



the beautiful between

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CHAPTER SAMPLE



If you thought of high school as a kingdom—and I don't mean the regular kind of kingdom we have today, like England or Norway, I mean those small ones in fairy tales that probably weren't kingdoms at all so much as they were nobledoms where the nobles considered themselves kings and granted themselves the right of *prima nocte*, that kind of thing—if you thought of my high school like one of those, then Jeremy Cole would be the crown prince. The crown prince who could choose from all the women in his father's domain—and not only choose them but also have them parade in front of him at, say, a dance, trying to catch his eye, hoping to be chosen.

I don't know where I'd fall in the fairy-tale-kingdom hierarchy. I'm hardly Cinderella. I'm not beautiful and I'm not poor, and we have a cleaning lady who comes once a week, so I'm not stuck with the housework. Not Snow White either—the dwarfs always struck me as stranger than they were endearing, and wild animals don't look so much cute and cuddly to me as rabid and flea-ridden. Sleeping Beauty—not a chance. I'd be happy if I could just sleep through the night, let alone one hundred years. But I guess I could be Rapunzel; I do have long hair and I'm locked not so much in a

tower by a wicked queen as in an Upper East Side apartment building by the SATs and college applications. Which are wicked enough for a hundred wicked queens and then some. Just my luck: Rapunzel, who wasn't a princess at all; Rapunzel, who—in at least some of the versions of the story—didn't have a happy ending.

It's pretty easy, sitting in the cafeteria, to imagine I'm in a fairy-tale kingdom, to transform the girls one by one from trendy students into stately-attired ladies. Just take the prettiest girl in the room, the most popular, whose clothes hang on her so lightly that you know she could pull off a gown as easily as she can those tight jeans with that black tank top. Give the boys swords hanging from their belts, and turn their baseball caps into crowns. I guess high school cafeterias are kind of like a royal court: your chance to show off the latest fashions, to make an entrance, and, if you're lucky, to be invited to have an audience before the royals—you know, sitting at the cool table.

I never sit at the cool table. I'm not at the nerds' table either, though I admit to having had a few dangerous weeks there in middle school when I was caught talking to myself in the stairwell. Now I know better, and keep my little reveries to myself.

Sometimes I grab a bagel and run off to the library to work on my SAT words, but mostly I just sit at the table right smack in the middle of the room, the biggest table, the one where almost anyone could sit and fit in just fine. So it's not that Jeremy's choosing me was a total shock because I was a dork. I mean, I am a dork, in my own "Hey, have you read this amazing novel?" kind of way—but not in any of the ways that get you kicked out of the kingdom. I speak up in class, but not too much; I come to school with my skirt

too short and a black coffee in hand (even though I add so much sugar that you can barely taste the coffee); I even sneak out of the building between classes from time to time and stand on the corner with the smokers, bitching about the latest history substitute. The popular girls tolerate me just fine; the cool boys never take note.

So here I am, sitting at the central table in high court, staring at Alexis Bryant, who is sitting across from me and picking at a plate of limp lettuce. Alexis and I used to have playdates when we were younger, and the snacks at her house were always organic and whole-grain, while at my house, it was all Wonder bread and Coca-Cola. I wonder whether anyone else notices that Alexis is anorexic. Anorexia is so 1990s. In the twenty-first century, you only noticed when girls got skinny because they were doing a lot of blow. Even when celebrities got checked into clinics for eating disorders, rumors always flew that it was just a cover-up for their drug problems.

Emily Winters sits down next to me, her bangle bracelets clicking against themselves. She has to take them off when we're in class because they're so loud, but she always wears them in between classes, before and after school, and at lunch.

“Did you hear who Jeremy Cole is dating?”

Like anyone else would when Jeremy's name is mentioned, I snap to attention. “No, who?”

“Well, this is just a rumor, but I swear to God, I heard he hooked up with Beverly Edwards last weekend.”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“But she's so . . . She's not smart. Once she asked Ms. Jewett whether *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a hunting book.”

“She must have been joking.”

“She wasn’t.”

“He can’t be dating her.”

“Maybe he just hooked up with her.”

