

INTRODUCTION

EVIL LIBRARIAN

ITALIAN

LANGUAGE

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Evil Librarian

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Chapter

01

Italian class. The shining highlight of my Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Not because I am any good at Italian (I'm not), or because I like the teacher (I don't). It's because Ryan Halsey sits one row over and two rows up from where I sit, which is absolutely perfect for forty-five minutes of semi-shameless staring.

He's one of those boys that you just can't quite believe is actually real. I know how that sounds, and I don't mean to be all pathetic and ridiculous, but — he's *so beautiful*. At least to me. Maybe not, like, French underwear-model beautiful (although I would certainly enjoy seeing him in said underwear — or, you know, without), but definitely worthy of serious visual appreciation. Of course, he has no romantic interest in me whatsoever; he barely knows I exist at all, in fact. I don't even think he knows my name. I have no illusions this will ever change.

I just like to look at him. And think about him. And dream impossible dreams of our future life together as boyfriend and girlfriend, husband and wife, romantic roommates at the old-age home. But I can't speak to him. I can't even be in the same room with him without turning into a mindless drone of longing. I think if I ever touched him I'd just dissolve into a little pool of liquid bliss on the floor, and someone would call the janitor to come and mop me up and I wouldn't even care, because I'd be too happy. Yeah, it's dumb. I *know*, okay? But my brain just sort of vacates the premises when I'm around him.

Anyway, there's nothing wrong with a little pleasant distraction. A girl needs something to get her through Italian (not to mention junior year) without going crazy.

Annie reaches over and slips a piece of paper onto my desk. It's one of her little drawings: me, in all my stick-figure glory (I can tell because of the wavy shape of the hair bunched into a stick-figure ponytail and because there is a little arrow pointing to it labeled YOU), arms out zombie-style, walking toward a stick figure of Ryan, drool streaming from my mouth. (I can tell the drool is drool because there is an arrow labeled DROOL.) Ryan isn't labeled, but he doesn't have to be—even as a stick figure, he's too beautiful to mistake for anyone else. I have a fluffy thought balloon over my head filled with little hearts.

I tuck the paper into my book before Signor De Luca can catch me with it. Then I glance over at Annie, who is looking innocently forward as if today's vocabulary list is the most interesting thing she's seen in months. *Biblioteca?* Really! Fascinating!

"The drool was a nice touch," I whisper at her. "Very classy."

She doesn't look at me but she can't stop herself from grinning. She loves giving me a hard time about Ryan. It's okay. Someday she will be the one with the hopeless crush, and I will mock her mercilessly. I look forward to this with great anticipation.

When the bell rings, I swing around to punch her in the arm and accidentally knock my notebook onto the floor. Before I can get it, four beautiful yet manly fingers and a perfect thumb reach into view and pick it up for me.

"Yours?" Ryan asks.

I take it mutely. Manage to nod. *Yes. Mine. I love you. Let's get married and have a million babies together, right after we both graduate from Ivy League schools on full scholarship and have fulfilling and exciting careers. You are the most perfect creature ever on God's green earth. Love me. Love me right now. Please.*

He walks away.

Annie explodes in peals of laughter. I'd be mad, except she has the best laugh ever, and it's impossible to be mad at someone who can laugh like that.

"Oh, Cyn," she says, when she can speak again. "It's like you're possessed! Seriously. You couldn't even say anything, you just sat there staring and drooling."

"I was not drooling." Oh, God, tell me I wasn't drooling. I can't help it; I rub the back of my hand against my chin. Perfectly dry and respectable. Annie's a jerk. A sweet jerk, whom I love to death, but still.

She's still laughing when we part ways at the second-floor landing.

I can't wait until it's her turn. That girl is in for a world of pain.

Or at least a whole lot of relentless good-natured teasing. She is my best friend, after all.

Later. I wait by my locker for Annie to work her way over from the other side of the building. Students pass by; slowly, quickly, alone, in groups. And in pairs.

I try not to stare wistfully. It's clearly been way too long since my last boyfriend. And I don't even know if my last boyfriend was technically my boyfriend at all. The whole thing with Billy at the end of the summer was more awkward than anything else. We ended up kissing that time at Sarah's party and then suddenly we just were sort of *together*, but it had never seemed to be a conscious choice on either of our parts. And it wasn't what I wanted, anyway. *He* wasn't what I wanted. Even while it was good, I wanted . . . more. Different. *Better*.

It would be so nice to have a real boyfriend. Someone who would hold my hand walking down the hallway and not be embarrassed about it. Someone who would text me during the day just to say he was thinking about me. Someone who would be my guaranteed Friday-night date and who couldn't wait to see me and kiss me and introduce me to his parents and do all the cheesy things I would never admit wanting out loud to anyone in a million years. I don't want to be *that* girl, the girl who thinks all she needs to be happy is a boyfriend. And I'm not, not really. I have friends, I have fun, I have varied interests and above-average intelligence and am deeply invested in running the set and backstage crew for this fall's

school musical and rarely spend a weekend night at home if I don't want to. I am far from lonely and miserable. But it sure would be nice. To have someone.

And yes, okay, especially if that someone were Ryan Halsey.

At this moment, of course, ridiculously on cue, he suddenly appears from around the corner, and I swear he's moving in slow motion like some stupid sequence in a bad summer movie, one hand reaching up to run through his perfectly tousled brown hair, head turning to smile at something one of his buddies has just said, the sea of students parting automatically before him, the pigeons outside the windows cooing his personal theme song and the team banners on the wall gently waving in time and the sun shining down in targeted rays to illuminate him in a glorious halo of glowing enchantment.

