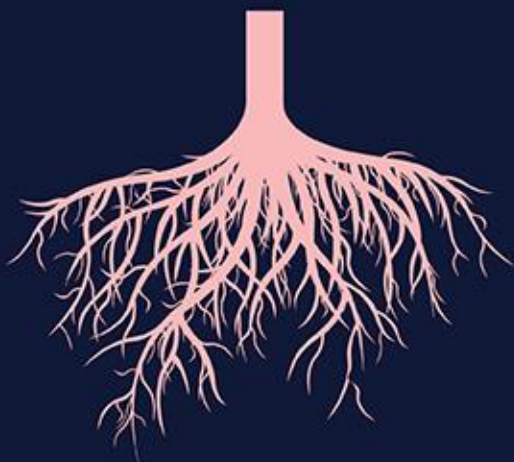




THE SPACE
BETWEEN



MICHELLE L. TEICHMAN

CHAPTER 1

Harper barreled down the stairs, looking for her red Tommy Hilfiger T-shirt. In her hurry, she crashed into her sister.

“Watch where you’re going, spaz,” Bronte said. She looked at Harper and seemed to take in how distressed she was, because her voice softened. “Hey, I’m just teasing, Harp. You okay?”

Thank God she had Bronte to guide her through the first day of high school. Beyond being the most popular girl in school, she was also an adolescent anomaly. She actually liked Harper and wasn’t afraid to be nice to her, even in public. Sure, there had been a few years when they didn’t get along, but that was when they were younger and their interactions involved a lot of hair pulling and Barbie doll beheadings. They’d mellowed out since then. Bronte and Harper weren’t just sisters anymore; they were also close friends. Some of her friends had already been warned not to talk to their older siblings in the hallways at school. Bronte, on the other hand, was excited for them to hang out together. Since she was seventeen and a senior, Bronte could even drive them there, sans parental supervision and all.

“I’m just nervous,” Harper said.

“You have nothing to worry about.” Bronte put a hand on her shoulder and walked the rest of the way down the stairs with her. “You already know me, and to be honest, that’s all you need to know.” She spoke with a confidence that Harper—for all of her own popularity—had often tried to emulate but was never quite able to match. “Just stick to what I told you and you’ll rule the school.” She gave her shoulder a squeeze and headed back up the stairs. “By the way, I’m borrowing your Tommy T-shirt,” she called over her shoulder. Harper groaned.

Okay, this wasn’t such a big deal. Bronte was right. With her advice, Harper had easily taken over the reign of the popular crowd in middle

school—Bronte’s constant visits to the campus hadn’t hurt—and if she just kept up with Bronte’s instructions, the torch of the high school in-crowd would be passed from her to Harper as well. Still, Harper had her doubts.

High school was a lot bigger than middle school, with almost five times more students. That was a lot more kids to impress, and a lot more people to convince she had it all together and that whatever she said should go. She was starting with a ton of people who wouldn’t know her, so how could everyone be expected to fall in line and follow the leader?

Watching movies about high school hadn’t helped. Sure, the groups were almost always the same across the board, but the tenuous reign was presented as something that could easily be lost by one big mistake. If she did something stupid enough, not even Bronte would be able to save her.

Unlike Bronte, she wasn’t a born leader. It might have something to do with the fact that she had, in essence, been following her sister her entire life. High school wasn’t likely to be any different. With both their parents working long hours, Bronte had pretty much taken Harper’s social education upon herself. Bronte had shown her many things that only popular kids seemed to know at her age, like how to smoke a cigarette without coughing. She was even getting the inhaling down pretty good. She’d smoked a joint, and Bronte had already gotten her drunk a half dozen times. Bronte had also given Harper almost free-run of her closet, and had even convinced their parents that she was old enough to start wearing makeup. The more Harper thought about it, the more it seemed like she had the best big sister in the world.

“I’ll show you who not to talk to as soon as we get there.” Bronte returned wearing Harper’s T-shirt. As she took in Harper’s oversized pajama shirt, her eyes narrowed. “Oh-my-God-get-dressed!” She blurted out the sentence as one word. “We have to leave in like five minutes if I’m going to show you all the loser hangouts to avoid,” she said with

urgency and exasperation, as if she were going to teach her which wire to cut on a time bomb.

Harper hurried up the stairs and rushed to get ready. She quickly chose between her navy blue and the black bra—the black one gave her more confidence for some reason—and decided on a charcoal grey V-neck that was pretty tight on her, but she liked how it hugged her flat stomach and showed off the curves of her chest.

After pulling the T-shirt over her head, she hauled her long, light brown ringlets out of the neck and set them to the front of her shoulders as Bronte had taught her. Her sister had woken up extra early that morning to give Harper the long, loose twists with her curling wand, but warned her that this would not be an everyday event. She said that she was welcome to borrow it and work the curls in on her own, but that getting up at 6:30 a.m. was not going to happen again that semester. Pleased with the light touch of gold eye shadow and brown mascara that made her green eyes pop, Harper grabbed her favourite black hoodie and ran down the stairs before Bronte could change her mind about waiting for her.

“Lose it.” Her sister pointed at the sweatshirt as soon as she appeared.

“But it’s fall. It’s getting cold outside,” Harper whined.

Bronte rolled her eyes. “Don’t let anything happen to this or I’ll kill you.”

Harper watched wide-eyed as Bronte took off her brown leather jacket and handed it to her. She was speechless. This jacket was Bronte’s prized piece of clothing, the one she wore when she wanted to drive boys crazy or convince the poor sap at the liquor store that she was nineteen and really had forgotten her ID at home. Harper wanted to tell her that she couldn’t take it, that it was too special. Then she remembered that they were talking about a worn-in leather jacket and she felt silly.

“Just put it on and don’t ever say I’m not a kickass sister.” Bronte thrust the jacket at her.

Harper did as she was told before swinging her black messenger bag over her shoulder. Bronte had told her that backpacks were so minor-niner.

Bronte looked her over. "Ready?"

She nodded as Bronte grabbed another jacket, and then they headed out the door. Their mom and dad had already left for work, and Bronte was careful, as always, to lock up and test the door before they left.

The ride went all too quickly. Before she was ready, her new school came into sight and that nervous feeling came back. It was excitement. It was the unknown. It was giving Harper a stomachache.

The sky shined with blue, and she couldn't see a cloud on the horizon, making the September morning somewhat less foreboding as they turned onto the street in front of the school. She'd told her best friend, Alexis, and their other friends, Melissa and Jen, that she would meet them by the middle doors. Bronte had vouched that this was where her group usually met.

"That's the ravine where the stoners hang out." Bronte pointed to the wooded area just beyond the school grounds. "It's fine to smoke their weed, but don't talk to them in the halls and, for God's sake, don't even think about dating one. That's the parking lot where the seniors wait for niners and then throw them down the hill. Never go there unless escorted by one of us," she said seriously. "You'll be fine once they realize who you are, but avoid it for now. Hippies...goths...keeners." She kept pointing out the groups as they drove along. "Finally, fresh meat."

As she looked at the boys and girls her own age, that uncertainty began to wiggle in her tummy again. They stood awkwardly hiking their backpacks up and looking around for new friends or old ones, and Harper was happier than ever that she had her big sister with her that morning.

"This is going to be such an awesome year." Bronte pulled her car into the parking space right in front of the school, directly across from where Mara and Katie were already waiting.

“Great spot. I can’t believe it was open.” Harper unbuckled her seatbelt, and Bronte laughed.

“It’s open because it’s my spot.” She shook her head, and her beautiful brown hair swayed in front of her face. Harper hoped hers looked the same when she moved her head like that.

“What do you mean?” It wasn’t like they were in the school parking lot. It was a parallel parking space across the street, in front of one of the neighbourhood houses.

“Oh, Harp, so much to learn,” Bronte teased. She put her arm around her as they crossed the street to meet Katie and Mara. “Just make sure you don’t let that pesky education push out any of the important things I teach you,” Bronte whispered to her just before they reached her friends. “Hey, bitches.” Bronte removed her arm from around Harper’s shoulder so that she could hug her friends hello.

“Hey, Harper.” Mara surprised her by pulling her into a hug. Katie did the same.

“Hey,” she responded, trying to look cool about it. Some of the niners watched, clearly envious. When Alexis, Melissa, and Jen walked up, Harper felt like she was back in her element, and they giddily ran over to hug her as if they hadn’t seen each other in years. Mara, Katie, and Bronte easily opened the circle for her friends. Bronte might be right; this was going to be an awesome year.