A new voice enters the conversation, a guy’s voice all high-pitched and pretending to be girly: “We should take him out back and beat the crap out of him.”

Emily and I look up—Jeremy is sitting on the other side of me. If my face is anything like Emily’s, I’m blushing wildly. Emily pretends to be done eating and leaves me. Alone. With Jeremy Cole. I’m sure that everyone’s watching; this table is right across from the food line, right smack in the center. Everyone can see.

“What’s wrong, Sternin?” He grins at me.

I always liked the idea of being called by my last name but figured I didn’t have the kind of name that adapted well to that. No one has ever called me Sternin before.

I guess because of that, I didn’t respond right away. “Connolly?” Jeremy prompts.

“Yeah?” The magic of “Sternin” is gone, so I can be nonchalant.

“I hear you’re having trouble in physics.”

“Where’d you hear that? I’m doing fine. I’m fine.”

It feels like the chatter in the cafeteria has gone quiet and everyone is listening to us. Which, by the way, isn’t entirely beyond reality, because people are always watching Jeremy Cole.

“Hey, don’t worry.” Jeremy seems surprised. I realize that my response had been pretty shrill.

“Well, then why are you mentioning it?” I ask, still defensive.

“Okay, so I didn’t so much hear it as I did see your test score when Mr. Kreel gave them out.” I must look horrified, because he adds, “It wasn’t on purpose, Connelly, it was just that you were sitting right in front of me.”

Does Jeremy know that physics is already—a month into the school year!—my lowest grade this semester and I’m freaking out because one bad grade can bring your whole GPA down and then it’s goodbye, Columbia, the school you’ve been working your whole life to get into? I’m angry at him. How dare he come over here with his preternaturally perfect tan and his charmingly gap-toothed smile and announce my shitty grade. Why would a person do that? It’s just mean.

“Look,” I say defensively, pushing my hair behind my ears and then back out again, “I’m going to work on it. I’ll figure it out.”

“Hey—calm down. I’m sorry.” Jeremy touches my arm. “Sternin, really.” And I melt because he’s calling me Sternin again. His hand on my arm doesn’t hurt his case either. I can actually feel the little hairs tingling. “I was just going to offer to help.”

“Huh?” I say dumbly.

“I’m really good at physics. You seemed so bummed about your grade. I could help you with that lab that’s due next week—it would bring your grade up to at least a B if you did well.”

Oh thank God. I wanted to hire a physics tutor, but I didn’t want to have to admit to my mom that I was having this much trouble. And Jeremy might be cheap enough that I could pay for him myself, without my mom’s help. Maybe he sees it as one of his princely duties to help a citizen in distress, and paying him would be like paying taxes.

“I could pay you cash, but it depends on how much—I mean, I can’t afford much.”

Jeremy laughs. “Dude, I didn’t mean you had to pay me. I just wanted to help you.”

“Oh.” I’m suspicious again, because I can’t think of why Jeremy Cole would want to help me.

“Yeah, you could pay me in kind. I could use some help with my SAT words.”

“Couldn’t you just get a real tutor for that?” I ask dumbly.

Why am I trying to talk him out of hanging out with me? Shut up, Connelly, shut up. Let Jeremy do the talking.

“I’ve tried that. I still suck. Maybe you can teach me something they couldn’t.”

Either Jeremy is hitting on me and is remarkably smooth—only the savviest of men would know that complimenting my vocabulary is the best way to get on my good side—or he’s genuine. Either way, I’m pretty much jelly by now.

“Okay, sounds good.”

“Thursday after school?”

“Okay.”

“Meet you in the lobby.”

“Okay.”

“All right, Sternin, stay cool.”

How is it that Jeremy makes me feel like I’m twelve and he’s twenty?



My mom isn't entirely unlike the evil stepmother in "Cinderella." I don't mean that she's wicked—she's a perfectly nice person and mother. But I think she would love to be part of a more glamorous world than the one that she inhabits, and sometimes I think she's hoping that her daughter will get her there. I can't explain why; maybe it's because she's sent me to the school I go to, Jeremy Cole's school, a school where celebrities' children go—that kind of place. She's always made sure I wear the right clothes; shopping is one of the few ways we really spend time together.

