

Some vampires are good.
Some are evil.
Some are faking it to get girls.



Bloodthirsty

By

Flynn Meaney

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For my parents,

and for all the books they read me,

far too many to name.

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chapter 1

“Turn me,” Jenny demanded, looking up at me, her eyes so intense they could have bored me into the brick wall behind me. “Turn me into a vampire.”

Her neck was milky white, like a blank canvas or first-day-of-school looseleaf. The few freckles near her collarbone jumped out at me like targets. *Sink your teeth in*, they called. *Right here*. One vein in particular bulged, full to bursting. The jugular. Two years ago I’d been taught about the jugular vein, how it was the largest vein in the body, holding the most blood. My biology teacher hadn’t predicted that the knowledge would grow dangerous in my hands. But it had in the past few months.

I had to admit—the opportunity was perfect. Jenny was a really little person, an entire foot shorter than me, ninety-eight pounds tops. She was not only a weak and easy victim, she was also a willing one.

The setting, too, was tailor-made, the stuff of low-budget horror movies and Mary Shelley novels. Jenny and I were in a dark alley. At her feet were dead leaves, litter, and a mangled pigeon. Aside from a brief flicker of light from three floors up, nothing and no one interrupted us. There were no witnesses.

But I was really, really wishing someone would come along. Lost tourists with Southern accents, pickpockets, whoever. I prayed for someone to interrupt us. I felt insane for having started this whole thing. This whole lie.

I’ve reached several points in my life at which, no matter what I did, I couldn’t win. Here I was again. So, hoping for inspiration, praying for a miracle, I bared my teeth, tilted my head, and nose-dived for her neck...

Wait, hold on. I must be telling this the wrong way. That whole thing made me sound like one of those bad vampires, one of those horror-movie vampires who goes around sniffing out victims, isolating them, and draining them of their blood, turning them into vampires against their will. In reality, in that alleyway I was just as scared as Jenny was—even more unsure. I was actually hopeful that someone would wander in—a cop, a homeless man, a superhero. I was so unsure in that moment because I’d never turned anyone into a vampire before.

Actually, that’s not true. I was the one who turned me into a vampire.

* * *

And, actually, I became a vampire under pretty normal circumstances. Not normal like the back-alley bared-neck incident, and not normal like the circumstances in fantasy books or horror films. My wrists weren’t bound by bloody chains. I wasn’t in a basement with the crosses and the windows covered. No one hovered dangerously by my bared throat. No thirsty fangs were at the ready. There were no splintered coffins, no Transylvanian castle, no rabid bats. No one wore a cape. Definitely not me.

I became a vampire in the third car of a train in Westchester County, New York. I was a Catholic schoolboy from the Midwest who was raised on Kool-Aid and overdue library books. And turning myself into a vampire like I did was normal for me, seeing as I’d taught myself how to tie a double

Windsor knot, taught myself the lyrics to Tupac Shakur's "Changes" in Latin, and taught myself that if I wore a double Windsor knot or recited the Latin lyrics to Tupac Shakur's "Changes" in public, I would get beat up. Okay, those last two may have been taught to me by others, against my will. But becoming a vampire—I chose that.

Characters in books and movies rarely become vampires by choice. They're usually pinned against a coffin or a castle wall and sucked dry while they writhe in agonizing protest. Becoming a vampire *hurts*. Or, in my case, is a pain in the ass. To "turn" voluntarily, you'd have to be on the verge of death, or so sick of the pathetic human being you are that you'd throw away your mortality for any kind of change. Looking back, I had definitely reached this brink, this point of desperation and self-disappointment. And now I'm trying to remember how I got there.

Maybe it started with the move to New York.

I grew up in Alexandria, Indiana. Well, I shouldn't say "grew up." I lived there until I was sixteen after which I was hopefully still growing. I was already six-foot-one, but in terms of facial hair, I'm behind the curve, so perhaps I hadn't reached maturity. Anyway, Alexandria, Indiana. Its claim to fame is being home to the World's Largest Ball of Paint. What's a ball of paint, you ask? Fair question. It's actually a regular-size baseball with more than 21,500 coats of paint. You can check it out on our family Christmas cards from the past twelve years. We pose in front of it every year.

My dad was a regional sales manager for an electronics company. He was like one of those CIA guys who goes to the office and comes home and never speaks of what he does. The only part of his job he brought home was his love of gadgets. This really pisses off my mother, who's really nervous about things like technology and assumes that anything that plugs into a wall is a carcinogen. Although my dad is clueless, somewhere someone thought he was smart enough to be promoted to a consultant. That's how he got moved to the New York office. Apparently a consultant is someone who peers over your shoulder as you do *your* job and tells you how to do it better. I couldn't picture my dad doing this. My mother, on the other hand...

My brother, Luke, and I had just finished the tenth grade at this Catholic school, St. Luke's, a few towns over. Luke was a running back on the football team and a point guard on the basketball team. He had played both so well in his sophomore year that the coaches promised he would start as a junior. As for me, I'd been promoted to editor of the literary magazine. Okay, so I'd been promoted from solo contributor to editor. And, okay, the *St. Luke's Lit* only had a circulation of five (that would be me, the faculty adviser, my mother, and two anonymous students who had been too embarrassed to include their names in a survey). But "editor of the literary magazine" would look good on my college applications.

But I was pretty sick of St. Luke's. Despite my powerful position on the *Lit*, no one really respected me. Especially this kid Johnny Frackas, who was always bugging me. Since everyone called him "Johnny Freckles" (both for his own freckles and for his mother's full-body freckles, which were the subject of much speculation), he grew embittered and took his anger out on the closest person. Thanks to the school's obsession with alphabetical order, the closest person was me: Finbar Frame. Every homeroom through ninth grade, Johnny Frackas would hail my arrival in the classroom with "Good morning, Fagbar" and a bout of raucous laughter. In tenth grade, I got upgraded to Admiral Fagbar. In reality, that should have made *him* a loser, because it was an allusion to *Return of the Jedi* but somehow pointing this out didn't win me any points. And I should have been protected from this torture by my twin brother, who shared my last name and thus should have shared my homeroom. Bu

Luke only showed up in homeroom three times a year, because his football and basketball coaches gave him passes to get him out of everything. I was left to fend for myself.

Monday mornings of sophomore year were the worst. Most guys were starting to get driver's licenses, girlfriends, and fake IDs that didn't make store owners laugh in their faces. Other guys now looked forward to the weekends, to house parties and playing beer pong and puking their guts out and kissing girls. (Hopefully not those last two simultaneously, although I've heard stories...) None of these things was happening for me, not even the puking.

It wasn't like I was never invited anywhere. In fact, my brother, Luke, invited me everywhere. Every Friday afternoon, he'd sprint down the long hallway that separated his room from my room and say, "Hey, Sean O'Connor's brother gave him three cases of beer. All the cans have dents in them, but he Googled it and said that we probably won't get botulism. Come drink with us!"

Or: "Maddy Keller's hot sister got back from Sweden and they're having a party. With *Swedish* girls. They're the hottest girls after Brazilian girls. Finn, you gotta come with. It's gonna be *uh-may-zing*."

