference to the squirrels. I know this because RUFF played Shoe's little hunting expedition repeatedly on the student council station all Spirit Week.

As if that weren't bad enough, Sun and Clap also unveiled their film, *Squirrels: The Homeless Living Among Us*, that Saturday evening. They held the screening at the

county courthouse in honor of Shoe's grandmother. They did it to remind her that she'd lost her case and that plumbing would be an issue in the Golden house until the day she died. They did it to remind her that though she could survive Hitler, she sure as hell couldn't survive her neighbors.

Patel and RUFF marched with posters proclaiming squirrel reproductive rights since rumor had it that a WGN reporter was coming to cover the screening. The posters had a picture of a hunter shooting a baby squirrel in the head with a machine gun. You could tell the hunter and the gun had been Photoshopped in. The caption read, "Let Squirrels Make Babies!"

Why Patel and RUFF decided to jump on the equal-rights-for-squirrels-bandwagon was a no-brainer. Patel was Michael's nemesis, and Shoe was just the fall guy. Hating Michael was a part of his character, and he would play it to the best of his ability. RUFF was merely the vehicle Patel used to spread his hatred of Michael to the rest of the student body. Not that Patel needed much help. Michael was doing a pretty good job of getting people to hate him all on his own. He continued to wear a blue scarf even though the weather slowly grew warm. He wore it to class, during Speech and Debate competitions, in his house. He wore it everywhere and all the time, just as he'd worn the cape.

It got on your nerves to see him looking like that, flaunting his loserness. Still, the Downers North student body found itself between a rock and a hard place concerning Mr. North. Nobody really wanted to vote for Todd as that would be casting your vote for douchebags everywhere. But nobody really wanted to vote for Michael either. Voting for

Michael came too close to admitting he was right. We didn't know what to do. It was like a Choose Your Own Adventure book with some of the pages ripped out.

For the record, I hated Spirit Week, as I hate all forced fun. First, I hated the pressure of dressing up as something every day. Truly, it made me anxious. You know, the pressure of appearing to clash without actually clashing. Only the dorks actually clashed. Second, I hated the tension between classes, the useless arguing over who had the most school spirit when nobody really cared. And third, I have never liked basketball. It's stupid. Okay, the third point isn't that strong; I just harbor resentment against Mr. Allen, who also volunteered as an assistant JV Coach.

I hated putting a ton of time and effort into a cheer / skit / poster, etc. I needed to be doing my math homework.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Shoe appeared at my bedroom window for our usual Sunday night run before Spirit Week started. I wanted to ask him about the screening at the county courthouse, but decided not to. I knew Michael had attended, and I figured I could just get a synopsis on Monday from him.

“I came to ask if you know how to fend off sharks,” Shoe said as we started out in a nice, slow, steady jog. “But I think it’s more important that you know how to escape from the Sears Tower if it ever caught fire.”

“I would jump,” I said.

“You would jump off the Sears Tower,” Shoe said.

“I would jump off the Sears Tower.”

“You would die, you know, unless you jumped into a large body of water. Like Lake Michigan.”

“Or the Chicago River.”

“Or the Chicago River.”

“Or a dumpster.”

“No, not a dumpster.”

“Yeah, I’d use some sort of tilting action to position my body and break the fall. Or roll. I’d probably roll.”

“Okay, but when you actually hit the garbage, what would you do?”

“I don’t know, Shoe. Does it really matter what I would do in the dumpster?”

“It matters tremendously.” He looked at me over the rim of his glasses.

“Tremendously.”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, then.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

We ran in silence. Sweat stung the corners of my eyes.

“I really don’t see what difference it makes if I know this stuff or not.”

“Would you even know how to identify a bomb? What would you do if you stepped on a hornets’ nest? You don’t think it might be good to know stuff like that? Just in case?”

“I seriously doubt I’ll ever get attacked by a shark.”

“Say that to Bethany Hamilton.”

“I don’t surf.”

“Neither does she.” He raised a bushy eyebrow. “Anymore.”

We passed Perry’s house. Perry’s head appeared from behind the hood of a rust-bucket Firebird. “Shoe!”

Shoe jogged in place. I did the same.

“Hey,” Perry called.

“Hey, Perry,” I said.

“You guys want a drink or anything?”

Shoe shook his head, still jogging in place.

“We’re good,” I said.

“Sorry. I couldn’t make it to the squirrel-killing yesterday!”

Shoe shook his head.

“Want to take a break?” Perry called. “Hey! How come you guys weren’t at the screening?”

“We gotta get going,” I said.

“Well,” he said and wiped his hands on his jeans. “Hope you killed them all!”

I kind of half-waved and took off. When I looked back half-way down the block, Perry was still waving.

“He’s not going to win,” Shoe said.

“What?”

“Michael. He’s not going to win.”

“Why not?”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“Todd?”

“Maybe. Probably. I don’t know.”

“If Todd doesn’t, who else is there?”

“Look, I’m not saying Todd is or is not going to win. Only that people don’t want to vote for Michael. People don’t like Michael. *I* don’t like Michael. And you’re crowding again.”

I lagged behind. “So that’s what this is about.”

“He’s a freaking creep-show, Merdock. And everybody seems to get that but you.”

“What creeps you out?”

“Everything. But just to start, the turtlenecks. And capes. And scarves.”

“He likes being different. Looking different.”

“He creeps people out. The scarves, Merdock,” he exhaled, “creep people out.”

“You think people would rather vote for Todd than Michael even though Todd is douchier than Patel and Mr. Allen combined?”

“I do.”

I didn’t say anything for two whole blocks. I tried to run ahead of him, but I was too exhausted. So I steered into him with my elbows instead.

Shoe’s hair, stringy and wet, matted against his bushy eyebrows. His Adam’s apple looked especially wonderful. It was impossible to hate Shoe with an Adam’s apple like that.

Shoe stopped and said, “Look. He’s an idiot. I just have to say it.” He shook out his arms. “He’s manipulative and disturbed. Definitely disturbed. And I don’t fault him for that because, you know, everybody has their stuff. But I’m about done with his creep-show, and I think you should be, too.”

And now from here where I can safely look back on it all, of course I can see that he was right. Of course, he was right. Only I didn’t know it at the time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Monday came with its sea of sombreros, as the first day of Spirit Week was always Wacky Hat Day. Todd posters literally covered the atrium. He totally copied Tonya W. and promised to Bring Back Ketchup. Patel and RUFF made the Todd posters. “Tired of naked dogs?” the caption read under a sad-faced hot dog squished between a skinny bun.

On the offensive, Patel championed RUFF’s smear campaign of Michael. Besides playing the squirrel-detonation footage nonstop, Patel and RUFF also plastered the school with pro-squirrel / anti-Shoe propaganda. The posters said, “Animals were here first!” and “Humans are such specieists!” and “What happens when the animals get together and decide *we’re* over-running the earth?” Patel wore a T-shirt which read “Make Love not Squirrel Bombs”.

“Why does everybody hate you so bad, Shoe?” Perry asked when he entered the atrium Monday morning to help us hand out our promotional blue scarves.

“Take a wild guess.” Shoe nodded towards Michael who was wrapping a scarf around a pretty little freshman’s neck.

Carl said, “Forget the Rodenator Pro. We shoulda put them all in little paper bags and attached them to an exhaust pipe.”

“The squirrels or RUFF?” asked Perry.

But Shoe just held his head in his hands.

During lunch, the two Mr. North hopefuls put up their most promising contestants for a food-eating competition. You had to eat whatever was in the brown paper sack that Mr. Allen gave you.

And this is how Shoe found himself swallowing a live goldfish the first day of the Spirit Week competition his senior year.

Afterward, he bragged about it. How it just went to show how awesome he'd be on *Man Vs. Wild*. "I'm so *awesome* I don't even need to cook my food. I'm so *awesome* I don't even need to kill my food."

But immediately afterward, as Michael and I waited outside the men's restroom, Shoe was a puking mess. I felt sorry for him.

"I knew Mr. Allen was a douche, but I didn't know he was an epic douche," I said.

"You're assuming Mr. Allen picked what went in the mystery bags," Michael said.

"Seems like a Mr. Allen thing to do."

"I like Mr. Allen."

"Crap off, Michael."

"No. I mean it. I do."

"You like everybody, Michael."

"There are a lot of people I don't like, Lucy. Too many. Mr. Allen just isn't one of them."

