

1.

“This is the craziest idea you ever had,” said Natalya.

“My idea?” My heart was racing. “What are you talking about? It was your idea.”

“Fine. Our idea. Do you think we’ll get caught?”

“Don’t be a baby. Nobody can trace us.”

“And it’s not like we’re even breaking the law,” Natalya added. “Right?”

“Right. We’re not doing anything illegal.”

But we were about to do something—although tonight had started like every other Saturday at the Zawadski house. First a sit-down dinner of heated debates while the meatloaf got cold, followed by Natalya and me whipping up a pan of Duncan Hines milk chocolate brownies, then stuffing our faces with warm brownies à la mode while watching back-to-back-to-back episodes of *Island of the Undead* on Syfy channel.

The third episode was about a zombie who collected the bodies of her victims. That’s when we decided to do it—to make Elizabeth, our own Facebook zombie. A girl who’d lure in all the guys we’d never dare approach for real.

“Only we won’t kill them,” Tal said. “Unless, of course, they deserve it.”

The whole thing was a joke. Or a dare wrapped in a joke, but with each layer we added to Elizabeth’s profile, she became more human.

Comment [pu1]: p. 58 Raye talks about warm democracy of their family dinners—so reword this saying it’s a lively family dinner where everyone’s talking and laughing?

Now it was past midnight. Natalya's house was dark except for the glow of her laptop in her bedroom. The casts of *Lost*, *Star Trek*, and *Battlestar Galactica* stared down on us from their posters as we made our last touches to Elizabeth. From her nationality (Krakow, Poland) to her school (a freshman at Moore College of Art, in Philadelphia) to her picks and preferences.

Slowly, Elizabeth breathed life. She liked Coldplay and Anne Hathaway and Van Gogh and shrimp scampi. She missed her kid brothers Boris and Drugi who lived in Poland—and we'd even found stock images of two bowl-cut grade-school boys to stick in her photo album. We'd set up her email from Natalya's mom's Yahoo account that she checked about twice a year. The final task was to upload her profile photo, which was why we were browsing www.nulookmodels.net.

"Elizabeth needs to be cute," I said, "so that guys sit up and pant."

"But not too cute or they'll think she's a lie." Natalya clicked through images like a Hollywood casting agent. You could never tell what sort of random project might catch Natalya's interest, but this one had. "Girl-next-door pretty. Like how you could look, Raye, if you weren't always rocking the double ex-el sweatshirt." She paused. "Hey, what if I snapped a—"

"—that would be a no." I yanked up the neck of my sweatshirt so it hid my face. "Don't even think about it."

"Why not? It's not like any prime MacArthur guy would recognize you."

I peeked out. "Thanks." But I knew what she meant.

Socially, we were both pretty much invisible, though Tal did stake one claim to fame as the older sister of Thomas Zawadski, MacArthur Hall's varsity-letter freshman, All-American lacrosse goalie, and unofficial Duncan Hines milk chocolate brownie pig.

"How about her?" I pointed. Heart-shaped face and skinny black tank.

Natalya nodded. "And she even kinda looks like you."

We watched in silence as her photograph uploaded.

"It probably *is* illegal to borrow someone else's face," murmured Natalya. "This whole thing is insane." But I could tell she was enjoying herself.

"Insanely cool, maybe."

"Whatever. Okay. Now for the personal message." Natalya rubbed her hands together. "Here we go. 'Hello, I am Coach Fernier's niece and just came to this country for art school. Want to please to make some American friends?'"

"That's good. Now. Who're we friending?"

"Who's on your wish list?"

"I guess anyone the Group dies for. The best guys. Chapin Gilbert and Julian Kilgarry and Frank Senai." My cheeks burned to say their names.

Natalya nodded, but she was chewing the edge of her pinkie. We'd raised the ante and we weren't going back. "So we'll start with them. Nobody'll deny Coach Fernier. Thomas says he walks on water. And then we'll mix it up with some of Nicola's friends, for authenticity. Nic won't care." Nicola was Natalya's cousin, who really did go to Moore College of Art.

