

THE



BOY



RECESSION



a novel by  
**FLYNN MEANEY**  
AUTHOR OF *BLOODTHIRSTY*

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# THE BOY RECESSION

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by FLYNN MEANEY



**poppy**

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

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*For my gal pals,  
and the nights we spent scheming at Starbucks*

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# CHAPTER 1: HUNTER

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## “Summer Jobs with Sex Appeal: A Teen’s Guide to Working in Whitefish Bay”

Aviva Roth for *The Julius Journal*, Special Summer Break Edition

“When are you gonna get off your lazy ass and get a job?” Eugene asks me.

I’m so Zen right now, I don’t even realize the kid is talking to me. Eugene and Derek and I are out on Eugene’s sailboat on Lake Michigan. We’re pretty close to shore still, so the wind isn’t too crazy here. It’s just this nice breeze rocking the boat a little bit back and forth as I lie stretched out on the deck, the warmth of the sun on me. Man, this is a nice day.

We live in Wisconsin, and in Wisconsin, you really appreciate days when it’s warm and sunny. In winter this town is freezing. You step out your door in the morning and the whole place looks like one of those nature specials in which a guy brings a camcorder to the North Pole and then the camera cuts out and you hear on the news that he got eaten by a bear. Since school starts next week, I’m taking advantage of the last full day I have to lie on my ass and do nothing.

“Hunter!” Eugene says. “Are you gonna get your act together for the school year or what? You were supposed to get a summer job, and the summer’s over.”

“I tried to get a summer job,” I tell Eugene, sitting up and yawning.

I open my eyes, but the sun is really bright, because I’ve been lying down with my arm over my face for so long.

“It’s, like, a recession, dude.”

It’s Eugene’s sailboat, and he’s doing something sailboaty—tying a knot, or something like that. Like usual, he’s dressed like an eighty-year-old dude on a golf course—pink shirt and shoes with tassels and all that crap. Even though he’s wearing big sunglasses, I can tell he’s rolling his eyes.

“It’s a recession, for real!” I tell him, lifting up my T-shirt to scratch my stomach. “My dad hasn’t had a job for, like, six months.”

Derek’s sitting balanced on the side of the boat. He thinks he’s a badass for balancing there, but the boat is barely moving at all, so he’s definitely not gonna fall off. Derek actually came out here to fish but we’re so close to the docks and the beach and the people swimming there that he’s not catching anything. Now he puts down his fishing pole and swings his legs around so he’s facing us.

“I thought your dad was a stay-at-home dad, Huntro,” Derek says.

Derek and Eugene call me “Huntro” sometimes. I have no clue why.

“He’s not a stay-at-home dad,” I scoff. “He has one kid, and it’s me. If he’s supposed to be watching me, or whatever, full-time, he’s doing a crappy job. Because I’m out every night, doing stupid shit with you guys.”

“Don’t be sexist, Huntro,” Derek says. “Dudes can be stay-at-home dads, too. I think it would be pretty cool. I’d be one.”

Derek’s totally given up on fishing. He reaches into his pocket for a pack of Marlboros and shakes out one really old, wrinkly cigarette. I’m pretty sure he’s had this same pack since eighth grade, when health class sparked his interest in smoking. He takes out a match, too, and strikes it on the brim of his hat.

“Yeah, you’d be a great role model,” I tell him, lying back down on the boat deck.

Eugene is still all stressed out about my job search.

“Where did you apply this summer?” he asks me. “Did you actually apply for any jobs?”

“I did!” I say, putting my arm back over my eyes to block the sun. Whoa, I don’t smell so good right now. I must be sweating through my shirt.

“I applied at the pool,” I tell him. “To be, like, the snack-bar guy, or lifeguard, or something.”

“Which one?” Eugene asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe it was a job application for the lifeguard, and I wrote about snack-bar stuff.”

Eugene sighs loudly. “What else?”

“Uh... I applied at Culver’s, too. I was there, eating a bunch of Butter Burgers, and I saw a job application, so I grabbed it.”

“So what about that?” Eugene says.

“Still waiting to hear back,” I tell him. “Apparently, no one’s impressed with my eating experience.”

*Man, I could really go for a Butter Burger right now.*

“Hunter, you can’t just sit around waiting for people to call you back,” Eugene tells me. He stands up and starts to pace the deck.

“Finding a job is about bothering people. You’ve got to go door to door, ringing doorbells, finding old ladies who need you to do stuff to their chimneys. You gotta be willing to do anything. Go out and *find* something. You’ve got to get *aggressive*.”

“I don’t know,” I say, yawning so wide I kind of drool on myself by accident. “I’m not a super-aggressive person.”

“You’re *Hunter*,” Eugene tells me. “Be a *hunter*, Hunter.”

It is pretty ironic that my name is Hunter. I’m actually much more of a gatherer. I don’t do stuff; I let stuff happen to me. If we were still cavemen, I wouldn’t be out there at dawn, stalking down buffalo and turning their bladders into beer mugs or whatever. I’m pretty sure I’d be sleeping in until someone dragged my ass out of that cave. And if I was hungry, I’d end up eating grass or ants or whatever you could scrounge up in the *Homo erectus* version of a vending machine.

Derek’s still leaning on the side of the boat, but he’s not smoking. He just keeps lighting matches against his hat and then holding them between two fingers, letting them burn down until they’re close to his skin. Once they burn down, he throws them over the side of the boat, into the water.

“If you wanna help the kid out,” Derek says to Eugene, “why don’t *you* hire him?”

Actually, Eugene probably could hire me, since he’s an “entrepreneur.” That’s what he calls himself. He makes most of his money buying beer for people’s parties. Eugene’s got a fake ID, and he actually gets away with using it because he looks like he’s thirty-six, thanks to his devotion to tasseled shoes and his ridiculous carpet of chest hair. Besides buying beer, Eugene sells *Maxim* magazines and cigarettes, and does stuff like make fake notes so people can watch that *Miracle of Life* video in bio class. That’s part of the reason he has this boat—he stores a lot of illegal shit on here.

“I don’t think so,” Eugene says. “No offense, Huntro, but I work in a high-pressure, high-stakes environment. I just can’t take a chance on you.”

I’m not offended. And I don’t give a crap. I don’t want to work for Eugene. Actually, I don’t want to work at all. It will be hard enough to go back to school next week; I don’t want a job on top of that. I’ve gotten way too used to my summer schedule: waking up at 2 PM, going to the pool, falling asleep in the sun without sunscreen, going home, going to Derek’s house to wrestle in his wrestling ring (which is actually a bunch of mattresses in his basement), going home again to play *World of Warcraft* until 3 AM, then going to sleep after a day of being generally irresponsible.

“Ugh. Will you look at those douchebags?” Derek says. “Those preppy d-bags piss me off.”

Derek is glaring over at the docks at a bunch of guys we go to school with, the guys who are really into school and sports and crap. These guys are on the student senate, go to dances, and throw keggers—and all the rest of that Zac Efron typical high-school crap. Right now, a bunch of them wearing plaid shorts are doing cannonballs off the dock.