Shoe banged open the bathroom door and asked if either of us had a tic tac or a mint or even a cough drop. “Did it come up okay?” I asked.

Shoe pushed past Michael and said over his shoulder, “Next time, eat your own damn fish.”

I laughed.

Michael said, “He hates you for making him do it, but he’d do it all over again in a heartbeat.”

“I wonder if it came up dead or alive?”

“Shoe’s a pretty accepting person.”

“Shoe’s the best,” I said.

“You know who else is accepting?”

“Who?”

“Katy.”

“Katy Wren?” I sighed. “Well, yeah. Maybe now.” I tried to be careful because I knew how much Michael liked Katy. “But she wasn’t always that way, you know. She’s a lot more accepting since she met you.”

“You’re wrong, Lucy. If Shoe would swallow a live goldfish for a friend, Katy would kill a shark.”

Patel’s mom’s yoga class also practiced meditation. You know, mantras and stuff like that. Katy and Michael used to practice sometimes during lunch. There are four mantras that they used to recite to one another: *Darling, I’m here for you; Darling, I know you are there, and I am so happy; Darling, I suffer; and Darling, I know you are suffering, and*

that is why I am here for you. They would say these words aloud. To each other. It was very, very odd. It made the rest of us feel moderately uncomfortable. It was never romantic. In fact, that's probably what made it so odd. Because when they said these words to each other over their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, you got the feeling that the two of them were the only people in the room, in the world. You felt like an intruder. But in a good way. You felt the residual effects of their peace on your shoulders.

I sometimes think that if there is an answer to why Michael killed himself, the one person who might know it would be Katy Wren. At the funeral, she was the only person who kissed his coffin.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tuesday was Clash Day. My mother clashed on purpose. I wanted to die. Clash day is for almost-clashing. The only person who clashed worse than her was Michael. Tuesday's lunch competition was Battle of the Bands. Each Mr. North candidate selected his favorite band to compete on his behalf. Michael selected Perry.

“Broken Baby Dolls won't let you down, man,” Perry said. “I'll personally see to that.”

But Broken Baby Dolls turned out to be a one-man show. Perry stood on the stage in the cafeteria dedicating love songs to Noel and strumming them on his electric guitar.

“Well, you can't win them all,” Carl said.

“*I* won yesterday,” said Shoe. “Let's not forget that.”

I hated this about Spirit Week—all the pointless competitions. The real point of the week was to choose a Mr. North. Everything else was forced fun. But the Mr. North candidates were required to participate in the lunch competitions. Besides, as Shoe pointed out, Michael needed all the extra positive exposure he could get.

Wednesday was jersey day. Michael wore a Chicago Cubs jersey. It disappointed me. You barely recognized Michael in something so ordinary. If he hadn't been wearing a scarf in April, he would have looked completely normal. When I confronted him about his lack of originality, he shrugged, “I always root for the underdog. What can I say?”

Wednesday's lunch competition was another food eating contest, this time hot dogs. Katy competed for Michael, and I remembered what he had said about killing the

shark. Downers North couldn't believe its eyes: the prettiest cheerleader, big as a whale, shoving eight and a half hot dogs down her throat for the loser who once wore a cape. She stuffed them down her throat by the fistful. Shoe and Katy both threw up on Michael's behalf. Perry sang for Michael which was basically the musical equivalent of throwing up. Even Carl sacrificed by refusing his customers their prescription drugs unless they promised him they'd vote for Michael, an economic reversal as opposed to a gastronomical one. I tried to think of something I could do to help Michael win.

"Cupcakes." I told him. "I could sell cupcakes. People love cupcakes."

Michael laughed. "You don't have to do anything. Besides, your cupcakes are horrible."

"Everybody else has figured out a way to get votes for you, except me."

"Your vote is the only one that really counts, anyway. If you're voting for me, I've already won."

Michael grabbed my elbow after school. "I've figured out a way for you to help with the campaign. Today, you meet Henry."

He continued dragging me down the hallway, out North's front doors, to the bike rack. Michael's bicycle was the only one without a lock and chain. I guess nobody else at Downers North was in the market for a bicycle with a yellow banana seat.

"Ladies first," Michael said.

This is how we made it to 75th Street: me with my arms around Michael's waist and him puffing hard as he pedaled uphill all the way to the bus stop.

The Bum was awake when we arrived. Michael shook his hand.

“I brought somebody to meet you.” Michael grinned.

The Bum asked me to sit down. He had an orange beard and a beer belly and smelled like all the dumpsters in Downers Grove put together. I felt like I’d been tricked. He offered us a peanut from his brown paper bag. The bag looked like it was a hundred years old. Only Michael reached into it and took one out.

“I’m not that hungry,” I said.

“I’ve missed you,” the Bum said to Michael.

“Sorry, Henry, I’ve been sort of busy.”

The Bum winked. “I can see that.”

Michael blushed. The tips of his ears actually turned red. “No. I mean, well, yes, that, too.” He was almost crimson. “I mean, I’m running for office.”

The Bum nodded. “Often thought about it myself.”

“It’s a popularity contest,” Michael said. His eyes sparkled. “The Mr. North competition.”

Henry’s brow furrowed. “Popularity contest, you say?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t put much stock in what’s popular. The masses seldom determine anything’s true worth. But then, you know that already.”

I was shocked at how articulate Henry was.

“Lucy,” Michael said, “is helping.”

“Where’s your other lady friend?”

This time it was Michael who frowned. “Oh, you mean Katy. She couldn’t make it today.”

Katy Wren had been here? Had the world gone mad?

“Give her my regards. Still think her little bugger should be a Henry. My great-grandfather was a Henry.” He scratched his beard. “Hope she has an easy time of it. My wife, God rest her, never did.”

The Bum had had a wife? Children?

“How are Amy and Donovan?” Michael asked.

“Busy. Don’t see them as much as I’d like.”

“Henry’s son, Donovan, is an architect,” Michael said. “Amy has twins.”

“Used to keep pictures in my wallet. But it’s been so long since I’ve had one of those, I just keep the pictures in here.” He patted his chest. “So why do you want to win this popularity contest?”

“First, to see if I can. Second, to prove a point.”

“Ahh. A protest of sorts.”

“Protest by participation,” Michael said.

“Clever,” replied Henry. “And what, may I ask, is the point?”

“To prove you wrong. To show that people can change.”

I kept waiting for the twist. You know, for Henry to say something wise and sageful and Michael to look at me like, See? But it never happened. The whole conversation between Henry and Michael was surprisingly enjoyable. Delightful, as a matter of fact. Maybe that was the twist. To show me how I’d misjudged the Bum on 75th

Street. It made me forget all the delightful repartee; it made me mad. Afterwards, as Michael pedaled me back home, I said, "What was that all about?"

"What was what about?"

"That."

"Henry?"

"Yes, Michael. Henry."

"He's my friend. Can't a guy want a friend to meet a friend? Doesn't Shoe introduce you to his friends?"

"Henry isn't on the same level as any of Shoe's friends."

"Henry is ancient. He protested Vietnam. He feels people should get medals for not fighting. I think I do, too."

I exhaled slowly.

By this time, he had turned into my driveway. I got off the bike. Michael braided the pom-pom strands hanging from his handlebars. "I'm proud of him."

I didn't say anything. It felt like a trap.

"Henry stands for things, you know? He may be the only guy in Downers Grove who does."

I didn't want to encourage him, but my curiosity got the better of me. "How'd you meet him?"

"I was waiting for the bus."

"In his house. The bus stop is Henry's house, right?"

“Well, yes. Only we had just moved here, and I didn’t know that at the time. I guess you could say Henry was my first friend.”

“What do you guys do, you know, when you hang out?”

“Just talk, mostly. Henry’s big into philosophy. The after-life. That sort of thing.”

Michael finished braiding the left pom-pom and started on the right one.

“Could you stop that?”

Michael looked up. “What?”

“That. Could you stop braiding for a minute?”

“Lucy, what’s wrong?”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I just don’t get it.”

“Why I’d be friends with a homeless druggie?”

“Why you’d bring me there to meet him. It’s, well, creepy. It’s the kind of thing you can’t do if you really want to be Mr. North, which I’m not all that sure you really do want. You can’t creep people out.”

Michael thought about this for a moment and then said, “When I look at Henry I see something in him that reminds me of myself. I don’t know. I just know that I can talk with him and be myself. Isn’t that what constitutes a friendship?”

