

Chapter 1

WAKE UP, WORLD!

My dad had turned into a nocturnal creature. Some rare half-owl, half-lemur, with a majestic wingspan but blood-shot eyes, shedding gray wisps of himself everywhere.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said when I walked into my parents’ bedroom with his morning coffee. No matter how many hours he’d been up staring at the shadowy walls, Dad never let on how lonely or exhausted he felt. Only his slow, red-rimmed blinks gave him away.

“Are you really watching this?” I asked.

Dad shrugged. The prehistoric twelve-inch TV on the dresser usually served as a shelf for Mom’s dry-cleaning pile. But today it was cleared off and actually showing signs of staticky life. Dad had on some morning talk show with three ladies discussing their *aha!* moments while perched on hot-pink stools.

“Apparently, peach pits are the new drug of choice,” Dad said. “Orders from the Sergeant,” he added, nodding toward his night table. On it was a stack of political biographies, a ziplock baggy full of trail mix, and a take-out menu for Peking Mountainside. Mom (aka Sergeant Nutbags) had left for work extra

early that morning, but had jotted down in the margins between noodle dishes:

saline rinse

sprouted almonds with acai

must watch Wake Up, World! with Wendy Wackerling

(special on naturopathic remedies!)

Coming up next was Chelsea Diamond, slightly renowned guru and author of *Cancer-Free and Fearless, Thanks to My Peaches*. I instinctually groaned. Not that I wanted Chelsea Diamond, slightly renowned guru and author, to contract more cancer or fear. But I was officially done with Mom's theories about how to outsmart uncontrollable cell replication with pits and seeds.

My older sister, Emma, was actually the one to crown Mom "Sergeant Nutbags," and I think Mom took pride in her serganship. She carried around these little baggies of walnuts, almonds, chickpea-flaxseed-macadamia-cacao-kibble, telling us we had to eat them because they could make us live forever or grow new skin or some other miraculous nutty trick. And because Mom was always doing ten things at once and ran around like a wind-up toy on steroids, she tended to bark orders like a drill sergeant and talk in a storm of words instead of pausing for useless things like air.

"I've definitely learned a lot already," Dad said with a wink.

Leading into Chelsea Diamond's segment there was now a string of commercials about finding freedom in feminine hygiene products. "How about we get this over with, huh?" Dad handed me another bag that the good sergeant had filled with four alcohol swabs, two pairs of latex gloves, and a preloaded saline syringe.

"Woo-hoo," I answered weakly.

"Yeah," Dad said. "Sorry, kiddo." Which made this whole thing even worse.

I hated that Mom had left this for me. I'd never done the saline flush solo before. Everyone else my age was comparing hickeys or posting sweet sixteen dance videos, not injecting their dads while watching floating douches.

Dad had just hit the year mark since he was diagnosed with metastatic rectal cancer. It was exactly as ugly as it sounded. In the past 365 days, a team of surgeons had pulled out pieces of his abdomen, rewired his colon, and closed up his butt. Then they outfitted him with lots of tubes and a colostomy bag that he hid from me at all costs.

For the first few months, Dad acted like the whole cancer thing was just a bad-hangnail kind of annoyance. He took some sort of chemo that came in pill form and popped it in his mouth like a gumdrop, then chased it with toast and coffee and headed to his usual 7:23 commuter train for work—he was a partner at a patent law firm. A few times he went in on the 8:05. Once he skipped going in completely, but he said that was because he

had a lot of conference calls and they were easier to do from home. I chose to believe him.

Things got more complicated after his first operation. They opened him up the Tuesday before Thanksgiving and then announced that Dad was banned from turkey and all other solid foods until further notice. Which led to a second operation just a month later. After that, he started carrying around the bag I was supposed to not see and he couldn't sit for very long without a special butt pillow packed with ice.

Once he was mobile, he started taking the train into New York City again—the 9:03 or the 10:38. I don't know how he managed the trek to his midtown office or what he actually got done at work without his ice pillow. His dark hair never fell out. Instead it just clung to his head in damp, tired clumps.