Harper’s homeroom class was English, and if anything, it seemed the most palatable option first thing in the morning. Jen and Melissa had to start out with pool. Looking like a drowned rat wasn’t the best way to begin a high school career, and she knew from Bronte’s horror stories that there wasn’t enough time for them to shower, change, do their hair, and put makeup back on before the next class. Something on that list inevitably suffered.

Harper arrived just before the bell sounded and was forced to take one of the seats in the front row. Her homeroom teacher was on the younger side and had her dark-black hair in a cute bob. She wore a white blouse with a floral skirt and wasted no time in giving them their reading list for the first semester.

“Welcome to your homeroom and my ninth grade English course. My name is Ms Cox. To do well in my class, all you have to do is try.” Ms Cox walked through the aisles. When she returned to write something on the whiteboard Harper noticed that her bra straps were somewhat visible through her tight, white blouse. It was an odd thing for her to notice, and she worried that people might be able to see her bra straps through her shirt as well.

Own it. Bronte’s words went through her head. Wearing a real bra and a thong was not supposed to make her squeamish. It was supposed to be hot, and it was supposed to drive boys crazy.

“As long as you are trying in this class,” Ms Cox continued, “you cannot fail.”

Harper decided that she liked Ms Cox. As she went through the attendance list, Harper turned to check out some of the students as their names were called. The twisting grew old, so she looked forward and waited for her own name.

“Isabelle Harper?” Ms Cox called.

“Actually, it’s Harper Isabelle.” She gave a slight hand raise to acknowledge her presence.

“Oh.” Ms Cox looked over her paper and made a note. “Okay, thank you, Harper.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the boy sitting to her right—Taylor, maybe—smiling at her. She returned it and looked back at the teacher. A boy smiling at her was nothing new, but Taylor was cute. Bronte would approve of his stylishly gelled hair and designer jeans.

Her sister had handpicked the two boyfriends Harper had in middle school, and told her to get rid of Andrew that summer as there would be a much higher caliber of boys waiting for her in high school. If she

wanted, she could probably even get an eleventh grader to look her way. Bronte was especially proud of that part. Dropping Andrew was easy as she'd never cared for him in the first place. His lips felt thin and hard, and she always thought kissing an iguana would feel about the same. She had only done it a few times, but it was enough to turn her off for good. Doug, the tragedy that had come before Andrew, kissed by swallowing her entire mouth in his big lips. He had been easily dismissed as well.

Since she was popular, she had her pick of the guys, and as soon as she let one drop, she decided if he should remain cool or not. No one ever questioned her, because her friends didn't feel they had the right to ask. The only person she'd ever had to explain herself to was Bronte, and as Bronte was making most of her decisions for her, that hadn't been a problem so far.

"Sarah Jamieson?" Ms Cox looked around the class for a response.

"Loser!" was coughed out of the side of someone's mouth. A few people laughed. Harper had never heard the name before, so she assumed she went to the other middle school, along with the kids who laughed at her.

"Who said that?" Ms Cox looked for the culprit. Harper looked around too, but several people sported the same guilty smile. Ms Cox cleared her throat. "Sarah Jamieson?" she said again.

Three seats behind her, a hand tentatively shot up and back down hastily. Ms Cox nodded and moved on quickly, as if to save the girl further embarrassment. Harper craned her neck around to see the girl, but her face was hidden. All she could make out from her seat was a black canvas backpack with patches ironed onto it, a pair of worn-in sneakers with the laces undone and hanging loose, and a pair of pale, ripped jeans. She returned her attention to the front of the class.

Ms Cox set her attendance sheet on her desk. "Now, if the first person in every row would come grab the books for the rest of your row and pass them back, we can get started on our first book this year."

Harper grabbed seven copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, took the best looking one for herself, and passed the rest to the girl behind her. She began to flip through the pages for something to do, but it wasn't necessary. She'd already read this book several times. It was a great way to start the year since she would ace the assignments on it.

Ms Cox must have seen her grin, because she approached with a knowing smile of her own. "Any relation, Harper?"

She nodded. "It's one of my dad's favourite books."

"You're related to the writer?" the guy who might have been named Taylor asked. Before she could answer, she heard a snicker and a soft "moron" come from a few rows back. She was sure the voice belonged to Black Backpack and Ripped Jeans.

"I was named after her." The conversation ended there as the bell sounded. It was time to move from their homeroom and to the next period. Soon it would all be routine.



Harper's second class was math, which she hated, followed by geography. At the beginning of lunch, she took a quick minute to find the locker she'd been too busy smoking to find before class that morning. Thankfully, it was on the first floor. She dropped off the heavy math and geography textbooks, but kept *To Kill a Mockingbird* in her bag. It was comforting to have it with her.

As she was positioning the new mirror on the inside door of her locker, a pair of worn-out, untied running shoes appeared in the reflection, along with pale jeans that were worn through where the heels scuffed the ground. Harper turned. The owner of the locker opposite hers was a girl with shoulder length, jagged-cut blonde hair, the tips dyed purple. A black canvas backpack with patches rested on the floor at her feet. The girl didn't have a mirror in her locker, so she couldn't see Harper unless she turned around. *Turn around.* Harper needed to see her. Why had this person been labelled a loser before the end of first period on the first day of high school?

Popularity was such a capricious friend, and she felt bad for those who didn't have it. To her surprise, Maybe-Taylor walked up and gave the girl a big hug. Hadn't she called him a moron in class? When they embraced, his face blocked the girl's, and Harper found herself straining to see more than wisps of the blonde and purple hair that fanned over Taylor's black peacoat.

"Who's got your attention?" Alexis' voice pulled Harper's stare from across the hall. "He's hot," she said appreciatively. Taylor disengaged from the grungy looking girl, who now frustratingly had her head ducked in her canvas knapsack.

"Yeah," Harper agreed. "He sits next to me in homeroom."

"Lucky." Alexis hit her arm playfully. "Why's he friends with that loser?" she asked, disdain in her voice.

The comment didn't surprise her. They could judge a person fifty feet away based on how she dressed, her hairstyle, her countenance. "Maybe he copies her homework." She shrugged and linked her arm through Alexis'. "Let's go have a smoke so we can eat. I'm starving."

After their obligatory look-at-us-standing-outside-and-smoking-right-on-school-property cigarette and some brief conversations with some popular boys that they knew from their last school, Harper, Alexis, Melissa, and Jen went to the cafeteria. Only losers brought bagged lunches from home—it had been the same in middle school—so they lined up for spicy fries with gravy on the agreement that they would split two orders between the four of them.

Jen and Melissa reeked of chlorine, but their damp hair appeared to have product in it and their makeup was done, so it was obvious that the shower had lost out in the war for time management after pool.

"At least it's only for one semester," Alexis said sympathetically, but sent a surreptitious smile Harper's way.

When she finished her last fry, Harper was still starving, but it had taken her six months to lose the weight that she'd put on at summer camp after sixth grade. Luckily, she'd gotten rid of it before the real

stakes of popularity began, and if anyone remembered that she'd had a not-so-perfect body at one time, they sure as hell kept it to themselves. Still, she didn't want that tummy or extra weight around her face and sides ever again.

"I have to pee," she announced, and the other three clambered up quickly to go with her. It was nice being the leader.

The others spent their time putting on lip gloss, making mirror-faces, and adjusting their hair and shirts while she used the toilet. They were the only four in the washroom until she heard the door open and the squeak of shoes walking toward the stalls. Her friends stopped talking for a few seconds, but as soon as a stall door closed, they began again.

"Oh my God, can you believe what she's wearing?" Alexis said with a snigger, as if the stalls weren't sixty percent open air. Harper ducked her head down a little and looked over. An unexpected feeling of dread came over her when she saw those worn-in sneakers and a black canvas bag on the floor.

"Like, dress for the gutter much?" Melissa said, and they laughed. Harper flushed the toilet and zipped her jeans as quickly as she could. She didn't want the girl to see her with them. For the first time, Harper was embarrassed of her friends. As she washed her hands quickly, Alexis leaned in close. "You should ask Drusilla if that hottie's single." She motioned her head toward the stall.

Harper was irritated. Not only had Alexis already decided that she was interested in Could-Be-Taylor, but she was being mean to someone they'd never even met. "Let's just go."

As usual, no one argued. They made their way outside to meet up with Bronte and her friends to have a cigarette before afternoon classes. After learning how to smoke, Harper had promptly shown Alexis, Melissa, and Jen. The four of them were now pros.

Bronte excitedly introduced Harper as her little sister to a few girls, but when it came to the guys, she gave them a warning. "She's only a niner, which means hands off, no matter what this little minx tells you."

