

— CHAPTER 1 —

Hope is vanishing.

Does that sound too dramatic?

Okay, fine. It's really just barely dramatic enough. Maybe not even enough.

I don't mean "hope" the way they think. How could I explain it to them? They're beyond stupid. They're clueless and retarded. All of them. I hear my mother and father say, "She doesn't realize the gravity of all this..." and I want to yell, are you crazy? Are you on crack?

I'm the one it happened to. So I, like, sort of understand the GRAVITY. I had the bruises on my wrists for weeks. I wouldn't even go outside to walk to the classroom building from my gorgeous dorm at my lovely NEW school for months, either. And I still won't go out at night. I don't even like to look out the window when it's dark.

Let's try this again, class. This time with motions!

I was a girl with a gift, who was totally going places, and now I'm the girl no one will ever know except as "that Hope somebody-or-other, the girl who vanished."

Well, at least for the time being, until I can straighten everyone's head out! That's not exactly fun and games!

My mother used to say that every news story, even a bad review, was good if they spelled your name right. Good for an actor, that is. (We never said "actress" in our house. That was for people who didn't know any better. Anyone who's serious about acting is an "actor," even if you're a girl.) What my mother meant was that someday I'd be on Broadway or in the movies or have CD's with my name on them bigger than the title of the CD, and then we wouldn't care less what people thought of my performances, because I'd be wonderful and I'd know it!

I don't think this was what she had in mind!

What's really grave is the effect on me. They talk about everything that happened right in front of me like I'm not there. They don't see me. When you don't see someone, she disappears. That's why I'm vanishing. And not the way the police and the school said it. And definitely not the way the newspapers said.

Let me try to show you how I feel right now.

This is my All-About-Me Journal you're seeing. (Sweet Jesus, we all have to do these. I haven't written stuff like gee, I like kitties and pizza and birthday parties and the color pink since the first grade! That's what they actually want us to write! One day's assignment, I swear, was a list of All The Things I Like About Me.) Every time I make an entry, I have to date it. Except I won't date it, because that's what Miss Taylor wants me to do, so I use a mark of my own, just to piss her off. So look back. See that little "I?" At the top of the first page? But it works to tell you how I feel. That "I," it could be a Roman Numeral One. Or it could be a person's self! Your ego, who you are.

Your "I."

That's how big I feel. As big as that little letter. And getting smaller and smaller and smaller.

I'm shrinking outside -- and I was already very, very thin -- but I'm shrinking inside, too. Down to a little, little mouth, with a tiny, squeaky voice that says, "Help me." Like Alice in Wonderland, when she swallowed the bottle that said, Drink Me. (Or was it the cake? I don't remember.) But if I don't find the reverse potion fast, there's going to be nothing left. It's unbelievable.

I'm sure my parents are very concerned. Everyone here at my new school says my parents are very, very concerned.

But if I had to bet, I would bet my mother cried, that morning at the school when they told her what happened. Then she would have blotted her mascara with tissue. Not to get too carried away. That would be so UN-Marian.

When they finally brought me to my parents, that's exactly what she did. I saw it! Two perfect, elegant tears, and then blot, blot, let's not wreck the look! Let's not

stain the Kate Spade sweater! There I was – cold and dirty and bruised and dehydrated and scared to death and my mother just wanted to make sure her "face," as she calls it, was still perfect. My dad at least messed his hair up, and kept muttering to the police things like, That seems impossible, and, How could she have done that? and, No, that was her mother's sister, not her sister. We only have one other child, a son. Finally Dad said, Are you sure?

And when Officer Goofus muttered something, and shoved a paper in front of him, Dad didn't say anything else.

He might have been pulling on his tie and messing up his hair; but he sure was not all over me with kisses and relief and joy. I sure wasn't his little princess then, his superstar, his little stick of dynamite – all those things he'd called me when he came running to the stage door, night after night, every time I was in a show for the past eight years! He acted like none of that had ever happened. He didn't pick me up and swing me around and give me a big bouquet of yellow roses (Our special flower, though I read somewhere it means betrayal).

They looked at me like the princess who turned into a frog.