“It’s just that sometimes you try too hard to be different.”

“Thank you.”

“See? That’s exactly what I’m talking about. It wasn’t a compliment. By running for Mr. North you’re putting yourself out there. You’re putting all of us out there.”

Michael put his kickstand down with his hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Parking my bike.”

“You did that on purpose.”

His face was a blank. Truly a blank. He had no idea what I was talking about.

“You don’t even put your kickstand down like a normal person. God, Michael, who uses their hands to put down a kickstand?”

Michael sat on the driveway. He took a deep breath. “If I kick it too hard, it’ll fall off. That’s why I use my hands.”

“You always have a reason, don’t you?” By now, I didn’t even know what I was saying. “Well, it may all make sense in your mind, Michael. But it doesn’t in ours. It doesn’t in mine. And why did you take Katy to meet Henry? What did she say?”

“I thought she might like him. Just like I thought you might like him so I brought you there.”

“And did she?”

“Yes, she actually did. They got along fabulously.”

“If Katy’s so wonderful, why was she such a douche before you came along? Tell me that.”

“Katy has nothing left to lose. Being in a place like that changes a person,” Michael said. “And I wanted you to meet Henry because I like him a lot just as I like you a lot. Only you smell nicer.” He smiled.

“Oh, that makes it tons better.”

“Okay, Lucy. So what if Henry is homeless? So what if he smells a little. That doesn’t bother me.”

“That’s my point. That’s exactly my point, Michael. Nobody, *nobody* thinks like that.”

There was a change in Michael, in the way the air felt between us. He sighed. “I know.”

“It’s real. I’m sure it must be real, but it’s just so freaking *weird*.”

“Don’t you think I know that, Lucy?”

Everything inside me told me to quit, but I just couldn’t. “So do you do this stuff on purpose? Did you befriend Henry because it was the one thing nobody else in Downers Grove would do?”

“Actually, Henry befriended me. And no, I try not to think like that anymore. I do what I want to do now.”

“And is that why you befriended me? Did I seem like a Henry to you?”

Michael looked at me and blinked. “Yes, Lucy. You did.”

I wanted to hit him. “You are so damn proud of yourself. So much better than the rest of us.”

He put out his hands. He did not touch me, but put out his hands with his palms up and held them in the air between us like that.

But I went on. “Thank you, Michael, for befriending me. You’re better than everybody I know. Forget Mr. North—you get Person of the Year.”

“I saw the same thing in you that I saw in Henry, although I suppose with him it’s a lot more obvious.”

“And what is that, Michael? Did I seem that needy? That desperate?”

“Of course not, darling.” Michael searched my face. “Like Henry and me, you just seemed a bit homeless.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thursday was Occupation Day. Michael dressed up as a Buddhist monk. I wondered what his Christian missionary parents thought of this, but didn't ask. Michael acted in character all day. During lunch, after he and Katy won the egg toss competition, he made The Scarf Club a pot of tea. He drank the tea slowly, savoring it. Shoe burnt his tongue on his.

Michael talked nonstop while pouring the tea about what he should do when Mr. Allen pronounced him Mr. North during half-time at Friday's basketball game. Bow? Make a speech? Salute the crowd? Shoe said something under his breath about not winning, but Michael only blinked in response.

He pulled a bunch of papers out from behind his back. "I wanted to show you all these." He paused. "Applications. Filled-out applications for The Scarf Club. Apparently, other people want in."

Katy said, "Really?"

"Really."

Carl said, "Why?"

Michael just smiled. "Maybe other people like scarves just as much as we do. Or maybe Downers North is changing its mind about us."

Shoe choked on his tea. I gave him a look, and he said, "What? Wrong tube."

Carl said, "He's right. Todd will probably win. It's easy as predicting Christmas will happen. You've got the drug vote. But that's about all I could do for you."

Michael replied, "And I thank you for that Carl. It means a lot."

Perry said, "Hey man, I'd vote if I were allowed." You had to be an actual student to vote, and Perry was too old.

"I know you would," Michael said.

Katy's eyes sparkled as she put her hand on her belly. "You've got our two votes."

Shoe got up and threw the rest of his tea in the trash. "And ours," I said as I watched him walk away.

"Are you nervous?" I asked Michael as he walked me to Calculus after lunch. The Mr. North candidates would deliver their speeches during fifth period.

"A little, but that's good," he said. "A little bit of the jitters keeps you on your toes."

"What are you going to say?"

"I don't know yet." He grinned. "I never do, you know."

"I know. I remember."

We arrived at my class, and he glanced at his watch. "With two minutes to spare."

"Michael, why are you doing this?"

"Lots of reasons."

"But aren't you afraid of humiliating yourself? I mean, I'm not looking forward to next Monday if you don't win. Things are bad enough now."

Michael's eyes widened. "How so?"

“I mean, everybody already thinks we’re losers. If we lose, it’s like they were right all along. We prove them right.”

“True, but what if we do win? What if we prove them wrong? Prove that we were winners all along, and Downers North just didn’t get it.”

Michael seemed to be the only one who didn’t get it.

“I don’t care if I win or not,” he continued. “I mean, I’d really like to win. But being named Mr. North doesn’t change who I am.”

I let this sink in. “So winning Mr. North changes them, is that it? That’s what you and Henry were talking about?”

“Bell’s about to ring. I’ll see you after the speeches.” He kissed my forehead. “Oh, I almost forgot.” He pulled a thin, freshly sharpened pencil from his back pocket. “Just the way you like it.”

“Michael, I just don’t want to see things get any worse for you. I mean, things are okay now. You’ve got a small following. It’s nice. We’re losers but in a semi-acceptable way. Downers North can be pretty ugly. Most of the kids here would like nothing better than to see you lose.”

“I know that, Lucy.”

“Don’t you care?”

He sighed. “I do care. I care a lot, to be honest. Maybe more than I’m willing to admit.” He started to leave and then turned back around. “Maybe it’s not Downers North I’m trying to convince at all.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Shoe, Carl, Perry, Katy and I sat in the back of Schuler Auditorium waiting to hear the Mr. North speeches. There were only three Mr. North candidates seated on stage: Todd, Michael and Tonya W. Tonya W. sat between Michael and Todd, but we were pretty sure that she was just a joke. Michael sat with his left leg crossed over his right one, like a girl. Carl nudged Shoe and nodded at this. Shoe caught my eye, crossed his left leg over his right as well, and smirked.

Everybody pretty much spaced out as Todd bullcraped about improving school lunches, and then Tonya W. took her place behind the podium. She promised us a longer Christmas break, and that she, personally, would bring back ketchup. Mr. Allen reappeared and escorted her out, just as she was throwing in world peace as a bonus. Then it was Michael's turn. He had toyed with the idea of rapping his speech. He thought the shock-value alone might count for something, but Carl said, "That's gay", and so that was that.

He whipped his scarf over his shoulder with deliberate flourish and walked slowly to the microphone. He adjusted its height and tapped on it twice. The crowd waited in expectation. With Michael, you never knew. He cleared his throat and seemed to be deciding something. Then he folded his hands on the podium and stared out into the crowd. He seemed to be searching for someone. Finally, he found me. "I want to be Mr. North," Michael said to me, "because I can't. Because life doesn't work that way. Because you have to play football or cheer or be extremely good-looking to be somebody

at Downers North. And I wondered if I could prove that wrong. I wondered if, just once, it would be enough to be myself. That's why I'm running. I want to find that out."

Carl was busy rolling his eyes at us when Michael walked off the stage and out the exit door. That was it. That was all there was to his speech. Nobody knew what to do. Finally, Katy stood up and clapped, and then everybody else sort of joined in, too. Disappointed with the crowd's response, Katy said to us, "This school sucks. I'm leaving."

As she waddled up the aisle, suddenly it dawned on Downers North that we didn't have to vote for a douche if we didn't want to. Big of a loser as Michael was, he was a better pick than Todd. A million times better. You could see this in how long it took Katy to get to the exit door. You could hear it in how hard she breathed while getting there. Some dork in a scarf in the back pocket of the auditorium called out, "What's the baby's name?"

Katy froze.

Somebody else yelled, "Yeah? What you gonna name your baby?"

Suddenly, it hit me that they were yelling this not at Katy but at Todd.

Todd cleared his throat and tried to disappear in his chair.

A big girl in a blue scarf whom I recognized from Speech and Debate stood up and said, "How you gonna stand up there and promise us this and that when you can't even take care of your own responsibilities?"