Bronte made her sound boy crazy, but Harper supposed she had done some work toward that reputation. After she'd dropped Andrew on Bronte's orders—to Harper's relief—she had made out with three other guys over the summer. It was only kissing, and she didn't consider it even second base because their hands always stayed over her clothing. She had been trying to make a name for herself with them, and the fact that she could dispose of them so easily after made the whole thing a game to her.

Bronte had told her what high school guys expected based on their age, and she didn't want to enter this world looking like a prude. If she had some experience under her belt and if multiple people could vouch for it, then maybe she wouldn't have to hit those milestones with high school boys until she was ready.

It felt okay when she was drinking, mostly because, at that point, it didn't feel like anything. Whenever they started to put their hands on her though, she had to resist the urge to completely freak out. So far, she had blamed her squeamishness and sudden disappearances at parties on rum, her period, and bad shrimp. The truth was, deep down, when she was with them, she wanted to be anywhere else.

The way the others talked about making out with guys, it sounded like the greatest thing in the entire world. Their eyes held that excitement, that look of electricity she had never quite been able to muster when talking about guys, no matter how hard she tried.

When the bell rang, they put out their cigarettes and headed to class. Unfortunately for Harper, she didn't notice the P before the room number for her first afternoon class. By the time she realized she was in the wrong room, thanks to an irrationally annoyed teacher, she was already late. Portable 118 was outside by the track. As she hurried to find the right one, rounding the corners and weaving through the rows of one-room buildings, she ran headfirst into a wall. A person-shaped wall. A girl-person-shaped wall.

Harper knocked the girl flat on her back, and then landed on top of her with an inelegant grunt. The girl cried out when her head hit the

pavement, and again when Harper dug into her stomach as she tried to right herself. Somewhere between trying to get up and knocking the breath out of the poor girl, Harper looked into her eyes. They were angry and the fiercest shade of blue she had ever seen. Harper, captivated, stopped struggling and stared. The girl's skin was pale, and when she winced, deep dimples creased her cheeks. Her hair, disheveled and sticking out around her head, was light blonde—natural by the look of it—with the tips dyed lilac. She was face-to-face with Sarah Jamieson.

“Uh, can you get off of me?”

Harper flushed. “Sorry.” She rolled away and stood. In an uncharacteristically chivalrous gesture, she rushed to offer Sarah her hand. By the time Harper made it to her feet, however, Sarah was already standing and wiping bits of gravel and rock off of her jeans and picking them out of the palms of her hands. “Are you hurt?” Harper asked.

“No,” she answered bitterly, then almost reluctantly added, “are you?”

“No.” Harper shook her head. She didn't like that Sarah seemed so pissed at her. She apologized again. “I didn't mean to do that.”

“It's okay,” she said, and some of her anger seemed to dissipate. “Just watch where you're going with those things.” She nodded to Harper's legs, and the shadow of a smirk flickered across her lips. She wore black lipstick to match her thick, dark eyeliner and mascara. Now, Harper understood why Alexis had referred to her as Drusilla, but it irked her that it was meant as an insult. So, she wore black makeup. Did that really make her a freak? Of course the answer was yes, but Harper told herself that it wasn't.

“Oh, yeah.” Harper laughed lamely and rubbed her hand on the back of her head. It was something she did when she was nervous.

“Are you sure you're okay? Maybe you should see the nurse?”

“I don't need a nurse.” Harper blushed. “I've got to get to class.” She turned abruptly and continued on to the portable. Finally, she found it, stepped inside, and reached behind her to close the door. It caught on

something, and when Harper looked behind her to see what was wrong, Sarah was standing there. *Great.*

“You’re late,” the teacher called from the front. He pointed at two seats in the back of the class by the corner. Harper frowned. The only two open desks were right next to a group of geeks. She took the corner, forcing Sarah to sit next to the losers. Harper wasn’t sure sitting next to Sarah was any more bearable after the ass-hat she’d made of herself outside.

The teacher resumed the class, Introduction to Law, and dropped two heavy textbooks on their desks. Harper leaned down into her bag to pull out a pencil and notebook. A musky, sweet scent came from Sarah, like vanilla incense. After a few minutes, Harper grew bored of her introduction to law, and glanced at Sarah. She was doodling in the spine of her notebook. Without overthinking what she was doing, she wrote a note before she lost her nerve.

Sorry again. I’m Harper.

She slowly ripped the page from her notebook and handed it to the girl with a small nudge. They were at the back, and the teacher was facing the whiteboard, so she didn’t bother with all the folding and furtiveness that usually accompanied note-passing in class. When the girl didn’t reach for the paper, Harper dropped it on her desk. The girl put her pencil in her mouth, looked at the note, then looked back at what the teacher was writing on the board.

She ignored Harper.

Harper sighed, annoyed, and the girl finally looked down at the note. Her gaze slowly met Harper’s, who nodded in encouragement and looked away again quickly. In a movement that was torturously slow, Sarah studied the note. After what seemed like ages, she wrote something but didn’t pass it to her. Instead, she nodded her head to the paper, as if signaling that Harper could take it back now. She wasn’t even going to

Michelle L. Teichman

meet her halfway. Curiosity beating out pride, Harper leaned over and grabbed the note.

I'm Sarah. Your friends are bitches.

Harper couldn't believe what she read. A large part of her wanted to shout "Do you know who I am?" Another part was embarrassed by what her friends had said about Sarah in the bathroom. How had she known that she'd been in there with them?

How do you know who my friends are?

She dropped the note on Sarah's desk again. The response came quicker this time, and she grabbed for it.

I saw you with them at lunch. We have English together.

Of course, Harper already knew they had English together, just like she already knew her name was Sarah Jamieson. How could Sarah have seen her with her friends when Harper hadn't even been able to get a glimpse of her face?

How do you know Taylor?

Sarah's response came quickly this time, and she actually handed it to her.

Who?

Okay, so maybe his name wasn't Taylor.

The guy who sits next to me in English.

If you like my brother, you should learn his name. It's Tyler.

Taylor—no, Tyler—was her brother? Something about that just seemed wrong. Harper didn't like him the way Sarah thought she did. Not that she planned to tell Sarah that.

What school did you go to before? I haven't seen either of you around.

Our Lady of Worship. My elbows hurt. You hit hard for a girl.

Harper smirked and her face flushed with heat.

I'm sorry about your elbows. The Amazons around here should really look where they're going. It's all fun and games until someone takes someone's elbows out behind a portable.

Harper wanted to write more but couldn't think of anything witty, and thought she'd better leave it at one lame joke before completely humiliating herself. Sarah scribbled a response, and Harper could feel her watching out of the corner of her eye as she read it.

It wasn't all bad. I think you rearranged my spleen. It's happier now. It's been getting into it with my liver lately. You can fall on me anytime.

Harper let her hair fall over her face to hide the flush in her cheeks, but she was smiling at the same time. Sarah had a decent sense of humour. Even though Harper wasn't used to being teased, she didn't mind Sarah doing it. In fact, she wished it could continue, but class would be over soon. Harper wanted to get one more line in.

Cool. Well if you see me around, you can say hi.

Harper watched with anticipation as Sarah wrote back and dropped her response on her desk when the bell rang. Sarah left, a bit rushed, before she read the note.

Thanks, Your Highness.

If she had been blushing before, her face was on fire now. Who did Harper think she was? Sarah didn't know her, and she expected her to be flattered because Harper said she could say hi. *I'm such an ass.*

CHAPTER 2

Sarah hated school. She hated the students and she hated the classes. Academically, she did well enough, but she didn't see why this school or this class should be any different than those in her past. Besides, this one was even worse, because Harper Isabelle was in it.

What was it about girls like Harper that made them popular? How did everyone just know, as if born with the understanding, who was cool and who wasn't? Whatever it was, for the first time, Sarah felt it. She felt herself being pulled toward Harper. Did she have that effect on everybody? Was that the reason she had somehow already become the most popular girl in their grade? Was it the way Harper's long hair fell in beautiful, lustrous twists, where Sarah's was only a shoulder-length, volume-less straight cut?

Harper sat with her back straight and her clothing hugged her in all the right places, forming perfect creases across her stomach and back. If she had even an inch of fat on her, she wouldn't be able to pull that off. Although Sarah wasn't big, she wasn't skinny like Harper. She usually bought her clothes in the boys section because they were baggier and fit loosely, draping over her slightly hunched shoulders, which her mother told her was an indication of her lack of confidence.

