

FOREVER
FOR A YEAR

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I asked Carolina who this book should be dedicated to, and she said:

“To soul mates, obviously, but not just the ones that have each other, or even the ones that lost each other, but, gosh, you also have to dedicate it to the ones that never found each other at all.”

part One



STRANGERS
FOR A WEEK

1

Carrie will now be Carolina

IT WAS MY IDEA FOR US TO START USING OUR FULL NAMES. It was going to help us take ourselves more seriously now that we were starting high school. It's like I used to be Carrie, this awkward eighth grader, but now I was going to be Carolina, this amazing freshman. Oh my gosh, this sounds so dumb when I say it like that. Never mind.

Wait a minute. Just because I didn't want to be geeky Carrie anymore didn't mean Carolina wasn't going to be a good student. She was. I mean, *I* was. Obviously. I mean, school was still the most important thing. By far. And if you ask me, I wasn't really a geek in junior high. I'm super normal. It's just that other people thought my best friend, Peggy, and I were geeks, so we didn't really argue with them. Can you even do that? Argue with popular people on how they categorize you? Maybe you can, though it probably would have just made us even bigger geeks in their eyes. Gosh! Why was I worrying about this NOW? It was the first day of high school and I had to get ready! I mean, I was totally ready. I had been waiting by the front door for twenty minutes for Peggy and her sister to pick me up. But, you know,

get ready in my mind. Because this year was going to change my life. I just knew it.

So I sat and pictured (“envisioned” might be the better word) how today would go in my head. Except the horrible stuff that happened with my dad earlier kept popping into my brain and I got mad at him again, and suddenly I felt like I was going to cry (again) and if that happened, I was sure my first day would be ruined, which might ruin my entire existence. Wait a minute! I reminded myself I’m in control, that I’m super smart, that my dad was part of my past, not my future, and then I felt better.

And then I heard the honk. And even though nobody could have gotten out to the car faster than I did, Katherine honked again. Katherine is Peggy’s sister. She’s not very patient. Or nice. In fact, she’s kind of a lunatic. But she has a car, and if I did everything she said, I wouldn’t have to take the bus. And taking the bus is for losers. At least that’s what Katherine said.

By the way, Peggy’s new name is Marguerite. It’s not her new name. It’s on her birth certificate, just like Carolina is on mine, but nobody knows it’s her name. Except me, because we’re best friends, remember? Peggy wouldn’t go by her longer name unless Katherine said it was okay. See, Katherine was a junior, and always tan and really pretty when she wore lots of makeup, and—most important to Peggy (and maybe me)—Katherine was super popular. Maybe the most popular girl ever to go to Riverbend High School. And since Peggy wanted to be cooler in high school even more than I did, Peggy wouldn’t go by Marguerite unless Katherine said it was okay. Which she did.

I would’ve become Carolina no matter what Katherine said. Because I was ready.



“WHAT’S WRONG?” PEGGY ASKED AS I GOT IN THE BACK seat of the Civic, which Katherine had painted CRAPMOBILE on the side of with nail polish. (I’m gonna have to learn to call Peggy Marguerite in my head, aren’t I?) Anyway, Peggy/Marguerite knew something was wrong even though I had hoped I was over it because Peggy has known me since before time began. (Actually, fourth grade.) I should stop exaggerating for effect. I’m in high school now. High schoolers don’t do that. Maybe they do. I don’t know. But they shouldn’t. They should be mature enough to just tell the truth as it is. Which is what I’m going to do.

I said, “Nothing” to Peggy. She knew it was not nothing, but she also knew my “nothing” meant I didn’t want to talk about what was wrong right then. I mean, I kind of did, but not in front of Katherine. I wanted to tell Peggy ALL about how my dad had ruined my first/last/only morning before my first day of high school. But Peggy knew to drop it for now, because she’s amazing, and changed the subject.

“Guess what? Katherine talked to her friend Elizabeth Shunton, who’s the older sister of Shannon Shunton, and told her to tell Shannon that she should be our friend this year.”

Katherine, who was driving like a person who thought looking at the road was optional, grinned. “I’m gonna make you two the hottest chicks in the freshman class. You watch. You will love me.”

I smiled at Peggy, pretending to be excited about being friends with Shannon Shunton. Because I was so not excited. Shannon Shunton was the most popular girl in eighth grade, and I suppose she would be the most popular freshman, but I didn’t care about being

popular. (Okay, I'm lying! I totally already admitted I wanted to be popular.) But, and I mean this, I don't care about it if it means pretending to want to be friends with Shannon Shunton. Who is the meanest person ever. She could make you cry just by rolling her eyes at you. How could you be friends with someone like that?

Katherine started giving us a lecture on how we should walk through the halls, where we should sit in the cafeteria, what boys we should talk to (soccer players yes, football players maybe, band members no), and how she knew we were both good students, but maybe we shouldn't try too hard or it would make us look geeky. This is the dumbest thing ever said. But probably true. This is why I shouldn't care about being popular! Or boys! Or any of it!

Riverbend High School, which most kids call The Bend, came into view as we turned right past the bank onto Kirby Street. It looked huge. Peggy (I mean, Marguerite) and I came here most of July for soccer camp, but it was empty during the summer, like a ghost school. But now we were pulling into the parking lot and there were so many cars and kids, and they were so tall, and looked like they were thirty years old even though they could only be four years older than me. My stomach started eating my insides. This is what happens when I get nervous. My stomach becomes an alien and eats all my organs and I almost die. Yes, I exaggerated, okay! I'm sorry. Gosh.

"Now, Carrie," Katherine said, turning back to me as she parked.

"Carolina," Peggy said. A big mistake.