Katy turned around and faced the platform and waited for Todd to respond.

The big girl went on, "Seems to me like you got enough on your plate. Seems to me like you got enough to handle."

"She's right, you know," Katy said. You could barely hear her.

The microphone picked up Todd's heavy breathing.

"Things just got way more interesting," Carl said, rubbing his hands together.

Katy continued, "Well, she is, you know. Why won't you call me back?" She was crying by now. There was no mistaking it. "Don't you want to know your son?" Her sobs filled the empty space. "Don't you?"

By this time, Perry had noisily made his way down the row to the aisle. He took her arm and led her out the exit door. Shoe elbowed me, his eyes gigantic. Carl whistled softly. Katy still sobbed and sobbed. You could hear her even after the door closed behind them.

Todd was still panting, but the big girl still had more to say, "That's just wrong. You that baby's daddy, and you don't even want to be that. That other kid may be crazy, but least he's nice to that poor girl. That's just wrong, if you ask me. Mm-hmm. That's just wrong."

She had called the emperor naked and pointed out the giant elephant in the room in one fell swoop. She was still standing there shaking her head at Todd who by this point had wilted in his chair. Somebody stood up and chanted Michael's name, pumping his fist in the air. The big girl joined in, and then a few other kids did, too. It wasn't everybody, and it wasn't hypnotic. It was the sound of Downers North discovering the

beauty of free will. If Michael could break out of the Downers North caste system by winning, perhaps we all could. The chorus of Michael's name sounded like hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY

We were in student parking lot C handing out blue scarves after the speeches when Patel and two RUFF kids approached Michael. Patel grabbed a scarf out of Katy's hand and whipped it at Michael's face like he was cracking a rope. Another RUFF kid grabbed a scarf from Perry and whipped it at Michael, too. The other RUFF kid grabbed a scarf from Carl and threw it at Michael's face. Nobody said anything which made the whole thing even creepier.

Katy was the first to find her voice. "What the hell are you doing?"

Patel dangled the scarf in Michael's eyes. "What the hell was that all about?"

"What?" Michael asked.

"I'll bet you planted that girl. Newsflash: Todd doesn't need a good speech to win."

Michael didn't say anything.

"Todd doesn't need anything to win. You think anybody here actually wants to vote for you?"

Michael started to speak, but then stopped.

Patel and his friends circled Michael tossing the scarves at his mouth. "I'm not going to tell you this again. Leave my mom alone."

Katy walked to Michael's side. "Let her tell us herself."

Patel said to Michael, "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" Michael asked.

Patel put the scarf around Michael's neck from behind. He pulled it taut, choking Michael. "*Humiliating* me."

"Not trying to humiliate... anyone," Michael said, as he tried not to panic.

Patel pulled the scarf again. "I suppose you actually want to be Mr. North. I suppose you actually like yoga. I suppose you like Indian food, too."

Michael coughed. "Yes."

Patel suddenly yanked the scarf really tight around Michael's neck with both hands. "Get the fuck out of our life!"

Michael's face grew red. He seemed to stop breathing.

Everything just stopped.

Carl, as if on cue, lunged at Patel's shins and grabbed them with both arms. Perry stepped forward and gagged Patel with a scarf. Katy screamed, and then yanked the scarf from Patel's hands so Michael could breathe.

Michael gasped for air.

Katy grabbed the scarf gagging Patel away from Perry and pulled it with all her strength. "How does it feel *now*?"

Horrified, Michael tried to wrench Katy's hands from scarf choking Patel. "Let him go."

Katy said, "He deserves it. He deserves it. They all deserve it." She was crying again.

By now, it had started raining. Big plops of water dotted the asphalt. Patel said something, but nobody could tell what it was. His brown face darkened.

“You’ve got to let him go, Katy,” Michael said as he struggled with her hands.

Perry got in Patel’s face. “What you want to say about my hair now?”

“You little piece of horse-shit,” Katy said. “How dare you tell us anything.”

“Let go, Katy! Let go!” Michael’s voice was now frantic as Patel fell to his knees, his hands wildly trying to pull the scarf out of his mouth.

Carl said, “Bastard deserves whatever he gets.”

Katy whispered in Patel’s ear, “Leave him alone or I’ll kill you.” She released the scarf, and Patel ripped the scarf out of his mouth and sucked in huge mouthfuls of air.

“Yeah,” Perry said and sort of kicked him.

Michael crouched down to where Patel had collapsed on the pavement and said in a very quiet voice, “I’m sorry.” He offered Patel his hand to help him up.

Patel exploded. He leapt up like a cat and clawed at Michael’s face.

It wasn’t until after Mr. Allen peeled Patel off Michael, that we saw the marks. On his neck and very distinct, they looked like burns from a wire. Michael’s scarf had come off in the fray, and this is what you saw: the visible result of something unspeakable. There were *marks* on Michael’s neck. Michael’s hands flew to his neck, but he couldn’t cover them all. His hands moved around and around his neck. But he couldn’t hide them. In one glance, we saw the whole sad story of Michael.

It seemed to go on forever. Nobody knew what to do. Finally, Katy unwound her scarf. Gently she lowered his hands and wrapped her scarf around his neck, so that he was covered again. Then she took his arm, but slowly as if she were supporting an elderly man or perhaps a very sick child, and walked him to her car.

Michael did not look back.

Mr. Allen shook his head and made some annoying noise with his tongue and walked back into the school. Patel and his buddies left without a word. It was all very surreal.

We watched Katy's car pull out of the parking lot, and still we stood there in the rain not speaking.

Finally, Perry said, "Dude, did you see how long they were?"

Carl said, "Shut up, Perry."

Suddenly, I remembered Shoe and looked for him. He was standing at my side, had been standing there all along. His hands held my upper arms, ready to pull me away.

That night Michael appeared on my porch, saying he needed to speak with me. He asked if we could go somewhere alone. I didn't know where to go. I didn't want to stay at my house with my hovering mother, and I really didn't want to go to his house. Michael's parents were nice, but weird. I suggested we go downtown. But he said he needed to speak with me *alone* and could we walk to the giant snow hill near Shoe's house?

The grass was muddy.

That's why we left the snow hill for the Treefort.

The grass was wet.

Was that why we went to the Treefort?

The grass?

Even now, I still can't say. It seemed reasonable at the time. I told myself it would be okay even as I knew that when you have to tell yourself something is okay, it never is.

I took Michael into the Treefort because of the condition of the grass.

The Treefort felt different with Michael there. Empty and cold and not alive anymore.

We sat on the wooden planks next to one another, facing the trunk.

His lower jaw quivered, then he opened his mouth, and his lip shook. He broke a skinny branch from the oak and traced the lines of the Treefort planks with it. "It's nice here. Cozy." He smiled, and his stick snapped, but he continued scraping the end of it up his leg to his thigh where it broke again. He dropped the stick and looked at me. "I'm sorry, Lucy. I'm sorry for dragging you into, well, into me."

I knew then what should remain unsaid.

"I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything."

"But I need to say it. I need to say it all."

"Please don't, Michael."

"You make me feel happy again. Like South Africa. Free, I guess. I didn't have to hide anything there. You don't know how I wish I could go back."

What was Michael hiding? The marks? Something else? "Maybe you will."

"My parents will never go back now."

"Then maybe you'll go back by yourself. After graduation."

"I can't."

I wanted to resist saying it, but I couldn't. "Why?"

"You saw."

"Because you tried to hurt yourself?"

"I tried to kill myself."

The crickets continued singing even though it was pitch black now.

"Thousands of miles of land at your back as you face Antarctica. The mountains smell like fresh laundry. Like God himself molded them with His very hand. The sun is brighter than anything you ever saw. And the people are just...charming. You feel so loved. I've never felt that way anywhere else." He played with a piece of my hair. "You know, I think God lives in Cape Town."

I didn't know what to say so I just nodded.

"I miss Him."

I didn't want him touching me. I felt afraid. But it was like we had to go on, like the part had been scripted for us. "If you were so happy over there, then why?" I stopped. And this was it; this was what Michael was hiding, what I'd been trying to get at for all these months.

"Why try to kill myself?"

"Well, yes."

Michael took my hand. My right hand. He rubbed it absent-mindedly. He touched the callous on my forefinger. His brow furrowed, and his worry lines appeared as he held up my forefinger to look at the bump. I wanted to pull my hand away, but I didn't.

