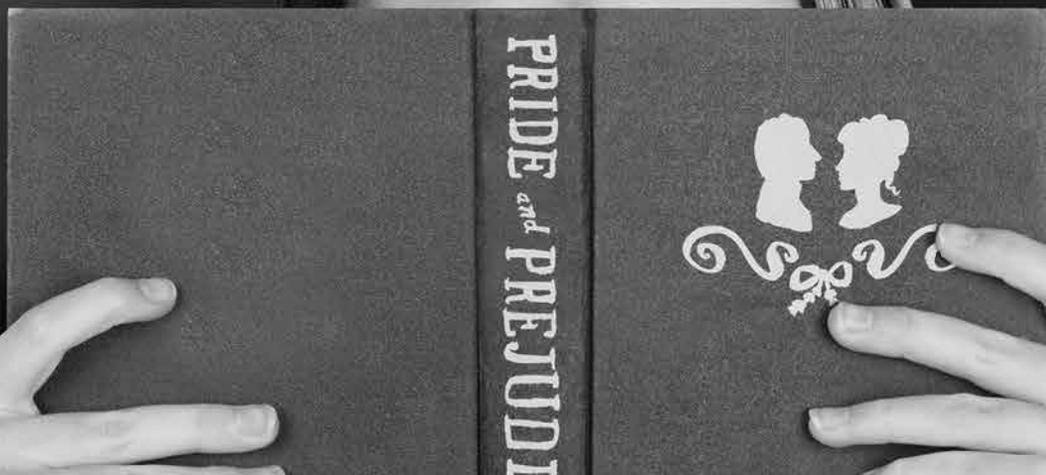


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Bookish Boyfriends



AMULET BOOKS
NEW YORK

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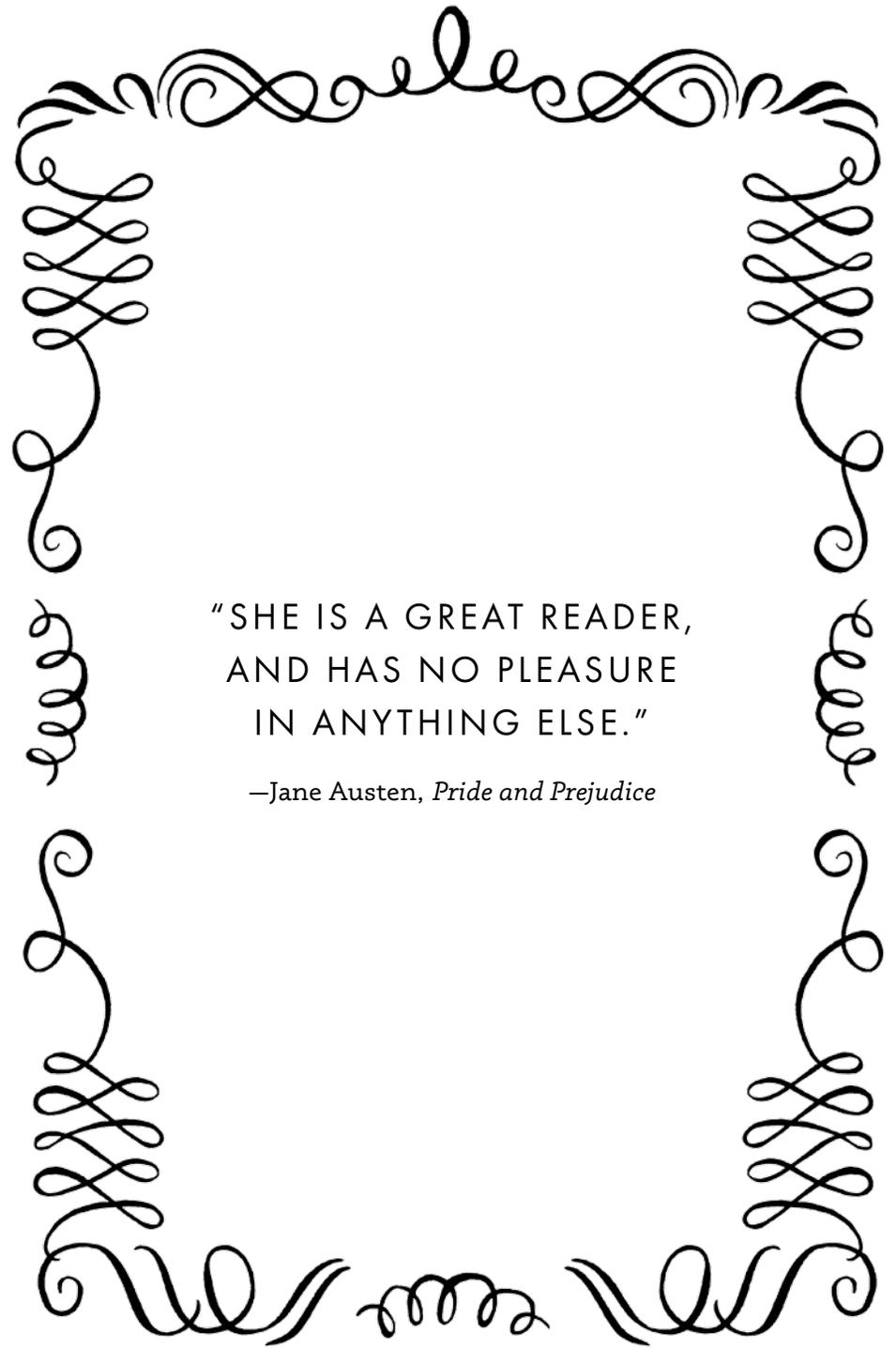
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TO MY PARENTS,
WHO TRIED TO STOP ME FROM
READING UNDER THE COVERS . . .
BUT NEVER TRIED TOO HARD.



