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The official autobiography of Hilary Laura Boles (Original writing, Novel).

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THE OFFICIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HILARY LAURA BOLES

by

Marnie Lamb

**A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
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1999

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The Official Autobiography of Hilary Laura Boles

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Prologue

Dear Whoever,

I guess that seems like a rude way to begin a book, but the truth is, I don't know who's going to read what I'm writing. You—whoever's reading this—might be someone from my school, even someone in this story. Or maybe you're someone who's never heard of me. And since I don't know who you are, I'm not sure what to call you. I could make up a name like Wilbur or Egberta but maybe you had a bad experience with someone named Wilbur or Egberta and you might be insulted if I use those names. So I'll just call you "you."

I could've said "Dear Diary," but that wouldn't be right either because what I'm about to write isn't a diary, exactly. And I just realized I called it a story, but it's not a made-up story. It's a true story about something that happened to me. I guess you could say it's my autobiography, but it's only part of my autobiography because it doesn't talk about everything that's ever happened to me. Oh well, I'll just call it my autobiography because that's as close as I can get to explaining what it is.

I guess I might as well tell you I'm scared. I've never done anything like this before. I mean, I love writing—in fact I think I'd like to be a writer when I'm finished school—and I've written some pretty long stories, but never my autobiography.

I have to admit, when someone told me I should write my autobiography, I thought it was a pretty weird idea. Me, Hilary Laura Boles, write an autobiography? Why? Nothing that interesting has ever happened to me, and I haven't done anything important. I mean, I'm not one of those teenagers who's discovered a gene that will help cure cancer or won a Juno award. Who'd want to read about my life? But once the idea got into my head, it didn't want to leave.

And when I started thinking about it, I thought, well, maybe some interesting stuff has happened to me. And then I heard something at school, something about—well, I guess I won't bother to tell you who it's about because you won't know who I'm talking about

anyway, unless you're someone who knows me. But it's about someone I used to know, and it got me thinking about something that happened six years ago. So I figured, well, if I have to write about something that happened to me, it might as well be about that summer. Well, not only about the summer because lots of other stuff happened after we went back to school. It just started in the summer. But I guess this doesn't make any sense to you, and it's hard to explain because you—whoever you are—might not know anything about me. I'd better stop trying to explain and start writing my autobiography, the *official* autobiography of Hilary Laura Boles.

Chapter One: Hey Loser!

It was two days after we'd graduated from grade six, and I was over at my best friend, Lynn's. Summer had officially started three days earlier, and as I rode my bike to Lynn's, I noticed that flowers in pinks and purples were sprouting up jauntily in neighbourhood lawns and that the sky was one of those cloudless blues that resembles a dome. We were free from school for the next ten-and-a-half weeks, and when we did have to go back, we were going to junior high instead of babyish elementary school. I know what you're thinking. All of this should have made me happy and excited. Well, it didn't. I was upset.

"I wish you didn't have to go!" I said.

Lynn looked at me from where she'd been folding a t-shirt.

"It's not forever, Hil. It's just for a few weeks."

"Eight weeks," I corrected.

"Whatever."

I flipped the tag of one of the suitcases I'd been helping Lynn pack. Lynn and her family were going to California for almost the whole summer, while I had to stay at home doing nothing. As if that wasn't bad enough, she was leaving the next day, so we didn't have time to do anything together before she left. Lynn and I had never been separated this long, and I didn't really have any other people to hang around with. So I was looking forward to this summer about as much as I would've looked forward to eight weeks of scrubbing public toilets with a toothbrush.

While Lynn bounced around the room, picking up things she just had to take, I sat there staring at the carpet, feeling like a huge bag of wet sand.

"Hil, you're not really helping."

"Sorry." I began folding a scarf. "It's just that there won't be anything to do here with you gone."

"Aren't you going on a vacation with your mom and dad? You usually go somewhere."

“No. My dad has to plan some conference at work, and he can’t take any time off, so we won’t be able to go anywhere.”

Lynn made a sympathetic noise. Then she said, “But think of all the fun things I’ll be able to do! Just imagine—eight weeks in California! I still can’t believe it!”

“Where are you guys going exactly?” I asked, interested in spite of myself.

“First we’re staying with my aunt and uncle in San Francisco, then we’re travelling around for a few weeks. We’re going to see everything. Disneyworld, Death Valley, Baja California. But the part I’m looking forward to most is L.A.”

“That’s going to be so cool. You’ll probably get to see some movie stars! Do you think you might see Damian Sámos?”

The Damian Sámos was just getting big as a movie star then. That summer, he was starring in *Over the Big Top*, a movie I would’ve scrubbed a hundred toilets to see. It was a thriller about a rebellious cop who gets kicked off the force and goes undercover as a dog trainer in a circus to catch a psychopathic clown. I think the police chief’s daughter was a contortionist in the circus, and she and Damian Sámos’s character ended up falling in love. But I used to imagine I was the one Damian Sámos was rescuing, my hair billowing like flowers flattened by the wind as he carried me away from the heat of the burning popcorn stand, our eyes meeting amidst the sparks from stray popcorn kernels that exploded like fireworks.... Anyway, I’m not really into him now, but I was then. Big time.

But Lynn didn’t seem interested. She responded with a shrug and a “Yeah, maybe.”

“You don’t sound very excited. I thought you really liked him,” I said, pointing to a poster on the wall. In the black-and-white poster, Damian Sámos was slouched against a pier. He had a disgusted expression on his face. Lynn said it was sexy and masculine. I thought it made him look like he’d just eaten a rotten egg, though I’d never dared to say that.

“Well, maybe my tastes have changed,” she said lightly. A little smile crept onto her lips. It could only mean one thing.

“Omigod, Lynn! You like someone! More than you like Damian Sámos! Who? Tell me!” I demanded.

“O.K., but I don’t think I’d ever have a chance with him.”

“Who?”

“Brett Filburn.”

Brett was my second biggest crush. He was only slightly less cute than Damian Sámos, and he was someone I knew. Well, O.K., I didn’t actually know him. He hadn’t gone to my elementary school. He’d gone to Simcoe, the other school in my neighbourhood, but I’d seen him at the movies with several of the other cool people from his class. Everyone in my class knew about the students from Simcoe because it was a really cool school. The principal there had even let the grade sixes have a graduation dance, something our principal wouldn’t let us have. Lynn and I secretly thought of our principal as an evil dark lord from another planet whose only purpose on Earth was to destroy the happiness of grade six students at Susanna Moodie.

Brett would be going to Mackenzie High School with us in the fall. I pictured his sly grin and slick black hair. I’d heard he used almost a quarter bottle of Brylcreme on his hair every morning, but I figured that might be an exaggeration. In my mind’s eye, he winked at me.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, “he is cute. But isn’t he going out with—”

“Yeah.”

And then we both said, at the same time, “Chanel Winters.”

Every grade six student who was going to Mackenzie that fall had heard of Chanel Winters. She was the most popular girl at Simcoe. She lived with her mother, and rumour had it that their house was a mansion, with a swimming pool and a tennis court. But that wasn’t all. Chanel was beautiful, she worked as a model on the weekends, and she was allowed to wear makeup. I tried to picture how my mother would react if I asked her whether I could wear makeup, and it always involved her screaming “What?” in a high-pitched voice and her face turning into the wicked witch’s from the *Wizard of Oz*, all green and filled with warts. It would’ve been funny, if it weren’t so scary.

Of course, I’d never had the privilege of meeting Chanel. She was way out of my league. I’d only ever seen her in the distance at the mall or the movies. But even those glimpses of her made me admire her. She had long blonde hair that reminded me of silk

pyjamas. She was several inches taller than me, not that that was saying much, with a figure like a licorice whip, slightly curvy, but mostly slender. No wonder all the boys, including Brett Filburn, were after her.

But my greatest hope going into junior high was that I might one day be friends with her. Lynn and I had been talking about it all year, how cool it would be to go to Mackenzie and attend dances and wear the right clothes. Lynn said that maybe, if we were careful enough and we knew what we were doing, we might be able to become part of Chanel's group. I asked her if she thought that would happen anytime soon.

"Are you kidding? It's Chanel Winters we're talking about here! You'd be lucky if she even looked at you right now!"

"Yeah, I guess so."

I stared at the carpet again. Lynn was right. Someone like Chanel would never be interested in someone like me. I didn't have to glance in Lynn's huge mirror to tell me that. I knew all my faults off by heart. My dark brown hair refused to grow any longer than shoulder length. The last time I'd been to the hairdresser, my mom had suggested I get a new style. So now my hair was chopped bluntly into an ugly page boy. And I didn't even want to think about my height and weight. If only I looked like Lynn, I thought. She has naturally blonde hair that falls to the middle of her back, and she's taller and skinnier than me. Maybe if I looked more like Lynn, I might be more popular with people like Chanel.

But I knew that even if I lost weight or dyed my hair blonde (and my mother would ship me as a mail-order bride to some foreign country before she'd let me do *that*), Chanel probably still wouldn't be my friend. My biggest problem was that I just wasn't cool. Lynn tried to teach me the latest expressions, but whenever I used them, they always sounded fake, like I was some loser who'd been practicing them in front of her bedroom mirror. No guy—cute, normal or repulsive—had ever even looked at me, and every time a cute guy came near me, I managed to say something stupid or stumble into a table. Face it, a voice in me snarled, you're just not good enough for someone like Chanel.

"Hey loser!"

My head snapped up and I saw one of Lynn's older sisters, Nicole, standing in the

doorway looking at Lynn and me. I felt the blood draining from my face. But when Nicole turned to Lynn, I exhaled.

“Where’s my black scarf?” she demanded. “I need to wear it on the plane tomorrow.”

Lynn scowled. “You lent it to me.”

“Yeah. And now I’m asking for it back.”

“Well, I don’t know where it is. It’s probably already packed,” said Lynn impatiently.

Then I realized I was still holding the scarf. I stepped towards Nicole and handed her the scarf.

“Here it is,” I said, hoping my voice wasn’t trembling too much.

“Oh, thanks a lot, Hilary,” she said, smiling. “I’m glad someone’s organized.” Then she left.

“I’m glad someone’s organized,” mimicked Lynn. “She is so annoying.”

“I think she’s really nice!”

“That’s because you don’t have to live with her.”

“You’re so lucky to have two sisters. I wish I had a sister. I don’t want a brother, but I’d really like a sister.”

“Why?” Lynn asked. “They hang their pantyhose all over the bathroom so there’s no room for yours. They hog the phone, and they wouldn’t let you call an ambulance if you were dying, let alone a friend. Then they lend you things and get mad when you don’t give them back right away.”

“Yeah, but they still lend you stuff. And your sisters have really cool things. But the best part of having older sisters is that they can drive you places. I mean, let’s face it. It’s much cooler to be driven to the mall by your sister than by your mom.”

“Yeah. I guess there are advantages.”

Lynn had her back to me now. She was checking her camera to make sure the film was loaded.

“Just gets boring being by yourself,” I added.

“Yeah. I guess it would.”

But I could tell she wasn't listening to me. Suddenly she whipped around and yelled, “Say Chanel!” Before I could stop her, she took a picture.

“Lynn!” I said angrily, shielding my face with my arm.

“What's the matter? Didn't do your hair this morning?” she teased.

“I just don't want my picture taken.”

“Party pooper,” she retorted, putting the camera in a suitcase.

I felt embarrassed about being so whiny, so I changed the subject. “I can't wait to go to Mackenzie! I'm so glad to finally leave boring old Susanna Moodie!”

Lynn rolled her eyes. “Yeah, really. Mackenzie's going to be so much better. We won't have all of those babyish little grade sixes around.”

I laughed. “Lynn, until two days ago, we were those babyish little grade sixes.”

“I know. But we're not any more.”

We giggled.

“It's going to be so much fun,” said Lynn eagerly. “Just think—we're finally going to a school that allows us to have dances!”

“Yeah! And you know what else I heard? Mackenzie might be getting a swimming pool! Wouldn't that be neat?”

“Yeah,” said Lynn disdainfully, “if you want the boys to see you in a bathing suit.”

I felt my cheeks go the colour of overripe tomatoes. My weight was the bane of my existence. Well, one of the banes anyway. My mom and I had frequent arguments about it. She always insisted that I was a perfect weight and shape. I always shot back some sarcastic response. My latest one was, “Yeah. Perfect for a middle-aged opera singer.” I was convinced even my doctor thought I was fat. Well, O.K., I reminded myself, she didn't actually tell me that. She told me that my weight was normal for my height, but I figured she was probably just being nice. Because when I checked my height and weight on the chart in her office, I noticed I was in the high end of the “ideal zone,” or what I thought was the high end anyway. I knew it would only be a matter of time before I crossed the line into the “caution zone.” Don't kid yourself, I told myself, they might call it the caution zone, but

it's really the fat zone.

I looked up at Lynn. Her mouth was open, and her eyes were wide. "Oh, Hil. I didn't mean it that way—"

"No, it's O.K. You don't have to be nice to me. I know I'm fat."

"You're not fat!"

"Oh, yeah? Look at this!" I performed this new trick I had for whenever someone said that to me. I grabbed my stomach at either end and wiggled it so it bobbed up and down like Santa Claus's.

"See?" I demanded. "That proves I'm fat. If I wasn't fat, I wouldn't be able to do that. Try it. I bet you can't do it."

She hesitated. "You just have some leftover baby fat on you."

"Yeah? Well, when's it going to go away? When I enter a retirement home? By that time, I'll have old person's fat on me!"

Lynn sighed. She'd heard this before. Many times.

"Lynn, how can you deny my fatness? You're two inches taller than me, and you weigh ten pounds less."

"I just have a higher metabolism than you do. I can't help it."

"Well, where I can buy a higher metabolism?" I grumbled.

By now, Lynn was impatient. "Hil, there's more important things in the world than worrying about that."

"Like what?"

"Like getting my suitcases packed before tomorrow morning so I can actually go to California instead of standing here with you talking about it! And where did my black high-heeled sandals go?"

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't believe she thought her stupid sandals were more important than my weight problem. What kind of a friend was she? One of the sandals was lying next to me. Without thinking, I picked it up and tossed it at Lynn.

"Here you go, your Highness. And I wouldn't call those high heels. I could stick a wad of gum on a sneaker and it would be a higher heel than that."

Lynn looked at me, hands on her hips.

“Hilary, what is your problem? Look, I’m sorry you’re not going anywhere this summer. Believe me. Because it would make things a lot easier if I didn’t have to deal with your jealousy. But I can’t help it if I’ve got plans and you don’t. What am I supposed to do, apologize because my dad doesn’t have to stay in Toronto and plan some stupid conference?”

I turned my head aside and ran into my reflection. I looked like a dwarf whose tea set had just been stolen.

“Are you even helping me pack?” she demanded.

I didn’t move.

“How many things have you put in the suitcase? One?” she yelled.

“It’s not even my trip!” I snapped back.

“Fine. If you don’t want to help me, why don’t you just leave?”

There was a pause. We stared one another down. I really wanted to leave. Let her finish her stupid packing on her own. I didn’t care if she left all her underwear at home and had to strap rags around her butt just so she could go out in public. Good riddance, I thought. Don’t bother to send me a postcard. Wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.

But I knew that wasn’t true. I did want Lynn to have a good time on her trip, and I definitely wanted a postcard. And it would be silly, I told myself, to let something as small as Lynn’s comment bother me. She didn’t mean to hurt me, she’s just really into her trip, so of course it’s more important to her than my weight. Right now.

I looked at the carpet. I’d almost memorized the pattern of entwined roses by now.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

“I’m sorry, too. It’s this packing. It’s driving me crazy!” But I could tell Lynn didn’t mean it by the way her voice rose at the end of the sentence, like she was happy.

“Yeah. Well, I guess I’m not making it any easier.” My voice trembled, but I tried to smile.

“Hil, I shouldn’t have said that. You’re a guest. You don’t have to help.”

“No. I want to.” I began folding some t-shirts that were lying on the bed. We were

quiet for a few minutes until I said, “And you’re right. I am jealous of your trip. You’re going to have an awesome time in California, and I’ll just be... here.”

“I know. But don’t worry, Hil. You’ll find someone else to hang around with.”

“Even if I do, they won’t be as much fun as you. You’re my best friend.”

“Oh, Hil. That’s so sweet. You’re my best friend, too.”

Lynn was busy pushing things down into a suitcase, so luckily she didn’t see the tears beginning to form in my eyes. I commanded them back like they were rebel ants advancing without the queen ant’s permission.

“Hey! I know something that’ll make you feel better!” she exclaimed, turning around.

I sniffed, trying to appear casual. “What?”

“Why don’t we look at our report cards?”

Why not, I thought. If I’m going to be a fat loser, I might as well at least get good marks.

“Mine’s right here,” she said, grabbing an envelope off a shelf. “Did you bring yours?”

I nodded, reaching for the worn-out Eaton’s bag my mom had given me for going out. She wouldn’t allow me to have a purse because she said I wasn’t old enough. Her usual excuse for denying me anything I wanted.

We’d been given our report cards at the graduation ceremony, but Lynn had insisted that we wait until today to open them. It was difficult for me because I desperately wanted to know what my marks were. Some people didn’t care, but I did.

I was especially anxious to see my mark in art. Our teacher had given us a big assignment at the end of the year. We had to create a collage depicting our lives. Each of us was given a giant piece of cardboard, and we could paste anything we wanted on it. A lot of people were complaining that it was a hard assignment, but I didn’t think so. While most people taped or stapled family photos or pictures from magazines on their cardboards, I went wild. I glued, nailed, stuck, pressed, smushed. Feathers, empty pop cans, tickets to movies I’d been to. Whatever I could find that had anything to do with my life, I put on the

board.

And when the board got full, my dad helped me build a little sculpture out of a broken lamp shade and an old record player. I stuck more stuff on the sculpture. I spent more time on my collage than on any other school project. Even in studying for our last math test, and I was a total idiot in math. But when I looked at the finished result, it was worth it. My collage had bright colours, neat shapes, and different materials. It was way more interesting than any one else's collage. And when I set it up at school, everyone in my class loved it.

"Omigod, Hilary! That's amazing!" Heather Banks said when she stopped to look at it.

Heather was the closest thing we had to a cool girl at Susanna Moodie. She wasn't friends with me or Lynn. In fact she'd been kind of rude to us the whole year. So when she told me she liked my project, I knew she meant it.

But I still wanted to get a high mark on the collage.

Lynn was already ripping open her report card. She looked awfully excited for someone who always said it didn't make any difference to her what kind of marks she got. To postpone opening mine, I waited to see her reaction. She glanced down the page, stopping suddenly and snorting.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Miss Carter the Farter gave me 63 in math."

"That's too bad," I said.

She shrugged. "Math's retarded. What do I need it for anyway?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I murmured. Lynn wanted to be an actress or a fashion designer when she grew up, so what would she need math for?

"Come on, Hil. Aren't you going to open yours?"

But I still hesitated. "I'm nervous about my mark in art."

"Oh, come on! You won the medal for the highest mark in the class."

"I know, but I still don't know what the mark is."

"Well, open it and find out!"

When I unfolded my report card, the first mark that jumped out at me was my art mark. Ninety-five! I gasped, and my hands began shaking. When Lynn asked “What?” I told her.

“That’s great, Hil. What did you get in math?”

When I saw my math mark, a cold, wet feeling like a melting ice cream cone spread through my chest. “Sixty-eight.”

“Well, that’s better than I did. And I only got 82 in art.”

I looked at the rest of my marks. They were all in the eighties and high seventies, except for gym, which was even lower than math. I was going to tell this to Lynn, but she’d already put away her report card and grabbed a packet of photos off a shelf.

“Want to look at the graduation pictures now?” she asked. I nodded eagerly.

We spent the next half hour looking over the pictures Lynn’s dad had taken of our graduation. There were dozens of different shots: Lynn and her parents, Lynn and her older sisters, Lynn and me. She’d been wearing a short pink sleeveless dress, while I had to wear a sailor suit in navy blue, a colour I thought should only be seen on a sofa in a funeral parlour. But my mother had insisted that sailor suits, especially in navy blue, were classics that never went out of style. Probably because they were never in style, I’d retorted. The suit my mom had chosen made me look even shorter and stumper than I already was. I looked like a diseased tree standing next to a vibrant young flower.

I adored Lynn’s dress. Partly because it was beautiful. But mostly because it came from le château. le château was the coolest store in the world. It had amazing clothes, clothes you wouldn’t find anywhere else. Anyone who was anyone shopped at le château. Of course Chanel Winters bought all her clothes there. Even Lynn was allowed to buy some stuff there (“within reasonable limits,” her mom had told her), and her oldest sister worked there. But was I allowed to shop there? If you have to ask, you obviously haven’t been paying attention to my description of my mom.

Once, when my mom had been in a good mood, I’d taken her to le château, hoping she might become more open-minded when she saw the clothes there. After all, surely even my mother couldn’t deny how stylish le château sweaters and skirts were and how essential

it was for someone who was almost in junior high to be stylish. But when she stepped into the store, it was like she'd stepped into some strange dreamworld. She looked around her as if the leopard-print stretch pants were dripping ectoplasmic goo and the see-through tank tops were giving off toxic gases.

I had to admit, some of the clothes were a bit freaky. There was a leather skirt so short that, according to Lynn, who whispered it to me in the store, only a prostitute would wear it. But I thought that the clothes I wanted were perfectly "within reasonable limits." I showed my mom some bell-bottomed jeans and a plain white shirt, but she frowned at them. When we left the store, I asked whether she would buy me stuff from le château. But she just got angry and said I wasn't going to shop there until I was 16 and maybe not even then. I tried to explain to her, in a nice tone of voice, that everyone shopped at le château. But she refused to be conquered. I begged, argued, and bargained with her. When none of these tactics worked, I threatened to spend my allowance buying clothes there, and she forbade me to wear anything from that store without her permission. Which I had no hope of getting. So I couldn't wear le château clothes.

"You're so lucky your mom lets you buy clothes from le château," I sighed.

Lynn wrinkled her nose. "It's only because Morgan works there. And even then there are things I can't get."

"Yeah, but it's better than nothing." I wanted to add that on second thought, maybe nothing was better, since I probably wouldn't fit into any of the clothes at le château anyway. I mean, let's face it, I thought, tank tops and miniskirts make fat people look like one of those insects with little rungs around their bodies, a caterpillar, maybe. Maybe that was why my mother refused to let me buy anything there. Maybe she was trying to save me the disappointment of realizing that nothing in the store was my size. But I knew Lynn was tired of hearing about my weight, so I didn't say anything.

"Well, at least you don't dress like Marcia," said Lynn, holding up a photo.

The photo showed a slim girl with her head cast down. She was scurrying away from where Lynn was standing outside our school gym, smiling and holding a bunch of roses her dad had given her. The girl was wearing a long, shapeless white dress that trailed on the

ground.

“I heard her mom buys their clothes at K-mart,” Lynn sneered. “But what can you expect from someone who’s on welfare?”

I frowned, thinking back to items I’d seen on the news about people on welfare. “So you mean, Marcia’s mom doesn’t have a job?”

Lynn smiled a knowing smile. “That’s what she says.”

“What do you mean?”

“A lot of welfare people pretend not to have jobs just so they can collect welfare money. But most of them have jobs on the side, and some of the women, well, let’s put it this way: they’re the kind of women who buy those leather skirts at le château.”

My eyes widened. “You mean Marcia’s mom is a... a...” But I couldn’t say it.

Lynn kept smiling. “Maybe. Anyway, it’s true about people on welfare. I read about it in the paper.”

We looked at the picture of Marcia.

“She’s such a loser,” Lynn said.

“Yeah,” I said. Marcia did look weird in that dress, like she was too cheap to buy a real dress and had ripped a sheet off a bed and wrapped it around herself. Her hair was stringy and tangled. Had she even washed it for the graduation? And if it were true about her mom.... no wonder hardly anyone talked to her. Who’d want to be friends with someone like that? But I kind of felt sorry for her too. The way she was bowing her head reminded me of how I’d been bowing my head not too long ago. I shifted uncomfortably.

The door opened, and Lynn’s mom came in. She smiled... until she saw how many suitcases were open and how many clothes and shoes were on the floor and in the closet.

“Is this all you’ve got done, Lynn?”

“Yeah,” said Lynn guiltily, trying to hide the pictures under a pillow.

“Well, you’d better hurry up. Dad will be home from work soon, and he won’t be happy to see this mess. I know you two girls are having a good time, but I think maybe it’s time for Hilary to go home.”

“But, Mom, she’s helping me!”

“Lynn,” said her mom in that special tone.

“Oh, all right, just let us say goodbye.”

Lynn mom’s closed the door, and we walked towards it slowly.

“Well, have a great trip,” I murmured.

“Thanks. I’ll send you some postcards.”

We stood there looking at one another. Then at the same time, as if we were a mirror and its reflection, we reached forward and hugged each other.

“I’m really going to miss you,” I said. The tears rolled down my cheeks, and I didn’t try to stop them this time.

“Oh, Hil, I’m going to miss you too.” When we let go of each other, I saw that she was crying too. We both laughed.

“Don’t worry. You’ll find something to do,” she said.

“I could always hang around with Marcia,” I joked, wiping my cheek.

Lynn just laughed. “Hey, I know. Now would be a good time for you to go biking or something. That way, you could lose weight for junior high.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, smiling.

Lynn’s tears had almost dried up. She wasn’t going to delay our goodbye any longer, and I’d run out of things to say.

I hugged her again. “Have a great summer, Lynn.”

As I mounted my bike to ride home, I tied the handles of my Eaton’s bag together so my report card wouldn’t fly out. But not even my art mark made me feel any less like I had a giant tennis ball stuck in my throat.

Chapter Two: A Sanguine Meeting

I sometimes wonder what would've happened if I'd remembered to ask Lynn for Trish's and Stacey's phone numbers. I would've called them, we would've started hanging out, and then all four of us would've hung out together at Mackenzie. That much is certain. But what would've happened after that? Would I have ended up becoming a different person than I am now? I'd like to say no, but sometimes I wonder.

But I'm forgetting. You probably don't know who I'm talking about. I'd better explain.

My summer didn't get off to a good start when I woke up on the day of Lynn's departure and heard this odd moaning noise, like a little kid imitating a car starting up. In my dazed state, I was convinced that the sound was Lynn's plane taking off. But later, when I was having breakfast, the moaning started again, and it was louder and closer this time. I asked my mom what it was, and she told me it was coming from next door, where the new neighbours were moving in.

"What new neighbours?" I demanded.

My mom was standing at the front door, peering out. "You remember. The ones who are moving into the Prestons' old house. I hadn't seen them before. I guess they're just moving in today."

"Why are they making all that noise?"

My mom craned her neck to get a better view. "It looks like they're trying to start up some sort of machine in the middle of their driveway..... My goodness, it's an old washing machine. Or part of one anyway. You know, the kind where you have to pull the clothes through the wringer to squeeze out the water? I haven't seen one of those in years. I wonder what they could be doing."

But I didn't care. "Well, I wish they'd stop. They're giving me a headache."

After breakfast, I marched up to my bedroom and lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. I had some strange idea that if I lay there, the neighbours would somehow know that they'd offended me and stop making noise. Of course it didn't work, and this only made me

angrier. I got up and began pacing.

I spent the entire weekend pacing over every square millimetre of our house. My parents rented a movie, thinking it would cheer me up, but I just told them I had a headache, which was true, and stamped up to my room.

All I could think about was Lynn. I analyzed every detail she'd given me about her trip, trying to pinpoint exactly where she was. I'd check my watch and think, "It's four o'clock, so that means it's one o'clock there. She's probably just having lunch at a restaurant in downtown San Francisco right now." I pictured Lynn munching on a sweet-and-sour egg roll on one of those white plates with a pattern of pink roses.

Sometimes my fantasies got more elaborate, particularly when I thought about Lynn going to L.A. Lynn was very good-looking, so she might get snapped up by a talent agent and end up becoming a big star. I imagined her starring in an action thriller like *Over the Big Top*, hanging by one hand from the pyramids and squealing, her hair ripping around her face in a high wind. Or she might get a job as a dog trainer in a circus. I saw her wearing a tutu and holding up a glittering hoop for a French poodle to jump through. I knew Lynn would probably kill me if she knew about that last bit. But, I told myself mischievously, she doesn't ever have to know.

Sometimes I figured into these daydreams. If Lynn did become a star and stay in L.A., I could visit her. Maybe some of her movie star friends would give me a make over. They'd rub hormone-boosting oils in my hair to make it grow longer and to bring out the natural blonde highlights I was convinced I had. (If they brought out natural highlights, my mom couldn't accuse me of dyeing my hair, could she?) They'd put cleansing oils on my face so I'd never get a pimple again. Best of all, they'd give me a whole new wardrobe free of charge, clothes so cool even my mom would let me wear them. I'd arrive for the first day of school at Mackenzie in a BMW driven by a chauffeur... Brett Filburn would swoon over me... Chanel Winters would want to do lunch and a movie with me....

Of course this was all just speculation. I had no idea what Lynn was doing. And every time I remembered that, especially after one of these daydreams, I felt awful. My imagination became like a drug. I had to keep taking more of it to make myself feel better,

but when it wore off, I only ended up feeling even worse.

So by Monday, I was getting sick of thinking about Lynn. I knew it was going to be a crappy summer without her, and I did want to know how her trip was going (though I supposed it was probably too early to start checking the mail for postcards). But I had to do something to get my mind off her before I went loony. I had to get a hobby.

I decided to try what Lynn had suggested: exercising. I wasn't looking forward to it. Certain kinds of exercise were O.K., like swimming or biking. But I thought that if you really wanted to lose weight, you had to do the kind of stuff they do in a gym, like lifting weights or riding one of those bicycles that don't go anywhere. My dad had one of those bikes in the basement, so I figured I might as well try using it.

And then—well, this is pretty embarrassing but I have to finish the story because otherwise you'll wonder how it turned out—I put on a sweatband and sneakers and brought down a water bottle. My plan was to pedal non-stop for an hour. I figured I could do it, since I was used to riding my own bike, and after all, how different could this bike be? I should lose at least one pound that way, I told myself. So I if use the bike every day, in ten days I'll have lost the weight I want to lose.

The bike stood in a corner of the basement where the sunlight from the window didn't reach. A fake racoon-fur hat someone had given my dad as a joke hung on the wall above the bike. I wanted to move the bike, but it was screwed into the floor.

I tried to lift my leg over the seat, but it was too high for me. I couldn't move it because it was also screwed in place. So, gripping the handlebars for support, I tried to throw my leg over the seat several times without success. I was becoming angry and sweaty, so I started breathing deeply, like I was having a baby, to calm myself down. Hoo hoo hoo.

"Hilary!" shouted my mom. "Why are you making monkey noises?"

I froze. I knew that if I said "it's nothing," she might come down, and I didn't want her to think I needed help getting on a bicycle that was nailed to the ground. So I called, "I'm just playing a game."

I finally managed to heave myself on to the bike and start pumping. It was O.K. at first, but soon my muscles felt like some psycho was using them as rubber bands. And to

think some people actually did this for fun! What was wrong with them, I wondered, choking on my own sweat. I reached for the water bottle and tried to squirt some in my mouth. Nothing but air came out. I'd forgotten to fill the bottle! I threw it away and continued to pump furiously. Objects on the wall began rattling, and I was making so many strange noises my mother must have thought a whole pack of monkeys was performing a conga line in the basement. I began to have visions of monkeys in pink spangled bikinis kicking up their heels—did monkeys have heels, I wondered—on stage at the Princess of Wales Theatre.

Suddenly my sweatband fell over my eyes. I didn't stop to fix it—You're going to pump for the full hour, not for 59 minutes, I ordered myself—so I tried blowing it back onto my forehead and then nodding vigorously to get it to fall down under my chin. But it only fell over my nose so I couldn't breathe. Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, something dark and furry leapt on my head, covering my eyes. I screamed, batting at the thing with one hand and pumping frantically, as if I could somehow escape that way. I soon realized it was only my dad's hat, but I still couldn't get it off me. Finally I stumbled off the bike and yanked the hat's tail away from my eyes.

By now I had no energy left to even remove the hat, so I left it there and trudged upstairs. My only hope was that I had achieved my goal of having pedalled for an hour. I passed my mom, who took one look at me and started to snicker, but I ignored her. I went into the kitchen to check the clock. I'd been on the bike five minutes.

So that was the end of my experiment with exercising.

The next morning, I was back to moping around. But by now, my mom was becoming irritated with me.

"Hilary, I wish you'd find something to do instead of just hanging around."

That morning my "hanging around" consisted of watching her paint the kitchen table. After breakfast, I'd been sitting on the counter top staring out the window when my mom had come in to paint. I'd thrown an annoyed look at the back of her head. I didn't know why, but the past few months, it seemed like my mom was always hanging around. Everywhere I went, she went, bugging me, asking me silly questions. She hadn't done that

when I was younger. At least, not that I could remember. And my dad didn't follow me around, even when he was home.

Now she'd stopped painting and was staring at me, brush cocked in her right hand.

I shrugged elaborately. "If you can hang around painting, I can hang around doing nothing." When she gave me one of those flat-eyed looks, I said innocently, "It's not my fault there's nothing to do. It would be different if we were going on a vacation. Then I'd have something to look forward to. But Dad has to work for the whole summer, and it ruins everything."

"Dad doesn't want to work for the whole summer, but planning the conference is a big opportunity for him. It'll really help him at work if this conference comes off well. Maybe his boss will finally appreciate him."

I squirmed. "I know but can't you talk to him? Convince him to take at least a week off so we could go somewhere?"

"He and I have already discussed this, Hilary, and we agreed it would be better for him to stay in Toronto." She turned back to her painting.

"But what about me? I may perish of boredom!" I cried, placing my hand over my chest. "How hard is it to plan a conference anyway? What does he have to do, make sure they order the right kind of coffee? He could take a week off, if he worked hard enough during the other weeks. Why don't you tell him that?"

Mom frowned. "I don't tell him how to do his job. And you shouldn't complain. You've been lucky enough to go on big holidays for the last few summers. Some people never get to go anywhere...."

Blah blah blah. I'd heard all this before. She just doesn't care if I'm bored, I thought angrily.

"... should be able to keep yourself entertained. Why don't you write a story?"

I felt like I'd been zapped by a mini lightning bolt. I liked writing stories even more than I liked doing art. At least I used to. But this past year, I'd lost interest in writing. It was O.K. when I had to write something for school, but I felt uncomfortable writing stories on my own. Whenever I tried to write, my stories were no longer fun and crazy and laugh-

out-loud. They were fake and forced, like someone being squeezed into a suit of armour. But I figured it didn't matter because when I complained about this to Lynn, she said writing stories wasn't cool anyway.

"Do you think Chanel Winters sits around writing about her life all day?" she asked. "She's too busy living it."

Lynn was right. Writing was something from my past. Something I used to be good at but wasn't any more. Something I no longer needed.

I told my mom, "That's boring. I outgrew that a long time ago."

Mom sighed. "Well, Hilary, I wish you had some other friends. I mean, Lynn is a very nice girl, but I think you're too attached to her. You can't expect that one person will always be there to keep you company. You should try to be more outgoing and make some new friends."

My jaw dropped, and I could barely speak. How dare my mom imply I had no other friends? Did my own mother think I was that much of a loser?

"I have plenty of other friends!" I sputtered.

She raised her eyebrows. "Like who?"

"Like... Trish and Stacey!"

This wasn't strictly true, though I guess if I had to count anyone other than Lynn as a friend, it would be Trish and Stacey. Lynn and I had hung out with them at recess and lunch this past year, but we never saw them outside of school. At least I never did. Sometimes Lynn went to movies with them when I couldn't make it. I suspected they sometimes even went without asking me to join them, but I'd never proven it.

Mom looked at me for a long time, and then said, "Well, why don't you give them a call?"

The gentleness of her voice calmed me down, and I started to feel better than I had all weekend. Finally, here was something I could do.

And that's when I remembered I'd forgotten to ask Lynn for Trish's and Stacey's phone numbers.

But just when I thought I'd have to tell this to my mom, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," I volunteered.

I opened the front door and stared. A girl I'd never seen before was standing on our porch. She was as skinny as a pencil. In fact she looked like a pencil, with her straight body and mop of short frizzy hair. This hair was a funny shade of light brown, like brown sugar, and its wild strands reminded me of the flakes formed by an eraser when you rubbed it. The girl was dressed all in white, and she looked as though she'd rooted through her laundry basket and thrown on the first things she found. A t-shirt with a pattern of small pink animals. A pair of gym shorts that must've ended eight inches above her knees. Scuffed sneakers. But somehow, maybe because her clothes were all the same colour, she didn't look sloppy. I started to frown, but when I looked into her eyes, the frown froze. Her eyes, a deep brown, were almost completely round, like chestnuts. I'd never seen eyes like that before.

"Hi," the girl said. "I'm Kallie. I just moved in next door. What's your name?"

She spoke in a voice that rose at the end of each sentence like she was asking a question.

"Hilary," I answered hesitantly.

"Hi, Hilary. Nice to meet you. Do you want to be friends?"

The question was so unexpected and abrupt I didn't know what to say. The girl looked right at me with her chestnut eyes, and I got a shivery feeling that she was looking right into me, if you know what I mean. But she was smiling, expecting an answer. Before I knew what I was saying, I stammered, "I guess so."

"Great! Let's go play outside!"

I needed to stall for time. I didn't want to go anywhere with this odd girl, but I didn't know how to turn her away without being rude. So I said the only thing I could think of.

"I have to ask my mom first."

Leaving the door open, I started down the hall towards the kitchen. To my surprise, Kallie followed, even though I hadn't invited her. We entered the kitchen at the same time.

"Uh, Mom? This is uh... Kallie from next door. Can I go out to play with her?"

I could've smacked myself for sounding so childish in front of my mom and a

stranger. Even worse, as soon as I asked the question, I knew it was a mistake. Of course my mom would let me go out. Hadn't she just been telling me I needed more friends?

Mom didn't disappoint. Smiling warmly at us, she said, "Of course, Hilary." Then she stood up, wiped one hand on her overalls, and reached for Kallie's hand. "It's nice to meet you, Kallie. Sorry about the paint."

"No problem," said Kallie. "We've been painting all weekend, so I'm used to it."

"Where do you come from?" asked my mom.

"I come from my mom and dad," Kallie said solemnly.

My mom laughed, a little puzzled. "I meant, where did you live before you moved here?"

"Oh. In Mississauga. We've moved around a few times, but I've lived in Toronto all my life."

"Well, welcome to the neighbourhood."

"Thanks. I'm looking forward to living here."

I began to twitch. My mom and Kallie were acting as though they'd known one another for years and as though I wasn't even there. I hoped their conversation would end soon.

"We're so glad you've moved in," my mom was saying. "Hilary was just saying she wanted to meet some new friends now that Lynn's gone, weren't you, Hilary?"

I felt like a trained dog being asked to sit up and beg. "Actually," I responded coldly, "you were the one who was saying that, and I was disagreeing with you. I have plenty of friends," I assured Kallie.

Mom and I glared at one another, but luckily, before she could respond, Kallie broke in.

"I'm sure you do. But I don't know too many people around here, so I wouldn't mind a tour of the neighbourhood, if you're not busy with anything else, Hilary?" She sounded like she was negotiating a peace treaty between two warring nations and didn't want to upset either one.

"Sure, fine," I said, not taking my eyes off my mother. "I have an opening in my

social calendar right now, so I think I'll be able to accommodate you."

"Great!" She turned to my mom. "It was very sanguine meeting you, Hilary's mom."

Sanguine? What language was she speaking?

My mom laughed. "It's Mrs. Boles."

"Mrs. Boles, then. Cheerio!"

Kallie turned and headed for the front door. I had no choice but to follow if I wanted to avoid an argument with my mom. As I was pulling the door closed, Mom called, "Don't worry about being back for lunch, Hilary. Stay out as long as you like."

I rolled my eyes.

Chapter Three: The Mona Lisa of Toronto

I turned around to see Kallie looking at me thoughtfully, and I realized she must be wondering why my mom and I were so mad at one another. I tried to act normal, like what had happened was no big deal and I didn't care that Kallie had witnessed it. But my face gave me away by turning red as a geranium. I had to say something that would prove that I wasn't embarrassed and that it was just the heat making my face red.

So I blurted out, "Let's go to your house."

"No!" she said violently.

I pulled back incredulously. When she didn't say anything more, I thought maybe she was trying to get back at me for making her uncomfortable in the kitchen. I was going to apologize, but curiosity got to me first, and I asked, "Why can't we go to your house?"

"Because," she responded in a cheerful tone, "it's not ready yet. We still have much painting to do. It'll take about another week. I want you to see my room only once it's nearly finished."

Then she skipped—not ran or jumped but really skipped in little hops and bounds—down to the end of our driveway.

I stared at her, wondering why she cared whether I saw her messy room and why she'd gotten so mad when all I'd done was ask to see it. How was I supposed to know her house was off-limits?

"Come on," she shouted.

When I reached her, she was smiling again, just as she'd been when I'd first seen her, as if nothing had happened since then.

"When my parents and I took a walk last night, I saw a neat park with a playground and swings not too far from here. I thought we could go swinging," she said.

Swinging? What did she think I was, a grade three, I asked myself. But again her request was so abrupt I couldn't think of a good answer, so I agreed.

We didn't say much on the way over, but when Kallie pointed out the park to me, I felt like someone had grabbed my belly button with a hook and twisted. The park Kallie had

chosen was at my old school, Susanna Moodie. What if someone from my class saw us there, swinging?