It made me think, really, did they ever really care? About me? The real me? Was there a real me – to them?

Or was it just, ever so casually, Oh, Hope got the lead in this...Hope won that competition in Los Angeles.. My mom used to find a way to work every conversation around to me being an actor – it was like SHE won the competition or got the role. It was all she could ever talk about, and I can't imagine how she would go on when I wasn't even there to get embarrassed and tell her to shut the hell up or I would walk out of the house. And when I would just do normal kid things, which was not very often (I had to sleep ten hours and in a cucumber mask!) she wouldn't even notice me, except when I was walking out. She'd say, "Don't eat fries, Hopie. Use your skin lotion, Hopie."

I can't blame the kids I used to go to school with for hating my guts when I got paid hundreds or even thousands of dollars for being in a commercial or a play -- or even in the regional theater group I acted in when I couldn't get something that paid. Not only was I better than they were – I don't mean better at acting, I

mean, just better, and prettier, and more grown-up. They must have thought I was totally stuck up because I didn't go out for burgers or stay over or go to the nine o'clock movie. You can't expect regular people to understand. I know that. Kids thought I was nuts that I gave up going to the pool (tanning wrecks your skin) and Disney World (no time) and all that junk for "my art."

But my parents! They made me who I am! You'd think they'd want to at least protect and take care of the girl they gave ten hundred lessons, the girl they took to ten hundred auditions. I remember them sending me up to the studio or agent's office (they would stand downstairs and smoke. They thought I didn't know). I can remember them saying afterward they were just sure I'd done the best of anyone... but did I remember to smile on the word "Super?" Was I sure? You'd have thought my parents would at least think of how valuable I was, and how dear to them, and how damned hard I tried for them. For me, too, of course. For me, too.

But all I had to do was get in trouble once (never mind that I had nothing to do with it!) and they went cold as the ice on the lake.

Maybe all they ever cared about anyway was how things looked. That's it. How things looked to the gourmet group and the Fine Arts Council and the Bellamy Club.

Not me.

The Gift.

Yeah, what they cared about was The Gift.

It's like I'm just a coat that was wrapped around The Gift.

I remember it all. When I was twelve and I made, like, half a noise about wanting to be a cheerleader for just one year. And they were like, "You have a gift, Hope. And we've spent years and a great deal of money developing that gift...but we want you to be happy, and if you want to give it up, we'll understand..."

Well, I didn't then, not after a complete guilt trip! The next week I was back getting a song ready to try out for some Christmas show at the Civic Center.

And they liked me again.

It was as if The Gift and I were two people, two separate people.

Only one of them – Hope – nobody cared about. And nobody does still, I guess!

The Gift always wanted more, and always got what it wanted. "The Gift" wanted me acting and singing in plays, being in commercials, and someday in movies. The Gift was my parents' little medal they could take out and wear.

When I was little, it was just fun. When I got a little bigger, it wasn't so much fun.

And then, when I got old enough that I actually could have stopped acting if I wanted to – they couldn't have forced me -- I was obsessed with it. And plus, there isn't anything else I could ever do. The world of backstage in a theater, the smell of makeup and dust and chalk is more real to my than my own bedroom. My parents made sure of that. They dragged me to Broadway shows that were written when they were kids. Revivals, they called them. And you practically had to revive me after I saw one, like 'Oklahoma!' Because it was so boring. But they said if I wanted to be a big movie star, I had to "pay my dues" on the stage. All really famous actors did. They loved "the stage." For me, until I got used to it, I could never understand how you wouldn't go bonkers saying the same words over and over and over every day. But then, I got to know, like every time a singer sings a song, even if it's their famous song that they've done a thousand times, it feels different. And people go crazy over you. There's nothing like people going crazy over you. That's what you want, even more than the money.

My mother would tell me how she and her two sisters, Maggie and Marjorie, went to every Broadway show when it opened and sat in the cheapest seats with their grandmother. How her grandmother taught my mom to play the piano, though my mother can't do it anymore. Even when I was little, before I got addicted to the applause and the attention, my mom was already addicted to it for me. She was going to be an actor when she was young; but I picked up that her parents made her get married instead. She got married, like, four months after she met my father. You had to then if you were pregnant. Her sister Marjorie was going to be a dancer. She didn't do it, either. She quit. Her other sister had no talent,

except a little for singing, and she didn't do it long. She ended up as a Biology professor.