Or: "Did you see the commercial for that horror movie where that Disney Channel girl shows her boobs? The team is going, come with!" Pause. "But there's *chain saws*, bro."

To my brother, Luke, a ball of energy and optimism, lots of things were *uh-may-zing*. That's because every time Luke walked into a room, there was applause and adoration. For Luke, every high school party was like a red-carpet movie premiere, and he was Vince Chase from *Entourage*. People were fighting to talk to him and ask him questions. Girls were tugging at his clothes and asking for his autograph. Guys were calling out to him with weird nicknames they'd come up with between Gatorade spits on the football field. Everyone was happy to see him.

I could only imagine how guys like... oh, say, Johnny Frackas, would react to me showing up at a party of Swiss girls and adding to the sausage fest. Or how Sean O'Connor would feel if a random nerd showed up to drink one of his precious cans of dented beer. Or how hard they would laugh if they ever saw me try to do a kegstand (Luke made me do a kegstand once when our parents were away, and I'd since been convinced you have to be a Romanian gymnast to perform one). It wasn't that I didn't like Swiss girls or horror movies. And it wasn't like I didn't like Luke. I liked Luke, but I didn't want to hang out with those other St. Luke's assholes.

I would never ever tell Luke that I was worried his friends would be mean to me. First of all, my brother never worried about social interactions, and he wouldn't understand. Second, Luke took everything literally and might tell people, "Don't be mean to my brother." Which would, of course, have the opposite effect.

So sometimes I would give my brother a legitimate excuse, like, "I'm sick of hanging out with the guys from school."

Sometimes I would go a little more ridiculous and tell Luke very seriously, "Oh, I can't drink that beer. I'm really scared of botulism."

Or, about the movie: "I heard that Disney Channel girl is actually a transvestite."

Or, about the party: "Too bad all the girls in Sweden take vows of celibacy till they're twenty-five. No, I read it, the government makes them."

But Luke did not fear botulism, gender confusion, or the challenge of state-enforced abstinence. So off he went and I sat home while other guys racked up months of sexual experience. Every Monday, those guys would come to school looking all disheveled, like they were exhausted from rounding the bases. And every Monday, Johnny Frackas asked me, "Score any ass this weekend, Fagbar?"

Did I snap back with a clever response? Did I use my wit and mastery of words to craft the mother

of all Your-Mom jokes? Did I take advantage of the fact that Johnny “Freckles” Frackas was such an easy target? No. Never. Never once. In fact, I never even answered him. I sat there like a wuss, shrugged my skinny wuss shoulders, or pretended to be really interested in my chemistry textbook all of a sudden. I never said a thing. And I really regret it.

So I was obviously glad to leave St. Luke’s and move to New York. It was definitely an ideal time for a transformation—but New York itself didn’t turn me into a vampire.

Maybe the whole transformation started in New York, with that girl on the train. She spotted me the second I got on and beelined for the seat next to mine. Although she was reading a thick paperback book, she was sneaking sideways glances at me every other paragraph. Her eyes took in the raised red patches on my hands and the bandages on my arms. Then she told me she knew what was wrong with me. And she seemed so certain, so understanding, that I agreed with her. Maybe that’s when I decided my life needed to change.

Or maybe the need for transformation started fifteen years and nine months ago, with the fertilization of two very different eggs by two very different sperm. Sorry to bring up my parents’ sex life, but that’s how Luke and I started. My mother released one egg with her enthusiasm and energy, and another with her social anxieties and cheesy sentimentality. My dad released one sperm with his sports skills and his mild likability, and one with his tendency to hole up in his room for an entire weekend. The cool sperm found the cool egg and they hung out together in the cool part of the uterus. The wallflowers got together by default and made me.

The doctors told my mother she was expecting dizygotic twins, more commonly called fraternal twins. Two different sets of genes. Two different kids. One absorbed all of the nutrition and grew round and healthy. The other was malnourished but too sleepy to put up a fight. To this day, the first still has twenty-five pounds on the second.

One of us was named Luke, and one of us was named Finbar. It’s hard to think that my lifelong bad luck wasn’t confirmed by that name choice.

Luke was born into a world full of praise and admiration. And girls. My brother was exiled from the YMCA day camp playground eight times in one summer for being kissed by girls. It was actually unfair. My brother shouldn’t have gotten in trouble; he was the victim. He was the one attacked by girls. He still is, to this day. He was the only sophomore guy at our school who was invited to a prom. This hot Asian girl from All Saints’ Girls School asked him. And believe me, despite the school name, those girls were *not* all saints. My brother came home with his rented pants on backward.

The differences between us really kicked into gear when we were twelve. Luke came home from a boy-girl party with kids from our parish and announced to our parents that three girls had *kissed* him that night. Like, *kissed* him. On the mouth. My mother, who’s a die-hard romantic but also a germaphobe, was torn between horror and curiosity. She solved this dilemma by asking my brother for all the gossipy details while driving him to the doctor for a mononucleosis test.

I also wanted to know more about these kisses (had one been from that girl with the rosary beads and halter top?), but by the time I asked, Luke was distracted by a fervent hunt for Fruit Roll-Ups. Where, you may ask, had I been when all this kissing was going on in the basement of little Mary’s house? I was there. At the same party. But Luke had been in the basement, and I had been upstairs, watching Henry Kim play solitaire. P.S., the only thing more pathetic than playing solitaire at a party, even a seventh-grade party, is watching someone *else* play solitaire. Plus, I hadn’t even known there was kissing going on in the basement. I always missed all the kissing.

Because telling my parents that I was hanging out alone with another guy while everyone else was kissing girls might have given them the wrong impression, I just shrugged when they asked, “What about you, Finbar?”

It’s not that I’m not interested in girls. Just ask the priest who hears my confession every month. I’m *very* interested in girls. In fact, I’m interested in girls every morning for about six minutes in the shower. I have the sex drive of Bill Clinton. Even my obsessive love of books may stretch from my overstimulated libido. Specifically, from the children’s librarian at the Alexandria Library. This librarian had really big breasts. Actually, not big. *Enormous*. Each one was the size of an adult bowling ball. I swear. As a result, from my *Once Upon a Potty* days onward, I associated reading with all the things the female body represents: comfort, softness, sensuality, motherly bonding, nutrition, sense of well-being... and *boobs*.

Because I don’t get out much, in my mind, love and sex are all tangled up in books and movies. I’ve lived vicariously through Heathcliff, Romeo, Rhett Butler, George Clooney, Harrison Ford, and James Bond. From the safety of my bedroom, it’s easy to believe I could be as gallant and brave as any of these old dudes. My mother, too, finds these things in books. Well, not sex. She’s a stringent Catholic. But she loves love stories. Like a bloodhound, she sniffed out that romantic streak I tried to hide. I became her companion, her romantic-comedy buddy, her personal Oprah’s Book Club. Let’s just say I know more about the evolution of Katherine Heigl’s hair color than any man should.

In many ways, the woman ruined me.