“Sounds good.” My heart was still pounding. Elizabeth Lavenzck thrilled me. She was us but not us, she was real and a lie, and soon she’d be friends with guys we’d only dreamed of talking to. “This is more fun than I’d thought.”

“Uh-huh.” Though Tal didn’t sound convinced. “But Raye, what are we going to do with her? If she works?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered honestly. I really couldn’t think about it past this point. Now I stared into Elizabeth’s heart-shaped face, her Mona Lisa smile. The options seemed endless. “First let’s see who we can get.” ||

Comment [pu2]: Nice opening!

2.

If your spring sport at Fulton wasn't tennis or lacrosse or crew, then you took Health & Fitness. This was not cool. It could have been inked into the school ledger: *any student participating in Health & Fitness is hereby decreed, for the duration of this scheduled activity, kind of a Loser.*

But Health & Fitness was no joke. You could get suspended for blowing off the timed bar hangs or fencing parries or whatever was on the menu three afternoons a week in the north gym. Almost worse than taking H&F was the H&F uniform: blue nylon short-shorts and a maroon T-shirt with our antiquated class mascot—"Hooter," the Snowy owl—cupped unironically over the left boob.

Non-athletic Natalya and I put out a major effort to keep a low H&F profile, so when Tal's shorts' elastic snapped right in the middle of kickboxing that following Thursday, she panicked.

"S.O.S. and Coach says you can come with," she whisper-yelled as she jogged up, her hands cinched at her waist. "I don't want to run around dealing with this alone." *In my lameass H&F uniform*, she meant.

My turn at boxing had made me really sweaty, and I was conscious of my shiny face and the wet circles under my armpits as we swung past the Administration desk for safety pins before bolting to the locker room. All my friends at my old school had joked

Comment [pu3]: Too many teachers/names to keep track of—lose ones we don't need.

that I wouldn't care how bad I looked in a school of just girls, but that had turned out not to be true. Girls looked and judged, same as guys. Usually worse.

"If I pin on each side and one in the back, I think I'm okay." Tal sighed. "Hey, are you still coming over this weekend?" she asked. "We can update Elizabeth."

"Yeah, sure." Although the Elizabeth experience had been sort of a dud. Every guy we'd asked had accepted, even Tal's crush, Tim Wyatt, who was captain of MacArthur's debate team. But everyone had declined to answer more than a few words.

I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but I know I'd been hoping for better.

"Hang on. Now that I'm pinned in, I need to pee." Tal ducked into a stall. "Stay?"

I dropped on the bench outside the showers. A few more minutes sweating in my Hooter uniform wouldn't kill me.

Then the Group barged in, and I thought maybe it would.

Lindy Limon, Faulkner—named for her famous relative—George, Ella Rose Parker, Alison Sonenshine, and Jeffrey Makinopolis. Not a single girl from my old school came close to the Group's fabulous factor. As a unit, they were terrifying. ||

Comment [pu4]: Nice!

I stared down at my wristwatch, noting every aspect of it, as they stripped off their lacrosse uniforms while discussing a party Lindy might be throwing on Saturday.

Alison, the Loud one, was dominating the conversation as she turned to Ella. "Get past it. If he comes, so what? Him and Mia McCord have been hooking up since in kindergarten."

Comment [pu5]: (p. 28)

"Are you still talking about Jay-Kay?" asked Faulkner. She was the Sweet one of the Group, the only one with classroom crossover appeal—example, she was our class president.

Jay-Kay was Julian Kilgarry, new VIP friend to Elizabeth Lavenzck. Though I'd never met him personally, girls gave his name when they wanted an extreme. As in, "The lead singer was amazing, like an older Jay-Kay." Or "He was a hottie, but not *Kilgarry* hot." My one sighting was last fall, when Natalya pointed him out at MacArthur's Homecoming game. In a word: drool-worthy. Iron jaw, inky Irish curls, and eyes the precise color of a June sky at sunset. In the last picture I'd ever taken of my mom, framed next to my bed so I can see it every day, that same blue is diffused behind her.

After Homecoming, I'd become temporarily obsessed, clicking Julian's View My Complete Profile on Facebook several times a week to see what he'd updated. I knew all his passions (lacrosse, chess, journalism) seen all his pictures and tags, and read every line of text he'd ever thought to post.