Katherine's face jumped two feet in the air as she screamed: "YOU MAKE YOUR FRESHMAN DORKS CALL YOU THAT; I CALL YOU WHATEVER I WANT, PEGGY! PEGGY! PEGGY! PEGGY! OKAY, PEGGY?"

See? Lunatic. But she was my best friend's sister and my ride. So I listened as she began again.

“Carrie, listen to me. My ugly sister Peggy hit the jackpot the past four months, in case you didn’t notice.” Katherine pointed at Peggy’s boobs. Which had grown from super small to SUPER huge in 114 days. It was amazing. Like when you add water to a scrunched-up straw wrapper, but not that fast. Obviously. We started measuring them every day, laughing like it was the funniest thing ever, until one day she cried from her back hurting and I cried because I was still flat. Peggy slunk down in the front seat, her face becoming one big freckle of embarrassment. Katherine continued. “And she still has skinny legs. She doesn’t quite get it even though I’ve told her, like, every day, but every dude with a penis, even the gay ones, are gonna stare at her, want to talk to her, ask her out, and kiss her just so they can reach up her shirt. Trust me, I know this, and this is so true. But your boobs are still small and you dress like a boy, so we are going to have to come up with a thing to make boys like you. I can’t put my reputation on the line for you if you aren’t willing to make boys like you. So I’m thinking you should learn to talk dirty. Like they do in porn. Guys love it. This college guy, Nick, would go nuts when I would say certain stuff. And they’ll never expect you to talk like that, because you’re such a goody-good girl. It will make them see you as someone new. So I want you to learn to say things like, ‘I get turned on thinking about you.’ So go ahead and say that right now.” (Except she didn’t say “turned on”; she said something so embarrassing I don’t want to even think it.)

She beamed her big saucer eyes down at me. Making me feel one inch tall. And like she stole my ability to talk even though she wanted me to say something. No, no, no! I was not going to say that ever. I’d walk to school. I’d even take the bus! Ugh. I hate Katherine. Hate her. Hate her. Hate her.

“Say it or I’ll know you’re a big waste of my time and you’ll stay a loser like you were in junior high.”

I didn't care. I'd be a loser. Life is one hundred years. High school is only four.

"Don't be a loser, Carrie!"

Ugh. This was so unfair! "I get turned on thinking about you." Except I said it her gross way. I know I said I wouldn't, but Katherine is crazy and sometimes you have to do what crazy people say or they get even crazier. And, OBVIOUSLY, I know what it means. I'm a teenager and there's this thing called the stupid Internet.

"Good job," Katherine said, grinning as she looked at herself in the mirror. Pouting her lips and narrowing her eyes like movie stars do on red carpets. She continued, "Marguerite and Carolina, yeah? Okay. Okay. I got your backs. Let's rock this." She swung open her door. Peggy and I slinked out of the car and fell in line behind her as she marched us toward the northeast entrance. (And I know I'm supposed to call her Marguerite! I'm sorry, okay? I had a really difficult morning.)

Wait a minute.

Wait. A. Minute.

I was starting high school.

2

Trevor doesn't give a...

“TREVOR.”

“Dad,” I said, but I pretended I didn’t know why he was talking to me.

“Trevor.”

“Dad.”

“Trevor!”

“Dad!” I knew that would be our last back-and-forth name calling. I was right. My dad stepped—in two giant, super loud steps—across the room from the doorway toward my bed. I was still lying in it. It was seven thirty or something. Classes were starting in twenty minutes. I was going to be late. I hadn’t overslept. I’d just overstayed in bed. Staring at the ceiling.

Thinking.

Thinking about how there was another Trevor in another dimension who was happy. A Trevor who had gotten up on time, was excited about school, and had friends, a girlfriend, and a reason to live. Then I was thinking about how this Other Dimension Trevor would be

clueless, and I would hate him for being clueless. Because I might not have any of those things Other Trevor did—friends, a girl, a reason to live—but at least I wasn't clueless. I knew what the world was really like. I had seen its dark, corrupt core, and I couldn't and wouldn't unsee it.

My dad didn't care about Other Dimension Trevor. He didn't care much about This Dimension Trevor right now either, because he was mad. He didn't get mad very often. So when he was mad, you could tell. And right now, as he sat on my bed, you could tell he was very mad.

He grabbed my shoulder and turned me toward him. I didn't fight it. He's not evil. He's just ignorant. Ignorant that everything is bullshit. "Trevor, this is a new school and a new year. Don't you want to start off on the right foot?"

"That's a cliché, Dad. 'Start off on the right foot.' I no longer comprehend clichés. Try again."

"Trevor. No smart-mouth. Get up. I'm driving you."

"You're going to be late for work."

"Don't worry about me. Get up. Lily refused to get on the bus since you were still sleeping. Now she's late too. So get up now. We leave here in twenty minutes."

"Mom can drive me."

"Your mother is sleeping."

"Are we sure she's sleeping? She might be dead." This was a joke. You don't understand it, because you don't know my mom overdosed on sleeping pills over a year ago. Maybe you don't find it funny now that you know. Neither did my dad. He gave me that look where I feel I'm the worst son ever born.

"Okay, fine," I said, but I didn't move. So he didn't move. "Fine. Okay. I'm up." I kicked off the blankets and sheets, which also

dislodged him from my bed. A bonus. He didn't leave the room until I walked into my bathroom.

Yeah, I have my own bathroom now. My little sister, Lily, who's seven but talks like she's forty, says this is the best part of our new house. "We really should be grateful, Trevor. Not many children get their own bathroom. We should be grateful for a lot of things, I believe. Our family really needed the fresh start." She's right. She's super smart. She was smarter when she was five, but then the crap happened with my mom and now she tries too hard. But she's still the smartest seven-year-old ever.