Mom, Dad, Emma and I celebrated New Year's Eve in the emergency room because he was in so much pain he couldn't talk. That's when the doctors found new metastases in his lymph nodes. They started a supersonic blitzkrieg of chemo, pumping him with miracle venoms every two weeks and then giving him a couple of days to catch his breath before starting all over again. Everything fell out then, including his eyelashes. He didn't even have to get his parking validated at the hospital because the guard saw him so often.

Two months ago, on his last overnight chez Urgent Ambulatory Care, Dad got a chest catheter installed so he could do more of his treatments at home. It took me three weeks to get

up the guts to glance at it, even though it was under his skin. It looked like they'd planted a silver dollar just below his right clavicle. Only as he got thinner, the catheter poked out more and more.

There was a divot in the middle where all his shots went. I made sure to be far away when that happened. A visiting nurse came on Tuesdays to administer the heavy meds and check vitals. Mom took care of keeping the catheter clean and giving Dad horse-pill-size immuno-boosters the rest of the time.

Except for today, of course. It was the first Friday in May and finally felt like spring, though, like Dad, I hadn't slept much the night before. Partly from pre-syringe jitters and also because we were rotating through the third of four lunar eclipses this year and I'd been researching the theory of all life ending after the blood moon sequence.

The bright side was, dawn came.

Mom abandoned us extra early today because she was in session hearing some controversial indictment about noise pollution at our local mall. She was one of the supreme court justices of Westchester County, New York. I had a hard time being impressed with that because they had never been able to curb fracking or stop the county from hosting an annual gun show. Also, whatever this noise pollution verdict was, I knew Mom would find something else to keep herself overscheduled soon enough.

She was constantly rushing around like the day was about

to disappear, leaving a trail of nutbags in her wake. She worked sixty-plus hours a week as arbiter of all things judicial. She also was on the board of five thousand different charities—we called them all “the sisterhood” because she only ever told us about the women at her meetings. One was for an animal shelter and we were currently sponsoring a guinea pig she named TinyGinsberg (after United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg). In Mom’s spare time, she was training for a triathlon with an obstacle course. She swore that at age forty-eight, she was in the best shape of her life and she owed it all to the power of *going raw*.

Going raw was Mom’s newest theory about how to cure cancer and save the world. Before that it was eating cloves of garlic and trashing our microwave. Before that it was getting rid of all wheat, meat, corn, sugar, and laundry detergents in our house. At one point we boiled all our water and turned off all our electronics (that lasted exactly three hours). Mom had read so much about cancer research and hidden carcinogens that my brain got achy even looking at the latest article she’d clipped and posted under a refrigerator magnet.

I knew it was her wonky way of coping with Dad’s insides turning into a battle zone, and I appreciated her efforts. I just hated feeling like finding the right legume was going to fix everything. It gave me too much hope and a false sense of control that ultimately came crashing down and/or gave me indigestion. My sister Emma was finishing her first year of state

college four hours away and constantly texted me pictures of the stews and waffles in her cafeteria so I could see the world of cooked food. Emma used to be the one who could tell Sergeant Nutbags to chill out. Now we were rudderless. I was afraid of all things related to conflict, so I spent a lot of time silently seething, and Dad laughed a lot as if Mom were a well-meaning but misguided puppy. Which, in many ways, she was.

As Chelsea Diamond took the TV's stage blowing air kisses to her viewing audience, Dad set down his coffee and opened the top two buttons of his pajama shirt. I didn't mean to whimper, but his chest looked so bare and bony. He used to have sprigs of dark chest hair. When we went swimming at Wahonsett Bay he'd get seaweed caught in it and pretend to be the Loch Ness monster. There was not a single strand there anymore. Just this tender, splotchy skin.

"I know!" squawked Chelsea. "So simple, right? I'm living proof!"

I officially hated her and the peach pit she rode in on.

"It's okay," Dad said quietly. "Just read Mom's instructions and I can walk you through it."

Mom's scrawled notes on catheter sterilization were in the wonton section of the take-out menu. I had to thoroughly clean the skin around Dad's clavicle, wait thirty seconds, then stick the saline syringe into the magic divot to flush the valves underneath with a cleansing rinse. Hopefully without either of us fainting or screaming "Help!" at the sky.