My mother’s romantic comedies made me believe girls want guys who are thoughtful, dependable and romantic. Sure, when the movie starts, the girl’s dating the self-absorbed guy in the Maserati. But slowly she’s drawn to the guy who remembers her favorite flower, picks her up from the costume party where she’s the only one in a costume, and reassures her that her interesting mind makes her far more sexy than her sister, the *Playboy* model. The whole audience melts when this guy delivers the heartfelt speech of genuine reasons he loves her. His occasional awkwardness and fumbling only make him more dreamy. This is the guy I could be. This is the guy I *am*.

And yet? High school girls hate me.

Guys who get girls in high school honk their car horns and yell at girls with short skirts; they down tiny hotel bottles of vodka at school dances and work up their nerve as they work their hands up girls’ dresses; they make fun of girls at football games for tucking their jeans into their boots and put girls’ numbers into their phones as “Blonde” because they never asked their names and never cared. Or because they genuinely forgot. That’s how Luke is with girls. That’s why he gets them—and actually now that we’re talking about girls, it started with one.

So that’s where it started.

Celine.

chapter 2

But hold on. Before I launch into my tale of humiliation (the first of many), I'll tell you more about the move to New York.

In August, we moved from Indiana to Pelham, New York. Pelham was bordered by the beach and the Bronx, both of which Luke and I thought were awesome. Within a week, my mother had located a Catholic churches and emergency rooms within a fifteen-mile radius of our new house. Having grown up in Boston, my mother was glad to live near New York City and reacquaint herself with all her urban neuroses—about falling in that crack between the platform and the train, getting robbed in a back alley, being tempted to join a gang with a cool handshake, contracting diseases carried by homeless men and pigeons (my mother hadn't quite reached the level of sympathy that her oft-referenced role model, Jesus Christ, had for the poor). She equipped Luke and me with medical masks and silver whistles. After deciding we looked like SARS patients heading for a gay club, we promptly “lost” both—in a very unfortunate incident involving the Long Island Sound and a receding tide.

My dad got a raise at his new job, so we got a new car for Luke and me. A silver Volvo. Luke and I spent July learning how to drive, and we both passed our driver's tests. I was actually a good driver. Luke was such a dangerous one that I think our evaluator passed him out of relief for having survived the test. One car for two eager teenage drivers—and for once, things worked out in my favor. I got the Volvo, sexy airbags and all, to drive to school. Luke would be taking the train to a Catholic school in the Bronx called Fordham Prep. Fordham had recruited him for the football team, and he would be taking the train every day. Fordham was a lot like St. Luke's—a small community, uniforms, heavy focus on sports, and all boys.

In a rare moment of true empathy, my mother had realized that I needed a change from St. Luke's School, or, perhaps, a change from Luke. She enrolled me in Pelham Public High School.

“You'll get to meet more people!” my mother said. “It made me sad that you didn't have more friends at St. Luke's.”

“Mom,” I groaned. “I had friends.”

“Oh, yes, Henry Kim! I forgot about Henry Kim,” she said. “What a nice boy. He was so good at math. And the violin.”

(The worst part about my mom's shameless stereotyping of Henry Kim, who was Korean American, was the fact that he *was* very good at math and the violin. Of course, he was also a star player on the varsity soccer team. But I didn't tell my mother that, because I didn't want her to know that Henry was better at sports than I was.)

This was my first time going to public school. This was my first time going to a different school than Luke. Most importantly, this was my first time at school with girls. But I had already met a girl in New York. Celine.

We had been talking online for four months. We'd met on an Internet message board called College Confidential. It isn't a dating site. Usually it's a place for high school students to post a list of extracurriculars the length of *War and Peace* and then ask, “Will I get into Duke?!?!?!?” Sometime it's a place for parents to advise one another on which is a more admissions-friendly extracurricular, fencing or playing the oboe.

For Celine and me, it was a place to chat about colleges with comparative lit majors. Then our relationship got more intimate, moving over to Facebook and AOL Instant Messenger. We began talking weekly, and then every other day, discussing our favorite books and degrading their crappy movie adaptations. Once she went to a reading by Jeffrey McDaniel (a performance poet we both liked) and messaged me immediately when she got home. She wrote, “I was hoping you’d be on!!!” That was a spectacular moment. I could see my own doofy grin in the reflection on the screen.

Luckily I could play it very cool through a wireless connection. Celine had actually never seen my face, because my Facebook profile had a picture of Tolstoy instead of a picture of me.

Celine was born in France but lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She went to this snooty all-girls’ school with the daughters of hotel magnates and faded rock stars and their second wives. Celine told me all these things about her life that she didn’t tell anyone else, like how her classmates threw parties at their lofts when their parents were on Martha’s Vineyard and got their multi-poo dog drunk on Smirnoff Ice. Celine—like me—didn’t drink, which probably made us the only two teenagers in the world who weren’t chugging beer every Friday night. Celine smoked, but only clove cigarettes. Besides, it didn’t really count because she was European. And she had tried pot twice, but the first time was only to see what it was like and the second time someone had tricked her into it with brownies, which she couldn’t turn down because she had PMS (I didn’t ask more questions about that story).

As a European, Celine surely appreciated someone with sophistication, intelligence, good manner and a broad knowledge of literature and culture. These are the exact traits I’ve developed during my years reading in the Alexandria Library, smushed between the ginormous breasts of the children’s librarian and Live Bait, the bar/strip club/fishing supply store next to the library.

Celine and I had upgraded to the intimacy of the text message after I moved to New York. We agreed to meet up in late August to hang out and get to know each other. We planned on a coffee date. But then I switched it up: instead of coffee shops, I searched online for French restaurants on the Upper West Side. I texted Celine: “Change of plans,” and I sent her the address of the restaurant. She would think I’d found a great coffee shop halfway between my train station and her apartment, but *really*, I would wow her with a fancy dinner from her native land at a place called *Les Poissons*, which had good reviews of its food but also a review that declared, “The waiters were unforgivably rude.” These two comments combined led me to believe it was an authentic French restaurant.

Yes, I know, I am a suave and romantic gentleman. In fact, this move showed me to have the elegance of Richard Gere in *Pretty Woman*, the spontaneity of George from *A Room with a View*, the boldness of Harrison Ford in *Star Wars*, and the technological skill of Tom Hanks in *You’ve Got Mail*.

But even when you’ve got a romantic plan in place and you’re wearing a collared shirt, there’s nothing more stressful than waiting for your Internet date to show up. First I started to question myself. From “Is there too much gel in my hair?” down to “Loafers? What was I thinking?”

Then, when she was sixteen minutes late, I began to worry about her. Was she still as cute as her pictures? Maybe she’d looked like that once, but she had gained three hundred pounds. Or had gotten her entire face pierced. She was now ninety percent metal and could never return to her home country because of the airport metal detectors. Or she could be an alien. Or she could be a murderer. Or she could be a man!

Seventeen minutes into my wait, anxiety switched to primal fear. I looked rapidly around the restaurant. Who was in this restaurant to protect me if Celine burst in with a chain saw and metal face? There were two tables of older couples, and by older, I mean old enough to order alcohol legally. Then there was a table of scientists in lab coats who were toasting to some discovery. Wow, that

stereotype of the mad scientist wasn't so far off....