"SHE IS A GREAT READER,
AND HAS NO PLEASURE
IN ANYTHING ELSE."

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*



Merrilee Rose Campbell, what are you doing?”
I barely heard Eliza’s question over her pounding on my bedroom door. Not that she waited for me to answer it—the door or her question. My best friend flung it open and stood in my doorway wearing her brand-new uniform and an exasperated expression. Despite her frown, she looked perfect. Her skirt and shirt were as crisp as a new book’s pages. Her blond hair gleamed in my room’s twinkle lights.

My uniform—well, if Eliza’s was a new hardcover, mine was a well-loved paperback. And my brown hair was only half dried because I’d gotten distracted—again—by the novel propped on my dresser. It was held open by my hair dryer and brush as I hopped on one foot and tugged a tall sock to my knee without taking my eyes off the page.

I offered her an apologetic shrug. “Reading.”

She stormed into my room, eyebrows and voice high. “We’re going to be late! On the first day!”

I nodded solemnly, then turned back to fiddle with the contents of my jewelry box while I gulped in the last paragraphs of chapter twenty-three.

“Merrilee!”

“I’m looking for earrings,” I said. The hero, swoon-worthy Blake, *leaned in, closing his eyes*—

“You are not! I can see you in the mirror!”

“It’s the end of a chapter!” I protested as she yanked the book away.

“Late! First day!”

“Kissing scene!”

“New school!”

If she was going to kidnap my book, I was going to retaliate. “There’s no rush. We can always catch a ride with Toby and Rory. If he drives, we’ve got an extra thirty minutes.” Nothing irritated Eliza more than my *other* best friend, Tobias May.

Her fair skin flushed prettily when she was mad—much like the heroine Blake was about to kiss. Of course, Blake’s heroine was half angel, so *she* had a reason for being that gorgeous. Eliza was just the genetics equivalent of a Megabucks winner. Most of our former classmates at our all-girls charter school would’ve killed for her eyebrows alone.

She took a deep breath and shut her eyes before answering. “I already agreed to ride with Toby and your sister for the rest of the year . . . but this is *our* tradition. Doughnut Day! So, please, can’t the kissing scene wait until later? I promise to listen to you talk all about your new book boyfriend on the walk.”