Our town is Whitefish Bay, but people call it “White Folks Bay” because it’s so preppy and privileged and whatever. A lot of the terrible stuff people say about the suburbs is true about Whitefish Bay. There are rich white kids who drink too much. There are spoiled kids who get Bimmers for their sixteenth birthdays, crash them, and then have their parents buy them new ones. This kinda stuff offends Derek; I don’t let it get to me.

“Just ignore them,” I tell Derek. “Let them have their fun with their plaid shorts. Don’t be jealous.”  
“They’re probably jealous of *us*,” Eugene says, letting the mainsail out by unhooking a rope. “We’ve got a boat.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Derek says sarcastically. “We’ve got a boat, and they’ve got *girls*.”

That’s true. They do have girls. There are about thirty girls over on the dock with those plaid-short guys, and all those girls are wearing bikinis. Those guys have girls jumping on their backs, girls diving into the water with them, girls dunking their heads underwater, girls racing them back to the docks all soaking wet and hot. Eugene, Derek, and I don’t have any girls. We never have any girls.

“Look at that crap,” Derek says bitterly. “Look at those pricks with their abs and their... haircuts. Guys like that try to look all clean and shit so no one realizes how sketchy they are. Girls might think *we’re* sketchy, but those guys are sketchy. Those guys are sexual assaults waiting to happen. Those are the guys who get girls wasted and take advantage of them.”

Derek shakes his head and sits down on the deck next to me. He lights another match against his hat. Derek’s kind of a pyromaniac—in case you haven’t noticed. On the Fourth of July he had this whole plan; he was gonna learn how to become a fire-eater by watching YouTube videos. It didn’t pan out, though, because his mom found out, and she stopped him because Derek’s already been to the emergency room three times this year. So I guess he’s pissed because that plan didn’t pan out.

“Yeah, those guys get girls wasted on alcohol they buy from *me*,” Eugene says. “Don’t talk shit about my clients.”

“Don’t you ever get mad when you buy all their beer and deliver all their kegs and you don’t even get invited to their parties?” Derek asks Eugene now.

Eugene shakes his head. “I just sit back and count up my money.”

Now Eugene does that. He sits down in what he calls the “captain’s chair,” and he whips out his wallet. This kid carries an amazing amount of cash on him. Sometimes I think about pickpocketing him. It would be pretty easy—he’s only, like, five-foot-three. I’m pretty sure I could rob him, no problem. Right now, though, I’m too lazy.

Derek’s so busy glaring at a guy in plaid shorts who’s groping this freshman girl underwater that he lets the match burn all the way down to his fingers.

“Shit!” he cries out, shaking the match so hard it drops to the floor of the boat.

Eugene looks up from his money, all pissed.

“Do *not* light my boat on fire,” Eugene tells Derek.

“A boat can’t catch on fire,” Derek says. “If it does, we’ll put it out. We’ve got *water* all around us.”

He picks the match up off the boat deck and throws it over the side. He stays standing up and shades his eyes so he can watch the dock some more.

“You know who I want to punch in the face?” Derek says, stretching his arms over his head.

“Charlie Devine.”

~~When I sit up, my hair is all over my face. What I really want to do right now is jump in this water. I’m sweaty as balls.~~

“Don’t you hate guys like that?” Derek asks me. “I seriously can’t deal with those guys for another year.”

“I don’t really give a crap,” I tell him. “I mean, yeah, girls like them better than us, so that sucks. And they have parties and we’re not invited, but... whatever. I mean, we do stuff. And they’re not invited to our stuff.”

Derek rolls his eyes. “We hang out at the gas station and TP people’s houses.”

“And they’re not invited!” I tell him, laughing.

“You know what girls call those pricks?” Derek says. “*The guys*. That’s what they call them. They’ll be planning their parties and crap, and they’ll be like, ‘What time are *the guys* getting here?’ You know what that means, Huntro? They don’t even count us. We’re not even *guys* to them.”

To be honest with ya, I don’t like “the guys” any more than Derek does. But I don’t get worked up about them. I’m not an angry dude. It’s too much effort to get pissed off. The other night we were wrestling in Derek’s basement and he accidentally crotch-stomped me. I didn’t even get mad; I just forgot about it and ate some Fritos.

“You know what you need?” I tell Derek, throwing my arm around his shoulders.

He’s blowing on the fingers he burned. “What?”

“A swim,” I tell him.

Now I wrap both of my arms around him and start pushing him toward the boat railing. I think I can throw Derek overboard. I mean, he’s stronger than Eugene, but I caught him by surprise, so I’ve got the advantage. Unless he lights me on fire, I’m gonna push him into that water.



## CHAPTER 2: KELLY

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### “Summer Lovin’: Tips for Trapping Your Own Danny Zuko”

Aviva Roth for *The Julius Journal*, Special Summer Break Edition

Do you ever feel bad our lives aren’t more like *Grease*?” I ask Darcy.

It’s the last day of summer vacation; Darcy, Aviva, and I are at the beach; and for the sixteenth year of my life, I’m disappointed with my tan. You can’t even call this a tan. There’s one strip of pinkish sunburned skin between the bottom of my tankini top and the top of my tankini bottom. That’s it. That’s as tan as I’m going to get this summer. In Wisconsin, we don’t see the sun from October to April, so in a few months, I’ll be able to go skiing naked and just blend in with the mountains.

I reach for Aviva’s tanning oil to rub on my shoulders, but then I think, *What’s the point?* and throw the bottle at Darcy, who hasn’t answered my question. She’s too busy reading this huge book that’s almost as big as her entire body. When I first met Darcy, I was seven years old and I was jealous of her blond hair and blue eyes because I thought she was like Tinker Bell. I found out pretty quickly that she is nothing like Tinker Bell. I don’t think Tinker Bell would be reading a book called *Shostakovich and Stalin*.

“Darcy!” I say.

When she gets to the end of the page, Darcy takes her blue zinc oxide–covered nose out of the book and repeats, “Do I ever feel bad our lives aren’t more like *Grease*?”

“Uh-huh,” I say.

I spray some Sun-In in my hair. As well as being my last chance for a tan, today is my last chance for natural highlights. And by “natural,” I mean highlights made by spraying my hair with sticky fake lemon-scented spray and then sitting in the sun, crossing my fingers that all those reports of the ozone layer breakdown are true. Maybe if I go back to school tomorrow all tan and blond, people will think I went to some exotic island this summer.

Darcy holds her place in her book with her finger and asks for clarification.

“You mean like ancient, naked-Olympics Greece, or economically corrupt modern-day Greece?”

I snatch Darcy’s huge book out of her hands and put it on Aviva’s towel, which is on the other side of mine.

“You need to stop reading at the beach,” I tell her. “School starts tomorrow. This is our last day to gossip and have fun.”

“That is fun!” Darcy whines. “That’s my fun book!”