“What’s wrong?” asked Kallie.

“Oh, uh... nothing,” I answered quickly. I didn’t want to tell Kallie this was my old school. Who knows what she might do. Run up and introduce herself to anyone who walked through the yard, maybe. So I acted normal.

The swings were empty. Kallie raced over to one and plopped down in the seat, launching off immediately, and she was soon swinging high in the air, the sunlight catching her hair and making it appear blonde. I sat down on the other swing and watched her. She seemed so happy, just swinging, and it reminded me of me when I was younger. When Kallie noticed I wasn’t swinging, though, she began to slow down, and eventually she dragged her feet along the sandy ground to make herself stop.

“I guess you don’t feel like swinging today?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“That’s O.K. We can just talk.”

But I couldn’t think of anything I wanted to say to her. Then I noticed a classroom door opening and someone coming out. A cold wave washed over me as I realized that the figure looked like Miss Carter. But the person only stepped a couple of steps away from the door, shook out a small rug, and went back inside.

Kallie looked from me to the school and back again, and her eyes narrowed. I knew she’d figured out this was my school, but she didn’t say anything. She began swinging slowly.

The silence was almost painful. As much as I didn’t want to, I decided to start a conversation.

“Have you seen any movies lately?” I asked.

“No. We don’t have a VCR, and I haven’t been to the cinema in ages. It must be at least a year.”

A year! I could barely last two weeks. And everyone I knew had a VCR. In Toronto, it was like having running water and electricity.

“Besides,” she added, “there’s not much worth seeing. Mostly it’s just people making kissing noises that sound like cows pulling their feet out of their own poo-poo, or people getting blown into pieces. I can see that on the news for free. I usually only like cartoons. There’s a good one coming out this summer, *Saura*, about a warrior princess.”

I struggled to keep my eyes from wandering upwards. “Well, what kind of music do you listen to?”

“Again, I don’t listen to much music. My parents have some opera C.D.s, which are enchanting. When you’re in the mood.”

Why am I talking to this person, I wondered. We obviously have nothing in common. I didn’t think I could stand much more of this, so I searched my brain for a good excuse to go home. My mom needed me? No. I was sure Kallie had heard her tell me to stay out as long as I liked. I suddenly remembered there was something I had to do? That was so fake even I wouldn’t have believed it. I felt sick? Hmm. That had possibilities.

Just as I was trying to figure out how to fake an ulcer, Kallie suddenly asked, “Do you have any middle names?”

“Of course.”

“What is it?”

“Laura.”

“Looorra,” she said slowly, as if she’d never heard this name before. “That’s very mellifluous. It means ‘laurel tree,’ you know, and the laurel is the symbol of victory.”

I kind of liked that, though I didn’t feel very victorious right then. Maybe it was supposed to be ironic in my case.

“I myself have two middle names,” Kallie continued.

“And what are they?” I asked, not because I cared but because I knew she expected me to ask.

“Amonalisa Eadoin.”

I burst out laughing.

Kallie looked hurt. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because those are the dumbest names I’ve ever heard! No one has names like that!”

“But I do.”

“A-mona-lisa? As in one word?”

Kallie nodded. When she saw my slant-eyed expression, she asked, “Haven’t you ever heard of the Mona Lisa?”

“Well, duh! Everyone’s heard of the Mona Lisa! But Mona Lisa is two words, not one. *I’ve* never heard of anyone named Amonalisa.”

“Neither have I. My parents made it up.”

“So it’s not a real name,” I said smugly.

Kallie had stopped swinging and was looking at me, her eyes narrowed. “How do you define what’s a real name? All names are made up at some point. Someone made up your name centuries ago. Just because a name’s newer, why is it any less real?”

I couldn’t think of an answer, so I started picking on her second middle name.

“And Ea-doin? What does that mean? Some Italian guy calling his cousin? ‘Eh! Dean!’”

“No. It’s Irish. It means something like ‘blessed with many friends.’”

“And are you?” My voice was dripping sarcasm.

But she ignored me. “While we’re on the subject of names, you should know that Kallie is not my first name. At least, not my whole first name. It’s a nickname.”

“For what?” I snickered. I couldn’t wait to hear what was coming next.

“Callisto.”

“Callisto?”

“Yeah. Sometimes I call myself Callisto, but mostly I like Kallie better because it’s less encumbered. Kallie is a kite in the wind, but Callisto is a corset.”

I didn’t know what a corset was, but I wasn’t about to ask.

“And I like Kallie because you can spell it in so many different ways. Sometimes I spell it with a *c* instead of a *k*, sometimes with just one *l*, sometimes with a *y* instead of *ie*. It all depends on how I feel.”

“How do you usually spell it?” I asked sarcastically, playing along with what I thought was a game.

“K-a-l-l-i-e.”

I squinted at her. Her expressionless face suggested she was serious. I didn’t know how to respond, so I said, “I don’t believe you. Nobody spells their name in different ways.”

“I do,” she said simply. She was swinging again and smiling as if she knew a secret. Nothing I said made any difference to her, and this bothered me.

Finally, as though I were accusing her of something, I said, “I think you’re making up a story.”

Her face brightened. She dragged her heels on the ground to stop swinging.

“Do you write stories, too?” she asked.

I inhaled sharply. I hadn’t thought about my writing in months, and now two people had mentioned it on the same day. But instead of feeling resigned to failure, like I had when my mom had mentioned my writing, I felt uncomfortable, even a bit frightened. And Kallie’s hopeful face made me even more uncomfortable. I responded, almost violently, “No.”

Kallie looked disappointed and began swinging again.

“Who’s Lynn, by the way?” she asked.

“How do you know about Lynn?” I demanded.

“Your mom mentioned her. Is she your friend?”

“Yes. She’s my best friend,” I said proudly.

“Your mom said she was gone. Did she move away?”

“No! She’s just gone to California for a vacation. She’ll be back very soon,” I lied. I sounded snobbier than I’d meant to, but something in the way Kallie had asked me about Lynn made me wonder whether Kallie wanted to replace Lynn as my friend. And I’d be more likely to sprout a green rubber horn on my forehead than to ever choose someone like Kallie over someone like Lynn.

But Kallie didn’t seem to notice my rudeness.

“What grade are you going to be in next September?” she asked.

“Grade seven. I’m starting junior high.”

“Really?” She stopped swinging and looked at me expectantly. “So am I! What

school are you going to?”

I told her.

“Well, what do you know? That’s where I’m going, too! I’m so glad there’ll someone I know there. Isn’t it great that we’re going to the same school?”

Wonderful, I thought. Not only will I have to live next to her, she’ll probably be in all my classes too. I just looked at the ground and didn’t bother to answer.

Kallie started swinging again, but she had barely been going before she suddenly leapt off in mid-air, landing on her hands and knees. I leapt up from my swing, a cry rising in my throat, when she bounded to her feet.

Her back was to me so I couldn’t see her face, but I heard her exclaim, “Got to run! Nice meeting you, Hilary. See you around!” Then she took off.

For a few seconds, I stood there, not knowing what to do. Then I started to run after her. I wasn’t sure why I was doing this, but all I could think of was that I wanted to ask her what the name “Hilary” meant. After a couple of minutes, though, I gave up chasing her. I felt like some torture device with pointy little teeth had latched onto my side. And Kallie ran like one of those African animals you’d see on the Discovery Channel. I soon lost sight of her.

I walked home slowly, holding my side, thinking about Kallie. I couldn’t figure her out. Even the way she spoke was weird. I didn’t understand some of the words she’d used—enchancing? mellifluous?—and that made me feel stupid. And I’d never had someone ask me if I wanted to be friends with her. You can’t just decide to be friends, I thought. You have to get to know the person and like her first. But for some reason, even though I’d felt bored and uncomfortable sitting there with her, I wished Kallie hadn’t taken off on me like that. I looked for her as I walked past her house, but she wasn’t outside. When I got home, my mom was surprised to see me. She stood up from where she’d been crouched, painting.

“Back so soon?”

“Kallie had to go.”

“Did you have fun?”

I shrugged, grabbing a can of Coke out of the refrigerator. “What’s for lunch?”

“You can heat up one of those mini-pizzas.”

I had my back to my mom, but I could tell she was looking at me. After a while, though, I heard her turn around and begin to paint again. I munched my pizza in silence, but when I stood up to leave, my mom asked, “Did you find out about the washing machine?”

“What washing machine?”

“You know, the thing they were trying to start up in their driveway. What are they doing with it?”

“Oh, that. Who knows. Probably trying to contact the planet Zoolaxstar.”

Then, without warning, my mom said angrily, “Hilary, sometimes I get really sick of your attitude.”

“What? What’s your problem?”

“Kallie seemed like a very nice girl. Why don’t you give her a chance?”

I froze. How had my mom known what had happened between Kallie and me? It was as though she’d read my mind. But another suspicion took root in my mind.

“Did Kallie come over before I got home?”

“No. I could just tell by the way you’ve been talking about her. You think she’s a geek, or whatever your latest word is for people who don’t fit a certain mold. I really think you should become more tolerant of other people. You’ll find when you go to Mackenzie this fall that not everyone is going to be like you and Lynn.”

I stared at the ceiling.

“It’s true, Hilary. You’ve been going to the same school since you were four years old, and you’ve had the same classmates almost the whole time. But next year there will be many new people, people of different backgrounds and cultures, and you have to learn to accept them as they are—”

“What! Of course I accept people from other cultures! What do you think I am, a racist?”

“No, of course not. But being open-minded means accepting people of all cultures, including your own, even when they don’t act like you.”

I quieted down, like a cauldron about to boil that had been turned down to a simmer.

“You need to have a little more confidence, Hilary. You have to like yourself before other people can like you. If you don’t believe in yourself, no one else will.”

What did that have to do with anything? “Of course I like myself!” I exclaimed.

Mom sucked in a long breath. “Well, I hope so, Hilary,” she said quietly.

But by now the cauldron was boiling.

“You just want to tell me what to do!” I shouted. “You don’t have your own life, so you’re trying to run mine! Well it won’t work!”

“Hilary!” she exclaimed, dropping the paintbrush on the table.

But I’d already stormed out of the room and was halfway up the stairs. I slammed my bedroom door and leapt onto my bed, where I curled up like a baby tiger. I lay there fuming until suddenly I jumped up and grabbed my dictionary. To my surprise and annoyance, I found what I was looking for.

“Sanguine, an adjective meaning ‘cheerful and hopeful’ or ‘having a healthy red colour.’”

What had Kallie said to my mom? “It was very sanguine meeting you, Hilary’s mom.” “It was very having a healthy red colour meeting you, Hilary’s mom”—no, that couldn’t be what she’d meant. “It was very cheerful meeting you, Hilary’s mom”—that didn’t make much sense either. I supposed it was just Kallie’s weird way of telling my mom she was happy to meet her.

And I don’t care what Mom says, I thought. Thinking Kallie’s weird doesn’t make me intolerant, and it doesn’t mean I discriminated against her. She just is weird. Anyone can see that.

I vowed that no matter how much my mom tried to push me away from Lynn and towards Kallie, it would never work. I didn’t want to be friends with Kallie, and I vowed to avoid her from then on.

Chapter Four: Hambrushinas

Avoiding Kallie turned out to be easy. She didn't come over, and I never saw her outside, even though I started going out more often. My latest plan was to spend the summer getting a tan. So I slathered on suntan lotion like icing on a cake, plopped down in the reclining chair in our backyard, and spent the days flipping through old movie magazines and trying to convince myself I was on a secluded beach instead of in a cramped suburban backyard.

But soon I began peering over the fence into Kallie's yard to see if she was around. This more than just curiosity. Ever since the fight with my mom, I'd been thinking about the way I'd treated Kallie. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I had been kind of rude to her, like when I'd made fun of her names. I thought I might've hurt or offended her, and I wanted to tell her I hadn't meant to be so nasty.

Don't get me wrong. I still felt my mom's accusations weren't fair, especially the one about me discriminating against Kallie. But I figured that since Kallie and I were going to be neighbours, we couldn't completely avoid each other, so we might as well be civil. And the fact that we were going to the same school made this civility even more important. I didn't want to make any enemies at Mackenzie, especially before I'd even started school.

But the days went by, and Kallie never appeared. Then one day, I was standing at the fence longer than I usually did, staring in at her yard. This was dangerous because I didn't want to be caught snooping. But Kallie's yard intrigued me. A hammock was strung between two trees. I'd always wanted a hammock, but our trees weren't big enough to support one. A hexagonal plot of land had been dug out right in front of Kallie's family room. I wondered what they were going to plant there. It was too deep for a regular garden and too small for a swimming pool.

"Hello!" called an unfamiliar voice.

I tried to duck, but it was too late. A woman was standing a few feet away from me, at the gate leading into the yard, and she was looking right at me, smiling.

I peeked up over the fence again. "Hi," I murmured.

“You’re Hilary, aren’t you?” she asked.

I nodded.

As the woman came forward, her yellow and orange sundress swished back and forth, making her resemble a citrus fruit swaying in a city breeze. But as she came closer and the shadows blocked out the glare of the sun, I saw that her face was paler and more oval than Kallie’s. And her eyes were a watery blue, like the ice on a children’s skating rink.

“Kallie’s told me so much about you. Hello. I’m Calypso, Kallie’s mother.” Her voice was musical, like Kallie’s, but in a different way. If Kallie’s resembled a bird chirping, her mother’s resembled a trickle of water falling in a pond. She held out her hand to me, and when I shook it, it was warm and slender. I felt myself smiling without knowing when I’d begun.

There was a pause. We continued to smile at one another, and I secretly began to pick at my nails until Kallie’s mother said, “We do hope you’ll come over to the house sometime.”

“Sure,” I said, not realizing what I was agreeing to.

“Wonderful. See you later, then.” She turned and went back through the side gate, while I scurried into the house.

It wasn’t until I got to my room that it dawned on me that I’d agreed to visit Kallie. I did want to apologize to her, but I had no intention of hanging around with her again. I shuddered, picturing myself going to her house and remaining trapped there for hours, while she told me the symbolism of every name imaginable. I’d have to figure out a way to go over, apologize, and leave quickly, so no one could accuse me of failing to come over when I’d promised I would. I’d have to come up with a plan.

That Saturday, my mom suddenly announced that she was going shopping and asked whether I wanted to come along.

This was rare. Mom usually only took me shopping when she had to, when I needed new clothes. We went once in the fall and once in the spring, and both of us thought that two shopping trips together every year were plenty. But I loved to go shopping anytime I got

the chance, and since Lynn wasn't around, there was no one else to go with. And I thought it would be lame to go to the mall by myself.

So I agreed to go with my mom. Big mistake.

First, she spent over half an hour in a kitchen store, trying to decide what kind of salad tongs to buy. Then she dragged me to two more stores to look at sets so similar they were probably clones of the first one. She kept trying to get me interested in the stuff she was buying, even though she could see I didn't care. Finally she said she would buy me some new clothes for junior high. I perked up and asked if we could go to le château.

She gave me a sideways glance and said, "If you like."

But you already know what happened when my mom and I got to le château. The usual thing. I showed my mom a blouse I thought was stylish, cheap, and—and this was the most important consideration for my mother—modest. She made a harumping noise and turned away. We lasted all of ten minutes in the store. But this time, instead of waiting until we got to the car to start fighting, I began as soon as we left the store.

"Why won't you let me buy clothes from there?" I demanded.

Mom sighed. "Hilary, I've told you before. Those clothes are too revealing. They're too old for you."

I wiggled uncomfortably. Could my mom be right? Was it wrong for me to want those clothes? Suddenly I felt like one of those women who bought the leather skirts.

I tried to justify myself. "Mom, didn't you notice? They have a new section for junior girls. You know what that means? Eight-year-olds can shop there now. So how can you say the clothes are too old for me when they make the same clothes for people younger than me? Besides, if people my age weren't supposed to wear those clothes, le château wouldn't sell them, and the seamstresses wouldn't make them in such small sizes." I thought this argument was quite brilliant, and I didn't see how my mom could refute it.

But she didn't even bother. She just sighed again and said, "Oh, Hilary. You're so naïve."

"I am not!" I said angrily. "And what does naïve mean anyway?" When she didn't answer, I exclaimed, "Lynn's sister works there!" As if that somehow made things different.

Mom looked at me incredulously, her hand on her hip. “What difference does that make? Do you honestly think I’d buy you those clothes just because Lynn’s sister works there? That’s not a good enough reason!”

“Lynn’s mom buys her clothes from there!”

“Well, that’s her business, not mine. We’re going to another store. Somewhere where the clothes are more suitable to girls your age. We’re going to Zellers!”

“Mom, no! Not Zellers!” I squealed, as if she were holding a huge, frothy-mouthed monster on a leash, about to sic it on me.

By this time, several people nearby had turned to look at us. As humiliating as it was to go to Zellers, it was better than throwing a tantrum and being dragged there by my mother. I gave the people who were staring at us a dirty look and hurried after my mom.

When we got to Zellers, she tried to interest me in what she called “the latest fashions” there. I knew she was being sarcastic, and this infuriated me. Fashions from Zellers? That was a laugh. What were they called, the Garbage Pail collection? What losers everywhere are wearing this fall.

But it soon became obvious she was going to buy me something, whether I liked it or not, so I figured I might as well at least choose which ugly clothes I had to wear. I fingered a beige-and-brown striped top.

“This is O.K.,” I said unenthusiastically.

“Let’s see.” She grabbed it and looked at the price.

“Well, I don’t like it that much—” I began, alarmed.

“This top is only eight dollars! I’m buying it!” she declared.

From there things got worse. Another horrible striped top ended up in our shopping bag, and so did a pair of hideous beige flannel pants, which I vowed never to wear. By the time we got home, we were both fuming.

“I’m never wearing these clothes!” I shouted, as we stormed in the house.

“For God’s sake, Hilary, why do you always have to do this?”

“The clothes from le château are perfectly fine for people my age!” I yelled. I spotted my dad coming from the kitchen carrying a mug of coffee and the newspaper. “Dad

would let me buy clothes from there, wouldn't you, Dad?" I asked him.

"No he wouldn't," said my mom irritably.

Dad turned around and headed back to the kitchen. I turned my wrath on my mother.

"Why did you even bring me shopping anyway? If you were going to choose all my clothes for me, why didn't you just go yourself?"

"I was trying to make you feel better," she said sharply. "I should've known it would be a mistake."

My jaw dropped. "Well, next time, don't bother trying!" I snapped.

I stomped up to my room while Mom yelled at me to take up the bags with the clothes. I grabbed the bags roughly and dragged them upstairs upside-down. One of the tops fell out and I left it lying on the stair looking mournfully up at the ceiling. When I got to my room, I threw the bags against the wall in fury and flopped down on the bed.

I lay there for a while, hoping Mom would come up to see me and either apologize or continue the fight. Either way, I didn't want to be the one to go to her. But she didn't come up, and I stayed in my room, feeling trapped. After about half an hour, my dad knocked at the door.

"Hilary? That girl from next door has come to see you. She's downstairs."

Going down to see Kallie would be a good way of leaving my room without letting my mom win. I forgot that I hadn't yet formulated a plan to escape from Kallie if I got bored. Right then, Kallie wasn't a friend or an enemy, only an escape route.

When I got downstairs, she was standing in the front hallway, barefoot, wearing polka-dot shorts and a white t-shirt.

"Guess what!" she exclaimed before I could even say hello.

"What?"

"I've almost finished putting my room together, so it's ready for you to see!"

"Great," I said, slipping on my sneakers and hurrying out before Mom could see me.

Maybe hanging out with Kallie won't be so bad, I thought. I'll get to escape from my mom, and I'll get to see Kallie's room and find out what all the fuss is about.

There wasn't much to make a fuss about downstairs. The walls were bare, and the

living room had nothing in it but a wicker table.

“Oh, we’re not finished with those rooms,” Kallie said, when she saw where I was looking. “Come up to my room.” She bounded upstairs.

“Where are your parents?” I asked.

“Out.”

My face fell. I’d been hoping to see Kallie’s mom. But luckily Kallie had her back to me so she didn’t notice my reaction.

Kallie’s room was the first on the left. Swinging open the door, she spread her arms out dramatically and exclaimed, “Ta-da!”

Although I expected something unusual, I wasn’t prepared for what greeted me in Kallie’s room. The walls and ceiling were black, and the ceiling had a pattern of white dots and lines that reminded me of the night sky. A huge hammock stretched like a crescent moon between two walls. Some sort of pulley apparatus that looked like something we’d built in science class last year was attached to the hammock at one end. In front of the French doors leading to the balcony was a telescope pointed at the stars. At least a hundred stuffed animals sat against the walls, and books and clothes lay scattered all over the floor.

“What do you think?” asked Kallie proudly.

I didn’t know what to say. It was the strangest room I’d ever been in. At first, the black walls seemed creepy, but the white dots and hammock made the room cheerful and fun, like a little kid’s room. Again it struck me that Kallie was childish, but I was also envious of her. My room looked so boring compared to hers. Finally I mumbled, “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Really? Great! I wanted to make it unusual.”

“Is that the night sky?” I asked, looking up at the ceiling.

“Yup. Those are the constellations. Razi and I finished painting them last night.”

I stared at her. “You painted them? You mean it’s not wallpaper?”

“No, but if you thought it was, we must’ve done a better job than I thought.”

“You did a great job!” I exclaimed. I looked around the room in awe. How could Kallie have painted a ceiling in such a complicated pattern? I couldn’t imagine painting a

wall so well, let alone a ceiling.

Kallie was beaming. “Thanks. We did it at night because we could see the sky then. We had a big map to help us during the day, but you can’t really get the feel of the stars without looking at them, you know?”

Actually, I didn’t know. I’d never thought about that before.

“But the real reason I asked you to come over,” said Kallie, grinning slyly, “was that I wondered if you wanted to help me paint stuff on the walls.”

For the first time, I noticed that the walls had no patterns on them.

“You want me to help paint your room?” I was surprised and kind of honoured that she’d asked. After all, she barely knew me.

“Yeah. You do know how, don’t you?” responded Kallie, with unmistakable sarcasm.

I blushed. “Of course.”

“Great! Stay there!” She dashed out of the room. While she was gone, I looked around. That’s when I realized something was missing. When Kallie came back, pushing a wooden cart with jars and tubes of paint in dozens of colours, I asked, “Uh... Kallie, where’s the bed?”

“What bed?”

I paused. “The bed you sleep on?”

“Who says I sleep on a bed?” she retorted, carefully moving some stuffed animals to the hammock.

“Well, where do you sleep?”

“On the hammock, of course.”

I was stunned. “You sleep on a hammock? Why?”

“Why not?”

“Well... isn’t it uncomfortable?” I demanded, starting to feel impatient. Why did she always have to answer my questions with another question?

“No. It’s great, especially in the summer, when it’s so hot. And you couldn’t put a bed near this window because otherwise every time you wanted to go out, you’d have to

climb over it, and that would be annoying. You can hop over a hammock or scoot under it.”

“But why do you need to have a bed in front of the window anyway?”

“So I can look out of the telescope at night. The hammock’s also great when I’m bored and I can’t fall asleep because I can swing. You can’t do that on a regular bed.”

No. I had to admit she was right about that.

“What does that thing do?” I asked, pointing to the pulley.

“Watch.” Kallie grabbed the pulley and yanked it so roughly I gasped. The hammock shot up to the ceiling, trapping the stuffed animals between the ceiling and the hammock.

Kallie was grinning. “Isn’t it great?” she asked, as she yanked the pulley again. The hammock came back down, the stuffed animals bent out of shape from their encounter with the ceiling. When she noticed this, Kallie exclaimed, “Oh, no!” and began patting their faces back into shape.

The hammock incident made me uncomfortable. And I became even more uncomfortable when I realized Kallie wasn’t in the mood to talk any more. She squirted some orange paint on the wall and began circling it around with a small brush. I didn’t want to just stand there, but I didn’t want to start painting either. Kallie was obviously a great artist. I’d always thought I was pretty good, but I knew anything I painted would look like a two-year-old’s scribbles compared to her drawings. So I walked over to the window and looked out at her backyard, hoping to find something to talk about.

“I see you have another hammock in the backyard,” I commented.

“That’s Udu. This one’s Budu.”

“You named your hammocks?”

“Yes,” she sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Why?”

She turned to me, paintbrush held over the wooden floor. The orange circle now had pink hair and green eyes, which looked at me owlishly.

Frowning, she asked impatiently, “Why do you ask so many questions? And are you going to help me paint or just stand there? Because if you’re just going to stand there, I’d

like you to stop talking. It's disturbing me." A drop of green paint rolled off the end of the brush and hit the floor.

"Oh, bugaboo!" exclaimed Kallie, which I guessed was her way of swearing. "Hey, that looks kind of good, though." She squatted down and began making a green circle on the floor.

I knew I had to either start painting or leave, and I didn't want to look like a baby by running away. So I strode across the room to the wooden cart and picked up a big paintbrush, dipping it in a jar of magenta paint. Then I started making circles on the wall, a few feet away from Kallie. Gradually the circles turned into fluffy shapes that looked like flowers from another planet.

"Hey! That's neat!" said Kallie, leaning over. "What are those?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just started making them." We painted in silence for a few minutes until I suddenly had the urge to say, "Let's call them Hambrushinas."

Kallie's head snapped up from the floor, where she'd been making the green circle into some sort of creature with many arms and eyes. "That's the first sensible thing you've said since I met you," she said. Her wide smile assured me that this was a compliment. I smiled back.

We continued painting, filling Kallie's wall with creatures, flowers, and trees in every colour on the cart. Kallie suggested leaving the uncapped tubes and open jars on the floor, in case we needed them again.

"Who's Razi, by the way?" I asked.

"My dad," she replied. I nodded. I was learning not to ask Kallie why she did the things she did.

"You shouldn't lie out in the sun too long," she said.

"How do you know about that?" I asked. Had Kallie been out in the yard without my noticing?

"I saw you from the window while I was painting."

"I put on suntan lotion."

"Yeah, but it only lasts for so long. If you stay out too long, your skin might become

all crinkly and dry like the skin of a baked chicken.”

“I guess you’re right.”

And that’s how the conversation between us went that afternoon, in short and jerky bursts. During one of these bursts, I found out Kallie was also an only child.

“Do you like being an only child?” I asked.

She frowned, as if puzzled. “Yeah. I’ve always been pretty independent, so mostly I don’t mind being by myself. And there are advantages. Your parents can give you more attention.”

“That’s true. And they give you more Christmas presents because they don’t have to buy for anyone else!” I added, grinning.

“And they treat you more like an adult.”

I was silent, thinking that Kallie didn’t know my mom very well.

“But sometimes I wish I had someone to share things with,” Kallie continued. “You know, things like stories and jokes and ideas. I share that stuff with my parents, but they’re busy with work. It’s not the same as having someone your own age who goes to school when you do and stays home when you do. It can get kind of lonely, I guess.” She stopped painting to look at me. “Do you ever get lonely?”

“Yeah,” I said, in a small voice. I wasn’t sure why I was telling Kallie this. I’d never admitted it to anyone but Lynn. And somehow this was different because Kallie was in the same situation as me, but Lynn wasn’t.

I watched Kallie for a while. She was painting the wall again, and her long legs looked like wires in her skimpy shorts. Before I could stop myself, I asked, “What kind of food do you eat?”

“Huh?” She turned around. “What do you mean?”

I collected myself. I didn’t want Kallie to know about my weight problem—although she’s probably already noticed, said the snarly voice in my head. But I really wanted to know what she ate to stay so skinny, so I said, “I mean, what’s your favourite food?”

She scratched her head. “That’s hard. I like lots of things: sour cream and onion potato chips, blue cheese, strawberries, deep-fried ice cream, hot and sour soup, coriander,

although I guess that's a spice."

"Do you like cheeseburgers?" I asked. I had a weakness for cheeseburgers. I still do.

"No! I'm a vegetarian. I don't eat meat."

I hadn't met many vegetarians, so I regarded it as something exotic. "Really? Why not?"

"I don't like having to kill things just so I can eat. It doesn't seem fair. What did a cow or a chicken ever do to me?"

I couldn't answer that argument. "How long have you been a vegetarian?"

"All my life. My parents are vegetarians."

So Kallie had never eaten a piece of meat. I couldn't help feeling she'd been deprived, but I also admired her. I didn't think I'd have the strength to give up meat. Maybe certain kinds of meat, but not cheeseburgers. Then again, I supposed it was easier for Kallie since she'd never had meat. She didn't have to face the difficulty of giving it up.

Just as I was wondering how my mother would react if I told her I was becoming a vegetarian—it involved her cooking dozens of cheeseburgers to tempt me away from my solemn vow—Kallie barked.

Or rather, she said "Woof." I wasn't sure what to do. Maybe it was some sort of cue, and I was supposed to say "Meow." I decided it was safer to pretend I hadn't heard and keep painting the wall.

"Woof!" she said angrily.

I jumped, looking around. A small black poodle was sitting between Kallie and an open jar of paint. The dog cocked its head innocently and shuffled towards Kallie.

"Good boy," she said. Then she picked up the dog, placed it on her head, and arranged its legs and tail around her face like feathers on a fancy hat. The hat clung to Kallie's head for nearly a minute while she painted purple trees. Then it stood up, leapt off her head, and sailed through the air like a flying squirrel, landing on a jar of red paint. The jar tipped over, the paint spilled, and the hat ran out the door, leaving a trail of red paw prints.

Kallie dropped her paintbrush and raced after the dog, stepping in the spreading tide of paint with one foot.

“Kallie! You stepped in the paint!” I cried.

“I’ve got to stop Woof!” she exclaimed. “He’s headed downstairs!”

For a couple of minutes, I stood there, wondering what Dear Abby would do in a situation like this. Before I could decide, a loud bark erupted nearby and an Irish wolfhound scampered into the room.

The dog and I looked at one another. Then it stepped towards me, spilling a jar of green paint. When I headed for the dog, it began wagging its tail, and green paint sprayed every which way.

“Kallie!” I screamed, ducking. “Get up here!”

But I couldn’t wait until she arrived. I had to stop the dog myself. I tried to grab it, but it scooted to the side. I chased it around the room, but I only ended up kicking over several more tubes and jars. The dog seemed to think it was some kind of game because it never once moved towards the door. Finally I lunged at the animal, and we both ended up on the hammock.

We squirmed and twisted and wiggled, flopping around like two fishes in a fishing net. Kallie ran in just in time to see me trying to clamp my arms and legs around the dog, like one of those toy koala bears that clamps around a desk lamp.

“Be careful,” I called, still struggling with the dog. “There’s paint spilled all over the floor.”

She picked her way across the room and carefully unwound the hammock. As soon as it was free, the dog leapt up and wagged its tail. I stood up wearily.

We looked around the room. Rivers of paint were coursing over almost the whole floor. Stuffed animals, books, and clothing had splashes of several new colours on them. The hammock had come undone at one end. Kallie and I were covered with paint and dog hair.

Suddenly Kallie started snickering.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded.

“You,” she giggled. “Your face. Look.” She pointed to a mirror propped up against the wall of her closet.

I stepped over to examine my face. Specks of green paint dotted my forehead and cheeks as if I’d contracted a disease from an alien.

“You look like you’ve had an outbreak of polka-dot-itis!” laughed Kallie. “Be careful. It’s very deadly,” she added, in a deep voice.

“Well, what about you?” I snorted, pointing to the streaks of red paint on Kallie’s forehead.

She leaned forward to look in the mirror and burst into laughter.

“You’re suffering from Terminal Licorice Face Syndrome!” I cackled. “Slowly, your entire body will be taken over by the Dark Lord of the Licorice!”

Soon we were bent over like accordions, laughing uncontrollably.

The wolfhound barked happily. “Oh, Fortunado,” sighed Kallie. Then she said seriously, “We’d better start cleaning this up.”

“Where’s Woof?” I asked.

“I put him in the basement. We’ll put Fortunado there too,” she said, taking hold of his collar.

“What happened downstairs?”

She gave me a see-for-yourself look.

The downstairs hall was covered with two sets of red prints, one from Woof’s paws and the other from Kallie’s left foot. It looked like a one-footed person had been chasing a rabbit.

But before we could follow the one-footed person’s route, the front door swung open and Kallie’s parents were standing in the hallway. They were smiling, but as their eyes rotated slowly around, their smiles dropped like melting play dough.

“Callisto Amonalisa Eadoin Foster,” said her mother. “What in Hades went on here?”

“I can explain,” said Kallie.

Not surprisingly, Kallie’s parents weren’t any happier when they heard the

explanation. They lectured us for several minutes on the dangers of letting dogs in a room with open jars of paint. I'd been lectured on many things before, but never on that. Somehow, though, getting a lecture from someone else's parents isn't as bad as getting a lecture from your own. Maybe because you don't have to live with the other person's parents.

Kallie's punishment was to clean up all the spilled paint. After the lecture, her dad got out some cleaning materials and showed Kallie how to apply them to the floor.

Meanwhile I was standing around awkwardly. I didn't want to scrub the floors, and now that the commotion was over and things were returning to what I supposed passed for normal in Kallie's house, I began to feel uncomfortable again. I was embarrassed about the mess I'd helped cause and about being caught by Kallie's parents, but I was also angry with Kallie. I mean, yes, we'd both left the jars open, but only she knew about the dogs. Kallie's dad was right. Why couldn't she have been more responsible? It's not like she was a little kid, although sometimes I wondered.

But just as I was contemplating making a quick exit, my mom's voice broke into my thoughts. *Hilary Laura Boles, don't you dare run away. You helped cause this mess, you help clean it up.* I suppressed a sigh and turned to Kallie.

"Can I help?" I said, in what I hoped was a pleasant tone.

Kallie's mom smiled at me. "That would be very nice of you, Hilary."

I must've spent two hours scrubbing Kallie's hall, living room, and kitchen. Fortunately Woof hadn't made it into any of the other rooms, or who knows how long I would've been there. Kallie and I also scrubbed our faces, arms and legs so we wouldn't look like freaks. There wasn't much I could do about my clothes, though. I had no idea how I was going to explain those to my mother.

Kallie saw me to the door. "I'm really sorry about everything, Hilary."

But all I said was, "Why did you put the dog on your head anyway?"

"I thought it would be safer." I gave her a look. "I trained him to sit there. Sometimes he'll sit for up to an hour while I'm reading. I thought he'd better sit there than run around on the floor. It's true," she said defensively when she could see I didn't buy it.

My look hardened. Did she really expect me to believe a story like that?

Her eyelids drooped. “Well, thanks for coming over anyway. I really enjoyed painting the walls with you. And thanks for the Hambrushinas. They’re quite idiosyncratic.”

Whatever that meant. “Well, see you around,” I said. Before she could answer, I left.

When I got home, my mom was scooping out the dinner salad, using her new tongs. She smiled when she saw me, but her expression turned to one of dismay when she took in my paint-stained clothes.

“Hilary! What happened to you?”

I paused, my hand on the banister. Under my mom’s rules, spilling paint on the floor of Kallie’s bedroom would be an offense against cleanliness and calm behaviour. I might be brought up on a charge of hooliganism. But spilling paint on the floors of the downstairs rooms was an offense against Kallie’s parents, and Mom took offenses against parents very seriously.

But if I told my mom about how Kallie had suggested leaving the jars open and how she’d put a dog on her head to stop him from spilling the paint, I knew my mom would never urge me to hang around with Kallie again. In fact she’d probably encourage me to stay away from her. The golden cheeseburger was within my reach. I could be rid of Kallie for good if I said the right thing now. I opened my mouth.

And closed it again. Maybe it was fairness to Kallie, since the whole thing had been an accident. Maybe it was guilt or fear, since I’d also left the paint jars open and didn’t want my mom to find out about that. Or maybe it was common decency, not to rat on someone else. But for whatever reason, I didn’t blow Kallie’s cover. I just said casually, “Oh. Kallie and I spilled a little bit of paint. It’s no big deal. We cleaned it up.”

“Oh.” There was a horrible pause when I thought my mom would question me further, but she turned back to the salad. “Hurry and get changed then. Dinner’s almost ready.”

After dinner, Mom and I declared a truce. Not because we’d agreed on anything, but

because she had a headache and didn't want to argue any more. I spent the evening lying on my bed, thinking about Kallie. Even though I'd spent the whole afternoon with her, I was more confused about her now than I'd been when I first met her.

Painting Kallie's walls had been fun. I hadn't spent the afternoon painting or doing any kind of art for at least two years. And that was strange when I thought about it because I really enjoyed art. It was nice to meet someone who liked it as much I did. Lynn never bothered with art or stories outside of school.

But that was the problem too. Kallie was so different from Lynn that somehow being with Kallie had only made me miss Lynn even more. And the conversation hadn't helped. Other than our interest in art, Kallie and I didn't have anything more in common today than we'd had a few days earlier. Plus no matter what my mother said, Kallie was weird. Otherwise she wouldn't sleep on a hammock. I remembered Kallie's comment about how she'd wanted the room to be unusual. Maybe that was why she did strange things. Just to be different. It didn't seem like a very good reason for doing something, though.

So I was glad to be home, lying on my bed listening to my C.D.s, flipping through some fashion magazines Lynn had leant me, and deciding which clothes I'd wear on the first day of school, if I suddenly won thousands of dollars and had a mother transplant. One thing was certain: I wouldn't be wearing the clothes I'd worn today. The paint would probably never come off. Which got me thinking that despite all the commotion, the only really terrible thing about today was that I hadn't been wearing one of my new Zellers tops.

Chapter Five: A Hilary Boles Original

The next week, I started checking the mail for postcards from Lynn. I figured by now enough time had passed for one to arrive. But when no postcard came, I went back to daydreaming about Lynn and California. Part of me enjoyed these daydreams, but another part said, Get a life. It's pathetic to keep imagining what Lynn is doing. You think she's thinking about you right now? Think again.

This part of me wondered what Kallie was doing. She hadn't been by since the paint incident, and I couldn't go over to her house until I was sure her parents had gotten over their anger at the mess we'd caused. Or at least this was what I told myself. Kallie's parents hadn't seemed terribly upset at the time. Mine would've grounded me until I'd finished a Ph.D. in Obedience to Parents.

One day when I was pulling my bike into our driveway, I saw Kallie bringing her recycling box to the curb. She waved and came over.

"How's everything going with the... you know?" I nodded towards her house.

"Oh, the paint? It took a lot of work, but it all came out. Thanks for helping."

"So I guess you're allowed out of the house now?"

She looked puzzled. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You mean you weren't grounded?"

"No. Having to clean up the paint was punishment enough. I'll never let the dogs near a can of paint again, even if it's closed. I've been helping my dad unpack and decorate for the last few days. What've you been doing?"

I shrugged. "Not much."

"Well, you're welcome to come over anytime."

I nodded. Was she inviting me over now, or was I supposed to wait a few days?

"See you!" she called, bounding towards her house.

Since Kallie wasn't grounded, I expected her to come over. Her invitation to me sounded very casual, and I wasn't sure she really meant it. Besides, I thought, she owes it to me to come over, after all the trouble she got me into on Saturday. But as the days went

by and she never came, I began to think maybe she didn't like me.

Finally I realized Kallie wasn't going to come over. Maybe she had expected me to take up her invitation, and she was angry that I hadn't done so. So, feeling like a princess who'd been asked by a slave to empty the chamber pots, I decided to call on Kallie.

When she opened the front door, she looked happy to see me, and we went upstairs. The paint cart was in the middle of her room.

"We can finish painting the other wall," she said enthusiastically. When she saw the look on my face, she added, "Don't worry. My parents said we could. We'll put the paint on the cart instead of on the floor. And the dogs are in the basement."

We spent awhile painting in silence. I was beginning to really enjoy myself. Kallie had said I could paint anything I wanted, so I did. I created several new kinds of aliens, animals, flowers, and vehicles. Sometimes I just made shapes without worrying what they were supposed to be. And I added lots of Hambrushinas in a rainbow of colours.

As I was admiring a particularly fine bronze Hambrushina, Kallie suddenly said, "So what do you like to do, Hilary?"

"What do you mean?"

"What are your hobbies? Other than art. You haven't told me much about yourself."

I didn't think there was much to say about me, but I replied, "I like reading, I guess."

"Me too! I especially love Nancy Drew. I have almost the whole set. What kind of books do you read?"

I was quiet, thinking about the new Nancy Drew book I'd bought a few weeks ago. I knew Nancy Drew wasn't cool. The coolest books, the kind Chaneí Winters read, were about some character named Ryann, whose last name I can't remember any more. Ryann was a beautiful, rich blonde who went to high school in California, drove a red sports car, and dated a hunky football player.

Lynn had lent me one of these books, and although I liked the sports car and the hunky boyfriend and the way Ryann's hair was naturally wavy, I thought that altogether it didn't make for much of a plot. Ryann didn't solve crimes. She didn't fight evil. She didn't do anything except worry about what shade of toe polish to wear for the upcoming dance.

No, I'm exaggerating. I think in this book she spilled a bottle of toe polish all over her gown, and she cried because she thought it meant she couldn't go to the dance, but then one of her friends gave her a dress. Ryann put on the dress and made a grand entrance at the dance on the arm of the football player. I remember wondering what happened to the friend, who was never mentioned again. Did she get to go to the dance? But I figured maybe she wasn't as important because she didn't have a boyfriend.