I twisted my remaining sock into a pretzel. “He’s pretty drool-inspiring. Hot, British, rich, brilliant, *and* an actor.”

“You’re not dressed or walking. I don’t want to hear about him until you’re doing *both*.”

“Compromise.” I picked up my hairbrush. “You read aloud while I get ready.”

“Fine.” She snapped the book open, and I fought the urge to clap. Eliza read better than any audiobook narrator—a fact I’d learned during last spring’s reading-on-the-treadmill concussion mishap, when I was given strict instructions for “brain rest” while in the middle of an addictive series. She read with clarity and feeling—even when her own feelings about the books were those of complete disdain. Have I mentioned she’s the *best* friend?

“Okay, here’s what you need to know—”

Eliza held up her hand. “I don’t need context. I’ll read. You dress.”

“No teasing.”

“No stalling! You have five minutes or I’m heading to the Donut Hut without you.”

“Relax,” I said. “I’ll be ready.”

I brushed my hair into a ponytail and fussed with my shirt while Eliza skimmed the page. We could wear *any* white button-down shirt, but as I toyed with the navy-and-red crossover tie that was a mandatory part of my new uniform, I started to second-guess the Peter Pan collar on mine. And the red heart-shaped buttons. “Is fifteen too old for heart-shaped buttons?” I asked, then shook my head. “Whatever. I like them. I think of my style as toddler-chic. Lots of color and sparkles are a bonus.” I turned to get Eliza’s opinion.

She lifted her eyes from the pages and gave me a scan. “It works. It’s a very you look,” she said, then turned back to the book and scowled. “I’m not reading this.” She flipped to

the next page and her eyes went wide. “I can’t believe *you* are reading this. I don’t think this scenario is possible—*she doesn’t notice she’s not breathing?* And, biologically, that’s not correct; the pupils of his eyes wouldn’t *constrict*, they’d *dilate*.” She pointed to a paragraph. “Also, the body dynamics here don’t make sense. Is Blake an alien? Because he appears to have three hands: one on her neck, one around her waist, and the third—”

“Give it back before you ruin it for me. You’re supposed to read it, not dissect it.” I tossed the book onto my bed. It landed in the mound of throw pillows I used to disguise the lumpy, unmade state of my blankets. “Anyway, how do I look? I’m still not sold on uniforms.”

“You’re good.” She paused. “But are those the socks you’re wearing?”

I crossed one leg behind the other. Purple unicorns reached halfway up my left calf, while flying pigs soared around my right. I liked them both and had no idea where their pairs were hiding. “Yes?”

Of course *she* loved the uniforms—even in a boring, no-frills white shirt, school tie, and navy skirt, she looked stunning. Without a single fleck of makeup or hair product. She was flaxen haired, long legged, hourglass-y. Her eyes were large and expressive. And paired with her dark lashes and brows, their blue “fathomless depths” “blazed” and “flashed” in all the ways novelists described. She was a romance heroine, a fairy-tale princess, a Helen of Troy. Or, as stupid Brandy Erlich at our old school had dubbed her, “Brainiac Barbie.”

It was obvious where she got her genius from, but I still

wasn’t convinced her parents hadn’t genetically engineered the biologically ideal appearance for their daughter. Except . . . beauty was the exact opposite of what they valued.

I couldn’t do beautiful, or hot, or breathtaking. My nose was too perky, slightly upturned. I had freckles—not a coat of them, but a healthy sprinkling across the bridge of my nose. My brown hair was lost somewhere between light and dark, and it was a flyaway static magnet. My gray-blue eyes were too big and my mouth was too small.

I got “cute.” I got “adorable.” I got “feisty”—which doesn’t even describe appearance. Or “pixie,” which made no sense since I was average height, or at least I would be once I hit a growth spurt. Both my sisters were five-six, and there was no way I’d let them stay taller than me—it interfered with borrowing their clothing.