Until—

Oh. My. God. There she was.

I'd never understood what science classes taught you about matter, about the very physical stuff of existence, but there she was existing in real life, taking up a solid outline of space between the fancy glass doors. She wasn't text on my computer or a snapshot taken from above by her own hand. Celine was *real*.

And she was perfect, in a little pink dress that showed the golden-brown skin on her thighs and all up and down her arms, her chest. What a tan! This girl was a melanin goddess!

Improbably, she walked toward me.

The men in the restaurant turned to watch her. The *women* in the restaurant turned to watch her. The scientists turned to watch her. Then they all watched her walk over and hug... me. Yes, me, the slumped-over boy with the sweat under his arms and his legs jiggling. I could see the scientists furiously developing hypotheses to explain:

"What is *she* doing with *him*?"

I could sense them evaluating me.

"He seems to suffer from a lack of pigmentation," the oldest scientist would observe clinically.

"And from excessive perspiration," his younger colleague would add eagerly.

"He doesn't appear very fertile," the only female would surmise. "*I* wouldn't select him as a mate

But the scientists could suck it, because Celine came up and hugged me! As her head pressed against my chest, her dark brown hair felt like ribbons. She smelled like she wore deodorant over every inch of her body. God. Wow.

"How great to meet you!" Celine said, pulling away. "And—the restaurant! This is... well, a surprise."

"Do you like it?" I asked, pulling out Celine's chair for her.

"It's certainly a surprise!" She laughed, folding her little pink skirt under her tan legs. "I thought we were just having coffee."

"I thought we could have dinner instead."

"Oh! Well, great!" Her voice was so high-pitched that I couldn't tell if she was excited or faking enthusiasm in a high-decibel range.

After I took my seat, we sat facing each other like chess opponents. I was looking at the napkin I was folding in my lap, but Celine was staring unapologetically at me.

It made me uncomfortable, seeing as I'm *unusual*-looking. Well, not *unusual* looking. I'm not a van Gogh or anything. But my dark hair is kind of shocking because my eyes are *really* light blue. Like, really light blue. Think Siberian husky. And, as I've told you, I don't have the greatest tan.

"You're very pale," Celine informed me.

I was startled by her saying that, just straight out.

"Oh, yeah," I fumbled. "Well..."

"I didn't know you'd be this pale."

"I described myself as looseleaf..." I began. We had exchanged physical descriptions via Facebook message. I had been honest, but focused on my height—my best attribute.

"I didn't understand the extent."

"... covered in Liquid Paper," I finished.

"Right. Well." Celine sipped her water. "This is a lovely place!"

For a lovely lady, I thought. Nope. Censored. Don't spout that weak shit, Finbar. You are already

unworthy of her.

There was definitely a *Beauty and the Beast* situation happening here. Celine was even a French brunette who liked to read, like Belle. I could picture all these little bakers popping out of their houses singing “Bonjour” to her. Of course, I didn’t have much on the Beast. He was über-manly and could kick some ass. Also, he was abnormally hairy. I’m not even *normally* hairy, judging from brief and frightening glimpses in the St. Luke’s locker room.... Okay, I needed to stop thinking about body hair and Disney movies. And how Celine was way beyond my league.

Man up, Finbar! Get in the zone! Keep your eye on the ball! Get your head in the game! Get your, get your, get your, get your head in the game.... No! Do not sing the songs from *High School Musical* in your head! That is *another* damn Disney movie! Does Zac Efron have more body hair than me?

“So,” I interrupted my own stream of insanity. “What are some places I should check out in Manhattan?”

Knowing my interests, or perhaps based on her own interests, Celine began to talk about bookstores. I was mesmerized by the movements of her mouth, picturing it on my mouth, so I didn’t speak much. Luckily Celine was content to talk, giving me the poser quotient of every bookstore on the island. It wasn’t until the waiter interrupted us that I realized I couldn’t read the menu, which was written in French.

I gestured for Celine to order first, and she pursed her lips even more to order. God, French was a sexy language. You had to make kissing faces just to speak it! Celine ordered two different dishes. They sounded sexy but later turned out to be snails and exploded duck liver.

Was there anything written in English? Or anything I would actually eat? I scrambled frantically.

“Hamburger!” I declared in triumph. “I’ll have the hamburger.”

A curt nod from the waiter. He snatched the menu from my un-continental hands.

“Ahm—burr—gare,” Celine pronounced.

Oh. Hamburger. In French.

“Om—burr—gahr,” I tried.

Celine laughed lightly. As our food arrived, the conversation turned to Manhattan’s coffee shops. “I just don’t understand what Americans have done to coffee,” Celine was saying. *I never drank coffee in my life*, I thought as Celine compared the expansion of the Starbucks chain to “entrepreneurial genocide.” *Maybe I should start*. Of course, to drink coffee, I would have to be a whole different person. A guy with not only body hair, but facial hair, too. A mustache. Maybe I *should* be a whole new person. If I was all sophisticated and disdainful like Celine, if I was all sophisticated and disdainful *with* Celine, I wouldn’t care about everything so much. I wouldn’t care about not being good at sports like Luke. And I wouldn’t worry about guys like Johnny Frackas calling me a fag. If I spent the weekend drinking coffee out of tiny cups with a French girl and sported a mustache, no one could call me a fag.

Wait, maybe they still could. Scratch that. If I had a *girlfriend*, no one could call me a fag. So I needed to make moves. While Celine was chewing on foie gras, I spoke up. “I have something for you,” I said.

Over her greasy-looking and expensive liver, Celine looked surprised. I removed a small package from my pocket and set it in front of her. It was a book with a ribbon wrapped around it, like a present without wrapping. I’d tied the ribbon myself.

“It’s *No Exit*,” I told her. “I remembered you said it was your favorite play.”

Celine looked at the cover as if it enshrined an object from an alien spaceship, something she didn’t know how to touch or open.

“But it’s not my birthday,” Celine said.

“No,” I said. “It’s just a gift.”

“For what?” Celine first looked confused, but then the confusion softened to sympathy when my eyes met hers. She didn’t get why I was trying so hard. Disappointment and embarrassment swept over me. For the rest of dinner, Celine made an effort to be nice, like I was a speech-impaired kid assigned to her camp cabin. She smiled and nodded a lot, and even reached to touch my hand a few times. But she refused coffee after dinner, and the waiter delivered the check to me. I guess he knew I would pay because this was a date, even if it was the lamest date in the world. Or maybe he just couldn’t fit a check anywhere among Celine’s many plates, each of which had cost me... wow. My dad would really regret giving me this credit card. Celine grabbed her purse and I carried the book for her.

Out on the sidewalk, Celine abruptly stopped her diatribe against some kind of shoe called a FitFlop, and I said, “Let me walk you home.”

“Oh...” Celine tried to glance at a watch, but she wasn’t wearing one. Then she pointed vaguely in two different directions. “I’m going way uptown, so I’m taking the subway.”

“I can walk you there,” I said halfheartedly.

