

My mom just waddled into my room and sank down on the bed beside me.

How are you doing, honey? she asked. All ready for school tomorrow? It's a big day eleventh grade. I can't believe my baby is a junior already!

=Yeah, Mom, I said. Everything is great. Don't worry about me.

=You're the only one I don't worry about, my mom said, patting me on the leg. I know what a good head you've got on your shoulders.

Then she noticed the outfit that was hanging on my closet door.

Well, she said, after a minute. That's new.

She didn't exactly say it like she thought it was a good thing, either.

My mom is funny that way. I mean, I have tried explaining to her before that Wrangler jeans aren't the same as Calvin Kleins. I've tried telling her how just ignoring Lauren at school when she starts in with the Don't Pull a Steph stuff really doesn't work.

But my mom and Dad, too totally doesn't get it. I

think because she never cared about being popular in school. All she ever did was read books. It was always her dream to open and run a bookstore, just like it was always my dad's dream to be a published mystery writer (a dream that still hasn't come true). I've tried to explain to her that being popular isn't the point getting people to give me a chance to be liked a chance Lauren has pretty much ruined for me that day in sixth grade—is all I ask for.

But she doesn't understand why I care about being liked by people like Lauren Moffat, whom she considers intellectually beneath me.

That's why I can't tell her about *The Book*. She'd just never understand.

I suppose, Mom said, still looking at the outfit, that you borrowed the money for that from Grandpa.

Um, I said, surprised. Yeah.

My mom, seeing my questioning look, shrugged.

Well, I know you'd never dip into your savings for new clothes, Mom explained. That wouldn't be fiscally responsible.

I felt pretty bad then. I know how angry Mom is at

her father.

I hope you don't mind, I said. I mean, that I still talk to Grandpa.

Oh, honey, Mom said, with a laugh, leaning over to brush my bangs away from the eye they fall over (in a look that Christoffe, Curl Up and Dye's leading hair stylist, assures me is THE hottest thing. You are a gamine, Christoffe insisted, last time I saw him. Insouciant! The rest of those girls at your school, with the part down the middle phwah!

You've got a look that says, I am sophisticated.)

You and your grandfather are so much alike, Mom went on. It would be a crime to keep you two apart.

I liked hearing that. Even though Mom's mad at Grandpa, I'm glad she thinks that I'm like him. I

want to be like Grandpa. Except for the mustache.

I don't see why you two can't make up, I said. I

know you're still mad about the Super Sav-Mart.

But it's not like Gramps is using the money all for himself. I mean, he built the observatory, and gave it to the town.

He didn't do it for the town, Mom said. He did it

for her.

Ouch. I guess my mom really doesn't like Kitty. Or maybe she just doesn't like that Gramps gave up smoking for her, but wouldn't do it for his wife, even though she was dying of cancer.

Although Dad once confided in me behind Mom's back that Grandma was kind of a battle axe, which was why Mom spent so much time reading as a kid. She needed to get away from her mother's constant harping and criticism.

Still, even if your mom was a total beeyotch, you don't want to hear your dad going around calling some other woman the girl of his dreams, as Gramps often calls Kitty.

What this town needs is a rec center for you kids, Mom went on, so you don't have to spend your Saturday nights cruising up and down Main Street, or sitting on that wall, or lying on that hill, with all the chiggers. If Gramps really wanted to be a philanthropist, that's what he'd have built, not a planetarium.

Observatory, I corrected her. And I get what you're

saying. But are you and Dad really not coming to the wedding?

Gramps's wedding to Kitty is going to be the event of the year half the town has been invited, and Grandpa already confided it's costing him fifty thousand dollars. But he says it's totally worth it since he's marrying the girl of his dreams.

Except of course, every time he says this, my mom's lips get all small. Kitty Hollenbach never gave him the time of day before, I once overheard Mom complaining to my dad. Now he's a millionaire, and suddenly she's all over him like sweat on a horse.

Which isn't a very nice description of Kitty, who is actually a very cool lady who always orders Manhattans when Grandpa takes her and me and Jason out for dinner at the country club. Grandma, from what I understand, thought it was a sin to drink alcohol of any kind, and frequently told Grandpa, who is not what you'd call a teetotaler, so. We'll see, was what mom said in answer to my question about her going to the wedding.