“Why would I want our lives to be like economically corrupt modern-day Greece?” I ask. “I’m talking about *Grease Grease*.”

I grab Aviva’s pink iPod off her towel and scroll through the summer playlist I made for her. I choose “Summer Nights,” which I put on the list after my seven-year-old sister, Lila, made me watch *Grease* five times in one week, and put the volume up so Darcy can hear the opening notes.

“Oh, the movie *Grease*,” Darcy says. She’s obviously disappointed I’m not trying to start a conversation about gross domestic product. “The movie *Grease*? No way. Drag racing and pregnancy scares? I don’t think so, Kell.”

“But it’s so cute on the first day of school, when Sandy’s telling everyone about her and Danny, and how they met on the beach, and they were so cute together, drinking lemonade. I didn’t do any of

that stuff this summer. We're sixteen. Shouldn't we be summer loving?"

Darcy is slathering her arms in SPF 85. At least I look tan compared to her. She could fly to Canada right now and ski naked—not that she would ever be naked in public.

"It looks like Aviva's getting some summer loving," she says, shading her eyes and looking out at Lake Michigan.

My other best friend, Aviva, is with a cute lifeguard on the dock. She just jumped on his back and wrapped her ridiculously long legs around him. The lifeguard is jogging down the dock, and when he jumps off the end, Aviva is still on his back. After a minute underwater, she pops her head up above water and laughs in the guy's face. When she climbs back up onto the dock, Darcy and I can see down her bikini top from fifty yards away. According to Aviva, it was her good karma that gave her boobs that look amazing in a bikini top that doesn't even have underwire in it.

She also says that people stare at her a lot because she's one of the three and a half black people in Whitefish Bay—she's actually the half, because her mom is black and her dad is white. But it's actually because she's really pretty. And because she decided to have a "braless summer." Now she gets stared at the most often in places with air-conditioning.

"That's not summer love," I tell Darcy. "Aviva's gonna do what Aviva always does. Make out with him, then defriend him on Facebook and move on to someone else."

Darcy, Aviva, and I have been best friends since fourth grade, when we were in the advanced reading group together. Aviva gives me credit for holding the three of us together. I'm a Libra, which is all about balance, and Aviva claims I balance her and Darcy out with my normalcy. I guess you could look at it that way. Like, Aviva has those amazing boobs, Darcy has no boobs, and I can go either way, depending on how much effort and how many Victoria's Secret products are involved. Right now, Darcy's wearing a one-piece bathing suit that the Pope would approve of, I'm wearing a tankini that shows only the decent part of my stomach, and, out on the dock, Aviva's bikini bottom is creeping toward thong status.

It's the same thing with boys. Aviva is interested in a different boy every day. Darcy won't let herself get interested in any boy. (Except Stalin. And maybe Shostakovich.) Me, I just want one normal, nice boy to crush on.

But the thing about being normal is no one notices you. I blend in. I always have. In my fourth-grade school picture, I was in the middle row with a bunch of other girls with long brown hair, bangs, and headbands. My mom pointed to the picture and said, "You look so cute!"

She was pointing to Maddy Berg, another girl in my class.

Blending in wouldn't bother me, except I think it's contributing to the patheticness of my pathetic love life. I've never had any summer lovin'. And I've never had any school year lovin', either. I've never had a boyfriend. I've never hooked up with a guy. And this morning, on my Internet browser, an article popped up about women marrying themselves.

Even my wireless connection knows I'm alone.

I've been semi-depressed all day, realizing another summer has gone by without me having a boyfriend or even a crush. I'm picturing myself buying my own prom corsage, ordering a giant cake with three layers, and showing up at a scientific lab and asking if they've perfected asexual reproduction yet.

My sad daydreams are interrupted by Aviva, who comes back from the lake dripping wet and shakes out her towel, getting water and sand all over me.

"How's what's-his-face?" I ask Aviva.

"He won't last long," she says, tilting her head and rubbing her towel against her ear.

“You’re sick of him already?” Darcy asks.

“No,” Aviva says darkly. “He has a very suspicious mole on his shoulder.”

Darcy turns to me and rolls her eyes.

Aviva cheers up quickly and says, “I burned off a lot of calories flirting. Can we go get frozen custard?”

“No way.” Darcy shakes her head. “That’s so unhealthy. I brought snacks!”

It’s not a real trip to the beach unless Darcy brings three books, SPF 85, and a mini-cooler—which she opens now, to take out a box of blueberries.

“They have antioxidants!” she says. “They keep your skin young.”

“Young?” Aviva makes a face. “What do I want with that? Darce, stop with the sunscreen and the antioxidants. We already look young. Find me a berry that makes me look twenty-one. Find me a berry that will get me into an R-rated movie.”

Darcy’s about to lecture her, but I interrupt to keep peace.

“Darce, you eat the blueberries,” I tell her. “The ice-cream truck is here. I’m gonna get Viva and me snacks that will make us old and fat.”

“Ooh, Choco Tacos!” Aviva says, stretching out full-length on her towel, with sand clinging all over her wet body. “Those will do the trick!”



“Hey, Kelly!”

As I walk toward the ice-cream truck, shaking sand on the sidewalk with my flip-flops, Hunter Fahrenbach comes at me on his skateboard. Hunter and I are friends and have been in the school band together since freshman year. Darcy calls him Hairface Hunter, because his hair goes down past his chin—and it’s usually hanging in his face. Right now, it’s soaking wet. Actually, all of him is soaking wet—his shirt, his khaki shorts, his socks. His sneakers make squishing sounds as he stops short in front of me and gets off his skateboard.

“I would hug you, but…” Hunter holds out his arms, displaying his wet shirt, and grins.

“What happened to you?” I ask him, laughing.

“I jumped off Eugene’s boat. With all my clothes on… obviously.”

Hunter and I talk a lot during band, but we don’t hang out much outside of class. I guess it’s because he’s busy doing crazy things like hanging around the gas station and setting stuff on fire. And apparently, jumping into Lake Michigan fully clothed.

“What did you do this summer?” I ask him, adjusting the tankini strap because it’s rubbing against my sunburn.

“Just hung out so far,” Hunter says, putting one foot up on his skateboard and rolling it back and forth. “I’m supposed to find a summer job, but I haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

“Um, you know school starts tomorrow, right?” I ask him, smiling.

“Oh, crap, right,” Hunter says, looking up at me from under his hair. He breaks out smiling when he sees me smiling. “I guess I can stop job hunting, then!”

He takes his foot off his skateboard and asks, “What have you been up to?”

“I worked at a music camp,” I tell him. “I taught the cutest little kids.”

“Oh, yeah?” Hunter says. “The Lieutenant will be happy with you.”

I laugh. The Lieutenant is our band teacher, who was in the Marines for ten years. She makes us

call her Lieutenant, and also makes us play patriotic music at every single concert. My dad refuses to videotape our performances anymore, because he's so sick of the "Armed Forces Medley."

"Oh, guess what I heard?" I say. "We're getting a piccolo! A freshman is coming in."