Anyway, I preferred Nancy Drew. I liked the way she always caught the bad guys by herself. I sympathized with Bess, who was always trying to lose five pounds. And I loved how in the updated version of the books Nancy wore fashionable clothes and got to kiss Ned, instead of only holding his hand. She had all the good things about Ryann, plus she fought to bring down the evil crime syndicates of the world.

But when I told Lynn how the books had been updated, she said that didn't matter. Nancy Drew might try to be cool, but she'd been too nerdy for too long to make the transition. Nancy Drew was a fake. Ryann was real. I had to admit that Lynn was right, so I promised myself this would be the last summer I read a Nancy Drew.

Kallie didn't seem to have a problem reading them, but I wasn't sure I should take her as a model for behaviour. And I was afraid if I admitted to her that I was going to stop reading Nancy Drews, she might try to change my mind. So I responded nonchalantly, "I don't know. A bit of everything, I guess." Which was a terrible lie, seeing as how I never read anything but Nancy Drew.

She wasn't discouraged by my vague answer. "What else do you like to do?"

"Go to the mall. See movies. Listen to music. Shop."

"Is that all?" She sounded disappointed.

"Why? What's wrong with doing that stuff?"

"Nothing, but it all takes place within such a small radius. I bet you shop for clothes and C.D.s at the mall, see a movie in the mall cinema, then go home and play your C.D. and try on your new clothes while talking on the phone and planning your next trip to the mall."

I frowned. This summary was accurate, but somehow Kallie had managed to make really cool activities sound boring. "Yeah. So what?" I demanded.

“So you only ever go one place: the mall. And I bet it’s the same mall, too. Don’t you ever do stuff outside or go to places like museums or galleries?”

I snorted. “A museum? Are you kidding? Who’d voluntarily go to a museum?”

“I would. And I go to the art gallery all the time. My dad exhibits stuff there.”

“What do you mean?”

“He rents space from the gallery and exhibits stuff he makes. Sometimes he’s even invited to display his pieces as part of a show.”

So Kallie’s dad was an artist. I’d never met a real live artist before. I knew people who did pottery or hooked rugs for church bazaars, but I’d never met anyone who had exhibited something in a gallery. It was like meeting a famous author. I looked at the walls thoughtfully.

“Is that how you got so interested in art? Because your dad’s an artist?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess,” she responded. “I’ve just always been interested in art, as long as I can remember. How did you get into art?”

“Well, my dad’s definitely not an artist!” I laughed, thinking of the time I’d started crying because I didn’t know how to draw a dog for a grade three art assignment. My dad had drawn one for me. It looked like a water balloon with pancakes for feet. When I’d seen my dad’s drawing, I’d cried even harder. “But I’ve always enjoyed doing art and writing stories,” I continued. And before I knew it, I found myself telling Kallie about my collage.

When I’d finished, she asked, “Would you mind showing it to me?”

“Of course. I mean no, I wouldn’t mind. If you’d really like to see it.”

“I would.”

Five minutes later, we were climbing the staircase to my room. My heart began beating quickly as I wondered what Kallie would think of my collage. Opening the closet door, I lifted the collage carefully and put it on my desk. Then I waited for her reaction.

She frowned, stepped forward, and examined it. She peered into the cracks of the lampshade and put her face close to the items on the cardboard, rotating her head up and down, as rhythmically as a lawnmower. Finally I couldn’t stand the suspense any longer.

“Well?” I asked timidly.

She stepped back as if she'd been struck. "It's beautiful, Hil. It's absolutely beautiful."

"You really think so?" I asked, my voice catching.

"Yeah. It's awesome. I love the way you've used different materials, colours, textures, and shapes to symbolize the variegated and chaotic nature of life."

"Uh... yeah. That's what I was going for." I had no idea what she meant, but at least she wasn't being sarcastic.

"You know, my dad made some collages a couple of years ago. I believe we still have them in the basement. Want to see them?"

We spent the rest of the day at Kallie's, looking at the collages. Kallie had made one too. "But," she said, "it's not as good as yours." And it was true. Her cardboard had lots of neat stuff on it, but it didn't have the variety mine did. And it didn't have a lampshade. To think that my collage was even a bit better than Kallie's made me feel... I don't know how to describe it except to say I was more comfortable with myself than I'd been in a long time.

Later, Kallie asked, "By the way, why did you tell me you don't write stories?"

"What do you mean?"

"When we first met, you said you don't write stories, but today you said you do. How come?"

I remembered telling Kallie I didn't write stories, but I hadn't realized I'd corrected the lie. I couldn't think of another lie to tell to explain this, so I told the truth. "I do write stories, but only for school. I stopped writing them on my own a long time ago."

Kallie looked disappointed, and I saw my own disappointment reflected in her eyes, as if I were looking at a part of myself. I turned away.

A couple of days later, Kallie came over and asked whether I wanted to make wooden boxes. Ever since I'd shown her the collage, I'd begun to think maybe Kallie wasn't so bad after all and it would be O.K. to hang out with her, even if she wasn't interested in boys or movies or fashion. But only until Lynn got back. Then I wouldn't really need Kallie.

Kallie and I spent the day painting designs on old scraps of wood leftover from a piece her dad had made a few months earlier. Then she showed me her father's studio, which was one of the upstairs bedrooms. Her dad was often at home, working in his studio. He helped us make our boxes by nailing the pieces of wood together and screwing hinges into the wood so the box could open and close.

Unfortunately, Kallie's mom wasn't usually around because she worked all day at a computer company downtown. "She's a Senior Software Engineer," said Kallie proudly. I thought it was pretty cool that Kallie had a mom who was a software engineer with a Ph.D. from Waterloo. It was especially cool given the way Kallie's mom looked. She seemed more like she should be gathering flowers on a Caribbean island than sitting in an office in downtown Toronto. At the time, I was aware that these attitudes were Jurassic. I mean, I knew there was no reason women, including pretty women like Kallie's mom, couldn't be software engineers. But still, I didn't know many women who had these kinds of jobs. You know, jobs that involved science or math. Neither my mom nor Lynn's worked outside the house. Ryann's mother was a model. I didn't know what Chanel Winters's mom did, but I was pretty sure it didn't involve math or science.

But Kallie's mom wasn't only into computers. She had an artistic streak. The room next to the studio was a sewing room, where she made clothes using her own designs. And the times I did see her, she was super nice. She asked me questions about my schoolwork and my hobbies, she made lunches and snacks for Kallie and me, she even showed us how to dye material. Soon Kallie's mom was second only to Chanel Winters in my list of People I Wanted to be Like.

And one of the coolest things about Kallie's parents was that they let Kallie call them Razi and Calypso instead of Dad and Mom. I wondered why my mom didn't do things like design clothes or cook Chinese vegetarian meals or paint or let me call her by her first name.

"How come you don't paint?" I asked her once.

"What are talking about?" she retorted. "Didn't you notice the new colour of the kitchen table and chairs?"

"Yeah, but that's not real painting. You should paint for fun. You should paint a

picture to put in the living room.”

My mom rolled her eyes. “I don’t have time to paint for fun, Hilary. I’ve got too much to do around here.”

Another time when I came back from Kallie’s, I asked my mom how she’d feel if I started calling her Sylvia instead of Mom.

“I wouldn’t like it,” she answered.

I sighed. My mom was just not as cool as Kallie’s mom, and I had to learn to accept that.

I lay on my bed, scowling. Mrs. Carmel had called. The babysitting job had fallen through. Again. Oh, I guess I forgot to mention Mrs. Carmel. She was this lady I’d been hoping to babysit for. But every time we arranged for me to sit, she ended up cancelling. This time she explained that it was nothing to do with me, but one of the kids had the flu and she didn’t feel she could leave him... blah blah blah. I knew the real reason she’d cancelled. She’d gotten an offer from someone older than me. For some reason, there was a surplus of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds in our neighbourhood at the time. And people preferred to hire them because they had more experience. But how was I supposed to get experience if no one would hire me in the first place? I’d asked myself and my mom this many times, but neither of us had an answer.

As you probably know, other than babysitting, there aren’t many options for employment for twelve-year-olds, except for mowing lawns, which I thought was more of a guy thing. And I needed to make money. My allowance was a pathetic five dollars a week. It wouldn’t even buy a C.D. or a ticket to a Friday night movie. And it definitely wouldn’t buy anything decent at le château. How was I supposed to survive junior high without some cash?

Then one day I had a brainstorm. Not just any old brainstorm. A big, loud thunderstorm with zigzagging lightning and high winds. And it happened at the Art Gallery of Ontario, of all places.

Kallie’s dad was bringing a piece to the gallery for a show. She asked me to go with

them, and I eagerly agreed. As I was walking over to meet them, I saw Kallie helping her dad lift some kind of machine into the trunk of their car.

Then Kallie's dad went back in the house. I peered into the trunk. I'd never seen this kind of machine before. It looked like a rolling pin in between two wooden boards.

"It's the wringer part of a wringer washer," explained Kallie.

I remembered the noise I'd heard when Kallie was moving in. "Is this the thing you guys were trying to start up in your driveway?"

She looked surprised that I knew. "Yes. It's my dad's exhibit."

I frowned. "Why is he exhibiting an old washing machine?"

"Well, he fixed it up so it looks like the printer of a computer. The paper goes in there." She pointed to a tray that jutted out at the bottom of the machine. "That wasn't part of the wringer, my dad added it. That thing that looks like a rolling pin has ink and typeset on the bottom. The paper feeds under the rolling pin like the paper on a printer goes under the mechanisms in the printer. My mom built a mechanism so the paper goes in and out without us having to feed it. We just press a button on the side of the machine there. The noise you heard was us testing out the mechanism."

"So this used to be a washing machine?"

"Part of one. The clothes were washed in another part, then you put them under that rolling pin and pulled them through. It squeezed all the water out." She stepped back to examine the piece. "It symbolizes the changing yet unchanging nature of society and technology," she said grandly.

When Kallie's dad came out, he was carrying computer paper. After he'd secured the wringer in the trunk, we got in the car. Kallie held the paper proudly.

Weird, I thought.

When we arrived at the art gallery, a guard unlocked the front door for us and the curator meet us there with a trolley for the wringer. He greeted Kallie and her dad, so I guessed that Kallie had been there before. We followed the curator up a ramp and through a long hall divided into different rooms housing glass cases and paintings. Finally we came to a room where other people were gathered and items resembling machines sat on raised

platforms. When the people turned to greet Kallie's dad, I realized that they were also artists and the machines were their work. They were displaying pieces as part of a special exhibition on technology.

Meanwhile Kallie and I were standing in the neighbouring room, staring at paintings by Picasso. This was my first time seeing Picasso's paintings. I kind of liked them because somehow they reminded me of my collage, but I found them very strange. The people in the paintings didn't look real. They had one eye three inches higher than the other and mouths twisted like candy canes.

Kallie's dad spoke with the curator and then came back to us. He told us he was going to set up his work and it might take awhile, so the curator had given us permission to wander around the gallery if we wanted, provided we stayed on the first floor and didn't touch anything. I felt like we'd been given permission to spend the night in a department store. We scurried back to the beginning of the long hall, exchanging secret smiles.

Kallie's dad didn't have to worry about us wandering off to another floor because we were riveted by what we saw in the first room. The glass cases housed hundreds of objects from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: miniature portraits, little pistols, combs, ornately carved cups made out of coconut. We were fascinated by the objects relating to astronomy, like the astrolabe (which, as far as I can remember, is something they used to measure the altitude of the sun) and the sundial, all made of gold.

"All this stuff must be so valuable," I breathed, gazing at the sundial. "I wonder how much you'd get if you made something like that and sold it."

"Who knows," said Kallie, moving on to the next case.

And that's when it struck me. Maybe Kallie and I could make money by selling the boxes we'd made.

We'd already made six this week. Granted, the boxes weren't as valuable as the gold sundial, but they had to be worth something. If we sold them for ten dollars apiece, that would be thirty dollars each right there. And if I made two boxes a day every day until the end of the summer, that would be over a hundred boxes. I did a quick mental calculation. I could make a thousand dollars selling boxes! O.K., maybe that was a bit optimistic. I

might not be able to sell all of them. But even if I only sold ninety, that would still be nine hundred dollars! And after all, I figured, I might as well get something out of making them.

An hour later, as all three of us emerged onto Dundas and breathed in the fresh garbage smell of Toronto in the summer, I told Kallie about my great idea.

But she wasn't enthusiastic. "I don't know, Hil. I'm not sure I want to sell them. I don't know if I can."

"Why not? Besides, will you really use all of them? How many boxes can you possibly need?"

"I only made three—"

"Yeah, but you're going to make more, right? So if you sell some of them, you can make room in your house for other kinds of art."

She twisted her mouth to one side. "All right. If you really want to, we can try selling some of them."

The next day, I decided Kallie and I would set up a stand downtown. People sold all kinds of things in little stalls downtown, from exotic vegetables to nose rings, so there had to be room for us and our wooden boxes.

When I came into the kitchen for lunch, I noticed my mom admiring one of my boxes.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

She ran her fingers along the small red Hambrushinas I'd painted on the box's side. "It's lovely."

"Do you want to have it?"

She smiled. "Yes, I would. Thank you, Hilary."

"Great. That'll be ten dollars, please."

She laughed an insulted little laugh.

"Kallie and I are going to sell the boxes," I explained, "so I can make money for junior high, since as I don't have any income worth mentioning now." We exchanged a look.

"I see. And even mothers have to pay?"

“I’m sorry, Mom, but if I’m going to be a businesswoman, I can’t make any exceptions. I won’t get rich by giving things away,” I lectured, as if I were an expert on the subject.

“And where exactly do you plan to sell these boxes?”

“Downtown. We’re going to get a stand. And I bet you’re going to ask me where we’ll get the stand. I’ve already thought of that. Kallie has tons of cardboard boxes and pieces of wood in her basement, so we’re going to build one.”

My mom just looked at me and said quietly, “You’d need a permit from the City.”

I hadn’t thought about that. “Would I have to pay for it?”

“Yes. Anyway, it’s a moot point because they wouldn’t give one to you. You’re too young. You’d have to be at least eighteen.”

That age thing again! But I wasn’t sure whether my mom was telling the truth or whether she just wanted to stop me from becoming an entrepreneur and escaping from her financial clutches, so I huffed, “Well, we’ll just see about that!”

I decided to phone the City myself and find out. But the person there just told me the same thing my mom had said: you had to be at least eighteen to get a permit.

It didn’t take me long to think of a new plan. We could still have a stand. It just didn’t have to be downtown. We could put it at the end of the driveway, like a lemonade stand. Sure, it was a bit childish, but our neighbourhood had lots of cyclists and walkers, so we were bound to get many customers.

Kallie and I constructed a makeshift stand out of cardboard boxes. She was quiet, so I guessed she wasn’t enthusiastic about my plan. I tried to get her involved, but she didn’t respond, so I gave up. Fine, I thought. Let her sulk if she wants. But she’ll have to eat flannel when our stand makes money and she becomes rich, thanks to me.

I made a fancy banner for the stand: Hilary Boles and Callisto Foster Originals. The next morning, we hauled the stand to the end of my driveway. Then we sat in the sun and continued making boxes while we waited for customers.

And waited. And waited. People zipped by on bikes or strolled past. But no one stopped at our stand until the afternoon, when an old lady who was walking so slowly the

hare would've beaten her minced towards us.

I stood up and smiled invitingly. When the woman greeted me, I recognized her as Mrs. Carruthers, who'd lived on my street forever. Mrs. Carruthers was like a staircase; she was there, but you never thought about her.

Kallie introduced herself and they began talking. Then Kallie showed Mrs. Carruthers the boxes, describing each one in detail, and Mrs. Carruthers oohed and aahed over our fine craftsmanship. I grew impatient with her doddering and wished she would decide. Finally she choose one of Kallie's boxes.

As she paid, she kept talking, asking me what grade I was in, telling me how I'd grown, the usual stuff. I tried to be polite, but I didn't want to talk to her. Finally she wished us luck and said it was nice to see me again. I smiled weakly and watched her totter away on her cane.

Flush with the success of having sold one box, we set up the stand the next day. But it was late again before we had a customer, when a guy on a bike pulled up.

He must've been in his mid-twenties, dressed in spandex biking gear with black shorts and a multi-coloured shirt. And from the size of his muscles, he obviously worked out at a gym. I stood up, pushing my hair behind my ears. "Would you like to buy a box?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think I'll get one for my roommate. He likes these kinds of things." He picked up a box with a pattern of intricate turquoise flowers. One of Kallie's. She smiled.

"There's also these." I pointed to mine.

He glanced at them. "Naw, I like this one better. How much is it?"

"Ten dollars," I responded.

The guy laughed like a hyena on helium. "You got to be kidding! For this?"

I scoffed. "I'll have you know that you are holding a Hilary Boles Original, and they're not cheap."

Kallie opened her mouth, but I shot her a look.

"Yeah, right, kid." My face went crimson. He placed the box on the counter and hopped back on his bike. We watched him until he'd rounded a curve and was lost to sight.

“You should’ve bargained with him,” she said quietly.

“And lower our standards? No way! If he’s not willing to shell out enough money, who needs him, anyway?” But as I looked down the empty street, I wasn’t convinced.

“And why did you tell him that was one of your boxes? You know it was one of mine.”

“Oh, lighten up,” I sighed. “It’s not like he bought it. He’ll never know the difference.”

When we hadn’t had any more customers by the end of the day, Kallie said she didn’t want to set up the stand again.

“Face it, Hil, we’re not going to make any money this way.”

I had to admit she was right. “Well, don’t worry,” I assured her, even though I could see she wasn’t. “I’ll come up with something.”

That night I had my last brainstorm. If this didn’t work, that was it. I’d short-circuited.

I decided to contact YTV and see if the people there could help me. After all, the station did give awards to young people who’d made exceptional contributions to society, including entrepreneurs. I visited the YTV website to read about past winners. A guy in Alberta who started his own restaurant. Two girls in P.E.I. who operated a successful cat-sitting service. I can do this, I thought. I pictured a modest beginning in a stand downtown (because the YTV people would convince the City to put aside rules that discriminated against the young), then customers discovering our product, liking it so much they came back for more, telling their relatives, co-workers and mail deliverers to come, and finally a booming business, Kallie and I working frantically to keep up....

And of course we’d be nominated for a YTV Achievement Award. The website said the nominees would be flown to the city where the awards were held. I pictured myself arriving at a huge theatre in New York or L.A. (the fact that the station was Canadian escaped me at the time), a theatre bigger than the Pantages. I’d be clad in a low-cut strapless gown of magenta silk made by a top Italian designer or by Kallie’s mom if I couldn’t afford the designer (because although my daydreams got pretty wild, they always had some basis

in reality). *That's Hilary Boles*, enunciated a well-known T.V. personality as I glided past, waving to the adoring masses, *Ms. Boles is the youngest nominee here*. And when—not if—I won, I'd step gracefully to the stage to accept my cash reward and gold statuette.... Visions of my dazzling success made me cocky. Restaurants, cat-sitting service, ha! I thought. These people were amateurs! Wait till they saw my boxes!

If only I could get started. But since YTV gave out awards for young entrepreneurs, I figured the people there would help me get started becoming an entrepreneur. Maybe they could talk to their friends at other T.V. stations and get me on to the Home Shopping Network. So I sent an e-mail to the station explaining my situation and requesting help. Then, very pleased with myself, I went to bed, and dreamt that while I was accepting my award, a giant gold chandelier came crashing down on my head.

The next morning I went over to Kallie's and gave her all the details of my plan.

"That's great, Hil," she said, "but after you hear what I have to say, you might change your mind."

"You're not going to tell me you don't want to do this? Come on, Kallie, I can't do it without you!"

"No, it's something completely different. Hilary, would you be interested in posing for my dad?"

For the first time I could remember, I was speechless. My lips moved but no sound came out, like a goldfish pressed up against a tank. Finally I sputtered, "You mean with no clothes on?"

"No!" she said sharply. "What do you think he is, some kind of perv?"

My face flushed.

Kallie collected herself. "I'm sorry, I should've explained it to you first. My dad's doing this collage, and he's planning to put some faces on it. He'd like to sketch your face. It would only take a few minutes."

"So... my face would be on his collage?"

"Kind of. It would be rearranged, like the faces in Picasso's paintings. It wouldn't

be an exact representation of your face, more like the inner essence of you as revealed in your face.”

“The inner essence?”

“Yeah. What’s inside you. Your personality, your spirit, your soul.”

I shifted my weight. “Why does he want me?”

“He said you had an interesting face.” I felt the flush deepen. “Don’t worry, he only wants to sketch your face. He just thought that because you’re interested in art, you might like to be part of his latest project. It’s no big deal. My mom and I pose for him all the time.”

“Yeah, I know it’s not a big deal,” I said, not very convincingly.

“He’d pay you,” added Kallie.

Somehow that made it worse. I felt as if someone were trying to rent me. “Pay me?”

“Unless you don’t want to be paid? But I thought you wanted to make money. See, that’s what I was thinking, you could pose instead of trying to sell the boxes.”

“But then you wouldn’t make money.”

“I don’t care.”

I couldn’t think of another objection. Everything Kallie had said made sense, but there was something about the situation that made me uncomfortable. So I told her I’d have to think about it.

“Sure. And if you don’t feel comfortable with the idea, don’t feel like you have to accept,” she said.

We spent the afternoon dressing up in old costumes. Kallie had a whole trunk full in the basement. We acted out some kind of play where I was a princess desired by the richest men of some faraway land and Kallie was my servant. Usually I would’ve loved playing the princess role, but today I wasn’t in the mood. In fact it only made me feel worse. I was glad when it was dinner time and I had to leave.

Just as I was opening the front door, a voice called, “Hilary!”

At first I couldn’t see who it was because the open door of the basement cast a shadow. But I could tell it was someone tall, probably a man, and he was heading right for

me. When the figure stepped out of the shadow and I recognized Kallie's dad, I exhaled. Then I remembered how he'd wanted me to pose for him. I began to pick at my nails.

"Good evening," he said in his deep voice. "Did Kallie tell you about my proposal?"

I nodded. He looked at me as if he were trying to figure me out. Then his expression softened so that he resembled a kindly old man. He looked at his daughter.

"If you like, Kallie can come and sit with you while you pose." She nodded. "Your parents are also welcome to come and watch." I was silent. "Well, you think about it. There's no pressure. I would be honoured to sketch your face, but if you don't feel comfortable, we'll forget we mentioned the idea."

I managed to croak out a thank you before I hurried home.

That night, I thought things over. Up until now, I'd liked being around Kallie's dad. I didn't know him that well, but he did silly things like hum "Flight of the Bumblebee" or make jokes with us as he drove us to the art gallery. And he'd helped us make the boxes. He was goofy and normal, like my dad.

But then I imagined him behind a sketchbook, holding a pencil, me standing in the middle of his studio, my arms wrapped around myself, his narrow gaze stripping away every object in the room but me as he slashed firm lines across the paper.... And the idea of having an audience made it even worse. Suddenly an image of me in the magenta gown, waving to fans at the YTV awards, intruded itself in my mind. The thought of me in that dress made me tremble. What had I been thinking, wanting to draw attention to my body? What would people at school have said, if they'd seen me on T.V. like that?

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that Kallie's dad just wanted to sketch my face, not my body. But how did I know his sketch wouldn't make me look even worse? What if my inner essence translated into a cone head with a square nose? No. I couldn't do it. I'd just have to tell Kallie no.

And then with a sinking feeling I remembered YTV and the boxes. What if I did get nominated for a YTV award? My mom would never forgive me if I didn't attend the ceremony, and Lynn would never forgive me if I wore a babyish dress picked out by my mother. But it wasn't only the dress that bothered me. It was the thought of me everywhere,

my name stamped onto wooden boxes, my picture in the newspaper, my voice on the radio.... All Hilary Boles, all the time. I couldn't stand the thought of being exposed like that. I had to stop this boxes project before it went too far.

"Hilary," said a voice. I jumped. My mom was standing in the doorway. "Don't look so scared, I'm not coming to ask you to do any chores. I just wanted to tell you there's an e-mail for you from YTV."

The e-mail was from the station manager.

"Dear Hilary, We applaud your initiative in writing to us to request an interview for help with your business. Unfortunately, much as we would like to, YTV does not have time to meet with each hopeful entrepreneur. We suggest you contact the City for assistance. They have programs that can provide guidance for young business people. Good luck with your entrepreneurial venture. We hope to see you at the YTV Achievement Awards!"

Fat chance, I thought. And contact the City, of all places! Normally I would've been furious, but right now I was so relieved I laughed like a pack of chimps. I'd been saved from total humiliation. Now all I had to do was figure out a way to tell Kallie I didn't want to pursue our project.

The next morning, I was back at Kallie's. We were pretending to be two elves heading a resistance movement against an evil emperor (a stuffed bear with a lopsided bow tie). As we were sitting on Kallie's balcony, drinking a dexterity potion (fruit punch) and eating manna (a vegetarian pizza we'd ordered with Mrs. Carruthers's ten dollars), I began hesitantly, "Kallie? I've been thinking about the whole posing thing and well, I'm sorry but... I don't really want to do it."

"That's O.K.," she said easily. "I kind of expected you wouldn't want to, after what you said yesterday."

"You mean you're not upset?" Then I remembered Kallie's dad and how his face had softened when he'd looked at me. I added, "And your dad won't be either?"

"Of course not. It was just an idea. It's not anything to make a big deal about."

I exhaled. But I wasn't free yet. I still hadn't figured out how to tell Kallie about my decision to abandon the box scheme. Kallie was smart. She might deduce that there was

a connection between me not wanting to pose and not wanting to sell the boxes. And even if I wanted to, how could I explain this connection? I didn't understand it myself.

But before I had to say anything, Kallie announced, "Hil, I have something to tell you too. Don't be mad, but I don't want to sell the boxes any more. I know I said I'd sell mine, but I just can't let go of them. They're mine. I created them. I don't know if you can understand that, but that's the way I feel about my work."

"I do understand." And the strange thing was, as soon as I said that, I began to understand. I thought of my collage. I couldn't sell that, not for all the clothes in le château.

She sighed. "My dad said that's not realistic because if you want to be an artist—an artist who makes money anyway—you have to be willing to part with your work to galleries or to new owners, like my dad does. But I guess I'm just not ready for that. And when we were sitting outside making more boxes, I wasn't enjoying myself. See, the neatest thing about art for me is that I can make whatever I want, whenever I want. If I have to make the same stuff, it gets boring."

"Are you sure you don't want to?" I asked, pretending I had to be convinced to abandon the project.

"Positive. But don't let me stop you."

"Oh, that's O.K.," I said quickly. "I was getting kind of bored of it too." I decided not to mention how YTV had turned us down. Kallie didn't need to know about our rejection. "Besides," I added, "it was supposed to be a partnership. I wouldn't feel right doing it without you."

She smiled brightly. "Thanks, Hil. That's really nice."

I bowed my head so she wouldn't see the patch of red creeping over my face. But I wasn't blushing for the reason you think. I was remembering how I'd pictured myself on stage, accepting the YTV award alone, despite all I'd said about partnership.

Chapter Six: Sandball

Although my scheme to turn us into wooden box magnates had failed, my friendship with Kallie grew stronger. And that's what it was. A friendship. When I think about it, I'm still not sure how it happened, but sometime during those hot days in late July, Kallie became my friend. Maybe it was the fiasco at the beach that first made me think of her that way.

Sorry. I've got to stop getting ahead of myself. I'm forgetting I haven't told you about what happened at the beach yet. But whether it happened before or after the beach incident, I stopped thinking of Kallie as a tool to stave off boredom. I went over to her house because I wanted to see her, not because I had nothing better to do. Kallie's world was fascinating to me, full of new colours, shapes, smells, and ideas, and I was drawn to it as I would be to a bright, shimmering fabric from another land.

Then one day I received a postcard from Lynn. By this time, I'd given up waiting for one, and a dull anger was brooding somewhere cold and deep inside me. Mostly this anger stayed buried because I was too occupied with Kallie's latest plans to think about it. But sometimes, in those few minutes before I went to sleep, this anger would simmer, and I'd wonder how my "best friend" was doing. I figured she must be extremely busy, not to have time to send me even one postcard.

The postcard arrived over a month after Lynn had left. But my anger lessened as I looked at the card, which showed the shops on Rodeo Drive in L.A. Eagerly, I turned it over and read:

"Hey Hil! L.A. is like so cool! You'd love it here. I love it here! I want to live here! I haven't seen Damian Sámos yet, but I'll keep looking! Friends, Lynn"

I couldn't believe it. I'd waited a month for this? A few pathetic lines that said almost nothing. No explanation of what she'd been doing the past month or why she hadn't written. No mention of whether she missed me. No questions about how I was doing. It's the most selfish thing I've ever heard of, I huffed to myself.

That postcard only made me more eager to hang around with Kallie. Not only

because she was so much more thoughtful than Lynn—I remembered how cool she’d been about me not wanting to pose for her dad—but also because I thought that by hanging around with Kallie, I’d be punishing Lynn for not paying attention to me. Where only a few weeks earlier, I’d been criticizing Kallie for being too different from Lynn, now I wished Lynn would be more like Kallie. Kallie has more important things to do than shop, I thought, forgetting that this was my main hobby.

Kallie and I did do different things together, stuff I would never have thought of myself. Sometimes I wasn’t eager to do the things Kallie suggested, but she always ended up persuading me to do them. And I wasn’t usually disappointed. Like the time we went to Mackenzie House.

When Kallie asked if I wanted to go to Mackenzie House, I had no idea what it was. I thought it might be a 24-hour pancake restaurant or a discount store like Honest Ed’s. But Kallie explained that it was where William Lyon Mackenzie used to live.

“Who’s that?” I wondered.

She stared at me. “William Lyon Mackenzie? The leader of the 1837 rebellion? Our school’s named after him.”

I groaned. “You mean it’s a museum?”

“Kind of.”

“Kallie, I don’t want to go to a museum.”

Kallie spent the next ten minutes telling me that Mackenzie House was filled with fascinating things—it had a real live print shop, she enthused—and we should learn about the house’s history because when we studied Mackenzie at school next year we’d know things the other students wouldn’t and it would be nice to go downtown instead of always hanging around here... and I ended up agreeing to go, mainly for the last reason.

But when Kallie’s dad dropped us off in front of a box-like building with shuttered windows, I lost the little zeal I’d had for seeing Mackenzie House. Kallie’s dad had driven down Yonge and I’d beheld the Eaton’s Centre in all its glory. Rarely had I been so close to this marvel without my mother around. Kallie’s dad had to go to the gallery and he wouldn’t be back to pick us up for an hour-and-a-half. We could make an escape to the

Eaton's Centre. I suggested this to Kallie.

She frowned. "But we came downtown to see Mackenzie House. You agreed."

"I know, but it'll be so boring. Let's go to the mall. There's tons of stuff to do there!"

"I'm sorry, Hil, but I'm really in the mood to see Mackenzie House. We'll go to a mall another time. I promise." When she saw my dejected expression, she said, "Look, if you really want to go to the mall, go. Just meet me back here in an hour-and-a-half."

I hovered, wondering whether I should take off. But I chickened out and followed Kallie under the arch into the side courtyard.

We entered a narrow room where there were books for sale. A smiling woman in a black dress, white apron and bonnet took our money and told us we were right in time for the tour. Even the people who work here are antiques, I thought, frowning at the woman's outfit. Then another woman wearing the same costume led us up some steep stairs and into a dusty-looking parlour. We were the only people on the tour, which made me feel like an even bigger geek.

"I'd like to welcome you both to Mackenzie House, former home of William Lyon Mackenzie," our tour guide began. "My name is Ann [here I should point out that I don't know whether she spelled Ann with or without an "e" but I'm going to spell it without] and I'll be giving you a tour of the house and the print shop. Now have both of you heard of Mackenzie before?"

Kallie answered "yes" eagerly and I forced myself to nod instead of rolling my eyes. What did she think I was, a ten-year old? Of course I'd heard of Mackenzie.

"Great. You might already know the history of Mackenzie, but just to recap: Mackenzie was a journalist and politician who came to Canada in 1820, when Ontario was called Upper Canada. At that time, a group nicknamed the Family Compact was in charge. They controlled everything: politics, the law courts, even the church. Now most of the members of this group were related, which is why they were called the *Family Compact*, and they wouldn't allow anyone else to have any power. Mackenzie didn't think this was fair, and he argued against it in his newspaper—"

Blah blah blah. Was there a more boring way to spend a morning? I wondered what Lynn was doing... until I remembered that postcard. The person who goes to cool places doesn't pay attention to me any more, and the person who pays attention to me drags me to places like this, I thought. Great.

"... friends bought it for him for \$3500."

What? I asked the tour guide to repeat that last part.

"Mackenzie's friends bought him this house for \$3500," she said. "Which, in those days, was a lot of money. It's as if someone bought you a house at market prices today."

"Wish I had a friend who'd buy me a house," I muttered.

Kallie smiled and Ann laughed. "Yeah, me too," said Ann. "A house would come in handy. Then I could finally move out of residence."

I was about to ask her where she went to school when she led us upstairs. I stomped up the stairs until I realized how creaky and uneven the floors were. Then I stepped gingerly, listening to the different moan each stair made, like a separate voice. The rooms upstairs looked just as dusty as the parlour, though they had some O.K. stuff in them, like one of those pitchers called a ewer that people used to carry water to wash their faces.

Ann continued talking about Mackenzie's life and where different things in each room had come from. None of what she was saying caught my attention until she mentioned that when Mackenzie lived here, he and his family had to use things called bed warmers because the house wasn't heated.

"Not heated at all?" I gasped.

She shook her head. "That's why they had fireplaces in so many rooms. They heated up bed warmers and lay them at the bottom of the beds so ice wouldn't form on the bed during the night."

I shivered. And I complained about our house being cold during the winter.

"Is that where he died? In that bed?" asked Kallie, leaning over the railing for a better look.

"That's right," responded Ann.

Kallie and I exchanged a secret smile. I felt a ghoulish delight in seeing a bed where

someone kind of famous had died, but also a sense of awe. The person our school was named after had died a few feet away from me. My sense of awe was brief, but it was there.

The kitchen, which was in the basement, was filled with neat little gadgets for cooking, like tiny cupcake trays. When Ann pointed to one object and explained that it was a chestnut roaster, I pictured a squirrel hunched over it, roasting chestnuts like people roast marshmallows, wearing a little scarf to keep itself warm during the icy winters of the nineteenth century. It's too bad these tools are so dusty, I thought, looking at the copper pans hanging beside the big iron stove. No one would want to eat off them. And then—and I still don't know why I did this, except that I thought a cupcake tray that wasn't being used was a tragic thing—I found myself telling this to Ann.

“Oh but we do use some of them,” she responded. “We have cooking classes here a few times a year. We show people how to make chocolate and biscuits using genuine nineteenth-century methods of cooking, complete with period tools. We even use the stove.”

I squinted and looked harder at the cupcake trays. What did you know. They weren't as dusty as I thought.

As the last part of our tour, we visited the print shop at the end of the room filled with books. Ann explained how the printing press worked and how the apprentice to the publisher had to set each letter of each word by hand. It was painstaking to produce a newspaper, Ann told us, and when it was all printed and delivered, very few people could read it because most people didn't know how to read in those days. Imagine, I thought, they could never have read a Nancy Drew book. I began to wonder what girls my age did for fun in those days. They didn't have malls or T.V. and most of them couldn't read. They couldn't even go to Mackenzie House.

Ann let Kallie set some typeface and crank the wheel of the printing press, and when she was done, Kallie had made a banner saying, “Kallie Foster and Hilary Boles visited Mackenzie House on July 31st, 1993.” I hadn't asked Kallie to put my name on it, but I was glad she did. As Kallie browsed the book shelves, I talked with Ann. She told me she was a history student at York and this was her summer job. When I asked how she liked working there and wearing that costume, she laughed.

“The costume does get a little hot, but it’s fun to wear. It’s like getting paid to play dress up. And I was so tired of working in fast-food places in malls. It’s nice to get away from the crowds and the noise. I hang out there enough with my friends.”

When I didn’t respond, she smiled.

When Kallie and I left Mackenzie House, there was still another half hour before her dad was due to pick her up. Kallie asked whether I wanted to go to the Eaton’s Centre, but the strange thing was I wasn’t in the mood anymore. So we sat in the courtyard beside a patch of blooming tiger lilies and Kallie read from a book of ghost stories she’d bought.

Later she me asked whether I’d enjoyed the visit, and to my surprise, I said yes. I mean, don’t get me wrong. Mackenzie House wasn’t the Eaton’s Centre, but Kallie was right. There were some interesting things there. After all, any place that offered lessons on how to cook chocolate couldn’t be totally lame.

But I promised you I’d tell you about the time Kallie and I went to the beach.

As usual, it all started with an idea of Kallie’s. We’d been playing this elaborate show set in the year 2305 on several planets in a parallel universe. No, not the one where we were elves in a resistance movement. In this one, we each acted at least twenty different roles, from good sorceresses to evil princesses to cute furry things to wise old trees. I liked acting so many roles because I got to say and do things I couldn’t in real life, like tell off a snorthog (a creature Kallie and I made up. I don’t remember what it looked like, but I still like the name) and pretend the snorthog was my mom or rescue a handsome wounded knight from a sticky green pool of quicksand poison, which was about to suck him into a vortex of death. I also loved wearing so many costumes, especially because I thought some of them made me look O.K., even kind of pretty. Of course these were the ones that covered up most of my body.

Anyway, we were playing this one day when Kallie announced, in that enthusiastic way of hers, “Want to go to the beach this Friday, Hil?”

I felt like she’d handed me a chocolate cupcake. “I’d love to!” This was the best suggestion Kallie had made yet. But it got better.

“Great! Now we just have to think of what to wear!” she exclaimed.

I couldn’t believe it. Kallie was getting interested in fashion. This was what I’d been hoping for since I’d met her. “I’d be happy to help you out in any way I can,” I said eagerly. “Do you want to go shopping?” I imagined myself taking Kallie to the mall, showing her my favourite stores, helping her pick out the coolest ensembles. I almost felt—not exactly, but almost—that if Kallie could get interested in boys and clothes and music, I’d like her as much as I liked Lynn.

But I didn’t get that opportunity right then because Kallie said, “I think we should have everything we need here.”

O.K., I thought, she wants to work with what she has. Well, if we do her hair in a different way and if she has some shoes that don’t like look they were made for a giant eight-year-old and if she borrows a dress from her mom, it might work. For now.

So imagine my surprise when Kallie went to the trunk of costumes, which had now migrated from the basement to her room, and pulled out a red trench coat.

“I’ll wear this,” she said. “And you’ll wear... this.” She removed a long purple velvet cloak with a bonnet.

“What?” I laughed. “No, I won’t.”

She frowned. “Unless you want to wear your tree costume. But that might be a bit difficult to take off underwater. I wouldn’t want the plastic to tear.”

“All right, pause. What kind of a beach do you want to go to?” I asked slowly.

She looked surprised. “The beaches along Lake Ontario. Where else?”

“O.K. so what’s all this about a tree outfit?”

“For the play. We’re going to play the scene where the orgs cross the Sea of Rel and land on the shores of Gorgolia. Why did you think I wanted to go to the beach?”

Someone had sat on my cupcake. And here I’d thought Kallie was developing some sophistication and style, but all she wanted to do was a play a silly game.

“I thought it might be because you wanted to tan and swim, but no. We have to play a dumb game.”

Kallie flared up like a piece of straw set on fire. “Dumb game! Well, it seems to me

you've been enjoying it these past few days!"

"I didn't mean it that way. But there's a big difference between playing this by ourselves and performing it in front of other people."

"We won't be performing anything. We're just going to put on our costumes, go in the water, say a few lines, take them off in the water, and get out. The whole thing will only take a minute."

"Why can't we just pretend? We've pretended everything else."

"We will be pretending, we'll just have better props. Razi has to go downtown Friday and he said he'd drive us. It's the perfect opportunity."

"No way. I am not humiliating myself by wearing some ridiculous outfit in public and saying some weird lines no one but us will understand. People will think we're crazy."

"So that's their problem, not ours. And we'll be wearing our bathing suits under our costumes, so we can go swimming and tan afterwards. All I'm asking is for one minute."

"Forget it, Kallie. You can stop talking about it because I'm not doing it."

But she didn't forget or stop talking about it. She went on and on, saying we wouldn't be able to continue the game if we didn't do this scene, and we just had to do it in water and not in a bathtub but in a real live lake.... When it became obvious she wasn't going to shut up about it, I tried to bargain with her.

"Why do we have to wear costumes? Why can't we just go in our bathing suits and say our lines?"

She rolled her eyes. "Because the orgs are shape-shifters, remember? They can't look the same on land as they do in the sea. They have to change shape to avoid the watchful eyes of the Pippipalians." She sounded like she was reciting something from a textbook.

That night, I thought about Kallie's idea. It was especially odd since I'd just told her I didn't want to pose for her dad. Didn't she see the connection? Doing either of these things would make me look ridiculous in front of hundreds of people. Then again, I told myself, no one would be sketching me in my cloak and bonnet. My face wouldn't be displayed in the Art Gallery of Ontario for all posterity. If someone accused me of wearing

the cloak or performing that silly play, I could always deny it. There would be no proof.