"And who can tell me why the townspeople of Maycomb were so quick to condemn Tom Robinson?" Ms Cox walked between the rows of desks. It was something she did often during class. When no one answered, she paused by the front and leaned on her own, larger desk. "Is there something symbolic in Jem and Scout's treatment of Boo Radley, and the way the town treats Tom?"

Ms Cox scanned the room, and Sarah's stomach dropped when she stopped at her. "Sarah, can you tell me the answer?"

"I-I-I..." she stuttered. *Please, not now.* She knew the answer, but why did Ms Cox have to call on her? She was so self-conscious that she

didn't talk in class unless she had to because of her stutter, which had been ubiquitous since it started in the second grade, when the school separated her and Tyler. They put them in different classes to aid their social development. Yeah, right. What a joke that had been. Taking Tyler away had left her exposed, and with her shyness, her speech got worse.

"Try again," Ms Cox said. It was supposed to be encouraging, but it wasn't. Why couldn't she just move on to someone else?

"They're m-mocking birds."

"What does she m-m-mean?" the boy behind her mimicked her stutter, and Sarah bowed her head.

"Out of my class."

Sarah looked up sharply at Ms Cox. She was pointing the student in the direction of the door. This was new. At her old school, even the teachers had managed to earn Sarah's ire by repeatedly failing to stick up for her when she was being bullied. She had expected no different here. High school was kakistocracy at its worst, and mob mentality at its height. Being caged inside one building with hundreds of sociopaths, she thought the teachers would more than likely be just the same as the students. No one had ever thrown a student out of class for making fun of her before.

"That's excellent, Sarah." Ms Cox pushed off her desk, seeming more at ease now that the boy had left the room. That made two of them. "And what do you mean when you say that they are mockingbirds of the story?"

This was also new. Her teachers usually thought she was a slow learner because of her stutter, her inability to express herself, and as a kid, she'd even been put in the special class. It wasn't until Ms Dawson actually paid attention to her work in the second grade and realized that Sarah was expressing herself, just not verbally, that the school board realized she was in the wrong class. Her parents, ashamed that their daughter had special needs, had prayed for her to get better, and in their opinion, that made all the difference.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,” her father quoted, thanking the Lord in this case for giveth-ing. Unfortunately, the good Lord’s graces seemed to stop there. She’d prayed for years for the bullying to stop. She’d prayed to God to straighten out her tongue and rid her of her stutter, but God wasn’t listening.

With the encouragement of Ms Dawson, Sarah excelled at art, and by the time they began written assignments, Sarah was making straight As. After some testing, they moved her to the gifted program. Most of her teachers didn’t take the time to learn that about her though. They just passed over her like she wasn’t even there, and for the most part, she had gotten used to it.

“I think she means that they’re mockingbirds because they are good, innocent people who the other characters see as different, which makes them evil in their eyes, and they are punished for it,” Harper said. “The killing of their innocence is the killing of the mockingbird.”

Sarah closed her mouth when she realized that it was hanging open. Sure, she had decided that maybe, just maybe, Harper wasn’t a completely phony moron like the rest of her friends, but had she suspected her of possessing actual intelligence? She didn’t think so.

“That’s extremely insightful, Harper. Just be sure to raise your hand next time.” Ms Cox smiled, and moved to the whiteboard to make a note.

Sarah had never before given much thought to the in-crowd, other than for basic survival, such as how to avoid them. They were like a pack of hyenas to be circumvented if she didn’t want her school bag tossed over the fence. She’d never wanted to know anything about any of them, but she couldn’t look away from Harper Isabelle.

Girls like Harper made fun of her in the washroom. That was Sarah’s normal. She’d been on the receiving end of it since popularity became a thing in second grade. There was something different, though, when Harper’s friends did it. It hurt. It had only been the first day of school, and already she’d become a target.

Harper hadn't acted the way girls like Harper usually acted though, and Sarah had been dumbstruck when Harper passed her a note in class. At first, she wouldn't even reach for it, not wanting to see whatever insult was written on it. Instead, Harper Isabelle had been nice to her.

Sure, Sarah sneered at high school royalty like anyone else who wasn't invited into their exclusive club. Unlike the rest of the serfs, she never expected to forget how much she hated them and become a bumbling, adoring fool if one of them ever chose to pay attention to her.

So why couldn't she stop staring at Harper? She didn't understand it, and as she watched her now, whispering with Tyler, she was upset with her. Not because of anything Harper had actually done, but because of how looking at Harper made her feel. It was there again, that pull she'd felt since the first time she'd seen her, heard her voice, and good God, looked into those brilliant green eyes. When Harper had run into her, she'd knocked the wind out of her. Twice.

Sarah had seen green eyes before, but looking into Harper's as she lay on top of her was like gazing into a sea of emeralds. They were unequivocally the prettiest eyes that she had ever seen. She had been embarrassed to find herself searching them and quickly made like she wanted Harper off of her. She had been surprised by how discomfited Harper was about the whole thing. She'd blushed and apologized and looked around as if she wanted to be anywhere but stuck in that moment with her. Who wouldn't? To say she wasn't popular was a gross understatement.

She wasn't exactly sure what it was that made the other kids pick on her, but whatever it was, she had an extravagant amount of it. She knew she wasn't gorgeous, but she didn't think she was horrible either. She had blonde hair that behaved if she put effort into it—which she generally didn't—and she wasn't overweight or anything. Physically speaking, her best feature was probably her eyes, but she'd never much cared about looks. Besides, nice eyes were something a person either had or didn't have, not something she could take credit for. No boys

had ever seemed interested in her, and she'd never dressed or tried to look good for them either. Instead, she'd always done what made her feel good, which was likely the root of the problem, as her brother had told her.

“Does anyone have anything they'd like to add to Harper's comment?” Ms Cox looked around, and her gaze settled on Tyler and Harper, who were still whispering in the front row. “Tyler?” she asked. “Have you anything to add? Surely you and Ms Isabelle are discussing the book, and not whispering in my class?”

Tyler had the good grace to laugh at himself. “I'm sorry, I don't know the answer,” he said. He didn't add anything to the conversation about the book, because he hadn't read most of it yet. He'd told Sarah that much on their walk to school that morning. Ms Cox smiled at his self-deprecation and moved on, looking for another hand to rise.

Tyler, unlike Sarah, was effortlessly popular. It didn't make sense to her. They were twins, yet he could make friends like he was giving away candy, and she hadn't one to her name. Why was everything that came so easily to Tyler, so difficult for her? Blessings, friends, the support of her parents; Tyler was flush with them. Here he was, talking to Harper Isabelle like it was the easiest thing in the world. She tried not to care. Teenagers were stupid anyway. They cared about stupid things and acted like complete idiots. The majority of Tyler's friends liked to drink away their brain cells, and started having sex before high school. She thought it was disgusting, and not just because none of them wanted to have it with her. The idea of having sex with a boy was gross, and part of her was happy that she didn't have to put up with someone expecting it from her.

Still, she'd always hated girls like Harper. Girls who were gorgeous and popular without even trying. She was angry that those girls had the ability to make her feel so small and insignificant. In high school, if you weren't a deity, then you were a sniveling subject. She knew she would never be a goddess like Harper, and she resented the fact that

she should be expected to grovel before people like her and Tyler for the rest of her life. What she hated most about Harper, but could not admit to herself was, after her first personal encounter with her, she didn't hate her at all. She wanted to, but just couldn't.

Harper wore makeup in the adult way. Instead of caking on layers of eyeshadow and lipstick just to prove she was old enough to wear it, like a lot of kids at their school did, Harper used it sparingly to highlight her flawless face. Sarah used makeup almost as a disguise, war paint meant to mask her feelings from the outside world. How different they were.

She had been so brazen that first day, talking to Harper as if she was nobody at the school. She'd seen her several times since then, but hadn't dared speak to her, even if Harper had told her she could say hi when she saw her. She should have been insulted at Harper's words, and she hated that, instead, she'd been flattered. As if school wasn't bad enough, now it had to be confusing too.

Despite Ms Cox's admonishment, Tyler leaned over and whispered again to Harper. Sarah couldn't wait for class to be over so she could run to art. It was the only part of school that was bearable. Schools had access to so many different types of media that Sarah couldn't get her parents to buy for her at home. Whenever she asked for a new set of oil paints or money for canvasses, they asked if she wouldn't rather go to a movie with friends or use the money to buy a ticket to the next church social. As the minister, her father seemed to think everything his children did should revolve around their faith. Without a social life of her own, Sarah more often than not fell into that role.

"What's another major theme in the book?" Ms Cox roved the class again. Thankfully, she did not call on her. Harper raised her hand this time. Ms Cox pointed to her. "Yes, Harper?"