I turned on the shower, sat down in the tub and just let the water rain down on me. I love sitting in the shower. Usually do it for forty-five minutes. Just sit and think and sometimes don't think, which is just as nice. Lily says it's bad for the environment, wasting all that water. I tell her it's not wasting water; it's a sacred palace for my soul. Then she says, "I have such a strange brother," and walks away.

My dad pounded on my bathroom door less than ten minutes into my shower escape. I almost pretended not to hear him, but I decided to be nice. His year has been pretty crappy too.



MY MOM GREW UP IN RIVERBEND, ILLINOIS. THAT'S WHY we moved back here from Los Angeles, to be closer to my grandma and Uncle Hank and his family. My grandpa, who was super cool because he just listened and didn't try to impress you, died a few months before my mom overdosed. He had a stroke, didn't like being weak, stopped eating, and just died. My grandma blames his death for my mom's depression. My dad agrees, which is total denial. My mom's been depressed my whole life, so it has nothing to do with my grandpa dying. Just a good excuse. I don't blame her for being

depressed. Life is pointless. I'm sorry. It is. But I am pissed at her for trying to leave us behind.

I was going to be a freshman this year. I was a freshman last year in Los Angeles too. But about two weeks in, I'd said screw this, I'm not going to school anymore. My mom had just come home after months at some fancy loony bin resort, so my dad thought I wanted to stay home to make sure my mom was okay. But I didn't care. I mean, I cared about her. I still do. But I didn't care about stopping her from trying to kill herself again. Because, guess what? You can't stop people from hurting themselves. Impossible. So I'm smart enough to never try. I'm also smart enough to know my dad wasn't going to fight me about going to school last year. But after twelve months of video games and a move halfway across the country, he was fighting me this time.

"Trevor! We are walking out this door!" he yelled from downstairs. I threw on some jeans, Chucks, and a blue T-shirt that just said FREE YOURSELF. All my T-shirts say crap like that. People are so gullible. Free yourself from what? Exactly.

I hadn't gotten a haircut since my mom's thing. That's a lie. My dad made me get a trim two days ago, but my hair was still pretty long. Below my ears. I couldn't quite put it in a ponytail, at least not a cool one. But soon.

When I got in the back of my dad's BMW, Lily handed me a bagel with cream cheese and a bottle of water.

"Why don't you say thank you, Trevor," my dad said.

"I was about to, but you didn't give me a chance," I said. "Thanks, Lily."

"Do you know what I was thinking might be a fun activity this weekend for the whole family?" Lily started. See? Like she's forty! She's blond like my mom, tall for her age, and probably will be the

most beautiful woman ever by the time she's a teenager. If she becomes president someday, we'll all be lucky. "I think we should drive into Chicago, shop on Michigan Avenue, and then have dinner somewhere nice. We haven't done that yet, and we've been here a whole month. I really think that could make us feel like we belong here. What do you both think about this idea?"

"I think that's a great idea," my dad said. He likes Lily better than me. I can't even be angry at him for this. I like Lily better than me too.

I said, "Sure, Lily. But only if I don't have tons of pointless homework that I must do for no reason."

"Trevor, I think you're going to like high school this year. I really do," Lily said. She's always trying to be my life coach.

When we stopped outside Skvarla Elementary, Lily turned to my dad and me and said, "Both of you have wonderful days," and then hopped out and sprinted toward the entrance, her hair swishing and backpack spinning on her right arm. Only when she ran like that did you remember she was seven years old.

I think it reminded my dad of the same thing, because he mumbled, "I should walk her in on her first day," and then jumped out of the car and ran after her. Later, watching him walk back to the car, he had this smile that only Lily can give him. That smile was gone by the time he got back behind the wheel. He had to deal with me now. "Get in the front, Trevor."

"I prefer you being my chauffeur."

"Trevor. Now."

Lecture time. Yay. I climbed over the seat and slid headfirst into the front passenger seat before twisting around and seat-belted myself in.

"I know the move, and all the stuff with Mom, has not been easy.

But in four years colleges aren't going to care how rough you had it, so you have to start buckling down. Work hard. Working hard can help you forget about things."

I almost said, *Like working hard helped you forget your wife hated life so much she tried to off herself?*, but I didn't. Just because. Sometimes it's easier to ignore my dad than argue with him, even though ignoring him makes him think I'm listening. Which makes him think he's wise. Which annoys me. Because he's not.

He continued talking, telling me he'd put a call in to the football coach to see if I could play even though they'd started practice a couple of weeks ago. I used to love football. I have a pretty good arm. Played quarterback in eighth grade for the park district team. But football just doesn't interest me anymore; it's so serious and ridiculous at the same time. Dad just wanted me to make friends, which I suppose would have been nice if I could snap my fingers and have super-cool friends who weren't full of crap. But the long-drawn-out process of making friends, being fake and generic so you don't scare anyone off, just seemed like such a headache. I'd rather play video games and talk to Lily.

When Dad stopped outside Riverbend High School, he said, "I love you, Trevor," and for a second he seemed real and vulnerable and awesome, so I said, "I love you too."

But then he added, "Keep your head down and work hard," which was a cliché and meaningless and pointless. So I didn't hug him, just flung open the door and walked inside without looking back.



I HAD TO GO TO THE FRONT OFFICE SINCE I ARRIVED AFTER first period started. The lady behind the desk asked why I was late.

I wanted to say something clever and over her head, but I couldn't think of anything, so I just said, "Missed the bus."

The office lady asked if I had my class schedule. "Yeah, of course," I said, only to realize that I didn't. I had left my backpack at home. Or maybe in the back seat. "Actually, can you print it out?" She nodded and handed me a copy of my schedule, a map of the school, and a hall pass. Hall passes. So insulting. Just let kids go where they want and figure it out. Or give adults "life passes" so they can't wander off. Because I guarantee you, right this second, more adults than kids are in places they shouldn't be.