Maybe it won't be so bad, I told myself. The play would only take a few minutes, then I'd be free to tan and check out the guys. It's not like I was going to be wearing something skimpy. My bathing suit was conservative and the purple cloak was one of the outfits I thought I looked good in. And I didn't want Kallie to think I was prudish about my body. I'd begun to worry that I'd overreacted about posing for her dad. Most people would've jumped at the opportunity, but not me. Maybe this game was a test to see whether I was comfortable with my body. I wasn't, of course, but I didn't want Kallie to know that. I figured I'd rather have some strangers snicker at me than a friend think I was weird.

So the next day I told Kallie I'd go. I tried to persuade her that we should go to one of the beaches in the west end. At least it wouldn't be likely anyone from school would go there. But no. She had to pick the beaches in the east end. "It's much closer for Razi," she explained.

Kallie's dad drove us the next day. I was no longer afraid of him. I'd gone back to seeing him as a dad. Mostly. But now I felt there was some part of his life I didn't have access to. It was as if by asking me to pose for him, he'd opened a door and a triangle of light had shone into a pitch dark room, a room I hadn't known existed.

After he dropped us off, we scrambled down to the beach, Kallie carrying a canvas bag for our costumes. We were already in our costumes so we could start the play right away. The sooner we got this over with the better.

"O.K. Now you remember what to say?" Kallie asked.

I rolled my eyes. She'd only gone over it a trillion times. "Yes."

"Great!" To my surprise, she pulled two plastic swords out of the bag and handed one to me. "Here's your sword! When you're about to come into shore, just after you say your final line, raise it in the air in a show of boldness and courage."

"What! You never told me about that!"

"Of course I didn't. If I had, you wouldn't have come."

I opened my mouth to protest, but it was too late.

"And remember," said Kallie in a low and urgent voice, "the orgs are on a

reconnaissance mission. No one can find out about it. So try not to be too conspicuous.”

I left that alone.

As we skulked towards the lake, I felt like I was on a reconnaissance mission, whatever that was. Kallie was bent over almost double, moving her arms like a mime trying to escape from a box, her sword sticking out from under her armpit. Already a few people were looking at us. I poked her in the butt with my sword. “Come on, let’s get moving,” I hissed, glancing around.

But she was either so into the game she didn’t hear me or she was ignoring me. The crawl to the beach was painful, it seemed more eyes gathered around us by the second. When we reached the shoreline, Kallie tore out across the water, splashing up so much she nearly engulfed herself. I followed at a more dignified pace.

When I reached Kallie, I stopped, and we both turned around to face the shore. At least now the water hid our bulky clothes, and we wouldn’t have to wear them again on the beach. On shore, I noticed two good-looking guys laying down a beach blanket and turning on a ghetto blaster. Maybe this day won’t be so bad, I told myself. Just then, Kallie turned to me and said, “Lo! ‘Tis Gorgolia!” She sounded as if she’d found the Holy Grail.

She signalled for me to speak. “‘Tis!” I spat.

“And now,” intoned Kallie, “the time of our mission draws near. Let us, dear Aloosha, shed our skins so that we may better camouflage ourselves against the Forces of Universal Destruction.”

“Let us, dear Alooha,” I mumbled, as I looked around. A man was swimming less than fifteen feet away from us, and three girls were closing in on us. But Kallie looked annoyed at my lack of energy. I was afraid she might make us act the scene over again, so I said heartily, “Let us go forth and gain valuable information to bring back to the Grand Masters of our land, so that we may defeat these hideous forces and our people can again live in harmony and prosperity.”

“To freedom!” Kallie shouted, wielding her sword above her head.

“To freedom,” I echoed feebly, lifting my sword so the broken hilt rested on the water.

Kallie trudged forth, waving her sword and hooting wildly, which was *not* part of the plan. I followed, trying not to trip over my cloak. But the material had absorbed so much water I had difficulty moving. Finally I came within fifteen feet of the shore. It was time to cast off my cloak, so I planted my sword in the sand and fumbled with the drawstrings of the hood.

I glanced ashore in time to see Kallie ripping off her trench coat and hopping out of the water, sword still held high. The two guys with the blanket were looking at us. I grappled with my cloak, but the drawstrings had tangled. While each wave was washing me closer to shore, I tried pulling the cloak up over my forehead. I'd just managed to strip off my costume when a giant wave hit me from behind, throwing me onto the shore stomach first. I landed with a plop, feeling as if a football player had just punched me in the kidneys. The guys were roaring with laughter, pointing at me. I couldn't figure out what was so funny about someone being thrown ashore like a fish, until I felt a coolness on my torso.

That's when I realized. The force of the wave had pulled down the top of my bathing suit. My breasts, small and wet and shrivelled, were exposed for everyone on the beach to see.

The guys' laughter rang in my head like a maniacal clown's. I couldn't move. I looked down at where my bathing suit straps were floating in the water like two blue snakes. Something dripped from my face, but I couldn't tell if it was water or tears.

I took a deep breath and lifted my head. The guys were still pointing and laughing. Kallie looked at them and then at the shoreline, no doubt wondering why I was taking so long. When she saw what had happened, she rushed over.

"Hil, are you all right?"

I nodded, pulling up my bathing suit.

"Come on, let's go," she said gently. She helped me to my feet and handed me the cloak, which had washed ashore. "Here's your cloak. Now where's the sword?" I pointed to the lake. She retrieved the sword from where it was still stuck in the sand.

I was shaking, and I wrapped the cloak around me. We made our way to where Kallie had shed her costume, and then back to where we'd left the bag, Kallie with her arm

around me as if she were helping an old woman. Then we began walking east along the boardwalk. In my daze, I was only aware of my body, which felt like someone had dipped it in ice, until one of the guys whistled and shouted, “What a babe!”

Kallie turned and glared at them venomously.

“Please,” I whispered, “just ignore them.”

One of the guys said loudly, “So which one do you want? That one’s a stick. The other one’s fat, but at least she takes her clothes off.”

I heard a snapping noise and looked up to see Kallie’s head thrust forward like a curious young bird’s. Before I knew what was happening, she’d bent over and was scrabbling around in the wet sand. Seconds later, she leapt up and pitched a ball of sand at the guys.

It knocked one of them on the head.

“What the—” he began.

“And one for you!” She launched another ball of sand, this one as big as a baseball. It hit the other guy square in the chest.

“Maybe that’ll put hair on your scrawny chest!” she screamed.

Suddenly she grabbed my hand, and we took off down the boardwalk like a pair of gazelles. I don’t think I’ve ever run so hard in my life. Usually I would never have been able to keep up with Kallie, but something inside me made me go faster. We ran and ran, past the last lifeguard’s station and a rocky, deserted beach until we came to another supervised beach. When Kallie pointed to a tree and said, “Over there,” we hid behind the tree, even though I’m pretty sure the guys had given up chasing us a long time ago, if they ever were chasing us.

We were both panting and holding our sides, laughing hysterically at the thought of having escaped. But soon my gasping laughs turned into sobs. I plopped down on the sand.

“I’m so ugly! I hate my body!” I cried.

Snot gurgled in my nostrils, and I let my wet hair remain plastered to my face and neck. I’d never let go like this in front of anyone before. It was almost as humiliating as what had happened in the water, but I couldn’t help myself.

“No, Hil! You’re not ugly! Far from it.” Kallie sat down beside me. She looked so earnest and so convinced of what she was saying I couldn’t help but believe it, a little.

I sniffed. “Well, I’m fat, anyway. I’m fat in the wrong places and skinny in the wrong places. My stomach is too big and my... well, you know... are too small. No wonder those guys laughed at me.”

“Those guys are... jerks.” She spit the word out like a piece of stale gum. “They would’ve laughed at you no matter what you looked like.”

“Thanks and that’s supposed to make me feel better?” But it did. I wiped my cheeks. “Well, maybe some good can come out of this. Maybe it’ll force me to finally start exercising and lose weight.”

“Well,” said Kallie cautiously, “exercising is definitely good, but I don’t think you should worry about losing weight. There’s nothing wrong with your weight.”

“Oh, come on, Kallie, you must’ve noticed I’m overweight. Everyone notices. Even Lynn. She tried to make me feel better, though. She said I just have leftover baby fat.”

“What?” Kallie was frowning.

“Leftover baby fat. And she said that while she was gone this summer, it would be a good time for me to lose weight for junior high.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe she said that.”

“Why? What’s so bad about it?”

“First of all, you don’t need to lose weight. Anyone with two functioning eyes can see that. Plus even if you were fat, that’s your business, not hers, and you should be the one to decide if you want to diet. And where does she get off saying you should lose weight because she’s gone? So she’s allowed to go off and enjoy herself, but you have nothing better to do than to go on a diet just because she thinks you should? And she calls herself your friend?”

“She is my friend,” I said defensively. But now that I thought about it, Kallie was right. Lynn’s comment had been kind of rude. Where did she get off telling me I had to lose weight? But even though I was angry at Lynn, I didn’t want anyone else to criticize her. So I performed my jigging stomach trick to prove I was fat. “See?” I demanded. “If I wasn’t

fat, I couldn't do that."

"Oh yeah?" asked Kallie. Then, to my surprise, she grabbed her stomach and did the same thing. I blinked several times, wondering if was an optical illusion.

"How did you do that?" I breathed.

She laughed. "Everyone can do it, Hil. It's just natural body fat. It doesn't mean you're overweight." But when she saw my downcast eyes, she continued, "I don't know if you learned this in school yet, but there are three different body types. An ectomorph is a person with a small build, a mesomorph is a person with a muscular build—"

"And an endomorph is a person with a large build. Yeah. I know. And I'm an endomorph." Tub-o-morph is more like it, I thought.

"No. I'd say you're a mesomorph."

Me a sports type? That was even funnier than me being an ectomorph. I imagined myself winning a gold medal in stationary biking at the Gym Olympics. Hilary Boles, fastest stationary biker west of Ottawa.

"Maybe if I stop eating long enough I'll become an ectomorph." I laughed hopelessly.

But Kallie looked serious. "You shouldn't joke about that, Hil. You can get this disease. Anorexia. My mom told me about it. There was this singer... it was awhile ago, when you and I were really young... but she wanted to be skinny so badly she starved herself to death. And it's happened to other girls too."

"That's mental, Kallie! I just want to lose a little weight. I wouldn't starve myself."

"Those girls didn't intend to starve themselves either. But it happened."

I began playing with the powdery beige sand, sifting it through my fingers like icing sugar. "Maybe I should become a vegetarian." The image of my mom cooking cheeseburgers recurred.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. You shouldn't become a vegetarian just because you want to look a certain way. Being a vegetarian is hard work. You have to make sure you get enough protein and that means eating all kinds of vegetables. That's why we're building the greenhouse—"

“You’re building a greenhouse?”

“Yeah. In front of our library.” So that’s what was going in that hexagonal space. “We’re going to grow our own stuff so we can have it all year round. Anyway, I happen to like veggies, so it’s easy for me, but I know a lot of people don’t. It’s a serious thing to give up meat, and you should really think about it before you do it.” She was quiet for a while before adding, “Besides, even if you were fat—which you’re not—who cares? As long as your doctor says you’re healthy, you shouldn’t worry about your body.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re thin.”

“That’s only because I have a different body shape than you do.”

I laughed in frustration. “You just want me to keep this shape, right? So you’ll look better compared with me!”

Kallie looked down at the sand. “I just want you to be happy, Hilary.”

I stared at the shoreline. People were swimming, walking dogs, bouncing a giant inflatable ball. They seemed a long way away, but I could hear their laughter. The sun had climbed to almost its full height in a cloudless sky. Far away to the east, where the boardwalk ended near Lake Front, thin silver lines danced. I pushed the cloak off.

“This is all my fault,” said Kallie. She looked into my eyes. “You didn’t really want to act out the org scene, did you?”

I shook my head.

“So why didn’t you just tell me?” she said unhappily.

“I did, several times! Didn’t you notice?”

“Well, I knew you weren’t as eager to do it as I was, but I didn’t think you were violently opposed to it.”

“I tried to tell you, but you were so insistent and I didn’t want you to think I was... I don’t know... afraid of doing it or something.”

“You mean you did this because you were afraid I’d laugh at you if you didn’t?”

“Something like that.”

“Then I’m triply sorry because doubly doesn’t seem like enough,” she said earnestly. “I get like this sometimes. I get so wrapped up in my own plans that I bowl right over

everybody else. And look what happened. I made you do something you didn't want to. And then when my dumb plan went wrong, I just made you feel bad. Stupid!" She cursed and kicked up a cloud of dust in front of her.

I shifted away from her, shocked at her violence. "It's not your fault, Kallie. You had no way of knowing my bathing suit would fall off. It could've happened even if I hadn't been wearing the cloak."

"I know, but that's not the point. I don't ever want to make someone feel like she has to do a certain thing or be a certain way for me to like her. I won't do it. Ever." She sounded like she was making a vow about something far more serious than the Forces of Universal Destruction.

I tried to lighten the mood. "We'd have to do it differently next time anyway. The orgs shouldn't be carrying swords. It's too obvious. The Pippipalians would know they were enemies."

She smiled but the smile melted like a popsicle left out in the sun.

"Hey, Kal, what was that thing you did with the sand?"

This time her smile was genuine. "Oh, that's a sandball."

"I've never heard of a sandball."

"It's exactly like a snowball, except with sand. You have to get sand that's not too dry or too wet, otherwise it falls apart. There's a real art to making one, you know."

"Where did you learn to make one?"

"From one of my cousins. We used to all hang out at my grandfather's cottage a few years ago."

"That must've been fun," I said. Most of my cousins lived in other provinces, and I hadn't even met some of them. "Why did you start making sandballs?"

"Let's just say I had to learn to defend myself," she said tightly.

I started to say something more, but Kallie leapt up, dusting the sand off her iridescent bathing suit.

"We've still got most of the day left to enjoy!" she exclaimed. "Are you ready to go back in the water?"

I nodded. “You go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I stood up, adjusted my bathing suit, and smoothed back my hair. As I watched Kallie bounding towards the shoreline, / felt like a sandball. Wet and round and crumbly. I was no longer Hilary Boles, famous entrepreneur, or even Hilary Boles, mean stationary biker. I was Hilary Boles, the Sandball of the Eastern Beaches.

Chapter Seven: Mallrats

As we were walking back to meet Kallie's dad, cutting across some nearby tennis courts to avoid the guys on the blanket, Kallie said, "Just try to forget about what happened back there. It's over. It doesn't have to have a bad effect on your life." I couldn't understand what she meant. How could what happened possibly have a good effect on my life?

But I decided she was right. I was determined not think about what had happened on the beach any more. I was Hilary Boles, soon-to-be grade seven student at Mackenzie, and my life was going ahead according to plan. I was going to have the latest C.D.s and see the coolest movies. I was going to buy clothes at le château, whether my mom liked it or not. And I was going to walk into that school this September looking pretty and in shape and with a better haircut and not caring what some stupid men with no chest hair thought about me, when there were hordes of worthier guys at school.

And I still wanted Kallie to get interested in the mall. She didn't understand the mall but it was like... another country. It had its own culture and language. It was fast-paced and exciting, way more exciting than Mackenzie House. Kallie had to experience that excitement. She has to get over this old person's attitude she has about malls, I thought. It's not that I wanted to change Kallie, exactly. There were some things—a lot of things—I really liked about her. But let's be honest, I thought, some stuff needs work, like her sense of style. And who knows? She might love the clothes at le château. After all, she has the body for them.

So one day, soon after the beach incident, I reminded her of her promise to go to the mall with me. She said she'd be happy to go, as long as it wasn't on Wednesday because we were going to the planetarium that day, remember? We agreed on Tuesday.

As I was eating breakfast Tuesday morning, my mom asked, "What are you and Kallie doing today, Hilary?"

I ground my teeth. These past few months, any talk of the mall had ended in an argument between my mom and me. I'd tell her Lynn and I were going to le château, and

she'd say we spent too much time at the mall and couldn't we think of something else to do ... yadda yadda yadda. I wasn't in the mood to argue, so I was about to snap back that we were going to the mall whether she liked it or not when something—and I'm still not sure what but maybe it was the thought of going to the mall with Kallie instead of Lynn—made me change my mind and say pleasantly, "We're going to the mall."

"Have fun, then. Just be back in time for dinner," she called, as she went out to the garden.

I stared after her, milk dripping from my mouth.

Kallie and I went to the mall in my neighbourhood. I felt that even though my mom had been in an amazingly good mood that morning, I didn't want to tempt fate by asking permission to go to the Eaton's Centre. As the bus pulled up next to the mall, my palms became sweaty. I really wanted this day to go well, for more reasons than one.

We pulled open the big heavy doors and then we were there, in the mall. I inhaled deeply, breathing in the atmosphere and looking around. The aroma of freshly baked pastries wafting from a nearby bakery. Rock music pulsating from a C.D. store. A fountain spitting jets of water at the ceiling three stories above. And posses of teenage girls and guys, flipping small le château or Mr. C.D. Man bags. Oh yeah. This was the mall.

Turning to Kallie, I asked her where she'd like to go first, assuming she would say she didn't care and would go wherever I wanted. But my plan was foiled.

"Let's see." She leaned over a black lacquered map. "Oh! I'd really like to go to The Science Dude. I need a new set of crystals to experiment with!"

"Uh... all right."

When we reached the store, Kallie tore inside, searching for her crystal set. I hadn't known she was so into science, but I supposed she got it from her mom. I shuffled around awkwardly, staying out of sight of the store's entrance so no one walking by could glance in and see me there.

I thought Kallie would be ready to leave once she'd chosen her crystal set. But no. She had to check out everything else in the store, examining plastic-wrapped packages, picking up toys and making them squeak or giggle. Once she tried on a pair of thick lab

goggles and pursed her lips in and out like a goldfish's, giving me a robotic wave from across the crowded store. I shot her an annoyed look. Didn't she realize this mall was *the* hangout for anyone who was or wanted to be anyone? I'd have to put a stop to these embarrassing displays before someone from school saw them.

When she finally emerged from the store, carrying two bags, I asked her again, out of politeness, whether there were any other stores she wanted to see. To my horror, she dragged me to a toy store and another science store.

"You know, this mall stuff isn't so bad after all!" exclaimed Kallie, as we left Sciencemania! By now she was carrying several brightly coloured bags of varying sizes. "I saw another store back there I'd like to look in. It's kind of an art-science store. They had an intriguing mechanical sheep in the window."

How many of these stores were there? They seemed to be multiplying!

"You know, Kallie, there are some stores I'd really like to go to," I said quickly.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm doing it again, bowling right over you," she said loudly. We'd stopped in a courtyard filled with wooden benches and those synthetic trees. At least ten people could hear what she was saying, so I made noises to indicate she didn't have to go on.

But she continued, "No, I promised myself I wouldn't go it again and I won't. I, Callisto Amonalisa Eadoin Foster, solemnly to vow you, Hilary Laura Boles, by that lofty tree"—she waved her arm wildly—"that I will try my best never to bowl you over again. This afternoon, we'll go where you want. Lead the way!" she proclaimed.

Three girls standing nearby looked at us and giggled.

Quickening my step, I took Kallie to Fairweather's. Fairweather's was only a semi-cool store, but I thought I should introduce Kallie to the stores gradually to give her a chance to get used to the kinds of clothes they sold, which were pretty different from what she usually wore. That way, she wouldn't be too shocked when we got to le château. In Fairweather's, I showed her a black miniskirt I liked.

"It's nice," she said nonchalantly.

"Why don't you try it on? I bet it'd look great on you."

“Mmm... no thanks. But you can try it on if you like.”

Yeah right, I thought. I'm sure it would look lovely on someone with my shape. I sifted through some nearby racks and picked out a long white shirt.

“What do you think of this?” I asked, turning to her.

But Kallie was examining her crystal set. I had to clear my throat to get her attention. “Oh, yeah. That's nice, too, Hil. It'd look good on you.”

O.K. so obviously she wasn't interested in what Fairweather's had to offer. I took her to Suzy Shier and Jacob, but she just wandered around the stores aimlessly or sat at the front, examining the stuff she'd bought. She's not the least bit interested in anything in these stores, I fumed to myself, she just sits there playing with her stupid toys. This whole trip is a big waste of time.

As I stormed out of Jacob, she hopped up to follow, asking, “Aren't you going to buy anything?”

“No,” I said shortly. I strode up to a synthetic tree and stood there, trying to catch my breath.

“Hilary, did you come here to buy clothes for you or for me?” I heard Kallie say.

Embarrassed that my purpose was so transparent, I collected myself before turning around. “I thought you might like to look at some new clothes, something different from what you usually wear.”

“I appreciate the thought, Hil, but I don't shop at stores like that.”

“So where do you buy your clothes?” I demanded. “Your mom can't make all of them.”

“Well...” Ignoring my rude tone, she considered the question for a minute. “Sometimes I buy leggings and t-shirts from Cotton Ginny.”

No one shopped at Cotton Ginny.

“And Sears has some pretty good stuff.”

Sears! I couldn't believe she'd said that out loud. I glanced around, but no one seemed to have heard.

“But just because I don't wear those kinds of clothes doesn't mean I think there's

anything wrong with someone else wearing them. So if you want to look at those stores, I'll come with you."

I stared at her, my eyes boring into hers. I'd never met anyone so uninterested in clothes. How was I going to get her to look decent for junior high? If she didn't like Fairweather's or Jacob, there was almost no hope for le château. But maybe, just maybe, by some freak of nature, Kallie would see something at le château and fall in love with it. I was going to make one final effort before I admitted defeat.

I was going to show her The Dress.

"Follow me," I ordered.

Lynn and I each had a special le château dress we coveted. Hers was a lavender slip dress with spaghetti straps and a heart-shaped neckline. Personally I wasn't sure I'd have the courage to wear it on my honeymoon, but I admired Lynn for wanting to wear it in public.

I approached the store anxiously, afraid my dress might have been sold to someone who had a more understanding mother than I did. But it was still there, prominently displayed in the largest window. A blue A-line mini dress that ended several inches above the knees, sleeveless, with a low circular neckline, and navy flowers splashed unevenly over the soft, flowing material. It was as beautiful as ever. The bald mannequin wearing The Dress had a mouth that turned down at the corners and a bored expression, which made me want The Dress even more. I had to stop myself from putting my hand to the glass.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I breathed.

I turned around to see Kallie's reaction. But she wasn't even looking at The Dress. She was frowning at a pair of black lace-up boots in a casement next to it.

"Hello!" I exclaimed. She looked up. "This is what I brought you here to see," I said, pointing to The Dress. "So what do you think?"

Kallie looked at The Dress and then at me for a long time, so long it made me nervous. Finally she said evenly, "Yeah. It's nice."

I let out my breath slowly. "Do you really think so?"

"Sure." She looked at me cautiously. "Are you going to buy it?"

“I don’t know. It’s pretty expensive. Eighty dollars.”

“Eighty dollars?” asked Kallie, her mouth falling open.

“Yeah. Why, do you think that’s too expensive?”

She shrugged one shoulder and began swinging her bags back and forth. “I guess not, if you really want it.”

I continued to stare at The Dress. Suddenly I noticed that Kallie hadn’t said anything about me trying it on. I realized it must be because she thought it wouldn’t fit me. I was humiliated to feel tears forming behind my eyelids. All the cool clothes were made for someone with her shape, but she didn’t want them. I wanted to wear them, but I couldn’t. It wasn’t fair. Why couldn’t we switch bodies?

“Are you finished looking here?” asked Kallie carefully.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“What do you want to do next? You know, we haven’t eaten. Why don’t we get some ice cream?” she exclaimed, smiling.

I just looked at her. How could she think about getting ice cream when she could see I was so upset? Maybe she wasn’t so thoughtful after all. Lynn would’ve been sympathetic. Lynn. I missed her more than I had in weeks. At least she’d be back soon. Meanwhile, I decided that if Kallie was going to pretend not to notice my unhappiness, I was going to hide it. So I followed her to the Baskin Robbins nearby.

“I already know what I want,” announced Kallie happily, stepping up to the counter. I hung back, trying to decide. I wanted chocolate strawberry ice cream, but I thought mint daiquiri frozen yogurt would be better for me because it was less fattening.

“What’ll you have, miss?” a gangly guy behind the counter asked Kallie. I was disturbed to realize he was a student at Mackenzie. I recognized him from when my class had toured the school in May.

“Double Peanut Fudge Deluxe Supreme, please.”

“Excuse me?” the guy said.

“Double Peanut Fudge Deluxe Supreme. I’ll have three scoops. And put it in on one of those sugar cones, please. Not the ones with all the little coloured doodads on them.

They obscure the flavour of the peanuts. Just a regular giant-sized sugar cone.”

“Uh... I’m sorry. We don’t have that flavour of ice cream.”

“What?” she said slowly. “You don’t have Double Peanut Fudge Deluxe Supreme? Well, what do you have?” She put on her hand on her hip with an exaggerated flourish.

The guy was becoming flustered. I could feel my face changing to the colour of the strawberry ice cream behind the counter, and I wished Kallie would stop making such a fuss over something so silly.

“We have chocolate peanut butter,” he tried.

“Oh, all right,” said Kallie, as if she were indulging a five-year-old. “I guess that’ll have to do. But it’s really most unsatisfactory.” Turning to me, she smiled and said, “Do you believe this place?”

I stepped up quickly and ordered a frozen yogurt, not wanting to order the chocolate strawberry ice cream and make us look even more childish after Kallie’s fuss.

After we’d gotten our food, we started heading back in the direction we’d come. That’s when I noticed a group of girls coming out of le château. Three girls were clustered around a tall girl one with long blonde hair who was wearing a tight black tank top, short white shorts, and high-heeled mules.

“It’s Chanel Winters,” I breathed.

“Who?” asked Kallie, taking a big bite out of her cone and stepping into the oncoming traffic of the mall.

A cold wave swept over me as I looked at Kallie. She was wearing a batik dress with a lopsided sash and those flat cloth shoes you buy on Dundas. Her nails were chipped, and her hair looked wilder than usual. She stood there, happily licking her huge ice cream cone, swinging her *Science Dude* bags, oblivious to all the people who were giving her dirty looks as they tried to get around her. And Chanel Winters was less than fifty metres away! This had been my biggest fear in bringing Kallie to the mall, that she would embarrass us in front of the cool group. I couldn’t risk that happening. Who knows what dire consequences it might have for me at school next year?

Without thinking, I grabbed Kallie and pulled her behind a postcard rack that was

sticking out from a nearby souvenir store.

“Hey! What did you do that for?” she demanded.

But I ignored her. I was too busy wondering what would’ve happened if Chanel and her friends had come out of the store when Kallie and I were still standing there. I was suddenly grateful for Kallie’s urge for ice cream.

I turned to Kallie, who was looking at me as if I’d just pushed in front of her in the line to look out the big telescope at The Science Dude. I felt a small pang, not only for having pulled her back so roughly but also for having felt the need to pull her back. This last sensation was new and confusing to me, so I shook it off.

I peered around the rack and motioned for Kallie to do the same. Chanel and her friends were still standing there. “It’s Chanel Winters,” I said, as if that explained everything.

“Which one? The blonde?”

I nodded, wondering how Kallie was able to guess correctly.

“I’ve never met her. She went to Simcoe, that’s the other elementary school in our neighbourhood,” I told Kallie. “She’s going into grade seven at Mackenzie this fall too.”

I explained how Lynn and I had wanted to be part of Chanel’s group since last year and how we were making plans to befriend her, but all Kallie said was, “Why do you want to be friends with her so badly?”

“Are you kidding? Look at her! She’s so cool. She was the most popular girl at Simcoe *and* Susanna Moodie.”

But Kallie didn’t seem impressed. “Who said that?”

“Everyone.”

“I guess it must be true then.” Her voice was odd, not sarcastic exactly, more like amused.

We continued to watch Chanel and her friends. Once Chanel laughed loudly. A beautiful laugh, I thought, all high and tinkly. Two older guys walking by noticed her and smirked at one another. She smiled at them and flipped her hair over her shoulder. Then she started walking towards the front entrance of the mall, and her friends followed.

“She’s so pretty,” I said quietly. Looking at Chanel was like looking at a beautiful, expensive piece of artwork. I felt happy and honoured to look at it but also powerless because it represented something I couldn’t have, something I couldn’t be. “Lynn’s so lucky. She looks a lot like Chanel,” I murmured.

I heard Kallie say, “Really?” Then she said, “Here. Hold this,” shoved her dripping ice cream cone into my hand, and disappeared into the postcard store. I was lost in my thoughts until Kallie appeared in front of me, holding yet another bag.

I didn’t bother to ask what she’d bought. It probably involved some silly game of hers, and I wasn’t in the mood for her games. Seeing Chanel Winters had only made me feel even worse. Kallie and I began wandering towards the front entrance of the mall. I couldn’t stop thinking about Chanel, and I blurted out, “I’d love to be her.”

“Chanel Winters? Why?”

I laughed. Sometimes Kallie was so clueless. “Well, who wouldn’t? She’s beautiful, she’s popular, she wears the coolest clothes. Not to mention all the guys are after her.”

“Don’t you want to be yourself?” asked Kallie, taking another huge bite out of her cone. She seemed to be enjoying it an awful lot for someone who’d said it was “unsatisfactory.”

“Myself? No.”

“Why not?”

Without thinking, I responded, “Well, there’s nothing interesting about me. Who’d want to be like me?”

Kallie stopped walking and put the hand carrying the bags to her hip, saying angrily, “What do you mean, who’d want to be like you? You’re nice, you’re friendly, you’re smart, and you’re funny. Lots of people would want to be like you.”

I looked at her, my lips parted, feeling as if someone had just told me—seriously—that I had a good shot at winning the Miss Toronto pageant. No one had ever told me all those things about myself, except my parents. And even then they hadn’t said them all at the same time.

I didn't know what to say. "Thanks," I managed to get out. "But even if all of that is true, I'm not as good looking as Chanel, and that's what counts. At least, it counts to guys."

"Boys," scoffed Kallie. "I leave them alone. As far as I'm concerned, they're another species."

A giggle escaped my throat. "Well, that's true enough."

"It is true. And you are good looking. You just don't look like those girls. I don't think Chanel's that good looking, not from what I could see anyway. She seems like your average blonde with too much make-up."

"But Kallie," I asked, feeling confidential, "haven't you ever wanted to be like someone else?"

"Sure."

"Who?" I asked, smiling.

Her voice was wistful. "Joan of Arc because she was strong and brave and she fought for what she believed in. Picasso because he was creative and original and not afraid of taking risks. And Einstein, mostly for the same reasons as Picasso but also because I liked his hair."

"What?" I laughed, picturing Kallie with white hair even wilder than her own.

"It's true. And I still want to be like them. O.K. maybe I don't want Einstein's hair." She tilted her head at me. "But you didn't say you wanted to be *like* Chanel Winters, you said you wanted to *be* her. There's a big difference. So have I ever really, truly wanted to *be* someone else? Never."

"Why not?"

She sighed and looked at the entrance a few metres away from us. When she spoke, her voice sounded far-away, as if she were speaking on the phone long distance. "Because there's no point in wishing that. I'll never be anybody but me. I learned that a long time ago. So you might as well get comfortable being you because you is the only person you'll ever be. The sooner you learn that, the sooner you can stop worrying about what other people think and just enjoy being you."

We were quiet. Some commotion was going on outside Mr. C.D. Man. I think someone had tried to shoplift a C.D. But neither of us heard the racket.

After a minute, Kallie swallowed the last of her ice cream cone and threw her napkin in the garbage. “Look,” she said. “A movie theatre.”

I looked up. To our left was the mall’s theatre.

“I haven’t been to the movies in an eon. Do you want to go?”

I scanned the movies on the marquee. *Over the Big Top* was playing. This day might be salvageable, I told myself.

“Jumping Jupiters! *Saura* is playing! Let’s see that!” Kallie exclaimed, turning to me with a delighted smile.

I swallowed my frustration. Of course I wanted to see *Over the Big Top*, but I didn’t want to explain to Kallie why. Somehow I thought she wouldn’t understand. She’d say it was too full of people getting blown into pieces or making kissing noises that sounded like cows pulling their feet out of their own poop. I didn’t think I could take that, not on top of everything else that had happened today. So I slapped on a smile and said, “Sure. We can see *Saura* if you’d like.”

“Great.” Kallie checked her watch. “We’d better get our tickets. The movie starts in a few minutes.” She looked at me, then said softly, “Let’s just forget about Chanel Winters and enjoy *Saura*, O.K.?”

I nodded, looking down at my frozen yogurt. I’d eaten maybe a quarter, and the rest had become sticky in my hands. I tossed it in a garbage can and followed Kallie to the box office.

I enjoyed *Saura* more than I’d expected. I mean, it wasn’t *Over The Big Top* or anything, but it was kind of cool, especially when Saura karate-chopped the rapiers out of the hands of five large and threatening men. Kallie loved the movie and raved about it the whole way home. I was quiet, half listening and half thinking about what Kallie had said about Chanel and the importance of being yourself. When we reached Kallie’s yard, I said morosely, “Well, I’m glad you enjoyed the movie, Kallie. At least something went right

today.”

“What do you mean?”

I was quiet, but Kallie tilted her head back in understanding. “Oh, this is about the clothes, right?”

“I just thought I could show you something different that you’d like. You’ve shown me so many new things—the art gallery, the kind of food you eat, even Mackenzie House—but I haven’t given you anything.” I sounded like a little kid disappointed that the drawing she’d made for Mother’s Day had fallen in the bathtub. A kid who was expecting a chocolate in return for the drawing.

“Hil, don’t say that! You’ve given me plenty of things. Time, imagination, but most of all friendship. That’s way more important than a bunch of rags.”

I winced. “I just wish you liked those clothes.”

Her eyes narrowed, but her voice was sad. “Well, I’m sorry, Hilary, but I don’t. They’re just not me.”

I looked at her. Her dress had a streak of chocolate peanut butter under one armpit, and her hair was sticking up even more than usual, looking as if a helicopter had just taken off in it. Face it, I told myself, she’ll never change her style. I couldn’t think of anything to say to her, so I asked half-heartedly, “What did you buy in the souvenir store?”

“Oh. A postcard with a picture of some shoes from the Bata Shoe Museum. It’s for one of my scrapbooks.”

It was as if I’d been told that a loved one had drowned off Point Pelee, only to hear that person’s voice in the distance. “You’ve been to the Bata Shoe Museum?”

“Yeah, a couple of years ago. It’s a really cool place. You should go, Hil. I bet you’d like it.”

“You mean you’re interested in shoes and fashion?” I said slowly.

“Yeah,” she said simply. Then her eyes widened. “Oh, I get it. You think because I don’t like your kind of clothes, that means I don’t like any kind of clothes.”

“I just assumed—”

“Well don’t. Don’t assume things about me and I won’t assume things about you.”

“Well don’t. Don’t assume things about me and I won’t assume things about you.”

She spoke in a sharp, conclusive voice that reminded me of the way she’d spoken at the beach when I’d asked about the sandball. Although it was bright outside, I felt as if menacing storm clouds had suddenly materialized over my head.

“O.K.,” I said in a small voice.

Kallie exhaled, and the storm clouds moved off and became small grey patches hovering in the distance, somewhere over Markham. “Good. I have to go home now because I’m supposed to help my mom cook dinner, but thanks a bunch for taking me to the mall. I really enjoyed it.”

I managed a weak but sincere smile. “O.K. See you.”

“See you.”

I started to walk across my lawn when Kallie called me back.

“Don’t you think it would be a lot of pressure?” she asked.

“What?”

“Being popular like Chanel. What if your hair looked bad one day or you got a pimple on the end of your nose? Then everyone would laugh at you, and you’d be popped like a balloon.”

“I guess so.”

“But if you’re a geek, everyone laughs at you anyway, right, so who cares? One more time won’t make any difference. You can do what you want.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Let’s just say I suspect being a geek has its advantages.”

I wasn’t convinced.

That evening, I lay on my bed, thinking. I wasn’t surprised that Kallie didn’t like the le château clothes, only disappointed. How I was going to deal with having a geeky friend at school next year? And don’t even get me started on what I was thinking about The Dress. I remembered how Kallie had looked at me quietly, like she disapproved of me wanting The Dress, and I felt like I’d ballooned from a one-ton into a two-ton sandball. After everything I’d been through at the beach, how dare she imply that I was too fat to wear the dress of my

dreams? I picked up one of my stuffed animals and threw it against the wall in fury.

And then I remembered all those compliments Kallie had given me. It was nice, almost embarrassingly nice. Again I couldn't figure her out, how she could be so cruel and then so concerned about making me feel better.

And I was having even less success understanding myself. Even though I didn't like to, I had to admit some of the stuff Kallie said got to me. Especially the stuff about being yourself and not worrying about what other people thought of you. It had never occurred to me not be worried about what other people thought, but maybe Kallie was wrong about that. I didn't think she had as much life experience as I did.

And what was so wrong with wanting to be like someone else? Oh sorry, I said to an imaginary audience, I mean "be," not "be like." Like, be, what difference did it make? Why was it bad to want to improve yourself? This friendship with Kallie was making me confused, and I longed for the previous summers, when I hung out with Lynn and didn't have to worry about anything more complicated than whether Mom was making her infamous meatloaf for dinner.

Just then, Mom herself knocked on my door.

"Hilary? There's a phone call for you."

I'd been so absorbed in my thoughts I hadn't even heard the phone ring. I thanked my mom and hurried into my parents' room. My parents wouldn't allow me to have a phone in my room. Another point of argument between my mom and me.

Grabbing the phone, I said, "Hello?"

"Hil?" said a voice scratchy with static.

"Lynn!" I exclaimed happily. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm O.K. How are you?"

"Fine."

I'd been waiting to hear from her for so long, but now that I had, I didn't know what to say. We both burst out laughing and then Lynn apologized for not having written. She explained that she'd intended to send more postcards, but things were crazy there and when she wasn't visiting relatives, her parents and sisters were taking her places....

I forgot my anger at how she hadn't been in touch. After all I'd been through today, just hearing her voice was like having a cool, sweet-smelling lotion poured on a burn. I asked how she liked San Francisco.

"Oh, it's fine. We saw the Golden Gate, Chinatown, rode in those streetcars. We've been all over the place, actually. The whole family went to Disneyland a few weeks ago and that was fun. I mean, fun for the little kids. But the best was L.A. My parents took me and my sisters there for the week, and it was so cool."

"Did you see Damian Sámos?" I interrupted.

"No, but we drove down Rodeo Drive and guess what? I bought something from one of the stores. It cost like a million dollars and my mom was freaking, but it was worth it! I mean, it's from L.A. le château is like nothing compared to the stores there!" she said gleefully.

A cold, hollow space opened up in my stomach.

"So, yeah, it's been a fairly good vacation." She was speaking in that smug voice she used when she was trying to act cool and distant even though she was really excited about something and wanted me to know she was excited. "So what have you been up to?"

I drew a deep breath. "Oh, nothing much. I went to the beach last week."

"Oh, that's nice. You went with your parents?"

"No," I said quietly. Then I dropped the bomb. "Actually, I went with a friend."

There was a pause. "A friend," said Lynn, in a totally different tone of voice. "Oh. Who was it, someone from our class?"

"No." I waited. I wasn't going to tell her about Kallie. She'd have to ask.

Lynn sighed. "Are you going to tell me who it is, Hil, or do I have to guess?"

"Her name is Kallie Foster, and she just moved in next door to me. She's really nice. She's going to Mackenzie in the fall, too. We've been hanging out a lot in the last few weeks," I said, sounding as if I were telling a rival I'd just been asked out by Brett Filburn.

"Oh," said Lynn coldly. "Well, I'm so glad you have someone to hang out with when I'm not there."

I started to feel bad. Maybe I'd been too hard on Lynn. There was nothing wrong

with her enjoying her vacation. I'd been having fun here, so I should be glad she was having fun too.

"I think you'd really like her," I tried.

"Whatever. Look, Hil, I've got to go. It's almost supertime here, and my mom doesn't want me to tie up my aunt's line too long."

Before she could say goodbye, I interjected, "I'm sorry, Lynn, I didn't mean to—"

"Don't worry about it," she said dismissively.

But I could tell she was going to worry, so I added, "When you come back, maybe we can go to le château and look at those dresses."

Her voice thawed. "Sure, Hilary. I'd like that."

"What day are you coming back again?"

"August 20. Anyway, I have to go. Nice talking to you. And have fun with Carrie."

"Kallie," I corrected.

"Whatever. Talk to you later, Hil."

I trudged back to my bedroom, ignoring my mom's questioning look. I flopped down on my bed and sighed. I knew it wasn't very nice of me to rub Kallie in Lynn's face. I mean, yes, Lynn was having fun without me, but she was having fun with her family, not with another friend, so it was different. Then again, I thought, Lynn has two sisters and many cousins, but I really don't have any family other than my parents, at least not family who live near Toronto, so why shouldn't I be allowed to have another good friend?

And hadn't Lynn hung out with other people besides me? I remembered a summer about three years earlier when she'd started playing with someone named Deirdre. Even so, when I thought about all the times Kallie and I had painted her walls and played Gorgolia, I had the same awkward feeling I'd had when I'd come back from Kallie's that first time. I felt like Lynn had found out all about my time with Kallie, although really I'd told her almost nothing, and that now I was charged with something and I had to defend myself, only I didn't entirely believe in my own case.

But even in my confusion, I could think clearly enough to know I didn't want to let Lynn or Kallie tell me what to do. I'd just have to figure that out for myself.

Chapter Eight: Galileo's Moons

The red-haired woman braced herself against the crate in the pitch dark storeroom, the scissors gripped tightly in her hand, ready to strike the masked man who was after her....