But if I couldn’t be glamorous, or chic, or gorgeous, then I was certainly going to make the best of cute. If Eliza tried fighting me on my socks, she’d get to see feisty. I lifted my pointy pixie chin defiantly.

She sighed. “We don’t have time to discuss your issues with matching—but, *boots?*” She went through the beaded curtain that served as my closet door and returned with a light brown leather pair.

“I’m glad the uniform doesn’t stipulate footwear. At least my feet get to have personality.” I straightened the waist of my navy pleated skirt and zipped my calves into the boots. “Can you believe we’re going to be in classes with *boys!*? I bet the Hero High guys look amazing in uniforms. . . . Though do you think they’re still the same unromantic mouth breathers

we had in elementary school? If so, what a waste. *Someday*, I'll have my first kiss/boyfriend/love—hopefully before I'm ancient—but until then . . ." I shrugged and looked longingly at the book on my pillow. "Boys are so much better in books."

Eliza was hunting among the paperbacks and clutter on my desk, adding pens, notebooks, and the folder containing Reginald R. Hero Preparatory School sophomore schedule/orientation papers to my satchel. I'd meant to do that last night, but . . . I glanced again at the book. Black cover, the title, *Fall with Me*, in fancy script. Oh, *Blake*, you plot-tastic distraction.

"Did you hear me?" I asked.

"Yes." She held out the strap and I ducked into it. "Boys are better in books. It's your latest maxim, I know."

"*So much better*," I corrected as I grabbed a stack of bangles off my dresser and slid them onto my wrist. Eh, they clanged too much. I took them off. "Fingers crossed we find our own heroes at Hero High."

"Don't lump me in that *we*—I'm not interested. Adolescent girls involved in romantic relationships are more likely to experience depression and lowered levels of academic success." Facts her parents had drummed into her head the same way she drummed her fingers against my doorframe while I checked that my balcony door was closed and unplugged my twinkle lights.

"Ready." I tapped on the corner of the Fibonacci poster on the back of my door, shut it behind us, and started down the long hallway to the stairs. The walls were covered with photos of my two sisters and me at all ages of awkward and all

seasons of apparel. Thank goodness Mom couldn't dress Lilly, Rory, and me in matching holiday outfits anymore. Nope, now Rory, Eliza, and I would just have matching uniforms, *every single day*. Gag.

"So if you don't want *real-life* romance, you should agree with me—about boys and books." I waggled my eyebrows, but she just shook her head. "Speaking of books, do you think we'll be reading a lot of them?"

"Probably. It's private school. Parents expect to see more homework. It makes them feel like they're getting their money's worth."

"I hope our . . ." I looked over my shoulder at her and shrugged. "Syllabuses?"

"Syllabi."

"Aren't full of stupid war stories. I mean, I love a good classic—you know how I feel about *The Great Gatsby*—but why do teachers always seem to assign war books by old dudes?"

"Classics become classics for a reason." Eliza paused to straighten a photo of Mom and Dad at their twentieth anniversary party. "And usually that reason has to do with our patriarchal society and the authors being privileged white men."

"Yawn. I want it noted: if we have to read *The Catcher in the Rye* again I'm staging a protest. I'm so over Holden and his privileged ennui." I jumped down the last two stairs, my skirt blooming out like the bell cap on a mushroom.

"Noted," said Eliza with a smile. "And agree. I loathe that—"

She was interrupted by my parents rushing into the foyer. They were already in work polos because our family-owned

dog boutique opened early to catch the morning leashes and lattes power-walking crowd.

“There you are!” Mom’s lipstick was the same peach color as in all the photos in the upstairs hallway. I’m sure it had been trendy at some point in the past twenty years, but I only cared that it was as familiar as her wide smile.

“Good luck to our sophomores.” Dad tweaked my nose and grinned at Eliza, whose cheeks turned pink as she fought a smile. I loved him for making her a part of their “our,” since her parents were off at the South Pole, more interested in being the first to discover new species than in being around for first days of school. I bumped a shoulder against Eliza’s.