"No way!" Hunter says. "The Lieutenant is always saying we need a piccolo. What's that song she wants to play that has a big piccolo part?"

" 'Stars and Stripes Forever,' " I say. "I know, she's always talking about that song! But get this. This is the best part. It's a guy!"

"The piccolo?" Hunter says. He's so surprised he lets his skateboard roll away from him, and he has to jog a few steps to stop it with his foot. "We're getting a *guy* piccolo?"

I'm sure there's a male piccolo player in every orchestra in the world. But the piccolo is such a tiny, squeaky little leprechaun instrument that it seems like something a high-school guy would get beat up for playing.

Hunter must be thinking the same thing, because he says, "That kid's got to have balls to play that weird little thing in public."

Hunter sounds so... impressed... that I have to laugh.

"Should be an interesting year," he says. "I gotta take off. I'll see ya tomorrow, though. Bye, dude."

"Bye... dude," I say as he skates away.

I head for the ice-cream truck, and my bad mood returns. Maybe it will be an interesting year for Hunter or an interesting year in band. But I doubt it will be an interesting year for me. It's hard to have an interesting year when you're the kind of girl that guys call "dude."

## CHAPTER 3: KELLY

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### “Popularity of Plaid Shorts Plummets as Preppies Flee Julius”

Aviva Roth for *The Julius Journal*, September

“Happy First Day of School!” Darcy chimes when I get into her car.

Before I can sit in her passenger seat, I have to move Darcy’s huge backpack that’s full of a month’s worth of books. Then I have to buckle my seat belt, because Darcy won’t even shift out of park until I’m buckled.

“What are you so happy about?” I ask her irritably.

I’m pulling on the right side of my hair, which is wet. The left side is dry. Last year I had way too many messy-bun days, so I made this resolution that I was going to blow-dry my hair every morning of junior year. But today I had time to blow-dry only one side of it before Darcy was honking outside my house. On the first day of school, Darcy drives both Aviva and me so she can force us to be on time. Every other day, Aviva drives me, and Darcy arrives freakishly early on her own.

“All the boys are gone!” Darcy announces.

“What? What boys?”

I wish I could tilt Darcy’s side-view mirror so I could see the right side of my head, but she would freak out. She has very strict rules about the angles of her mirrors.

“All the boys!” Darcy says. “All the Devine brothers transferred out of our school. And all the McKennas.”

There are four Devine brothers, all of whom are really smart and cute and preppy. Charlie Devine, the oldest one, is president of our student senate. And there are five McKenna brothers, all of whom are amazing athletes—and also really cute. Mrs. Devine and Mrs. McKenna are really competitive with each other. They fight over everything. They end up taking up three pages of ads in the back of the yearbook every year, because they try to one-up each other by buying more space. Mrs. Devine is always bragging about Charlie’s grades, because she’s still angry that Mrs. McKenna beat her by having that fifth son. The girls of Julius P. Heil High School are really grateful for this rivalry, because, besides being entertaining at school fairs, it’s produced so many beautiful boys for us to look at.

“Why did they leave?” I ask. “How could they leave? They’re involved with so much stuff! Pierce McKenna is the whole reason our football team is good!”

“Remember the budget cuts I told you about? How teachers were leaving because Julius did a salary freeze?”

“Um, sure,” I say.

I didn’t understand everything Darcy told me about the salary negotiations she sat in on as student senate rep. But she did report back that one teacher dropped the F-bomb when talking to our principal—although she wouldn’t tell us which teacher it was.

“So the football coach left for this prep school in Milwaukee,” Darcy says. “And Pierce McKenna followed him, so he can get his college football scholarship or whatever. All the McKennas are going to prep school now, so once Mrs. Devine found out, she found a *better* prep school in Chicago, and the Devines are going there. They said it was because Mr. McDonnell left, and Charlie needed a good guidance counselor to get into Georgetown.”

“You’re not worried that Mr. McDonnell left?” I ask Darcy as she turns onto Aviva’s street.

Mr. McDonnell was the guidance counselor for all the really uptight kids who started taking practice SATs in the seventh grade—i.e., Darcy. Lots of Mr. McDonnell’s kids joined the band last year after there was an article in the *Tribune* saying playing the oboe could get you into college.

“Please,” Darcy scoffs. “I’ve had my college essays written for eighteen months now.”

She stops in front of Aviva’s house—the biggest of any of our houses, which is unfair, because Aviva is an only child—and honks really loudly.

“But Charlie Devine is the president of our school,” I remind her.

When Darcy turns to me, she’s grinning like a maniac. She shakes her head.

“Not anymore,” she says.

Wait. Darcy is the vice president of the student senate. And once I caught her in the school computer lab researching presidential assassinations. She said it was for a report on John F. Kennedy but I secretly wondered if she wanted Charlie out of the way so she could take over. No wonder she’s so happy. With Charlie gone, Darcy takes over as...

“I’m the president of the United States!” Darcy bursts out, unable to hold her announcement any longer. “I mean, of Julius P. Heil High School.”

“Okay, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I caution her.

*Great.* Darcy is the ruler of our school. Pretty soon, Julius is going to be like Singapore—you’ll get a \$500 fine for chewing gum or making out in the hallways. *Oh, well.* The making-out thing won’t affect me. And the boys leaving won’t affect me, either. My love life couldn’t be more nonexistent if Julius was an all-girls’ boarding school with a moat full of alligators around it. I give up on pulling out the wet side of my hair and let it go frizzy as we wait for Aviva.

Now, I am not a morning person, but Aviva takes not being a morning person to the extreme. Every time we pick her up, she stumbles out of her house like she’s hungover—or still drunk—from some party the night before. It’s not true, because Aviva doesn’t drink, but that’s how she looks. Today she comes stumbling out of her house in a loose black off-the-shoulder top and short black shorts and immediately winces at the sun in her eyes. She fishes her big black sunglasses out of her messenger bag, puts them on, and starts clomping across her wet lawn in four-inch wedges, walking right through the spray of a rotating sprinkler.

Darcy rolls down her window and says, “Dry yourself off before you get in my car!”

Aviva makes some vague attempt to wipe her wet legs with her wet hands, and then gets in the backseat and curls up in the fetal position, moaning.

“Morning, sunshine,” I say, looking back at her and grinning. “I see black is the new black?”

“I’m in mourning!” Aviva declares dramatically.

“You still have to buckle your seat belt,” Darcy says, waiting patiently to shift into drive.

“What are you mourning?” I ask Aviva, watching her buckle.

“All the boys are gone!” she whines. “Pierce McKenna left, so the other guys who wanted football scholarships left, too! All the boys are gone!”

“Well, not *all* of them,” I say. Then I get nervous. “Right?”

As Darcy pulls away from her house, Aviva starts to count on her fingers.

“All of the Devines. That’s four. All of the McKennas, which makes nine. And then six other guys from the football team!”

Aviva throws up her hands in despair. She ran out of fingers.