These days, just like the wicked stepmother who wanted her daughters to marry the prince so that she could rub shoulders with the royals, my mother seems to be waiting for me to come home with a nice high-society boy through whose parents she could catch a peek at the best of New York. I know that I can always get her attention if I have some good gossip from school about something that's going on in some family whose name she knows. She loves any kind of gossip about people like that.

So you can imagine her delight when I walk in with Jeremy Cole on Thursday afternoon. She certainly knows who Jeremy is—

his family is one of the wealthiest in New York. He's one of those boys you see pictured occasionally in *New York* magazine, whose family parties make it onto Page Six of the *Post*.

"Hey, Mom!" I call out as I open the door. I forgot to tell her Jeremy was coming over, and there's a possibility she's puttering around the apartment in an oversized T-shirt and rollers. It's not that she doesn't do stuff during the day—she goes to lunches, is on a charitable board or two—but every so often, she's just *here*. I wonder if she gets bored.

"Hey, honey," she responds, and comes out from her room in—phew!—jeans and a loose black T-shirt. Not quite what I imagine Jeremy's mom wears around the house, but nothing embarrassing either.

"Mom, this is Jeremy Cole."

When she talks to him, her voice is high-pitched. I can't tell if she's trying to sound fancy, or if she's nervous to be talking to him.

"Why, hello, Jeremy. I'm Ellen, Connelly's mother. She didn't mention she was bringing anyone over today."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Sternin." Jeremy replies robotically but politely, like a well-raised royal should.

"Oh, call me Ellen, please!" She laughs like "Mrs. Sternin" is preposterous, and her hand lands on Jeremy's upper arm. If we stay here, my mom will start to flirt—on my behalf, perhaps, but flirt nonetheless.

"Well, Mom, Jeremy and I have to study now, so we'll be in the other room." I head toward my bedroom, and Jeremy follows.

"All right, kids, let me know if you need anything. I could make you a snack or something."

My mother didn't even make me after-school snacks when I was in kindergarten.



I open the door, and it isn't until Jeremy follows me inside that I realize that in my haste to get him away from my mother, I've brought Jeremy into my room. This is problematic on several levels. One, Jeremy may get the wrong idea. Two, my room is immaculate, and what if he messes with my stuff? Three, the dining room table would have been much more conducive to studying.

Alone with Jeremy Cole, I'm not quite sure what to do. I can't quite wrap my head around the fact that I went from barely ever having spoken to Jeremy Cole to having him here in my room. The weather today is humid and thick, even though it's October, and normally I'd check up on my books, because I'm protective of them and humidity curls the pages. But I can't possibly check on my books in front of Jeremy. He'll think I'm a freak.

Much to my relief, Jeremy takes the lead. He settles on the floor, leans against my bed, reaches into his bag, and pulls out his physics book. I'm a little embarrassed, looking around the room at the white wicker furniture that seemed so pretty when I was nine and looks so babyish now. I'm sure that there's nothing in Jeremy's room more than a year or two old, that everything is trendy and cool and up-to-date.

"All right, Sternin." He grins up at me. "An hour of Einstein, and then you gotta tell me what the hell 'defenestrate' means."



Jeremy has a little sister. She's in seventh grade, but unlike most twelve-year-olds, she seems to have entirely skipped that preteen

awkward phase. She's beautiful, with long, wavy blond hair—just the kind of hair a princess should have, the polar opposite of my stick-straight brown mess. Her name is Kate and everyone loves her, especially Jeremy.

After lunch today, buoyed by the knowledge that I was studying with Jeremy tonight, I invited Kate into the elevator. Only juniors and seniors are allowed to use the elevators, despite the fact that our school is ten stories high, being, as it is, smack in the middle of Manhattan, where buildings tend to go up more than they go out. The younger students get into trouble if they get caught taking the elevator, but the juniors and seniors always try to sneak them on. If we get caught, we pretend it was an accident—we were talking with them, helping them with homework, so they just followed us into the elevator. We didn't even realize.

I was waiting for the elevator when I saw Kate coming out of the nurse's office—the perfect excuse to offer her a ride.