Riverbend High School had two major wings, east and west. The east seemed to have all my classes, including first-period biology. Connecting the wings was a long hall, with the cafeteria and library on opposite sides. The gym, pool, and auditorium were north, down another long hall.

When I found the biology classroom, I thought about not going in. What was one more day, right? Then I thought: Exactly. What was one more day avoiding the inevitable? Might as well get this crap started and over with. So I walked inside. All the kids, in eight rows that were four desks deep, turned to me. The teacher kept talking, not noticing or caring that I was entering or that the rest of his students had stopped paying attention to him. Mr. Klenner was old with greenish skin and a baggy neck, like some giant frogman. Maybe I just thought that because he was a biology teacher.

There were two empty seats. Remember when I said all the kids looked my way? Well, that wasn't exactly true. One didn't. At least not for more than a second. A girl with brown hair. One of the two empty seats was next to her, and for some reason I decided to sit by her even though it was closer to the teacher.

After I sat down, I realized everybody was back to taking notes. Which I couldn't do. Because my bag was in some undetermined place. I didn't care. I'd just daydream about better stuff.

Then two sheets of paper and a pencil appeared on my desk. It was the brown-haired girl, but by the time I turned to mouth *thanks* she was already back to staring ahead. As pathetic as this sounds, what she did was one of the cooler things anyone had done for me in a long time.

I felt I almost had to start taking notes or else it would be an insult to her cool thing. So I did, even though it made me a robot brainlessly writing down crap a teacher said so we could regurgitate it to him later. Pointless! Why can't people see this? Someone should realize how absurd school is and make it better.

I would do it if I cared. Which I don't. But I do care about being cool back to people who are cool to me, like the brown-haired girl. I'd have to figure out a way to repay her.

3

Carolina's first day doesn't go according to plan

OKAY, LISTEN: EVEN THOUGH SCIENCE IS MY WORST subject, first-period biology—my first class of high school ever—started perfectly. As it should have, since I had been envisioning it all summer. Most other classes come easy to me, like Spanish, or I find them really interesting, like history, but I knew I was going to have to work extra hard and pay extra attention in biology.

Which I was totally doing until this boy showed up late to class and sat right next to me. He was a new student. Definitely didn't go to junior high with us, which most kids at Riverbend High School did. And he didn't have a bag or a notebook or anything, so I gave him a pencil and some paper to take notes with. Not because I cared about him—I mean, I'm nice, but the real reason I did it is I just knew if I didn't give him paper, I would be thinking the whole class how he didn't have any, and then I wouldn't be able to concentrate.

So why couldn't I concentrate now? This was sooo frustrating. It was the first day of classes; I needed to start off good! Start off WELL, I mean. . . . See, I was a mess! What was going wrong? I was

so prepared! Wait a minute. I totally know what was happening: The new boy was staring at me. He had to be. Definitely.

But when I glanced toward him, he was staring ahead at Mr. Klenner, even writing stuff down. Ugh. Why did I feel so weird? Was there something weird about HIM that made me feel weird? I stole tiny, bitsy glances out of the corner of my eye. Mmm. Okay, he was cute. That's just a fact. He had dark skin and a chin that looked like a sculpture. Oh, what a corny thing to say. Though I guess it's true. But there had to be something about him besides being cute that was making my brain unfocused. He probably looked like someone I knew. Or maybe I met him once. That had to be it, right? He just felt sooo familiar. . . .

Oh my gosh. Wake up! Just listen to the teacher, Carolina! Listen. Listen. Listen.

Which I totally did, except when I was thinking about the new boy and what his name was and where he was from and if he was going to thank me for giving him sheets of paper at the end of class.

Which he didn't. Because after class ended, I lingered there at my seat for an extra couple of seconds, even though I'm usually fast to leave so I can get to my next class on time. But he was even faster than I was, so he left and didn't say anything.

I didn't care. I didn't. Boys are horrible. All of them. New ones with nice hair and even nicer forearms. And old, dumb ones too.



“CARRIE!” MY DAD CALLED OUT AS I WALKED INTO THE kitchen that morning at 6:40 a.m. More like he sang my name. Waving, with a big smile on his face. He liked to do this—sing your name when he was saw you, especially me—because he thought it would make everyone forget he was a big jerk. I would never forget. Never.

“My name is Carolina now, and WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, DAD?” I screamed because his being here ruined everything. Everything, everything, everything.

“Please don’t scream at me. What made you decide to start going by Carolina? I like it.” My dad talked like he was the mature one. Which he isn’t.

“Why are you here?” I whined. I hate when I do that. I’m too old to whine now. Oh no, I could feel tears forming. No, no, no! I would not cry. I would not let him ruin this day. I’m strong. I’m amazing. I’m a grown woman now.

He said, pretending to be a good parent, “It’s your first day of high school. I wanted to see my little girl off. I know your mom had an early shift, so I’m here.”

For, like, maybe one tiny little second I thought this was true. I mean, maybe part of it was true, but for just that tiny second I thought it was the only truth. And I remembered when I loved him, before he hurt my mom. When he was my best friend who I could talk to about anything, and we flew to New York City, just the two of us, just to see a new musical, and he was so wise and interesting and funny and the best dad ever, and . . . NEVER MIND. I hate thinking about that stuff now. Because then I noticed he didn’t have shoes on. He noticed that I noticed.

“Carrie . . . Carolina,” my dad started, smiling, always thinking he can smile away all the problems he causes. “You’re right. I don’t have shoes on. Which means I spent the night. You don’t miss a thing, do you?” He laughed really big. Like it was sooo cute that he couldn’t trick me. “Please don’t cry. Oh, my princess, please don’t.”