"From throwing up. I do that, you know."

“I know.”

He still held my hand in his, and I remembered how it had felt when Coach held my hair back, safe.

“I suppose I tried to hurt myself for the same reason you throw up.” He said it matter-of-fact. His chin fell to his chest, and he sat like that for a while. Then he took my forefinger and kissed the callous. His eyes were large and blue and sad.

You could see everything in that gesture. You could hear everything your father never said. You could feel Coach. At long last, if only for a moment, you felt you were enough.

“I could take you to South Africa, Lucy. We could go tonight.”

He placed his hand above my right knee where no one knows I’m ticklish, but Shoe.

I smiled involuntarily, and then Michael smiled. His face was close, too close to mine. Somebody sucked the oxygen from the world. I couldn’t breathe. His hand moved up my leg. The trees groaned. But it wasn’t the trees, it was me. I was groaning like an animal without a home.

I tried to push him off of me, but he just pressed closer, harder. I pushed again, but he moved his face into mine. He kissed my forehead, my cheeks.

And then I was calling for my father. For my father to come and save me and take me home even though I knew he was halfway around the world and that I didn’t have a home or a father. Not really. So I called for Coach.

Michael let go.

But still I was calling for Coach.

As Michael stared at me, his eyes became frightened. He moved away from me until nothing of him was touching me anymore. Finally, he said, "He's dead."

"What the hell?" I asked because suddenly Michael was Michael again.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm so sorry," he said over and over.

I didn't know what to say, what to do. Fear and relief and then pity because I remembered in a place nobody else had ever been able to visit that Michael was a homeless animal, too. "It's okay."

Water ran down his cheeks, and he covered his face with his hands.

"Hey," I said. "It's okay. Everything's okay."

Sobs and sobs came up his throat. I pulled one of his hands from his eyes, and said, "Michael. Look at me. It really is okay."

He held on to my hand like he was drowning. "I'm just so sorry."

I don't know how long we stayed like that. The crickets stopped singing, and still I was searching for the perfect words to make everything right again. At length I said, "Everybody has their stuff, Michael. Everybody has marks." But it was not enough to make anything right.

Suddenly, I heard Shoe's voice coming up the tree. "Get the fuck out of my Treefort!" His head appeared through the floor boards. His hands followed, flying. "Get out! Get out! Get out!"

"Shoe, it's alright," I said.

“Get the fricking fuck out!” He climbed up into the Treefort and broke off part of a branch and waved it in our faces, shooing us away.

“Shoe, what’s the matter with you?”

“What’s the matter with *me*? You’ve got some balls, Merdock. You’ve got a fricking lot of balls asking *me* that.”

“He’s sick, Shoe.” And as I said it, it occurred to me that it was true.

Shoe waved the branch again at me like a shotgun. “Get out.”

“It’s mine, too.”

Shoe stopped wielding the limb. He took his glasses off, and his eyes seemed twice as large as usual. “Are you kidding me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Are you god-damn kidding me?”

“Shoe. What’s the matter with you?” I sounded like my mother.

Michael sat in a dark corner of the Treefort, not moving at all.

“He’s sick, Shoe. Something’s not right with him. And I was just trying to help.”

“I’ll bet you were.”

I bit my lip.

“Have you forgotten where you are, Merdock? Have you gone crazy? Because I hope to hell you have. I hope to hell you’re just insane.”

“Instead of what?”

“I don’t know. You tell me why you and this...schmuck are in our Treefort.”

For my eighth birthday, my father gave me a camera. He showed me how to take a picture. How to focus and wait until everything was perfect. The lighting. The angle. And that inexpressible something that makes the picture seem alive. When all three things come together, you have a memory, he said. It's like a little click in your mind before you click the camera. I remember this distinctly because it's one of the very few things my father ever taught me.

That little click went off someplace inside me. Shoe waving a dead tree branch over his head, minus his wire-rimmed glasses. Michael limp in the corner.

“The grass was wet.”

Shoe dropped the branch. A deflated sigh escaped. Michael made a little noise that suddenly stopped. Then the boy who built me a treefort put his glasses back on, shook his head, and climbed down the tree one last time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Michael didn't show up at school the next day, Spirit Week Friday. He didn't meet us before school in the parking lot to hand out scarves, and he wasn't in any of his classes. At lunch, Perry hurried over and said, "So what do we do now that he's MIA?"

Katy said, "I'm sure he'll be here for the pep rally."

But I wasn't so sure. And I could tell by the way she nibbled her hummus wrap that she wasn't either.

Carl said, "I have a lot of customers who are going to be really pissed if he doesn't."

Shoe ate his fries without looking up.

The Omega, Downer's North's student newspaper, lay on the table under Shoe's fries. Its poll showed Michael was neck and neck with Todd. Apparently, the big girl's speech had worked more magic than we knew.

I spent fifth period in the restroom because I didn't want to go to the pep rally. Somebody banged loudly on the stall door fifteen minutes into the period.

"He's not here," Katy said.

I came out.

"He's not here."

That worried me. "Have you tried calling his house?"

"Not yet."

"Well, do that. Where's everybody else?"

“In the hall.”

We left the restroom, but only Perry sat on the linoleum in the hall.

“Where’s Shoe?” I asked.

“He left with Carl,” Perry said. “Carl said Michael would show up when he was ready.”

Katy threw her cell phone in her large red purse. “No answer.” She whipped around. “Okay, who saw him last?”

“I did” I said.

“When? Where?”

“Last night at Shoe’s.” I didn’t want to go into it. It really wasn’t anybody’s business.

“Did he say anything weird about today?”

Perry said, “I think he’s planning something.” His eyes shone. “You know, some sort of staged event to really win it big. Like he’ll show up and light himself on fire or something like that.”

Katy shook her head. “Something’s wrong.”

The Darlings stood straight and tall and empty by the time we reached downtown Downer’s Main Street. I half-expected Michael to be picnicking under them or detangling a kite. We searched the snow hill and most of the bus stops. Nothing.

By now, school had let out. All the votes had been cast. There was nothing else we could do to save Michael’s chances of Mr. North. There were still two full boxes of blue scarves in Katy’s trunk that we’d planned on handing out during the pep rally, but it

was too late. We wandered the neighborhood in Katy's red convertible. Perry wanted to put the top down, but Katy wouldn't let him.

"Noel loved convertibles," he said.

Suddenly, I remembered Henry. I had this uncanny feeling he might know where Michael was. "Drive over to 75th Street," I told Katy.

"You're right," Katy's whole face lifted. "Henry. Why didn't I think of that?"

Perry said the Bum on 75th Street looked like Santa on crack only with an orange beard instead of white. We found him sleeping on some half-filled trash bags. Perry picked up a stick and poked him. "Dude, wake-up."

Katy grabbed the stick from Perry and threw it on the ground. She crouched down and gently touched Henry's elbow. "Good morning, Henry."

Henry was completely out of it. She had to do this several times before he even rolled over. He opened his eyes momentarily and rubbed them with his fists. "Turn off the lights," he said.

Perry asked him over and over if he knew where Michael was, but he couldn't get anything out of him. "Dude's *wasted*," Perry said.

"I don't know what else to do," said Katy.

"Henry," I leaned over him and opened his eyes with my fingers. "Michael's in trouble. Do you know where he is?"

Henry rolled over and said something about the lights again, but not before I saw a glint of knowledge in his eyes.

"He knows something," I told Katy. "Make him talk."

“Henry,” Katy jostled him. “Where’s Michael? Do you know where Michael is?”

Henry opened one eye and said, “Did he win?”

“We don’t know, yet. Where is he?”

“Tell him I said congratulations,” Henry said. “Tell him I concede. He was right.”

It was almost five now. The varsity game started at six. Mr. Allen would announce Mr. North during half-time.

“What do you do when you don’t know what to do?” Perry asked.

“Call Carl,” I said.

“What?” said Katy.

“Carl. Call Carl.”

Katy dialed his number.

“Here,” I said.

She handed me the phone.

“Carl, he’s still missing.”

Carl breathed heavily on the other end.

“Have you seen him?” I asked.

“No.”

“Have you seen Shoe?”

“No.”

“Carl. Think. Think. Where would he be? Perry says it’s a stunt.”

“I doubt it. My guess is he’s trying to send some sort of message.”

“You think he’s okay?”

“I think Michael knows what he’s about.”