He's going to walk by me, and I don't know what to do with myself. Smiling and saying hello are, of course, out of the question. I want to turn around and hide in my locker but I think it's too late, it would be too obvious. So I peer farther down the hall, pretending to look for Annie, even though I know she will be coming from the opposite direction, and then when I can't stand it one more second I turn my head and he's right there, passing right in front of me, almost close enough to touch. For one second I think maybe our eyes meet but then it's over and he's gone, passed me by, surrounded by his posse and the swirling invisible whirlwind of my longing, lustful thoughts.

For one crazy moment I am tempted to run forward and just tackle him. My legs are perfectly willing to move at my

command, I feel them ready and waiting, eager, giving me the enthusiastic all clear. *Let us go to him*, they implore me. *Release us to chase our destiny!* My legs are a bit melodramatic, but I hear what they are saying. I could throw him down and take a big juicy bite of his absolute deliciousness. Straddle him right there in the hallway and then, after a long, smoldering look deep into his eyes, lean down slowly and start kissing him in the way I have imagined (in excruciating detail) ever since the first day I saw him in the cafeteria last year. (September 18, 12:03 p.m., third table from the windows, counting from the wall closest to the lunch counter. He was wearing a faded *Glengarry Glen Ross* T-shirt and eating barbecue potato chips. Or so I vaguely recall.) And at first he would be surprised, but then after a moment I would feel his hand come up behind my head and wrap itself in my hair and pull me closer against him, crushing my mouth to his, and —

I stop before I really do start drooling.

Sigh.

Where the hell is Annie? Not that I really wanted her to witness a second helping of my Ryan-induced stupidity today, but she is usually here by now. I turn back to watch the corner that so recently produced the heavenly vision of my dream-boy, and finally it releases Annie into view.

Something is going on.

She's sort of half walking, half twirling. She is often a rather bouncy girl, but this is different. This is like a *Sound of Music* the-hills-are-alive kind of thing. Her face is flushed and her eyes are shiny and kind of, well, strange. Intense. In a very non-Annie kind of way.

I take a step toward her and she grabs my arm and pulls me against her and spins me around to walk back the way she came.

“What — where —?”

She leans her head close to mine as she propels us along. “New. Librarian.” She breathes the words as if they are sacred scripture.

“I’m sorry, what? New *librarian*?”

She nods like this explains everything. I pull her — with some difficulty — to a stop. She turns to me with very uncharacteristic impatience. “Cyn, come on. You have to —” And now her face sort of melts into helpless dreaminess and I start to get it. “You have to see him.”

Ohhh.

I feel an evil grin coming on. Maybe Annie’s turn at the hopeless crush is going to come sooner than I thought.

She whips us around the next corner and up the stairs and down the hall toward the library. I suppose I’d heard something about a new librarian being hired, but it’s not like this is an event I would expect to greatly impact my life in some significant way. And if I’d thought about it, I probably would have assumed that the new librarian would be something like the old librarian. Who was a perfectly nice-seeming middle-aged woman who could help you find whatever you needed for your paper or project or weekend reading but was not someone who inspired breathless words or flushed faces or shining eyes. Unless you happened to be the sort who got really excited about primary-source research materials or something, I guess.

We reach the double doors and now Annie stops, releasing me so she can try to smooth her short dark curls a little and peek in her compact mirror.

“Do I look okay? I look okay, right?”

“Yes, sure. Of course. Jeez, Annie. You realize he’s the *librarian*, right?”

She looks at me, her eyes still bright with—something. “Uh-huh,” she says. And again she sounds nothing like the Annie I know. The Annie whose previous semi-romantic interests have been nerdy science guys and various unattainable boyish celebrities and whose yearning has always been sort of cute and fluffy and innocent. This Annie in front of me is way more . . . carnal. And it’s not like I don’t get it; I mean, was I not just daydreaming about taking an almost-literal bite out of my own fantasy crush? It’s just so not like her. It’s almost alarming, except I can’t wait to tease her to the full extent of my ability. She *so* has it coming.

She takes a deep breath and then pulls open the library doors. Together, we step inside.

I have been in the library plenty of times. Shelves of books, rows of computers, a bunch of wooden study tables, the shiny modern circulation desk that got a makeover during holiday break our freshman year. It has inspired occasional feelings of resignation, or indifference, or maybe panic, when I’ve waited too long to start a project, and sometimes even a modicum of pleasure when I’m actually there to find something to read for fun. It has never made me feel anything like what I feel right now. The air, usually quiet and still and slightly dusty with the

smell of books, is now charged with some strange energy. It's like walking into some otherworldly combination of old church and late-night dance club, where the music happens to be silent and pulsing and all of the dancers are invisible.

I stop, confused, trying to figure out where this feeling is coming from. Shapes seem to flicker at the corner of my vision, but when I turn my head, there's nothing there. It's the same library it has always been, nothing has changed . . . and yet everything is very, very different.

Annie seems to have forgotten me. She steps forward, slowly, one step at a time, and again I find myself thinking of an old church, some sacred ritual where a young girl proceeds slowly and significantly toward some life-altering event. I feel like I should be scattering rose petals in her wake. I want to speak, to break this weird sensation of being somewhere else, but it feels wrong and I can't. It's crazy—it's the high-school library, for Pete's sake—but I feel like an outsider, meant to quietly observe and not interfere.

There is a sound from behind a row of bookshelves and Annie lights up.

"Mr. Gabriel?" she calls softly.