“Hey, I'm heading up to the tenth floor—want a ride?”

Kate grinned at me. “Definitely!” She seemed energized by the offer, and practically skipped toward me and the opening elevator doors.

“What'll we say if Mrs. Turley catches us?” Mrs. Turley is the strictest teacher in the school.

“We'll say it was all my fault. I lured you in here with promises of a trouble-free flight up, with ice cream sundaes and elevator passes waiting for you at the top.”

I've never felt so clever; certainly this is as much as I've ever said to Kate Cole.

“That’s not fair,” she said, stopping just before stepping into the elevator. “You shouldn’t get in trouble for doing something nice.”

No wonder everyone loves that girl. She even managed to say that without sounding like a goody two-shoes.

“Don’t worry.” I grabbed her arm and pulled her in. “The teachers love me. This is probably the naughtiest thing I’ve ever done.”

She grinned at me again. “Yeah, but you’re hanging out with Jeremy later; he’ll get you into plenty of trouble before long.”

I could feel myself blushing as the elevator ascended. Kate probably knew better than I why Jeremy had decided to help me with physics. I didn’t know what to say to her; suddenly the ride up to the tenth floor seemed interminably long, and inviting Kate into the elevator seemed like a ridiculously bad idea. But then Kate just started giggling, and so did I, all the way up to the tenth floor.

“Don’t worry, Connelly,” Kate said as she headed to her class and I turned toward mine, “Jeremy may be the most popular boy in school, but he’s really just as dorky as you and me.”

And then she grinned at me, and I smiled back. I don’t believe for a second that Kate Cole is a dork, let alone Jeremy, but it still made me feel better knowing that she thinks they are—and that she thinks we’re the same.

Now, in the two hours we spend studying, Kate calls Jeremy’s cell phone twice, and after both calls Jeremy talks about her for a good ten minutes. He tells me she’s the family mascot. He calls her Mouse when he talks to her on the telephone. When she hears me saying “Hi, Kate” in the background, Jeremy tells me, she says,

“Oooh, Connelly Sternin is super pretty,” and I’m happy for the rest of the evening, because maybe that means that I’m one of the juniors that the middle schoolers look up to.

We spend a lot more time on physics than we do on vocabulary, so I think I’m getting the better end of the studying deal. Then again, when Jeremy leaves, he says, “Better abscond.” So he’s learned at least one new word, while I don’t feel any closer to understanding vector equations.



I look for Kate at school the next day. I want to say hi to the girl who called me pretty. Kate isn’t the kind of kid who’s intimidated by upperclassmen; she hangs out with the juniors all the time. She’s the only seventh grader—the only kid from any of the other grades—who regularly spends time in the junior lounge. Anyone else’s sister and everyone would complain, but no one would ever say anything to Jeremy. And Kate’s so cool that no one minds anyway.

At lunch, Jeremy sits next to me again, and we spend the better part of the period staring at Alexis Bryant cutting her single lettuce leaf into perfect little squares—sixteen, we count—and then eating them one at a time. I think Jeremy had every intention of talking to me when he sat down, but instead, neither of us can tear our eyes away from Alexis. She seems to enjoy the attention. Jeremy and I don’t say anything, but it’s obvious that she knows we’re watching. She looks smug.

When she finally gets up, Jeremy and I turn to face each other. The teachers’ table is right behind this one, and I find myself staring at the backs of their heads. How is it that none of them notice—

or that they all turn a blind eye? I'm not entirely sure where the teachers fall in the fairy-tale-kingdom hierarchy—everything I can think of is too mean, too much like calling them servants. I rack my brain for the right title for them. Jeremy's voice interrupts my thoughts.

“Jesus. That girl is so fucked-up.”

“I know. What's more fucked-up is that we couldn't take our eyes off her,” I say, and Jeremy looks guilty. “I don't mean it was our fault—I just mean we couldn't look away, you know, like the pull to look at a car wreck.” He looks really upset that I called us out for staring at her. “Jeremy, I'm sorry.” He doesn't look at me. “Jer?” I say.