See, if you don't care about what my mother cares about, you don't count. Just like her sister, (my mother calls her "the frog dissection queen") doesn't count, even though she used to sing. It was my Aunt Maggie's choice to quit. Something happened to Marjorie – maybe she pulled a groin muscle or something. I don't remember. Anyhow, she didn't want to quit. If you have The Gift and quit anyhow, you don't count.

Now, I don't count.

Which makes no sense because it wasn't my decision.

You know what I expected; after all I'd been through? I really thought I'd get taken care of at home kind of carefully for part of a semester, like someone who had been sick. Instead, they started driving and I thought we were going home so I went to sleep in the back seat. Until they turned into Miss Taylor's, I didn't know a thing.

I was so pissed off that I punched my dad, and told him what a lying crap he was. I wouldn't get out of the car, so they sent this beautiful but wacko girl, Suzette, who has like four zillion tattoos, down to talk to me. Suzette told me I could sit there until I starved to death and I would still have to come in anyway. She said she wanted to sing in a metal band but her parents wanted her to go to Yale, so guess who won? After than, I could tell it was no use.

My parents were going to get their way. At least temporarily. They couldn't wait to get me stuck away here. All nice and out of sight. Nothing to embarrass the Romanos once the big hoopla died down in the newspapers. But after that, my parents didn't come to see me for a month! And I was only allowed to call them once because I was supposed to get used to my new environment and "trust" it. I'm so sure.

I think they're embarrassed. They've done so much bragging about me to their friends – the guys with their red martini noses and the women with their lips so stuffed with collagen they look like a bass or a goldfish. Now, those "friends" have

something juicy to gossip about. It's probably like get-even time for them. They can talk about me, but that's only because their own kids have no talent. They practically have no lives. Their fat daughters are good in math! Or history! That's so fine. Except math and history don't make you famous. Name one person who's famous for math.

Okay, Einstein.

The kids were always jealous of me, but the parents were worse. It must have been awful for them to have kids who were so dull and ordinary. The girls whose feet got so big they would never make it past city in gymnastics even if they took lessons until they were forty, and the boys all covered with zits and sitting with their shoulders humped over in their DethZone t-shirts and their ear buds in, bobbing up and down.

But the thing is, they're home. They'll probably all turn out normal. Normal. Like lawyers and teachers.

But who wants to be normal? I used to think, hello! No one? But now I don't know. I guess it would be better, considering this mess. I used to feel sorry for the Neeland kids and Abby, my so-called "friend" from the theater group, but they don't have to write stupid journals and do twice the homework of an ordinary high school like I do because this is an exclusive prep school. I'm the one who was so special. I'm the one stuck here. Their parents wouldn't just sweep them under the rug when something happened to them. My parents did. They basically swept me under the rug. I wonder if rape victims feel this way.

Even now, my parents have only come to visit two times. For two hours. They say it's the rules. But I think it's that my mother's convinced that people will think I'm nuts or something. Stuff does happen around here that doesn't sound normal. But hello! Stuff happened back in Bellamy that would have freaked them out, and in Starwood, too! I can remember sitting in the back of the bus in, like, eighth grade in Bellamy – which is supposed to be as rich as Palm Springs or someplace – and hearing girls say, "I get high and I get drunk and then I do it! I don't care who with! As long as he's cute!" What would my parents have thought of perfect Starwood if they knew about the deserted cabin? And don't think my brother, Carter, doesn't know about that stuff, just like I did! Now, when my dad talks, I

bet it's all about Carter, Carter, Carter, who they just sort of let grow up and play soccer before. They can't talk about me anymore, They had to go to the reserve kid.

I know because when my dad does bother to come, he's like, Carter's turning out really good. Carter's on the honor roll. Carter's getting really tall. It's like Carter grew out of the ground like a magic mushroom after the kidnapping.

Before, they didn't even notice they had two kids.

Well, they're going to notice me again.