"Racism, for sure."

"That's right." Ms Cox wrote the word on the whiteboard. "There's also a strong theme here of social inequality." Those words soon joined the

other on the board. “Of things not being fair for some of the characters, while others enjoy privileges they haven’t earned.”

Sarah’s father always said, “Fair is fair.” Whatever that meant. Nothing about her life was fair. Her parents didn’t understand anything. The kids at school hated her. Her brother’s popularity was a constant, mocking reminder of what an outcast she was. Social inequality didn’t even begin to explain her life. Whatever genetic defect she had, her twin brother should have inherited it as well, but it seemed, when they split, Tyler got all the good, leaving her with the shit.

“What do you think is the most important lesson from the book, Harper?” Ms Cox asked. It was clear she’d found her favourite student. God, was there anyone Harper couldn’t captivate?

“I think Sarah said it best. It’s about the mockingbirds. Not to judge people you don’t know, because appearances can be deceiving, and people aren’t always what we assume them to be.”

Sarah hadn’t said that at all. Sure, she’d wanted to, but since when could she articulate herself in public that way? Why was Harper giving her the credit? Nothing about this girl made any sense to her, and as the class drew to a close, she kept replaying and replaying that incident from their first day, where she’d landed underneath Harper, and for one moment in time, those amazing eyes had seen only her.



As she made her way home from school, leaves crunched loudly under her All Stars. Sarah liked the sound they made and sought out the crispest ones to stomp. Tyler was at football tryouts where he was sure to become a starter in the Panthers lineup. After a particularly satisfying crunch, she heard a group of guys laughing. Happy they weren’t laughing at her, she continued stomping along the sidewalk until she heard another noise she couldn’t quite identify.

She stopped and cocked her head to the side to listen. It sounded like the fluttering of wings. Hearing the laughter again, she hesitated.

It was definitely wings. Something wasn't right; she knew that, but was she willing to get in the middle of it? Before she could fully make up her mind, a thud and a squawk prompted Sarah to act. She rushed in the direction of the sound to find four guys, students from school, standing between a chain link fence and an old brick apartment building. They were hunched over looking at something. One of them picked up a pigeon from the trashcan and threw it to one of his buddies like a football. Her stomach heaved. When the other boy caught it, the bird struggled to fly away. He dropped it to the ground.

"Stop it!" Sarah charged in.

One of them turned around at the sound of her voice. "Oh, what do we have here?"

"L-I-let it go." Sarah's voice cracked.

"You going to make me?" A boy with longish brown hair approached her. He was a senior. They all were.

"J-just leave it alone." The bird was trying to escape, but it couldn't spread one of its wings.

"I-I-I don't think so." The boy mimicked her and sniggered. "What are you going to do about it, loser?"

Sarah stumbled backward and her knees began to wobble. She tried to turn, but he grabbed her schoolbag and ripped it away from her. When she reached for it, he threw it to one of his friends.

"Give it back," she pleaded.

He tossed it again. This time, it opened mid-air, dropping the contents onto the ground. Sarah blinked away the sting of tears behind her eyes. She did not want them to see her cry. She turned to run out of the alley and collided with someone. The person stumbled back a step, but kept her footing and held Sarah up as well.

"Are you okay?" Harper studied her, her eyes clouded with concern. She turned her attention to the guys. "What the hell is going on?"

"That's Bronte Isabelle's sister," one of them muttered to the others.

"Get out of here!" Harper firmly held onto Sarah's arms and watched the boys over Sarah's shoulder as they left. Harper's hand trembled

slightly. Sarah turned back to watch as they reluctantly cleared the alley. She bowed her head when each one of them shot her a menacing look. Harper stared them down. “Are you okay?” Harper asked her again once the guys were gone.

Sarah stepped out of Harper’s arms and ran back into the alley, as much to check on the bird as to get away from Harper. Since there was little it could do to stop her, the pigeon allowed Sarah to pick it up.

“Oh, you poor thing,” she cooed. Harper approached her from behind and peered over her shoulder. Sarah pointed at the disheveled grey, blue, and white feathers. “I think its wing is broken.”

“Yeah, looks like it,” Harper said. Sarah glanced over her shoulder. Harper’s brow was drawn down and she stared at Sarah rather than looking at the bird. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Um, yeah.” Sarah swallowed. “Thank you.” She managed to say it without stuttering. Of all the people to find her getting picked on, she *really* wished it hadn’t been Harper Isabelle. “They were t-tossing him around a-and...” She looked away, embarrassed by her stutter.

“You were standing up for this little guy?” Harper used her index finger to rub the top of the bird’s head gingerly. It closed its eyes slowly, relaxing into Sarah’s arms. “He’s lucky you came along.”

I’m lucky you came along. Sarah knew how close she’d been to being in real trouble.

“I was walking across the street and heard yelling.”

So, Harper had heard raised voices and just decided to see what the problem was? Sarah would love to feel that kind of confidence. She shook her head and looked at the bird. “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know.” Harper shrugged. “I’ve never had a bird before. Have you?”

“No. I don’t just want to leave it though.”

“We won’t leave it.”

We? Sarah hadn’t had a partner in anything since she and Tyler split in the womb.

“Let me get your things.” Harper gestured to the contents of her backpack, scattered out on the ground. Sarah wanted to stop her, but with the bird in her hands there was little she could do about it.

“You don’t have to do that.” Sarah’s cheeks flushed with shame.

“Nonsense.” Harper gathered her things and stuffed them back in the bag. When she came to her sketchbook, she paused. Sarah started to tell her not to open it, but it was too late. She held her breath as Harper flipped through the pages. Harper looked up at her. “These are really good,” she said with awe. “Like, really good,” she emphasized. “You have a great talent.”

“Thank you.” It felt incredibly personal for Harper to look at her work, as if she’d opened up her diary and started reading through the pages. She looked down at the bird, searching for anything else to talk about. “Do you think we can fix his wing?”

Harper seemed to get the hint and put Sarah’s sketchbook back in her bag with her other things. Once everything was packed up, she swung it over her own shoulder instead of handing it to Sarah. She looked at the wing thoughtfully. “Do you think we’ll hurt him if we try?”

Sarah looked at the poor bird. “I don’t know, maybe, but I can’t just leave him here.”

“Let’s go over to the field by the ravine. We can see if we can do anything for him. If we can’t, at least we can get him into the woods where he’ll be safe from those assholes.”

The bird didn’t try to get away as they walked out of the alley and down the path beside their school. They were headed away from the main building, toward the ravine that led to a wooded area. Sarah kept a slow pace so as not to startle the pigeon, and Harper didn’t protest her speed.

“That was really brave of you, you know?” Harper hiked both their schoolbags higher up on her shoulder.

Sarah shrugged. “You don’t have to carry that.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

She wasn't going to argue with Harper. "How do you think we should do this?" They were nearing the dense, riparian woods.

Harper looked at the bird thoughtfully. "I guess we could see what his good wing looks like, and then see if we can make the other one look the same?"

Sarah winced. It could work, but on the other hand, it could make things worse. "What if we hurt him?"

Harper looked off into the distance, as if the woods could bring some inspiration. The sun illuminated the honey gold highlights in her hair, and she squinted her gorgeous green eyes against it.

She's so beautiful.

"I don't know what else to do." Harper's voice brought her back to attention.

She was right. If they left him like he was, he'd be vulnerable not just to assholes but to the wildlife in the woods as well. She nodded. Surprisingly, Harper seemed to be waiting for her approval.

She leaned over Sarah's arms, gently took the bird's good wing in her hand, and slowly spread out its feathers. The bird shifted a little but didn't try to fly away. Sarah worried he was getting worse the longer they waited. When Harper tentatively did the same with the other wing, the bird allowed Harper to do it. The bones jutted out differently, looking more like branches and bramble than a proper wing. Queasiness bubbled up in Sarah's stomach.

"It's okay," Harper spoke softly to the bird. "We're going to fix you right up."

"What are you going to do?" Sarah's voice was filled with fear and awe, even to her own ears.

"I'm going to try to make the bones in this wing match the other."

Sarah's stomach lurched when Harper deftly shifted the broken parts of the bird's wing back into place. To the bird's credit, it didn't squirm or even try to peck at them. "There," Harper whispered warmly.

The bird spread its wings and fluttered them. A moment later, it hopped out of Sarah's hands and landed on the grass at their feet. "I think you did it." Sarah smiled.

Harper kneeled and gave the bird a skeptical look. It flew a short distance and landed on the grass again. "I hope I didn't make it worse."