I knew the restaurant and the gift had been too much. But I really did want to be a gentleman to the end.

“Don’t bother!” Celine’s sharp nails waved me off. “You’re completely in the other direction.”

Actually, I had no idea which direction the train station was. This was my second trip to Manhattan ever. But I said, “Okay...” and hesitated. Now it was time to say good-bye. Right here on this busy sidewalk. The whole street was lined with the tables of outdoor restaurants, so we were being interrupted by other people’s conversations and lethal amounts of secondhand smoke. God, people in New York smoked a lot.

Celine reached up, popping onto the balls of her feet, to kiss me good-bye. No, not *kiss me*, *kiss me*. She went for the cheek. There was nothing romantic or sexual about it—even heterosexual Frenchmen kiss each other like that. To me, the kiss felt like a consolation prize.

The problem was that, at the same time, I leaned down to hug Celine. My head was headed for her right shoulder. Her lips were pursed toward my left cheek. As a result—

We kissed on the lips.

Or, more accurately, we collided.

The shock pushed Celine back on her heels. My arms hung empty in front of me like I was imitating a gorilla.

“Oh, Finbar!” Celine cooed with sympathy. She gave me these rapid little pats on the forearm. “I really think we should be good friends,” Celine told me.

“Actually, that was an accident—” I began to explain.

“But nothing more than friends.”

A falafel vendor had observed our whole little soap opera, and it was clear he thought I was coming on to Celine. Now he eyed me with suspicion and turned the long pointy sticks of his sizzling kebabs in a sinister fashion.

“Just friends,” Celine repeated yet again.

Okay, okay! I didn’t need her to translate “just friends” into French and sign language. So I said, “See you around,” and walked away.

Was I going in the right direction? I had no freakin’ idea. I didn’t know New York City at all. So I removed my map from my pocket.

Uh-oh. Something else came out with the map. *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre, the first English

edition. Shit.

Looking back now, I should have dropped the damn book in the garbage. I should have just let it go. But at the time, I didn't want a souvenir of this awkward first (only) date.

So I doubled back.

"Celine!" I called from the end of the block. Celine was already crossing the busy street between two honking yellow cabs. She hadn't heard me.

A Frankenstein-like mob was clawing its business-casual-clad-way out of the subway station. These New Yorkers were moving at warp speed (hey, I lost the girl, I can dork out as much as I want). So I set off with a few jogging steps in Celine's direction. Seeing as my jog was slower than most people's walking, I hoped no one would notice my desperate efforts to catch up.

I called, "Celine! Hold up!"

But I'd lost sight of her. There were more people on that stretch of New York sidewalk between Celine and me than there were in the whole town of Alexandria. When the crowd parted, she was a full block and a half ahead of me. In order to catch up, I set off on a bizarre obstacle course. To the right the hundred-year-old grocery woman. To the left of an imposing businessman. A sharp angle to avoid a double stroller; a leap over a pissed-off dachshund in a dog sweater. A sprint past a drag queen in size-fourteen heels.

Celine had crossed the street already. When I reached the curb, my chest was pounding and I was out of breath (and, clearly, out of shape). But my primal side emerged. I called "CELINE!" above a honking yellow cab, all Rocky Balboa.

Celine was enjoying a little French stroll by a park where the sun was setting. There were no lap dogs or transsexuals in her path—proving once again that life was unfair. Celine was ignoring the wind, which was blowing her skirt up around her legs in an attempt at a paparazzi shot. She also ignored me when I called her name. Maybe it was for the best. If she had turned around, she would have seen her pale and sweaty Internet lover sprinting at her—and probably would have freaked out.

But she didn't turn. I crossed the street but didn't have time to call Celine's name again. While I was looking ahead at her skirt, something hard tripped me up, and I lunged forward into a restaurant's basement cellar. My shoulder slammed down three cement steps, which hurt like hell, and I tumbled headfirst right into a box of peppers. I guess landing with my head in peppers was better than smacking my head on the cement floor of the basement while my arm was pinned under me, but they weren't even red peppers, which are ballsy and kind of cool. I landed in a bin of green peppers. Wuss peppers. How appropriate.

As I tried to push myself out of the bin, overwhelmed by the smell, a large truck backed up onto the sidewalk in front of the restaurant cellar. Two men climbed out and began unloading wooden crates. They were bringing new food down. They wouldn't have even seen me if I hadn't tipped the bin over, spilling the green peppers everywhere, like bocce balls.

"Hey!" the first man called to the second. "There's a kid down here!"

"I'm just leaving," I mumbled to the two of them as I climbed the steps.

"Sure you're not tomorrow's white meat, kid?" the second man asked. They both burst out laughing.

Because people who mock me often do so with enthusiasm, he repeated the joke. Somehow, they found it even funnier the second time around.

I didn't even attempt a laugh. I stood up, looking as bruised as the green pepper that had been smushed between my ass and the lowest cement step. I brushed off my nice collared shirt, apologized, and left. And the copy of *No Exit*? I never wanted to see that shit again in my life. I left it buried

beneath the peppers.

Empty-handed, I walked the eighteen blocks back to Grand Central Terminal. Neither those long city blocks of open air nor the bootleg Burberry cologne I bought outside the train station could get rid of my pepper stench. On the 8:43 train, a man in my car kept sniffing around my seat and mumbling to his friend, "I don't know why, but I suddenly feel like pizza."

chapter 3

I'd been rejected by a vicious Frenchwoman and sniffed out like an Italian sausage by hungry tourists. How could it get any worse?

"Finn! Is that you?"

This is how it could get worse. My mother. She would need a post-game wrap-up of the worst first date since Adam and Eve got caught trespassing. She emerged from the living room, where she'd been fighting with our new air filter. She'd bought it because our house in Pelham was older than our house in Alexandria and she was convinced it was lined in asbestos.

"Finbar!" She began fluttering around me like a hummingbird after a Starbucks Doubleshot. "How was your date?"

"Oh." I pulled the door shut behind me. "It was good."

"Did Celine like dinner? You smell like something delicious; it must have been good."

I smell like humiliation, I thought. As I took off my shoes, my mother followed me. I was accustomed to this. But, for once, she didn't whip out her brush and pan to sweep up the invisible but deadly molecules of dirt.

"Dinner?" I said. "Well, she ordered a lot of food."

My mother clapped her hands together rapturously. "That meant she liked it! And what about the book?"

"Uh..." I tried to avoid this question and escape her entirely by going up the stairs, whose banisters were now cloaked in toilet-seat covers. Look what happens when I leave this woman home alone on a Friday night.

My mother followed me shamelessly, up the stairs and into the first room, which Luke and I shared. We'd had separate rooms since the days we rocked out to Raffi songs, but here in Pelham, we shared a room. Luke was rarely here, between his football practices and all the friends he'd made in five freakin' days. But he left a stench of sweat and overenthusiasm to keep me company, as well as enough cleat-dirt to AstroTurf our bedroom.