First of all, I'm practically starving away to nothing because I won't eat the garbage Miss Taylor calls food.

I heard my father say they were hitting him up for twenty big ones a year for tuition. You'd think for that much they could afford better than baked beans and iceberg lettuce! Canned beans? Iceberg lettuce? I never had those things in my entire life. And sauerkraut? Who eats sauerkraut? Oh God, I ran into the hall bathroom and yakked the first time I even smelled it. And they make it, like, twice a month because it's cheap. Even the teachers are cheap because they can only get jobs at places like Miss Taylor's. Everyone knows private school teachers suck.

My parents aren't going to get away with it and Logan isn't going to get away with it.

It's too much.

Oh, shit. I should be done with this by now.

I wrote and wrote and wrote, and I still have to write five more pages. In my OWN handwriting. It's more "authentic" than the computer. You have to write more the first few months to "get your feelings down on paper." Okay.

Retards.

Assholes.

Second verse, same as the first!

Think of it this way: Say that one day you were this girl who was well, it.

It.

I'm not bragging.

I was. I was the person that other people wanted to be like. Like a trendsetter, a person who had this style of her own, where there were only preps and Goths, basically. Not just at home but at Starwood, too. It was natural for people to copy whatever I wore. I was so much more adult. I knew how to wear clothes. Real clothes, not kid clothes. I wore tight Capri pants under dresses with straps and other people did, too. I could wear a scarf and not look like someone's mother. (You don't just throw it on; you have to know how to tie it.) I wore ballet shoes for real shoes. Other girls started doing it, too. When I did my hair up in these tiny little rows of colored pins, other girls did, too. When I got gigantic shades, other girls got their parents to send them the same kind, and layered their short skirt over long skirts, even when it just made them look like fat asses. They even pronounced words how I pronounced words. It was almost annoying.

That's what it's like to be it.

And then there was this big total misunderstanding that I was just led into! You'd think, with it being someone like me, they would give me a little belief. NO! They blame me. Not Logan. He's fine and dandy. He's a real actor, even in real life! He lies and they believe him. I'm the one thrown out of Starwood. My school doesn't stick up for me. My parents don't stick up for me. My so-called boyfriend acts like we never even met.

And I end up here.

Some of the girls, they really need to be here. It's the best they can do. But if you were ... something, not just something – if you were "it," then it's hard to come down to this. I had more to lose, you know? I'm not being conceited. It's just the truth.

Wouldn't you be pissed off? Or more? Like, desperate?

Wouldn't you just cry and cry and cry? I do! Me! I cry like one of the idiot girls I used to go to school with in Bellamy. They cried over their retarded boyfriends or that their best friends didn't invite them to a sleepover or that they got grounded and couldn't go to the big game! Stuff that never even affected me.

I never cried.

Well, not never.

I used to cry, from anger, when I got to the last round of callbacks only to lose out to some Barbie doll. Callbacks are when they invite you back, on another night, to audition again for a show, after they weed out all the zero-talent blobs and fatsos. I cried over stuff like that, even when my mother said, they were just looking for a particular type, honey.... I cried just recently when my dog, Hero, died without ever getting to see me again.

I cried over Logan.

And now, I walk around like a zero among negative numbers. Wearing my Miss Taylor's uniform, my black watch plaid skirt and red blazer. Ohmigod. I look like the American Girl doll I had when I was little, the one they would never let me play with. Like this outfit was designed by a blind nun! I swear. LOAFERS with a little hole for a penny! No jewelry, not even little diamond studs. My ear holes are going to grow together. I take Latin! I have to sing in a choir in chapel! And when I really start to really sing, they say, now remember, this is unison singing, no stars here, we're all stars! We all have to walk together to meals and sit next to a different girl every time. I have to spend one hour every night minimum, writing in this stupid-ass journal. I'm learning to play Lacrosse and soccer! Please! Is it any wonder that crying is, like, all I do? I am crying my head off and no one cares.

Except this one girl who lives on my hall, Em.

That's what I should write about.

Em. She is so sweet. Like, a really good person. Though she probably does belong in a very strict school like this. She has big issues. I mean .. big!