"No, I don't think so. He couldn't even spread that wing before," Sarah said, to reassure herself as much as Harper.

"Yeah?" Harper glanced up, a hopeful look in her eyes.

"Yeah." Sarah met Harper's gaze, and they grinned at each other. When she heard another flutter, she regretfully looked away. The bird was about ten feet from them and on the verge of taking flight again. "I think he's going to be okay now. You saved his life."

Harper shook her head. "You did. He's lucky you were there." Before Sarah could answer, a whistle blew in the background from the football field. Harper checked her watch. "Shit, I have to run. I'll...I'll see you around."

Sarah stood there for a long time, an unfamiliar feeling pitted in her stomach as she watched Harper walk away. She wasn't sure if it was nerves from the incident in the alleyway, awe at watching Harper play vet, or because Harper had been brave enough to come to her rescue, but something about Harper Isabelle stirred something inside Sarah.



Ms Cox instructed them to finish reading chapter sixteen of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Harper sighed and lazily leafed through the pages. Harper had read it before since she was named for the author. So had Sarah, but she'd never given any thought to how beautiful the writer's name was until it was attached to the girl sitting three seats in front of her.

She'd been disappointed that morning when Harper wasn't at her locker at the same time Sarah was. It was an odd feeling, but she wanted to see Harper again. Sarah had rearranged her books over and over as

she stared at Harper's locker, worried Harper might not be at school that day. For some reason, that possibility disappointed her. The whole thing was unsettling. What did she care if Harper Isabelle was in class or not? Harper should mean as little to Sarah as Sarah clearly did to her. Still, when she got to English and Harper was already in her seat, Sarah felt relieved.

Partway through class, her brother leaned over and whispered something to Harper. Tyler was rewarded with a soft chuckle. Tyler had always been great at talking to girls. He looked older than he was, had already lost his virginity, and had gone pretty far with at least two other girls over the summer. He was a great brother, but he was fast with girls. Sarah was acutely aware of how uncomfortable the laugh he'd elicited from Harper made her, but that didn't keep her from leaning forward on the edge of her seat in an effort to hear their whispered conversation.

Tyler was smiling, and when Harper reached up and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, Sarah saw that she was smiling too. She was relieved when the bell rang as it should have forced an end to their conversation, but they continued to talk as they lackadaisically packed up their bags. Unsure why the sight of her brother talking to Harper was getting her so worked up, she jammed her notebook in her bag and made haste to her Art class.

Art was, by far, Sarah's favourite subject. Although she preferred drawing and painting to the sculpture and design part of the curriculum that came later in the year, she wouldn't trade a minute in art for any other class. Ever since Sarah could remember, she loved to draw, and doodled on whatever was handy. When she didn't have a pen or pencil, she'd use her finger to draw imaginary figures on desks, walls, or even in the air. She believed that the world was a landscape of art, and she saw life through its many canvasses.

When Sarah drew, she felt free. Nothing rivaled the way she felt when a work came to life under her paintbrush. When Tyler was out at

the mall meeting girls or playing video games with his friends, Sarah would lock herself away in her room and create every piece of art she felt moving within her. Sometimes, she couldn't sit still when an idea came to her, and it took all the effort in her body not to run from whatever she was doing, no matter where she was, and get that image out of her and into the world. The act of creating was exciting and cathartic. It made her feel alive and complete, and she couldn't imagine anything else ever feeling that good.

The lesson that day was to learn a bit about art history. Not the most exciting assignment or what she had hoped for, but at least the history of art was better than solving equations or learning about eco systems. She contented herself with drawing flowers around the border of her notebook while Mr Chase talked about art deco and God knew what else for half an hour. Finally, he told them they could draw in their sketchbooks for the rest of the class, and Sarah pulled out a drawing of her hand with a thorn going through it. She'd started it the night before.

After art, came dreaded biology. She hated when teachers let students pick their own seats, and always cringed when a group assignment was given where they were allowed to partner with their friends. A true loner, Sarah didn't have any friends, and it was always embarrassing for her to find a group of other misfits and ask if she could join them. In biology, they were allowed to pick their own lab partners, and Sarah was the odd-man out in the twenty-nine student class, so she sat at the two-seater, high, black lab table alone. The teacher had told her that he would partner with her on the assignment her first day, but he obviously couldn't do that every day for the rest of the year. So far, she'd only had a partner once when someone else was home sick.

When Sarah got to class, she took a seat at the table at the back nearest the windows. When the second bell rang and class began, the seat next to her was still empty. Mr Epnerns looked at her with some discomfort, as if he didn't want to be her partner either. A knock on the door delayed the start of class.

It was one of the secretaries from the office. Mr Epnerns went to the door to speak with the woman. He nodded his head and pushed his thick, black glasses up the bridge of his nose with his index finger. The woman from the office left, and Harper Isabelle stepped through the open door. Sarah's breath caught at the sight of her. Mr Epnerns said something to Harper, and when he pointed toward her lab table, Sarah's stomach knotted. Something seemed to flicker behind Harper's eyes as she took in Sarah and the empty chair next to her. She hesitated long enough to make Sarah wish she could fall into the floor and disappear.

Harper quietly took her seat. "I have a gift for you," Harper whispered.

Surprised that Harper was talking to her, Sarah looked at her, confused, but didn't respond.

Harper smiled as she reached into her bag and pulled out Sarah's copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "You left it in class. Ms Cox asked if someone would be seeing you again today. I told her your locker was across from mine, so she gave it to me." She placed the book on the space of black table between them.

She had been in such a rush not to see Tyler and Harper flirting that she'd let the book fall out of her bag, or maybe it had never made it in. Why hadn't Tyler taken the book for her? Why was Harper here? "What are you doing here?" Sarah whispered.

"I switched one of my classes. Is your lab partner out today?"

"I don't have a partner," she answered acerbically.

Mr Epnerns announced that they would be watching a movie on homeostasis, and turned off the lights. Harper leaned in a little to Sarah. "I'll be your partner."

Harper's words moved through her. She probably should have replied, but couldn't. Her mouth had gone dry. In the darkness, Harper smiled at her before turning her head to watch the movie, and Sarah got a funny feeling in her centre.

It was a long film, and Sarah found herself using the time to stare discreetly at Harper. Harper had two piercings in her left earlobe and

a dark freckle behind her ear, just where her hairline began. Her eyelashes were long when she blinked, and she had a habit of twisting pieces of her lustrous, brown hair between her fingers. When she played with those soft-looking strands, Sarah could smell her shampoo. It was fruity and refreshing, and it made Sarah's stomach ache.

As if sensing the weight of Sarah studying her—cataloguing the way Harper's stomach dipped when she leaned forward, the way the back of her shirt rose up just enough for Sarah to spy a half inch of skin before it met her jeans—Harper turned toward her. Sarah looked away. She stared at the TV and used all of her willpower not to look back at Harper. After a few moments, Harper returned her attention to the screen, and Sarah let out a long, steady breath. Then, Harper opened her binder, wrote a note, and slid the binder a few inches so that it sat in front of Sarah.

Don't you like me?

When Sarah read the note, her heart missed a beat.

I don't really know you.

She slid it back, unable to believe that Harper Isabelle was passing notes with her again. Before Harper, the last note she'd gotten was on the last day of eighth grade. Luke Avery had asked if she was going to spare her next school the torture of having to look at her by killing herself over the summer.

We should get to know each other then. Tell me about yourself.

Harper passed the binder back. Why the fuck did Harper Isabelle want to know anything about her?

What do you want to know?

Harper grabbed at the binder eagerly, but seemed disappointed with the response.

Tell me something nobody else knows.

If Harper was playing a joke on her, Sarah didn't want to end up as the punchline.

You first.

Harper read the note and gave her a mock narrowing of her eyes, but there was a smile playing on her crimson lips, and Sarah licked her own in response. Harper tapped her pencil against her teeth before she began to write. After a few long moments, she passed the note to Sarah.

When I was six, I broke my arm in our playroom. I told my parents I fell, but my sister pushed me. She felt really bad though and gave me the Barbie of hers I wanted.

Sarah read the story, and it felt funny to be reading something personal about Harper Isabelle, even if it was inconsequential. This was definitely a weird way to get to know someone. Sarah looked at Harper, then the note, then back at Harper, and wrote her response. She passed it back, watching Harper warily.

I don't have any friends.

Harper stiffened when she read the message. For just five words, she seemed to spend a lot of time on them. Long seconds ticked by, and the longer she waited, the more exposed Sarah felt. It had been stupid

of her to write that. If she'd been worried about becoming a laughing stock, she'd certainly just handed Harper the ammunition.