Footsteps, and for a second I want to turn and run. My breath catches and I am suddenly terrified, for absolutely no reason except that Annie is being so weird and the library feels so strange and I don't seem to belong here. I want to grab Annie and pull her away and tear down the hall and down the stairs and outside into the sunny afternoon and not look back.

And then he appears, and I feel ridiculous.

He's just a man. A young and, yes, okay, very attractive man. *Of course he is*, my brain says patiently, as if speaking to a small and not very bright child. *What on earth did you think he would be?* And I don't know what to say to that. I guess, for a moment, I did think he would be something else. Something—terrible. But that seems very silly now. He's just a nice-looking guy in dark jeans and a white button-down shirt. He could almost pass for a student; he must be right out of library college, or wherever young librarians go to learn about library things.

"Annie? Back so soon?" His voice is deep and low and sort of gently amused, and the sound of it instantly makes me amazed that I ever thought he could pass for a high-school boy. His words carry a weight of age and experience that seem way beyond his apparent years. Those library-school courses must really be something.

"Hi, Mr. Gabriel," Annie says, breathless again. "I'm sorry. I hope I'm not bothering you. I just wanted to introduce my friend Cynthia."

He steps closer to her and looks down kindly. "Of course you're not bothering me, Annie. You are always welcome here." Then he turns his gaze to me. His eyes are a startling dark color, maybe gray, maybe black, maybe even a sort of very deep violet. I have to struggle to blink; part of me seems to want to stand there staring into them for as long as it might take to figure out exactly how to describe them.

"Cynthia. How nice to meet you. I guess Annie has told you I'll be the new librarian." He reaches out his hand, smiling, like I'm a colleague instead of some random student who

interrupted his book organizing or whatever he was doing back there in the stacks.

I reach out to take it, and as his fingers close around mine I feel a kind of — spark. Like the kind you get from static electricity sometimes, only different in some fundamental way that I can't really explain. I fumble for a second but then it's gone, whatever it was, and I shake his hand firmly. "It's nice to meet you, too, Mr. Gabriel."

He looks at me for a second, like he's expecting me to say something else. "Um, welcome to our school," I add, and after another second he releases my hand and smiles again. For a moment, though, he looked — odd. Surprised, maybe. Or something.

"Well, I guess we should get going," I say finally. "Come on, Annie."

She comes obediently, looking back at him the whole time we are moving toward the doors. I look back, too, just once, to try to see what she is seeing. He is very attractive, there's no question about that. And for a moment, when I felt that weird spark, he seemed beyond just attractive: movie-star gorgeous, almost breathtaking, like I was suddenly seeing him on his best hair day ever in the most flattering light possible. But then it passed and he was just a regular cute guy again. But Annie and I never had quite the same taste in men. I guess she just sees something in him that I don't. Which is good, probably. It would suck if we ever both fell for the same guy. I like that we seem to fall in different directions.

She leans her head against my shoulder as we move down the hall. "Isn't he something?" she asks dreamily.

I reach up and pat her hair gently. “Yes, Annie. He sure is. I bet you’re going to be doing lots and lots of reading this year, aren’t you?”

“Uh-huh,” she says again in that strange, breathless voice, and again I’m struck by the heat underneath her words, so different from the Annie that I know and love. But lust changes you, I get that. And she deserves her chance to drool helplessly over a guy who makes her heart and loins heat up and dance around like they’re on fire.

I feel my evil grin coming back. This is going to be a lot of fun.

Over the weekend we don’t talk about the new librarian much. Maybe Annie’s already feeling a little foolish about her total swooniness on Friday. I don’t push it; I suspect I will have plenty of time to enjoy her enthrallment. I want to savor every moment. And so I wait, and we do our normal weekend things: movies; mall; ice cream; more telephone conversations than are strictly necessary, talking about everything and nothing. I dedicate a few solo hours to trying to save the fall musical set from lame last-minute replacement parts that will completely destroy the show as far as I am concerned. (Operative word: *trying*. As in, not yet succeeding. But I’m on it. I will figure it out. I *have to* figure it out. Somehow.) A pretty average weekend all around.

On Monday morning, Annie rings my doorbell a full half hour earlier than normal. I go to the door, still holding my half-eaten bowl of cereal, and raise my eyebrows at her. She just stands there, bouncing lightly on her toes.

"Hello, early," I say. I open the door to let her in.

Her face falls a little. "Oh, you're not ready? I thought — I thought maybe we could go in a little early today. I want to stop by the library before homeroom."

And so it begins.

"Sorry, still eating." I raise my bowl significantly. She is strange again, like she was on Friday. It's less fun today. But maybe that's just because I'm not exactly a morning person.

She comes in but stops a few feet inside the entryway. "How much longer do you think you'll be?"

"About a half hour. Like always. I didn't know it was go-to-school-early-to-gawk-at-the-librarian day, Annie. Sorry."

She nods but still stands there, bouncing.

I roll my eyes. "Go on without me. I'll see you in English."

"Okay, bye!" She's gone before I can say another word.

I shake my head and walk back to the kitchen with my Lucky Charms. She's got it worse than I ever did. Sure, I could sit and watch Ryan for hours at a time if I had the chance, but you certainly wouldn't catch me getting up early to do it. There are limits.

Okay, *maybe* if he were going to be naked.

But I am pretty sure Mr. Gabriel will be fully clothed, and that he will look pretty much the same at lunchtime as he would at 7:30 a.m. I can't see why Annie couldn't just wait until later to stand around and stare at him.

Now I won't even get to make fun of her, since I won't be there to watch. Oh, well. That wouldn't have been worth getting up early for either.