I didn’t know I was crying until he said it, which made it worse. My motivational pep talk in my head didn’t work. This made me cry more. Why couldn’t I be perfect? I wanted to be perfect!

I would be. I WOULD BE. I would be.

Tears were wiped away. Big breath. Chin high. “Scott . . .”

“Scott? You’ve never called me that before. So I’m Scott and you’re Carolina? High school already marks some big changes. I prefer Dad, but I respect your choices.”

Ignore him? Definitely. “Scott, I will have a discussion tonight with my mother, your ex-wife, about her mistakenly letting you back into her life last night.”

“We’re not divorced. We’re not getting divorced. Stop talking like that. So cold and stilted. That therapy-speak makes you sound brain-washed, not mature, like you think.”

“I only saw a therapist because of youuu!”

“Carrie, you’re being mean. You haven’t let me see you all summer. Can you please sit down and talk to me? I want to hear about your new school year.”

“Scott, first off, I’d really appreciate it if I didn’t have to tell you again that I’m going by Carolina now,” I said, calm, perfect. “Second, I am going back to my bedroom, where I will get my bag, go over my checklist one last time, and then come back here to have breakfast. I am requesting that you be gone when I return so I may enjoy breakfast before my first day of high school in peace.”

He looked down. My dad never cried when he was sad; he just looked down and stopped trying to charm you. I felt bad about making him sad, but then I remembered he ruined my life, and walked back to my room.

After I closed the door to the bedroom, I looked in the mirror. I had been so proud of myself for regaining my composure and speaking to my dad the way I did, I assumed my reflection would show this amazingly powerful young woman. Like a beautiful TV lawyer in a tastefully sexy suit admiring herself before a big case.

But the person in the mirror was just me. Red-eyed and puffy-faced me. Carolina Fisher. Calves too big. Boobs too small. Baggy clothes to hide both. The same shoulder-length brunette bob I'd had since the first grade.

My brother had gotten my father's good looks. I was athletic like my mom. It should have been the opposite. Only now that Heath was in college did his being terrible at sports stop mattering so much to the other boys. And junior high would have been so, so, so much easier if I was popular and all the boys liked me. I wouldn't have liked them, but, well, you know.

I called my mom. She wouldn't pick up, I knew, because she was working, but I felt like leaving a message to let her know she was in trouble. "Mom, I just saw Dad. You and I are going to talk when I get home from school today. I love you, but . . . Okay. Bye."

After going over my checklist, which I had completed six days ago but kept because I liked seeing completed checklists, I walked back toward the kitchen, deciding whether I was going to use "therapy-speak" again on my dad or just yell at him. Thinking, thinking, thinking. I was going to yell. Definitely. It made me a bit excited, even. Which was weird and bad, I know, but it just did.

Except when I got to the kitchen, my dad was gone. Aaah! Aaah! Aaah! I hated him for leaving before I could yell at him. Which was stupid since I had told him to leave. But you know what? You know what? I didn't care that it was stupid. I still hated him.



"WHO WAS THAT GUY WHO SAT NEXT TO YOU?" PEGGY ASKED after we left biology.

"Who?" I said, even though I knew she was talking about the new boy I gave the paper to. Why do people do stuff like that? Ask things

like *Who?* even though they know exactly who people are referring to? I'm going to stop doing it. I really am.

"You think he's cute, don't you?" she said. Sometimes it's frustrating not being able to lie to Peggy. It's also, obviously, amazing. No matter what else turns bad in the world, I'll always have Peggy, the *best* best friend ever.

I whispered so nobody in the hall could hear except Peggy. "Yes, but he's a jerk. And a jerk can only be cute for a few days." Then Peggy and I hugged good-bye, and I walked toward my second class.

During Spanish and then third-period literature, I didn't think about the new boy from biology at all. It probably helped that he wasn't in either of those classes, but I was also sure I was back to my normal, focused self.

But then, guess what? We had fourth-period world history together. I made sure to sit in the front center so he wouldn't sit next to me. Because handsome boys always like to sit in the back. But then, guess what? He totally did sit next to me.

Oh.

Wait. A. Minute.

Did this mean he liked me? It must, right? Why else would he sit next to me? What should I do? What should I say? This was impossible. I hated this. I wanted to go to an all-girls school so I could just concentrate on getting good grades and going to a good college and anything besides what a stupid new boy thinks of me!

Wait a minute, Carolina. Silly, silly Carolina.

Obviously he sat by you. Want to know why? Because he needs more sheets of paper. He wants to use you. Some girls get used for sex stuff; I get used for my school supplies.

Without looking at him, I tore two sheets (a neat tear—I hate

jagged sheets of paper) and put them on his desk. Only I did it just as he was putting down his own notebook. A new black one.

Oh, my face must have turned sooo red. I felt sooo stupid. I looked like such a clueless geek, right? I AM a clueless geek. Never interact with any boy, ever, ever, ever again. Ever. But then the new boy said, “You’re awesome. Thanks. But I went to the school store after biology so I could pay you back.” Then he slid back the two sheets I just gave him PLUS two more empty ones to replace the ones I gave him during first period.

Did I hear that right? He called me awesome, right? He totally did. My gosh. This definitely meant he liked me, right? I wanted to throw up. I wanted to move seats. I WANTED to say something back. I really did. But it needed to sound cool, fun, smart, amazing, and like something he would remember the rest of his life, and my brain couldn’t think of anything. Nothing. So I just smiled. It wasn’t even a good smile. I’m sure it looked like a mean smile. Like a Shannon Shunton smile. Which is the worst smile ever. The worst.