“Fifteen boys,” she says. “Fifteen boys, and we go to the tiniest school of all time. That’s, like, sixty percent of the male population.”

Darcy raises her eyebrows right away at that dubious calculation. Without taking her eyes off the road for a second, she corrects Aviva.

“There are approximately two hundred fifty students at Julius P. Heil High School, so we’ll say for argument’s sake that one hundred twenty-five of them are male. If fifteen of those one hundred twenty-five left, that’s only twelve percent of the male population. *Not* sixty.”

“Aha!” Aviva says, leaning forward to stick her head between our seats. “Twelve percent of the *population*. But sixty percent of the *hotness*.”

“You shouldn’t care, anyway,” I tell her. “You already made out with most of the guys at Julius. You hooked up with two Devines and the three cutest McKennas.”

“Yeah, but some of them I kissed before puberty,” Aviva says. “I was gonna give them a second go-around now that they have facial hair.”

“I’m sure you’ll find someone,” I tell her. “You always do. You can reignite your imaginary relationship with that cute teacher’s assistant.”

“He probably left, too,” Aviva says. “There’s a complete exodus of testosterone. I don’t know what I did to deserve this. Where is this horrible boy karma coming from?”

“Maybe it’s because you always make out with boys and then refuse to talk to them,” I tell her.

“Do they not like that?” she asks. Then she sighs and asks Darcy, “Can we go to Starbucks? I need an iced mocha to cheer me up.”

“No! We’re turning into school right now!” Darcy says. “I have to get there early to sit in on the budget-cuts meeting with Dr. Nicholas before first period.”

Dr. Nicholas is our principal, who everyone calls “Dr. Nicotine” because every year he tries and fails to quit smoking. I’m guessing if he has to deal with budget cuts, this will be another year he fails.

“What budget cuts?” I ask her. “Is there other stuff besides the teachers leaving?”

“Just frivolous stuff,” Darcy says. “Like sports and the arts.”

“The arts?” I ask her. “What about the arts?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll find out in my meeting and tell you after,” Darcy says. “But don’t worry, Kell. I’ll fight against anything that screws us over.”

I want to ask about band, but Darcy’s making a big show of pulling into the best space in the parking lot—the first front-row spot, the closest one to the school building. This is the school president’s spot.

“Crap,” Aviva says as she takes off her seat belt. “This reminds me—I forgot to enter the parking raffle!”

The parking raffle decides who gets the good spots in the Julius parking lot—the VIP parking. These spots are mostly taken up by senior and junior girls we call “spandexers” because they always wear thongs and tight stretchy pants to school. These girls are so devoted to showing off their asses that they join the volleyball, field hockey, and tennis teams just so they can spend more time wearing spandex. Darcy, Aviva, and I dislike most of them. I would say they’re our enemies, but it’s pretty hard to have enemies when your entire class has sixty-five people in it. You keep bumping into them and being assigned group projects with them, and you figure out how to get along.

Unless you’re Aviva, and you’re in a bad mood because boy karma is biting you in the ass.

“Ugh, look at this place,” she says as she gets out of the car and sees a group of spandexers smoking and drinking coffee in an empty parking space. There’s not a boy in sight.

“There’s so many *girls*,” Aviva says in disgust. “Yuck.”



It turns out that one of the “frivolous” changes Darcy mentioned was that Julius got rid of the school band. Dr. Nicotine let the Lieutenant go. My first reaction when I heard was to wonder if the Lieutenant was the one who dropped that F-bomb. My second was to feel really bad for her. I hope she found another job, and that some school in Iowa is playing the “Armed Forces Medley” for the first time and is actually excited about it.

After her meeting, Darcy came and found me and promised me she would lobby the school board to get band back. But for now, I’m supposed to sign up for a study hall. I don’t. Instead of going to the guidance office to change my schedule like all the other band kids do, I go to the band room, just like I have every third period since freshman year.

The room is so depressingly... neat. The chairs on the bandstand are in perfect rows. The music stands are all the same height. This is how the Lieutenant always wanted the room to look, and now she’s not here to see it. Personally, I liked the messy chaos when there were fifty people in here—everyone tripping over the open euphonium cases, the clarinets passing around sheet music one of them forgot, the tubas emptying their spit valves onto the bandstand... okay, that last one was not sexy. Maybe I won’t miss that.

My favorite thing in the band room is still here, though: the large-scale score of “Rhapsody in Blue” that’s painted on the wall. It must have been painted there before the Lieutenant, because “Rhapsody in Blue” has nothing to do with the military or the American flag. It’s a jazz-classical Gershwin song.

I love it, mostly because of the first time I played it, in this room. In third grade, we were bused here from the elementary school twice a week for beginner band. There were about fifteen of us learning the flute, but I was the first one to actually make a sound, and the first one to read music. So the Lieutenant let me read “Rhapsody in Blue” and play it right off the wall. Everyone else watched, and when I was done, they clapped.

Now I walk over, climb up onto the director’s chair, which is against the “Rhapsody in Blue” wall and trace the blue-paint notes with my finger. Then I swing around so I’m facing the bandstand and see that the baton is still on the director’s music stand. I lift it and begin to direct the rows of empty chairs.

Then the door opens. *Uh-oh*. I drop the baton, and it bounces against the music stand before rolling onto the floor. I’m pretty sure I shouldn’t be in this room right now, and I hope it isn’t a teacher at the door.

But it’s not—it’s Hunter. He opens one of the practice-room doors.

“Hunter?”

Hunter stops short, then comes toward me, laughing.

“Oh, crap,” Hunter says, laughing. “You scared me! I feel like this is forbidden territory now, or something.”

“I know,” I say. “I guess it is. No more band.”

“I didn’t think Julius could be any more cheap,” Hunter says. “They’re still using Office 95 in the computer labs.”

“Do you think Dr. Nicholas sold the practice instruments on eBay?” I ask him, pointing to the empty cubbies.

Hunter steps back, looking at the cubbies.



“Whoa!” he says. “I didn’t even notice that. Man, this sucks. This was my only extracurricular.”

Hunter hops up onto the grand piano, which is covered in a black quilted cover, and swings his legs, kicking the bench with his untied Chuck Taylors.

“Do you remember beginner band?” I ask Hunter. “In third grade? They won’t have it for the third graders now.”

“Yeah, that was when I played the drums for the first time,” Hunter says. “I think it was good for me. It really mellowed me out.”

“It was good! We need stuff like that!” I say. “They can’t cut arts programs. This isn’t some Disney Channel movie where the Jonas Brothers throw a benefit concert at the end to save the day.”

Hunter laughs.

“Ya know, my mom works at another high school,” he says, “where the seniors teach the freshmen music. It’s called peer music... something.”

“Peer music something?” I say. “Is that PMS for short?” We both laugh, then I say, “That’s actually a good idea, though. We should have something like that!”

“We should definitely have PMS.”

“I bet that would work!”

“I dunno.” Hunter shrugs. “I’m not sure if it actually works. I think the school just can’t afford real teachers.”