I saw her the first day. She was shy. Just sort of slipping around the corners in the hall. But she reminded me of someone. She had this long, curly black hair and she would have been pretty if she hadn't been so fat. She was graceful. I found out later that was because she'd been a ballerina. We got to be friends, like, right away. She still hardly ever says anything. But I can tell that she understands. One day, she smiled when she walked past. She has this beautiful, sad smile. So I wrote a note to her. I slipped it under her door. Now, I write things to her all the time, and when she sees me, she smiles. When I talk to her, instead of looking straight at me, she's smart enough to act like she's looking out in the distance. I know she's listening though. Sometimes, when she's heard me through the wall at night, crying, she has tears in her own eyes the next morning at breakfast, and makes the OK sign at me.

Like it could ever be okay.

I'm crying and crying all the time except I never get to float or drown like Alice in Wonderland almost did, in a river of her own tears. A river of her own tears.

I told Em about that. She thought it was beautiful. It was her favorite book when she was little, too. She wanted to go to another world, too, away from this boring, ugly one, with people with blackheads in their noses and Cheetos on their breath. When I was little, my mother would tie my hair back with these sparkly velvet bands, and my father would say I was his Alice in Wonderland.

I told Em about Logan. About Logan and his big Plan. For ruining my life. And how he won't answer his phone: "Logan here. Speak." How he's at Starwood having a ball. Probably literally. Probably with Alyssa Lyn Davore. Getting a scholarship to Carnegie-Mellon. Never thinking of me. Glad he's out of it.

And I'm here.

Em. She's a great listener, and she's funny and smart, the two days a month when she's only mildly chemically imbalanced. I can tell by the notes she sends back to me. Sometimes, they're just little cartoon drawings. Sometimes, they say like, "Just be sure not to be yourself!" When she's out on one of her whippy trips you could be talking to your basic floor lamp. She doesn't even react. But she's not like that all the time.

If it wasn't for Em, I'd be gone now. Gone. As in dead. Like the real Juliet, not the girl I was playing at Starwood.

You know the play, Romeo and Juliet? I mean, Shakespeare, not the movie? God, you have to. Everybody is forced to read it in high school. Well, I was the star. I was Juliet. In the play, Juliet got married on Sunday and she was dead by Thursday. She killed herself. She stabbed herself with a dagger! That's why it's so famous, such a famous tragedy. She was only fourteen, younger than me! Imagine being Juliet, and then a few weeks later being told you could never act again, when it was your life, your whole life. All because of a stupid freaking trick by a stupid guy.

I'm so sure. I'm so sure that's what I'll do. Never act again.

Maybe become a nice . Or a dentist!

By now, if it wasn't for the fact that Em sort of needs me as a role model for surviving prep school, I'd probably have taken a hundred Tylenol PM. She needs me, and also, I think taking Tylenol like that damages your liver if you don't die. I read that some people in England took some kind of painkiller and they woke up and their liver was destroyed and they were going to die and they had to sit there for a couple of days? Just waiting to die.

They probably didn't even really want to die in the first place, and probably didn't take enough on purpose. How retarded can you get? If I did it, I would do it right, like Juliet. So they couldn't save me. I'd do it beautifully. Falling down on my bed in the moonlight. Some nights, on top of my comforter on my crummy bunk, I imagine I'm lying in my casket, in Juliet's wedding costume, with the little velvet cap on my hair. I'd leave a note to make sure that my parents would buy it from Starwood. That would be the least they could do. And there would be music. Like 'Pachibel's Canon.' I know, it's a cliché but everyone knows it and it makes people get all weepy. Or 'Clair de Lune.' Because I'm so young and I'll never look at the moon again. Or what is it? 'Pavane for a Dead Princess'? My parents made me listen to all that classical crap along with show tunes when I took piano lessons. I got imprinted on it like a little duck and now it's always the soundtrack when I imagine my life as a movie. I don't even know the songs kids my age know.

Yes. It would be so sad.

Classical and sad. Classy and sad!