And then the teacher, Mr. Rivard, started talking, so I couldn’t even whisper something simple back like *thank you*. Oh, why couldn’t I have just said *thank you*? That would have been so nice if I just could have said that. It would have made everything great; it would have saved everything from being ruined.

Mr. Rivard talked for the whole class because that is what teachers do. Which I usually like in history, especially teachers who get so excited about all the stories from the past that they pace and even sweat a little bit. Mr. Rivard was definitely sweating too, but I couldn’t hear a word he was saying. I mean, I was writing a bunch of notes down, so I must have sort of heard it, I suppose, right? But it had to be only the tiny part of my brain that tells my hand what to do, because what

I was really thinking about what I would say to the new boy at the end of class to make up for my stupid, snobby smile that I totally didn't mean but was now the only thing he knew about me. Yes, he knew I gave him the sheets of paper, but that was sooo long ago. The terrible smile was the last thing he saw, and he was going to hate me just like all the boys in eighth grade.

Maybe that's why I was obsessing about him. Which was so against my rules to NEVER OBSESS ABOUT BOYS and so unlike me. But, see, he was new, you know? He didn't know anyone from eighth grade. He didn't know that all the boys didn't like me or talk to me. He didn't know there was, like, this secret rule that you couldn't like Carolina Fisher.

But I totally messed that up.

Which was fine. Yes, Carolina, it's fine. It's better this way. School. Soccer. Peggy. No distractions. I was fine. It was fine. Everything was amazing. Always. Definitely.

4

Trevor follows orders

“WHAT UP, TREV,” MY COUSIN HENRY SAID AS I SAT NEXT to him and some other freshman football players at lunch. Henry is my uncle Hank’s son. He’s a year younger and always looked up to me when we were kids, even though we’d only see each other once a year. But now we were in the same grade. At his school. Where he knew everyone. Was friends with everyone. And I was this new, strange kid who everyone probably labeled as the boy with the mom who tried to kill herself. My dad said Henry promised his parents he wouldn’t tell anyone, but who knows. You know? The two times I had seen Henry since we’d moved to Riverbend, he’d acted strange. Like I didn’t really belong there. Which I didn’t. I don’t belong anywhere.

Henry turned to his friends and said, “Guys, this is my cousin Trevor. But his last name is Santos, not McCarthy. My dad and his mom are brother and sister. So that’s why his last name is Mexican and not American.” What Henry said was true. I still wanted to beat his face in. In Los Angeles, I was half white and nobody cared. Here, I’d

be half Mexican and everyone would care even if they pretended they didn't. What nobody knew unless they met my dad was that he acts whiter than most white people. His name is Robert Santos. He was born Roberto but dropped the "o." He's a sellout like that.

"So why aren't you on the team? Are you not a good athlete like Henry?" one of the kids asked.

"I'm okay," I said. Truth was, I was better. Henry knew it but just sat silently. "My dad said he might call the coach and see if I can play even though you started practice already." Why was I saying crap I didn't want to say?

"No way Coach Pollina would go for that, Trev. First game is Friday. Sorry," Henry said, not looking at me.

"No worries." Whatever. I wished this day was over. Just wanted to go home and sleep.

"Have any hot girls in your classes?" another kid asked. His name was Jake. He was over six feet tall. Maybe six feet wide too. But baby-faced like a fifth grader.

"Yeah, I suppose," I said back.

"You like one already?" Jake said. "Who? Who? Who? Tell us and we'll let you know if it's okay."

Don't say anything, Trevor. But I couldn't listen to my own self. I suck. "She's brunette. Really pretty."

"What's her name?" Jake asked. Now all twelve freshman football players were looking at me.

"I don't know her name. She's cool." Though she ignored me in history. Probably knows how beautiful she is and doesn't want to be nice to every guy who tries to talk to her. Girls are always playing games like that.

"What class do you have with her?"

"Why's it matter?" I asked.

“Because how else are we supposed to know who she is?”

“Biology and history, but that probably won’t help—”

“Carrie Fisher,” another kid said. He was wearing a white hoodie, and I think people called him Licker. He was in my history class. Figured that out too late. He added, “I heard she wants to be called Carolina now.”

“The Princess!” Jake screeched, cackling like some gremlin jumping in gold coins.

“Carrie Fisher’s a loser, Trev,” Henry said. Matter-of-fact. “You can’t like her.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said. Just accepting Henry’s order as if he were my goddamn lord and master. What was my problem? This was my idiot younger cousin who used to throw crybaby hissy fits when his parents put vegetables on his plate at Thanksgiving. This was why I hated school! Makes you think crap matters when it doesn’t! Makes you listen to idiots! Makes you act like someone you aren’t! Get me out of here!

But I didn’t say anything. I didn’t go anywhere. Just sat there nodding, or maybe I didn’t move at all. My brain was turning dark. Hot. Ready to explode and blow up the entire school. But my body must have been still. So still. I must have seemed so calm. Nobody can tell anything about anyone. We are all a big mystery to one another.

Jake kept saying stuff like, “He thought the Princess was cute! She’s so ugly! So ugly!”

Then another kid said, “Carrie and Peggy Darry are lesbians. Everyone knows that.”

So Licker added, “Yeah, I know a girl who saw them making out in the bathroom last year.”

Jake felt it was a good time to say, “Has anyone seen Peggy Darry this year? Her tits got huge!” And the whole table leaned in and smirked, whispering just how huge.

Henry then said, “I might pretend to like Peggy just so I can feel her up.”

And that’s when I decided I hated my little cousin. But I didn’t say anything. Because he was the only person I knew at this crappy new school in this crappy new town. Him and Carolina Fisher. But I didn’t really know her. Just that she was cool to me. But not cool enough for me.