“Got it,” I whispered, pretending I wasn’t shaking all over. I took out the four alcohol swabs I needed and lined them up on top of his book stack, tallying, “One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.”

“Hey,” said Dad. “You’re gonna do great.” He tried to take my hand, but I was shoving it inside a latex glove, so we wound up swatting each other. I lined up the swabs again. And again.

“If it helps, Wendy just agreed to plant a peach tree in the third-world country of your choice,” offered Dad. It wasn’t fair that he was trying to cheer me up when he was the one broken.

“Let’s do this,” I said, putting on a second pair of gloves just to be extra sterile.

I ripped open a swab, wiped down Dad’s silver-dollar-size lump and counted to thirty Mississippi. “Nice, nice,” he murmured. Then I uncorked the saline syringe and lined it up with the little dip in the middle. Which really was a gaping hole leading into his fragile body, and I was about to dump some preloaded syringe that could’ve been filled with arsenic or glue or hairspray. I had no idea. I was just trusting blindly. Trusting my absent mom. Trusting the new developments in immunotherapy. Trusting whoever invented chest-catheter ports and decided saline was any kind of solution.

“Ready, set, go,” I mumbled through clenched teeth. I pressed the needle into his body; it made a horrible *pock* sound. We both gasped as I felt Dad’s whole body tighten. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Still good?” I asked in a tiny voice. He didn’t answer. “Dad!” I yelled into his scrunched-up face.

“Yeesh,” he said, trying to smile.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “I just—are you okay? I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m—”

“Pull it out. *Please.*” He was sweating along his pale top lip.

“Right.”

We both panted while I took out the syringe and wiped another alcohol pad over his skin. Then I watched closely to make sure his chest was rising and falling. As opposed to oozing or collapsing. I wanted to run so far away and smash everything that made this moment. I wanted to hurl that syringe and suck the alcohol swabs until my insides burst into flames. Instead, I restacked Dad’s untouched books. “One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four,” I repeated. It was the only thing that felt certain. One plus one was two. Three would always be followed by four.

Dad’s breath slowed down a bit. I offered him a sip of juice but he shook his head, eyes still closed.

“Amazing!” Wendy Wackerling cheered. The television sputtered with applause. “How can we get more of these extraordinary pits in people’s hands?” she marveled. I threw two of my four latex gloves at the screen. They barely cleared the end of the bed and landed with a chalky outline around them on the navy carpet.

“Dad, I’m gonna turn off the TV, okay?” I didn’t want to touch him again, so I did an awkward snap by his ear.

“Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat. His eyes roamed around the room and then landed on me wearily.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Do you want me to . . . ?” I didn’t know what I had to offer. I didn’t even know what I’d done. In the past year my dad had been through so many grueling treatments, operations, bouts of radiation, implants, and items of unsolicited wheat-free wisdom. And now I was sure I’d sealed his fate with one swift needle jab, just sloppy enough to puncture an artery or lung.

Dad closed his eyes again and whispered, “Go. School. Fine.”

“Okay, but if it does something or you feel funny, please call me.”

“Mmmmyup.” He was drifting into what I hoped was a diamond-studded nap.

You’re just napping. You’re just napping. It’s good to nap. You’re just napping.

I mouthed those words twenty-five times while I watched him inhale and exhale. My dad detested naps. That was probably my hundredth clue that something was very wrong that first Friday morning in May when the world was erupting into either spring or everlasting darkness.

I scooped the syringe and wrappers off his night table and dumped them in the garbage. It took another five minutes to peel off the other two sweaty gloves I was still wearing. I went to the bathroom down the hall and turned on the faucet as hot

as it would go. I shoved my powdery hands under scalding water, watching them turn pink, holding on to the hurt as long as I could. No matter how hot it got, I couldn't scrub away all my ugly thoughts about coming home to Dad crumpled on the floor or shoved in a coffin and Wendy Wackerling shouting at him to wake up.