“Is Shoe there?”

“No. I told you that. Big C’s on the other line. I’ve got to go.”

He hung up.

“What did he say?” Katy asked.

“He said Michael’s trying to send some type of message.”

Katy collapsed against the steering wheel which was already pressing into her belly. “He’s right. I know he’s right.”

“The question is,” I said. “what is Michael trying to say.”

“The question is what do we say if he wins,” Perry said. “What do we do?”

“We accept the award,” said Katy.

“All of us?”

“Yeah. I guess. That’s what Michael would want, isn’t it?”

You could sense Downers North’s anxiety. You could see it in the way the Todd posters covering the gym suddenly went limp. You could see it in the half-hearted way the cheerleaders pumped their arms and worked the crowd. You could smell it in the staleness of the hot dogs.

I didn’t pay too much attention to the game because I kept eyeing the gym entrances for Michael. Katy and Perry sat in the bleachers in front of me, Shoe, and Carl. Carl sat between us. Shoe was still majorly pissed at me. I wanted to say something, but the words got stuck. And besides, there were no words for what I had done. I knew that.

The first quarter was over, and we were almost through the second. Katy turned around in her seat, her belly pumping Perry in the elbow. “Where *is* he?”

The buzzer went off. Half-time. The cheerleaders did their thing, and then Mr. Allen came out to center court with the microphone. He droned on and on and finally said that it was time to announce the winner of this year’s Mr. North competition. “Can I have a drum-roll, please?”

“This year’s competition was as close as I’ve ever seen it in all the years I’ve been here. I’m really pleased at the effort of both candidates to really pull the school together. We’ve never had as many North students participating at the voting booths as we had this year. Although the competition was close, one student barely squeaked ahead. Spirit Week 2010’s Downers Grove Mr. North is Michael Wineberger.”

The bleachers went nuts. The guys high-fived, and the girls hugged each other. The cheerleaders did back-flips and cartwheels. People were crying. Even the hot dog lady banged on the concession stand wall with her hands. It was so cliché it hurt, and had I not been so worried about Michael, I would have actually enjoyed the irony of it all.

“Michael, please step forward and accept your crown.”

I stared at the gym’s entrance, expecting Michael to appear at the last possible second. It was just the type of thing Michael would do.

“Would Michael Wineberger please step forward?” Mr. Allen said. Whispers of “Where is he?” rippled across the bleachers.

Katy stood up and smoothed her palms on her thighs. “It’s time,” she said.

Perry said, “I guess it’s just us.”

It felt weird standing in center court with all the lights on us as the applause went on and on. Katy told Mr. Allen, “Michael couldn’t be here. We’re here to accept the crown on his behalf.”

Mr. Allen placed the crown on her head with ceremony and handed her the microphone.

“We are thrilled to accept the Mr. North crown in honor of Michael D. Wineberger.” She smiled as the crowd settled down. “Michael can’t be here tonight, but if he were here I think he would want to say thank you for your votes and thank you for believing in him.” She turned to hand the microphone back to Mr. Allen, but then changed her mind. “And I think Michael would also want to say thank you for believing in yourselves.” She offered the microphone to Mr. Allen, but Perry grabbed it out of her hands.

“You guys rock! Way to rock the vote!” he screamed into it. “We love you, man!”

Somebody shot off an air-horn, and then people threw their scarves in the air like after graduation. Downers North chanted Michael’s name. Michael, Michael, Michael. You half-expected him to come swinging down from the gym rafters on a rope or rise slowly up from the floor in a cloud of smoke. But Michael did not come.

Some of the RUFF kids sprinkled throughout the crowd began to chant “Todd” to counter all the Michaels. Carl raised his arms high above his head and flicked them off with both hands. Mr. Allen whisked the microphone away from Perry who was still screaming into it, “I love you! I love you guys!” and told us to sit down.

So Michael had won. He had actually beaten Todd Coleman. It was something to take in. I scanned the bleachers. Katy Wren with the Mr. North crown adorning her pretty blonde hair. Perry blowing kisses to the cheerleaders. Even Carl and Shoe smiling in surprise. Michael beat us at our own game. He showed us another way to think, to be. He had finally been what all of us so desperately wanted to be: enough. His name rung in my ears. I looked back at Katy Wren who was now holding the crown in her hands, frowning. I wondered if she was thinking the same thing I was. How long would we remember this? How long would we remember Michael?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I don't know where I was when they cut him down. I know where I wasn't. Shoe was far away. And the Treefort seemed impossible anymore. Some guy who worked at the True Value near the Darlings found him the next morning. His parents got the call. A voice they did not know told them that a boy in a blue scarf had hung himself the night before and could they come to identify the body?

Shoe was going to Texas Tech and Michael was gone and I was going nowhere the summer after graduation. I began running in the cemetery. I do not know what prayer is, but running in a cemetery is as close as I've ever come. I would run and tell Coach about stuff, but mostly I would tell him about Michael.

My mother took me to the ClipNCurl the day before the funeral. I remember the stylist, a short fat Mexican lady, complained about the price of gas. Three bucks and twenty-nine cents. Three bucks and twenty-nine cents for a tank of gas and Michael was dead because the True Value guy found a boy in a blue scarf hanging from one of the Darlings.

The funeral was held at the same place Coach's was. We took long drinks at the water fountain and ate the same stale mints. We wore our scarves and some of us wore capes, just as we'd worn our T-shirts at Coach's funeral. It was like the sequel to something important. Shoe was with me when I found Coach. But the True Value guy found a boy in a blue scarf hanging from one of the Darlings alone. And surely, surely, this must mean something.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

After Shoe found Michael in the Treefort, my mother did not Windex him away for a long, long time. Amanda Lindell came home during Texas Tech's Spring Break to break up with Shoe. I heard about it through Perry.

“Yeah, seems she got married or some junk like that,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“Yeah, married some dude from El Paso. Seems to me like Shoe shoulda done what he could to keep her. Like I shoulda done with Noel. Girls with hair like that don't come around but once in a lifetime. Take it from a guy who's loved and lost.”

So Amanda had gotten her ring after all.

My father came with us to the funeral. He sat with me in the pew of Michael's parents' church. My mother sat on the other side of me crying into her hanky. During the opening prayer, I left the service to throw up. I don't know why I throw up when my mother is around. I think it's because I feel out of control. I met Katy Wren in the bathroom. She threw her arms around me and sobbed, “Oh Merdock, what are we going to do? What are we going to do?”

The funeral service was supposed to be a celebration of Michael's life. His mother wore a white linen dress. I suppose she wore it on purpose as some kind of a symbolic gesture, but I found it depressing and hypocritical. I mean, how do you celebrate a suicide? His parents showed a slide show with pictures of Michael growing up in South

Africa. In every picture, he was grinning ear to ear. I'd never seen him so happy. Only in the last picture in South Africa, the one of the family on some sort of safari, did I recognize the Michael I knew. He must have been around sixteen or so, and there were the marks on his neck we had seen that day in student parking lot C. After that, the pictures were more recent, and in them, Michael wore turtlenecks, capes, or his characteristic blue scarf.

The funeral music was upbeat and joyful complete with a black choir clapping their hands enthusiastically. I think Michael would have loved that. In fact, I know he would have. Michael's father performed the service, and after saying the final prayer, he invited all the mourners to join him downstairs in the church basement for a slice of sheet cake. I found this appalling. I wanted Shoe to be the warm body sitting next to me and not my father who consumed three slices.

About a week after the funeral service, I found myself taking our debate trophy over to Michael's house. I took it at night. Running through the dark holding this obscenely huge symbol of accomplishment, I felt like a fool. I wondered what Michael's parents would do when they found it with their morning paper the next day. I wondered if they'd try to contact me. I hoped they wouldn't.

I took my other trophies down, too—the ones Michael had given me. I didn't know where to put them, but it seemed wrong to just throw them in the trash. It seemed like throwing away a Bible or something. So I gave them away in Woodcrest, the cemetery where Coach is buried. Usually, I just chose random spots to leave them, because Michael's parents had had him cremated. Cremation has always creped me out

because the person cremated is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. In Michael's case, it made me sad because I could never visit him again. It made me feel like now, for sure, he would never really belong anywhere. For some reason, I liked to put the trophies on the kid graves. You can tell which graves are the kids' ones because they usually have some type of animal on the marker. For some reason, I always left a trophy on the butterfly ones.