"Kilgarry's like the king of hit it and quit it." This from Lindy, the Ditzzy one, the Party Girl, who never said anything unless it was a cliché.

"Oh, like you know," said Ella, the Beautiful and Quirky one, which also made her the Scariest, in my book. Or at least, I wasn't as used to her peculiar habits as the rest of the class. For example:

1. on the first Monday of every month, Ella baked cookies for both sections of homeroom.
2. she owned at least a dozen paper-thin kid leather gloves, in an array of rainbow colors, that she wore to protect her hands from the sun.
3. she always claimed the third desk in the third row of every classroom she ever sat in. And apparently, she always had.

While Ella's oddness seemed as natural to her as her long legs and gold link charm bracelet, I also knew that the real reason she got away with it was because she was so beautiful. You can't be that strange unless you're that gorgeous.

Now Jeffrey—the Gazelle, tall and skinny, who was signed with a New York modeling agency—gave Ella a long blink, as if she didn't get it. "Then why'd you ask him to Alison's?"

"Because he'd dropped so many hints," Ella answered. "It was more that he asked me to ask him."

"Convenient." Alison snorted. "Since you worship him."

Ella, now wrapped in a towel and on the way to the shower, had stopped to thumb through her cell messages. Suddenly she raised her phone and snapped a picture of their mirrored reflection. "So you claim."

"Looze!" Faulkner squealed. "I hate having my picture taken. You *know* that."

Ella clicked again. "Why? Because you're secretly revolting?"

"Because I'm in a towel, for one. Dumbass."

"One more," said Ella. "I always end on odd numbers. It's my thing. You *know* that, Useless." Mimicking Faulkner as she clicked in her face. Mean nicknames was another Group trademark: Tard, Donut, Zero, Looza, Useless, Dumbass, Lardass, Dali Lardass. And if what Natalya said was true, the Group had secret nicknames for everyone.

"I know mine, but only because I've been here since kindergarten. I'm Zaweirdski and the Wad and Nub," she'd once confessed. "One day I'll tell you more about that last

one.” She’d looked slightly embarrassed. “You’re something, too. Whatever it is, that’s the only thing they call you. Don’t worry, though. You’ll never find out.”

Tal was right. To our faces, the Group was very polite.

“Did you hear Julian’s father’s car dealership is kaput?” Lindy broadcast, as I rapped on the door for Tal to hurry. I knew she was holed up on purpose, hoping to wait them out. So unfair. It was a hundred times more awkward to be here on the outside than safe in a stall. “Kilgarry Saab. Tragic. I hear they’re totally poor.”

“That’s a tacky rumor,” said Ella with chilly authority. “And you should shut up, Looze. People are listening.”

Instant silence.

Ella meant me. I was “people.” So I hadn’t been invisible to Ella. She knew I’d been eavesdropping.

I looked away, but when I looked back, she was staring right at me. My pulse points jumped. I’d never looked Ella Parker in the eyes, which were white-gray, almost a non-color.

Her phone was poised. She snapped. I flinched. She smiled, an uptick at the edges of her mouth. Like we were in on something together. It was a moment that felt as important as a kiss or a secret.

Then it was over. As Ella pocketed the phone and brushed past me toward the showers. Nearly bumping into Natalya, all pinned up and making a break for it.

3.

My moment with Ella Parker wouldn't have meant anything if Filthcrack hadn't humiliated her the next afternoon.

But he did, which set the stage for everything that came after.

Filthcrack taught us Mandarin Chinese, and while I was in the honors section and Ella was in regular section, both sections joined up on Friday afternoons for fifty tedious minutes of “conversation.” With his lizard hips and pompadour, Filthcrack might have been greasily handsome back in the day, and he still thought he had some middle-aged game—you could tell by how he sauntered around the halls.

Comment [pu6]: Too much—delete.

Comment [pu7]: tighten

For the first few minutes, conversation was going okay. Beebee Bidell was leading it, explaining how she'd gone to the market and picked out a bag of rice and saffron and crab and put everything into her basket.

We'd all been chiming in with our simple syntax questions, and then Ella Parker asked, “Was the market very noisy, or very penis?”