When I got downstairs I dialed Mom's number. As expected, it went straight to voice mail. *This is Naomi Rosenthal-Hermann. Your call is so important to me—*

Which was bullshit. Because what could be more important than her sixteen-year-old daughter possibly murdering her beloved husband of twenty-three years with a shot of saline to the heart?

Mom always said if she was busy to call her clerical assistant. Her name was Pippi and she was obnoxiously chipper. I couldn't handle her squeaky optimism right now. So I called Mom's voice mail again and left her a very passive-aggressive message about Chelsea Diamond's riveting story and hoping she was having a fun day and she should maybe check in on Dad since the saline shot had been fairly traumatic for both of us. Then I washed my hands one more time before grabbing my backpack and jacket and closing the front door behind me.

My best friend, Julian, was parked outside. His Volkswagen Jetta was leaking something all over our driveway.

"Sorry. How late are we?" I asked, climbing in. Julian was consistently five minutes early for everything. I was consistently

five minutes behind. Today, I'd added an extra ten for possibly life-threatening needle procedures.

"Late enough to skip first period," he answered. We both had study hall first period, so it barely mattered. The Jetta started up with a ferocious cough; the front seat smelled like a forest fire. Julian had added about twenty-five new pinecone air fresheners to the rearview mirror but I could tell the cigarette in the ashtray had just been snuffed out.

"You know my dad's dying," I said, holding up a butt.

"Still?" Julian asked.

I punched him hard on his shoulder and he said, "Sorry! Sorry! C'mon. I'll treat you to free toast."

I didn't want to bawl before school, especially because I'd just started my liquid-eyeliner-makes-you-look-older campaign. So I cranked up Julian's newest Europop dance mix until my skin was throbbing. We didn't say another word all the way to the Unicorn Diner. Instead, I stared into the side-view mirror and tried to decide if the objects were larger in the mirror than in real life or larger in life than in the mirror.



Vacuum Decay

Also known as “catastrophic vacuum decay” or “cosmic death bubble.” Space decays into a lower energy state, which makes a ginormous monster bubble, expanding at the speed of light. The bubble wipes out everyone and everything in its path—i.e., Earth, space, us.

Stephen Hawking says, “This could happen at any time and we wouldn’t see it coming.”

If we make it through the bubble collision, then we will most likely collide with other galaxies. Benjamin Shlaer (Tufts cosmology dude) calls it a “catastrophic sort of crunch.”

Warning signs:

None, really. Which is the beautiful horror of it all. There’s no way to prevent or prepare or even collect canned goods because it could happen in any space or time continuum.

Preventive measures:

Stay away from particle accelerators

Write to Stephen Hawking for access to the doomsday preface he wrote for *Starmus* book

Read more of Roxanne Palmer’s article “Will the Higgs Boson Destroy the Universe in a Cosmic Death Bubble?”

Or better yet, don’t.

Chapter 2

DON JUAN CRUSTACEO

The Unicorn Diner was sort of like our secret clubhouse. Julian and I brought down the average age to midseventies because it was always crowded with blue-hairs from the retirement community behind the golf course. Our regular booth was on the side by the parking lot. It had optimal sightlines for people watching and checking in with the Unicorn ecosystem—i.e., the fish tank with three lobsters that never got eaten and a purple plastic seahorse sitting on a treasure chest with fake pearls dripping out the side.

Julian and I had a favorite lobster we named DJC, for Don Juan Crustaceo. He only had one claw. Julian said it was from a gang fight with a bunch of mermen. We loved to make up dialogue for DJC as he wooed the other diner customers. He had a thick Italian accent and no room for subtlety. As in, “Hello, ladies, would you enjoy to come inside my treasure chest and lick-a my pearls-a?”

DJC was quite the player. Plus, I was pretty sure he’d brokered a deal with the Unicorn cooks that he could never be slain. Not that there was a line out the door for surf and turf (that was

the one dish on our laminated menus involving shellfish). Our sleepy suburb of Mountainside, New York, was landlocked and the nearest beach had been voted number two on a national list of the most-polluted waters for the past five years. Yum. Maybe that's what gave DJC his gleam.