Since we were sharing a room, it was a lot harder to avoid Luke than it was in the days when I could refuse his invitation to a Swedish dented-beer-can orgy (or whatever weird event he'd concocted). Nowadays when my mother found a warm bottle of Killian's Irish Red beer inside a loaf in our closet, I was there for her interrogation ("Finbar, is this yours?" "I don't drink beer." "Luke, is this yours?" "I think it came with the shoes. They're, like, Irish leather."); I was there when she placed the empty bottle on our dresser and filled it with fresh flowers and a little note she'd written about the dangers of alcohol poisoning. I was there when Luke frowned at the bottle and said, "Hey, I think I recognize that vase. Is that from Grandpa's house?" And when he spit his gum into the note about alcohol poisoning. But where was Luke when *I* needed him?

"Did she like the book?" my mother prodded.

I thought for a second. "It certainly caused a scene," I told her truthfully.

"Great!" My mother curled up on my bedspread and didn't even pick off the lint balls. She was in her element. She loved hearing about love.

"When are you going to see her again?" she asked eagerly.

“I’m not really sure.”

“You didn’t make another date?”

“Nah.” I tried to sound casual. “I think we’re better as friends.”

When I turned around, my mother was giving me puppy dog eyes.

“Oh, Finbar,” she said. “I’m so sorry....”

I was glad when my father interrupted. Popping his receding hairline in the door, he said, “Hey, Finn! You gotta come downstairs and check out the new TV. This high-def is really something. You can see the sweat on the—”

“Paul!” My mother was offended.

“What?”

My father looked a little scared. We were all scared of my mother.

“You didn’t ask Finbar about his date!”

“Oh. Sorry,” my father said. “Finn, how was your date?”

“Paul! Don’t ask him about his date!” my mother interrupted. Then she scurried over to my father and lowered her voice, but not enough. “It didn’t go well.”

“Finbar,” my father preached suddenly, putting his hands on his hips and taking up the whole doorway. “You will never understand women.”

“Don’t tell him that!” My mother swatted his shoulder. “You understand me.”

“No I don’t,” my father said. “I just pissed you off!”

“Language, Paul.”

“But anyway, I didn’t mean *Finbar* won’t understand women,” my father explained. “I said ‘you.’ meant a general ‘you.’ A collective ‘you.’ ‘You,’ as in, all the male—”

“Enough, Paul,” my mother snapped.

“Well, Finn, come downstairs if—”

“Not with the TV again!” My mother spoke for me. “He doesn’t want that kind of radiation—”

And my mother followed my father out of the room. Well, despite her best efforts, she’d actually made me feel a little bit better about losing Celine. Maybe I didn’t need another crazy girl in my life

My mother had a long-term plan to comfort me and rebuild my self-esteem. She hid notes in my laundry and in my pillowcase that complimented me. For example, the first note I found pinned to my boxers told me: “Any girl would be lucky to have you.” Other notes reassured me about my physique and, disturbingly, my sex appeal. Whoever taught my mother the phrase *stud muffin* should be prosecuted.

My mother’s short-term plan was that on Saturday we would all get together for a family beach day. We would bask in the sun, swim, restore my sense of masculinity, and eat turkey sandwiches out of a cooler. The plan rapidly deflated. Luke bailed because he had a preseason Fordham football game that afternoon. He would be spending the morning at practice, leaving just Maud, Paul, and me.

My bedroom door swung open at 9 AM. Lifting myself on my sore right shoulder, I squinted across the room. Luke had already left. My mother appeared over me like a prison guard with orange juice.

“Wake up!” she said. “Beach day!”

When I finished the juice, my mother threw me in the car along with the collapsible umbrella, cooler of caffeine-free Diet Coke, and jug of SPF 89. On the way, my parents started arguing about my dad’s new toy—the GPS in the car. When I hear them argue about mundane things like telephone poles and the validity of the expiration date on a package of raisins (“They were always wrinkled,

Maud!” “Not this wrinkled, Paul. They’re geriatric!”), I forget that they once fell in love. But they did. In fact, my mother claims it was love at first sight.

Picture it: Chesnut Hill, Massachusetts, 1978. My mother was a nerdy college freshman squinting through inch-thick lenses at the Boston College hockey game. She was giggling and pointing at the cute players with her two roommates. It was hard to determine attractiveness, my mother told me, considering the guys were in full masks, pads, jerseys, and gloves—and the girls had nosebleed seats. But somehow she fell in love with my father, a freshman scholarship left wing on the hockey team. Actually, she fell in love with the **FRAME** in white stick-on letters on the back of his jersey.

“I couldn’t see his face,” my mother would remember dreamily. “But I loved him. Right then. Through his mask and gloves and everything. Actually...”

(At this point she always looked around to see if my father was there.)

“Actually, to be honest, I thought he had about twenty pounds more muscle on him. The chest pad you know.”

So my mother was in love with my father after that first freshman year hockey game. My father didn’t know my mother existed. In order to throw herself in his path, my mother became a sports reporter on the school newspaper. She thought they would develop a reporter-subject repartee that could build into love. My mother has kept copies of those college newspapers to this day; she interviewed my father for seven different articles freshman year. My father introduced himself anew each time because he never remembered they had met before.

Sophomore year my mother stepped up her efforts. She became a hockey team manager. At ninety-eight pounds, she lugged enormous duffel bags of skates and pads from Boston to Michigan, from Quebec to Toronto. She traveled with my father. She cleaned out his locker. She sat in a special front-row seat, right on the rink, to watch every game. There was an intimate Bengay incident, the circumstances of which I’ve never been entirely clear about. My father was polite, always thanked my mother for the towels and Gatorade bottles she handed him—but never called her by name.

In my mother’s sophomore yearbook, one of her friends wrote: “Mission for next year: MEET TALL PAUL.” “Tall Paul” was written in letters all skinny and tall like my dad. This bit of pre-parental lust disturbs me, but it also explains my tendency to fall and stay in love from a stalkerish distance.

But my mother almost gave up her stalking—er, love. Junior year, she switched from the sports beat to the college newspaper’s features section. She resigned as hockey team manager. She didn’t even go to hockey games anymore. That is, until the Eagles made the playoffs. Then my mother went to one game, the first playoff game. She sat in the third row, just to the left of the glass divider. My father hit a slap shot into her face.

There was a frantic time-out. Everyone sitting around my mother stood up and swarmed her. My father clawed his way over the wall and through the stands, and through the people, with his giant clumsy hockey gloves. He stomped up the rubber steps in his skates, all the while shedding ice in the aisles.

“Everyone stepped aside, and I saw her there, crying, blood pouring out of her nose,” my father says. This is how he tells the story. “And I loved her right then. I loved her. And I’d never seen the girl before in my life!”

* * *

The beach at Glen Island was a ten-minute drive from our house, and on the Long Island Sound, an

inlet of the Atlantic Ocean. There weren't big waves or anything, but it was nice, with buoys and boats and the whole deal. After hauling my dad's ergonomic beach chair across fifty yards of sand, I was starting to sweat and really looking forward to going for a swim. I also wanted to get in the water and out of it before people my age arrived. My skin got pretty transparent when I was wet. I'd rather wear a white t-shirt than go shirtless, although I looked similar either way.

"Finbar, make sure you use the sunblock," my mom said.