Filthcrack, who'd been leaning back against his desk, snorted. Ella'd said *ying jing* instead of *an jing*. In Mandarin, the words for quiet and penis are almost identical.

But nobody else in the class got it, and I felt somewhat creepy-geeky that I did. It had been a trend in my old school to learn all the dirty words in Chinese, and then to use them liberally—preferably in front of our clueless parents.

“Miss Parker,” said Filth, in English and smirking, “you are confusing a noun and an adjective. Try again.”

“Was it penis in the market?” Ella asked politely.

Now Filth laughed outright. Beebee had typed the word into her Macbook. “Ew, Ella, careful,” she warned. “Ying jing means dick.”

The class exploded. Expressionless, Ella stood and removed her petal pink gloves, slapping them five times into the palm of her hand. She always did things like that. Little touches and taps and knocks.

In the next second, she was out of there.

“Mr. Phillstack, can I follow her?” Beebee wasn’t in the Group, but she was captain of the varsity field hockey, which made her Ella’s closest contact, status-wise.

“Why? So you two can jabber in the bathroom until end bell? Don’t think so.” Filth pointed. “Raye Archer. Go retrieve Ella.”

Me, because I was least likely to jabber with Ella? But I went. Checking a few places along the way—library lounge, soda pit, bathrooms, cafeteria. Ella had a thing for the cafeteria’s kitchen, I’d seen her zip in there for the Clorox spray to wipe down her table before eating at it, and sometimes to wash her hands under the high-pressure sink faucet.

That’s where I found her. Sudsing away.

“Filth told me to get you.”

“He’s such an ass. Laughing at me.”

“I guess he thought it was funny.”

“Let’s see if that old fart’s still jolly when I get him fired. Set his screensaver to porn or something.” She turned off the taps and wiped her hands carefully. Up, down, up on a dishtowel. “He’s out for me. My last test looked like his pen had hemorrhaged red ink.”

“Everyone knows Filth’s an idiot. Honestly? I could teach you better with one arm tied behind my back,” I said on impulse.

Her answering stare flattened me. “Doubt it.”

“Well, okay, if Chinese isn’t your thing,” I continued quickly, “then what about Spanish? It’s way less—”

“Because my parents think I need it for college,” Ella snapped. “Even though I told them nobody else is taking it. They don’t get it’s like the hardest language invented.”

Nobody else. She didn’t even hear how insulting that was. I decided to ignore it. “Yeah, the tonal stresses are tough for me.”

“Oh, shut up. You’re the Sophie Fulton-Glass Scholar. You go to Fulton for free. You get straight As. You’ve got your room all picked out at Princeton, right?”

“Ha,” I answered, though it was all true. Except the room at Princeton.

“And my parents won’t let me take Spanish, they think it’s a cop-out. They both graduated Harvard, and they’re clinging to this moosick fantasy that I might go there, too. My sister’s a junior.”

What did Ella want me to say? “I understand.”

“Except my point is that you don’t.”

How had this turned into a debate? I'd completely annoyed Ella Parker, and I hadn't done a thing. But still I wanted soothe her. "There's more to smart than school smarts," I said. "And you're all over me on that."

She looked at me hard. "How?"

"People watch you. You have a way of doing things."

"What things?"

"I don't know." I stammered to explain it. "You've always got the best line." She was waiting for an example. "Last week in chorus, you told that freshman Jillian Sweeney to move it, since her bad breath was bleaching your eyebrows. The way you said it made everyone laugh." Except Jillian, who'd turned bright red.

"It did smell rank." Ella shrugged, but I sensed that she was pleased. "And I like to tell the truth."

"Exactly."

She touched a finger to the spigot. Tapped it seven times. "But I'm an incredible liar, too," she added. "You don't want to be on my bad side. I can get people to believe anything." There was something empty in her face as she told me this. A lack of ... emotion, maybe? Conscience?

"At least you've got a bad side," I said lightly. "Good people are so boring."

She smiled, that tiny uptick. That sister smile. "Are you bad, Raye?"

"Sometimes." I looked her straight in the eye. "Sometimes I'm treacherous."

She burst out laughing. If the mood had been intense, it wasn't now.