"Is that a barnacle on your back or are you just horny to see-a me-a?" Julian said in an offensively slimy Sicilian accent as we stopped by the tank.

"Don Juan, you naughty bottom-dweller!" I answered in my high-pitched seahorse voice.

"Please-a. I want to give you pleasure-a with my pincers."

"Oooch, that sounds kinky," said someone behind us. Julian turned around and pulled our buddy Dara into a tight hug, even lifting her off the ground a half inch. I saw she'd dyed her short hair again. It looked like she had on a helmet of fire.

"False advertising," Dara explained. "Also, I misread the instructions and didn't dilute. But hey—" She pointed to a new pin she'd gotten for her apron that said, I'M STILL HOT, IT JUST COMES IN FLASHES NOW.

"How are my two favorite misfits?" she said, knocking me sideways with her wide hip.

"Eh," I answered.

"Amen, sister." She showed us the mugs of coffee waiting for us at our regular table. The porcelain looked way too clean and each mug had a leaping unicorn printed on its side.

"What the what?" said Julian.

"Stephan's orders. Don't shoot the messenger, but coffee's

no longer bottomless, either.” Dara rolled her big eyes. Stephan was the new manager of the Unicorn and was driving Dara insane. He had some vision about making this place into a fine-dining experience, which so far involved a lot more potted plants, a calorie count for each dish on the menu, and all of the staff having to memorize a list of “International Delight” dishes.

“Actually, do shoot the messenger,” she whispered. “At least that way I get worker’s comp.” She put a few extra jams in my palm before rushing off to deal with a man complaining about runny eggs.

Dara was actually one of the few people who knew how crappy things had been for my family, because Julian and I came into the Unicorn so often to debrief. Dara hadn’t had it exactly easy in the past year either. She was a single mom with a fourteen-year-old son who’d been caught lighting things on fire in his desk at school. So at age forty-nine she moved herself and her son into a one-bedroom apartment with her mom and took a third part-time job so she could afford some mandated behavioral therapy for her kid. Dara’s mom sounded angry and agoraphobic. She drank whiskey all day and ordered a lot of kitchen utensils from cable channels. Dara was constantly trying to mail rubberized whisks to random P.O. boxes.

Whatever mayhem was going on at home, Dara showed up to every shift at the Unicorn with a new pin and a gritty smile. She swore she owed each sliver of her sanity to AA. Julian connected with her a lot on the power of twelve-step programs. They exchanged mantras and silent nods of recognition that I

wished I understood on a deeper level. Julian was my best friend in the whole world, and yet there were so many pieces of his past missing to me.

Julian and I were four years old when we first met at the nursery school sand table. He wore a blue superhero cape and called himself Captain Booger. His magical powers included picking his nose and predicting the future by gazing into a big bouncy ball colored like the globe. Julian said that I could be his sidekick, Louise. My superpower was that I could swim through concrete. I was never allowed to touch his Ball of the Future, though.

One day while we were in Ms. Birdstall's first-grade class, Julian's mom decided she was in love with the cleaning lady and they moved out to an apartment a few towns away from us by Yonkers Raceway. Julian had not predicted that. No one had. Rumors rushed from carpool to carpool because *who knew there was a lesbian amongst us?*

My mom told me there were crazy custody battles and Julian was forced to testify against his mom in court. (Julian's dad accused his mom of reckless abandonment because she'd once left him in the car while she ran into the grocery store to get milk. Which everyone had done at some point, but Julian's dad was on a vendetta.) Meanwhile, Julian started losing patches of hair from all the stress and I clearly remembered him peeing his pants in the hallway when we were seven and trying to deny it even though there was a dark stain seeping down his leg.

It was like a modern-day witch hunt, Mom told me years

later. Julian's mom was only allowed to visit once a week, and even then it had to be supervised. After a few months, she just stopped coming. I was pretty sure she was living on the West Coast these days, but I tried not to pry.

Julian and I lost each other for almost a decade because his dad put him in some private day school where they learned math by contorting their bodies into numbers. Julian got really depressed and self-medicated by smoking and snorting anything that could make him feel lighter. He once told me about some acid trip he'd been on and I felt like a naive idiot because I asked, "Does that come in pill form or as a spleef?"