* * *

I wait for Annie outside the door to English, but she doesn't show up by the time the bell rings. I linger another few seconds, but then Principal Morse walks by and gives me one of his waggly-eyebrow expressions that somehow always manage to simultaneously make you want to laugh at him a little (because he is not even close to being the stern, scary type) and instantly stop doing whatever you're not supposed to be doing (mostly because you just don't want to hurt his feelings). He's pretty nice for a principal. I go inside the classroom and sit down but keep watching the door. It's a full five more minutes before she finally shows up, handing a late pass to Mrs. McKenna. She catches my eye as she slides into her seat, shrugging sheepishly and mouthing the word "library."

She sits three rows over, tricky for note-passing, so I have to wait until after class to talk to her. As soon as the bell rings she comes over to my desk.

"I know," she says before I can open my mouth. "I know. I'm obsessed. I admit it."

"Hey, it's no fun if you don't deny it." I pick up my bag and we head for the door. "But yes, since you mention it, you're right. You are. Completely obsessed. Did you spend all morning in there, peeking out at him from behind the books? You're going to give the poor man a complex."

"No, it's not like that," she says. "I mean, yeah, I was in there for a while — he gave me a pass to get out of first period."

"You skipped class to make eyes at the new librarian?"

"Well, we were talking, and time sort of got away from me, I guess."

“Talking about what?”

She shrugs again. “I don’t know. Just things.” She looks up at me, beaming. “He’s going to let me be a library monitor instead of going to gym.”

I’m getting that uneasy feeling again, like I did on Friday. “Can he do that? Just give you permission not to take gym? Besides, I thought you liked gym!”

“I do, but — oh, Cyn, he’s so amazing. I don’t just mean to look at, I mean to talk to. He’s so smart, and there’s all these things he knows about. . . .”

She’d been slowing down as she walked, and now she stops and leans her head against the wall. “I’ve never felt this way about someone before,” she says. “It’s not like any of those times I thought I liked a boy. This is different. *He’s* different.”

Alarm bells are going off all over the inside of my brain. “Annie, you’re freaking me out a little bit. He’s a teacher, or as good as. He’s got to be, like, twelve years older than you. At least. And it’s probably illegal for him to date a student. And you don’t even know him! Do you hear what you sound like?”

She blushes, but not in her usual cute Annie way. She looks angry. And so *strange*. Like she’s suddenly become someone I’ve never met before. “Yeah, I know just what I sound like. Have you ever heard yourself talking about Ryan?”

“That’s different! He’s a student, and I’ve known him for longer —”

Annie huffs a mean little laugh. “Known him? You don’t know him. You’ve never even spoken to him! Have you ever said one word to him? Ever? At least John and I have had a conversation!”

“John? You call him *John*? Annie —”

And suddenly her face changes, and she looks like my best friend again. She also looks confused. “That is weird, isn’t it? I didn’t — it didn’t seem weird before, but now . . .”

She looks away and then back up at me. “I skipped class. I never skip class.”

“It’s okay. You were just —” I have to search for a word here. *Crazy* comes to mind, but that doesn’t seem like the most diplomatic choice. “You were just excited. I mean, he’s super cute, and smart, and I guess he just kind of dazzled you, huh?”

“Yeah.” She smiles weakly. “Yeah, I guess that’s what happened. It’s still weird, though. I wouldn’t have thought . . .” She shakes her head. “Oh, well. Whatever, right? No real harm done, I guess.”

We start walking again. I’m still feeling a little freaked out.

The bell rings for third period; we’re both going to be late.

We hurry around the corner and suddenly Mr. Gabriel is standing there in front of us. I almost scream. Right there in the hallway. For a second I am filled with terror like I was on Friday when I first heard the sound of his shoes on the library floor. But then it passes, again, and he’s just the attractive new librarian.

“Oh, hi, J — Mr. Gabriel,” Annie says.

“Now, Annie,” he says mock-sternly, “I thought I asked you to call me John.”

“Yes, you did, but —” She looks at me and I try to radiate encouragement. “It just feels weird. I’m sorry.”

He nods. Glances at me. Looks back at Annie. “I see. Of

course. Well, I certainly don't want you to feel uncomfortable, Annie." He reaches out and touches her arm.

The hallway shifts suddenly beneath me. At least, that's what it seems like. I'm dizzy and there's that church/night-club feeling again, and I feel like invisible people are shoving me from twenty different directions. And then it's gone, and everything is normal again.

Except that Annie's face has gone all strange and slack and dreamy. Again.

"Why don't you come by at the end of the day and we'll talk more about the library monitor position," Mr. Gabriel says, like nothing crazy just happened.

"Sure. Okay," Annie says in that breathless voice from Friday. She turns toward her chem class without looking at me. "Bye, Cyn." And then she is gone.

I stand there, in the hallway, staring after her. Then I turn and look at Mr. Gabriel.

He is looking at me, too.

"Why don't you come along, too, Cynthia?"

I feel like a mouse locking eyes with a snake. My legs are itching to move, my brain is shrieking at me: *Run! Run away!* But I don't. Can't.

"No, thanks," I say. "I don't think so."

We stand there another few seconds looking at each other. And then he reaches out to touch my arm like he did Annie's. I see his hand extending and I want to shrink back from it but I seem to be frozen in place. It comes closer and I feel as I might if a very large spider were reaching out to touch me instead

of a cute twenty-something high-school librarian. Like I might scream. Or faint. Or die.

His fingers brush my flesh and there's that weird spark feeling again and I wait for something else to happen, but then — nothing.