But for once I didn't care whether Nancy escaped from the blackmailer. All I cared about were three questions: How was I going to get Lynn to accept Kallie as my friend? How was I going to get Kallie to become less of a nerd? And most importantly, how was I going to get in with the right people at school next year?

I was reading the last paragraph for the third time when I heard the side gate slam. Kallie was standing in our backyard, wearing a black t-shirt with silver stars and moons on it, a long skirt, and crooked 3-D glasses that looked like they were from a cereal box.

"Hi, Hil! Ready to go?" she exclaimed, grinning.

"Go where?"

"To the planetarium!"

My heart felt like a miniature bowling ball. I'd never been less in the mood to go to a planetarium, and that was saying something.

"I don't feel like going today," I told Kallie. "Do you mind postponing it?"

"Sorry, Hil, but today's the only day Razi's going downtown this week."

I sighed. "All right, I'll get ready."

She seemed to notice my displeasure for the first time. "If you really don't want to go—"

"No, I said I'd go and I will." I sounded as if I were donating a small organ to save her life and she should be very thankful to me.

Kallie and her dad held a humming contest the whole way to the planetarium. He hummed the music to Hockey Night in Canada, and she tried to out-hum him with the Canadian national anthem. It was a good thing they weren't sitting in the back because I would've had to restrain myself from slapping them. They were so immersed in their hum-a-thon that we drove right past the turnoff to the planetarium, and it wasn't until a couple of streets later that I could break into their humming to tell them this. I checked my watch.

If we didn't hurry up, we were going to be late for the two o'clock show and we'd have to wait another hour until the next show started.

So you can imagine my mood when we finally pulled up outside the planetarium.

As we got out of the car, Kallie's dad intoned in a deep, formal voice, "Goodbye, Callisto Amonalisa Eadoin and Hilary Laura."

Kallie giggled. "Goodbye, O Humdacious Hummer. We shall rendezvous at precisely four o'clock in front of this fabulous—"

"Kallie, it's almost two o'clock. The show's about to start," I interrupted. Without saying goodbye to her dad, I turned and hurried up the steps to the front entrance.

We bought our tickets and I strode towards the theatre. Kallie lingered behind to fiddle with her 3-D glasses.

"Hurry up!" I snapped. "Why are you wearing those stupid things anyway?"

"Because it'll give me a different view of the planets. Do you want a pair? I brought an extra one."

"No! Let's just go, Kallie."

We entered the theatre and found seats just in time for the lights to dim. Leaning back, we gazed up as hundreds of tiny pinpoints of light dotted the domed ceiling one by one like fireflies popping up at a surprise firefly birthday party. The audience, mostly small children and their mothers, said, "Ooooh. Aaaah." One of those deep and patient voices that enunciates every syllable came over the intercom, "The universe is billions of years old...."

At first I was too irritated to listen to the commentary. I kept thinking about what had happened at the mall and wishing someone would give me the solution to all my problems. But gradually my thoughts were pulled back to what the announcer was saying about the human fascination with what lay beyond our planet.

"The ancient peoples of the world believed that the Earth lay at the centre of the universe, and that the planets and the Sun revolved around the Earth. In 1543, Copernicus published his theory of a Sun-centred universe. In 1610, Galileo used a new invention, the telescope, to locate four moons that revolved around Jupiter: Io, Europa, Ganymede, and

Callisto. With Galileo's discovery came solid proof that some heavenly bodies did not revolve around the earth. Galileo's theory was controversial because it went against everything that had been previously thought...."

I turned to Kallie and whispered, "Is that where your name comes from? One of Jupiter's moons?"

"Partly," she whispered back. "My mom's into astronomy, and she wanted to name me after a moon."

But I didn't get a chance to ask where else her name came from before the screen sent us on a dizzying tour of the universe. I leant back in my chair, absorbing the colours and shapes on the screen and allowing my mind to be swept away by the announcer's voice. I had no idea that asteroids had orbits or that the planets were named after Roman gods and goddesses. The names went by so quickly I couldn't remember which god or goddess stood for what, except that Mars was the god of war and Venus was the goddess of love. And I hadn't realized how immense the universe was and how long it had been around. There were probably other forms of life out there. Listening in awe to the presentation, I forgot about everything except what was beyond the Earth.

Before I knew it, the show had ended and we were filing out into the lobby.

I wasn't even aware of Kallie until we got outside, where the bright sun pierced my eyes, which had adjusted to the soft lighting inside the planetarium. Kallie was just as enraptured as I was.

"What a wonderful experience," she said quietly.

"Yes," I said. We exchanged smiles.

Then she broke the mood by declaring, "I'm hungry! Where can we get something to eat around here?"

I pointed in the direction of Queen's Park. "We could go to the park. They might be selling ice cream."

"Great!" She took off down the stairs of the planetarium.

I followed, panting to keep up. We found a guy riding one of those bicycles with a freezer attached. Kallie bought a purple popsicle ghost with gum for eyes and I bought a

drumstick. Then she left the pathway and strayed on to the grass, heading for an unoccupied bench under a huge tree.

I began to follow her, but I was so occupied with unwrapping my drumstick that I tripped over a tree root and landed on my hands and knees. The chocolate-nut part of the cone popped off and rolled several feet away. For a minute I considered picking it up, but suddenly a squirrel scurried out from behind a bench and began nuzzling at the ice cream.

I slapped my hands on the ground, and tears began to form in my throat. Nothing was going right. Lynn was mad at me for hanging around with Kallie. My mom wouldn't let me buy the right clothes, and even if she did, they wouldn't fit me. I had so little chance of being cool at school next year Chanel Winters probably wouldn't bother to spit on me. And Kallie, well, she was off in her own little world. Even the squirrels were against me.

Kallie rushed over when she saw me fall, but when she noticed the squirrel, she started snickering.

"It's not funny!" I cried.

"Sorry. I'm sorry." She tried to stifle her laughter, and suddenly the sight of Kallie in her 3-D glasses, one hand over her mouth and the other holding a purple ghost popsicle, made me start to laugh too. Soon I was laughing so hard tears were running down my cheeks, and then I started crying.

Kallie stopped laughing. "Why are you crying? Come on, let's go sit down." She led me to the bench. By the time we sat down, I'd finished crying, and I felt like I'd swum the length of Lake Ontario and been pulled up onto one of the Harbourfront docks by a pair of kind hands.

Kallie took off her 3-D glasses. "What was that all about?" she asked gently.

I sighed. "Nothing. Everything."

"Oh." She licked her popsicle, waiting for me to continue, while I tried to decide what to tell her. I couldn't tell her I thought her nerdiness might ruin my chances of getting in with the cool crowd next year, especially not when she was being so nice. And how could I talk about any of my other problems without mentioning that one? All my problems connected, like a giant spider web. But I had to get out of the web before it squeezed me to

death. Finally I said feebly, "It's about yesterday. You know, the clothes... The Dress."

I looked up at her from under my eyelashes to see her reaction, but she was quiet. "Oh, so now you're going to pretend it didn't happen?" I demanded.

She looked surprised. "What? What are you talking about?"

"You know. You thought I was too fat for that dress, but you didn't have the guts to say it. And you could see I was upset but all you wanted to do was go for ice cream," I whined. I crossed my arms and looked towards the Ontario legislature.

"Look, I don't know what made you think that, but I never thought you were too fat for that dress, and I'm sorry if I made you feel that way. And I only suggested we get ice cream because I could see you were upset and I thought it might make you feel better."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked, trying to sound tough. "Well, why didn't you ask me if I wanted to try The Dress on? And why did you act all quiet when I told you the price?"

"Because I was surprised at how expensive it was. I never buy clothes that cost more than fifty dollars. And I just didn't think to ask you to try it on."

I remained quiet, as I usually did when I knew I'd lost an argument.

"I can't believe you thought that about me," she continued. "Just a few days ago, I was trying to convince you that you aren't fat, remember?"

"I know! That's what made it so weird. It's just... I don't know. I mean, sometimes you're so nice, like at the beach, and then other times... it's like you don't want to be my friend."

She stopped licking her popsicle. "Like when?"

Then I remembered something that had happened at the beginning of the summer. I wasn't sure why it was coming out now, but it seemed appropriate. "Like a couple of days after that thing with the paint, I saw you in your driveway and you invited me over. But you never told me when I should come and you never came to get me. So I thought maybe you didn't really want to see me."

"I did want to see you, but when you didn't come after a few days, I thought you didn't want to see me. I'd called on you twice, plus I'd invited you, so I figured it was your turn." She licked her ghost, then asked, "Why did you expect me to come?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Anyway, I hope you believe me about the dress," she said. I nodded. "And you don't still think you're fat, do you?"

I exhaled through my nostrils. "Yes, I do." She gave me a look. "Well, you don't know what it's like, Kallie. You're thin. You don't have to worry about Chanel or anyone else laughing at you."

"Neither do you."

"Yes, I do.... You're so lucky you're thin."

"Hil, being skinny can be a curse. Trust me. Anyway that's not what I meant. I meant that you don't have to care so much about what Chanel thinks."

"Kallie, didn't you hear what I told you at the mall? Chanel is going to be the most popular girl in grade seven. She'll have a big influence over everyone else. If I want to be popular, she has to like me, and I want to be popular."

"Why?"

I rolled my eyes. "Why would I want people to like me? Gee, I don't know. Maybe because I want friends? Because I don't want to be some loser who sits by herself at lunch?"

Kallie pressed her lips together. I waved my hand impatiently. "Oh you don't understand! You don't care about being popular. If someone laughed at you, you'd just say something sarcastic and turn away. But for people like me who do care, it's hard when someone teases you. Like there was this girl in my grade six class, Heather Banks, and she used to give me dirty looks all year. Then one day I wore this pink sweater to school. It was a Christmas present from my grandma, and it was furry and kind of tight. I walked past her—Heather Banks, not my grandma—in the hall, and you know what she said? 'I can't believe they're letting pigs in the school.' Well, I couldn't go anywhere near her for a month after that because I was afraid she'd laugh at me again. You don't know what it's like to be picked on, so don't pretend you do."

Have you ever said something you know might make someone a bit upset, only to have the person blow up? That's what happened to me then. I knew I was being a bit melodramatic. Heather Banks hadn't really been *that* mean to me, though the part about the

pig comment was true. I'd thrown in the last sentence hoping it would make Kallie be quiet and stop trying to convince me that I wasn't fat when I knew I was. But I was not prepared for what happened next.

Her voice sliced through the heavy summer air like a knife through butter. "I'm so sick of hearing about your problems! Do you think you're the only person in the world who's ever been hurt? I don't know what it's like to be picked on? That's the most selfish thing I've ever heard!" Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a couple walking a big dog turn to look at us, but neither of us cared.

I'll never forget what Kallie said next. Even though it's been six years, I can still remember her speech word for word. In fact the rest of the conversation is as vivid in my mind as it if were taking place right now.

"You say you got picked on once," she began. "How about getting picked on every day? Being called things like stupid loner, retarded loser, ugly bitch every day for months? How about having no friends? Nobody even wanting to sit with you because they're afraid they might get picked on too." She leaned in closer, ignoring the purple juice streaming down her hand, and hissed, "How about being so upset by people's insults, you throw up in the bathroom during lunch? Your eyes hurt from trying to hold in the tears every time it happens. And you go home at night and wonder whether you'd be better off dead."

I didn't even try to stop my voice from trembling. "That happened to you?"

"Yes," she said. The word was like an arrow fired at a target.

"When?"

"In grade five. When I lived in Mississauga," she whispered. She took a deep breath, threw the popsicle into a nearby garbage can, and wiped her hands on a crumpled napkin. Some people on a nearby bench who'd been watching us turned away when they saw that Kallie wasn't saying anything more.

She spoke again, more quietly. "It all started when I became friends with this girl named Sheila. We were both new at school and we didn't know anyone, so we started hanging around at lunch and recess. And then I started inviting her over on the weekend." Her words came out in a torrent and then stopped, as if someone had turned off a tap.

“What happened?”

“One day, our teacher assigned us this project. We had to build something. Sheila and I decided to build an orrery.” When she saw my puzzled expression, she explained, “It’s a model of the planets and the sun. Anyway, Sheila wanted to add moons to all the planets because she thought we’d get a better mark if our project was more complicated. I tried to explain to her that some planets don’t have moons and it would be too difficult to add moons because my mom was going to help us build a little motor so the planets could rotate and if the moons all had to rotate, too... well, you can see the difficulty.”

I nodded.

“But Sheila kept saying she wanted moons, and we ended up getting in this huge fight and... I said something pretty mean.”

“What?”

She took a deep breath. “I told her I was going to build the orrery my way and I’d probably do a better job by myself. She got upset and left. She had low marks, see, that’s why it was such an insult. I talked to my mom, and she said I’d been too hard on Sheila and I should apologize. But when I called her, she hung up on me. So my mom helped me, and I finished the orrery on my own. I got an A+, but since we were partners, Sheila got one too. I thought that was fair, but now I’m not so sure.”

“I don’t think it was fair,” I said quietly.

“I thought Sheila would forgive me after she got the A+ because that was what she wanted. A high mark. But when I tried to talk to her, she ignored me. Then one day I found a box under my coat hook. It had all the stuff I’d ever lent her. At recess she told me she hoped I’d found my junk because she never wanted to touch it again. ‘It’s contaminated,’ she said. I tried to apologize, but she said she never wanted to talk to me again.”

“But why was she so mad at you?”

She shrugged. “Maybe she was jealous because I got an A+ without her help or mad because we didn’t do things the way she wanted. Or maybe she just wanted to hurt me. I don’t think she was very happy. She never invited me to her house, so I think maybe she had some problems at home.... Anyway, by this time, she’d made other friends in the class, so

one day, when I was just hanging out by myself, Sheila and this other girl made a remark—I don't even remember what it was, there were so many of them—something about how only losers dress the way I do.”

Suddenly I remembered Marcia, her white dress and limp hair, her downcast face, scurrying away from the graduation. “She’s such a loser.” Had Lynn said that, or had I? Despite the heat, I shivered.

“And that’s how it started. More people joined in, and soon almost the whole class was teasing me. The guys weren’t so bad, but the girls....” She leant forward, fanning herself with her hand. The sun had shifted so the tree no longer gave us any shade, making the bench unbearably hot.

She looked at me. “And you’re right, Hilary. At first I did answer back when they called me names or insulted me, but that only made them angry and then they started doing other stuff like stealing my hat and tossing it around during recess and... they said some really awful things.” Her voice caught.

I couldn’t restrain myself from asking, “Like what?”

“Like—” She bit the insides of her cheeks.

Tentatively I reached out and laid my hand on her arm. “It’s O.K. You don’t have to tell me any more.”

“No,” she sniffed. “I want to. They said my dad was a fairy because he’s an artist.”

I gasped. “You mean, like your dad is gay?”

“Yeah. And they said it like that if were true, it would be a really bad thing.”

We sunk into silence. Kallie seemed to have finished her story, but I had too many questions about plot and character to remain quiet.

“But weren’t some people in the class nice to you?”

“There were a couple of people.... Sometimes when the others were laughing at me I’d see them looking at me like they felt sorry for me. But they never talked to me because they were afraid of being picked on too, and I don’t blame them.”

“Well I do!” I exclaimed hotly. “They could’ve helped you. How hard would it’ve been? Yeah, they might’ve got picked on a bit, but it would’ve taken some of the bullies’

heat off you.”

Kallie lifted one shoulder. “That’s easy to say, Hil, but hard to do. Most people don’t want to go against the leader, especially if it means the leader might be mean to them.”

I frowned. “So what happened?”

“Eventually I couldn’t take it any more so I went to the teacher. She was very nice, and she even talked to Sheila and some other girls, but it didn’t do any good. They just had a new thing to tease me about. Running to the teacher like a crybaby. So finally I told my parents I wanted to go live with my grandma and go to school on the island.”

“What island?”

“The Toronto islands. That’s where my grandma lives. I thought I could get away from all those people, but my parents wouldn’t let me. They said it would be too complicated to change schools in the middle of the year and... well, it wasn’t a good time between my parents and me.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. I blamed my mom a lot. We kept moving around because of her job, and I kept having to change schools. It took me a long time to get over my anger at her but finally I did. And she promised this would be the last move.”

This surprised me as much as anything Kallie had told me. I’d always assumed she and her parents never disagreed, let alone fought.

“My parents let me go to a new school the next year,” she continued. “It was O.K. I didn’t have any friends and some people looked at me funny, but it was nothing compared to the year before. It was like... I’d been roasted over a raging fire, and now I only had to worry about the stray sparks.”

She pushed her hair off her face. I leant forward, pulling at my t-shirt, which was pasted to my back. Both of us looked longingly in the direction of the fountain, where a little girl was splashing around happily, oblivious to everything but the water.

“I’ve thought about this a lot this past year,” Kallie said. “I kept wondering if maybe I did something wrong, if I’d acted a certain way, if I’d been a certain way, maybe they wouldn’t have laughed at me. But after thinking and writing about it for a long time—and

talking with my mom and my grandma—I realized that I did or didn't do didn't make any difference. Those people had just decided they were going to be mean to me, and nothing I could've done would've changed that.”

She sat up and turned to me. “And see, that's what I mean about not worrying about what Chanel Winters thinks. Be yourself. Because if someone wants to make fun of you, trust me, they'll find a way to do it, even if you're wearing the right clothes and saying the right things. I've seen it happen.”

But I didn't want to talk about myself, so I said, “But... O.K. It's one thing for people not to defend you, but to pick on you? I mean, with Sheila—not that I'm agreeing with anything she did—but at least I can kind of understand. You guys were friends and then you got in a fight. But why did those other people tease you?”

She made a face and looked away, as if she were tired of the subject. “Why are there wars? Why is there prejudice? Sometimes people are just mean. My mom says it's because they're threatened by others who are different. Like with my cousins at the lake. My parents are different from their parents, so they thought it easy to make fun of me for being a vegetarian and wearing the kind of clothes I wear. I guess it's just the price you pay for being different.”

I looked again at the fountain, where the little girl's mother was lifting her from the water. Strangers sitting on benches waved and made funny faces at the little girl. I heaved a huge sigh.

“So much for the advantages of being a geek,” I said.

She smiled wanly. “Well, I said I *suspect* there are advantages. That doesn't mean I've found them yet.”

I stared at the parched grass until I heard a voice say, “Kallie!”

We both jumped. Kallie's dad was standing in front of us, his body making a long, cool shadow in the late afternoon sun. “Where have you guys been? I pulled up outside the planetarium, but you weren't there. I parked on the campus, and I've been looking for you for half an hour.”

I looked at Kallie. She chewed her lip and mumbled, “Sorry. We just got talking.”

He looked at both of us as if he could see right through to where our blood vessels were running up and down our veins. But he just said, "Well, we'd better get going."

As we headed for the U of T campus, I noticed that the crowd in the park had changed. Different couples were walking different dogs, different businesspeople were cutting through the park on their way home from work. Or maybe they just looked different. Somehow I felt that I'd grown older in the past couple of hours. I can't explain this feeling, but you'll understand, if it's ever happened to you.

No one spoke or hummed on the way home. When we arrived at Kallie's, her dad didn't linger with us outside. I think he knew we wanted to talk to each other alone.

"Thanks for coming to the planetarium with me," Kallie said.

I nearly asked, "What planetarium?" The planetarium was in another galaxy to me right then. "Oh. No problem," I managed to say.

We were quiet for a minute, and then I said, "Kallie, I'm really sorry."

"About what? You didn't do anything wrong."

"Well, for whining about The Dress and Heather Banks. It was really childish."

She smiled a wavy smile, as if she were being reflected in a disturbed pond. "That's all right. And I didn't mean to come down on you so hard. I guess we just all have our problems."

I nodded. "Um... do you want to go to the Bata Shoe Museum this weekend?"

"Thanks, but we're going to visit my grandma on the island." We looked at one another for what seemed a long time. Finally, she said, "Would you like to come visit my grandmother, Hilary?"

Her voice was serious, not light-hearted like it usually was when she invited me somewhere. This was a different kind of invitation.

"Yes, I'd like to," I said solemnly.

"Great. I'll call you and let you know when." Then she was gone.

As I slumped across my yard, I felt like I had hundreds of tiny bowling balls attached to all my bones, organs, and blood vessels, weighing me down like a prisoner.

Chapter Nine: The Fool's Journey

I hadn't intended to start another chapter now. I was going to put our visit to the island in the last one. But I can't help it. When I wrote down everything that happened at the park, I felt like the bowling balls had broken out inside me all over again. And I just couldn't write anything more, so I had to leave my autobiography for a while. Memory can be dangerous if you let it.

Anyway, I'm O.K. now. I can still feel the bowling balls pulling me, but I think I can handle them.

So... I can't remember how I was going to continue. But I guess I can start by telling you what I was feeling as I lay in bed that night.

Guilt. That was number one. For whining about my pathetic problems. And for the way I'd been thinking about Kallie. I thought her nerdiness would ruin my chances of being cool? How could I have been so cruel? I had to keep reminding myself I hadn't known what those girls had done to Kallie when I'd thought that, but it never seemed like a good excuse.

And shock. I would never have guessed—and I have a pretty vivid imagination—that anything like that had happened to Kallie. She seemed so happy and strong, like nothing anyone did to her could hurt her. But then again, maybe she'd only been pretending to be happy. Like that time she ran off in the schoolyard. She'd sounded cheerful when she said goodbye, but I hadn't seen her face. Maybe she really had been hurt by my rejection.

And let's not forget about sadness, fear and uncertainty. It was horrible to think so many people would be willing to gang up on an innocent victim. What if it happened again? And what did this mean to my quest for Chanel's approval?

I wanted to call Kallie, but I wasn't sure I should. Maybe she needed some time alone. I hovered near the phone, uncertain. My mom noticed and asked whether I was O.K. For a minute, I hesitated. Should I confide in my mom, I wondered. No. If I do, I'll have to tell her how I complained about my own problems, and I'll probably just get a lecture about my selfishness. I smiled and said, "Fine."

A couple of days later, Kallie phoned me to make plans for going to the island. She

sounded much happier than she had when I'd seen her last. "I think you'll really like my grandma," she said. "She's an artist."

The next morning, we took the 11 o'clock ferry to Ward's Island with Kallie's parents and the dogs. My mom had given me a jar of strawberry jam to take to Kallie's grandma. At first I was nervous talking to Kallie, after what had happened in the park. She seemed her usual self, though, and soon we were talking as easily as we had before. As we were leaving the boat, she stumbled on the gangplank. I grabbed her arm, crying, "Are you all right?"

She laughed. "I'm fine. Don't worry. I'm not breakable."

We headed towards the cluster of streets at the end of the island. Kallie's parents were carrying plants in Styrofoam boxes and Kallie was holding some flowers she'd picked from their garden. After a short distance, we arrived at a crooked gateway between two trees. Beyond the gateway a stone path led to a sunken brown bungalow with vines trailing up its walls and a lone window that looked at us like a giant unblinking eye. Kallie's dad rung the bell.

A woman no taller than Kallie opened the door. At first I thought she was a maid. Her complexion was the colour of dark sand, and she had long black hair tied into a pony tail. She was wearing a red two-piece dress with gold threading and designs that looked Indian. A gold charm bracelet dangled from her wrist. But then she leaned forward to hug Kallie's dad, and I realized, with a jolt of embarrassment, that this must be Kallie's grandma.

"Son," she said. Then she said something in another language, and Kallie's dad replied.

Kallie's mom gave the woman a hug. "Good morning, Rawnie."

"Calypso," said the woman. "And Kallie." Kallie gave her grandma an enthusiastic hug and a kiss on the cheek, squishing the flowers. Kallie looked disappointed, but her grandma laughed. "I can always get plain freshly picked flowers. But I cannot always get flowers that have been specially squished by my granddaughter." She turned her mesmerizing eyes on me.

“And you are Hilary.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes. It’s nice to meet you,” I said breathlessly as we shook hands. I’d never been introduced to someone like this before, and it was like meeting royalty.

“Come in,” she said.

We stepped into a short hall and then into the room with the eye window. Not counting Kallie’s bedroom, it was the oddest room I’d ever been in. It was like an old well-loved book. No, an old well-loved encyclopedia. I’d never seen so much stuff crowded into such a small space before—not even in Lynn’s room, and that was saying something. Shelves full of books, a violin, a piano, a funny-looking machine like the one you saw in ads for the Grammy Awards (What was it called? A gramophone—of course!), even a crystal ball. That was to say nothing of all the little tables and footstools and chairs.

I hadn’t realized I’d been staring at the room so long, but when I turned to the others, they were all smiling at me. I noticed that the plants and the flowers had made their way to a huge wooden table in another room, which looked like a kitchen. So I stepped forward and held out the jar of jam to Kallie’s grandma as if making an offering.

“I brought you something.”

“Thank you.” She picked up a pair of glasses from a small table and put them on. “Very nice. A lovely colour.”

I twitched uncomfortably. I wanted to look around the room, but I didn’t want to be impolite by turning away. Instead I let my eyes roll to the edge of their sockets.

I don’t know whether Kallie’s grandma noticed this, but she said to Kallie, “I think Razi and Calypso and I will go outside to do some planting now. You girls can look around if you like.”

Kallie’s grandma and parents disappeared through a small back door in the kitchen, and Kallie immediately ran to the gramophone, plopped down, and began searching for a record to play. I noticed some herbs and flowers drying on the windowsill.

“What’s your grandma going to do with all this stuff?” I asked, pointing.

“Use it to make potions. She’s a witch,” responded Kallie.

I stared at her disbelievingly. But when she stared back at me, I knew she was

serious.

“What? I thought you said she was an artist.” I glanced around, as if Kallie’s grandma might sneak up on me and strangle me with long bony fingers.

“She is, but she’s also a singer, dancer, jewelry maker, and a witch. She’s many things.” When Kallie saw my face, she said, “She’s not a bad kind of witch, she’s a white witch.”

That sounded only slightly better than a regular witch. “What’s that?”

“Someone who uses herbs and flowers to make medicine. She heals people.”

I looked out the kitchen window to where Kallie’s grandma was leaning over her garden pulling up a carrot. I imagined a black hat sprouting from the top of her head and a black cape billowing from her shoulders, her face breaking out in warts and claws growing from her hands. But it didn’t work. Whatever kind of witch she was, she wasn’t the kind you’d see in cartoons. I knew she was much more powerful than that.

But after I’d watched her for a while, I wasn’t afraid, just intrigued. I thought of my own grandmothers. They didn’t have houses like this, they didn’t wear clothes like that, they didn’t speak other languages.

“What language was she speaking to your dad?” I asked.

“Romany. She’s a gypsy.”

A witch *and* a gypsy! No wonder Kallie was... not odd, unusual, I told myself. Look at her background.

“What kind of art does she make?”

“Mostly crafts, like those dolls over there. She does some sketching. But her stuff is very different from my dad’s.”

I went over to see the dolls. They all had dark hair and wore long ruffled skirts, white blouses and head scarves. Some of the dolls were male and they wore pants with suspenders instead of skirts. The dolls were lopsided, like they’d been stuffed with tiny potatoes, but that only made them more interesting to me. Barbies, these weren’t.

I said, “I never really thought of making dolls as art.”

“There are many kinds of art,” responded Kallie.

I turned to the bookcase. One of the books was called *Names*. I pulled it out gingerly, expecting dust to fly. But the book was just old, not dirty or neglected. I opened it. It was a book giving the symbolism of first names. I suddenly remembered how I'd wanted to know what my name meant.

"Kallie, look!" I exclaimed. "A book of names!"

She leapt up and hopped over. "Let me see."

I handed her the book, and she began flipping through it. "Here's your name," she said. I wasn't sure how she knew what I wanted without asking, but I was glad she did. "Hilary. A Greek name meaning 'filled with pleasure.'"

I wondered what that could mean. Maybe that things weren't as bad as I thought and that I'd have a really good year at school next year. I beamed. "Well, that's good!"

But Kallie wasn't listening. She'd sat down on an Oriental carpet with the book. "I'm in the mood to look up names. Any other names you want to know about?"

I sat down beside her and tried to think of the names of everyone I knew. Lynn meant "waterfall lake." I wasn't sure what that meant. That she cried a lot? But then I pointed out that Lynn was short for Linda. That name meant "pretty," which made more sense to me. George, my dad's name, meant "farmer," which made me laugh. He could barely get grass to grow on the lawn. My mom's name, Sylvia, meant "woods." Well, I thought dryly, she is hard, like a tree. "Damian" meant "sweet and harmless." I wasn't sure I liked the idea of Damian Sámos having such a wimpy name.

Kallie's grandma reappeared through the kitchen door. When she asked whether we'd found anything that interested us, Kallie told her about the book of names. Her grandma asked, "Have you told Hilary about your name, Kallie?"

My guilty feelings returned when I realized I hadn't asked Kallie about her name. But something else happened that made me forget those feelings. For the first time, I saw Kallie blush. She squirmed and shook her head.

"I know it's one of the moons of Jupiter," I piped up.

"That's right," said Kallie's grandma. "But originally it came from Greek mythology. Callisto was one of the attendants of the goddess Artemis, who was a huntress.

But Callisto became pregnant, and Artemis was so angry that she turned her into a bear and had the rest of her attendants hunt the bear. But then the great god Zeus saw how Callisto was being persecuted, so he took her and put her in the stars. You can see her there now, as the constellation Great Bear. The name Callisto means ‘beautiful.’ I first told Kallie that story a long time ago, when she was not as high as the piano over there.”

As Kallie and her grandma exchanged warm smiles, I felt something I’d never felt towards Kallie before. Jealousy. I wished I could be like her and have what she had. Part of me even wished I could *be* her. I turned away and looked out the window.

Then I heard Kallie’s grandma suggest that Kallie and I take the dogs for a walk. I was glad for the opportunity to leave the house. Before we left, I checked the book of names, out of curiosity. It didn’t have “Chanel” in it.

Kallie and I walked back towards the dock through a park. She assured me it was safe to let Woof and Fortunado off their leashes, and they went tearing across the grass, yapping excitedly. I asked Kallie where her grandma was from originally.

“England. After the First World War, her father decided to come to Canada to find work.”

“Work? But I thought gypsies just travelled around.”

“They do, but they still need to work to support themselves. My great-grandfather was a metalworker and a jewelry maker, and he thought he might find more work in Canada, so they all came over, thirty of them. It was a big family, and my great-grandfather was the head of it.”

“Was your grandfather also a gypsy?”

“No. He was Irish. That’s why one of my middle names is Irish. My grandparents met at a fair in downtown Toronto. My grandma and her sisters were selling scarves and jewelry they’d made and telling fortunes. My grandfather was very shy, but he stopped to talk to her, and they fell in love right away.”

I’d never heard a story about someone’s grandma before, at least not a story about when the grandma was young. I wondered whether my grandmothers had any interesting

stories like that, but I doubted it.

“That’s nice,” I said. “Did they always live on the island?”

“Oh no. That wasn’t until later. My grandfather was in the army, so they moved around a lot. My grandma liked it at first because it meant she got to travel, but it was a different kind of travel than the kind she did with her family. Plus, the army people weren’t always very nice to my grandparents. They didn’t like gypsies.”

I lowered my eyes and said quickly, “Doesn’t she ever miss travelling?”

“Sometimes, but she’s happy here.”

We walked the last few steps to the dock. Suddenly I remembered I’d meant to apologize to Kallie for the way I’d treated her that time in the schoolyard. But I never had.

“Kallie,” I began.

She looked up from where she was fastening Woof’s leash. We were too close to the water now to let the dogs run free.

“I’m sorry about the way I treated you. I haven’t always been very nice,” I said.

Her face was hidden behind Fortunado’s body as she tied his leash.

“I was pretty rude the first time we met,” I continued. “It’s just that I thought you were...”

“Weird. I know.” She sighed.

“But you’re not weird in a bad way. You’re weird in a good way.”

“I’ve never heard that before,” she said, looking up and smiling slightly.

“It’s true. But I’ll admit I didn’t want to be friends with you for a long time.” I frowned. “Why did you keep trying to be friends with me, even after I was so mean?”

Kallie rose, a leash in each hand, and looked at me. “Because I wanted to make friends. See, I learned something. I learned that even though that year was horrible and I had no friends for a long time, that didn’t mean I should stop trying to make friends. I didn’t try last year, and I just ended up being lonely. So when we moved and I found out there was a girl my age living next door, I decided I was going to try as hard as I could to be friends with her. And if that meant I had to put up with a bit of rudeness at first, that was O.K.”

I looked down at the weathered planks of the dock.

“The other thing I learned is that you should never stop trying to defend yourself against people like that. Otherwise it means they’ve won.”

We were both quiet until Kallie smiled and said warmly, “Anyway, let’s not think about all that. We’re good friends now and nothing can change that, right?”

“Right,” I said, smiling.

When we returned from our walk, we asked Kallie’s parents if we could rent bicycles and ride around the island. They smiled and told us we could do whatever we liked. So we did. We swam, we bought ice cream near Centreville, we stood on the observation deck at the southern point of the island and gazed out at the horizon. The blue of the water melted into the blue of the sky so you couldn’t see where the water ended and the sky began.

After dinner, we sat in the room with the window. The dogs were asleep under separate chairs. Kallie and her dad had put some jaunty fiddle music on the gramophone and sat near it playing cards. Kallie’s mom and grandma sat beside a small table, doing a crossword puzzle together.

“My daughter must help me,” Kallie’s grandma explained. “She knows how to fit the right letters into the puzzle just as she fits the right parts into the computer.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” Kallie’s dad said to me, smiling. “Rawnie Foster can do the *Globe and Mail* crossword puzzle backwards in ink.”

“Now, now, Razi, that was only once.”

I smiled, feeling like I belonged in the room. I hadn’t talked much to Kallie’s mom, but just having her there made me feel warm. A feeling I realized I didn’t often get with my own mother. Kallie’s dad was goofy and normal again, and I felt comfortable enough with her grandma to explore the room.

I wandered around, examining different objects. Kallie’s grandma didn’t look up from her puzzle, so I knew she trusted me not to break anything. Then I found a small wooden box in a dark corner of one shelf. As I picked up the box, I noticed that the wood was chipped and the gold clasp that opened and closed the box was broken. Inside was a stained pink cloth. I unwrapped the cloth carefully.

Inside was a pack of cards. But it didn’t look like any pack of cards I’d ever seen.

There were too many of them, way more than 52. The first one showed a man dancing and playing the flute, like a joker, but as I flipped through the pack, I didn't notice any suits on the cards. Instead there were swords and cups, and lots of cards with people on them. The cards intrigued me, though, and I went to sit down with them near the window.

"Oh, I see you have found a pack of Tarot cards," Kallie's grandma said suddenly.

I looked up, surprised. So that's what they were. I'd never held a pack of real live Tarot cards before.

"Those are very old cards," she continued. Everyone was looking at her now. "They were given to me when I was a child, younger than you and Kallie."

I looked at the cards again. Even though they were well-thumbed and creased, the pictures on them were bright and clear.

Then Kallie's grandma asked, "Hilary, would you like me to do a reading for you?"

A thrill of delight did the macarena up my spine. I felt like having my Tarot cards read was slightly dangerous, like sneaking in to see an R-rated movie. So of course I said yes.

"Do you want me to get one of the newer packs, grandma?" asked Kallie.

"No. There must be a reason Hilary found this one, so we will use it."

What reason, I wondered. It was just luck. But I was excited about having my fortune told. I'd always wanted to phone up one of those physics—you know, the ones on T.V. who'll tell you exactly what'll happen to you—but you always had to be over 18. But here I was getting my own personal psychic. Just imagine what my mom would say when I told her. *If* I told her. Maybe I won't, I thought sneakily.

Kallie's mom and grandma cleared everything off the small table, spread a red cloth over it, and moved the only lamp in the room next to a chair. Kallie's grandma sat in the chair next to the lamp, and Kallie's mom went to sit with the others, outside the ring of light.

"You sit here, Hilary," Kallie's grandma said, pointing to another chair. I placed the Tarot cards on the red cloth and sat down, feeling like I'd been chosen to be the follower of a powerful priestess. Just wait till Lynn hears about this, I thought happily, she'll be so jealous.

“Before we begin, I must ask you a question,” said Kallie’s grandma. “Have you ever had your Tarot cards read before?”

I shook my head.

“Then I would like to tell you about the Tarot, and about what it means to have your cards read. The Tarot does not always predict the future. When it does, it does not give you exact details. You cannot turn up a card that will tell you, ‘Tomorrow you will meet a one-legged man coming back from the market carrying a banjo.’ The Tarot is not like one of those psychics you see on T.V.”

The others laughed. I shifted in my chair.

“Tarot cards reveal what is hidden deep in your heart and mind. This is helpful because by understanding your heart and mind, you will be better able to make decisions that you think *and* feel are right. You must always have a reason for consulting the cards. Perhaps you are concerned or anxious about something and want some guidance. Is this the case?”

I nodded. My concerns could be summed up in two words. Junior high.

“I thought so. That is why you were drawn to the cards. Now before we begin, I must explain something. Every Tarot card has many meanings, and the meaning that applies to you will depend on the other cards in the spread. If the spread is negative, do not be alarmed or discouraged. Just remember that in the Tarot, as in life, the dawn always follows the night.”

I nodded, riveted to her every word.

“Now since you are just beginning, I will use a simple five-card spread. That means I will shuffle the deck and pick out five cards. The first card I lay down will represent your past; the second, your present situation; the third, influences on your situation; the fourth, advice about your situation; and the fifth, the likely outcome of the situation if you accept that advice. The cards will tie together to form a story. Do you understand all that?” I nodded dizzily. “Good. If you have any more questions, please ask me.”

But my head was spinning. This was getting complicated. Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, Kallie’s grandma shuffled the cards quickly. Then she put down five cards.

One of them was upside down, and I reached to put it right side up.

“No,” she said in a voice that made me draw back. “A card that appears upside down is important. Let it be.” She crossed her knuckles under her chin and stared at the cards for so long I grew bored. At last she said, “This is very interesting. All of the cards are from the Major Arcana. This is a very powerful and important spread.”

I raised my eyebrows. Her face relaxed into a smile. “I’m sorry. I should have explained. Tarot cards are divided into two types, a Major and a Minor Arcana. Cards in the Minor Arcana tell us about our day-to-day lives, but cards in the Major Arcana represent something larger, events of great importance to us or deep feelings. For instance, the first card.” She pointed to it. It was the one with the man dancing and playing the flute. “This is the Fool. He represents innocence but also naivete. His appearance here tells me that you have begun some kind of journey, you have found yourself in an important new situation. You’ve had to take a risk and be open to new ideas, but it has paid off.”

Well, that’s true, I mused. I’m about to start junior high, which is completely different from elementary school. But I haven’t started it yet, so how can she say I’ve already begun the journey? And as for being open to new ideas, I guess meeting Kallie counts. It was risky for me to be friends with her. Look at what happened in the mall. But it paid off in the long run. We’re good friends now.

“But the next card is the Moon reversed,” said Kallie’s grandma.

“Is that bad?” I asked.

She frowned. “It’s hard to know. Reversed cards do not necessarily signify something negative. They could simply mean that you are failing to notice the positive aspects of your situation. And the Moon is a complex card. However, since the Fool is first, I would suggest that the reversed Moon means that you’re finding this new journey confusing. It is a time of self-doubts, fears, illusions, and not seeing things the way they are. I also see some problems with women.”

That must mean my mom, I thought. But that’s nothing new. I’ve had problems with her for at least a year. And I have plenty of fears and self-doubts, especially about junior high. The cards seem to be right so far. I snuck a glance around the room. It was darker

now, and I noticed Kallie wasn't there. Where was she? How could she leave me at a time like this?

"The third card is the Empress. This is a card of good fortune. It symbolizes fertility, creativity, healing. The third card is the one dealing with influences, so I would say that artistic and creative pursuits will help you in your confusion and anxiety, though you may not realize it yet. The Empress also symbolizes the female and a willingness to help others. I feel that there is a woman or a girl who will be able to help you in your confusion, but only if you let her."

Who could that be, I wondered. Kallie? Lynn? Not Mom. She can't help me because she doesn't understand my problems. Maybe it's Kallie's mom. I've always felt she was a really nice person. Maybe she can cure me of some of my fears and self-doubts.

But that stuff about art—I don't get it. How can doing art make me any less confused? If anything, it only makes things worse. Kallie and I do art together, and she's complicating everything. I looked back to see if she'd returned, and to my relief, she was there.

"Then we have the Hermit. He represents meditation, thought, solitude. Since you are confused about your situation, you need to think about what's going on in your life. Stop listening to what others are saying and start listening to your inner voice. But be careful because your thinking will probably lead to an important decision, which is represented by the last card in the spread."

O.K., I said to myself, now I'm really confused. My inner voice? What's that supposed to mean? What decision? Sounds like a pretty major one. And I'm always thinking and talking to myself, but it never does any good. I only end up being confused. The room was almost completely dark. The lamp from the table cast a small pool of golden light on Kallie's grandma and me. But I couldn't see anyone else in the room. I shivered.

"The final card is the Lovers. They symbolize duality, union, sharing. But they also represent a decision or a choice, and in your case, I would say this meaning is more important. If you follow the advice about looking inside yourself, you will realize that you have to make a choice."

She fell silent, and I suddenly noticed the ticking of a grandfather clock I hadn't realized was there. I kept expecting her to say more, so finally I asked, "Do the cards say what I choose?"

She looked at me for a long time, then said, "No. They don't."