I didn't try to think about the good times with Michael or pray for his soul or think about what comes next. I thought about improv and living in the moment. I thought about how Michael had tried to create meaning out of chaos. How he'd taken our most vulnerable parts and had organized them into a club. I thought about how careful one must be when creating scarves. It wasn't that Michael had made the world an easier place for me to be like Coach had; it was that Michael had made the easy parts difficult. If Shoe could color our world black and white, Michael smudged it all gray.

I wanted Shoe back. I wanted him so much that it hurt to eat. It hurt my throat to swallow. My mother made me milkshakes for dinner. I could feel the muscles tightening as I pushed the icy sweetness down under her watchful eyes. The threat of Loser Camp hovered nearby.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Not long after the funeral, Patel started the rumor that Michael was gay. This news devastated Michael's devout Christian parents. I know they didn't want to believe it. But if Patel's rumors didn't convince them, it sure as hell convinced Downers North. We wore our scarves into May, into the first week of June, to graduation. Patel chartered The SCARF Club, Downers North's first club for homosexual, bisexual, and transgender students and got Todd to back it with his reclaimed celebrity status. Suddenly, it was not only okay to come out of the closet, it was cool. Todd's open-minded sponsorship of this group helped him, in turn, regain some of his former coolness. It made us forget his irresponsibility now that he was so accepting and progressive. It was a win-win.

Sun and Clap, who really were gay, helped, too. They saw a perfect opportunity for their next award-winning documentary which featured the struggle young Christian teenagers face in coming to terms with their homosexuality or lesbianism. Although they didn't mention Michael by name, they interviewed a bunch of kids at Downers North, including Perry, and recrafted Michael's narrative to fit their film. They called the documentary *The SCARF Club* and dedicated the film to Michael D. Wineberger in the opening sequence.

This is how SCARF Club chapters spread all over the Chicagoland area. They spilled over the Indiana border. A WGN reporter cornered me in the cafeteria in an attempt to interview me on the Day of Silence which Patel organized and patterned after the national one. The new SCARF Club protested anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying, and

harassment in schools by observing a vow of silence for a full day. My mother ordered the reporter and his camera guy off school property.

The squirrels were nothing compared to the scarves, and Sun and Clap made the most of their stardom. In all honesty, the film really was excellently done. It chronicled the average day in the life of a Downers North student. Michael would have liked the fact that they highlighted the injustices of teenage politics and the hierarchical hell that high school is. He would have applauded their insight. One shot was particularly moving. The film was in all black and white until the end sequence which showed the outside of the school as the final bell rang the day Michael died. North students flooded out of the school getting into their cars, loading buses, walking home. Each student wearing a blue scarf, each student who had voted for Michael, became a focal point, as one by one each scarf turned baby blue. So before the ending credits, you saw a hundred blue scarves dotting the Downers North landscape.

It really was touching in an exploitive kind of a way.

Patel ditched RUFF to focus on The SCARF Club in an attempt to ride the wave of the film's success. People's rights were just as important as animals' ones, he reasoned. In the documentary, he talked about how people had always picked on Michael, but that because Michael was in his mom's yoga class, they'd had a special bond. Patel said that he had always respected Michael in spite of their differences. And that he thought Michael would be proud of what he had been able to do to commemorate The Scarf Club.

Todd got on camera and said he was happy that he could help in some small way to bring the different factions at Downers North together. One Downers North, he said, was his mantra. He also said that he and Michael had actually had many, many conversations before his death about how they could, together, help bring unity to the divided student body. He said that Michael was the true Mr. North.

“What a dick,” said Katy when she saw this.

Mr. Allen’s only comment was “No comment,” which Sun and Clap dutifully included.

They also reused some of their old footage from the homeless squirrel documentary of Shoe looking like a loser. They showed this footage when Todd’s voiceover came on about how hard high school is for dorks.

Perry talked about how awesome it was to have been part of the original Scarf Club. He said what an honor it was to have known Michael and to have been a part of his vision. He also hawked his self-published book of poetry, *I Spy a Suicide*, which he had republished with a new dedication to Michael. He called himself a prophet and gave a shout-out to Noel, telling her he still loved her and always would and would she please take him back.

I threw up after watching this. My father saw me do it behind our garage in the drainage ditch. He pretended he didn’t, but I know he did. He did not hold my hair back. But later that night, he knocked on my bedroom door.

“Come in,” I said, knowing it was him. My mother never knocked.

He sat down on the edge of my bed. “I’m sorry about your friend,” he said.

I remembered his three slices of cake.

“I just wanted to tell you that if you wanted to talk or anything...”

“I don’t.”

He sighed. “Well, if you ever do...”

“I won’t.” I’d never been so angry with anybody in all my life. My mother was nothing compared to this. Eat cake and talk about Michael. I wanted to tell him to eat his cake in hell.

It wasn’t until after I heard him leave the house for his business trip to Bangkok, when I found it. It must have fallen out of his pocket.

I don’t know what I was looking for as I searched through my father’s wallet, but what I found certainly wasn’t it.

A picture of me from middle school. I looked extremely fat. On the back he had written in his small print, “Beautiful Lucy, Eighth Grade.”

I cried until I threw up again.

Five weeks after the funeral, Katy Wren had her baby. She named him Michael, and the school newspaper did a little piece on the sweetness of this. There were a few raised eyebrows, Mr. Allen’s being one of them, but generally everybody was just glad that the baby was finally here and that nobody had to see Katy Wren looking like a whale any longer. My mother bought a little navy blue suit with a red tie and wrapped it up for me to take over to Katy’s house, but I shoved the present in the bottom drawer of my dresser and went to The Yarn Barn and bought some blue yarn instead.

It began as a scarf, but I didn't want to stop. My fingers remembered everything. It was like riding a bike. I thought Katy might use it as a blanket, but it was way too big for a baby's crib. So then I rounded out the edges and figured he'd just have to wait until he was old enough to sleep in a bed.

My hands hurt every time I stopped. They ached—pins and needles like when your feet fall asleep and you walk on them and they start waking up. They hurt so badly my mother took me to the doctor, but he couldn't find anything wrong with them and suggested she might mention the situation to Lynn who suggested I go back to knitting.

So I knit another blanket and then another. My mother wanted to donate the blankets to Good Sam, the hospital where she used to volunteer. But I just kept piling them up at the end of my bed. When I got Carl's graduation party invitation, I sent him a blanket with a graduation card because I knew he didn't need any money. I sent one to Perry who immediately showed up on my porch with it draped around his shoulders to thank me in person and to ask if I could make Noel one so he could give it to her on their used-to-be anniversary. By this time, I was only going to school a couple days a week because my hands were so sore. I thought my mother would pitch a fit, but she arranged for me to finish up the last couple weeks of school with a homebound teacher.

I sent the final thirteen blankets to Shoe. I didn't know what else to do with them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I heard the familiar noise at my window before I saw him and because it had been so long since our last run, I thought at first that he was a cat. And then before I knew it, I was banging open my closet, grabbing my running shoes, and yanking on my shoestrings.

I opened my front door and saw Shoe doing the splits. He looked up and grinned his crooked grin at me, which I don't have to tell you is still irresistible, and said, "You're late."

I knew we'd run the long route with the first part in silence. His breathing kept time for us. And when we got to the park district's water fountain, Shoe said, "So you're sinking in quicksand. What do you do?"

"Call you."

"I can't save you from drowning by jumping in to save you. Same concept as the oxygen mask in an airplane."

"I'd try to swim."

"Most quicksand deaths are the unfortunate result of flailing arms and legs."

"I wouldn't do that."

"That's what swimming is: flailing limbs to create movement."

"Okay, then. What?"

"Lay flat. Stay calm and don't wiggle around. If you've got shoes on, take them off."

"Why?"

“They act as a suction cup if the soles are flat.”

“Oh.”

“Also, relax. Exhaustion is your worst enemy.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“A stick is optional, but it can be very helpful in extricating yourself.”

We took turns taking drinks. Shoe sat down on the curb. I sat down next to him.

“Shoe, I’m sorry.”

“I was the dumbass. There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

“I’m sorry for everything.”

“Look. It’s nothing.”

“It was something. It was. I shouldn’t have dragged you into anything. You were right. Only he was sick. Something was wrong with him.”

“I know. I knew that from day one.”

I sighed. “He said that God lived in Cape Town.”

Shoe nodded.

“What do you think about that?”