Julian laughed a low, sad laugh and said, "Yeah, never mind. Why are we talking about this anyway?" essentially locking the access gate to that part of his life. I did know he went to Valhalla Treatment Center for rehab twice and to another private school that specialized in performing arts and was also sort of a correctional institution before I met him again as "freshpeople" at Mountainside High.

That was almost three years ago now. Julian had walked into World History, sat down behind me while I was writing my daily "All the Ways the World Can End" list, and said, "Really? Tsunami?"

I'd sucked in my breath quickly because a notebook was supposed to be private property and I didn't know any of my classmates well enough for one of them to be shoulder snooping. Certainly not anyone of the male persuasion. (On a scale of one to cool I was holding steady at a solid two.) But when I turned

around with a clenched fist, Julian just smiled. He looked exactly as I'd remembered him, with maybe a longer chin and some new blond whiskers. The same turquoise eyes smirking behind his sandy, shaggy hair.

"Megatsunami," I answered. "It's not that far-fetched. Could wipe out Honolulu in minutes and keep traveling inland for sixteen miles."

Julian frowned. "But I just bought a bikini," he said.

That was the biggest reason why I loved and admired Julian so fiercely. He took the fog of all my obsessions and shrank them into the size of a two-piece. I never told Julian why I was studying all the ways the world could end because:

- a) he never asked, and
- b) I didn't have an answer. I just *had* to.

I'd been writing some form of this list every day since I was nine years old. I even knew the precise day I started: December 27, 2010. I was on winter break and my dad and I had taken the train into New York City to visit the big planetarium. There was a special exhibit about the future of intergalactic exploration. We got to climb inside some simulator where we floated upside down and my nose dripped backward because I had a cold.

When Dad and I got out of the cockpit, I sat down on a bench to wipe my snot and there was a movie playing on loop

next to us called *Vacuum Decay: An Instantaneous End*. The subtitle said it all. There were clips of scientists in lab coats shaking their heads and pictures of meteors and quotes from people like Stephen Hawking coming out of the nebula. They couldn't be sure when it would happen or even if it already had happened once and was going to happen again. They just all kept saying vacuum decay was "a very real and cataclysmic possibility." Also, vacuum decay would bring "universal obliteration." And my favorite, "wiping out Earth and any memory of what it was."

I asked Dad for a pen and wrote those lines down on my forearm. Then I committed them to memory. Or really, my memory committed those lines to me.

Once I watched that stupid ten-minute horror-fest, I couldn't unwatch it. On the train ride home, I kept asking my dad how the Earth could be in that much peril and how come nobody was prepared. Dad answered, "How could we prepare?" which was the most terrifying answer possible. I didn't say another word the whole way home. I was so distracted that I ate the waxy paper that came with my hot pretzel and got a nasty scrape in the back of my throat.

I started my list of all the ways the world could end that night because I had to get it all out of my head. I added to it each day and made sure nobody else saw it. At least until Julian sauntered back into my life and shoved his nose into my apocalypse.

Of course, he was completely unfazed. He told me that the real threat was bioterrorism from homosexual robots and he

was going to lead that charge. Also that before we all died, he was going to skip last period of school and go get Carvel flying saucers and I could come with him, but only if I committed to eating three.

I did.

Then we lay on the brown grass at Squirrel Park and talked about who was more influential—Thomas Edison, Buddha, or Whitney Houston. I showed Julian all my data on nuclear proliferation and he showed me the scars on his wrists, and that night I forced Julian to swear he'd never leave again and would be my best friend forever.

"Whatever that means." He shrugged. Which I took as a yes.

I was so thankful to have Julian back in my life. I knew I wouldn't have survived the recent past without him. Whenever my dad was getting carved up or chemo'd, Julian took me to the movies or through the aisles of Costco for cracker samples. Once I'd escorted Julian to an AA meeting in the basement of St. Mary's Presbyterian, but I didn't go inside. My favorite was when we dressed up and went to the fancy car dealerships on Central Avenue. We talked to a lot of well-groomed salespeople and even test-drove a Lexus. Then we took a long time to count all our pocket change as if that could make or break the deal. We found it hilarious, even if nobody else did. I always felt taller when I was near Julian. If the world were ending, at least we'd go down together.