5

Carolina makes a vow

SO I TOTALLY RAN OUT OF HISTORY CLASS THE MOMENT the bell rang, without looking at the new boy, because I knew he hated me for not saying thank you. I didn't blame him—I would hate me if I were him. I mean, I did hate me, and I *was* me.

Fifth period was lunch. I was supposed to meet Peggy in front of the cafeteria and wasn't really paying attention to anything except getting there when this really, really, really weird thing happened. So weird! This boy leaned up against the lockers like he had been waiting there all day, and said, "Hey, you." I looked at him. I wish I hadn't, but I did.

I shouldn't even call this boy a boy, because he was definitely not a freshman. His face had scruff on it and he wore a thin black tie. Who wears a tie to school if they don't have to? He wasn't handsome, not really ugly either, but with his wide chin and long forehead he kind of looked like he should have lived one hundred years ago. Like on that HBO show about gangsters from the 1920s. He should have had a toothpick in his mouth, but he didn't. "You're the freshman who wrote that article in the *Riverbend Review* last spring?" the scruffy boy with

a tie on said. He didn't blink when he looked at me. His eyes looked very mature and very fast. Like he was taking photographs with them. Like he was having dirty thoughts. Gross. I wanted to run, but instead—

I said, “Yeah,” even though I should have said no. But I don't lie. Almost never, anyway. Because I *had* written an article for the *Riverbend Review*. The local paper had asked me, after the junior high principal recommended that they ask me, to write an article about what it meant to be a kid in Riverbend. Except all the horrible stuff with my dad had just started, so all I could write about was how kids didn't get to be kids very long in the world now. Obviously, I didn't talk about my dad directly. Just that every secret about sex and life was just a Google search away. That sort of thing. I didn't think anyone had read the article besides my mom and brother. Especially not some weird man-boy.

“My name is Alexander Taylor. I'm a junior. You interest me.” He talked slowly, so intense, like he was trying to brainwash me. Then he said, “Your name is Carrie Fisher, right?”

“Carolina Fisher.”

“Interesting. You're too young for me right now, but maybe I'll say hello again in a few months to see if you haven't been turned into one of the masses. Until then, Miss Carolina.” And then he nodded at me and walked away.

I wanted to take a shower just for having been near him, and I told myself I would never speak to or look at Alexander Taylor again. Such a weirdo.



I MET PEGGY JUST AS WE PLANNED, AND WE WENT INSIDE the cafeteria, which had puke-yellow walls, and found a table near

the food line, which is where the freshmen sit because it smells like dead animals and soap. Only seniors are allowed to drive off campus, so there were, like, nine hundred people stuffed inside, and it was sooo loud, like everyone in the room was screaming at the exact same time. Groups like yearbook club and chess club met in classrooms during lunch, and some people had lunch sixth period, so I'm probably exaggerating about there being nine hundred people. And I promised not to exaggerate. I know. But sometimes it's just how it FEELS, even if it's not how it is, you know?

Seven other freshman soccer players joined us at our table, also just as we planned, and then some other freshman girls that we didn't know too, but they sat at the end and just looked at their phones. Soccer season wasn't until the spring in Illinois, but we'd all gotten close during summer camp practices. Peggy and this girl Kendra, who was the best goalie I had ever played with, were both on the fall club team with me, and our mothers were going to rotate driving us to practice.

I spent the rest of lunch talking mostly to Kendra. She was quiet, and new like the new boy, except she was at summer camp so she wasn't new to us. She's black. Or African American. I wish I could ask her what's the better way to describe her. Or I wish we were all the same color. The best, however, would be if we were all a million different colors. The best. I know it's impossible, but I think sometimes you have to think about impossible things.

My dad would always tell me I was a "thinking addict," because I would ask him questions about everything. And then he would give me an answer, and I would ask two more and then three more. Even when I realized that he didn't know any more, I kept asking because I wanted him to go find out and tell me because not understanding drove me crazy. I used to love when my dad called me that because he

said it with such pride. He said it was our greatest bond. He said it was how he knew I was his daughter. But now that I hate my father, I kind of hate that I'm a thinking addict.

Near the end of the lunch period, Katherine—you know, Peggy's whack-job sister—stomped over to our table, pointed at Peggy and me, and said, "You two, come here."

I really wanted to say: Nobody tells me what to do! But I didn't. I always do what people say, sort of, which is pathetic. I want to change this about myself, but I didn't know if I could start right then. So I just got up and followed Peggy, who followed Katherine to a lunch table on the other side of the cafeteria. Shannon Shunton was sitting there with the four other most popular eighth graders. Emma Goldberg. Jean Booker. Raina Bethington. And Wanda Chan, who used to be a geek like me until she started to dress like a slut. You know, super-short skirts and super-high boots. I suppose all these girls were the popular freshman girls now. Does it work like that? You just get to carry your membership from one grade to another? Even one school to another? **DO NOT CARE ABOUT THIS!** This is dumb. I just wanted to go back to the soccer table. I thought I was going to faint standing there, waiting for Shannon Shunton to yell at me or not look at me or something just as mean. My whole head was turning into bumblebees that wanted to fly out of my eyeballs and kill me.

Even though I really did feel sick and about to die, I **ALSO** felt, and this is so lame to admit, that I was actually cool for just being there, near Katherine and Shannon and all of them. That just by being included in their little lunch table atmosphere, I was, like, one of them. Anointed cool. And I thought people could see us there and would think we were special. So **LAME**, right? But I couldn't help it. It's just what I felt.

Katherine said, to Shannon and the others, "Peggy's my sister, so

if you want to come to our parties and for me to introduce you to junior guys, you have to be friends with her. And Carrie's her best friend. So you have to be friends with her too. One more thing. Call them Marguerite and Carolina. Okay?" Katherine pronounced my name like the state (Caroliina) and not how I like it (Caroleena), but I didn't correct her because I didn't want her to kill me.