“You girls look so grown-up in your uniforms. Pictures? Pictures!” Mom fumbled in her pockets for her phone. When she didn’t come up with it, Dad brought out his own and snapped a pic.

“Say *cheeseboogers*,” he said, undermining her statement about growing up. He grinned at the photo on his screen, which was probably a super-flattering shot of me giggle-snorting. “It’s nice to know that even though you’re a high school sophomore, you’ll always be the little girl who laughs at her ol’ dad’s jokes.”

“Emphasis on *little*,” said my younger sister, Rory. She was slumped at the kitchen table eating some sort of sticks-and-dirt healthy cereal with her eyes half shut.

Mom turned and gave my sister a stern, full-name warning. “*Aurora*.” Then Mom and Eliza said in unison, “Ignore her.”

“I will,” I said, but couldn’t resist muttering, “I *do*, as often as possible.”

Rory’s eyes narrowed. “There’s something wrong with you two. No doughnut is worth getting up earlier and walking.”

I rolled my eyes. “Good thing you’re not invited, then.”

Rory turned back toward her cereal, unsuccessfully hiding her smug smile and pink cheeks. “When I’m sitting in Toby’s car enjoying air-conditioning and someone who knows where we’re going, I’ll try not to feel jealous.”

Now Eliza was the one rolling her eyes. It was her automatic reaction to Toby’s name. Rory’s was blushing.

“Now, girls . . .” said Mom. She sighed and clasped her hands together, pressing them against her chest. “You know, I met your father in high school. First day.”

Rory mumbled, “We *know*.” But I loved that story, so I nodded.

She kissed my cheek. “Maybe you girls will meet *your* special someones at Hero High.”

I raised my eyebrows at Eliza as Dad added his kisses to both our cheeks. *See! I come by my sappiness genetically*. Eliza knew my family well enough to interpret the sentiment in a single glance.

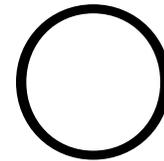
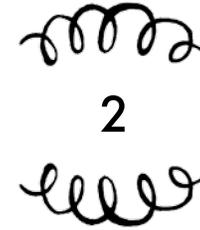
“Good-bye, Mr. and Mrs. Campbell.” She grabbed my arm and I let her drag me away, stopping only to give my dog, Gatsby, a kiss on his adorable muttsy nose. Outside on the sidewalk, I took a deep breath. Eliza groaned and gave a pointed look at her watch, but I stayed still, looking from my house to Toby’s next door to the road that led in one direction toward our old school and in the other toward our new one. Counting two years of preschool and kindergarten, this was my thirteenth first day of school.

The number felt a little ominous.

“Ready for Hero High?” Eliza asked, her eyes already focused down the sidewalk like she was picturing the state-of-the-art bio labs that awaited us on the other side of doughnuts.

Ready? To be the new girl in an unfamiliar school where boys and the potential for humiliation waited around every picturesque corner? Not really.

I slid my satchel higher on my shoulder and lifted my chin. “Please,” I said with a wink. “Hero High should be asking if it’s ready for me.”



nce we’d braved the lines at the Donut Hut and started walking toward our new school, Eliza looked at her watch and visibly relaxed.

“Told you we had time.” I licked powdered sugar from the corner of my lips, savoring it and the rare experience of being the one who was right.

She took a delicate bite of her cinnamon doughnut. “I like being punctual.”

Mine was a not-so-delicate bite, and I jumped backward as jelly filling shot out the other side. Luckily, it missed my uniform and landed only on my boot.

Eliza handed me a napkin and I knelt to wipe at the Ohio-shaped spot on my toe. Hopefully Mom or Google knew jelly-on-suede stain removal tricks, because now that I’d thought about it, the boots actually belonged to my older sister, Lillian.

I stared at the stain as every glossy photo from the school’s website shuffled through my memory. Would I find a place among the smiling clusters on the benches or in the labs? I wanted one, oh, how I wanted one. But. Those students were as crisp as kale . . . and I wore jelly as a boot accessory.