Only we were pulling into the last two months of our junior year now, and Julian had applied to some exclusive dance

conservatory in San Francisco. He was acting nervous and moody about it, but we both knew he'd be getting the thick acceptance letter soon. He was really passionate about modern dance and obscenely talented on stage. Plus, he'd already finished the high school credits he needed to graduate a year early by taking summer classes.

Logistically, Julian was being forced to move out. His dad had just gotten married for a third time—this one was a hedge-fund analyst named Katya who only had enough affection for her shihzoodle, Daphne, and told Julian he was “not her problem.” She'd even written a prenup that stated her decision to be child-free. Katya had scheduled demolition of Julian's bedroom for the first week of summer break. (So she could build a bigger office with a treadmill desk and a heated dog bed for Daphne.)

Even if somehow Julian didn't make it into the conservatory, he was determined to escape this town.

I gulped lukewarm coffee to get rid of that thought. Julian was digging into the plastic squares of jelly with a spoon and offered me a taste of mixed berry but I shook my head no. Life would be so much easier if he could be not gay and I could be not so needy and we could run away and live off the fat of the land. Whatever the fat of the land meant. Probably fields of bacon swaying in the breeze.

“What's up?” Julian asked, waving his sticky spoon in my face.

I just shrugged, because him leaving and my dad dying and the smell of home fries creeping up my nose was just too much.

Julian reached across the table and took my hands in his. I could feel his caffeinated pulse bouncing between us.

“I don’t know,” I said, scanning the blue-haired horizon for something else to talk about besides the truth. “Did you read that new study about how all tap water is contaminated with Teflon now? But who can afford to drink bottled water every day, right? And speaking of water, do you think Don Juan’s tank looks extra murky? I do. I think we should say something to Dara or maybe take it straight to management. What do you think? I can do the talking or you can really, because I use a lot of run-on sentences, which I’m pretty sure is hereditary. But whatever. Oh, and I was just thinking, not that you would, but could you please not go to San Francisco and never call and never write and forget that I ever existed?”

Julian’s knuckles were turning white as he held on to my hands firmly. He blew the hair out of my eyes and made me meet his gaze.

“I’m not sure which question you want me to answer first, but I will say this: Yes, you use run-on sentences. And no, I will not abandon you.”

Which gave me just enough courage to blurt out, “And can you tell me I didn’t kill my father this morning?”

This time it was Julian’s turn to take a gulp of coffee and cleanse his palate. While he did that, I described in detail what Dad’s chest looked like and tried to imitate his wince. Julian watched carefully before answering.

“Listen up,” he said sharply. “Your father might be dying. But you are not killing him.”

I loved and hated Julian so much all at once. I couldn’t trust my voice to be non-squeaky and warbly, so I just nodded.

“You know that, right?” he pressed.

More vigorous nodding.

“And you know it’s not your job to save him?”

I pressed my napkin into my eyes until I saw floating blobs. I just wanted to hitch myself to one of them and drift away too. There was no other place to escape this feeling of everything falling apart.

“Too burnt?” I heard Dara ask. She often brought us plates of rejected bread that had gotten jammed in the diner’s finicky toaster.

“Perfecto,” said Julian. “And hey—if anyone can pull off that highly flammable-looking hairstyle, it’s you.” I knew he was giving me some time to compose myself. I opened my eyes and shoved some blackened toast into my mouth, mumbling agreement.

“Aw shucks,” said Dara, fluttering her eyelashes quickly. “You say that to all the basket cases.” Dara gave my cheek a pinch before taking off for another table.

“I feel like we should get going,” I told Julian. “I want to try calling my mom again before second period starts.”

“Wait,” said Julian. “If you’re going to call anyone for medical advice, it should be Rama Krishna McHottinfelt.”

“You think?” I felt a smile peeking out from my haze of doom and pulled a business card from where I’d stashed it inside my jean jacket pocket. Actually, I had three copies of this card squirreled away in different pockets and a fourth locked in my top desk drawer at home. It read:

RADHAKRISHNAN GANESH, M.D., Ph.D.