We both look at his hand for a minute.

"Hm," he says. "Well. Good-bye, Cynthia."

He turns and walks back down the hall.

"What the hell?" I say out loud to myself, staring at his retreating back. "I mean, seriously, what the hell?"

A late student jogs by and gives me a very strange look.

I can't even bring myself to feel embarrassed.

Something is seriously messed up here.

I walk the rest of the way down the hall and turn into AP Physics. Mr. Levy is already talking at the board; he gives me a squinty look and a “Nice of you to join us, Cynthia,” but I barely notice. I mutter an apology and slide into my seat. Then I sit there, staring at my desk, Mr. Levy’s voice a meaningless drone in the background.

What exactly do I think is happening?

If I try to think objectively about this, not trying to rationalize it or explain it away or pretend I did not witness that extreme weirdness in the hallway just now, what is going on seems to be that the new hottie librarian has worked some kind of freaky mojo on my nice best friend. She is normal Annie, and then she sees him and she becomes psycho Annie.

No — not when she sees him. When she touches him.

When *he* touches *her*.

He touched me, too, though, and nothing happened. Or almost nothing. I didn't get weird, anyway. *He* got kind of weird, though, didn't he? Like it was weird that I didn't get weird. Or something.

I hear the crazy sound of my own thoughts and shake my head in disgust.

So . . . what, he's hypnotizing her or something? With his hands? Putting some kind of magic spell on her? Turning her into his zombie minion, only without the whole undead thing?

If I were saying this to Annie right now, she would be laughing her head off at me. As would only be appropriate. Because it is ridiculous. *Snap out of it, crazy brain. Are you even listening to yourself?*

"Hey," someone whispers, interrupting my silent conversation with my own head. I look up. Lisa Rinaldi, who sits next to me, is trying to hand me a stack of papers. Out of habit, I take one and pass the rest. Then I look down at it stupidly.

Quiz.

Huh.

Right.

Physics.

I shake my head again to try to clear some of the insanity from my brain, and I take out a pen. I am obviously being ridiculous. I will stop thinking about crazy theories. I will think about linear momentum and whatever else is on this quiz that I forgot to study for. And then the bell will ring, and I will go to lunch, and I will talk to Annie. And we will . . . we will figure out what is really going on. Somehow. Right? Right. Okay.

But when I get to lunch, Annie is nowhere to be seen.

I text her a quick *WHERE ARE YOU?* and then stare at my phone for several minutes while she does not respond. Leticia and Diane (our most-of-the-week lunch companions, whom we have both known since first grade) are off doing their usual Monday lunch thing with the yearbook crew, so there's no one here to tell me I'm being stupid and worrying over nothing. We're allowed to text but not to make phone calls in the cafeteria (school rules are dumb), so I have to wait until I can slip into the yard to try to call. And when I do: voice mail. Of course. *If she's in the building she wouldn't be able to pick up even if she wanted to*, I remind myself. But she would see that I called *and* texted and so she would guess that it was important and text me back, wouldn't she? But she doesn't.

I get more and more worried as the day crawls on. Annie does not appear at any of our usual pass-in-the-hall-between-classes spots. I linger outside her history class until the bell rings, but she doesn't show up there either, and my own teacher is beckoning to me from across the hall.

Reluctantly, I go to my class.

I take out my notebook, look at the cover, and sit there frowning at it.

It is becoming clear to me that I will have to go to the library after all.

Dammit, Annie.

This is no fun at all.

History takes forever. I feel the centuries turning as I sit there, ready to bolt. I couldn't think of a good enough reason to ask to leave early, and I'm not ready to take drastic measures, like leaving early without permission. I am ninety-nine

percent sure that I am totally overreacting. I have had a great deal of time to think about this while waiting for history class to go by. Eons.

Annie has a crush on the new librarian. This is not a big deal. This is not anything to worry about. She's acting like a goofball, but that is what happens when one has a crush. I am an expert on that particular subject.

And he — maybe he is aware of it and is being a jerk and having a little fun with her, touching her arm and asking her to call him by his first name. For someone like Annie, who's never had anything close to a boyfriend, it wouldn't necessarily take hypnotism or magic powers to send her a little off the deep end. The focused attention of those mesmerizing dark eyes and Mr. Gabriel's overall intelligent, attractive, younger-older-man package would be more than enough to make her swoon. Sure it would. Especially if he's turning on the charm on purpose, enjoying her obvious (and no doubt flattering) reaction.

Or maybe he has no idea and is just trying to be all cool and laid-back so that kids will spend more time in the library. Maybe librarians get points or something for all the books that get checked out, points that can be redeemed for valuable goods and services, like fancy date stamps or maybe those reading posters with the celebrities on them holding books, and he has a master plan to get all the points he can by charming all the charmable kids in the school and getting them to read a lot. Maybe it's not even *his* master plan; maybe it's, like, the American Library Association's master plan, and they

are stocking high schools across the country with hot young librarians as part of a massive literacy initiative.

These are all more reasonable ideas than the other ones. The ones I cannot allow myself to really think about. The ones that involve scary creepiness totally beyond anything that is remotely possible.

I'm waiting so hard that I'm not ready for it when the bell finally rings, tearing through the air like an ambulance siren. I yelp and everyone laughs but I don't care, because I'm already halfway out the door and racing down the hall.

I fly around the corner, so ready to be relieved, ready to see Annie and have her ask me what the heck is wrong with me, that I'm practically there already in my head, which is why I don't pay quite enough attention to where my feet are taking me. I slam full force into a large, solid obstacle of fellow student and knock us both sprawling to the ground.