A heavy silence hung like a velvet cape over the room. Finally, Kallie's mom said, her voice sounding muffled in the dark still room, "We really should be going."

A few minutes later, we were outside in the fading twilight saying goodbye to Kallie's grandma. As I watched the family hug one another, I no longer felt part of their group. I waved to Kallie's grandma and was about to head back down the stone path, when she stepped forward and pressed my hand.

"It was wonderful to meet you, Hilary. Good luck with your studies next year, and be sure to come back to visit me." Then she added, in a voice so low only I could hear, "Don't worry too much about the cards, but remember my words when you need to."

As we journeyed home on the ferry, I stared into the dark water. So much for my name meaning "filled with pleasure." And so much for having my own personal psychic. All the Tarot cards had told me was that I was worried and I needed to think about something and make a choice. But what choice, and what was I supposed to choose? I wanted to know the future. What good were the cards if they didn't tell me what to do?

Kallie noticed my discomfort. "Hil, don't feel bad about the Tarot cards. Most of the ones you had are positive cards. And even the Moon isn't that bad. I know you're kind of nervous about starting junior high, and I am too, but I think the worst is behind us."

I didn't answer. If the Tarot cards were any indication, my problems were only beginning.

Chapter Ten: My Soiree

“I can’t believe you went out with her last night! I told you I was going to be back!”

It was August 21. Lynn had returned the day before. She’d called me as soon as she got home, but I’d been out with Kallie. It was all the fault of my poor math skills. I thought the 20th was a Saturday, not a Friday.

“Lynn, I’m sorry. It was an honest mistake. We’ll do something tonight. I promise. I won’t be seeing Kallie then.”

“Yeah, well you’d better not be,” she said.

As my dad pulled into Lynn’s driveway, I was excited but also nervous. Lynn had been in California so long. What if she’d changed somehow? What if I wasn’t good enough to be her friend any more? Not to mention her anger about last night. My mom had gone shopping that morning, and she’d bought a box of chocolates for me to give to Lynn. I hadn’t asked her to do this, but I was glad she did. Maybe the chocolates would appease Lynn.

But I didn’t need to worry about Lynn being angry. When she opened the door, she exclaimed, “Hil!” and gave me a big hug. Then she hurried me upstairs to her room, which was overflowing with opened suitcases, bags, and shoe boxes.

We sat on the floor and ate chips while Lynn showed me pictures of her trip. She had pictures of everything. Parts of the Golden Gate Bridge (“because I couldn’t get it all in one shot,” she said), restaurants, shops, and long beaches with palm trees and powdery white sand—really white like whole wheat flour, not like the beige stuff you find on the Toronto beaches. There was even one of Lynn’s whole family at Universal Studios. They were standing under a giant plastic shark that looked like it was about to devour them. “We were creating our own movie,” she explained.

“So I guess you really enjoyed yourself,” I said, when she’d shown me the last photo.

“It was *a-mazing!*” she responded, rolling her eyes. “The weather is always perfect there, especially in L.A. None of these horrible cold winters. The beaches are to die for. And the clothes are *so* cool. We don’t have anything like that in Canada.”

“What about le château?”

“No, Hil. When you’ve seen the stores on Rodeo Drive, le château just doesn’t measure up. The States is way more interesting than Canada anyway.”

I got that hollow feeling in my stomach again. “Why?”

“Well, look at all the cool stuff it has. I don’t know if you know, Hilary, but most of the movies and fashions and music in Canada come from the States. If we didn’t have the States, life would be so boring here.”

“Oh really?” I asked. I don’t know why, but I felt like I was being personally attacked.

“Yeah. Plus there are way more people in the States, and you can tell the people there have more important things to do than the people here because they’re always hurrying places. Everyone is so slow and dull here.”

“Just because they’re hurrying somewhere doesn’t mean they have somewhere important to go,” I objected. I was impressed with this objection, and I didn’t see how Lynn could argue with it. But she found a way.

“Of course it does, Hilary. Why would they be hurrying otherwise?”

I couldn’t answer that. But I wasn’t sure why just because a place had more people, it was better than a place with less people. I’d always thought that way, too, but I was starting to wonder if I was wrong.

I asked Lynn about this, but she just said, “You haven’t been there. You don’t understand.”

I didn’t understand, and I felt stupid for not understanding.

“What movies did you see this summer?” asked Lynn.

“*Saura*,” I responded immediately. I knew that movie was from the States, so I figured Lynn would be pleased.

But she frowned. “That cartoon? Oh. What else did you see?”

I was surprised to realize I hadn’t seen anything else, and even more surprised to realize it didn’t bother me. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? What did you do all summer?”

I frowned, but I didn't have time to think of a response before Lynn started showing me all the clothes and shoes and souvenirs she'd bought in California.

"Wow," I said, examining a high-heeled sandal. "You bought great stuff, Lynn."

"Those are to replace the ones you said looked like sneakers with a wad of gum on them!" She laughed, hitting me playfully with a scarf.

"Oh, I'm sorry. That was a dumb comment."

"It's O.K. I thought it was kind of funny. But now for the showstopper!" Reaching under her bed, she pulled out a box and handed it to me. "Open it."

I did. Inside was a fuzzy blue sweater with long sleeves.

"Oh, Lynn! It's beautiful!" I exclaimed as I stroked it.

She smiled. "Do you really like it?"

"I love it!"

"Good. Because it's for you."

I didn't know what to say. "You're kidding, right?"

Her smile grew wider. "No. I bought it at that store on Rodeo Drive. Remember the one I was telling you about when I called? See, it's the same colour as that le château dress you like."

I swallowed. "It's really for me?"

"Yes! And look!" She pulled out another box and opened it, revealing the same sweater in black. "We're twins!"

I blinked back tears. All my bad feelings towards Lynn vanished like disappearing ink. "Oh, Lynn, that's so nice of you. Thanks so much." We laughed and hugged each other. Then something occurred to me.

"It must've been really expensive!" I exclaimed.

"Nothing's too good for my best friend," she said warmly.

I smiled. Lynn couldn't be mad at me or think I was "slow and dull" if she gave me such an expensive present.

We spent the rest of the evening listening to Lynn's new C.D.s, eating snacks, and laughing. We had so much fun that when it came time for me to leave, I couldn't help but

feel even guiltier for going out with Kallie the night before. I told Lynn again how sorry I was. Then something made me add, "I don't want you to think I was choosing Kallie over you because I would never do that."

She smiled. "I know."

I lay on the floor of my room, gazing up into my closet, where my new sweater hung right in the middle so I could see it from wherever I stood in the room. Things had been going really well. Lynn was back and she was coming to my house the next day, I had a great new sweater, even my mom seemed nicer. I thought for sure she'd frown disapprovingly at the sweater, but when she saw it, she smiled and said, "That's a beautiful sweater, Hilary. It was very thoughtful of Lynn to give it to you." I grew more hopeful about junior high. Maybe it won't be so bad after all, I told myself. Maybe those Tarot cards were wrong.

Then I had an idea. Why not invite Kallie over to meet Lynn? After all, we were all going to Mackenzie in less than a week, so Kallie and Lynn might as well get to know each other.

But when I called Lynn and told her about my idea, she wasn't eager.

"I thought it was just supposed to be me and you," she said, the faint hint of a whine in her voice. "I was going to bring the movie magazines I got in L.A."

I told her she could still bring the movie magazines and assured her she'd really like Kallie. After all, I liked Kallie, and Lynn and I were best friends, so why wouldn't she like Kallie, too? But she wouldn't agree until I promised her she and I would go someplace together before school started.

I was about to call Kallie when I realized I didn't remember her phone number. She'd given it to me, but I'd never called her. So I ran over instead. When she opened the door, she was wearing an apron and her hair was more disheveled than usual. I told her my idea, and she hesitated.

"Well, don't you want to spend some time with her alone? You guys haven't seen each other all summer."

“We’ve already hung out a few times this week. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I don’t know, Hil. I was supposed to... help my dad with something tomorrow night.”

I narrowed my eyes. It sounded like she was making an excuse not to come. But that wasn’t like Kallie. She never lied. If she didn’t like something, she told you straight out. What was going on?

She saw me looking at her suspiciously and said, “O.K. I’ll come. Do you want me to bring anything?”

“No, I’ve got it covered. Just be there at eight sharp.”

As I headed across our lawn, I started to wonder whether this soiree was such a good idea. Kallie and Lynn were pretty different. I couldn’t imagine Lynn playing Gorgolia or Kallie wanting to sit through an evening of looking at movie magazines. I had to find something they’d both want to do. A board game. A board game was neutral. Nobody could get angry about a board game.

The next day, I looked in the kitchen to find food for that evening. My mom saw me and offered to help.

“You could make some dip for chips and vegetables,” she suggested. “And how about a shrimp ring and some sauce? We have one left over from last Christmas.”

“Good idea.”

I spent the rest of the day tidying my room, which had officially been declared a disaster zone by my mom. Mom made the dip and put the shrimp ring and sauce in a fancy bowl, which she carried up to my room.

“I’m allowed to have food? In here?” I asked suspiciously. Normally Mom didn’t allow even gum past the bottom stair in the hallway. If you came upstairs with food, she’d *know*, even if she was somewhere far away. A radar in her head began beeping and flashing red lights, and then the Mom Food Police would seek you out and arrest you on a charge of smuggling alimentary goods into the Republic of Upstairs.

“Well, this is a special occasion. I think we can make an exception.”

Well, what do you know, I thought. The radar’s been turned off for one night.

As the soiree drew nearer, I grew more and more nervous. I wanted this evening to be perfect, and I knew it was up to me to make my guests feel comfortable and enjoy each other's company. So I forced myself to relax, telling myself that everything would be all right.

Lynn showed up at ten after eight with her movie magazines, but Kallie hadn't arrived, which was odd because she was usually early, not late. Lynn and I sat in my room, politely refusing to touch the food or look at the magazines. But by eight-thirty, the conversation was so strained I told Lynn she could begin showing me the magazines and eating. Finally, at ten to nine, Kallie showed up.

"Sorry," she explained breathlessly, as I met her at the door. "I was playing my new computer game and I got caught up in it, so I didn't notice the time."

I rolled my eyes. "Never mind, let's go upstairs. Lynn's waiting."

When we got upstairs, I opened the door to my room and stepped aside, letting Kallie enter first.

Kallie and Lynn locked eyes like they were locking laser guns. Lynn lifted her eyebrows at Kallie's yellow Wonderland t-shirt and baggy batik pants. Kallie frowned at Lynn's black mini-skirt and pink tank top, which gave a clear view of her bra straps. Both looked like they'd just met someone from the planet Zoolaxstar. I swallowed.

"Um... Kallie, this is Lynn Avery, my friend from Susanna Moodie. Lynn, this is Kallie Foster, my next-door neighbour."

They continued to stare at each other. I feared they might stay that way until they became petrified and stuck in a national park somewhere. But finally Kallie shattered the silence.

"Hello, Lynn. Nice to meet you." She stepped forward and held out her hand, which Lynn took as if she were touching a dead fish. "Likewise," she said quietly.

I exhaled. The worst is over, I told myself. "Sit down," I said.

Kallie sat in front of the table with the food, and Lynn plopped down on the bed. I sat in a chair between them. We all looked at one another.

"Help yourself, Kallie," I said, pointing to the food. "Lynn and I have already had

some.”

“Thanks, Hil. It looks delicious.” Kallie began piling veggies and chips and dip onto a paper plate while I tried to find topic of conversation.

“Lynn was just showing me the movie magazines she got in California,” I tried.

“We’ve finished looking at them,” Lynn added unhelpfully. I shot her a look.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” Kallie said, shrugging. “I’m not really into those things anyway.”

Lynn frowned. I said quickly, “Kallie and I did a lot of really neat stuff this summer. Tell Lynn about Mackenzie House, Kallie.”

But Kallie had been about to bite down on a giant broccoli spear smothered in dip. I opened my mouth to say something, but she began, “Mackenzie House was the home of William Lyon Mackenzie, the leader of the 1837 rebellion. I thought it would be neat to go there since our school’s named after him. And it turned out to be fun, right Hil? The house has a lot of cool stuff in it. It even has a print shop!”

“A print shop? Wow.” Lynn sounded like she was rehearsing to be Miss Teen Sarcasm of Suburban Toronto. So much for that conversation.

“Why don’t you have some shrimp, Kallie?” I asked.

“I can’t eat them, Hil, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot.” Great. Another thing that had gone wrong this evening.

“Remember what?” demanded Lynn, as if we were talking in some secret code.

“I’m a vegetarian,” Kallie explained.

“But I thought vegetarians could eat fish.”

“We don’t.”

“Oh. Well, that explains why you’re so thin. I’d be that thin too if I was a vegetarian.”

Kallie’s eyes narrowed and she put down the broccoli spear.

“How about a board game?” I said quickly.

I took out the Canadian edition of Trivial Pursuit. I’d got it last Christmas, and Lynn and I had played a few times. Since there were only three of us and we couldn’t have teams,

I suggested each person take turns asking the other two questions, and whoever got the right answer first would get a point. Whoever got twenty points first would win. They both liked this idea.

I asked the first question. "Who wrote *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*?"

"That's easy," replied Kallie. "Stephen Leacock."

"Who?" asked Lynn.

"Stephen Leacock. He's a famous Canadian humourist. He wrote many books in the 1910s and 1920s. *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is one of the most famous books in Canada. We'll probably get to read it in high school sometime."

"Oh," said Lynn. "Well, he can't be that famous because I've never heard of him."

It was going to be a long evening.

We managed to get through the first hour without too much trouble, probably because we concentrated on the game and didn't talk much. I was beating Lynn, but Kallie was way out in front of both of us. Things were O.K. until we got to a question about ice cream.

"What Ottawa valley factory is famous for its ice cream and cheese?" asked Kallie.

"Oh, I know this," I said. I tried to remember back to two summers ago, when we'd gone on a trip up the Ottawa Valley with one of my grandmothers. I was sure we'd stopped at that ice cream place. But neither of us knew the answer, which was Baldersons.

"Well, I wouldn't know because I never eat ice cream," said Lynn.

"Not even Double Peanut Fudge Deluxe Supreme?"

I froze. Lynn got a hard look on her face. I grabbed a card and started to ask another question. But it was too late.

"Double Peanut Fudge Deluxe Supreme?" asked Lynn slowly.

"Yeah. It's a new flavour they developed at this ice cream shop in Moose Bay," said Kallie, grinning. "You know, Moose Bay, it's north of Barrie. It's the best ice cream in the whole world. I bet you'd feel different about ice cream if you tried it."

I put a hand to my head. I'd always wanted to know where Double Peanut Fudge

Deluxe Supreme came from, but not right now!

“I’m sure I would,” said Lynn, in that same slow, hard voice.

Lynn and Kallie spent the rest of the evening sniping at each other, and every conversation I tried to start went about as far as a tricycle with a broken wheel. So I began to eat instead.

“Woah, there, Hil, you’re putting away a lot of shrimp,” Lynn said.

I looked down at the shrimp ring, which was half eaten, and blushed. I hadn’t realized I’d eaten so many.

Kallie looked right at Lynn and put down the card she was holding. “I heard you think that Hilary is fat,” she said accusingly.

“What?” snorted Lynn. She looked at me as if she thought it was a joke. I lowered my head. “I don’t think she’s fat.”

“That’s not the way it sounded, from what Hilary told me.”

“What did you say to her?” demanded Lynn.

I gulped. This was my worst fear, that I’d be caught in the middle. I was so nervous I didn’t know what I was saying. “Nothing. I just happened to mention that comment you made about... I don’t even remember... something about baby fat.”

Fortunately, this calmed Lynn down. She said, “Well, baby fat and actual fat are two totally different things. If you’re going to quote me, get it right, Hil.”

But Kallie wouldn’t give up. “If you don’t think she’s fat, why did you make that comment about the shrimp?”

“I was joking! Get over it already,” Lynn muttered.

“How about some music?” I interjected.

This was an even worse idea. We put on a C.D. Lynn had brought, one of her new ones, but Kallie said didn’t know any of the songs because she didn’t listen to music that much. Lynn replied that she’d never heard of anyone our age who wasn’t interested in music and asked whether Kallie really was our age. Kallie said hotly that she certainly wasn’t any younger than Lynn and was probably older. They made other comments, too. I don’t remember them all. I don’t want to.

Finally, I couldn't stand it any more, so I made up an excuse and went down to the kitchen, where I tried to figure out a way to make them both leave. This was much worse than when I'd wanted to get out of hanging out with Kallie that first time. How could I have thought that was so bad? It was *nothing* compared to what was happening now. I wished a giant cow would burst through the roof and drown us all in Double Peanut Fudge Deluxe Supreme. Anything to make this horrible soiree end!

My mom had seen me sneak downstairs, and she came into the kitchen from the family room, where she'd been sitting reading with my dad.

"How's everything going, Hilary?" she asked, smiling.

"Oh, fine. Mom, do you and Dad want to go to bed? I don't want to keep you up."

Mom looked at me suspiciously, but she kept smiling. "Hilary, it's not even ten-thirty. I don't think we need to worry about going to bed quite yet."

"Oh, O.K., great." I scurried from the room. My composure was melting under the glare of my mom's gaze, and I had to escape before I confessed all.

But when I got upstairs, Lynn and Kallie were both standing up. I glanced from one to the other. No sign of blood, bruises, or broken furniture. Yet.

Lynn was holding her magazines. "I really have to be going, Hilary. I called my dad while you were downstairs."

"I should go too," Kallie said quietly.

"What about the game?" I asked half-heartedly, trying to restrain the relief in my voice.

Lynn shrugged. "I don't care. She won, anyway."

"Oh, O.K., but please take some of the food." I moved towards the table, hoping to salvage something of this evening. But even that was not to be. Neither of them wanted any food.

Somehow I managed to get downstairs and thank them both for coming, and then watch while they acted all nice and polite in front of my parents. The whole time I felt the shrimps crawling their way back up my throat. I couldn't stand the way Lynn was babbling about her trip to California or the way Kallie kept standing around, like she had to keep Lynn

company until her dad got there. After a time that felt as long as Lynn's trip, her dad arrived and they all left. My parents started to ask about my evening, but I faked a yawn so that they'd think I was too tired to talk.

Then I went upstairs and ate the rest of the shrimp ring, even though I wasn't hungry.

Somehow I managed to go to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, all I could think was that I had to call Kallie and Lynn and explain to them that what had happened last night had been some kind of terrible accident. I'd say it was all a misunderstanding, the planets were misaligned. And if that didn't work, I'd say it was my fault.

I called Kallie first because I figured she'd be easier to convince.

"It wasn't your fault, Hilary. Please don't blame yourself. You did everything you could to make the evening fun. It just didn't work out, that's all."

I rolled my eyes. Kallie had dismissed my theory about the planets in less than five seconds, and now she refused to believe I'd done anything wrong. Why did she have to be so nice? It only made things harder. Frustrated, I asked, "Well, if it wasn't me or the planets, what went wrong last night?"

"Lynn and I are very different people," she said slowly. It sounded like she was walking across a field and wasn't sure if she was going to step on a daisy or a land mine. "We have very different interests and outlooks on life."

"So you don't like her?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I don't."

I sighed, frustrated. "You didn't give her a chance. Just because she dresses differently than you do—"

"It has nothing to do with how she dresses. I wouldn't care if she wore nothing but an inflatable tire, as long as she was a nice person. It's just... I don't like the way she acts."

"What way she acts?"

"Like the comment she made about you eating too much shrimp. It was mean, and it wasn't even true."

"Oh, yeah? Well, maybe it was true!" I exclaimed, thinking back to what had

happened after they'd left. But of course, Kallie didn't know I'd eaten all those extra shrimp, so I said more softly, "Look, Kallie, I know you think you were being nice by defending me, but you don't understand. Lynn and I have been best friends since grade one. We tease each other all the time. She didn't mean to insult me."

"But that doesn't mean she didn't insult you," Kallie said quietly.

I felt like someone had been jabbing me in the neck with a sharp pencil and had jabbed one too many times. "Well, you can hate her all you want but you better get used to her because we're all going to same school!" I exclaimed.

I didn't have any more luck with Lynn than I'd had with Kallie.

"How is it your fault she's a freak, Hilary? You didn't give birth to her. Misaligned planets... more like her brain is misaligned."

"There's nothing wrong with Kallie's brain, believe me. She just takes awhile to warm up to. I didn't really like her at first either, but once I got to know her, I realized she's pretty cool."

"Cool!" Lynn shrieked, as if I'd just shoved her into a vat of ice-cold water. "How can you use that word about *her*? She's the opposite of cool. She dresses like a six-year old, and she's interested in things only a forty-year old would care about, like Mackenzie House. Her idea of fun is probably dressing up stuffed animals."

Good thing I didn't tell her about Gorgolia, I thought. "But once you get to know her—" I tried.

"I don't want to get to know her. And it's not only because of the way she dresses or what she does for fun. I've seen enough of the way she acts to know I don't like her."

"Let me guess. The shrimp."

"Exactly! How dare she accuse me of thinking you're fat? She knows nothing about our friendship. And even if I did think you're fat, it's none of her business. Who does she think she is?"

My friend, I thought. But I knew if I said this it would lead to another argument, so I said, "Well, you'd better get used to her because she's going to Mackenzie too."

"Don't remind me. She'll probably be in all my classes."

I felt like someone had tightened a tiny valve in my stomach with a wrench. Then I said something that surprised even me.

“Look, Lynn, Kallie is my friend, and I’m not going to stop being friends with her just because you don’t like her.”

A pause. Then Lynn asked, “So does this mean you’re going to hang around with her at school too?”

“I guess so.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Hil. What would Chanel think of you hanging around with someone like Kallie?”

“She wouldn’t care,” I declared, trying to sound confident.

“I’m not so sure about that, Hil.” When I didn’t respond, she said angrily, “Fine. Do what you want.”

“I will,” I said.

After I’d hung up, I flopped down on the bed and listened to Lynn’s new Celine Dion C.D. She’d forgotten it last night, and I didn’t feel like giving it back to her. I pondered my soiree. What a disaster. I’d only made things worse. Kallie and Lynn hated each other. And where exactly did that leave me, I wondered. What was I supposed to do now?

Whatever it was, I’d have to figure it out soon. Junior high was starting in ten days.

Chapter Eleven: A Mackenzie Girl

As the bored, dusty-looking man at the head of the classroom droned on and on, I hid behind a tall guy in the seat next to me and snuck glances at Chanel in her tight red sweater and black miniskirt. She was even more beautiful—and skinnier—in person than at a distance of fifty metres. She was sitting between two of her friends from the mall, Tiffany Chen, an Oriental girl with hair like strands of dark wheat, and Burgundy Townsend, who had shoulder-length blonde hair streaked with brown. When I became friends with them, I decided, I'd grow my hair long, but I wouldn't dye it blonde, much as I was tempted. I wanted to retain a bit of my individuality, after all, and I thought they needed a brown-haired girl in the group.

And who knows what friendship with them might lead to? I'd heard Chanel had money. Maybe she'd invite me somewhere fancy. I saw myself standing on the prow of a magnificent ship at sunset off the Côte d'Azur (I didn't know where this was, but I'd heard rich people lived there), my diaphanous silk gown trailing behind me, my hair billowing in the breeze like a curtain, Brett Filburn swaying towards me, a tiny smile playing on his lips as he held two glasses of champagne....

"No. I'm sorry. That's not going to happen," said the bored man.

I was so startled I said, "What?"

But my voice was drowned out by the whine of a short guy a few seats away.

"So we're all going to be in the same classes? What if we don't have any friends in this class?"

The class erupted in laughter. The bored man, who was my homeroom teacher, Mr Benson, sighed and said, "That would be a very unfortunate situation. You will, however, have the opportunity to be with your friends during your elective, if you so desire. So you can talk it over with your coterie and decide by Tuesday."

Tuesday? What was this about Tuesday? I looked down at my timetable and wished I hadn't spent the last few minutes daydreaming. It was the most complicated timetable I'd ever seen. I had eight subjects. That wasn't so bad, but each subject was at a different time

depending on the day. I also had several different teachers and had to change classrooms for every new subject. Then I noticed one class said “elective,” but it didn’t give a room number. I started to panic. Had they left something off my timetable? What should I do? I couldn’t put my hand up. I’d look like an idiot.

Luckily, another girl put up her hand and asked, “Sir, can you explain about the electives again?”

Mr. Benson sighed. “You have a choice of three electives: visual arts, home economics, or woodworking. You need to go to the guidance office to select an elective by next Tuesday, and you’ll have your first class that day. Choose carefully because you’ll be in that class for the rest of the year.”

Mr. Benson had to answer a series of questions, from “which course is the easiest?” to “so how many electives can we choose again?” But I wasn’t listening any more. I’d already chosen my elective, and I don’t have to tell you what it was. Kallie turned around and whispered, “Isn’t it great, Hil? A whole year of art class to look forward to.” I nodded.

Today was the second day of school. Yesterday had been only a half day. Everyone had gone to sit in the gym, where the principal, a thin, bald man who reminded me of a vulture with good posture, called out the homerooms. I was in 7D, along with Kallie, Chanel, Burgundy, and Tiffany. Lynn was in another homeroom, and even worse, we found out our timetables were different and we’d only have lunch together on Wednesdays and Fridays. But at least we’d be in art together, I told myself.

Meanwhile I was taking every opportunity to watch Chanel during homeroom, so I could see how a cool person acted. I already had several little tricks that would let me observe her without appearing to be observing her. Like when we had to stand for the national anthem that day (I mean the second day of school), I leaned forward, pretending to adjust my sweater, but really I was peeking through my hair to see what Chanel was wearing. I decided to start keeping a list of what she wore every day so that when I started buying cool clothes, I’d know what colours and styles to look for.

Then there was my uncanny ability to tune out all conversation in homeroom except what Chanel was saying. Today she’d looked at her timetable and said, “Ugh. Social

studies. That'll be so boring." I made a mental note to pretend I disliked social studies, if anyone ever asked.

Besides Tiffany and Burgundy, Chanel had another friend in our homeroom, Kyle. He was one of the Simcoe group. He had a small, square head and startling blue eyes, and I found him very cute. Chanel Winters *and* a cute, cool guy in my homeroom—I couldn't believe my luck!

I wanted to talk to Chanel or Tiffany or Burgundy, but I wasn't sure how to approach them. I didn't have anything important to say to them, and I could just picture what would happen if I made up some weaselly excuse. They'd stand there, eyebrows arched, mouths twisted in disdain, looking down at me from the peaks of their one-and-a-half-inch heels, and say, "Yes? What do *you* want?" I couldn't let that happen, so until I had a foolproof way to approach Chanel, I'd have to be content to watch her.

Our first class was math with Benson, where we were assigned a whole chapter of homework we'd be quizzed on that week. Then on to gym class, where I quickly decided our teacher was actually an escaped psycho in disguise. She had the shortest hair I'd ever seen on a woman, all slicked back like a slimy reptile, and she made us run around the gym in circles. Whenever the stragglers (that would be me) weren't going fast enough, she'd blow this shrill whistle she held in her mouth like a pacifier. Kallie enjoyed the class, though, and on our way out, she told me she was going to join the track and field team.

Fortunately for me, the next class was English. Our teacher, Miss Stephanopoulos, was young and friendly. She had a stylish hairdo and was dressed in fashionable clothes. Well, as fashionable as a teacher could wear. I liked her immediately.

My heart thumped when she told us the course would include creative writing assignments. Ever since Kallie and I had created Gorgolia, I'd begun to think maybe my creativity wasn't dried up after all. There was nothing forced about the orgs and the Pippipalians. Maybe I could still write stories. In any case, I'd get to test that theory pretty soon. We'd already been assigned a description of our bedroom and a short story.

We also had Miss Stephanopoulos for social studies. But by this time, the morning felt like it had stretched into evening, so I didn't absorb much of what she was saying about

Simcoe being the first lieutenant-governor of the province, except that he wanted to model all Canadian institutions after British ones.

Finally the bell rang and Kallie and I headed for our lockers, lugging three heavy textbooks and trying to duck out of the way of people who were dashing towards the cafeteria as if they hadn't eaten in days. A six-foot guy crashed right into me and sailed on without a backward glance. As I rubbed my arm, I realized how short I was compared to everyone else here. Babyish little grade sixes, more like babyish little grade sevens.

By the time we reached the caf, it was as packed as a tin of sardines. I looked around for Lynn, but I couldn't see anyone I recognized. I had no idea Mackenzie had this many students. It hadn't looked that full when we'd taken the tour in May.

We managed to find an empty table squeezed against a back wall.

"I'm starved!" exclaimed Kallie, as she dug into her crisp pita sandwich. I opened my new black lunch bag to see what my mom had packed for me. A smushed peanut butter sandwich stared at me mournfully with a red jelly eye, where the bread had torn. I sighed and took a soggy bite.

"Hey Hil!"

I looked up to see Lynn standing over me, smiling. I said a warm hello, and she sat down beside me, exchanging a cold greeting with Kallie. Then Lynn and I began giving each other the scoop about our classes and teachers.

"Did you have Benson yet?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. And I heard he's your homeroom teacher. I'm so sorry."

"I think he's kind of funny," Kallie piped up. "He's the only other person I know besides my parents who uses the word 'coterie.' And it's a good word. People should use it more often."

Lynn and I exchanged a look, but she didn't say anything.

"And can you believe all this stuff about having to go the guidance office to choose an elective?" I asked. "Why couldn't they just give us a form to fill out in homeroom? I mean, it's hard enough finding your way to different classes, let alone the guidance office. I don't appreciate being forced into all these extra-curricular activities."

I addressed myself to both of them but only Lynn replied. “Mmm. I agree.”

Then she and I started dishing the dirt on our classmates. Lynn was really jealous that I was in a homeroom with so many of the cool people, including Chanel. When I asked who was in her homeroom, she made a face.

“No one I know except Heather Banks. And most of the new people look like geeks. But there is one person. Amber Valentino. She’s part of Chanel’s group. She’s the only one who’ll be worth getting to know.”

I saw Kallie raise her eyebrows as Lynn continued, “Oh, you know what, Hil? I noticed Amber was wearing lipstick and mascara. We should start wearing some too.”

I’d noticed Chanel wearing make-up, too, but I wasn’t enthusiastic about the idea of copying her in that way. My thoughts went to my mother. “I don’t know. Do we have to?”

“Well, if Chanel and her friends wear make-up and we want to be friends with them, it’ll look weird if we don’t too.”

“O.K. then.”

“Great. I’ll get some stuff from Morgan and we can put it on tomorrow before homeroom.” She sighed. “I’m so glad there’s someone decent in my homeroom.”

“I don’t think that’s very fair,” Kallie said quietly.

“Excuse me?” demanded Lynn.

“Well, I don’t think it’s fair to say that no one else in the class is ‘decent’ or ‘worth getting to know’ just because they’re not friends with a certain person. How do you think they’d feel if they heard that?”

“I don’t care,” Lynn scoffed.

“Kallie, just let it go, O.K.?” I pleaded.

But she didn’t. “And what makes you think you’re so much better than everyone else? Maybe the other people in the class think you’re a geek.”

Lynn scowled. “I don’t have to sit here and listen to this. I’m going to find Trish and Stacey. I’ll talk to you later, Hil.”

As she flounced off, I shot Kallie a did-you-have-to-do-that look. Her eyes widened and she said, “Well, I’m sorry, Hil, but how would you like it if someone said the only

decent person in our homeroom is Chanel?”

“I’d agree,” I shot back. Then I remembered that Kallie had been picked on very badly not too long ago, so it was natural she’d be sensitive about these things.

I said more calmly, “Kallie, can’t you just try to get along with Lynn?”

She stared down at her half-eaten pita. “All right, I’ll stop picking fights with her. But I was nice to her at your house, and every time I said something, she was sarcastic. So I don’t know what more I can do.”

Suddenly something occurred to me. “What happened when you two were alone in my room?”

“Nothing.” Her expression was blank.

I narrowed my eyes. “Did you really want to come over that time to meet Lynn?”

“Of course.”

“Because I got the feeling you didn’t. You weren’t that enthusiastic when I invited you, and you were late.”

“I wasn’t enthusiastic because you interrupted me in the middle of baking. And I was late because I got caught up in my computer game.” She was speaking carefully, and I got the feeling she was holding something back.

But I decided to let it go for now. Instead I tried to think of a way to bring these two warring nations together.

“Maybe if you and Lynn found something you both liked—” I began. And then, maybe because I’d been thinking about my soiree, I thought of Lynn’s C.D. She’d never asked for it back, so I supposed I was free to lend it to someone else. I told Kallie I’d bring it for her tomorrow. “I think you’ll really like it,” I added hopefully.

She looked at me for a long time. “All right, I’ll listen to the C.D. But the planet of friendship rotates both ways.”

“Huh?”

“She has to try too.”

Before I could respond, the bell rang and we were caught in the tide of students heading to yet another class.

The next morning, I handed Kallie the C.D. as we waited for the bus. I was even more uncertain about her reaction than I'd been yesterday. I'd listened to the C.D. again, and I wasn't sure screechy pop songs about lost love would be Kallie's thing. But I figured I wouldn't know unless I tried.

When we got to school, I left her and went with Lynn to the washroom. She'd brought a couple of lipsticks and a mascara, and she gave me a quick lesson on how to use them. She pursed her lips and applied the lipstick like a make-up artist, then brushed the mascara on her eyelashes with a few expert strokes. But when it was my turn, my hands shook and I had to keep blotting and starting over. Finally I managed to draw a red mouth on my lips and apply a generous quantity of mascara to my thin eyelashes.

I turned to Lynn. "How do I look?" I asked, grinning.

She made a noise that was a cross between a snort and a sneeze. "Look at yourself. I mean, really look at yourself."

I squinted at the cracked mirror and gasped in horror. It looked like someone had taken a fly swatter and smushed several large bugs on my mouth and eyelids. I wet a paper towel and was dabbing frantically at my face when the bell rang. Lynn grabbed her knapsack.

"Lynn, no! You can't go!" I cried.

"Hil, my homeroom's downstairs. If I don't go now, I'll be late and I'll get a detention."

"Who cares! You can't leave me looking like this!"

She reached for a dry paper towel and said, "Here. Hold still." She wiped my mouth with the towel and told me to look in the mirror. I let out a cry. The lipstick had migrated to my cheeks and jaw, leaving long red streaks like the marks made by old, hard erasers.

Tears welled up in my eyes as the bell rang a second time.

"I have to go!" Lynn cried, heading for the door. "Whatever you do, don't cry! It'll look worse!"

She was right. Already I could see black trickling from the corners of my eyes. I forced my tears back, wet the towel again, and rubbed my face viciously. Then I glanced

in the mirror. My cheeks were rosy and my eyelashes unnaturally dark and thick, but at least most of the make-up was gone.

I slunk into homeroom just as the door was being closed. The entire class looked at me. Kallie's mouth opened, several girls including Tiffany snickered, and even Mr. Benson looked startled, which made me feel really stupid.

The make-up didn't wear off over the day, so before I went home I spent fifteen minutes in the washroom scrubbing my face, my heart slamming against my chest like a basketball at the thought of my mother finding out. I vowed never to take such a useless risk again.

But the next morning, Lynn convinced me that all I needed was practice, and when I put on the lipstick—I wasn't touching the mascara again—I had to admit that I did look like I had fewer dead insects pasted to my face. And by Monday morning, I'd improved enough to decide I looked tolerable. I strode into homeroom, feeling more prepared than ever to face whatever junior high had to throw at me.

The first thing that hit me in the face was a C on my math quiz, which Mr. Benson handed back that morning. But when I overheard Chanel say to Burgundy, "I got a D+, but who cares?" I felt a bit better. And my mood improved when Miss Stephanopoulos handed back our descriptions in English. Nine on ten! Maybe my creativity was returning.

As I was contemplating this, Miss Stephanopoulos said, "There was one ten on ten, so I'd like to invite that person to read her description for the class. Kallie, if you wouldn't mind?"

My cheeks flushed as Kallie stepped proudly to the front of the classroom and read the description of her room. Yeah, you remember. The room with the ceiling painted like the night sky and the hammock instead of a bed. That got a few snickers from Chanel and her friends. But fortunately nothing else happened.

As we left the class and headed for lunch, I couldn't get rid of the nervous feeling I'd had when Miss Stephanopoulos had asked Kallie to read. Could Lynn be right? Would Kallie be a problem for me? I knew she wouldn't purposely do anything to embarrass me. It was what she'd do accidentally that worried me.

I was wondering how I could mention this to Kallie, when she said, “I hope you don’t mind, Hil, but I invited someone else to have lunch with us today.”

“Who?” I demanded. I didn’t think Kallie knew anyone here other than me.

“I don’t remember her name, but it reminded me of the planetarium.... Anyway, I know she’s in our grade because I’ve seen her going into one of the other grade seven homerooms. This morning I saw her in the hall. No one was talking to her and she looked kind of sad, so I went up to her and invited her to lunch.”

“When did this happen?”

“When you were in the bathroom with Lynn.”

When we got to the caf, Kallie said, “There she is.” She pointed to where a thin, familiar-looking girl with scraggly hair was sitting with her head bowed over a paper bag. It couldn’t be... but then the girl raised her head. It was! Kallie wanted to have lunch with—

“Marcia Williams?” I said loudly and slowly.

“Yes, that’s it! Marcia. Her name means ‘of Mars.’”

“We can’t have lunch with her!” I exclaimed.

“Why not?”

“Because she’s...” But what was I supposed to say? Because she’s a loser nobody likes? That would only make Kallie more determined to sit with her.

But Kallie was staring at me, waiting for an answer, so I sputtered out the first thing that came to mind. “Because she’s a horrible person. She went to my elementary school, and she was really mean to me. She said... she asked if I’d ever been arrested for smuggling watermelons in my sweater.”

Kallie gave me a funny look and said, “I thought Heather Banks was the one who picked on your weight.”

“After Heather, other people started picking on me, and Marcia was one of them,” I babbled.

Kallie looked at Marcia and said, “Well, we can’t eat with her if you don’t feel comfortable. But she doesn’t look like the type to say something like that.”

“Well, you can’t judge a book by its cover, Kallie,” I huffed.

“No, you can’t,” she said, looking at me in a way that made me nervous. “All right, I’ll just go over and tell her we won’t be sitting with her. Find a table and I’ll join you.”

“You’re not going to tell her what I said, are you?” I cried.

“Why not? I have to tell her something.”

“Well, it’s... it’s just really embarrassing. I don’t want to bring up all that stuff again. Make up some other excuse. Say... you have to go to the library or something. Please, Kallie?”

She looked at me. “All right, I’ll make up another excuse.”

I watched as Kallie went up to Marcia. Marcia smiled when she saw Kallie, but when Kallie started talking, the smile melted quickly. I straightened my shoulders and went to find a table before Kallie could turn around.

We didn’t talk much at lunch, but as we were finishing, she said, “Oh, I brought back the C.D. I’ll give it to you before class. I loved it!”

For a second, I thought she was joking. But her earnest expression said otherwise.

“Really?” I gasped.

“Yes. That Celine Dion... what a powerful voice. So emotional, so... clarion.”

“Clarion?” I asked. Wasn’t that a make-up company?

“Clear as a bell. High pitched, shrill, agonizing, but exquisite. I’m definitely going to buy more of her stuff. Thanks for lending it to me, and tell Lynn thanks too.”

I was impressed. Kallie had found something to like about Lynn’s C.D. Maybe a treaty was possible after all.

I gave the C.D. back to Lynn in the washroom after school, where we were returning our faces to mother-acceptable mode.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I lent it to Kallie,” I said, as Lynn tucked the C.D. into her knapsack. “She really liked it.”

“What?” asked Lynn hotly, as if I’d told her I’d shredded my Rodeo Drive sweater. “How could you lend this to Kallie?”

“I didn’t think you’d mind—”

“Well, I do. This is my C.D. I don’t want you lending it to anyone without my

permission, especially Kallie. Is that clear?" she snapped.

A girl emerging from a stall looked at us. I waited until she'd left the washroom before I said, "I'm sorry. But I don't see why it's such a big deal. You lent Morgan's lipstick to me."

"Yeah but I had Morgan's permission. You didn't have mine!"

"O.K., O.K. I just thought that maybe if Kallie listened to the C.D., you guys might have more in common and you might become friends—"

"Get it through your head, Hilary. I don't want to be friends with her!"

The emphatic way she'd spoken made me defensive, so I grabbed at the first thing I could think of to show my displeasure. "Well maybe I don't want to wear all this stupid make-up!"

"So fine don't wear it then. I don't care!" She turned away and busied herself applying a kleenex to her eyelashes. Obviously she doesn't care, I thought angrily. I grabbed my knapsack.

"See you in art tomorrow," I muttered, heading for the door.

"No you won't."

I stopped. "What?"

For the first time that day she looked embarrassed. "I'm not taking art. I signed up for home ec instead."

I must've stood there for a full minute with my mouth round as a timbit. "Why?"

"I've heard it's an easier course. Besides, anyone who's anyone will be taking home ec."

It was hard to argue with that. "But..." I sputtered. "I thought you liked art. You're so good at it."

"I'm O.K., but I'm not as good as you. I guess I'm just not that interested in it."

I hung my head. I suddenly felt guilty about fighting with Lynn, like her decision not to take art was my fault. "This is because of the C.D., right?" I asked.

"How could it be because of the C.D.? You just gave me the C.D. right now."