I know what we'll see means, though. Around my family, it means no way on God's green earth in this case, no way is Mom coming to her dad's wedding. I guess I can see why she's so mad. It really hurts small, locally-owned businesses when places like Super Sav-Mart--which sell the same products for much less, and all conveniently located under one roof--move into town.

On the other hand, Super Sav-Mart's going to need someone to manage the book section of the new store, and who better than my mom?

Except that Mom says she'd rather eat her own young than don a red Super Sav-Mart apron.

Well, good night, honey, Mom said, getting up from my bed with an effort, and waddling to the door.

See you in the morning.

See you, I said.

I didn't say what I wanted to, which was, If you just asked Grandpa for the money to expand the store into the Hoosier Sweet Shoppe, which has closed down, so we can have a cafe, which is exactly what Courthouse Books needs to blow Super Sav-Mart

out of the water, he'd give it to you. And then you wouldn't need to worry about having to wear that red apron.

Because I know if she took the money, she'd feel like she had to be nice to Kitty.

And that would just about kill her.

Wait! Your hair and wardrobe may be perfect, but your makeover's not complete without this:

The one thing you can wear this or any season that's always going to be in style and look great is confidence.

Having confidence in yourself is the one accessory no one can afford to leave at home.

People are naturally drawn to leaders, and leaders are those who have confidence in themselves.

Monday, August 28, 9AM

D-Day

Good morning, Crazyt What happened to you? is what Jason said, when I climbed into the backseat of The B this morning.

Nothing, I said, innocently, as I closed the door. We'd moved on from the 1977 compilation mixed CD, I realized immediately, when the sounds of the Rolling Stones assailed me. Why? Is something wrong?

What happened to your hair? Jason wanted to know. He actually turned around in his seat, as opposed to just looking at my reflection in the rear view mirror.

Oh, this? I pulled on my bangs, to make sure they were hanging sexily in front of one eye, the way Christoffe had meant them to. They were. I just used a flat iron, is all.

I think it looks nice, Becca said, indignantly, from the front passenger seat.

Thank you, Becca, I said.

Jason was still twisted around, staring at me, as Mick Jagger bemoaned the fact that he couldn't get

any satisfaction.

What kind of SOCKS are those? Jason demanded. Thigh-highs, I explained, patiently.

Although inside, I was wondering if I'd made a mistake. All the teen magazines had insisted sheer thigh-highs were THE must have for fall.

But judging from Jason's face, I might just as well have been wearing clown shoes.

I think they look nice, Becca said, from the front seat.

Is your skirt short enough? Jason asked me, looking strangely red in the face. Especially since my skirt was strictly mini, not micro-mini. I wondered if maybe Jason's mom had made him eat hot oatmeal for breakfast. It always upsets him when she does this, something she tries on the first day of school every year. She puts raisins in it, too. Nothing disconcerts Jason more than raisins, who had an unpleasant experience involving one and his right nostril when he was three.

That's the style, I said, shrugging.

Since when do you care what's in style? Jason

practically shouted.

Wow, thanks a lot, I said, pretending to be offended. I didn't mean to try to look nice for the first day of school, or anything.

I think she looks great, Becca said.

But Jason wasn't falling for it.

What is this about, Crazytop? he asked, as he put the car in gear. What's the plan?

There's no plan, I insisted. And you can't call me Crazytop anymore, since my hair isn't curly right now.

I'll call you Crazytop anytime I damn well want to, Jason said, crankily. Now what's the deal?

No matter how much I assured him that there was no deal (even though, of course, there very much was one), Jason didn't believe me.

And when we pulled into the student parking lot at school, right behind a certain red convertible, and watched as Lauren Moffat emerged from it, Jason seemed to reach a boiling point.

She's wearing those same socks! he cried

fortunately while we were still inside the car, so

Lauren didn't hear him.

I looked and saw with some relief that the teen magazines had been right sheer thigh-highs were in. At least, they were if Lauren Moffat was wearing them.

Only Lauren's thigh-highs, unlike mine, which were navy blue, were white.

This was a blatant violation of one of The Book's strictest fashion mandates, which is that white stockingseven sheer ones are fine only if you're a nurse, since pale colors have a tendency to make legs look larger than they actually are.

It was true, I saw, as Lauren, her cell phone glued to her ear, hurried across the parking lot. Her normally shapely legs looked big as an elephant's. Well, more or less.

What is the world coming to? Jason wanted to know, as we dragged ourselves to Bloomville High's back entrance (our first time using it, since in years previous, we'd been dropped off in front of the building by our bus). When Steph Landry and Lauren Moffat are dressing alike?