My parents also used to read me poems and make me memorize them to train my memory. It worked. I can memorize whole pages of lines in a few hours. Like there was this one, "Brightness falls from the air...queens have died, young and fair..." I have no idea who wrote that. But my mom read it to me when I was little. I just saw it again in a magazine story about Princess Diana dying all those years ago? And I thought how it would be perfect for someone would read it. My eulogy, just one little piece of poetry. Maybe one of the kids from when I was in Saint Barnard's Players in eighth grade. Like Abby would want to do it. Abby totally worshipped me. And she would be falling apart, sobbing while she was reading it. I can see it. I can hear her.

How would Logan feel then? Totally like shit. Totally like the turd he is. Standing there looking at the body of the girl he said he loved.

That would be worth it.

But he's so into himself. I don't even know anymore if Logan has feelings or if he just pretends he has them to impress people. He'd probably pretend he was so totally worn down by sadness. I cared so much. I did everything I could... I can hear him saying it. What a total liar. I'm so not the one in denial! He'd probably feel like he deserved all this pity and compassion and junk when he wasn't even dead! Girls would probably be falling all over him to comfort him. And they'd be dressed up and have pushup bras on and be smelling of perfume. I'd be lying there like this tiny little queen but he'd be standing there with his head on somebody else's shoulder?

It would be a big risk another way, too.

Like, would he even bother to come? Would his parents let him. Maybe they'd think it was too traumatic for poor, poor Logan. After all he's been through. What if he couldn't even say a final goodbye to me in my tomb? I'd be dead forever; and even if the funeral was really good, he might not go. I wouldn't even know if he was there or not. Maybe I wouldn't even be getting back at him!

You know your life is crap when it's not even worth killing yourself.

I'm going to get back at him. Maybe just by being better than him.

That's why I follow the rules.

Like the "jam sessions." That's what she calls them. The Miss Taylor we never see. Our wonderful leader. She sends some teacher or teacher-in-training every week to be the "moderator." You don't have to attend but it's "encouraged." Ohmigod. Wednesday nights in our "pajamas." Our dorm group meetings. I wear my nice flannel pants and long tee shirts. Suzette comes practically naked, in a thong with a see-through top. In front of girls, so the reason would be ...what? Em wears big men's striped PJ's if she's okay. If she's not, she wears whatever she's been wearing all week – like all week, including the same underwear, day and night. These get-togethers. They're so meaningless. You know what it's like when adults pretend to listen and you can see them thinking about other crap? You can see them thinking, oh, I should get my highlights touched up. Or, oh, I forgot to make an appointment for Devon's cavity. And all the while they're nodding and saying, I can see why you feel that way, and acting like you can't tell that their laptop means more to them than you do.

A healthy mind in a healthy body for the well-rounded young woman. That's the Taylor motto. That's what all that running up and down in the freezing cold chasing a ball on a stick with a net on wet grass is for!

Half the teachers are really well-rounded. They didn't used to be actors, or still actor wannabes, just barely over the hill, the way the Starwood teachers are. Like one has a waist is the size of one of my mother's exercise balls.

Em's waist is, too, though.

Em looks like the Queen of Hearts after she ate the tarts.

I mean this in a totally nice way.

Once, I passed her door and it was open. I saw her literally unloading her secret stash of Snickers, which she had stuffed in everything from her purse to her gym shorts (Yeah, we have to wear gym uniforms, like rejects from parochial schools.).

Not that Em isn't totally sweet. But how could you eat something you had kept hidden all day inside your clothes? It skives me just to think about it. I took a good look at her. Em is tall, like five eleven, like my mother, but she is massive. I thought, that day (I didn't know her very well yet) that if I didn't lock my door, she'd eat me in my sleep. She held out one of the candy bars to me. I was like, uh, no thanks, but thanks. I thought, where does she get them? They don't have a bookstore with tee shirts and candy and star stickers and lattes and stuff like they did at Starwood. I just waved and crept away from her door. I pretended I didn't notice the food on the bed. She looked so ashamed. Taylor should probably be helping her with her obsession with food, but all I've seen our "helpers" do is reduce Em to tears instead of a size six. Em probably should be at a place that really concentrates on...you know, fat. She should talk about why she can't get through a day without six candy bars at seven hundred calories apiece. I mean, fat ballerinas have limited appeal? She ate herself right out of the Concord Academy. She never used to be fat, she tells me in her notes. Her "freshman fifteen" must have turned into a freshman forty or something.