I blink and look to see whom I've accidentally pinned to the floor beneath me, and the apology dies on my lips.

It's Ryan Halsey. Of course it is.

I stare, unable to move. It's my earlier fantasy come to life but in some twisted clumsy version that loses all the sexiness and ends up just being awkward.

He looks up at me, seeming a little dazed. "You okay?"

God, he has the sexiest voice. I remain atop him, still paralyzed by his proximity.

"Nice tackle," someone snickers nearby.

That breaks the spell. I feel my face go fiery as I try to scramble off of him. "Oh, God," I say. "I'm so sorry."

I am the epitome of gracelessness as I try to get both feet under me without landing a knee in his groin. My jeans cling to my legs like evil blue vines, stiff and twiny and apparently determined to slow my extraction from Ryan's accidental embrace. His own jeans are darker, more manly, less twiny. I realize suddenly that for those long awkward moments before the even more awkward moment when I began trying to get up, our jeans were flush against each other, pant leg to pant leg, denim sliding on denim. What if I had been wearing a skirt today, I wonder helplessly. What if I had been wearing a skirt and he was in his gym shorts for some reason and instead of thin layers of denim between our limbs it was only skin, warm and smooth. Well, my skin would be smooth; his legs might be a little furry, I suppose. I realize I have stopped to stare again and quickly move my gaze up to his face instead of his pants.

Ryan waits patiently on the ground below me, a slight smile on his full and tasty-looking lips.

I apologize again, stepping free at last from the confusing tangle of our bodies and my thoughts.

"It's okay," he says. "I'm a pretty tough guy. I think I'll recover."

Oh, God. He's joking with me. He's making the effort to be funny. To me.

Then I notice everyone in the hall staring at us, and I realize he is probably being funny for them.

Well, whatever. He still said it to me. I still got to hear it.

I reach down a hand to help him up and he is nice enough to take it, even though, of course, he does not need my assistance. The touch of his fingers, his hand grasping mine, sucks

all the blood from my brain and again I stare wordlessly at him as he gets to his feet. *Don't let go!* my body pleads with me. I begin to worry that I won't be able to. My cells are practically singing with joy at his touch. I'm so ridiculous I can hardly stand myself, but knowing that does nothing to change it. Ryan Halsey turns me into a helpless, mindless zombie girl.

Like Annie around Mr. Gabriel.

See? I tell myself firmly. She is fine. Just crushing. Like me.

I shake my head—*Out! Out, insanity!*—and release his hand.

"Really, I'm so sorry," I say once more, mainly just to be saying something.

"Don't worry about it, Cyn," he says, already stepping forward to move past me, to walk on to whatever happy place is his intended destination. He touches my shoulder as he passes, and it's almost enough to make me sink right back down to the floor.

And also: he said my name. He knows what my name is. He spoke it out loud and used it in a sentence.

I pull myself together and continue toward the library at a normal-person pace, willing the flush I can still feel in my face to cool back down. My sense of urgency has been partially knocked out of me by the impact of my collision with Ryan. And partially eclipsed by my amazement that he does know who I am.

But once I see the library up ahead, my worry about Annie takes over again. I pause at the double doors, and through the little windows I can see Annie inside. Right there, perfectly fine, standing with her back to me in front of the circulation

desk. I pull the doors open and step through. She turns at the sound, her face alight with that same new hungry hopefulness from last Friday. Her voice, though, when she speaks, is her normal Annie voice.

“Oh, hi, Cyn. What are you doing here?”

“I came to find you. Are you — is everything okay?”

She looks at me strangely. “Of course.”

I am still waiting to feel relieved. I don’t quite feel relieved.

“You weren’t at lunch,” I say. “Didn’t you get my texts?” *My millions of texts? And my voice mail?*

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” She shrugs. “I figured you’d guess I came here.”

I take a step closer. That feeling of wrongness, of not belonging in this space, is starting to crowd in around me again.

“Did you — did you go to your classes? I didn’t see you in the hall, either.”

She laughs, but it’s not quite her lovely Annie laugh. “What are you, my mother?”

I try to laugh, too, but I can only manage a tight smile.

Mr. Gabriel appears suddenly behind the desk, and once more I fight the urge to scream.

“Hello, Cynthia,” he says. “We didn’t expect to see you.”

He is looking at me intently. I don’t quite meet his eyes.

“Yes, well, I just thought I’d come by to meet my friend.” I turn back to Annie. “Are you ready to go?”

She looks to the librarian, and I want to shake her. *You don’t need his permission!*

He nods, and she smiles. "Sure, let's go. See you tomorrow, Mr. G."

Well, it's better than *John*.

I look at him a moment more. He's still watching me. As we stand there, I feel that shifting again, that sense of bodies, of movement, of something else here in the same space with us. But there's nothing here. Nothing beside me, nothing around me but normal library things and Annie and Mr. Gabriel. What *is* that? I want to ask him. I feel like he knows. But I also feel like asking him would be a very bad idea.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow, Mr. G.," I say, turning away.

Annie is waiting by the door. Just as I reach her, I hear Mr. Gabriel's voice right behind me.

"I'll look forward to it," he says softly, his breath tickling my ear.

I spin around to face him, to push him away, how *dare* he sneak up so close to me like — but he's still standing behind the desk, where we left him.

"Good afternoon, girls," he says. Then he smiles at me. Something in that smile makes me grab Annie's arm and practically drag her out into the hall.