“We can’t afford real teachers!”

Then the door opens again, and Hunter and I have a moment of mutual panic. He puts his finger to his mouth, slides down from the piano, crouches on the floor, and lifts up the black piano cover, motioning to the space underneath. I climb down from the director’s chair, glancing over behind the bandstand, and then crawl under the piano. Hunter follows me.

Turning my head back toward him, I half mouth, half whisper, “How did you think of this?”

“I get in trouble a lot,” Hunter whispers.

I start to laugh but bring my hand to my mouth to keep quiet. Hunter reaches around me and carefully lifts the front of the piano cover so we can see who just walked in. It turns out we’re squeezed under this piano for no reason; it’s not a teacher. It’s a boy who looks really young—I guess he’s a freshman, because I’ve never seen him before. He’s kind of cute, actually, in this interesting way. He has dark curly hair, and he’s wearing khakis, a sweater—and clogs. Are guys supposed to wear clogs? Is anyone who’s not a dancer in the Appalachian Mountains supposed to wear clogs? He’s nice-looking, though, even with the clogs, and... is that a man purse? Or a pencil case? Or...

“The piccolo!”

I say it out loud without meaning to, and Hunter, with his shoulders shaking, puts his finger to his mouth. There’s no teacher in here, and we don’t have to worry about getting caught, so we shouldn’t be under the piano, but now we have to worry about getting caught under the piano.

As we watch, the boy comes up close to the piano, looks up at “Rhapsody in Blue” for a minute, sighs, and walks away, the little piccolo case swinging from his hand.

“Poor bastard,” Hunter says, shaking his head, which makes his hair brush against my ear. “He’s gotta be taking this hard.”

## CHAPTER 4: HUNTER

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“Skankology: How Female Desperation Has Altered the Julius Hook-Up Scene”

Aviva Roth for *The Julius Journal*, September

Let me tell you about Julius P. Heil High School. This place is pretty much a joke. Even the guy it's named after was a joke. Julius P. Heil was the governor of Wisconsin back in the day. I did a report on him freshman year, and according to my report, which I mostly got from Wikipedia, Julius was “known for clowning and silly antics.” The guy our school is named after was known for being a clown. He did do some good stuff, though. Apparently, he really liked dairy products and promoted Wisconsin's cheese, which is really good cheese. Our school cheese is pretty awesome, too. Our cafeteria makes these amazing bacon-egg-and-cheese sandwiches that I eat almost every morning.

Other than our bacon-egg-and-cheeses, though, this place is a joke. There are about two hundred fifty kids total, so our principal likes to go around bragging about how much “individual attention” we all get, like it's a good thing. Individual attention is a *terrible* thing. If you skip one class, everyone knows about it. The teacher will track you down, or one of the guidance counselors will track you down and ask if you're smoking pot. According to the geniuses running this place, the only reason you would skip class is if you're smoking pot, though I actually find my classes more enjoyable when I'm high.

At Julius, it's easy to track down someone who's skipping class, because the building is a square made up of four hallways. You get trapped in it like a lab rat in a maze. So instead of skipping classes I try to sleep through them instead. People think it's risky to sleep in class, but to be honest with ya, I manage to do it a lot.

Of course, the best you can hope for in class is a few five-to seven-minute catnaps. If you want some hardcore REM-cycle sleep, you gotta find some place out of the way. I used to sleep in the library, but then they installed cameras in the back of the library after an “incident.” Apparently, someone got jerked off on the F volume of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Which is the most appropriate letter, I guess.

I tried out a bunch of different napping spots—cafeteria, gym locker room—but this year, I found the nirvana of the in-school napper: the band practice rooms. The rooms are pretty small, but they're good for sleeping. I actually am bummed out about the band. I really liked to play the drums. I always got really into it. I mean, how many classes are there when you can sit in the back of the room banging on stuff? For me, just two: band and Mr. Castellano's computer class.

But I guess everything has a silver lining. There's no band, but there is a place for me to sleep.

“*Huntro!*”

Or not. Today I wake up to Eugene banging his hand against the glass door and staring at me. I've been sleeping stretched out in a chair with my feet up on the music stand.

“Let me in!” Eugene says.

“What time is it?” I ask Eugene as I open the door for him.

“The last bell just rang,” Eugene tells me.

As soon as I let him in, I sit down and put my feet back up on the music stand. “Crap,” I say. “I was supposed to go back to study hall.”

“Here, look at this.”

Eugene drops an envelope onto my stomach. When I open it, all this sparkly shit falls out of it and gets all over my shirt.

“What the hell is this?” I ask, standing up and brushing off my shirt.

“It’s an invitation!” Eugene says, moving a music stand out of his way.

“No—what is this crap on it?”

“Glitter,” Eugene says impatiently. “But read it! Read it!”

While I look at the invitation, Eugene bounces up and down on the balls of his feet.

“Back-to-school barbecue?” I say.

“It’s the student senate’s first social event of the year. A back-to-school barbecue for juniors and seniors. And you and I are going,” Eugene tells me.

“What? We don’t go to shit like this. We don’t go to... glitter... activities.”

I hand the invitation back to Eugene as he leads the way out of the practice room and into the main band room. I follow him out and sit on the lowest level of the bandstand.

“We are going,” Eugene lectures me, waving the invitation in my face. Some glitter gets in my eye. Damn.

“This invitation was hand-delivered to me by *Bobbi Novak*.”

*Ahh, Bobbi Novak.* It’s kind of hard to describe how hot Bobbi Novak is. She’s got these tits they should invent some kind of Nobel Prize for.

“She told me, ‘I really, really hope you’ll be there,’ ” Eugene says, with this dumb smirk on his face.

“She’s on student senate. She organizes this kind of stuff,” I tell him. “She wants everyone to show up.”

Eugene leans against the grand piano and crosses his arms over his chest.

“I think she kinda likes me.”

I shake my head. “There’s no way in hell.”

“*Last year*, there was no way in hell,” Eugene says, pointing his finger at me. When he makes speeches, Eugene gets really expressive, pacing the floor and waving his hands around like a politician.

“*Last year*,” Eugene repeats. “There was no way in hell. But this year, Bobbi’s single. Justin Messina was her last boyfriend, and he’s away at school. And a bunch of other guys are gone. All the McKennas are gone. All the Devines are gone. Huntro, we are in a boy recession.”

Because I’m still picking glitter out of my arm hair, I’m only half paying attention.

“Huh? What?”

“We are in a boy recession,” Eugene repeats. “There’s been a sudden, drastic decrease in the male population at this school. And I’m gonna take advantage of it.”

“Does a boy recession make you less ugly?”

From where I’m sitting, I grin up at Eugene. I call Eugene ugly to his face all the time. It sounds pretty harsh, but whatever, we’re dudes. Plus, he has a crapload of money, so he can deal with me calling him ugly.

“No,” Eugene says, pretty much ignoring my comment. “But a recession changes people. They don’t have the same options they did before. They have to reexamine their priorities.”