What had she been thinking? For the life of her, she couldn't understand what made her open up like that. Harper, the most popular girl in their grade, told her she'd broken her arm, and Sarah had responded with *that*? Suddenly, it seemed incredibly inappropriate and stupid, and she wished that she could grab the note back and rip it up. She needed to write something else to erase what she'd said. She put her pencil to the paper and began to write an explanation, but Harper slid the binder away before she could finish.

I want to be your friend.

Sarah thought she must have misread the note, so she read it again, and again. A fourth time confirmed that she really had read what she thought she'd read. Just as the feeling of unexpected elation began to move through her, she put a stop to it. She'd seen *Carrie* and *Never Been Kissed* and had watched the protagonists with contempt, wondering how they could've been so stupid as to think that the attention from the popular kids had been genuine. She passed Harper another note.

Why?

Harper read the response and stalled. Sarah was becoming anxious again as she stared at Harper, waiting for a reply. She searched out the freckle behind Harper's ear and let her gaze rest there, somehow comforted by being able to see the now familiar spot. The film must have finished, because Mr Epners turned the lights back on and resumed his lecture.

Sarah blushed when she saw that freckle behind Harper's ear in the brightness of the classroom. She felt awkward, as if it knew her secrets. Harper tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear as she flipped the

page in her binder, dismissing their go-between. Sarah fervently wished that their exchange wasn't in Harper's binder but her own. She wanted to grab the page and tear it out to destroy the evidence. Harper began to take notes.

There were only seven minutes left before lunch. Sarah watched the wall clock slowly tick away every agonizing second until the bell rang, ready to bolt from class. A touch on her arm brought her to a halt.

Harper stood there, an earnest look on her face. "Sorry, I didn't want to miss what he was saying," she apologized. "What are you doing for lunch?"

Sarah's heart raced.

"I'm having lunch with my brother." As Sarah said the words—not entirely the truth as she and Tyler hadn't discussed this yet—it occurred to her that the real reason Harper wanted to get to know her was her brother. It was Tyler she wanted to get to know, and she was using Sarah as the conduit. Pissed off at Harper for making her feel like an idiot, and mad at herself for not seeing through it like she'd always told herself she would, Sarah pushed past Harper, this time making sure to take all of her books with her before escaping the class as fast as she could.

Once in the hallway, she breathed a sigh of relief. She was free for an hour until their class together in Portable 118, and this time she would be sure to sit somewhere far away from Harper. As soon as the thought materialized, Sarah grew even more annoyed. What the hell was she thinking? She didn't need to plan her classes around a snobby, popular girl. She'd already spent too much time thinking about Harper Isabelle, and it didn't make any sense. She didn't even know her, so why did she feel as though she was constantly seeking her out? It was silly. Just a stupid connection to the in-crowd that she must secretly crave beyond listening to Tyler talk about them.

Instead of going to her locker, Sarah went in search of Tyler. She found him horsing around with Brian, one of his friends from middle

school. Brian knew that Sarah was Tyler's sister, so he didn't give her any grief when she walked right up and leaned on the locker next to Tyler's. He even nodded his head in slight acknowledgement of her before bumping Tyler's fist and moving on down the hall.

"How was your morning?" Tyler asked her.

"Okay." She blew a piece of blonde hair out of her eye. "Yours?"

He closed his locker door and pulled his backpack up over his shoulders. "Great. I was talking to Harper Isabelle this morning," he said excitedly.

"So?" Sarah tried to put a quizzical look on her face, as if she hadn't just been floored by the fact that *she* had been talking to Harper Isabelle as well that morning.

"So? She's the best looking girl in our grade, and she's pretty cool. Girls like that are usually conceited bitches. Her sister is Bronte Isabelle, who's only, like, the hottest girl in school."

Silently, Sarah disagreed. Harper was obviously the hottest girl in school. The involuntary thought made her face flush with heat.

"Never mind." Tyler shook his head with a private smile. "You don't care about that stuff. I think that's cool."

The compliment was genuine, but it made her feel guilty. She'd spent a lot of time that morning thinking about a certain popular girl, which reminded her of the reason she had taken this trip to Tyler's locker. "What are you doing for lunch?"

"I was going to grab something from the caf, but we can go home if you want."

Sarah didn't really want to go home, but she didn't want to eat alone by her locker again either, especially because there was a good chance that Harper might see her there and catch her in her lie. They headed out the side door closest to their house and started the ten-minute walk home.

They talked casually about their parents and their new classes, but Sarah couldn't help the feeling of uneasiness that had crept into her

stomach when Tyler brought up Harper and Bronte Isabelle back at his locker. Harper's sister was a senior, and even Tyler knew better than to go after a girl who he had no chance of getting, but Harper was their age. If he thought she was the hottest girl in their grade, then she was on his radar. It would only be a matter of time before he zeroed in on Harper, and for reasons she didn't care to explore, that didn't sit well with Sarah.

CHAPTER 3

Lunch was coming to a close, and Harper sat with her friends in the cafeteria, playing with the remnants of her beef patty. She'd eaten the middle part, but didn't feel like finishing the neon yellow crust. Typically, there wasn't room for ninth graders at the tables. Most had to sit on the floor out in the hall, but Bronte made sure that there was room for Harper and her friends at their table, cementing their popularity.

"I love high school," Alexis said dreamily. Harper followed her gaze to Todd Harrison, Bronte's ex-boyfriend. They were seated at the other end of the table, talking. Todd was one of the most popular guys in school. Bronte had broken up with him over the summer, but said she would probably get back together with him when school started up again.

"Oh my God." Melissa nudged Alexis. "Stop staring. He's Bronte's boyfriend."

"I'm so sorry," Alexis apologized to Harper.

Harper shrugged. "They're not together right now." She covered the last of the beef patty with a thin paper napkin and pushed it a few inches farther away from her.

"If you're not going to go after Tyler, can I take a stab at him?" Alexis flipped her long blonde hair. Harper was perturbed, though she tried to hide it by tucking strands of her hair behind her ear and looking away.

For the first time in a while, she really took stock of her best friends. Alexis, like Bronte, was a natural born leader, and she was sure that if her sister wasn't who she was, that they'd be following Alexis around instead of her. Beautiful, with naturally dirty-blonde hair, sea green eyes, and the smoothest, healthiest looking skin Harper had ever seen, Alexis was an easy ten and a full-on knockout. Melissa, with pale blue eyes, blonde hair, and the height of a Viking could also give a person a

toothache if he was into eye-candy, and she had caught the attention of most of their male peers. Jen had light red hair, pale skin, an easy smile, and natural good humour, which made her Harper's favourite, though she'd never before really considered it. As far as friends went, Jen was the truest, Melissa the funniest, and Alexis the most beautiful, but what did they think of her? What did they see in her? What did they really know about her? Unlike Sarah Jamieson, they didn't even know the story about when she broke her arm and covered up Bronte's culpability.

God, that had been a difficult exchange, note-passing with Sarah that morning. She wanted to know more about the girl. It had started before that though, in the alleyway behind school with the bird. When Harper had told Sarah that she'd been brave, she half expected her to agree and go on about how great she was, as any one of her friends seated at the table would have done. The fact that Sarah had merely shrugged away the compliment made Harper respect her. She hadn't been looking for any glory. She'd just been doing the right thing.

When it happened, Harper hadn't really had time to think in that moment, she'd simply reacted to the scene in front of her. Truth be told, she hadn't even seen the bird. All she had seen was Sarah in the middle of a group of boys as they laughed at her and threw her bag between them. She hadn't known at the time that they were boys from her school or that they'd recognize who she was and that Bronte's reputation would save them both. She'd just seen Sarah in trouble and felt her heartbeat quicken. She hadn't been thinking of the consequences at the time, but she knew now how lucky they'd been to get out of that situation so easily, and she wondered how many times Sarah found herself on the receiving end of cruelty like that. She didn't seem too fazed by it, and Harper realized with a twinge of sadness that Sarah was probably accustomed to being treated poorly.

Sarah had written *I don't have any friends* that morning. Such a simple sentence, yet how much it mattered to Sarah was etched on

her face. She'd looked at Harper, brow wrinkled, as if she expected something from her. How was she, the most popular girl in their grade, supposed to answer that? Thanks to Bronte and some very good genes, she'd never had to know what those words felt like, and she was sorry for Sarah that she did. Was it really possible that Sarah actually didn't have any friends at all? Sure, her friends had teased Sarah, but what could be so wrong with this girl that no one wanted to hang around her?