"Dad has it."

My dad's just as pale as I am, but due to advancing age he's a few steps closer to carcinoma-ville. So I let him attack the SPF 89 first. I took his ergonomic lounge chair (wow, that was comfortable. Not really worth the haul across the sand, but...) and gazed out at the Long Island Sound, thinking about these deep thoughts about water and rebirth and losing my virginity. Or, rather, not losing my virginity. Not being within fifteen miles of losing my virginity. Not being in the same planetary revolution as... okay, you get it.

Suddenly a vision came to me. Me, all wet, a skintight suit. Sounds creepy, I know. But I was picturing myself surfing. Surfer! I could be a surfer! I liked the beach. And I didn't mind exercise. It was just team sports I hated. They're so aggressive, and I'm not an aggressive person. Not even at the dinner table. I always get the last chicken breast.

Two girls my age appeared on the beach and quickly confirmed my love of the surfing lifestyle. They were free of ergonomic lawn chairs; they were skipping along barefoot with towels. They were wearing bikinis that were as small as their sunglasses were large. That is, mind-blowingly small. It was unbelievable to me. That they could walk around like that. Their cupped butt cheeks exposed. Their tan thighs. Their round breasts. Yes, I definitely like surfing—or at least the uniforms. I could scout girls like this all day. I could be a beach bum. I could be a lady-killer. I could be...

"Red as a stoplight, Finbar!" my father observed over his blue oxide-covered nose. My mother came over. She was wearing a hat the size of the Rose Bowl. As you can tell, my parents are not embarrassing at all.

"Oh, no!" she gasped. She covered her eyes with both hands. "Oh, Finbar, I can't even look at you!"

Panicking, I looked down at my shoulder. I'd gotten a six-inch bruise in a rainbow of nasty colors from the green-pepper incident. But I was still wearing my shirt, so it wasn't the bruise that was freaking out my mom.

"How did he get sunburned that fast?" my father asked. "We've only been here twenty minutes."

"I don't want to look!" my mother shrieked. Then she peeked out from between her fingers and gasped again.

"Don't look at his face if it gets you upset," my dad said.

What was I, the Phantom of the Opera?

"What is it?" I asked. "My face is kinda itchy."

"And your arms," my dad said.

"They don't itch," I said.

"They will," he said ominously.

I looked down. Red spheres were erupting along my forearms, like planets with rings. I looked like a pepperoni pizza, only less delicious. In fact, not delicious at all. I was disgusting. There were some large red patches, an inch in diameter, and some that were clusters of bumps. And my father was right. They began to itch.

"Maybe something bit him," my mother said. "Maybe he got bitten by a New York bug!"

“A what?” My father was puzzled.

~~“He should definitely go to the doctor,”~~ my mom said, purposefully focusing her eyes on my father and looking away from my freakish self. “All right, Paul, you get the stuff. And I’ll take Finn—”

She steeled herself to see me and then removed her hands from her eyes.

“AHHHH!” she screamed. My eardrums hurt. And my arms hurt too. And my face. And my legs, below the knee. I was breaking out everywhere, red and stinging and itchy.

“Mom, if you want me to go to the doctor, I’ll go by myself,” I said. “I’m not twelve years old.”

“You can take the car, Finn,” my dad said.

“He can’t drive like that!” my mother said.

That didn’t even make sense.

“I’ll take the train,” I said.

“Do you even know where the doctor’s office is?” my mother asked.

“As a matter of fact, I do!” I exploded at her. “It’s the place where you dragged me the other day to get eight vaccinations and a SARS mask!”

I tried to stomp off, but it’s really hard to do that in flip-flops.

The doctor’s verdict was: “You’re allergic to the sun.”

What? How was that possible? The sun is a natural thing. It’s *good* for you. That’s like being allergic to water, or air. Or something really important, like Pop-Tarts. I spent twenty minutes at the beach thus far this summer and I’m a monster? “Solar urticaria,” the doctor continued. “That’s what it’s called. The sun made you break out in hives.”

Well, I definitely wasn’t going to be a surfer anymore. And I guess I wasn’t going to school anymore either. Or church. Ooh, this would get me out of church! That was a good thing. But being locked up in my room like the Hunchback of Notre Dame? Not so good.

“Has the sun ever done this to you before?” he asked.

Of course it hadn’t. I’m not exactly outdoorsy, but I’d been surviving summer afternoons outdoors since childhood. For every two hours I spent ogling the children’s librarian, I would serve an hour at the Alexandria community pool working on my farmer’s tan.

“Let’s chalk it up to your change of environment,” the doctor said. “I hope it will be temporary. I would say avoid being in the sun for more than a half hour for the next few months. Okay?”

A half hour?

“I’ll write you a prescription for an antihistamine in the meantime,” he said. “And have the nurses come in to bandage you up. Gotta protect that skin!”

Afterward, I rode the train down to the Bronx to meet my parents at Luke’s football game, all the while looking like an escapee from a leper colony. The doctor had given me a pill that cooled off my skin and I didn’t feel as itchy anymore. But while I wasn’t quite as red anymore (more like a peach than a tomato), the nurses had given me those wraparound sunglasses only considered stylish in nursing homes.

The nurses had also wrapped my forearms in bandages, from my wrists all the way up to the hems of my t-shirt sleeves, so from the neck down, I resembled the Invisible Man. But I was not invisible, even slouched in a corner seat by the train toilet. Toddlers kept toddling by and pointing me out. Stay-at-home moms gave me sad and sympathetic glances but pulled their children away from me in case I was contagious. A man in a suit assumed I was blind and threw two dollar bills into my lap. After this incident, I removed the sunglasses.

Hey, at least no one was sitting next to me. Until the Mount Vernon East stop, when a blond girl about my age got on the train. I hate blondes. I seriously do. It's not that I think blondes are too good for me. But *they* think they're too good for me. Every blonde I have ever met has dismissed me immediately. From the *Playboy* blondes to the hipster blondes with short hair and glasses. Blondes always think you're trying to hit on them.

I didn't want to hit on this blond girl. I didn't want to look at her. I didn't want her anywhere near me. But she came down the row, passed three different empty seats, and then chose to sit next to me. She looked me over a little, which made me feel strange. I'm not usually the type of dude that girls cruise like an overpriced shoe.

At first, the blonde didn't say anything. As the train lurched south toward Fordham, she had her head buried in this enormous book. But she kept sneaking glances at the Ace bandages up and down my arms, the splotches of rash on the backs of my hands, the reflection of the oily ointment on my skin. The girl asked me, "What happened to your arms?"

Mind your own business.

"Too much sun," I grunted. Wow, being pissed off really made me into a caveman.

"I see!" the girl said. This chick was downright jolly, despite my bandages and rash. Apparently she took great pleasure in the pains and misfortunes of others.

Then she asked, "Have you read this book?"

I looked at her. She tilted the cover of the book toward me. There was a creepy stone dungeon on it as well as bats and a man in a cape with claws and fangs. It was called *Nocturnal Terror*.

"*Nocturnal Terror*?" I said out loud. "No, I haven't read it."