I just have to hold on. I have to make sure they don't get to me.

So, even though I don't have obsessions, I make them up for our "jam sessions," which I don't even know why we have because no one is really mental.

Even Suzette. Suzette just has to talk about her obsession with her brother dying in a car accident while she was driving or something and why it makes her want to fail in school and have sex constantly. Personally, I think Suzette is just a little over the top. Anyone would feel the way she does. She liked her brother, like, a lot. They were close, even though he was only eight or something. Suzette probably doesn't need to be at a school so military as Taylor's.

There are other girls who have academic problems and junk – like having flunked out of three other schools, including public, for smoking, drinking Scotch and milk or cutting class for four weeks straight. One even slapped her cheerleading supervisor.

See the difference? Watch carefully now! They actually DID something, even Suzette and poor Em. Although, I will say none of the stories are as interesting as what happened to me. None of them was on the news. Well, maybe Suzette's

brother was, but only in the local paper, because they probably felt sorry for the family.

I have to come up with something to be obsessed with, because I'm supposed to, so I say my mother came from a family where her father beat her mother, and her sisters were totally screwed up, and one killed herself with a dagger. I say that I'm afraid of being buried alive, and whoever the teacher or teacher's aide is that night, especially the one with the short, blond hair, gets all excited. They probably think they're psychologists.

Mostly, when I'm not having a sharing moment (vomit!) I just listen to them. Or if I can't stand it, I pretend to. I sit and stare out the leaded-glass windows and try to remember old monologues, so I don't totally lose my brain. If I say something, no one cares. Everyone here is either spaced out or thinks they're all that because their parents are so rich or whatever.

I end up turning out my cheap light every night when I'm done with my "journaling," and I scream in the night, biting my comforter, without making one sound, Logan, pick up your phone just once! Just so I can hang up on you, even! But then I wake up in the morning alive, looking out another leaded glass window across the room (what did this place used to be, a cathedral? And how the hell old is it?) to eat scrambled eggs that are like the rubber ones that came with my toy frying pan. I had it when I was five. It made sizzling noises so you could pretend you were really cooking.

How can this all have happened so fast?

Two months ago. Nine weeks ago, I was having final fittings for my gowns. I had to have a whole other set of costumes from Alyssa, because she was about twenty pounds heavier than I was. Like, do you know what it means for a sophomore, a fifteen-year-old, to be cast with seniors – and not just any seniors, one of them had been in a movie, and one had been off-Broadway? And I was totally holding my own, totally living in those beautiful words, those gauzy paintings behind us of castles. I had everything down right, to the tiniest movement of one of my hands. And this was at, like, one of the best arts prep schools on earth? I could feel the understanding begin deep down inside me, coming from the source of all the grief you have from your genes or whatever: "Oh, swear not by the moon, the

inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable." I knew it. I loved it. I was living it, onstage and off. Brooks Emerson, the guy who starred in that play based on a Cervantes story on Broadway, was totally in tears almost because I was so great.

He was.

I would have gotten into Julliard.

That's what Logan said. Logan Rose, my Romeo. Who screwed it all up. Screwed my life. Screwed me.

I guess that we, in the Wildflowers dorm with Suzette-the-tattooed-lady and Em-the-Hippo-ballet dancer, the crash-and-stash rejects from arts high school. At least we're not in Buttercups, with the gaga freshmen and the technology weenies eating their Ritalin.

I so don't need this kind of idiot place.

I need it like Ophelia needed swimming lessons.

Ophelia? She was Hamlet's girlfriend? And he totally rejected her, even though she would never love anyone else, so she drowned herself? The average teenage kid probably thinks of it as something you get Sparknotes for so you can write a boring paper on it. They probably don't even know what it really means. But then, most kids watch music channels and believe the girls who are so dumb, they like, cry when a guy asks them to PROM, are really super cool.

All I need is someone to listen to me and believe I'm telling the truth. And then all of this can end and I can go back to the way I was. Get out of here. Get started again. Back to who I was.

Before Logan.

Before the kidnapping.

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