Later, I'd always think this was the moment where it started. Ella's challenge. My answer. What we'd really meant, and what we'd unleashed in each other. |

Comment [pu8]: Nice!

4.

“Okay, so Uncle Freddie sent not one, not two, but *three* installments of “Midnight Planet” from London for us on Saturday night,” Natalya informed me excitedly in homeroom at the end of the day. “If we watch them all, we’ll be as caught up as anyone in the U.K. How cool is that?”

“Oh ... great.”

“Raye, you *are* coming over tomorrow, right?” she asked a minute later. “As per usual?”

I could feel my face toasting as I swiveled my head to examine my Chemistry notes. There were times I felt a touch mortified by my friendship with Natalya. Maybe it wasn’t personal—maybe any best friendship would have been too intense for me. Last year, I’d hung in a relaxed, loosely defined group, but Fulton’s selective social circles were knit by girls who’d hit the slopes and the shore together practically since kindergarten.

Whereas Tal and I were friends because she was an outsider, and so was I. Period.

“Paging Raye for confirmation on tomorrow night?” Tal asked, louder.

“Sure, I guess,” I relented. Anyway, Dad and his girlfriend were counting on it. It went unspoken that Saturdays were their night to be free of me.

Comment [pu9]: Named on next page

Fridays had a way of making me self-conscious about everything I'd be excluded from over the weekend, but I listened in on what was happening, anyway. Not only did I now know about Lindy's party, but I'd also overheard that Sadie Nufer, a junior, was throwing one. Another group of juniors were planning to hit the midnight showing of the new Harry Potter movie at the Ritz, and some seniors wanted to check out an exclusive dance club on South Street.

Fun, fun, fun. All this activity, and I wasn't part of any of it.

At last bell, I hit the library to finish all my weekend homework assignments. It was dark by the time I got home on the late bus. Dad's girlfriend, Stacey, was in the kitchen, heating soup and blowing her nose. Usually Stacey reminded me of a spaniel—, small and playful, warm dark eyes, always happy to see you. Today, between her mangy bathrobe and bad-hair-day frizzies, she looked more like a shelter dog. "Your dad's still at the store," she told me, with a snuffle. "Tal's called the landline twice, she says she has a burning question about her Renaissance Art project. Oh, and another girl."

The name on the scratch pad read Ella Parker plus her phone number.

"This girl? Ella Parker? Called me?"

"Yip." She blew her nose. "That's what she said."

I walked upstairs. Was this a joke? But even as I envisioned the Group sniggering on the other end of the line, my fingers pressed the numbers like a trail of breadcrumbs leading to Ella's ear.

She answered on the first ring. "Let me guess, Raye's cell? Thanks for getting back." She sounded friendly. It didn't feel like a joke. "Look, can I come over tomorrow night?"

Comment [pu10] : Named here

Comment [pu11] : Do they have dogcatchers anymore? Plus everyone wears sweats.

“Come over where?”

“Your house?” Then she laughed as if I was already delighting her with my company. “Sorry. Do you have other plans?”

“Not exactly, but ...” I stared over the banister into the living room. Noooo. Ella Parker couldn’t come over to my house. Not tomorrow night or any other night. It was too shabby here, too cluttered.

“You know I live in Radnor? And you’re on North Aberdeen Avenue in Wayne, right? Actually I’m not guessing—I looked you up in the school directory. I’m only fifteen minutes and Noreen—that’s my housekeeper—said she’d drive me.”

Why? Why did she want to come here? I was delirious to know and almost too shy to ask. “Do you need something ... from me?”

“Remember you said you could teach me Chinese better than Filth? Well, I’m free tomorrow. Do you mind? I’m in major danger of failing the semester. Then we’ll do something fun, after. Promise.”

Awful as it was to think of Ella in my house, I didn’t know how to deny her. “No, I don’t mind. Come over whenever.”

“Eight-ish?”

“Eight-ish, sure.” After I clicked off, I rested the phone on my beating heart. Then I called Natalya’s. Then I hung up. Then I stared at the phone. What would I tell her? I felt horrible. Maybe I’d put it off for now. Maybe the decision would make itself.