And I don't feel like talking, I wanted to add. *Even about books.*

"Oh, it's amazing!" the blond girl gushed. Then she began telling me the whole story... all three hundred pages of it. She started with the ancestors of the main characters, and everything that had happened to them all their lives, and then the second generation, and everything that had happened to *those* characters, and their cousins, and their hairdresser's brother's neighbor's dogs... and so on, and so forth. I can tell you the background story of all these people (and pets) in six words: they all got killed by vampires.

"And so, the great-great-granddaughter thinks that she can change the vampire," the girl continued. She used so many hand gestures when she talked that I was scared she would smack me in the face.

"So she shows up at the castle at night. And there's this, like, attraction, there's this *chemistry* between them. Like a spark, you know? So they get closer and closer, and they *kiss*. They're kissing, and she thinks he has all these human emotions. But then he goes for her neck... and he BITES her! He sucks all the blood out of her body—"

"Hmmm," I cut her off moodily. "Yeah, that's interesting. Maybe you shouldn't tell me any more though. You shouldn't spoil the ending for me."

"Right!" Blondie said enthusiastically. "*You* should definitely read it. I think *you'd* really like it."

I made a noncommittal noise and turned away to look out the window.

She only gave me one minute of silence. Then Blondie leaned in close to me and whispered in my ear.

She said, "I know what you are."

I jerked my head around and almost hit her in the face.

"What?"

"I know what you are," Blondie repeated. To make herself clear, she gestured to my arms and my bandages. What? She knew I was allergic to the sun?

Then she pointed to my face, which was not covered in a rash. And to my creepy husky eyes. She knew what I was? What was I? She knew I was the loser in a genetic lottery? A future skin cancer patient?

“A *vampire*,” she hissed.

Oh, Jesus. Blondes not only hate me, but they are *crazy*.

She pointed to the cover of her book. There was the vampire, a white old man with creepy fungus-looking fingernails and a face as wrinkled as an expired raisin. He was wearing a super-metrosexual cape. He had left the dead body of a woman in the corner of his creptastic dungeon. He was chillin’ with some flesh-colored bats who were probably his only friends.

How dare this girl? I am not old! I am not creepy! I am not a murderer! Most importantly, I would never wear a cape. Some kids I competed against in high school quiz bowl used to wear capes instead of varsity jackets, and they were complete weirdos. Furthermore, I don’t sit around in some cold dungeon sucking blood and talking to bats, plotting to lure women down there. I have a brother and a family and a life! Okay, so I still have to plot to lure women. But I don’t drink their blood!

Suddenly, the frustration of a week of accumulated insults caught up with me big time. I hated this blond stranger, hated her with a passion. I hated her blond hair. I hated her dumb creepy book. I hated the assumptions she made about other people based on their unusual medical conditions and their pale skin. I hated her dumb shoes and her dumb clothes. I hated her stupid necklace that said “best friends” on it and was shaped like half a heart. I hated whomever had the other half, because they were a dumbass for being this girl’s friend.

“You know what?” I stormed at her, standing up violently (then falling into the seat in front of me because the train lurched. But I maintained my anger throughout). “If I’m so creepy, if I’m so *scary*, I’m a *vampire*,” I said pretty loudly, “then why did you sit next to me?”

“No,” the girl interrupted. “You don’t understand...”

“I do understand,” I said. I squeezed past her, getting awkwardly stuck on her knees, but shoving my way through. Then I stood in the aisle of the train.

“I understand that you’re obnoxious,” I told her. “And that you could have sat next to that possibly homeless man.”

The possibly homeless man across the aisle looked up at me.

“Or that guy who’s awkwardly checking out that girl’s boobs,” I continued.

That guy, sitting in the third seat of the train car, quickly looked back to his *New York Times*, which was upside down. That girl, across the aisle from him, buttoned her jacket.

“But you didn’t!” I told Blondie. “You sat next to me.”

“You don’t understand,” the blond girl pleaded. “I really *like* vamp—”

“I’m leaving!” I told her. “This is my stop!”

I stood there, holding on to the pole, trying to not look back at the blond girl. Or at that guy who I called out for looking down that girl’s shirt. Or at that businessman who was pissed that I wasn’t blin’—no way was I giving back those two dollars. And then I realized that storming out of the train was becoming kind of anticlimactic because there were about three minutes of agonizing silence left before the train finally stopped and the doors opened at Fordham.

chapter 4

I think my twin brother, Luke, is a superhero. He can sprint like a cheetah. He can do the hundred-yard dash in ten seconds. He can catch something, throw something, and swat at a fly all at the same time. He can do no-look passes to the shooting guards on the basketball court. Actually, he can pass to *himself* on the basketball court. He has the reflexes of a Marvel comic character and the speed of a hermaphrodite Olympian.

Our pediatrician thinks Luke has a hyperactivity disorder. Luke can't read more than one chapter a book at a time. He can't finish standardized tests. He walked out on the PSAT last year and went to see an action movie instead. Then he walked out on the movie. Luke can't eat dinner without standing up and running around the table. He doesn't do great in school, and he makes some people impatient. During our childhood, three elementary school teachers, a zookeeper, and a museum guide at the World's Largest Ball of Paint all quit their jobs and not by coincidence. (My mother was sad when that zookeeper left the children's zoo. He was gonna give her advice he'd learned from raising baby baboons.)

In eighth grade, increasingly concerned about Luke's bad grades, my parents put Luke on a drug for ADHD. Three months into taking it, Luke collapsed midcourt during a CYO basketball game. I've never seen so many rosaries pulled out of so many purses so fast.

An ambulance rushed him to the hospital. The medicine had sped up his heartbeat, and there was so much blood rushing around his body that he got dizzy and passed out.

My mother has been neurotic about our health since she was knocking on her stomach and yelling "Are you dead in there?" at our nine-week-old fetal selves. So you can guess how much she freaked out about Luke and the ambulance. She never let him take that ADHD medicine again. In fact, she never let him take a Flintstones vitamin.

So how did she react when the weaker of her offspring arrived at the gate of Fordham Preparatory School wrapped in bandages?

"You look horrible!" my mother wailed.

"Hello to you, too," I told her.

"What's wrong with you?" my father asked eagerly.

I'm a pale and creepy virgin? Nope, not what he was asking.

"It's an allergic reaction," I reassured them. "It's temporary."

I was super thrilled when I saw that it was a pretty girl who was ripping the game tickets at the Fordham gate, seeing as I was wearing my best James Bond formalwear: my swim trunks, a t-shirt that showed off my man-nipples, and a Y2K supply of Ace bandages.

"Go Rams!" the ticket girl told me, making an admirable effort to focus on school spirit and not my arms.

She was a brunette, too. Brunettes are my favorite. Eff my lack of luck. Not only did I look like a freak, but when I sat down in the bleachers, I was one of the few kids with parents instead of friends. I was sandwiched between my dad, who was wearing a new Fordham Prep hat (my dad doesn't wear flat-brimmed hats because he's a rap star. He wears them in a very uncool way), and my mother, who kept accidentally smacking me in the face as she pointed to Luke on the field.

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