“You mean lower their standards?”

Eugene stops pacing to glare at me.

“No,” he says. “Because of this boy recession, Bobbi has the chance to see me in a different way. Sure, I’m not an athlete. I’m not on the student senate. I’m not—”

“Tall, good-looking, funny, sexually experienced...”

~~From the second level of the bandstand, where he’s been pacing, Eugene kicks me in the back.~~

“Stop!” I tell him, falling over onto my side, half laughing. “Stop! I think those are my kidneys!”

“Seriously, Huntro,” Eugene says, sitting down next to me. “I’ve been investing in the stock market since I was eleven, and I know a good opportunity when I see one. This is my chance. I’m going to that barbecue, and I’m gonna show Bobbi that I’m a good guy. I would do anything for this girl, Huntro. Anything.”

I look over at him. He’s completely serious, despite the glitter on his face.

“All right, Mr. Pluskota,” I say, kicking off my leather flip-flops. “I’ll go with you. When is it?”

“Tomorrow night.” Eugene claps me on the shoulder. “Your confidence means a lot, man.”

I don’t tell him the reason I’m gonna go to this barbecue is to watch him crash and burn. But who knows? It doesn’t have to be a disaster. Bobbi Novak’s a pretty nice girl. I think she’ll let him down gently.

“So what’s the plan?” I ask. “What’s the game plan, stud?”

“I’ve been asking around to find out what girls are into,” Eugene tells me, really pleased with himself. “So I’m gonna get a spray tan and make red-velvet cupcakes.”

*Well, this barbecue should be interesting.* I’ll get to see if Eugene’s boy-recession theory pans out. And if it doesn’t, at least I’ll get a cupcake out of it.

## CHAPTER 5: KELLY

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### “Boy Recession 101: How Julius Girls Can Make the Best of a Bad Ratio”

Aviva Roth for *The Julius Journal*, September

I’m gonna punch Diva Price in the face,” Aviva announces, coming back from the s’mores table with three marshmallows on a big pointy stick, which she’s waving around in a way that makes her threat actually threatening.

The back-to-school barbecue is the only Julius event other than graduation during which it’s warm enough to wear short shorts—which is why it’s Aviva’s favorite. It’s one of my favorites, too. I love that good bonfire smell, the picnic setup, and the s’mores, especially the ones with marshmallows that are burned on the outside and super-gooney on the inside. I’ve eaten two of them already tonight, and I want another one.

“Hey, watch that thing.” Darcy grabs the end of Aviva’s stick. “No one is losing an eye tonight. Or getting punched in the face.”

I guess Darcy wants to keep marshmallow-related violence to a minimum, seeing as it’s her first back-to-school barbecue as school president. But she kept a pretty close eye on things last year as vice president, because Charlie Devine was too busy popping the collar of his polo shirt to be very effective.

“What did Diva do?” I ask Aviva, pulling the top marshmallow off her stick and popping it into my mouth.

“She Tweeted that I lied about being biracial now that it’s cool because of Obama.”

“It’s not *cool* because of Obama,” Darcy says. “The fact that we have a biracial president has political ramifications beyond—”

“Just ignore her,” I tell Aviva, cutting Darcy off. “Diva is so ridiculous with her Tweeting and her creepy close-up Facebook pictures. The only reason anyone friends her is to mercilessly mock her.”

Diva Price is one of the notorious Julius spandexers. Her name is actually Dina, but after she starred in a lice-shampoo commercial when she was nine, she started making everyone call her Diva because she considers herself an actress/model. None of us consider her an actress or a model, seeing as that lice-shampoo commercial was her only gig ever, but we do consider her to be a diva, so that’s what we call her. Diva is the chief inquisitor of the panty-line persecutions, and she squeezes herself into the tightest synthetic pants possible and wears them stubbornly through the Wisconsin winter, when everyone else throws in the towel and turns to long johns and unflattering thermal layers. Right now, Diva is over by the s’mores table, posing for a picture with this cute senior, Peter Chung, both of them holding sticks with marshmallows on them.

“No, that’s not the right angle,” Diva says to Amy Schiffer, the redheaded senior spandexer who’s taking the picture. “Give it to me.”

Diva grabs Amy’s digital camera out of her hand and changes the setting. After that, Amy tries again. When the flash goes off, Diva grabs the camera.

“Ew! That is so gross,” Diva says. “Amy, you suck at taking pictures. We need someone tall—where’s Josh?”

Josh Long is another cute, tall senior. In fact, Josh and Chung are two of the only cute tall Julius boys left. There are always more girls than boys at stuff like this, but this year is extreme, and Josh

and Chung look like the only two redwoods left standing after a forest fire.

Aviva stands up to watch Diva pose.

“Be careful, Josh!” Aviva calls out across the fire, as Josh takes the camera. “Those things tend to break around Diva!”

Through the bonfire smoke, Diva glares at Aviva and sticks out her tongue, at which point Josh snaps the picture.

“*Joshhhh!*” Diva whines.

That cheers Aviva up.

“Hey, is anyone covering this for the paper?” I ask her.

“Oh, good news!” Aviva says. “They stopped printing the school newspaper!”

“What?” Darcy asks. “No one told me about that!”

“Ms. Graham just told us today,” Aviva says. “She gave us this whole speech about going green and saving paper. But chances are, the cheap-ass gene kicked in.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I say. “They can’t do this to you, Viva. Journalism is the only class in which you can make use of the hours you spend reading *Cosmo* and *Teen Vogue* instead of doing your homework.”

“Well, I was pissed at first,” Aviva says, taking her last bite of marshmallow. “But remember that rant I posted on my blog about all the guys leaving our school? I got tons of hits and thought, why don’t we just put the newspaper online? So we are! Ms. Graham liked my idea so much that she gave me my own column! And then she kinda looked like she regretted it....”

Aviva writes about the social scene for *The Julius Journal*. Last year she submitted a Valentine’s Day article titled “Fourteen Fun Things to Do with Whipped Cream” to Ms. Graham, the journalism teacher. Let’s just say there was not one mention of cake in it.

“What’s your column gonna be about?” Darcy asks.

“I don’t know,” Aviva says. “I need a catchy title, or a concept, like... *Ow!*”

Aviva whips her head around.

“Did you just throw a stick at me?” she demands. Diva, who’s trying to sit on a blanket in a tiny denim skirt without flashing everyone—or maybe not trying that hard—just shrugs.

“Oops,” she says, and gives Aviva a fake smile.

Aviva turns back to us, growling. “Maybe I should write a column about arch nemesises.”

“Arch nemesises,” Darcy corrects her. “But yeah, if you do, you can include mine.”

Darcy nods toward Diva’s blanket, where Bobbi Novak is bending over to kiss each of her fellow spandexers on the cheek. Bobbi Novak is the social chair of the student senate—and the reason so many people show up to events like this. Bobbi looks like a cross between a Barbie doll and a Kardashian—she’s blond and tiny but with big boobs and a bubble butt. Bobbi’s boobs and butt are real, but everything else about her is fake—her hair extensions, her tan, and the glitter all over her skin. Actually, I’m not sure about the glitter. Judging by Bobbi’s personality, she could have been born, literally, sparkly. It wouldn’t surprise me.