All the girls nodded, except Shannon Shunton.

"SHANNON!" her sister Elizabeth yelled from down the table, where she sat with a pack of junior girls, who all looked like they should be in college or working at the Macy's perfume department. Elizabeth and Katherine were best friends. Probably because they were both very pretty, popular, and liked to yell so loud it made your body convulse.

Shannon Shunton finally smiled and said, "Great, can't wait." What she really meant, obviously, is "Not great, could wait forever," but Peggy said thanks so I did too, and then there was the most awkward moment. Like, were we supposed to sit down and start talking? Or leave? Or make plans? Or exchange phone numbers? Or just wait in silence? Which is what we did, until Katherine yelled, "Stop standing around like freaks! Go to class already." Peggy and I quickly scooted back and made for the exit. Then Katherine must have felt bad because she started yelling at Shannon, Emma, Jean, Raina, and Wanda too.

"That was . . .," Peggy said as we left the cafeteria. For the breath it took her to finish her sentence, I wanted her to say, "That was stupid; let's totally not be friends with them," but then I realized how much I liked the idea of other people knowing we were friends with Shannon Shunton. Which is sick. Just sick. So sick. Why am I so sick? Then Peggy finished her sentence, ". . . so amazing." "Amazing" was Peggy's favorite word. It was mine too. I want to use it less, though. Feels too immature, I think. Don't you?

Except then I said, “It *was* amazing,” and giggled, and then I saw Kendra walking by herself to class and thought we should make Shannon be friends with Kendra too. But I stopped thinking about Kendra when I saw the new boy walking down the hall with Henry McCarthy, who dated Shannon Shunton in seventh grade and was not very attractive, but he was still the most popular boy all through junior high.

Not that I was surprised. Obviously, the new boy would already be friends with the popular boys. Obviously. Obviously. Obviously.

Wait a minute. I might be popular soon too, right? So that means the new boy and I could . . .

But then I stopped thinking these stupid things. Sooo stupid. High school and popularity is sooo stupid. I want to be grown-up and mature and never have to stress about this relationship stuff ever again. Ever. So I made a vow to think only about school the rest of the day. I’m usually pretty disciplined when I make a vow.



SIXTH PERIOD WAS ALGEBRA. HAVING A BORING CLASS, LIKE math, after lunch is the worst. Even though I’m a really good student, I really am, it’s sooo hard not to fall asleep after lunch. My dad says they should give nap periods at school, and at work for adults. I told him naps are for little kids. But my head kept nodding during algebra anyway.

Seventh period was health class, which you only had to take for one semester. It was an elective, but only sort of since you had to take it by the end of sophomore year. So I just decided to take it right away. Why postpone things? The teacher, Mrs. Maya, went over the syllabus and said yes, we would be talking about sex, and then everybody giggled, even the sophomores in our class. And then she said, “I’m

even going to use the words ‘penis’ and ‘vagina.’ ” And then everyone laughed, but not the sophomores as much. And then she said, “Let’s all say those words now so we can get the giggles out on the first day. First, let’s all say ‘penis.’ One, two, three,” and half the class said “penis” and half the class just laughed. I said it, obviously, because I’m mature for my age. Sort of. Then Mrs. Maya counted down and everyone said “vagina,” even the still-giggling freshmen.

Well, everyone except the new boy. He didn’t laugh or giggle or say the words. Luckily, I had not thought of him since I made my vow. I barely even noticed he was in the class. That’s just a fact. I’m glad I’m not going to be one of those girls that goes boy bonkers and thinks dating is more important than school because it would be embarrassing to be in health class with him and have to talk about sex.

When the bell rang, I decided to look toward the new boy because, well, just because. But he ignored me, probably because by now he’s figured out he’s too cool to even be my friend.

Which is fine. Totally. Because I don’t care. I don’t! Really.



EIGHTH PERIOD WAS GYM CLASS FOR ATHLETES. SO IF YOUR sport is in season, like football players in the fall, you just go to the locker room and head out to the field. Since girls’ soccer isn’t until spring, Kendra, Peggy, and I had club team Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and then study hall on Tuesday and Thursday.

My mom was waiting for the three of us in front of school to drive us to club practice in Highland Park. I totally forgot I was mad at her about having Dad spend the night when I saw her. Maybe that’s because I just needed to tell someone about my first day of school.

After practice, my mom drove us back home, dropping off Kendra first since her house was farthest from mine. She lived in the nicest

area of Riverbend, in a development called Covered Bridges. It was for rich people. The houses were really big, and the streets looked newly paved even though Covered Bridges was built almost five years ago.

Once Kendra was gone, my phone beeped with a text. It was from Peggy, who was in the back seat. For a second I wondered why she didn't just speak actual words, but then I read it:

PEGGY

**My parents are going to the lake
this weekend. Katherine is throwing
a big party at our house Friday and
said we get to come!**

I glanced back. She was so excited that I texted back:

ME

Yay!!

Even though the idea of going to a big high school party with upperclassmen made me queasy, stressed, and miserable. Peggy and I never got invited to parties in junior high. Obviously, we wanted to be invited; who wants to not be invited? But guess what? We usually spent the weekend watching movies or talking about a hundred million things, and never once did I think we would have more fun at some party. But now that Peggy's sister went to the same school and made us be friends with Shannon Shunton, we would have to do things like go to parties. Being cool would be hard and not always fun, I imagined.

Then I wondered if the new boy would come to the party.

No, I didn't.

Okay, yes, I did. But I hate that I did. I hate that I broke my vow.

Nothing is going as I planned it. Nothing. It's all ruined.

Possibly.