“I think that if God were to live in Cape Town, it would be because if ever a place needed the steady hand of God to keep it from sliding straight into hell...Cape Town is it.” He thought a moment and then said, “And I hear Johannesburg is worse. Place is fricking scary.”

I waited a little bit before saying, “I’m scared, Shoe.”

“Of what?” He smirked. “My grandma?”

“Yeah, I really am.”

“That’s good. That means you’re still you.”

“I’m scared of your grandmother, but of everything else, too. The future, dying. And my hands hurt. Lynn told me to keep knitting because that’s the only time they don’t hurt.”

“Yeah, thanks for the thirteen blankets.”

“I feel, I swear to God, I feel like I’m dying. Did that ever happen to you?”

“What?”

“You feel like you’re dying, but you’re not?”

“Sure. Happens all the time.”

God, I *loved* Shoe.

“Sometimes my heart stops,” he continued. “I’ll just be doing whatever and for no reason I feel it stop and then I have to wait until it starts back up again.”

“Like how often does this happen? Everyday? Once a week? Bi-monthly?”

“Twice a week.”

“You should get that checked out,” I said.

He shrugged.

I said, “That’s why I don’t like to be super-busy. That’s why, in part, I resist all those stupid student organizations. I mean, I like having stuff to do, but when you’re super-busy, you’re hurtled forward. Closer to death.”

“That’s why I like to be busy,” he said. “You forget.”

We sat in the darkness. We sat feeling out words which might connect the separate planets in their separate revolutions.

Shoe wiped his hands on his shorts, folded his shorts up, and wiped his fingers again on the underside.

I watched all this and said, “I think about death all the time, you know. I think—I seriously think—I’m going crazy.”

“Sometimes when I swallow, only it happens before I actually decide to swallow my food, before I consciously say to my brain *swallow*, it gets stuck in my throat and just lodges there. And there’s nothing I can do to make it go down.” He regarded me over his glasses. “It’s not acid reflux, either.”

I nodded.

“I know it’s not acid reflux because I take Prevacid, and it doesn’t help.”

“Do you take it every day?”

“Every other day. Stuff’s expensive.”

“Do you ever think what if after you’re dead, you don’t wake up. You’re just dead. Nothing,” I said.

“All the time,” he said. And then, “That’s why I’m going to Texas Tech, in spite of Amanda. Keep busy.”

“Because people don’t know when they’re dying. It’s not like the movies, where you’re surrounded by your loved ones, your family and friends.”

“I can’t move my neck in a full circle.”

“What?”

“You know how people roll their necks in a circle to loosen up? Well, I can’t do that anymore.”

I didn’t know what to say so I wiped my fingers on my shorts, too.

“I’m going to college because I can’t do a full neck circle roll anymore. Sometimes my heart stops and sometimes my food does. And,” Here he paused deliberately. “I’m losing my hair.”

I said, “I wake up at three—why is it always at three? I wake up and I’m sweating and stuck in the sheets and they’re choking me—I can’t breathe—and I just know I’m about to die. I can’t do anything to stop it. And nobody’s there. Not really because even if I wake somebody up, like my mother, she can’t do anything about it, nothing to help me not die, anyway. I’m all alone and I can’t breathe and I’m falling. And one day, I’m going to wake up, and it’s going to be for real. Only if it’s for real, maybe I don’t wake up at all.”

I waited a second for the import of it all to sink in, and when I thought that a significant amount of time had passed, I turned to see him feeling his hairline.

“Shoe, I just feel so alone. And I know that I’m going to be alone at the end because you’ll already be dead, and I’ll be stuck in some under-air-conditioned nursing home.”

“Maybe I’ll get a good job after Texas Tech and then I’ll have money and you won’t have to be in an under-air-conditioned nursing home.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’ve got money or not, everybody ends up in an under-air-conditioned nursing home. Alone.”

The minutes were slower now, seemed slower. They still tick, tick, ticked us forward, closer to our ends, but I felt as if we were going slower now.

“The thing is I’ve got to go to school.” Then he added, “And I’m not going because of Amanda, either.”

“I know you’re not.”

“I mean this is America. Why can’t I make something of myself? Keep busy?”

“I feel like I’m drowning all the time.”

“If there’s one thing that being an American should guarantee it’s that. Pursuing your dream. Going to school even if a running scholarship won’t cover it all. You shouldn’t have to die blue-collar just because you were born that way. You shouldn’t have to be a fricking mailman just because your dad is one.”

“I read a book about the towers. Nine-eleven. People on fire.”

“I can’t help it my father delivers mail for a living.”

“People were falling. *Clothes* were falling.”

“I just think I’d be liberated if I could get away. Do something different. Keep busy.”

“I think about it all the time.”

He pressed his forefinger to his thumb, forefinger to thumb, until I noticed this repetition, and then he stopped.

He wiped his palms on his calves, slowly, with deliberate motions and then touched his hair. He touched his hair and maybe thought about Texas Tech. And this thought seemed to bring him hope.

“I read somewhere that sixty-three percent of high school graduates go to college. Why shouldn’t I be part of the sixty-three?”

“It’s such a scary feeling. Until I kick myself awake.”

A cat yowled. Shoe gathered some pebbles in his fist and threw them.

“I miss him, Shoe.”

“I do, too.”

This surprised me, but not really that much. Shoe was a good man. A good man would miss Michael, would be sad about what happened to him.

“I feel like he picked us on purpose.”

“What do you mean?”

“For the club. I feel like he knew somehow who would need to be in his club. His stupid, wonderful club.”

“Maybe he did. I think he hand-picked you.”

“Why me?”

“Because he liked you so much. Because you needed something to do. I don’t know.”

“Carl said there was a message. I keep thinking what was the message? What did I miss?”

“I don’t think there was a message. I think this was a long time coming.” He paused a moment and then said, “Maybe Michael didn’t really care about Mr. North in the end. Maybe that was the message.”

I started to cry. “But he did care, Shoe. Tremendously.”

Shoe patted my arm. “Hey there. Hey,” he said.

There were no words to make it better. There never will be.

“You still afraid of my mother?” I asked as I wiped my nose on the back of my arm.

“Of course, I am.” He smiled. “Terrified.”

Shoe would go off to Texas Tech in three short weeks. He would become everything a good man should be: blunt and loyal and brave, just exactly what he’d always been. He would graduate and get married and have a couple kids. He would pay his taxes on time and tip his barber and he would run. And sometimes while running, he would miss me. You could see this in his eyes and hear it in his rhythmic breathing and feel it in the air moving between us that night as we ran home. I wanted, then more than ever, to put him in my pocket.

We passed Patel’s house. Patel was on his driveway in his swimming trunks tanning, even though by now the sun had gone down. As we jogged past, he gave us the finger, and it made me see a hundred scarves and it made me see Michael.

EPILOGUE

Phobophobia is the fear of fearing. I used to think Shoe had this because he always needed a survival plan for a completely unlikely death scenario. I figured it was his illusion of control, the way throwing up was mine. That's why I always went along with it—Shoe was worth it. Shoe tears up during the national anthem. He's the kind of person who thinks getting drafted for Vietnam is comparable to winning the lotto. Shoe built me a Treefort. He was a tree-climbing kind of friend. Eliot had Wolfie, but I had Shoe. There was always Shoe.

Darling, I am here for you.

Sometimes a person has to hurt himself in order to be heard. It is an act of love and not of despair. The monks during Vietnam burned themselves alive. They thought it was an act of love, a sacrifice for the good of the larger human family. I've grown to think of Michael in those terms because thinking about it any other way is unthinkable.

Darling, I suffer.

There are people in your life, and then there are People. There are coaches, and then there was Coach. Coach is how I can approach believing in God because Coach was the only father I ever really had. He was the kind of man who drove his wife to the ClipNCurl. He was the kind of coach who held back your hair.

Darling, I know you are suffering, and that is why I am here for you.

A scarf keeps you warm in cold weather. You can keep it or give it away as a gift. Who knows why any of the people in our lives are there and what they mean? I only know that for a short time I was part of a club where I was enough.

Darling, I know you are there, and I am so happy.

When Katy's baby turns one, I will give him a large blue blanket. Perry and Carl and Shoe will come to the party. We will sing and eat cake and nobody will wear a scarf or bring up Michael, but we'll all be thinking of him. And there is something ironic about this. Like the world being upside-down on a tarot card and not the man. Like the world being wrong and not him.

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