“Hi, girlies!” She waves as she passes our blanket. “Hope you’re having fun! Have some s’mores—they’re yummy!”

Darcy considers Bobbi to be the second most annoying ditz in the world, after Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*, but Aviva and I don’t mind her too much. She’s one of the better spandexers, in my opinion. Diva, Amy, and Amy’s best frenemy Pam Bausch-Farber can all be super-fake and manipulative, and Bobbi isn’t like that. At least she’s friendly.

“What about you, Kell?” Aviva asks, standing up and brushing off her shorts. “Any arch nemesises?”

you want me to write about?"

I don't have any, because I get along with everyone, even the meanest spandexers. Last year in Spanish class, Pam asked me to cover for her when she went into Milwaukee to meet up with a college guy. I asked her why she didn't use Amy as her cover, seeing as she and Amy were actually friends (except when they were fighting), and Pam said, "My mom likes you. My mom is always like, 'Kelly Robbins is such a *nice* girl.' "

When Pam said *nice*, she rolled her eyes and pronounced it like it was an annoying skin disease she didn't want to catch from me. Being nice is boring.

"The second wave of people is arriving!" Darcy says, popping up from the blanket. "Do you think there's enough soda? I'm gonna go check the tables."

Making our way back to the snack table, we check out the second-wavers, who probably showed up late to prove they're too cool for school events. Most of them are standing on the edge of the woods trying to smoke without getting caught by the school chaperones, and a few of the boys we call the gas-station gang, because they spend Friday nights hanging out on the corner by the gas station, look like they might be drunk. Hunter is with them, but he doesn't look drunk and he's eating a s'more.

"Look over at the drinks table!" Aviva gasps. "Oh my God! Look at them!"

"What?" I ask, turning back to the tables. And then I see them.

Behind the drinks table, Bobbi Novak takes a really big bite of a really big cupcake and squeals, "These are, like, super-delish! Like, *super-delish!*"

"I baked them myself," Eugene Pluskota tells her proudly, peeling the tinfoil back from the tray to reveal three rows of perfectly frosted cupcakes.

I'm surprised that Eugene is even at the back-to-school barbecue, and I'm even more surprised that he's brought baked goods. I don't think I've ever seen Eugene with a girl before. Actually, that's not true. Eugene has hit on girls, but it was always in such a creepy, perverted way that the girls ran away immediately. Like during the freshman laser-tag trip, when Eugene kept groping Aviva in the dark and asking, "Is this base? Is this base?"

But it doesn't look like Bobbi is getting creeped out, because she's licking frosting off her pinky finger and admitting with a giggle, "I don't even know what red velvet *is*. It's my favorite flavor, and I don't even know what it *is*! I know there's not real *velvet* in there, but..."

"Dutch cocoa," Eugene informs her. "And the red is food coloring. They're not naturally red."

"No way!" Bobbi says, batting her fake eyelashes in surprise.

I can't believe what I'm hearing.

"Are Bobbi and Eugene *flirting?*" I ask Darcy and Aviva.

"No way," Darcy says immediately, neatly capping her s'more with a perfectly square graham cracker. "Eugene is being a pervert, and Bobbi is being nicer than she should be."

"I don't know," I say. "It actually looks like Bobbi is flirting with *him*."

As I say that, Bobbi lifts her cupcake up to Eugene's mouth, and he takes a bite. Then Bobbi brings it to her mouth and takes a bite, right from the *same side of the cupcake*. I turn and hiss at Darcy, "She just took a bite out of his bite!"

Darcy looks disgusted and alarmed, like Eugene's carrying the swine flu and this is the start of a worldwide epidemic.

Having read at least fifty magazine articles on decoding body language, Aviva considers herself to be an expert, and she's been analyzing Bobbi and Eugene carefully.

"Look at her twirling her hair," Aviva says. "That could be flirting. But if she touches him, she's *definitely* flirting."

It's getting crowded on this side of the fire, so we can't hear what either of them is saying, but Eugene is talking a lot, and Bobbi is twirling her ponytail so hard I'm scared her extensions will fall out. Then Eugene says something and Bobbi starts to giggle... and she puts her hand on his arm. *Yup. Definitely flirting.*

Aviva fishes her yellow reporter's notepad out of her giant purse and turns to me.

"Kelly, go find out what's happening between Bobbi and Eugene. Just ask Hunter," Aviva insists.

"What?" I say.

"He's always with Eugene. He must know what's going on."

"Why do I have to ask him?"

"You guys are friends," Darcy says. "Aren't you in band together?"

"Band doesn't even exist anymore."

"But you've seen"—Aviva wiggles her fingers in front of my face like she's casting a spell on me—"the face beneath the hair."

I give in, but I refuse to bring the reporter's notebook over. Hunter is near the bonfire with his friends Derek Palewski and Dave Cheney, who we call Pirate Dave because he always wears a red-and-white striped shirt. As I walk over now, Derek takes advantage of the fact that the chaperones are busting someone for smoking in the woods, and throws a soda can into the fire. When it shoots up a bunch of sparks, Derek yells hoarsely in triumph and Hunter laughs.

"Hey, Hunter."

Hunter turns around. "Hey, Kelly. What's up?"

"Not much. What are you guys doing?"

"Just enjoying Derek's, uh, pyromaniac antics."

Hunter's been standing close to the fire and he's kinda sweaty. As he pushes his damp hair off his forehead, I notice that he's actually kind of cute underneath all that hair, and his blue eyes are really bright in the light from the bonfire.

"Darcy and Viva wanna know what Eugene's doing with Bobbi," I say. "They sent me over here to be nosy."

"Oh, man, yeah! Are they still talking?"

Hunter leans back to get a better view of the drinks table, where Bobbi is collecting empty soda cans and Eugene is holding the recycling bin for her. Seeing that, Hunter shakes his head and lets out a long whistle.

"I can't believe she's falling for his bullshit."

"What do you mean?"

Hunter pushes his hair back again. "Eugene's got this whole plan to get Bobbi."

"A plan? Did he put something in the cupcakes?" I ask, lowering my voice.

Hunter lowers his voice, too, and sounds completely amazed when he says, "He put *Dutch cocoa* in them. He seriously baked them all by himself!"

He's so serious that I burst out laughing. I was talking about roofies, and Hunter is impressed by Eugene's baking skills.

"So that's Eugene's plan?" I ask. "The way to a girl's heart is through her stomach?"

"I dunno if he's going for her heart," Hunter says. "But he thinks she'll be willing to go out with him because of the boy recession."

"Wait, because of the *recession*?"

"The boy recession," Hunter corrects me, kicking a stick toward the fire. His sneakers have no laces in them.



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sample content of The Boy Recession

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