Medical Oncology Resident

917-555-0198

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” said Julian.

Dr. Ganesh was the newest addition to my dad’s oncology team. He was also ridiculously handsome. Somewhere between thirty and timeless, with warm brown eyes and eyelashes that were long enough to be illegal. He was always so excited—to be doing rounds, to be studying immunotherapy, to be alive and part of the new alliance between Eastern and Western medicines. He loved to talk about how far we’d come in medical innovations just by looking back at our origins. (A quick search on the interwebs told me he was born in southern India and came here for college.) I especially loved how he used random American slang like “Can I get a what what?” and “That is what I am talking about!”

I could always hear him coming down the hall because his voice was so energetic and he gave a lot of fist bumps, especially when he liked my dad’s vital signs.

Julian didn't believe me about Dr. Ganesh when I first told him. Or rather, Julian said that Dr. Ganesh was symbolic of my need for unrequited infatuation and addictive self-flagellation and that I was transferring loss into lust. (Julian read Piaget and Bettelheim in his spare time). He was also pretty sure I suffered from "CTSD" (continuous traumatic stress disorder).

So about a month ago, when Dad had to do a hospital overnight (to replace his colostomy bag—party!), I begged Julian to visit for a look-see. Dr. Ganesh was doing his rounds and I could smell his sandalwood aftershave three rooms away.

"Ey-leah-nor!" he said when he saw me. "Can I get a what what?" (fist bump). Usually I hated going by Eleanor. My mom insisted on saddling me with this name because she thought Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the most underappreciated heroes of the world. I also had the clumsiest last name in the history of consonants, Rosenthal-Hermann, because Mom insisted on hyphenating. Everyone had called me Lenny since I was in kindergarten. Except Dr. Ganesh, of course. Somehow when he said my name, it sounded like it had five sultry syllables. Which was another reason his voice made me shiver.

"Damn," I heard Julian murmur. "One of us has to kiss that silly man."

Of course, I knew Dr. Ganesh could never really go for me. First of all, he was at least a dozen years older than me and had a regular habit of looking inside my dad's rectum. Also, I'd be wildly surprised if he was into awkward teen brunettes with

overbearing unbrows and panic attacks who wore thrift-store jeans and still didn't really fit into a B-cup. But that didn't stop me from dreaming. Like, it wouldn't be totally impossible for Dr. Ganesh to be treating my dad on a night shift and then I'd be there looking out a hazily moonlit window and we'd share our deepest secrets and some Milk Duds from the vending machine as the sky melted into a sunrise.

"Maybe I should call him to describe what happened this morning?" I asked Julian now. "It's a saline solution. Not supposed to do anything besides . . . salinify?"

"Nice," Julian said.

"Or I could just text him?"

"Do it."

It took me approximately eleven minutes to compose these two lines of text:

Hi Dr. Ganesh, it's Eleanor Rosenthal-Hermann. Can I ask you a question?

Julian had already etched a map of the United States into his fifth piece of blackened toast and bitten off three more fingernails by the time I finished.

"Is that okay?" I showed him my phone.

"Sure, just let me see that." He snatched it and typed in **Do you like pina coladas or getting caught in the rain?** Then he pressed Send while I tried to pry the phone out of his hands, screaming, "Stopstopstopstopstop!"

Dara wasn't too pleased with our noise pollution and gave

us a scowl. Julian and I each put down a three-dollar tip on our one-dollar cups of coffee and picked out the pink chalky mints from the host stand before heading out to say goodbye to Don Juan.

I noticed there was a big plastic bucket on the floor under the tank and a hose pumping some bubbly fluid into it.

“There-a goes the neighborhood,” said Julian.

“Who invited all the plankton to this party?” I chirped.

Julian tapped on the glass just as my pocket buzzed. I pulled out my phone and saw I had a text back from 917-555-0198.

Hahahaha.

How is my favorite Eleanor? You are very hilarious. Yes and yes!

~ Yours, Rad Ganesh.