I frowned and began to wonder whether maybe I shouldn't feel responsible. To

cover my confusion, I said, “This means we won’t have any classes together.”

“Why don’t you take home ec, Hil? I overheard Amber saying she was going to take it, and that probably means Chanel will too.”

I hesitated. “I already signed up for art.”

“It’s not too late, the guidance office is probably still open. Tell them you made a mistake. You won’t be the only one doing it.”

I was sorely tempted. Being in a class with Lynn and Chanel was a big inducement. But what would Kallie say? We’d already made so many plans for art this year. In the end, though, it was the thought of my collage that decided it for me.

“But I want to take art,” I said.

“Fine,” said Lynn, shrugging. “Ready to go?”

I checked my lips in the mirror one last time and led the way out of the washroom. As we headed for the bus stop, I thought about what had just happened. Lynn had never said she’d choose art, but I’d assumed she would. And for some reason I couldn’t understand, I felt betrayed.

“So how was your first full week at junior high, Hilary?” asked my dad at dinner that night.

I swallowed. Normally my dad didn’t ask me too many questions, but this past week, he’d been bombarding me every time he saw me. It was like he’d never heard of junior high before I’d gone there. I figured this nosiness was a bad habit he’d picked up from my mom.

Tonight I wasn’t any more in the mood to answer their questions than I had been for the last few days. It wasn’t that I was trying to be rude, but the last thing I wanted after a day of listening to Mr. Benson drone on about decimals or of noticing how all the guys, even the nerds, looked at Chanel was to replay the whole thing to my parents, of all people.

I looked down at my plate and mumbled, “O.K.”

But my mom got in on the act. “How’s your English class?”

“Fine,” I said. The clink of my milk glass against my plate sounded loud.

“How did you do with that creative writing assignment?” asked Dad. “The one

where you had to write a description of your room?”

“Good. I got nine on ten.” I looked from one to the other. “I have been doing my homework, you know. You don’t have to check up on me.”

Mom looked at Dad and then at me. “We didn’t say you weren’t doing your homework.”

“Well, that’s what you were implying. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have asked how I did on that assignment.”

“I asked how you did with it, not on it,” answered my dad, quietly but pointedly.

“Hilary, we’re just interested in your schoolwork,” added my mom.

“Don’t bother. I’m not. I’m finished.” I pushed away my plate and stood up.

“Wait!” called my dad, as I left the room. “It’s your turn to wash the dishes!”

I was about to yell back that the dishes could sprout legs and run off to Whitehorse for all I cared when I heard my mom say, “Let her go, George.”

I had my first art class the next day. It didn’t start off well when I walked in and the first person I saw was Marcia. But finding out that Miss Stephanopoulos was our teacher made me smile. And hearing about the art fair made me beam.

“On December 17th, the last day of classes before Christmas, there will be an art fair held at Mackenzie,” Miss Stephanopoulos announced. “An art fair is exactly like a science fair, except that instead of building something that can be patented and used by other people, like a machine, you build something that expresses your viewpoint on a specific issue. But in both kinds of fairs, it’s important to be creative and original.”

We were all going to build something, in groups of three to five people, that would be presented and judged at the art fair. Even better, we were allowed to choose our own group and topic. The topic should be something big, said Miss Stephanopoulos, and yes, Katie, you could do your project on hair if you wanted, but it might be more challenging and creative to do a project on more something abstract.

The more Miss Stephanopoulos talked about the art fair, the more excited I got about it. Grade sevens and eights from schools all over Toronto would be participating, and the

judges were giving out medals for the best project. YTV was even going to do an interview with the winners!

As the bell rang, Miss Stephanopoulos called out, "Please have your groups chosen by Friday so you can started on the project right away. We won't always be working on the art fair during class time."

I thought Kallie would be really excited about the art fair, but as we headed to the caf, she was subdued. After we sat down, I asked her what was wrong.

She looked up at me. "Why did you lie about Marcia?" she asked quietly. "I asked her whether she ever said that thing about the watermelons, and she said no."

My lips parted. "She's lying!" But I took too long to respond for my response to be believable.

"No, she's not. I could tell by the way she looked when I asked her. Just like I can tell you're lying now by the way your neck is red and your lips are wobbling."

I felt the red flow up into my cheeks. "O.K., you're right. I lied. I didn't want to have lunch with her, and I couldn't think of another way out of it."

"Why didn't you want to have lunch with her?"

I sighed. "Because she's weird! She doesn't have any friends. That should tell you something." But my voice faltered as I spoke. Kallie's eyes became slits. I sputtered, "Her mom's on welfare, she's no good at anything in school, and the way she dresses is... pernicious," I added, thinking of a word my dad often used when describing the government. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it must be an insult.

"No offense, but that's a dumb reason not to sit with someone at lunch, just because she dresses in a different way than you do. Besides, if her mom's on welfare, how do you expect her to be able to afford the kind of clothes you wear?" I didn't answer. "And I dress differently than you do, but you're still my friend."

"Well, that's different. O.K., some things about you are kind of weird. But you're interesting and smart. You have personality. Marcia doesn't."

"How do you know? Have you ever really talked to her?"

"No, but it's a well-known fact, Kallie. People who are quiet are boring."

“Funny. I’ve always observed that people who are quiet usually have way more to say than people who are always flapping their gums.” She looked across the room to where Chanel and her friends were laughing hysterically.

I didn’t answer, and she said, “I’m very disappointed you lied, Hil.” She unwrapped her zucchini bread and began nibbling at it.

We were quiet for the rest of lunch.

That night, I reflected on my first true full week at school. Junior high wasn’t exactly turning out the way I’d hoped. I had a C average in math, Lynn and I didn’t have any classes together, and she hated Kallie more than ever. I supposed there was no hope now that they’d be friends, and I was beginning to wonder how I could’ve been stupid enough to think that was even possible. They were totally different. It would be like mixing cheesies with Double Peanut Fudge Deluxe Supreme. It would taste disgusting. From now on, I’d have to visit the Peoples’ Republic of Foster and the Monarchy of Avery on separate days.

Boy, I thought, those Tarot cards were right. I do have major problems with women, and who would’ve thought Marcia would’ve been one of those “women”? I wondered what I was going to do about her. What if Kallie kept wanting to hang around with her? If Kallie was a geek, Marcia was a supergeek. No way would Chanel want to be friends with me if I hung out with Marcia. Suddenly I thought of the Lovers. Maybe the decision I had to make involved Marcia. But if that was true, who was the Empress? I wish those cards had been clearer, I thought. Maybe then they’d give me some real help. I could sure use it.

Chapter Twelve: The Ethnic Shield

I was standing in the hallway after school, minding my own business, when someone slammed me headfirst into my locker. As I blinked my eyes, trying to stop the cheeseburger-shaped stars from spinning around my head, a voice called out, "Hil! You'll never guess what!"

Turning around, I saw a body undulating like a wave of heat. Finally, the body stopped moving long enough for me to identify it.

"Lynn," I said weakly, rubbing my head.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you? I just wanted to get your attention. Are you O.K.?"

"I guess so but—"

"Omigod, Hil. You'll never guess what happened." She was breathing heavily, and she sounded like me on the stationary bike. "Are you ready?... Amber asked me to lend her my home ec notes!"

There was a silence. "And that's why you smashed me into my locker?"

"No, no, that's not the best part. After I gave her my notes, she invited me to sit at her table!"

In my dazed state, it took me awhile to figure out what she meant. But when I did, it was worth the wait. "You-you sat with Chanel?"

"Yes, and that's why I smashed you into your locker!" she squealed. "Omigod, Hil, I got to see Chanel up close, and she is so beautiful. She was wearing..." But I wasn't listening. Visions of Chanel and Brett and new clothes and parties danced in my head. I woke up in time to hear Lynn conclude, "And she's even skinnier in person."

I swallowed. "Does this mean we can be friends with them?"

"I don't want you to get too carried away, Hil. It doesn't necessarily mean anything. It might just be a one-day thing to thank me for lending Amber my notes. But it's still pretty exciting," she added. "Chanel and her group barely ever talk to anyone except each other. So if they asked me to sit with them... this could be it, Hil. This could be our ticket in to the cool group!"

We both shivered.

The next evening, Lynn called me to say she'd sat with the cool group in home ec again.

"So it's not just a one-day thing," she enthused. "Let's sit together at lunch tomorrow, just you and me. We can watch the cool group and I can tell you all about them."

I eagerly agreed.

My last class before lunch on Friday was art. Kallie was trying to talk to me as the class started, but I was too busy daydreaming to pay attention. When the bell rang, I hurried out of class. I vaguely heard Miss Stephanopoulos saying something about the art fair and saw Kallie gesturing to me, but I had to leave right away. Lynn and I had to find a table close to where the cool people sat, and that wasn't easy.

We sat two tables away from them. We had a good view, but we could easily duck behind a group of older students if one of Chanel's group looked our way.

"There are eight people in Chanel's group," Lynn explained. She sounded like she was reciting a lesson. "You already know Chanel, Burgundy, Tiffany, and Kyle. That's Amber beside Tiffany." Amber was a short girl with big lips (seductive, I thought), stringy blonde hair (windswept), and an annoying laugh (which just takes a little getting used to).

"And Brett, of course," Lynn continued. Brett looked as gorgeous as ever in his oversized plaid shirt and loose grey shorts. "Then there's Dylan." Dylan was a skinny guy almost lost inside his stylish, baggy clothes. I began to despair when I noticed he had blond hair, too, although it was obviously dyed. Did you have to have blond hair to be Chanel's friend? If so, I might as well forget it. Either that or start picking out my wedding dress for when my mom shipped me overseas. "And that's Chad." I breathed a sigh of relief. Chad was Jamaican, and he hadn't dyed his hair. He wore clothes similar to the other guys'.

"Wow. You're so lucky to get to sit with them," I sighed.

"Not all of them. The guys take tec."

"But I thought you said anyone who's anyone takes home ec."

"Get serious, Hil. They're guys! Can you imagine Brett in an apron? Total turnoff." I had to agree. Brett wearing a frilly pink apron and cooking a pot roast wasn't one

of my daydreams. Although now that Lynn mentioned it...

“I just wish I had better clothes!” she exclaimed, picking at her green shirt.

I’d always admired Lynn’s green shirt, so her comment made me hate my own boring navy blue sweater even more. No way could I meet Chanel wearing something like this.

“Hey, I know! Let’s go shopping tomorrow!” suggested Lynn. “We could both buy some new clothes.”

“O.K.—oh no,” I said, suddenly remembering something. “My short story for Miss Stephanopoulos is due on Monday. I haven’t even started it yet.”

“Who cares? You always get an A+ anyway. Just come.”

I hesitated. Ever since I’d started junior high, I’d had a ton of homework, twice as much as last year. I wasn’t sure I could afford the time to go out. Then again, I’d been doing so much homework I hadn’t had any social life for the past ten days. I had to relax sometime. And if I really crammed, I could get my work done for Monday. So I told Lynn I’d go.

The next day, we hit the mall, where we both bought several items of clothing at Fairweather’s. (We weren’t brave enough to defy our moms by buying stuff from le château.) After I’d paid for mine, my cash was down to almost zero, but I figured if the clothes helped me become friends with Chanel, they’d be worth the investment. Lynn was going to get her hair done because she said it looked awful (though I didn’t think so), so I decided to have mine done too. My hair had grown longer during the summer, and the hairdresser shaped it into a stylish new ‘do. I went home feeling better about myself than I had in a long time.

When I got home, my mom surprised me by complimenting me on my new hairstyle. Then she told me Kallie had come over while I was at the mall. But I didn’t have time to return the visit. I had to start on my homework right away if I wanted to get it all done for Monday. Whatever Kallie wanted would have to wait until then.

I began writing my story on Saturday night, and it wasn’t nearly as hard as I’d feared. I pumped it off in less than three hours. My creativity is back, I thought as I looked at the finished product, and now I can write faster and better than ever.

The story was about a girl named Diamond Summers. She was rich, beautiful, popular, and had an A+ average. She'd just turned sixteen, and her dad had given her a red Mustang for her birthday. Her boyfriend, Jasper, was the most gorgeous guy in the school. But all was not well for Diamond. On the night of her big birthday party, Jasper dumped Diamond for her best friend, Lacey. Diamond was devastated and cried a lot. But then Lacey realized that Diamond and Jasper truly belonged together, and Jasper came running back to Diamond, explaining that his mind had been temporarily deranged due to some rancid peanuts he'd eaten at her party. He vowed to always love her and never leave her. Then he took her in his arms and they kissed as the fireworks left over from Diamond's birthday party went off, making little heart shapes in the California night sky.

I really liked this story. I thought it was more mature than anything I'd ever written. Most of the stories I'd written before that had been about things that had happened to me, like the time my dad tried to rewire the bathroom himself and we had to flush the toilet if we wanted to turn on the shower. Sure it was funny, I told myself, but there's no drama in stories about toilets. You have to write about something bigger, like lost love or unhappy rich people. Something that happened to someone more interesting than you.

Still, I couldn't help being nervous. This was the first story I'd written for junior high, and I really wanted to do well. On Monday morning, I placed my story on the teacher's desk.

"Thank you, Hilary," said Miss Stephanopoulos, smiling her warm, red-lipsticked smile.

I smiled back. I liked Miss Stephanopoulos. She was different from my other teachers. She didn't yell at people if they came in late, and when she spoke to the class, you felt like she was talking to you, not lecturing you.

I was thinking about this as I left the class. Then I heard Kallie say from behind me, "Hilary, I need to talk to you about the art fair."

The art fair! I'd completely forgotten. I stopped walking. "Oh yeah. We had to pick our group for Friday, didn't we? Sorry," I said in a small voice.

She looked annoyed. "No we didn't. Miss Stephanopoulos gave us an extension.

Weren't you listening?" I felt my face flush. "A lot of people were complaining that they didn't have groups, so we all got another week's extension. Anyway, I've thought of a couple of people we can ask to be in our group."

"Oh. Who?"

"One of them's Marcia."

My embarrassment gave way to anger. "What?"

"I know you don't like her, but remember that first exercise we did in art? The one where we had to draw several pairs of scissors? Well, I saw hers and it was really good. Plus I don't think she has anyone else to go with."

Big surprise, I thought.

"We can also ask Chu Hua," Kallie said. "Her stuff's good too. And she's on my track and field team, so I already know her."

Chu Hua? The name called to mind a quiet girl who sat at the back of our row in homeroom. She was very small, and she wore flowered outfits and coloured hair ribbons.

"She's on your track and field team?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Kallie pointedly. "So what do you say? Do you agree?"

I sighed. None of the cool people were in art, but there had to be somebody better than Marcia and Chu Hua. But Kallie was obviously impatient and I couldn't think of anyone else, so I agreed.

"I just wish you'd told me about this earlier," I said grumpily. Maybe if I'd had more time, I could've thought of someone more decent.

She gave me a hard look. "I tried to talk to you on Friday, but you kept ignoring me, and you took off as soon as the bell rang. Then I came over on Saturday and your mom told me you'd call me back but you never did."

I pressed my lips together. I was sure Kallie wouldn't like it if she knew why I hadn't been there when she'd come over, so I just turned and led the way to our next class.

The next morning, we were standing against a row of lockers, waiting to be let into homeroom. Directly across from us, Chanel, Burgundy and Tiffany were talking about homerooms and about how ours was definitely the coolest.

I felt warm inside until I heard Chanel say, "Poor Brett. He's all alone in 7C. Remember that loser he told us about, the one who never washes her hair or wears deodorant? He told me he tried to tell her nicely that she stinks, and she just looked at the ground and walked away. How rude. What was her name?"

"Marcia," said Burgundy, like the word was a piece of rotten meat.

I felt as if a voodoo artist had pricked me with a needle. I couldn't move, speak, or breathe. All I could do was pray, Please let Kallie not have heard that. I saw the three girls look at their nails and Kallie step across the hall....

"Excuse me," she said, in a pleasant tone. The three girls looked up from their nails and down at her. "Marcia's a friend of mine. I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk that way about her."

Chanel sucked in her breath, when the homeroom door suddenly swung open.

"Homeroom, everyone," droned a voice. "Come on, girls. No dawdling." Right then I came as close as I ever did to thinking Mr. Benson was a god.

I hurried inside, well ahead of Kallie, but not before I heard a disgusted voice say, "What-ever!"

All morning I felt like Chanel's eyes were boring into Kallie's back, although whenever I snuck a glance at her, she was looking somewhere else. When the bell rang for lunch, I grabbed my knapsack and hurried to my locker, keeping as much distance as possible between Kallie and me. But the popular girls didn't hang around long. They took off to go to a pizza place for lunch.

When the crowd had cleared out and I was sure no one else was within earshot, I said to Kallie, "You shouldn't have said that to Chanel."

"Said what?"

"What you said about Marcia. You shouldn't talk back to Chanel. She's popular. She has a lot of influence over people. You don't want to become her enemy."

Kallie scoffed. "I don't care how popular she is. I'm not going to stand there and listen to her insult my friend."

"She is not your friend," I hissed.

“Yes, she is, and I don’t care what you or anyone else thinks of her.”

I swallowed. I admired Kallie’s determination to stand up for what she believed in, but didn’t she understand the risks to her, to me? Her friendship with Marcia was putting me in an awkward position. How could I get her to understand that?

“Oh, that reminds me. She and Chu Hua are waiting for us in the caf,” said Kallie.

“What?” I demanded.

“Yeah. I asked them to have lunch with us so we could start talking about a topic for our project.”

“It’s not due until December!”

“Well, at the rate you’re going, we’re going to need all that time.”

I trudged along behind Kallie. I felt like I was being forced to consume the orange-coloured slop they sold at the caf under the label “soup.” When we got to the table where Marcia and Chu Hua were sitting, Kallie greeted them warmly. I said a polite hi to Chu Hua, who smiled. Then I sat down.

“Hi Marcia,” I said bluntly.

Her eyes flickered up at me briefly before returning to their usual position, somewhere between the table and the floor.

Fine, I thought, I try to be nice to her and she doesn’t even answer me. What a crybaby. No wonder everyone hates her.

Our conversation was strained to say the least. It started off being about the art fair, but we didn’t make much progress on our topic before Kallie started talking about a new recipe she’d tried for dinner the night before. That only made me angrier. She’d forced me to have lunch with Marcia because of our project and now we weren’t even getting any work done.

Sitting across from Marcia made me uncomfortable. She didn’t say two words the whole time, just kept her head bowed and chewed her lips. I wanted to yank her head up and hold it in place with a ruler. And Chu Hua seemed nice, but she spoke so softly and her accent was so thick I had a hard time understanding her.

When the bell rang, I thought, The only thing that went right was that Chanel wasn’t

eating in the caf today.

My mood improved that afternoon when I noticed a glittery poster advertising the first school dance of the year. I had to be in good shape for that, so I decided to start exercising. That night, I asked my dad to lower the seat on the stationary bike. I knew what I was in for this time, so I managed to pump for about ten minutes. I planned to go a little longer every night.

I also decided to put myself on a diet until the dance. Oh, I wasn't going to start skipping meals—and even if I did, my mom would put a stop to that pretty quickly—but I was going to cut out junk food and sweets. My mom had often told me I ate too many chips and cookies anyway. With my new clothes and hairstyle, I figured I was firmly planted on the road to being cool.

If only I could get rid of Marcia.

The next day, Chanel and her friends ignored Kallie during homeroom, so I thought my troubles were over. But then in social studies, Miss Stephanopoulos gave us a special assignment.

“In about a month, it will be United Nations Day,” she said. “This is the day we celebrate the different races, countries, and cultures of the world. And since Toronto is the most ethnically diverse city in the world, we at Mackenzie thought it would be appropriate to have each social studies class make something in honour of United Nations Day, something that will be displayed in the weeks leading up to that day. So instead of continuing with our lesson about the Family Compact, I'm going to ask each of you to make an ethnic shield.”

An ethnic shield, she explained, was a shield showing what nationality or race your ancestors were. We each had to take a piece of paper, draw a shield, and divide it down the middle. One half was for your father's side, the other half for your mother's. You could divide the shield into quarters for your grandparents or eighths for your great-grandparents. When you finished dividing it, you made a crest for each nationality.

“For example,” said Miss Stephanopoulos, drawing a shield on the board. “My father is Greek, and my mother is Italian. So on this side of the shield”—she pointed to the

left—"I could draw a statue of a Greek god, and on the other side, I could draw the Leaning Tower of Pisa."

Miss Stephanopoulos encouraged us to make our shields colourful and to put as many drawings as we could into each crest. I thought it was a neat assignment, partly because I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't know where my ancestors were born. My mom's parents were from Quebec and they spoke French. But where had my dad's parents come from? I'd never thought to ask.

Some people, like Kallie, were scribbling away. The rest of us were looking around, as if we could borrow an ancestor from someone who had too many. After a few minutes, Chu Hua scurried to the front and whispered something to Miss Stephanopoulos.

"Chu Hua has just asked a very good question," announced Miss Stephanopoulos. Everyone looked up. "Her parents are both from China but from different parts of the country, and she wanted to know whether she could still divide her shield. The answer is yes. There are many different cultures within a single country, and even though we may assume that the people of one country are all the same, that would be a mistake. Every country is a mosaic filled with all kinds of people. So if your ancestors came from the same country but belonged to different cultures, please feel free to divide your shield even more."

As the bell rang, she reminded us that tomorrow we were going to stand up and present our shields. "Take time to make your shield a work of art," she said. "It's helped make you who you are today."

That night at dinner, I asked my parents about our ancestors.

"My father's grandparents came from Brittany in France and settled in Quebec City," explained my mom. "My mother's family also came from France, but from a town farther south called Limoges."

"I didn't know that," I said.

"Yes. You and I have a lot of French blood. In fact, my name is Sylvie, not Sylvia. My brothers and sisters and I anglicized our names when we moved to Ontario."

"How come?" I asked.

"My parents thought it would be easier for us. Less chance of being called a 'frog'."

by the English kids.”

“‘Frog’? What does that mean?”

“Oh, it’s what they used to call French Canadians. It means ‘loser’ or something like that. All these names mean the same thing.”

I looked down at my stir fry.

“My father came from England,” said my dad. “Then he married my mother out West. She’s Scottish, so you could divide my half in two, and draw Big Ben on one side, and a kilt on the other.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” added my mom. “My mother’s side has some Scottish on it too. You could divide my half in two, but leaving three-quarters of it French and one quarter Scottish.”

I couldn’t keep up with all this. Laughing, I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and told my parents to explain it again, more slowly.

The next day in class, everyone was comparing shields. People had ancestors from all over the world. One girl was Aboriginal, and she had divided her shield in half, drawing different crests for her mother’s and father’s tribes. Other shields had countries I’d never heard of. Tanzania? Where was that? Even the short whiny guy’s shield was interesting, he had a Mexican grandfather. I liked knowing these things about my classmates. I felt the ethnic shields somehow made us more equal, even though everyone’s shield was totally different.

Several people complimented me on my shield, but Kallie was getting the most compliments. I knew hers would be good, but even I was surprised when I saw it. It was filled with bright colours and intricate shapes, and it was divided into more compartments than anyone else’s.

When Kallie presented her shield, I learned all kinds of stuff about her. Her mom’s mom was Swedish, Danish, and English. That explains why Kallie’s so tall, I thought, I’ve always heard Swedish people are tall. Her mom’s dad was Irish and French. And the crests she’d chosen for each country were unique. Instead of drawing the Eiffel Tower for France, like most people had, she’d drawn the Louvre, which she said was a famous art gallery in

Paris. As part of her grandma's quarter, she'd drawn a tiny pack of Tarot cards.

When Kallie finished her talk, Miss Stephanopoulos smiled and said, "Thank you for a lovely presentation, Kallie." The class clapped, but Chanel and her friends frowned. Then Miss Stephanopoulos made a list on the board of all the countries and tribes from our shields. We each had to go and write our name under the appropriate ones.

"Who knows?" said Miss Stephanopoulos. "You might find you have something in common with someone you least suspect."

Kallie's name appeared most often. I noticed Chanel's was under United States and England. I smiled inwardly, knowing I had something in common with her. Tiffany frowned when she went to write her name under China.

After class, I was at my locker when I saw Chanel, Burgundy and Tiffany approaching Kallie. Quickly, I turned to my face away and used the mirror I'd hung on my locker door to watch what was happening.

Tiffany leant against the locker next to Kallie's. "We just want to thank you for a lovely presentation, Kallie," she mimicked.

"Congratulations, you win the award for the most 'ethnically diverse,'" chimed in Burgundy.

But Kallie wasn't fooled by their maple syrup-sweet words. She knew a snake was swimming in that syrup somewhere. I was disappointed when Chanel fished the snake out.

"You know what having all those different cultures in you means, don't you?" she said silkily. "It means you're a mutt. And mutts are a danger to society. They get diseases. We're purebred. I'm pure English and American, and so is Burgundy. And Tiffany is pure Chinese."

Kallie had waited for her opportunity, and she pounced on that snake like Rikki Tikki Tavi. "Yes, she is. Just like my friend Chu Hua."

Burgundy and Chanel tittered, and a pink patch spread across Tiffany's face like a continent forming in water. "Yeah, well," she huffed, "she's a different kind of Chinese. My parents are from Beijing. Hers are from Guangzhou and Chengdu. They're like the Newfoundland of China. Plus"—here she turned eager eyes on Chanel and Burgundy—"I

heard she goes to Chinese school. That's so retarded. I haven't gone since grade two."

"Don't worry," smiled Burgundy, "we're just teasing, Tif. You're totally different than Chu Hua. But it's appropriate *she* hangs out with her."

"Nerds of a feather," added Tiffany.

"That's really original! I've never heard that before!" said Kallie sarcastically.

Tiffany opened her mouth but Chanel spoke first. "Forget it. What can you expect from someone who has a gypsy for a grandmother?"

"How dare you!" spit Kallie.

But Kallie wasn't the only one upset. I spun around, ready to help her defend her grandma. But then I saw Chanel and her friends leaning over Kallie, and I remembered Kallie's grandma, with her long black hair and clattery jewelry, and how she'd read my Tarot cards. At the time, I'd been impressed, but standing here now, Tarot cards seemed silly and superstitious. Chanel was right. Kallie's grandma was kind of weird. I turned away.

Tiffany and Kallie were still arguing, when Chanel grabbed Tiffany's arm and said, "Come on, Tif, we've got to meet the guys in the caf. This isn't worth it."

I waited until the click of their heels had died out and then lifted my head. But by then, Kallie was gone too.

That night, I pedalled on the stationary bike for over half an hour, as if I could pedal my troubles away. As I walked across the kitchen afterwards, I spied a fresh bag of ketchup potato chips. Even though I'd promised myself I wasn't going to eat chips, I couldn't help myself. It was like my mind was being controlled by other life forces who were telling me, *Eat the chips. You want to eat the chips.* I grabbed the bag and scrambled up to my room, where I began munching away.

My story was lying on the bed. I stared at the small red B written at the top of the last page. I'd nearly freaked out when I'd seen the mark that afternoon, but it was nothing compared to the comments. I still have the story. I'll go get it so I can tell you exactly what Miss Stephanopoulos wrote. Just a minute....

Here it is:

“Dear Hilary, Although this story is well-written with some vivid metaphors, it is not entirely successful. At times the plot is predictable, and the characters don't strike me as genuine. The story might have worked if you were trying to make fun of its soap opera-ish plot, but I don't get the feeling that you are. Your writing shows a great deal of potential, however, and I think that you can write a better story. Please do not hesitate to see me if you have any questions. Sincerely, Elena Stephanopoulos.”

And the worst thing was she was right. I'd reread the story that night, and I could barely keep from gagging. Diamond and her beautiful clothes and her money and her A+ average and how she was so nice to everyone, even rotten Lacey... she was too perfect. No one was really like that. And all that stuff about heart-shaped fireworks... barf. Miss Stephanopoulos was right. The story was fake. I sighed. Maybe my creativity had dried up. Maybe I couldn't write stories any more.

Suddenly that snarly voice I hadn't heard in weeks spoke in my head. Forget it, it said. You've got bigger cheeseburgers to fry. The real question is, what are you going to do about Chanel and Kallie?

What do you mean, I answered.

You saw what happened today. They hate each other. Do you really think you can be friends with both of them?

I didn't respond. When Chanel had said that thing about Kallie's grandma... well, it was disappointing. It was like finding out Chanel had warts on her feet. But it was only one little comment and really, I told myself, it was all Tiffany and Burgundy's fault. They'd started the teasing, and Chanel was the one who pulled Tiffany away. So I wasn't convinced Chanel hated Kallie or that she'd have a problem with me being friends with her. In fact she might not even notice. It's not like I'd be hanging out with both of them at the same time.

But the snarly voice overheard my thoughts.

Oh really? it said. Think again. Chanel's not stupid. If you keep hanging around with Kallie, it'll only be a matter of time before she figures out you're friends. Then all your nerdiness—how you sit with Marcia, how you spent your summer holidays playing Gorgolia, the pathetic way you try to lose that bulk by pumping like an elephant on that stupid bike,

your loser fantasies about you and Brett Filburn—all will be exposed!

A sick feeling crept up my throat. I stuffed some chips down it in hopes of pushing the feeling away.

I can't let that happen, I told the voice.

Oh, it replied, so you mean you're going to dump Kallie? Kallie, who's been your close—no, your best—friend for the last few months, who's done so much for you, who threw a sandball at a cute guy because he upset you, who gave you all those compliments that time at the mall? And after everything she told you in the park about how she was teased? You're going to turn on her the way Sheila did? Nasty, nasty.

So what are you saying? I asked angrily.

I'm saying you have to make a decision.

What decision?

But the voice was gone.

I thought of the Lovers. Was this the decision I had to make, choosing between Chanel and Kallie? No, it couldn't be. That wasn't fair. I wanted to be friends with both.

And speaking of friendship, I thought suspiciously, I wonder what's going on with Lynn. This past week, she'd been calling me every night to tell me the latest thing Amber had said or give me a description of what Burgundy had been wearing that day, as if I couldn't see for myself in homeroom. But I was no closer to meeting any of them than I'd been at the beginning of the year. At the rate Lynn was going, I wouldn't have a decision to make because I wouldn't be Chanel's friend.

I called Lynn, but the line was busy so I had to leave a message. Probably one of Lynn's sisters gossiping with a friend, I thought angrily. Why couldn't she get off the phone? This was important.

I returned to my room and wolfed down the rest of the chips, even though I wasn't that hungry any more. Finally the phone rang and I raced into my parents' room.

"Hey, Hil," said Lynn. "Sorry I wasn't available."

"Oh, no problem," I replied. "I guess one of your sisters was on the phone?"

"No, I was on the phone with Amber."

I felt like someone had laid an icy hand on my kidneys. Lynn had never told me she and Amber had exchanged phone numbers. “Really? What did she want?”

“She was just telling me about this...” Her voice trailed off into laughter. “I’m sorry, it would take too long to explain. Just something this stupid guy in our homeroom did today. So why did you call?”

But I could barely remember. When I did, it only made the sick feeling come back. So I made up some lame excuse and hung up.

When I got back to my room, I sat on my bed, holding my stomach. The sight of the empty chip bag disgusted me. How could I have eaten so many? They’d just made my stomach hurt.

Lynn’s laughter echoed in my head, and I heard Chanel’s voice. *You’re a mutt. How dare you.* I saw myself turning away after Chanel insulted Kallie’s grandma. Then the snarly voice sneered, *You think Kallie’s grandma looks weird? That’s a laugh coming from a fat little tub with a bowl haircut.*

I leapt off my bed and ran to the bathroom. Luckily I made it there in time. When I’d finished throwing up, I watched the remains of the chips swimming in the toilet water like grotesque fish swimming in blood.

My mom was knocking at the door. “Hilary, are you O.K.?”

“Fine,” I called weakly.

I wasn’t very convincing because she opened the door and came in. “Oh, you’re sick,” she said sadly. “Did you feel sick at dinner? I thought that lettuce had been there too long, but your dad insisted it was fine.”

“No, no, it wasn’t the lettuce,” I assured her, smiling. “I think I ate too many chips.”

My mom felt my head and said I might have a fever. She wanted to give me medicine, but I insisted all I needed was rest. I changed into my pyjamas while my mom fluffed out my duvet for me. Then she turned out the light and told me to call her at any time if I needed anything. After she left, I curled into the shape of a crescent moon and wrapped the blankets around me like a sanctuary against the night.

Chapter Thirteen: The Pirate's Booty

It wasn't until the middle of the next week that anything happened in my "friendship" with Chanel. I was waiting for Lynn at our usual table, listening to the lunchtime talk of people around me. By now I was used to the number of students at Mackenzie, and I didn't feel quite as insignificant as I first had.

When Lynn sat down, she had an excited expression on her face. "Hil, you'll never guess what! I was talking with Amber yesterday, and she said you and I could hang with her and Chanel at the dance!"

My face froze so that I must've looked like a stunned mannequin.

"Well, aren't you excited?" exclaimed Lynn. "This is the big break we've been waiting for!"

But I'd waited so long for the popular group to notice me that now that it was happening, I couldn't believe it. It was like being told someone super-famous had just died in a horrible accident. It seemed unreal.

Once I'd had a minute to think about it, though, the shock was replaced by giddiness. I was actually going to be hanging—not just hanging out, but hanging—with Chanel at the dance! Which meant only one thing. I needed a new outfit.

Lynn and I agreed the occasion called for something from le château.

"So what are you going to buy?" I asked eagerly.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to buy *The Dress*."

"*The Dress*? Are you serious?" I asked, as if she'd told me she was planning to show up in nothing but a red cobra skin.

"Yeah, they still have a size two in stock at the mall. Morgan put it on hold for me. She has to work tomorrow after school, so I'm getting a drive with her there. Want to come with me?"

I nodded. "But... do you have enough money for *The Dress*?"

She shrugged. "I've got tons saved from babysitting, and if I don't have enough, Morgan'll give me some. What about you?" I looked down. "Are you going to get your

dress?”

“I’d really like to but... what about my mom? She’d be furious if I bought something at le château. She probably wouldn’t let me use the word ‘dance’ until my legs were too full of arthritis to walk into the gym.”

“Ah,” said Lynn, a lilt in her voice, “but I have a plan. See, we don’t have to tell our moms we’re wearing le château dresses. In fact, we don’t even have to tell them we’re going to the dance.”

I lifted my eyebrows. I wasn’t sure I liked the sound of this.

“Here’s what we do. We buy the dresses and stash them in Morgan’s room. Then on Friday night, Morgan takes the car to drive her and Nicole to the dance and you and me to the movies.”

“We’re going to the movies?”

“No, Hil. We’re going to say we’re going to the movies, but we’re really going to the dance. Morgan’s picking up Jason, so we can change at his house.”

“You mean we’re going to have to lie to our moms?”

“Of course. That’s the point.”

I drew breath. I needed time to think. “O.K. I understand why we have to lie about the dresses, but why do we have to lie about the dance?”

“Oh, come on, Hil. Do you really think your mom would let you go?”

I shook my head.

“Well, then, this is the only way. I arranged everything with Morgan and she’s cool with it. So do you want her to keep a dress for you?”

I frowned, staring down at my apple juice. Then I said, “O.K. Sure.”

But I was far from sure. Aside from the idea of lying to my mom, which made me super nervous, I wasn’t sure I could afford The Dress. I only had \$20 in my wallet, and no prospect of getting any more soon. I couldn’t ask for an advance on my allowance, it would look too suspicious. I thought of asking Lynn if she’d lend me the money, but I didn’t want her to think I was some pathetic loser who couldn’t afford one dress.

Then something occurred to me. Maybe I could get the money from my bank

account. I had about \$150 in it, and I'd have to take out at least \$70. I usually never touched my bank account money because I was saving it for something, though I wasn't sure what that something was. But I supposed this was as good a way as any to spend the money. That's what I'd do. I'd take the money out of my account tomorrow after school.

But when we passed a TD Bank on our way to the mall the next day, I didn't ask Morgan to stop. I'd lain awake for a couple of hours the night before, and on second (and third and fourth) thought, I didn't think I could go through with my plan. I just wasn't used to lying to my mom. I mean, O.K., I wasn't going to tell her about the dance, but at least with that, I could tell myself I wasn't positive she'd disapprove of me going. But I knew she'd disapprove of me wearing a le château dress. And what was I supposed to do with The Dress when the dance was over? Leave it in Morgan's closet? Lynn hadn't considered that in her great plan.

But when Morgan returned from the back with our dresses and put mine in my arms, my heart dissolved into a big pile of goop, especially when I noticed that the price had been marked down to \$50. Maybe wearing The Dress wouldn't be so bad. It would be like putting on make-up at school. Not really lying, just... doing something my mom didn't know about. I chewed my lip.

Lynn had been on her way to the cash, cradling a familiar-looking lavender dress, when she turned back. "What's the matter, Hil? Is something wrong with The Dress?"

"No... it's just... I don't know if I have the money. I mean, I do, but it's in my bank account... and I'm not sure I should use it."

"Oh, come on." She checked the price tag. "It's \$50! That's nothing!"

"I know, but I was saving the money in my account for something important."

"What's more important than this?"

I bit my lip. "I need another day to think about it."

Her eyes fluttered upwards. "All right, but Morgan can't hold it forever. It's from the summer. The store wants to get rid of it."

I returned my dress to Morgan and Lynn paid for hers, and we headed to the bus stop.

"What would your mom do if she caught you with a le château dress?" I asked.

She twisted her mouth. "Probably not much. She's already been through it with Morgan and Nicole. I'm not worried about what she'd do. I just don't have the energy for a big scene."

We pushed open one of the mall's heavy doors and braced ourselves against the late September wind. I enthused, "It's just so exciting that we're actually going to hang with Chanel at the dance.... I guess you and Amber are pretty good friends now?"

She nodded. "Amber says I'm the only one she can stand in our homeroom. Well, me and Heather Banks."

I stopped short. The wind pulled my hair and slapped it back in my face. "Heather Banks?" I said, as if I'd just come across a piece of fat in an otherwise perfect steak. "She's friends with them?"

"Kind of. We all hang out in homeroom and sometimes we talk in home ec."

"How can you hang out with her after what she did to me?" I demanded.

Lynn looked puzzled. "What did she do?"

"You don't remember?"

"No."

I was so appalled, I could barely get the words out. "That comment she made about my sweater, about letting pigs in the school, last year."

"Oh, that. Well, that wasn't very nice, but Heather was a lot younger then. She's really matured over the summer. I think you should just forgive and forget."

I made noises that sounded like a moose on its last strokes of the 200-metre front crawl.

"Look, Hil," said Lynn, "you better at least pretend to like her because she'll be hanging with us at the dance."

"Oh, great!" I yelled. I felt like plopping down on the ground and never moving again, spending my life in silent protest on the sidewalk in front of the mall. "Well, I guess I can understand why you'd want to hang out with her. She's a lot cooler than I am," I said unhappily.

Of course I didn't expect Lynn to agree with me, which made it even worse when she

did. “Well, yeah, but that’ll change.” She saw my dismayed expression and added, “Hil, you’ll be fine. Just don’t do anything to screw up our relationship with Chanel.”

“Like what?” I cried.

“Don’t admit to having any connections to geeks like Kallie. Well, I’m sorry, Hil, but it’s true. And don’t act puppyish.”

“Puppyish?”

“Yeah, pathetic and desperate. You know, like—” Here she made a series of panting noises worthy of Fortunado. “Please like me, please be my friend.”

I rolled my eyes. “Give me credit for some brains.”

“I’m just warning you. Oh, and when you’re around Chanel, don’t mention anything about fathers.”

“Why not?”

“You know her parents are divorced, right?” I nodded. “Well, when Chanel was ten, her dad left her mom for another woman. They went to the States and had a baby. Chanel never sees him any more. He never calls or writes to her, not even on her birthday.”

“Wow. That’s awful.”

“Yeah. Amber told me the whole story. Anyway, Chanel’s pretty sensitive about it, so just don’t say anything, O.K.?”

“Of course not.”

“And the one other thing you should never do is admit you like Brett Filburn.”

“Why not?”

“Even though he and Chanel aren’t officially dating, she considers him her territory. Do you know Bree McClanahan?” I shook my head. “She’s in 7G. She used to be friends with Chanel last year, but then she got a little too close to Brett, and it was—” She slashed her finger across her throat and made a “crrrick” noise. “So unless you want to end up like Bree, be careful what you say.” She looked at her watch. “We’re really late. We’d better go before peak hours are over.”

As I followed her, I tried to keep all these new rules straight. No geeks, no puppies, no fathers, no Brett. Maybe if I made a sing-song of it, it would be easier to remember.

The face was coming clearer now, emerging from the crowd of people with blank expressions and sheets of golden, copper, or raven hair. The face was in the centre, away from the others. It was looking at the others, and it might've been either following them or watching them. I wasn't sure which, but I liked not being sure. I cared more about this face than I did about the others, which explains why I was spending so much more time on it. I even gave the face eyebrows and eyelashes, which wasn't easy with pastels.

We had class time to work on the art fair that day, and I was taking advantage of it, seeing as I hadn't done much on the project outside of class. The topic for our project was freedom. You won't be surprised to hear it was Kallie's idea. At first, I wasn't enthusiastic. Freedom was too abstract. How did you draw freedom?

Then Kallie suggested we each do our own mini-project about what freedom meant to us and shape our projects so they all fit together.