Normally, Harper could spot a loser from across the class, but she didn't feel that way about Sarah. She was brave and had shown rare kindness with the bird that day. Also, there was the odd leap of excitement in her stomach as she'd walked toward the vacant stool next to Sarah that morning. How was it no one else had wanted to sit with her? Sure, her clothing wasn't the most feminine or flattering, and her makeup was definitely out there, but Sarah's standoffishness and aloofness made Harper wonder what was really happening beneath the surface. Where others found her off-putting, she found her intriguing. Her response to Sarah's confession, to tell her that she wanted to be her friend, had felt like the most natural thing in the world, because she'd meant it. What she hadn't prepared herself for was the follow-up when Sarah had asked her why.

She had a lot of trouble answering that one little word. The truth was, she didn't know why. She just knew that something inside her wanted to learn everything about Sarah Jamieson, and whatever that something was, it was getting louder.

"Hello? Are you going to ask him out or what?" Alexis pushed, and Harper couldn't remember what she was supposed to be thinking about. She replayed the question and realized that she was asking about Tyler. How quickly was she supposed to jump his bones if she wanted to stake her claim on him? Yes, he was cute, and on top of that he was nice and he smelled of deodorant and cologne instead of sweat and old shoes like most boys, but she didn't know a thing about him beyond that he liked to make silly jokes in class.

“I don’t know if I like him yet,” she said, to which Alexis pouted.

“If you decide you don’t want him, let me know, and soon. That boy’s going to get snatched up by a grade ten or eleven if someone doesn’t claim him. He is a cu-tie.” Alexis separated the word for emphasis. Harper felt like telling her right then that she could have him, but that wasn’t what was expected of her. Bronte had taught her to reinforce her place in the school hierarchy by going after the hottest guy she could find and making him her slave. For just a few handjobs and a blowjob every few months, high school boys would do practically anything for a girl. Todd carried Bronte’s books around for her, laughed at all of her jokes, and told her how pretty she was at every turn. He wasn’t even getting any from her anymore.

If Harper was going to make some guy her puppet, it might as well be Tyler. “I’m going to invite him to the park party this Friday,” she said decisively.

“I’m sure he’s already going,” Jen said.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know he’s going with me.” Harper affected a territorial tone that she didn’t actually feel. Melissa mimed snapping a whip. Harper had effectively convinced her friends even if she didn’t believe it herself. “Let’s go have a smoke.”

Outside, Jen spotted Tyler before she did. “There he is.” She elbowed Harper and nodded toward him. He was walking back to school with Sarah. It seemed so odd to her that they were brother and sister. “Go ask him,” Jen encouraged. She didn’t want to disappoint the group, so she walked right up to him. To remain at the top of the totem pole, she had to exude confidence. So, that’s what she did.

“Hey,” she greeted Tyler.

“Hey.” He nodded and stopped walking.

Harper struggled to keep her attention focused on Tyler. For some reason, she wanted to look at Sarah, who had stopped walking when Tyler did. “I wanted to make sure that you knew about the party this Friday at Eglinton Park. You should come.”

A smile spread over Tyler's face. Clearly, he understood the implication. "I'll be there."

"Great," she said, not feeling any ounce of the word. She turned to leave, then hesitated. Without looking at Sarah, she mumbled, "You should come too." After she'd said the words, relief surged through her. She hurried back to her friends to finish her cigarette.



By the time Friday rolled around, everyone was talking about the park party, so Harper was floored when Tyler said he couldn't go after all.

"Why not?" she asked, rejected. Whether she was into him or not, it still didn't feel good.

He glanced at Sarah's empty seat. "My sister doesn't want to go."

That was the second blow, and it hit harder than the first. Even though her invitation to Sarah had been half-assed, Harper still expected her to show up. Naïve assumption probably, but one her popularity afforded her with other people. Of course, Sarah wasn't the type of girl to swoon at an invitation, no matter who extended it. Part of her respected that, but Harper had to think about her reputation. People expected to see her with Tyler. If he didn't show up, it would reflect poorly on her, and Alexis might even use it as ammunition to challenge Harper's position as leader of their group. Tyler was a pawn to keep her pedestal in the politics that was high school popularity, but she had *wanted* Sarah to be there.

"So, she's just not going to come? I mean, you're not? Neither of you are?"

"I guess not." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Why doesn't she want to come?"

He made a face as though trying to decide how much to say, or if he should say any of it at all. "She just doesn't think she'll fit in," he finally said. "She doesn't really know anyone."

“I’ll talk to her,” Harper said with more confidence than she felt. “You have to come tonight.”

Tyler’s face lit up when she insisted, and she realized she shouldn’t have been so forceful. Sure, she wanted him to want her, but she didn’t want to deliver on those things high school boys expected.

Tyler left Harper to figure out how she would approach Sarah. By all rights, she really wouldn’t belong and would probably be miserable there, so convincing her wasn’t going to be easy.

Unfortunately, Sarah was late for biology class. Before she showed up, someone else asked to sit with Harper, so she didn’t get a chance to talk to Sarah at all. Sarah disappeared as soon as class ended, so law would be her last chance to change Sarah’s mind before the party that night.

When she got to the portable, Sarah was sitting near the front of the class. She took a seat near the back and let out a sigh of relief. After a whole morning to prepare, Harper still wasn’t sure what to say to her. Something about being around Sarah left her inexplicably exhausted and confused. Every small conversation was fraught with tension, and never seemed to go the way Harper wanted. In fairness, though, Harper had no idea how she wanted their conversations to go, so she couldn’t really justify her disappointment.

From the back of the room, Harper was safely out of Sarah’s line of sight. As the teacher carried on about jurisprudence and Aristotle, Harper watched Sarah.

“The law is reason free from passion,” he said, and Harper took a moment to mull that over. Was anything ever free from passion? Wasn’t passion the one thing that drove people in everything that they did? Not passion in the carnal sense, but more about the love or drive or desire to do or have things. Passion guided all of her decisions, and she didn’t think that anything could ever really be free from it.

Her gaze drifted to Sarah. Without fully realizing it, she traced the contours of her body with her stare. As she drew something in the

margin of her notebook, a chunk of blonde hair drifted into her field of vision and Sarah blew it out of her eyes time after time. Harper smiled. What passions made Sarah who she was? Whatever they were, Harper wanted to know all of them.

When the teacher told them to read quietly while he went to the main building to use the facilities, he left a keener in charge. Harper seized the opportunity and moved up to the empty seat beside Sarah. The keener didn't say anything to stop her.

"Hey."

"Hey?" Sarah arched an eyebrow. The black eyeliner and mascara were full around her eyes, but she hadn't painted her lips black today. They were a delicate shade of pink. Sarah had a full, pouty bottom lip which captivated Harper's attention, and gave her a funny feeling in her stomach the longer she looked at it. She didn't know what it was, but she knew that she liked it.

"I thought you were coming to the party tonight," she said, sounding whinier than she wanted.

Sarah looked straight ahead. "You only want Ty there."

The way that Sarah said it made Harper's stomach clench. In truth, she'd never been excluded, and didn't know what it was like not to be wanted and worshiped. "I invited you, didn't I?" She elbowed Sarah's arm playfully. "Come on. It'll be fun."

"Tyler told you he wouldn't go without me, didn't he?" she asked, turning those cold, blue eyes on her. They were like chips of ice today, and Harper chose her words carefully. Agreeing with Sarah was the safest way to answer, but it wasn't true. She only wanted Tyler there as a way to spend time with Sarah, not the other way around. The sudden realization of her true desire unnerved her.

"He mentioned it," she said as nonchalantly as possible, "but I want you both to come." There, that was almost the truth, and when Sarah looked into her eyes, she lost herself in the blue depths. There was no way she could actively lie to her.

“Why?”

That was a good question. Harper didn't know the answer, not fully, but there must be something she could say that would both appease Sarah and allow Harper to stop asking herself the same thing. “It's the first big party of the year. Just come. If you don't have a good time, I'm sure Tyler will take you home. You've got nothing to lose, and if you don't like it, you can leave. Plain and simple. What else are you going to do tonight anyway? I heard on the news that all of the birds in the area are perfectly safe and in no need of rescuing. You'll be bored if you don't come.”

Sarah's lips curled into a small smile. Slowly, she nodded her acquiescence, and Harper felt a huge grin pulling at her own cheeks.

“Thank you! Thank you! Tyler will be so happy,” Harper said excitedly, but she was the one who was ecstatic as she walked back to her seat, an ear-to-ear smile splitting her face.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

THE SPACE BETWEEN

BY MICHELLE L. TEICHMAN

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com