Annie and I both have eighth period free on Mondays. I am more than a little surprised that after apparently cutting most of the day to hang out in the library, she is now willingly leaving when she doesn't actually have to be anywhere else. With some trepidation, I point out this seeming inconsistency in her behavior.

Annie shrugs again. "He said he had things to do during eighth period."

And just like that, she is back to being herself. The world crashes back into place around me, and I feel like an idiot.

We head to study hall to pass the time until the final bell. Leticia and Diane wave us over to their table, and we swerve to join them. After a minute, Billy and Kelly sit down in the last two seats at the far end.

I drop my eyes without meaning to and feel Annie's glance of concern from beside me. I look at her and make a disgusted face, and she gives me a sympathetic smile. Kelly Nolan is the girl Billy started dating about five seconds after he told me that it wasn't "working out." She is lovely and petite with gorgeous red-blond hair that she often wears twisted up in some seemingly quick and casual way that I could never pull off even with a team of professional hairdressers to help me. She is one of those girls who don't ever seem to have a bad hair day or a zit or to even once make a regrettable clothing purchase. One secretly suspects that she never gets her period or goes to the bathroom, either. We hate her on principle, even though she is actually perfectly nice.

And really, I don't even care that they are together. I don't want Billy. I want Ryan Halsey. Ryan is twenty times the boy Billy is. Fifty times. Possibly a hundred. And I am way more interesting and intelligent than Kelly Nolan. But I don't really want to watch them making kissy faces at each other all through study hall, either. It's kind of insulting.

Even though I know she has a test to study for tomorrow, Annie spends the whole period drawing me little stick-figure

pictures to distract me from our lovebird tablemates. I end up being shushed twice by the teacher on duty for laughing, and by the time the bell rings I have stopped feeling at all weird or uncomfortable or vaguely and stupidly inferior.

Sometimes I love Annie so much I can hardly stand it.

Usually Annie sticks around on Mondays both to keep me company and to make actual use of study hall, because her house is always filled with small, loud children in the afternoons, her little brother and sister and their seemingly infinite number of small, loud friends who apparently do not have homes of their own to go to after school, and so it's impossible for her to get any studying done there. I stick around because I am tech director for the fall musical this year, which rehearses Monday and Wednesday afternoons.

I love musical theater, have loved it fiercely and unwaveringly ever since my parents took me to see a local community theater production of *Pippin* when I was five. I've experimented with being onstage a few times over the years (most memorably as Teresa the Turkey in our fourth-grade Thanksgiving assembly, which I don't think I will ever entirely live down), but as much as I love and appreciate the music and the singing and the acting, my true devotion is for the secret magic that happens behind the scenes. Even at age five, what most captivated me was the seamless shifting of the sets and the mysteries of how what was obviously just an empty wooden floor with some curtains around it could be transformed into another time and place so convincingly that everyone in the audience completely and absolutely believed it.

And since Mary Chang, who was the reigning queen of backstageery for the past three years, is now off enjoying her first year as a college student at Syracuse University, Mr. Henry came to me when this year's show was announced and asked me to be the new tech director. Which (as Mr. H. is fully aware) has been my not-so-secret ambition since freshman year, and I am determined to make him proud.

The set this year is, of course, the most challenging one we've ever attempted. We're doing *Sweeney Todd*, which, in case you are somehow unfamiliar with one of the best Sondheim musicals EVER, is about an insane barber (insane after years spent wrongfully in prison, where he was sent on trumped-up charges so a corrupt judge could steal and destroy his family — mitigating circumstances, people!) who returns to wreak revenge upon those who wronged him. And on pretty much everyone else, too, eventually. There is an equally insane pie shop mistress (Mrs. Lovett) who had been secretly in love with Sweeney from before and who helps him (but also deceives him horribly and is pretty much responsible for eviscerating what little shreds of sanity he had left, to the detriment of all) *and* who comes up with the brilliant idea of cooking the dead bodies of his victims into her meat pies, and there is a young, innocent sailor who falls in love with Sweeney's daughter, who is being raised in captivity by the very bad judge, and there is love and pain and humor and darkness and awesomeness all around.

If you think the plot is complex, you should see the set design. It includes a rotating two-story structure that serves as Sweeney's tonsorial parlor over the pie shop as well as the

pie shop itself and Mrs. Lovett's apartment and also occasional other scenes. And one of the key elements is ultimately the barber chair that Sweeney rigs up to be able to dump his victims conveniently down a trapdoor to the lower level, where they can wait to be ground up into pies. Some high-school productions forego the special chair and come up with some far less impressive method of getting the dead bodies offstage. We are not going to be one of those high schools. Just because there was a *little* mishap with the prototype and a couple of people got *very slightly* injured . . . Well, I am going to fix everything and we are going to have a totally kick-ass chair and it will all be amazing. It's still two weeks till the start of tech week (i.e., the week leading up to the dress rehearsal and then the actual performances), which is the deadline that Mr. Henry laid down, and I will figure it out.

And in related news, there is an extra, added bonus to this year's production.

After Ryan Halsey's extraordinary scene-stealing turn as the Pharaoh in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* last year, which, incidentally, positively sealed the deal for me in terms of my hopeless crush, there was no question that Mr. Henry would be casting him again this time around. And what better way to get to know someone than hanging out in the auditorium together between scenes, freed from the constraints of assigned classroom seating and Ryan's usual intimidating group of friends, who, fortunately, do not seem to share his love of the theater? I only wish I had some talent for sewing, so that I could have volunteered to do costumes on

the side and thereby have maneuvered myself to be alone in a corner some evening with Ryan Halsey and some measuring tape and a long list of necessary and intimate measurements that needed taking. But you can't have everything, I suppose.