“Whatever. Sorry. It's just, I've seen someone who can't eat more than that, you know. And she really wanted to.”

I try not to show my confusion. I glance around the lunchroom as though the crowd by the soda machine might give me some clue. Our school has a rule that you're not allowed to bring your own lunch—you have to eat the lunch that's served. I mean, I guess you could bring something in, but meals are built into the tuition, so you pay for the food whether you want to or not. Emily Winters and I did the math once, and it ended up being something like eleven dollars a day just for lunch, which seemed exorbitant to us. There are lots of choices, almost all the stuff you could have brought from home: plenty of stuff to make a salad or a sandwich out of, plus whatever the hot meal of the day is, and this is the only school I know of where even the pickiest of girls will eat the hot food—that's how good it is.

Alexis is proof, though, that being forced to eat the food the

school makes has nothing to do with being forced to eat in general; the cafeteria staff don't notice or care what you put onto the trays emblazoned with the school's crest, which has been the same since it opened one hundred years ago. Back then it was an all-girls boarding school, with something like thirty students being trained in etiquette, piano playing, and occasionally literature. Now it's gained a reputation as one of the most academically rigorous schools in the city, known particularly for how much the girls excel at math and science. I wonder how the school's founders would feel about that, or about the way that girls and boys spill hungrily into the lunchroom now, heaping food on their trays and holding their forks in the wrong hand.

Jeremy doesn't seem to notice the silence that followed his comment, so I decide to change the subject. "Hey," I say brightly, "I've been looking for Kate all day. Wanted to say hi, but haven't been able to find her."

I remember that she was in the nurse's office the day before. "Is she home sick?" I ask.

Jeremy looks right at me then. "Yeah, she's home sick. I gotta go to class," he says, and starts getting up, so I do too, even though I have a free period after lunch.

"Okay," I say, feeling awkward. I mean, it's weird—he sits down next to me, and then we spend forty minutes watching an anorexic girl eat her lettuce-lunch, and then, as soon as we actually begin talking to each other, he's scrambling away. Clearly he's only interested in me for my vocabulary. Clearly he doesn't actually want to be my friend. Even if his sister thinks I'm super pretty.

“Studying on Monday?” he asks, resting his hand on the back of my chair.

“Huh?” I turn to face him, distracted by his long fingers so close to my shoulder.

He grins at me and I melt, like always. “Monday, Sternin? After school? There’s that physics quiz on Tuesday. Gotta get you ready.”

“Yeah, definitely.” I say it too fast; I’m so excited that we’re still studying together. I try to slow down. “Sounds good.”

“Have a good weekend.”

“You too. Hey—tell your sister I hope she’s feeling better.”

He shrugs. “Sick or not, Mouse is pretty happy to have an excuse to get out of her French test.” He grins, and as he walks away, it seems to me that people part to make room for him to pass. Just like in Tudor England, where when the king’s presence was announced, everyone had to give him the right-of-way.



I spend the weekend alternating between studying for physics and the SATs. The physics is so hard that I’ve begun to consider the SATs a break. Emily Winters calls to quiz SAT words with me, but her phone calls irritate me, because they’re interrupting my studying and I have my own rhythm. She invites me over to study with her, but I turn her down. I much prefer to be in my room. Even though it’s not hot out, I have the air-conditioning turned up as high as it can go and I’m curled up on the bed, layers of blankets over me. I like to think that it’s so cold, I can almost see my breath. I like to bury myself under blankets.

Maybe Emily only invites me because she knows I’m good at

the vocab and thinks I can help. I say no because I think studying alone is better. But then I remember how well studying with Jeremy went, that I did exactly what Emily is asking me to do with him and it wasn't at all counterproductive. I even learned a new word or two. Plus, it was fun.

I think about calling Emily back, about going over to her house and quizzing words back and forth over a box of pizza like they do on TV or in the movies. But I'm in my pajamas and my bed is so soft, and going all the way to her apartment seems like such a chore.