Eliza pulled me up. “Stop rubbing it. That’s making it worse.”

I stretched the fingers of my non-doughnut hand wide, like I was reaching for something I couldn’t grasp. This wasn’t just about the boot. “You know that shimmy you get in your stomach and throat when you listen to Disney movie soundtracks? And you feel like you can do more—*be* more? That you should want to see how far you can go?”

Eliza paused and considered this. “Yearning?”

“Yeah, that’s probably it.” I fit the word in the Mad Libs of emotions in my brain. It clicked. “But I don’t know what I’m yearning *for*.” I opened and closed my hand, but it was still empty, whatever I needed elusive. “I want to spin on a mountaintop, or in a blizzard, or under the sea, or on a boat. I want a purpose. I want *so much more than this suburban life*.”

Eliza smiled and ducked the arms I’d flung outward. “It’s a little too early for improv show tunes.”

I smiled back, but weakly. “You have science. Lilly has her wedding and law school applications. Rory has her art. I want . . . something that’s mine. Something I’m good at. I *need* something. I hope I find it here.”

I started down the sidewalk, because technically *here* was still two blocks away. “This is a fresh start. I no longer have to be known as the girl who still believed in Santa in the fifth grade. Or the one sent to the nurse because she couldn’t stop crying over *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Or—who could forget the super-fun first week when I couldn’t find my gym locker, and I had to wear my sweaty clothes to class? Can I just not be *that* person?”

I wasn’t a fan of Lilly’s future mother-in-law, but I was grateful for her insistence that Rory and I switch from the charter school we’d attended since sixth grade to this “much more prestigious” private school.

“I promise to remember where your locker is,” said Eliza. “And I called to confirm that our schedules are identical.”

“Thank you.” Bless this girl for transferring schools with me and Eliza’ing her way into matching schedules. Of course her parents had *always* wanted her to go to Hero High and had only begrudgingly settled on Woodcreek Charter School for Girls because of studies about the benefits of an all-girls’ educational environment on confidence and achievement. *But*, as they’d been happy to point out, those advantages weren’t significant enough to make up for a lack of lab facilities, AP classes, or International Baccalaureate programmes—all of which Reginald R. Hero Preparatory School had in spades. This was a rare moment when my parents’ lack of finances and Eliza’s stubborn refusal to go without me were finally not obstacles in the Gordon-Ferguses’ plans. So, if I was blessing things, I should include the financial aid and scholarship committees.

Eliza looked mournfully at her last bite of doughnut before popping it in her mouth and chewing slowly. She swallowed and asked, “May I make a suggestion?”

I gave her some serious side-eye, but her poker face was inscrutable. “Maybe.”

She began, “You know you’re my favorite human on the planet—”

I interrupted to add, “And Gatsby is your favorite canine.”

She laughed. “Sure.” Then she continued, “And I love your fearless optimism and imagination. But . . . maybe don’t spend the whole day starry-eyed. I know you’re excited about going coed and don’t intentionally get so lost in your thoughts—but at least on the first day, try to focus on what people *actually* say—not the narratives you’re inventing for them.”

I dragged the toe of my boot along the pavement—then winced when it added a scuff to the stain. There was no way I could return these without facing capital punishment from Lilly. I’d have to bury them in the back of my closet with her pink blouse (blueberry pie) and Rory’s white skirt (impromptu Slip ‘N Slide—though to be fair, Toby had dared me).

Eliza cleared her throat and I blinked, realizing I owed her an answer. “Oh. I *do* try.”

She laughed. “You know what? Be you. If they don’t adore you, that’s their problem. And we’ll try every club until we figure out what you’re yearning for. Now, what about me?”

Because that was the thing about Eliza—she gave lots of advice, but she also asked for my opinion and listened.

“Try not to be so sensitive if your parents come up.” Since she was nodding and receptive, I added, “And be nicer to Toby.”

