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CHAPTER

1

Darla, my twelve-year-old sister, has shoved me halfway off the computer chair. “Brett, move!” she yells.

“Cool it!” I yell back. “I have to finish this essay.”

“I have to do my book report.” She stops shoving. “Dad! It’s my turn at the computer.”

Behind me, I hear the clink of cereal bowls landing on the kitchen table. “Why didn’t you do your book report last night?” Dad asks.

“Because I was doing other stuff,” Darla says.

“Same here,” I say. “We need our own computers.”

He sighs. Loudly. Opens the fridge. Looks in. Closes it.

I type the last sentence of my essay. Click Print. “Dad, you’re too paranoid.”

“There *are* online predators,” he says. “I want the computer where I can see what you’re doing.”

I get to my feet and grab the printout. Darla scoots into my place. “Ew, the seat is sweaty.”

“It is not.” I shove the essay in my notebook. Sit across from Dad at the table. “I wish you’d trust us more.”

“I trust you. It’s other people I don’t trust.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I mutter, grabbing the cereal box.

“Yeah, whatever,” Darla parrots. This is the only subject in the world my sister and I agree on.

I quickly go through a bowl of cereal. Banana. Big glass of orange juice. Football season is over, but I feel like I'm still in training. I pour another bowl of cereal. Grab another banana.

Dad frowns and shakes his head.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," he says, staring into his coffee cup.

I return the banana to the fruit bowl.

He grunts. Grabs the banana and tosses it at me. "Eat. You're sixteen."

Man, make up your mind. I shrug and start peeling it. "Not going out today?"

He shakes his head. "Water's too rough."

I look at him. He's still not making eye contact. His shoulders are slumped. Most of the time Dad's able to fish. But when he doesn't, there's no income. He's too proud to talk about money. Doesn't want to worry us. Which just makes me worry.

Money ... everything ... was so much easier before Mom died.

“Burger King is hiring,” I say. “I saw a sign—”

“No,” Dad interrupts me. “Your job is school.”

I take a deep breath and finish the banana. “It’s okay about the computer. We can get by with one.”

“No we can’t,” Darla pipes up.

“Darla, shut up.”

Dad’s so preoccupied he doesn’t even scold me. I know the whole computer thing is more about money than cyber stalkers. Why can’t he just say that? *Guys, we can’t afford another computer.* Why does he have to be such a super parent?

I get up from the table. Clean my dishes and grab my backpack. “Well, see ya later.”

“Yeah. Have a good one.” Dad’s voice

trails off. Like he's got ten thousand things on his mind. Things I'll never know about.

I'm standing at my locker. Hear, "Hey, Miller." Fermio whacks his forearm against mine. I notice a new bruise on the side of his face. A big one this time. He and his dad must have really gotten into it. A couple other friends from the team—Josh and Keesy—hover next to Fermio.

"Hey." I open my locker.

Josh says, "I saw an old Nissan at Earl's this morning."

"Oh yeah? I'll have to check it out." My 1996 Nissan pickup is too old and beat up to be cool. But it's old and beat up enough to be cheap. Earl's junkyard is my go-to place for spare parts.

I feel fingers tickling my sides.

"Don't look now," Fermio says, grinning and glancing behind me. "It's Jillia the gorillia." The guys laugh and take off.

I twist around. “Hey,” I say.

“Hey,” Jillia says, all purry and sexy. She wraps her arms around my waist. Her hair smells like apples. I cup her face in my hands and give her a long kiss. Taste her blueberry lip gloss.

“Yum, I want to eat your face.”

“I don’t think so.” She pulls away, wrinkling her nose.

“What?”

“Um, did you brush your teeth this morning?”

I slap my hand over my mouth. “No,” I say through my fingers. “Sorry.”

She smiles. Digs in her backpack and pulls out a mint. “Here.”

I toss the mint in my mouth. “I guess I was distracted.”

“About what?”

“Just ... stuff. Family stuff.”

Her phone chirps, and she snickers as she reads the screen.

“Shannon?” I ask. That’s her best friend.

“Yeah.” She smirks. “Says she’s gonna beat my ass at batting drills today. I don’t *think* so.” Jillia fingers her keyboard.

“I gotta hike it,” I say. “See you at lunch.” I kiss Jillia’s forehead in case my breath is still gross.

My first class is drawing. Which is in the art building on the other side of campus. I can hardly draw a straight line, but I needed an elective. Guys on the team say Mr. Spencer is cool. An easy A. It’s only the third day of the second semester, so too early to tell. I do like the art room. It’s so ... un-academic. About twenty easels and stools are scattered around in a jumbled semi-circle. Each easel holds a large pad of paper.

It’s late when I get to class. I grab the last untaken spot along the side of the room. The bell rings just as I land my butt on the stool.

There's a message in big letters on the whiteboard:

Mr. Spencer will be 30 minutes late.

Continue perspective exercises.

Perspective. Okay. I was kind of focused on a phone-app game yesterday. I glance at the guy next to me. He's drawing a 3-D box. "Oh, right," I say, still not sure.

He looks over at me. Smiles. I've seen him around once or twice but don't really know him. "Horizon line?" he says.

"Uh-huh."

"Vanishing point?"

"Uh-huh."

"Were you even here yesterday?"

"Uh ... huh?"

He laughs. Reaches over with his pencil. Draws a line across the top third of my page. "Horizon line," he says. His arm extends close to my nose. A rich, soapy scent wafts over. I suddenly wonder if

my breath is still bad. Wish I had another mint. Then wonder why I care.

He puts a dot on the middle of the line. “Vanishing point. Where all three-dimensional objects end?”

“Right. It’s coming back to me now.”

He smiles again. “I’m Zach.”

“Brett,” I say. “Thanks for the help.”

“No prob.” Zach turns back to his easel. I catch his profile as I glance at the boxes he’s sketching on his drawing pad. I notice his tanned skin. The outline of his biceps under his tight long-sleeved T. He looks over. I flick my eyes back to my easel. Grip the pencil in my fist. Feel the point dig into my skin. What is wrong with me?