My mother pops her head in a few times, wishing me luck, asking if I'm hungry. Sometimes I think she wonders how I can stand to stay in all day, in bed, studying. My mom likes movement; she's almost never home during the day on weekends. She goes out shopping, meets friends for lunches, takes long walks around the city. When I'm not studying, sometimes I go with her. When I was little, I almost always went along—we rarely used a babysitter, and I was too young to be left alone. I felt very grown-up at lunch with her friends, at restaurants where I was the only kid. I still remember the feel of my legs swinging down from the chair. My mother used to complain that I was kicking her, which always confused me, since I thought I was hitting the table legs.

Mostly, I'd sit quietly at these lunches and watch; I knew I wasn't supposed to participate. You can learn a lot if you watch. Most of my mother's friends were married. They were women with whom my mother had gone to college; women who had been at—or maybe, come to think of it, in—her wedding; women who had known her as a wife. I'd watch the rings that flashed on their

fingers and wonder why my mother, for all her stylishness, never wore jewelry. They discussed problems they thought I was too young to understand—fights with their husbands, impatience with their children. Maybe they thought I wasn't listening; I was given crayons and drew on paper placed over the tablecloth: princes and princesses and the castles they lived in. My mother's friends always looked to her for advice. No matter that she didn't have a husband—they wanted her ideas on how to liven up a quiet marriage; how to confront a husband who was overworking, overeating, even sleeping around. I might not have known the mechanics of what they were discussing, but I could tell that it was important and very, very grown-up.

My mother was always the prettiest woman at these lunches; none of the others could ever compare to her, with her dark hair, her painted nails, her bright lipstick, her fitted clothes. They always looked older than she did—even now, when I see her friends, I can never believe that my mother is the same age. I imagined she had a magic potion some fairy had given her, something that kept her looking young while the women around her aged. I didn't believe I would grow up to be as pretty as her; I don't look anything like her. I don't remember when I stopped accompanying her to these lunches. It's only now that I realize that I was the only kid there because the other women had husbands to leave their children with.



I'm in the kitchen when I hear the front door swing open and closed. I'm eating cereal over the kitchen counter, even though it's three in the afternoon. I haven't bothered to turn the lights on, so

the countertops look gray and dusty, even though our housekeeper just came a few days ago; when the lights are on, you can see that they're gleaming white.

"Hi, honey."

"Hey."

"How's studying going?"

"It's fine."

"Good." She's not really looking at me, she's sorting the mail. I wonder if she even remembers that I struggle with physics.

"Well, I'm going to go take a bath," she says. "I'll be out for dinner." She looks around the kitchen, as though it's just occurred to her that there might not be food enough for my dinner. "I'll leave some money in the drawer for you?"

"Okay, thanks."

"Okay, sweetie," she says, and heads for her room. I wonder whether having a roommate in college will be like this. Our conversation has been just long enough for my cereal to get soggy. I throw what's left in the garbage; it'll be dinnertime soon anyway.



On Monday, I bring my lunch from the cafeteria to the junior lounge so that I can work on physics. I really should be using my free time to study, though I did take the time to notice that Jeremy wasn't in the lunchroom before I decided to come up here. The lounge is completely empty, and more comfortable than studying in the library, since I can stretch out on the couches. I want to get some work done now so Jeremy doesn't think I'm a complete idiot when he comes over later. Between bites of a bagel and vector calculations, I see that Kate has wandered in.

"Hey, Connelly," she says, slipping her backpack onto the floor and perching on the couch across from me. "Have you seen Jeremy?"

I shake my head and pull myself into a sitting position. "Nope. He isn't in the lunchroom?"

"I didn't see him there. He must have gone out for a cigarette or something."

"Do you need him for something? I can go try to find him." The underclassmen aren't allowed to go out during lunch and free periods, and even I know where Jeremy and his friends go to smoke. There's a courtyard between a couple of apartment

buildings around the corner. Even the teachers know about it, but they don't care enough to catch anyone in the act.

"It's okay."

"I didn't know Jeremy smoked," I say, trying to make conversation. Kate's being here is a nice break from studying.

"Yeah." She wrinkles her nose. "Makes him smell bad."

"Yeah."

Kate leans back against the couch, closing her eyes for a second. She looks tired. She opens her eyes and sees my books. "Physics, huh? I never understand it when my dad and Jeremy talk about it. It sounds so hard."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure they'll tutor you if you need it in a few years."