Eliza scowled. “I can’t believe we’re going to have to see him every single day.”

He lived next door. I already saw him every day, but I didn’t remind her. I also didn’t say, *You need to learn to share me*, because I’d said it—and they’d ignored it—a gazillion times.

“We’re here.” My stomach tightened as the long driveway to Hero High loomed large across the street. I dropped

the last piece of my doughnut back into the bag and stared at the stone arch and, beyond that, a campus that looked much too perfect and pristine for someone with scuffed and jelly-spotted boots, someone who frequently got grass stains by just looking at lawns and who hadn’t yet managed to wear tights for an entire day without snagging them. Someone who occasionally still forgot to raise her hand and blurted out the answer in math class before the teacher finished explaining the problem.

I took a deep breath and a moment to absorb the beauty of the campus—*my* new campus. There was a double row of trees that arched over the drive leading to the stone mansions where classes were held. The grass was Technicolor green and so temptingly lush that I wanted to climb the gentle slope off to our left and roll down it.

Okay, so maybe there was a reason I was prone to grass stains.

“Ohhh, who’s that under the maples?” I pointed across the drive to a guy pacing beneath the row of trees. It reminded me of a scene from a book—I just couldn’t remember which one.

“Those are sycamores,” said Eliza. “And the only male I know here is Toby, so your guess is as good as mine.”

I studied the way the mystery student’s head was bent. Sunlight and shadows played across the black curls that spilled around his ears. “Does he look upset? Do you think we should—” I stepped off the path in his direction, but Eliza grabbed my arm.

“No, I don’t think you should bother the brooding boy

who's *choosing* to be by himself. He's a stranger, not a stray puppy."

But he was so *alone* beneath the trees. So alone and so picturesque with his dark pants and white shirt against the green backdrop and dappled shade. His tie wasn't fastened, just draped around his collar, and his sleeves were rolled up. A blazer was slung over a book bag at the base of a tree. The guy's face was hidden by the angle and those touch-me curls, so I couldn't see if his expression was as emotional as his posture and pacing, but I could practically hear his sighs as he clenched and unclenched a fist in time with his footsteps. It was something right off the pages of a half dozen romance novels. Only it was happening, real, live, right in front of me.

Color me emo-intrigued.

School with boys was awesome.

"Earth to Merri." Eliza shook my arm.

"He's so *mysterious*."

"You can't solve all the school's mysteries on your first day." Eliza spun me back in the right direction. "Today, let's focus on the mystery of locating our classes. He's probably just angsty about summer being over."

"I doubt it. Today's Friday. Who gets *that* moody about one day of classes? Though maybe his weekend plans are as exciting as mine." I wagged one finger in faux enthusiasm. "It's finally here—Lilly and Trent's engagement party is tonight."

I'd never understand what Lilly saw in Trent—what anyone did. Sure, he was handsome, in an entirely generic soap opera actor way. But before he'd put a ring on it—*it* being my sister's finger—he'd been on a list of the state's most eligible

bachelors. Everything about Lilly's relationship and fiancé were yawn-inducing. The party would be a total snoozefest, too—full of his mom's politics and fussy food. Gah, neither the election nor the wedding could come fast enough.

I let Eliza drag me farther down the path but glanced over my shoulder. The boy was leaning against a tree. Not *back* against it. He was facing it, one palm pressed flat against the trunk as he bowed his head, the other hand fisted tightly by his side. He was so broody and so mysterious. The broodiest boys in books were also the ones who made my heart *c'thunk*, and this guy was a Brontë hero: Heathcliff and Rochester combined. The mysterious ones brought out my inner sleuth—and this guy made me want to dig up Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie.

I wished he would look up so I could offer an encouraging smile or a friendly wave. Heck, if Eliza wouldn't have killed me for even thinking it, I would have given him a cheer-up hug. Since I couldn't, really, *shouldn't*—Stranger Hugger was *not* the reputation I wanted at Hero High—I just gave him one last look and vowed that as soon as possible, I'd solve his mystery.