Of course, thus far I have not worked up my nerve to do more than stare at him whenever he is onstage and then look down in embarrassment and panic whenever he actually glances my way. But as I may have mentioned, there are two weeks until tech Monday, which means nearly three weeks until opening night. Plenty of time. For everything. I will make my move eventually. I just have to work up the courage. Which might be sooner now that he has demonstrated knowledge of my name. My heart leaps painfully upward in pointless hope as I remember this wondrous fact, but I smush the feeling back down firmly. It doesn't mean anything. He just has a good memory, like he has a good everything else, and has heard Mr. Henry calling out tech notes to me during rehearsals or heard someone say my name in Italian class. That's all.

Annie would smack me for thinking that way, I know. But she has an occasional tendency toward optimism beyond all reason.

Ryan, of course, is playing Sweeney, and as he stands up there, holding the pen that is standing in for the razor, which we still need to procure, singing and exuding demonic barberness with a beautiful mix of sex appeal and insanity, all of my problems seem to melt away and I listen raptly, watch helplessly, and let myself temporarily forget that Ryan and I will probably never really be together in some kind of romantically

connected way. That's one of the things I've always loved most about musical theater. The way it makes anything, even the most unlikely turn of events, seem absolutely possible.

When Mr. Henry lets us go for the evening, I slip my set notebook back into my bag and then sit for a moment, thinking, as the other students begin to make their way toward the various doors. I am thinking I might swing by the library on my way out, because even though I was right there when Annie said "See you tomorrow, Mr. G.," I have a very strong suspicion that she ended up back there again anyway. And even though I have nearly convinced myself that nothing sinister is going on outside of my own overactive imagination, it will make me feel better to stop by. And then if she is there, we can walk home together, which would be infinitely more fun than me walking home alone with my thoughts.

I stand up and suddenly notice that Ryan is standing in front of me.

"Uh," I say eloquently, looking up into his face from this unexpected and surprisingly close vantage.

"Hey," he says back, as though I had said something similarly standard and comprehensible. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I realized I took off pretty fast after our little mid-corridor collision today. I have Marchansky eighth period; you know how he is about people being late to class."

"Oh," I say, which, while significantly better than my first statement, still doesn't exactly register on the charming-and-clever scale. I mentally slap myself across the face. *Wake up and be interesting, you idiot!* "Um, thanks. Although, I'm the

one who slammed into you; I should be asking if you're okay. But you seem to have made a pretty speedy recovery as far as I can tell."

Better. Not great, but at least all the words make sentences and things.

He smiles. I manage to stay upright. "Yeah, I think I'll make it. Anyway, I gotta run, but glad you're okay. That was a pretty serious full-on tackle. I can't remember the last time I was taken out like that quite so efficiently."

I smile back. The way he says *efficiently* makes me a little light-headed. "Anytime you want a rematch, you let me know." Crap. Too much? Am I flirting, or threatening him with further bodily harm?

His smile tilts up a bit on one side. "Maybe I will," he says. He gives me one of those chin-first nods that guys seem to use to communicate various forms of hello and good-bye and acknowledgment. I feel like it is all three, in the best of ways. "See you tomorrow."

"Sure, yeah. Yeah, okay. See you tomorrow, Ryan."

I watch him turn and jog toward the door and through the door, savoring the taste of his name on my lips. I tilt my head a little to the side and let myself take in the extremely pleasant rear view of him until he is out of sight.

Oh. Oh, sweet *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

It takes me a second to start moving again; my brain insists on a few instant replays first. Of my *conversation* with *Ryan Halsey*. The one I just had, right here, in which both of us said things to each other, and there was mutual smiling,

and no one ended up on the floor or otherwise demonstrated embarrassing behavior of any kind.

I glance up and catch Mr. Henry watching me in obvious amusement from the stage. He raises his eyebrows at me. "Nice boy, that Ryan," he says, grinning.

I grin back, unable to help myself. "No kidding," I tell him. I can hear the wistfulness clearly in my voice.

He laughs, but not in a mean way. Mr. Henry is a pretty cool guy. "You should go for it. Bass-baritones that good looking are few and far between."

"Ha." I shake my head. "Out of my league, Mr. H. Unfortunately."

"Now, Cyn. Come on. How do you know until you try?"

I just shake my head again and give him a wave as I head out of the auditorium. Mr. Henry is a little too far removed from being a teenager to really get it, I think. It's okay. While I am certainly not in any sense of the phrase going to "go for it" with Ryan, that doesn't mean I'm not going to be excited about our new level of interaction. It's not . . . *impossible*, after all, that we could get to know each other better. Maybe we could even become friends, and then eventually he would start to see how awesome I am, deep down. . . .

Now I am actively hoping to find Annie at the library. Screw the creepy librarian. I can't wait to tell her what happened. Okay, it's not a marriage proposal or anything, but now that we've had one conversation, a real one that's not just me staring at him in stupid speechlessness or me apologizing for knocking him over, it is highly likely that we could, you know,

have another. And another. Which could be the start of really getting to know him. Which could be the start of . . . all kinds of things. My heart makes a few small twitches of tentative hopefulness and I let it, just this once.

Anything really is possible in musical theater. Even if the music at the moment is only playing in my mind.

Evil Librarian

Michelle Knudsen

"Hysterical! Smart and funny, with a little drama, a little romance, and just the right touch of evil," – Stephanie Meyer, author of the best-selling Twilight Saga