"Yeah, we'll see," she says, like she doesn't really believe it.

"I mean, if Jeremy has the patience to tutor me, he can tutor anyone."

Kate smiles at me. "He likes tutoring you, Connelly. He told me."

"I still can't figure out why he offered—I mean, he could be doing any number of more interesting things than helping a girl like me with physics."

I can't believe I just said that. I've been thinking it for days, but I can't believe I said it out loud. She'll think I'm trying to get her to tell me why her brother is suddenly interested in my physics grade. She probably knows everything about Jeremy.

"He just thinks you're cool. He told me."

"He thinks I'm cool?" The words are out of my mouth before

I can stop them. I can hear how excited I sound. Kate must think I'm ridiculously lame.

But she grins at me. "Yeah. I mean, you are."

It's such a nice compliment that I can feel my cheeks getting hot; I'm blushing.

"I thought you said we were dorks."

Kate shrugs. "Who says we can't be both?"

That makes me smile so wide that my mouth will hurt by the beginning of next period. Kate gets up to leave, and I tell her I'll let Jeremy know she was looking for him, and she says it's no big deal, she'll find him later, but thanks anyway, and good luck on the quiz.

Okay, I know Kate is four years younger than I am, but she sure seems a lot wiser. But then, someone like Kate wouldn't have to wonder why someone like her brother was taking an interest in her. Boys like that will probably always be interested in Kate.



Later that afternoon, I'm freaking out because there's no way I'm going to pass the quiz tomorrow. None of the studying I've done has made a dent. Somewhere between neutrons and panic, there's Jeremy, leaning against my bed, calmly explaining to me that protons are positive and electrons are negative, and there's no air resistance in a vacuum, and it's just like math.

"That does not help. I hate math." My heart is actually racing. I'm terrified about taking this quiz. "I feel so stupid."

"Don't worry about it. I'm only good at this because my father's a science geek."

“Oh?” I remember that Kate said Jeremy and his dad talk about physics sometimes.

“Yeah, by the age of eight I already knew about atoms and quarks. He used to sneak into my room when my mom thought I was sleeping and give me science lessons. I thought dust particles were molecules until I was eleven.”

I smile helplessly. “So I’m at a genetic disadvantage, is what you’re telling me.”

“I’m afraid so.”

It’s quiet for a minute, and when I bend over my notes again, Jeremy says, “Hey, Connelly, I didn’t mean anything by that.”

“By what?”

“About my father, I mean. I wasn’t . . . That was insensitive of me, I’m sorry.”

It takes me a second to realize he means because I don’t have a father, it was insensitive of him to talk about his. Why bring that up? It’s not like I went all sad the minute he mentioned his father. And anyway, as far as Jeremy knows, I’m just a girl whose parents are divorced. That’s not so sad.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean”—he looks visibly uncomfortable—“I mean, your dad passed away. . . . I shouldn’t be making fun of you for not having a dad to go over physics with you.”

Now my heart is racing again, and it has nothing to do with math. Curiosity makes my muscles twitch. “How do you know about my dad?”

Jeremy looks taken aback. “What? I just—you know, people talk.”

“Who?” I ask, suddenly accusatory. “Who talks? I don’t talk.” I press my fingers into the floor as though I’m about to push myself up to stand. The hardwood floor suddenly feels hot under my hands.

“Who told you about my dad?” I ask again.

Jeremy’s face looks like what I imagine mine does when faced with vector equations. I don’t know what to do. I want to be angry at him, but now I feel guilty because I’ve made him look like that. I want to forget that this has happened. I don’t want Jeremy to know how curious he’s made me: How does he know about my dad? And what does he know?

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I say. “Forget it. People talk, whatever. Let’s switch to vocab so I can feel smart for a while.”

Jeremy’s face relaxes and he smiles slowly, like he’s being careful about returning to his usual self. “All right, Sternin, but I’m not leaving until you’re set for the quiz.”

“Whatever, dude. Define ‘peripatetic.’”

Even princes don’t know everything.

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