We're hardly dressed alike, I pointed out, pulling on the door handle. I mean, she's wearing a micro-mini, and mine's just—

But I didn't get a chance to finish, since my words were immediately swallowed up by the din that greeted us inside the school. Combination dials spun. Locker doors slammed. Girls who hadn't seen each other since school ended last spring let out piercing shrieks and hugged one another. Guys high-fived other guys. Teachers stood in the doorways to their classrooms, clutching steaming mugs of coffee and gossiping with other teachers. Vice-Principal Maura Wampler or Swampy Wampler, as she was commonly referred to—was standing in front of the administrative offices, fruitlessly yelling for people to Get to your homeroom! Get to your homeroom before the late bell! You don't want a detention your first day, do you, people?

Sit by you at the welcome back convocation? Becca screamed at me above the chaos.

See you then, I screamed back.

I'm not through with you, Crazytop, Jason assured me, as he reached his locker, and I had to keep going in order to get to mine. Something's up with you, and I'm going to find out what it is!

I couldn't help laughing at that one. Good luck, I called to him, and hurried on without him.

As I got closer to my locker, things seemed to get quieter. Which is actually impossible, because my locker happens to be located at a point in the school where two main hallways intersect. There's a girls bathroom AND a drinking fountain next to my locker, not to mention the doors leading downstairs to the cafeteria. Normally, this is the loudest corner of the school.

But today, for some reason, the hall seemed strangely hushed as I walked down it. And not, as I would have liked to think, because I looked so stunning in my new wardrobe and haircut, everyone was shocked into silence, like when Drew Barrymore showed up at the ball in her angel outfit in the movie *Ever After*.

Actually, it was probably just as loud as usual.

Things just SEEMED like they got quieter.

And that's because Mark Finley had entered my line of vision.

Mark's locker is across the hall from mine. He was standing there, talking to some of the other guys from the football team, as I walked by. In his purple and white jersey, he looked tanned and rested, his light brown hair bleached gold in a few places from all the time he'd spent out at the lake this past summer. Even his hazel eyes seemed brighter against the sun-darkened skin of his cheeks.

I, of course, couldn't take my eyes off him. Well, what girl could?

And with that kind of vision standing in front of me, was it really any wonder that I failed to notice that Lauren Moffat and her fellow Dark Ladies of the Sith, Alyssa Krueger and Bebe Johnson, were standing by the drinking fountain, staring at me?

What, Lauren asked, her gaze going from the top of my insouciant, gaminisque head, to the round-toes of my platform Mary Janes, are YOU supposed to be?

Fortunately just last night I read the section of *The Book* revolving around jealousy, so I knew just what to do.

Oh, hi, Lauren, I said, plastering a sunny smile on my face. Did you have a nice summer?

Lauren looked incredulously from Alyssa to Bebe, then back at me.

Excuse me? she said.

Your summer. I hoped they couldn't see how badly my fingers were shaking as I twisted the combination to my locker. How was it? Good, I hope. Did your mom like the books?

Lauren's jaw dropped. I could tell I'd thrown her. See, most of our previous interactions since the Super Big Gulp incident, anyway had been like the one we'd had on Saturday night. Lauren says something mean to me, and I respond by saying nothing.

The fact that this time I was responding and in a manner that made it clear I refused to let her bait me had her gears shifting into overdrive.

I certainly hope so, I said.

Lauren's blue-glazed eyelids narrowed. What? she asked, sounding irritated.

That your mom enjoyed the books she bought from our store, I said.

At that moment thank GOD the bell rang. I slammed my locker door shut, shouldered my new designer bag, and said, Well, see you at the convo, and hurried down the hall.

right past Mark Finley.

Who, I couldn't help noticing, had been looking in my direction, either because he'd noticed my interaction with his girlfriend, or even though I knew this was too much to hope for. Still, The Book said optimism is crucial for any successful social venture he was taking in my sheer thigh-highs.

Either way, our gazes met as I hurried by.

I smiled, and said, Hi, Mark. Hope you had a good summer.

They were the first words I'd ever spoken to Mark Finley in my life.

And I think they had the desired effect. Because as

I breezed past him, I heard him go, Who was that?
and heard Lauren hiss, That was Steph Landry, you
retard.

Oh, yeah. I'd pulled a Steph, all right.

And for the first time in my life, I felt GREAT
about it.