"The other groups are all working on one big project, but it seems to be causing problems," she said. We followed her gaze to another table, where the short whiny guy and a tall lumbering guy were having an argument about whether a toy motorcycle they were building for their project on "speed" should be made out of bubble gum wrappers or Crackerjacks.

"If we each do our own project," Kallie said, "we'll get to do our own stuff without anyone interfering, but we'll still be working as a team."

So each of us was working on her own section. Kallie had already drawn about twenty sketches, mostly of people with coloured faces and bright clothing. The sketches reminded me of the dolls at her grandma's. Chu Hua was using acrylic paint to draw tiny, precise pictures that reminded me of the flowers Kallie and I had painted on the boxes. Marcia was using water colours, but her paintings were so abstract, I couldn't make out what they were supposed to be.

I was getting used to working with Marcia and Chu Hua, but I still found it hard to communicate with Chu Hua. Like the time she asked about the project during class. Kallie was absent that day and Marcia was getting something from the supply closet when Chu Hua said, "Hilary, how we supposed to make our work? What shape?"

I lifted a shoulder. “Whatever shape you want.”

“But what about other people?”

“Kallie said we could do whatever we wanted.”

“No, but how fit together with others?”

Now I understood. “Oh. I don’t know. We’ll probably cut our stuff along the edges and fit it together like a jigsaw puzzle.”

Chu Hua furrowed her brow. “Jig-saw?”

I wished Marcia would get back from the supply closet. She knew how to explain things to Chu Hua better than I did. “A puzzle.”

But she still looked uncertain. “‘Puzzle.’ I hear this word once before. My teacher, she taught it us last year. ‘The man is puzzled.’ Puzzled, like confused? I don’t understand.”

“No,” I tried, “like a puzzle. You know, something that fits together.” But she didn’t know, and by this time, I was almost in tears. Finally, I said, “I’m sorry, Chu Hua, I can’t explain it to you.”

“Oh,” she mumbled, looking down. She blinked several times, which made me feel even worse because I knew what it meant.

Later I told Kallie about the incident. “It’s just so frustrating she can’t speak English well. It makes it hard to work with her,” I finished.

But Kallie wasn’t sympathetic. “Of course she can’t speak English well. What do you expect? Her family’s only been in the country two years. Up until this year, she was at an ESL school. And how do you expect her to learn English unless she works with people who have better English than she does?”

Snap! I’d been holding the pastel so hard it snapped in half. The box was at the other end of the table, next to Marcia.

“Marcia,” I said tentatively. She and Kallie both looked up from their work. “Can you pass me the box with the pastels?” I’d meant to sound friendly, but my voice came out all stiff and superior, and my thank-you wasn’t much better.

Things hadn’t improved between Marcia and me, and my dislike of her had gone

beyond the fact that she was nerdy. She just didn't seem to have any personality, no likes, no dislikes, no opinions. She answered Kallie's questions with "yes," "no," "I don't know," or "maybe," and she never started a conversation. I just couldn't understand what Kallie saw in her. But when I told Kallie this, she said I wasn't giving Marcia a chance, she was very shy, she had to open up to me. Well, it was like waiting all summer for a flower to open. I wasn't sure it would before the autumn frosts killed it.

For Kallie's sake, I tried to be polite to Marcia, but she never responded. So I wasn't surprised when she turned back to her painting without acknowledging my thank-you. Kallie looked at me, then at her, before resuming her sketching. We continued in silence until the bell rang. As I stood up, I glimpsed Marcia's latest painting. At first it seemed like a confused tangle of lines, shapes, and colours melting into one another. But when I stepped back and stared at it, certain forms emerged.

"That's a girl, isn't it?" I said, pointing to the central swirl of colours. I hadn't meant to say anything, but now that Marcia was looking at me, I felt bold enough to continue. "The peach part is her head, the brown is her hair, and the white is her dress. She's standing with her face turned up to the sky, and it's raining." I pointed to the sideways oval shape of the peach, which could indicate an upturned face, and to the silvery white lines rushing to meet it. "And this"—indicating the swirls of green around the figure—"this is the grass she's standing in."

"Yeah, that's exactly it," Marcia said. Her voice sounded like how a ladybug's would sound, if ladybugs could talk.

She gave me a watery smile, and our eyes met for the first time. I'd never noticed what a beautiful blue her eyes were, like a strip of the Caribbean sea. But then, I'd never noticed her eyes at all. And they were quickly lowered again.

Kallie had been paying close attention to our conversation, and she said, "Hil, Marcia and Chu Hua are coming over tonight. I'm going to show them how to paint those wooden boxes, remember the ones we made in the summer? After that, we're going to watch a movie on T.V. and play Trivial Pursuit. Do you want to come?"

My heart felt like it was being squeezed. It wasn't only what Kallie had said, but

the way she'd said it, in a lilting, friendly tone. It reminded me of the summer and all the times we'd hung out. At that moment I wanted nothing more than to spend that evening painting wooden boxes with Kallie, and I didn't even mind that Marcia and Chu Hua were going to be there.

Then I remembered. Tonight was the dance. I couldn't go. I asked Kallie if she could postpone it until tomorrow.

"Sorry," she replied, with an apologetic smile, "but I've got everything arranged. We'll do something another time."

I nodded. The three of them didn't bother to wait for me because they knew I'd be having lunch with Lynn today. As I gathered my school supplies, I watched them all walk out together.

"Move over, you jerk! Or are you too fat?"

"Me? You're the one who's taking up more than half the seat!"

"In case you hadn't noticed, sis, I've got 200 pounds sitting right next to me."

"Hey!" snapped a male voice. "I'm only a 197!"

"Would you guys cool it?" called Morgan from the driver's seat. "Are you O.K. in the back there, Hilary, with all those psychos?"

"Fine," I called, above the din of Lynn and Nicole's argument.

I smoothed my stretchy black skirt. Well, I'd done it. That day after school, I'd raced to the bank and gotten the money. The entire time I was there I kept expecting something to go wrong. The bank teller would ask me what I wanted the money for, and when I didn't have a good enough reason, she'd pull a string. Red lights would start flashing, alarms would go off, my mother would burst in, followed by a dozen armed policemen.... But none of that happened. I got the money, I went to le château, and a salesgirl brought out my dress for me.

You're probably thinking, wait a minute, if you got The Dress, what's this about a black skirt? The truth is, I didn't buy The Dress. The Dress was gorgeous, but as I stood there staring at it, I felt like I was holding a stolen treasure chest filled with emeralds and

rubies and gold doubloons. A treasure chest guarded by my mother and the snarly voice. In my mind's eye, my mother looked sad and haunted while the snarly voice looked... well, snarly. I could make a run for it with the chest, but sooner or later one of the guards would catch up to me. It probably seems weird to you, but as much as I wanted The Dress, I felt it wasn't right for me to have it. I felt I had to earn what was in the pirate's chest, not steal it. Stealing it just wasn't me. The Dress would be great for Chanel, but not for me. Not now.

The salesgirl noticed my uncertainty. "Is there something wrong with the dress?"

"I'm not sure it's right for the occasion," I fibbed.

"What's the occasion?"

When I told her, she agreed with me. I'm not sure now if it was because she thought a summer dress wasn't right for an autumn dance or because she could see I didn't want The Dress and was trying to sell me something else. But then she showed me a black two-piece outfit made of see-through velvet stretched over a silky material, and I agreed that it was much more suitable. After all, I thought, as I zipped up the skirt in the change room, black makes you look slimmer. The outfit fit perfectly. I exhaled. I'd have to pay more for it, but I felt I'd be appeasing the guards by buying it instead of The Dress. Like I'd taken only one doubloon, when I wanted the whole treasure chest.

And it was all worth it that night. I swallowed, staring at myself in the mirror at Jason's. I couldn't believe that this girl in the black dress, with the hair swept up on top of her head (done specially by Morgan while we were waiting for Lynn to change), the frosty pink mouth, and the lightly shadowed eyes, was me. I felt like I'd suddenly discovered I was a high priestess, and now I was going down to address an assembly of my people, who were anxiously awaiting my coming.

As I rounded the corner of the circular staircase, I saw the people gathered in the foyer turn to look. My cheeks tingled when I saw admiration and surprise in the faces of Lynn and her sisters. I saw something more than admiration in the face of Nicole's boyfriend, Alan, and when I locked eyes with Jason, a little electric current passed between us. I slid my hand along the bannister, flitting my eyes to and fro.

“Wow, Hil, you look amazing,” gushed Lynn.

I shrugged modestly. “Thanks,” I said, looking at Jason.

“Yeah,” he said eagerly. “You look really good.”

“Thanks,” I said again, smiling.

As we were leaving the house, Alan tried to hold the door open for me, but Jason beat him to it. I didn't complain. Alan was nice, but he had a body like a pit bull's and a face like a pug's. Jason, on the other hand, had curly red hair and big blue eyes, and Lynn had told me he was one of the three most desirable men in grade twelve.

Thinking of this, I smiled. To be told by one of the cutest guys in the school that I, Hilary Boles, former sandball, looked “good” was beyond incredible. My body felt like it was drifting off somewhere warm, and I barely noticed the elbow thrusts Lynn was giving me as she jostled with Nicole for more room in the back seat. And the next thing I knew we were standing outside the gym, handing our tickets to a girl behind a table.

We stepped into the gym, into a heady mixture of flashing lights and pulsating music. Lynn's sisters and their boyfriends were soon swallowed up by the crowd. Lynn and I stood in the entranceway, looking around. I felt like I was in a covered pot with a bunch of little Mexican beans all jumping at once, with only the occasional flashes of stove light when the pot cover was lifted to help me see. A bean popped up beside Lynn.

“Hi!” it screamed.

“Hi!” Lynn screamed back.

The bean had stringy blonde hair and was wearing a sleeveless blue dress. Amber.

“Omigod, you look so good!” she shouted to Lynn. They gave each other a little hug.

Lynn turned to me just as the D.J. turned up the volume. All I could hear of Lynn's words was, “This... my... Hilary.”

“Hi!” Amber shouted.

“Hi!” I shouted back.

She gestured for us to follow her. We wove in between guys in basketball shirts, scarlet-lipped girls dressed all in black, nerds in glasses and striped t-shirts, even some teachers dressed in tweed trying to pretend they knew how to dance. Finally, just as the

music stopped, we reached one end of the bleachers, where Chanel and her group were standing. I took a breath. This was it.

“Hi, everyone,” chanted Lynn.

The exchange of greetings gave me an extra few seconds to clear my throat discreetly before Amber said, “Everyone, this is Hilary, Lynn’s friend. Hilary, this is...” Amber introduced me to each person in turn. I said hi to every one. But when I looked into Brett’s dark brown eyes, my voice caught and my hi sounded more like a hiccup.

“Hey,” he said, smiling back.

Then Amber said, “And this is Chanel.”

Holding my breath, I looked up into Chanel’s hazel eyes. She raised her dark eyebrows. It seemed like an eon passed before she gave me a brilliant smile, showing all her teeth, and said kindly, “It’s nice to meet you.”

A ray of pink light flooded my insides. I barely heard Tiffany ask, “Hey, you’re in our homeroom, aren’t you?”

I nodded eagerly, the pink light spreading through my body until Chanel said, “You sit with that weird girl, don’t you? What’s her name, Kallie?”

The pink light disappeared. Chanel and Tiffany were staring at me, expecting an explanation. I teetered on the brink of a cliff for a few seconds, before I skillfully pulled myself back. “I sit *behind* her.”

“Oh.” Their faces lightened. I could feel Lynn’s relief, almost as strong as mine.

The music started up again and Amber began pulling everyone on to the dance floor. I was alarmed when she grabbed my hand. I didn’t know how to dance. Lynn hadn’t told me I’d have to dance. I’d look like a grade six, practising how to look cool in front of her bedroom mirror.

Before I could protest, I was on dance floor, in the midst of the cool crowd. I stood there for a few seconds, until Amber smiled and yelled, “Dance!” I tried snapping my fingers and twitching my shoulders, but Lynn shot me a warning look. Glancing around, I watched Chanel and her friends dancing. They were swinging their hips and waving their arms like snakes. I tried to copy their moves, but from the looks I was getting from the other

grade sevens, I looked more like a middle-aged woman trying to learn belly dancing from a video than a member of the coolest group in grade seven. Once the other students noticed who I was dancing with, though, their glances turned from contemptuous to curious.

By the time I'd swivelled my way through three dances, my skills had improved enough for Chanel to smile at me. But the next dance was a slow one, and since the girls outnumbered the guys, some of us would have to sit this one out. Of course I didn't expect to be asked, and I wasn't. But Lynn got asked by Brett Filburn! As the dance began, I sat on the bleachers, watching them all. Burgundy was also sitting out the dance, but she'd gone to the washroom, so I was by myself.

I took this opportunity to observe Chanel as she danced with Dylan, one of the few guys who could match her height. I might've felt awkward if I'd been that much taller than everyone else, but it didn't seem to bother Chanel. She wore a tight maroon dress with a see-through neckline and sleeves, part of the fall—not the summer—collection at le château. Her hair was piled on top of her head, and several strands fell carelessly about her face. I'd had the impression that her make-up was heavy, but I couldn't have said what colour her lips or eyelids were because I'd noticed her, not the make-up.

And now she'd noticed me. It had finally happened. I'd been pronounced acceptable, worthy, 100% geek-free. I'd been given a high school gold card, and I had so much to look forward to: dances, parties, new clothes, boyfriends. The pink light washed over me again.

When that slow dance ended, another began. But this time I wasn't left sitting by myself. Kyle asked me to dance. I was thrilled, until we got on the dance floor and I realized I knew even less about slow dancing than I did about fast dancing. After a few stumbling attempts to put our arms around each other, we finally succeeded and began shuffling around like a pair of walruses.

Then our heads knocked together. "Sorry." I smiled sheepishly.

"That's O.K." He smiled too, and I looked into his startling blue eyes. "I don't really know what I'm doing either."

We didn't say much during the dance, although he did compliment me on my outfit.

When we walked off the dance floor together, I became aware of people staring at me. But instead of looking at the ground like I usually did, I whipped my head around to see who was doing the staring. It was three guys from my grade six class, Jimmy, George, and Ray. They'd never looked at me as anything other than a sexless lump last year, but now they were huddled together, mouths agape, eyes glued to me as Kyle led me back to the bleachers.

I smiled and sat down next to Burgundy and Tiffany, who were snickering. "Oh, Hilary, we have to show you something. It's hilarious," Burgundy said confidentially.

I leaned forward. The something turned out to be Mr. Benson, clad in a green wool vest and striped polyester pants, moving his head to the beat like a chicken. We dissolved into giggles.

I looked up to see Jimmy standing next to me. "Um... Hilary, would you, uh, like to dance?"

I smiled. "O.K."

Jimmy wasn't the only one I danced with that night. Two other guys I didn't know came up to me and asked. When I wasn't dancing, I was sitting on the bleachers with whoever was there. I didn't get the chance to talk to Chanel much, but I did tell her I thought her dress was amazing, and I was rewarded with another megawatt smile.

Even better, she told me she thought my dress was amazing.

"Thanks," I said, feeling my face go hot. "Do I look too... I mean, does it make me look thin?" I asked anxiously.

I immediately wanted to cut off my tongue for saying something so stupid in front of her, but I couldn't help myself. Curiosity got the better of me.

"Definitely," proclaimed Chanel.

The evening couldn't get any better. I didn't need to talk to anyone after that. I was happy to listen to the others as they dished movies, C.D.s, clothes and guys. But once, Tiffany turned to me and asked, "Don't you think?" I hadn't been paying attention because I'd been watching Brett dance with some girl I'd never seen before, but I didn't want to let them know I hadn't been listening. So I said the only thing possible, "Yeah, definitely," and

this seemed to please them.

My perfect evening was nearly marred when Heather Banks showed up. She and Amber hugged. Then she started talking to Lynn, while I tried to hide behind Tiffany and Burgundy. But like a disease, Heather soon spread to them. And when she'd finished with them, we came face to face.

A brief something that seemed like a mixture of disgust, surprise, curiosity and respect passed over her face before she shouted hi. I shouted back and she motioned for me to put my ear to her lips. When I did, she said loudly, "I really like your dress." Astonished, I drew back and she gave me the thumbs up sign. As she hit the dance floor with Amber and Lynn, I sat back on the bleachers, winded. Had Heather Banks just complimented me? Maybe she really had changed. Maybe Lynn was right and I should forgive and forget. Besides, I was on such a high that night I was willing to forgive anyone for anything, even my mother for not letting me shop at le château.

Ten-thirty came way too quickly, and Lynn and I had to leave, in keeping with our story of having been at the movies. So when Morgan and Jason came to get us, we said our goodbyes and exchanged hugs with all the girls. When Chanel disengaged herself from my hug, I noticed her looking right at Jason. I said quickly, "I really wish we didn't have to go. It's so early."

She pulled her eyes back to me. "Yeah, it's crappy when your parents won't let you stay out late. I'm so lucky I don't have a curfew."

"You don't have a curfew?" I asked in disbelief.

"No," she replied, smiling. "My mom lets me stay out as late as I like. She doesn't care."

"I can't believe you danced with him," I sighed. "Imagine. Brett Filburn touched you."

Lynn gave a little sigh and rested her head on my shoulder. "I know."

"I don't think I'll ever wash my arms again," mimicked Nicole.

"Shut up," said Lynn dreamily. "Not even you can ruin my mood tonight."

Or mine, I thought. The evening had been... unbelievable. Like winning an Oscar. Maybe now, I thought, after all these months of worrying and planning, my life is finally going where I want it to go.

When Morgan dropped me off at home, I waved goodbye until they were out of sight, and then used my key to let myself in.

“Hello, Hilary,” said a voice from the top of the stairs.

I gasped. It was my mother. The skylight illuminated her so that she floated in her loose nightgown like the ghost of a sailor’s wife. Even though the hall was dark, I hugged myself involuntarily, before I remembered I’d removed all traces of my costume at Jason’s.

“How was the movie?”

“Oh, fine.” I waited, hoping she’d leave so I could go upstairs with the bag holding my outfit, a bag I’d have to stash deep in my closet. After a few seconds, she smiled and said, “I’m glad you had a good time. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I called, as she disappeared from sight. Then I snuck upstairs like a pirate with stolen booty.

Chapter Fourteen: Ms. Cool

It wasn't until I came to school Monday morning and Burgundy and Tiffany invited me to sit with them at lunch that I realized what hanging with them at the dance meant. I'd been accepted as their friend. I was one of them, a member of the cool group.

All morning I was so happy I wanted to hum, something I never felt like doing. I was in such a good mood I felt like being friendly to everyone. So in art class, I asked the others how their Friday night had gone.

Kallie smiled at seeing me smile and replied that it was a bunch of fun, I should join them next time.

I asked Chu Hua how she liked it, and she smiled too. "It was really wonderful," she said. "Marcia braid my hair, and it look so beautiful."

I raised my eyebrows and looked at Marcia, who gave an embarrassed little smile.

Chu Hua continued, "We play Trivial Pursuit, but it's hard. I know the answers to two questions, maybe. Kallie, she know all the answers."

"Yeah, she knew all the answers when I played with her too." Kallie and I exchanged smiles.

But at lunch she began following me to the caf, so I had to tell her I was meeting someone else. She looked surprised—I always sat with her when I wasn't sitting with Lynn. When I told her who I'd be having lunch with, her face fell. I shook it off and went to sit with the cool people.

I don't think ham and pumpernickel ever tasted as good to me again as they did that first lunch with Chanel. First of all, when I sat down, everyone said hi to me, including the guys. Then Chanel complimented me on my sweater (one of the new ones I'd bought at Fairweather's). Burgundy, Tiffany and Amber agreed that the sweater was amazing.

Later, they asked my opinion about *Over the Big Top*. This time it wasn't just a casual "Don't you think?" They said, "What did you think of it, Hil?" Of course I hadn't seen the movie, but that didn't matter. They'd asked *me* what I thought of it.

"I haven't seen it. But," I added quickly, "I think Damian Sámos is really hot."

“See!” exclaimed Burgundy to Chanel. “I told you so.” Turning to me, she said, “I’ve been trying to convince her he’s hot, but she won’t believe me. I’m glad someone’s on my side, Hil.”

“Damian Sámos is really out,” sighed Chanel. “I haven’t been interested in him since at least June. Now Mark Vanous, he’s different. He’s so cool,” she moaned.

Mark Vanous was a pop singer. You probably won’t remember him because he only ever made one C.D. Then he got hooked on drugs, was sued for plagiarism, and ended up a destitute door-to-door pet food salesman in Iowa. But at the time he was really in. His first C.D. had just come out a month earlier. I marvelled at how Chanel could keep up with the latest trends. It’s a real talent, I thought.

A talent I’d have to develop. As Chanel’s friend, I knew I had certain responsibilities. I couldn’t wear any old thing or listen to any old C.D. So one evening, Lynn came over and went through my clothes with me, banishing anything that smelled of geek to the deepest recesses of my closet. Unfortunately that didn’t leave me with very many clothes.

“You’ll just have to buy more, Hil,” said Lynn, when I told her this.

“But it’s so expensive,” I moaned. I already had to set aside money for C.D.s, movies, and lunches from the caf (because you just couldn’t eat a cheese sandwich and drink juice from a box in front of Chanel Winters and expect to be taken seriously).

“Yeah, but you want to be Chanel’s friend, don’t you? Well, this is what it takes.”

So I went after school one day and took \$30 out of my account. That left me with only \$50 in the bank, but it would be Christmas in a few weeks, so I was expecting some money from my grandparents. Money that would go directly into The Fund to Keep Hilary Boles Cool.

I was going to start eating sweets and chips again after the dance, but now that I was part of the cool crowd, it was more important than ever that I maintain a good body shape. So I decided to keep them out of my diet, along with other foods I thought were too fattening, like butter, salad dressing, and regular Coke. When my mother baked cookies as a “treat,” I frowned suspiciously. What was she trying to do, tempt me from the path of

righteousness?

And every night, including weekends now, I exercised faithfully on the stationary bike. Soon I could pump fifteen minutes non-stop, then twenty. My goal was half an hour.

It wasn't easy for me to stop eating sweets or start exercising so much. Every time I passed the freezer in the caf with its ice cream sandwiches and drumsticks, I wanted to grab one and scarf it down. Every time I trudged towards the basement, I wanted to flop in front of the T.V. and watch the coolest shows, like Chanel was probably doing. But after a while, I got used to not eating sweets, and the stationary bike became part of my daily routine, like brushing my teeth.

All this hard work, spending and self-denial quickly paid off. I really felt like part of the cool crowd, and not just some wannabe, when I could debate the merits of Mark Vanous versus Celine Dion or when Burgundy said my pants made my butt look hot. So it was all worth it in the end, I thought.

And I couldn't believe the difference being part of Chanel's group made. I was suddenly a *person*. Two girls from my homeroom who'd never looked at me before started talking to me. Jimmy kept "accidentally" running into me. People I didn't even know smiled at me. I knew this attention had something to do with the way I looked and with my new friends, but it'd been so long since anyone other than Kallie had been interested in me that I didn't care why people were interested; it was enough that they were.

Besides, I didn't think they were only responding to my looks. Ever since I'd become part of Chanel's group, I'd stopped thinking of myself as a blob. I remembered something my mom had said. "If you don't believe in yourself, no one else will." People notice that I believe in myself, I thought, and now they like me and believe in me too. It was so simple. I couldn't believe it'd taken me this long to figure out the secret to social success. So I began smiling and talking to these people, and their responses made me feel even better. Except for the occasional basketball dribble my heart did when I thought of my mother, I was perfectly happy.

O.K., not perfectly. A few things bothered me. One of them was named Heather Banks. After the dance, she started having lunch with us. The first time she sat down, I

flashed her a friendly smile, but she gave me that same look she'd given me at the dance, only more heavily seasoned with disgust. After that we ignored each other. She still hadn't apologized for calling me a pig, even though once when Tiffany was complimenting me on my sweater, I looked right at Heather. Fortunately, because she was in Lynn's homeroom, she only ate with us twice a week. But still, it ruined my appetite.

Then, sometimes when I was walking down the hall, this gang of guys would look at me, smirk, and whisper to each other. The first time it happened, I was flattered. But soon the way they looked at me made me feel like I'd felt when Kallie's dad asked me to pose for him. But at least he had a legitimate reason. There didn't seem anything legitimate about these leather-jacketed guys. They were older, at least grade nines. I wondered how Chanel felt when guys looked at her that way. It didn't seem to bother her, but I wondered. It soon got so that whenever I saw these guys, I'd pull my skirt down so it covered more of my legs or duck my head and scurry past them, but that only made them laugh.

But the biggest problem was Kallie. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I didn't want to be her friend because she wasn't cool enough, and I was worried about how to get rid of her. But my problem was the opposite. She didn't want to be my friend because I was too cool.

She no longer returned my smiles, and she never seemed happy to see me. It's true, I wasn't paying as much attention to her as I used to. I hadn't been over to her house in weeks, and I never sat with her at lunch any more. But Chanel wanted me to sit with her, and how could I say no? After a few days of this silent treatment, I began to feel angry with Kallie. How dare she be angry at me for finding other friends when she'd done the same?

One day I caught her staring at me as I was standing in line at the caf, her eyes like laser beams. So after school I confronted her.

"I don't know see why you're so jealous of my friendship with Chanel," I said, in a superior tone. "You made other friends."

She looked at me as if I'd told her three plus two equalled four. "Jealousy is the last thing I feel about your friendship with Chanel, Hilary," she said. Then she walked away.

After that I started to feel guilty. Maybe I had been neglecting Kallie. I decided to

do something for her, but I wasn't sure what.

Then suddenly I had it. I'd give Marcia a make over.

At first, it seemed like a pretty wild idea, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. I mean, I figured that even with some changes, Marcia was never going to cause a stampede, but at least she wouldn't be the butt of everyone's jokes, including mine. But if I'd been unkind to Marcia in the past, here was my chance to make up for it. If I'd improved so much, so could Marcia. And who better to give her pointers than someone who'd made the transition from geek to cool?

I spent that evening brainstorming. The first thing to do would be to get rid of Marcia's smell. Though I'd never noticed she had a smell, and I'd been a lot closer to her than any of the cool people had. But I figured if Brett and Chanel said she smelled, there must be some truth to the rumour.

So the next day, when we were all sitting around waiting for art to begin, I started talking about beauty products.

"I just bought this great strawberry soap from The Body Shop," I declared, looking at Marcia. "You should try it sometime. It would do you good."

Dead silence. Kallie's eyes were like snakes' tongues shooting streams of poison at me. Chu Hua looked confused. Marcia pressed her lips together firmly and stared at the table. No one spoke for the rest of class.

So much for the make over scheme. Things were pretty awkward between Kallie and me after that. When I came into the caf a couple of days later, I saw the three of them sitting in their usual spot. Kallie was telling a story, waving her arms wildly and making faces. Everyone was laughing, even Marcia.

I suddenly had the same feeling I'd had when Kallie had invited me to her Trivial Pursuit party. Except this time it was so powerful it hurt, like a steel hand squeezing my insides. Then I saw Burgundy standing in line, and I felt like I'd been injected with a pain-numbing drug. I went to stand beside her, ignoring the dirty looks I was getting from people in line.

"Hey," said one guy angrily, "you're butting."

“Tough,” I snapped.

Burgundy and I smiled at one another.

But if school was exciting, the weekends were a drag. They weren't filled with parties and shopping trips like I'd expected they would be when I started hanging around with Chanel. Sure, we went to the movies, but mostly Chanel was busy modelling. I wondered when she was going to invite us to her house. It was too late in the year to swim in the pool, but we could play tennis. And if the stuff inside Chanel's house was as cool as the stuff outside, there'd be tons of things to do. I pictured myself hanging with the cool girls (minus Heather Banks), eating chocolate fondue—of course I wasn't eating sweets, but I'd make an exception for Chanel's chocolate fondue—and painting my toenails while we watched a Damian Sámos movie.

But it never happened. One day in homeroom, I hinted to Chanel that I'd heard a lot about her house and I'd really like to see it.

Her smile was tight. “We're redecorating. We haven't invited anyone over for months, right Burgundy?”

“Right,” said Burgundy, smiling an expressionless smile.

Since there didn't seem to be any chance Chanel would invite me over before the redecorating was done, the only thing left to do on the weekends was homework, and even that didn't occupy much of my time. I was so used to it by now, I could get it done in half the time I'd taken before. It was weird, but pretty soon I began to look forward to school. At least there I could hang out with friends.

And then there was this thing with my mom. It started the day after the dance, when I came down to breakfast and she smiled and said she was glad I'd had a good time at the movies the night before.

That's when it happened. I had a revelation. My mom had feelings. And not just feelings of anger or disapproval. See, before the dance, I'd thought of my mother in one of two ways. As a wicked witch whose sole purpose on Earth was to prevent me from getting what I wanted. Or as a maid, useful for doing my laundry, packing my lunches, and

occasionally giving me good advice.

But then when she looked so happy and so unaware of how I'd lied to her, I realized she really cared about me. I thought of all the times she'd helped me with school projects and taken me to the library so I could borrow Nancy Drews and baked treats for me even when it wasn't my birthday or Valentine's day. And more recently, when she'd helped me organize my soiree and given me the box of chocolates to take to Lynn. I'd never expected to feel this way, but I felt guilty. Not only for lying my mom, but for the way I'd treated her these past few months. I wanted to do something to make it up to her.

I wasn't stupid. Obviously I wasn't going to tell her about the dance. If I did, I'd be grounded so long by the time I left my room Chanel's grandchildren would be redecorating. Instead I started being nice to her. I showed her all the new clothes and C.D.s I'd bought. I told her about how I was sitting with Chanel and her friends at lunch and how nice they all were. She smiled and said she was glad I was feeling better about junior high, which made me wonder how she knew I'd been feeling bad in the first place.

One Saturday my mom said she needed to go downtown to buy some kitchen supplies and pick up something for Mrs. Carruthers. I was surprised because I didn't know my mom was that close to Mrs. Carruthers. But I agreed to go, for two reasons. One, because it gave me something to do. And two, because it gave me a chance to be nice to her by agreeing. I suffered myself to be dragged to kitchenware stores and tried to appear excited when my mom found what she'd been looking for.

Pleased, my mom said she'd take me to the Eaton's Centre and buy me a hamburger and an ice cream cone. I smiled, thinking how cute it was that she thought I'd still get excited about something like that. When it came time to order, I forced myself not to give into temptation and ordered a salad. After lunch, I told my mom I wasn't hungry for the cone, despite her protests that she'd like to buy me a treat. Instead we strolled up Yonge Street, gazing up at the two-storey shops.

I'd just stopped to stare at the flashing blue-and-pink le château sign, thinking how cool it would be to buy clothes at the Yonge Street le château, when a throaty voice said, "Please miss, if you can spare some change."

I turned around. A man wearing several layers of clothing brown with dirt was slouched against a storefront window. His face was so red and chapped I couldn't tell his age, it might have been anywhere between forty and seventy. His hand shaking, he held out a torn baseball cap with a few coins in it. My gaze shifted from the people walking by, faces blank, eyes looking straight ahead, to the man's bulbous nose and grimy, wolf-like beard. The peppers and lettuce began forcing their way back up my throat. I grabbed a lamp post for support and shut my eyes. Where was...

"There you go," said a voice. I opened my eyes. The peppers and lettuce had settled down. My mom was handing the man a five-dollar bill.

"Thank you very much, God bless you, miss," croaked the man.

Mom turned to me, and I said quietly, "Can we go home now?"

"Of course, Hilary," she said, her forehead wrinkled in concern.

On the way back to the car, it seemed like we passed two hundred people leaning against buildings, holding out caps, tins, or bare hands, people I'd never noticed before. As we drove home, I chewed my lips and thought. Marcia and her mom were on welfare. I knew that meant that the government was giving them money because Marcia's mom didn't have a job. But what if the government stopped giving them money? Then they'd be out on the streets like that homeless man. I pictured Marcia and her mom sitting on a street corner, Marcia trying to sell her paintings for a few cents, no one from school even bothering to look at her....

And to think I'd made fun of her for not having money, like it was something she'd chosen. That was way worse than the people walking by the homeless man. It was like spitting in his face and knocking him over. I had to set things right. I didn't care what Chanel or Kallie or anyone else thought, only Marcia. I had to apologize to her, before it was too late.

On Monday morning, I went straight to Kallie's locker.

"Kallie," I asked, "where's Marcia?"

"Gone," she replied curtly.

Omigod! It had actually happened. Marcia really was living on the streets!

My face must've shown my shock because Kallie said, more gently, "Her mom got a job in Vancouver. They packed up their stuff on the weekend and left this morning."

I suddenly remembered what Lynn had said about Marcia's mom. Could it be true? If so, what kind of a job was she getting in Vancouver?

"But I thought Marcia's mom was a... you know," I said, out of the corner of my mouth.

"No, I don't know," said Kallie sharply. "But whatever it is, I'm sure she's not one. Her brother's friend is starting up a new business, and he needed a secretary, so Marcia's mom's going to work for him. Marcia told us about it at lunch on Friday. She was pretty excited."

"I had no idea about all this," I said emphatically.

"That's because you never eat with us any more." She studied my amazed face and said, "I thought you'd be relieved. Now you don't have to worry about sitting with a 'loser' who stinks. And that'll make things easier for you." She looked at where Chanel and her friends were gathered around Chanel's locker.

My face felt hot and I said quickly, "Well, I'm not relieved. I wanted to apologize to Marcia for all the times I'd... you know, been mean to her."

Kallie narrowed her eyes. "It's a little late for that now, isn't it?" she said matter-of-factly.

She walked away. I slouched against a locker, wondering what new plan I could come up with to make things up to the people I'd hurt.

But I didn't have time to think of one before everything blew up in my face.

Chapter Fifteen: The Chapter Where Everything Blows Up in My Face

When I think back on it now, it was like I'd been standing in front of a microwave for several months before it happened. The microwave was cooking a giant bag of popcorn, and the bag kept getting bigger and bigger until it exploded. The microwave door hit me in the head, and bits of popcorn bombarded my face like tiny daggers. When it was over, I was left standing there, butter dripping down my face like blood.

Here's how it happened. I was standing with the home ec crowd at Chanel's locker one day, when Kallie and Chu Hua walked past us, carrying paper bags. They were followed by Kallie's dad, who was cradling a tower of boxes. Then Miss Stephanopoulos came running down the hall, calling, "It's up this way." The three of them followed her upstairs.

Five minutes later, they came back down. A guy from our art class asked Miss Stephanopoulos what going was on.

"Kallie's father is an artist, and he's donating some materials to the class for the art fair," she explained. "That way we can all benefit." She smiled, looking right at me.

Meanwhile the other three had brought in more packages, and several students had stopped to stare. People rushing around with mysterious boxes was an unusual and interesting sight at Mackenzie.

Kallie was carrying something draped in a maroon cloth, and someone stopped her to ask what it was.

"It's my sculpture," she explained.

"Oh, can we see it?" cried a girl from our homeroom.

Kallie thought about it. "O.K., but it's not finished yet."

The sculpture was a group of figures holding hands and dancing in a circle. People crowded around Kallie as she explained how she'd made it. Then they started asking her a bunch of questions about her art fair project.

Beside me, I felt Chanel and the others stiffen like dead birds. I knew Chanel couldn't stand seeing everyone so interested in Kallie, especially when no one was paying attention to her. She wanted nothing more than to topple Kallie's tower.

And she got her chance a few minutes later when the packages and sculpture had been taken upstairs and the adults had left.

It happened almost in slow motion. Chanel sauntered towards Kallie, where she was standing talking with Chu Hua. The others moved in behind Chanel to form a pyramid. An unfriendly look passed between Chu Hua and Tiffany. Chanel stared at Kallie, her lip curled, and Kallie stared back defiantly.

Chanel spoke, her voice dripping sweet sarcasm. "Isn't it nice that Daddy's here to help you with your work? Does he still change your diaper or can you do that by yourself?"

I held my breath.

Kallie stared at Chanel for about ten seconds before she responded. "At least my father is interested in my schoolwork. Is yours?"

If there was one moment during this entire experience when I wanted to drop down dead, it was right now. I felt like some evil Greek god had slashed open the bottoms of my feet and sucked all my insides down a never-ending chasm. There was a collective gasp. Chanel began trembling, and her face and neck flushed deep red. I really thought she was going to tear Kallie apart like a wild animal, devour her, and use the bones to pick her teeth. But instead she drew a deep breath, turned around, and walked into homeroom.

Her friends didn't let Kallie off so easily, firing an arsenal of delectable four-letter words at her until the bell rang and Mr. Benson came out to collect us.

The worst thing that could possibly happen had happened. I spent the day in a daze, including lunch, where the only sound was Amber flicking her fingernails and calling Kallie every rotten name she could think of. When I got home, all I could think was that I had to fix this.

So I went over to Kallie's and told her she shouldn't have said what she'd said.

"Oh, come on, Hil," she sighed. "I know it was a bit petty, but it wasn't any worse than anything they said to me."

I looked right into her. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" she demanded.

I told her about the situation with Chanel's father. As I spoke, Kallie's face fell like

a crumbling tower.

“Purple planet of Pluto,” she murmured, when I’d finished. “No wonder she felt so... Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“What?” I sputtered. “You hate Chanel. You never wanted me to talk about her!”

“I know, but if I’d known, this never would’ve happened.”

I swallowed my rage at being unfairly blamed, and said quickly, “Well, you have to apologize to her. It will be a disaster if you don’t.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I’ll talk to her tomorrow.”

The next morning before homeroom, Chanel and her friends were at her locker. I was at mine, keeping a safe distance, when Kallie came in. She approached Chanel cautiously.

“Chanel?” she began. “I’m really sorry for what I said about your father. It was mean. But I didn’t know about your situation until Hilary told me last night.”

At the mention of Chanel’s situation, several people standing nearby suddenly seemed interested in the conversation. Kallie finished, “So I promise I’ll never say anything like that again. I’m truly sorry I offended you.”

“You didn’t offend me,” Chanel said coldly. “Nothing a hippie bitch like you could do could possibly offend me.”

The people standing nearby, including me, gasped, but Kallie simply bowed her head. I stared at her, wondering why she didn’t snap back a sarcastic remark. Then Chanel stalked into homeroom and Burgundy and Tiffany followed, shoving Kallie with their shoulders as they passed.

Then at lunch, I was standing in line with the girls, who were chattering about someone’s hair. I was thinking, O.K., maybe the worst is over, maybe they’re not going to do anything more to Kallie. Then Burgundy bought two plates of spaghetti.

I frowned. We’d all bought lunches, and I could see the guys had, too. So who could the other plate be for.... Burgundy handed one plate to Tiffany and strode across the room with the other. She came up on Kallie’s side and pretend to slip—

Then she tossed the plate of spaghetti like a hand grenade right at Kallie’s head.

Kallie probably didn't have time to blink before wet noodles and cold tomato sauce exploded against her face and chest.

"Omigod, I'm *so* sorry!" exclaimed Burgundy. People sitting at nearby tables were laughing hysterically.

Kallie didn't even look at Burgundy. She stared at the table and began calmly picking noodles off her t-shirt—I noticed it was the one with the little pink animals—and removing meatballs from her hair.

Then suddenly Tiffany was beside Burgundy. She looked at Kallie closely and said, in a disgusted tone, "Is that your face, or did your neck throw up?"

"Barf face," sneered Burgundy.

I think my face must've been redder than Kallie's. The noise in the caf reached a fevered pitch, like hundreds of hyenas at a bloody feast. Chu Hua and I seemed to be the only ones who weren't laughing.

Of course, conveniently, there were no teachers around. So Burgundy and Tiffany strolled back to their table, licking their lips, and sat down to eat.

With Chu Hua's help, Kallie cleaned all the spaghetti off her and then ate her lunch as if nothing had happened, even though half the people in the room, including the cool gang, were staring at her stained t-shirt and whispering and snickering.

And that was the beginning of it all. The war between Kallie and the cool gang. A war where Kallie was outnumbered ten to one. Where it was easy for the cool gang to tease her because she had no one to defend her except herself. I won't bother to tell you everything they did to her, though I still remember almost all their cruelties six years later. I'm sure anyone who's ever been to high school can figure it out.

The name calling. Loser. Welfare lover. Bitch (Amber's favourite). Loner. Moron. Geek. Suck-up. Nerd. Snotface. Retard. Freak. Idiot. Psycho. Slut (another one of Amber's, which I thought was a more appropriate description of Amber herself).

The alphabet of dirty looks. You know the one I mean. A for "you're an alien sent to take over the planet. Help, someone save me from this evil force!" B for "your hair looks like something the dog barfed up." C for "poor you. If I had to get my clothes out of a

Dumpster like that, I'd go naked." And so on down to Z.

The hysterical giggling you'd trigger like a land mine whenever you walked past. The whispering and passing notes whenever you were giving a presentation in class. The insults scribbled in light pen or pencil on your locker door, dark enough for you to read but light enough so the principal and teachers patrolling the halls wouldn't notice.

The times they'd "accidentally" slam you into your locker or against a wall and then apologize, squealing with delight like pigs in mud. The used kleenex, nasty notes, and hairballs that made their way into your desk. The time someone put a broken red pen in your backpack and it leaked all over your white gym shorts, which you put on in class the next day without realizing.

Where was I?

The worst thing was how it all spread, you know? Like the leaked pus of a pimple. At first it was only Chanel, Burgundy Tiffany, and Amber. But then others started joining in, like Heather and Kyle and Dylan and some people in our homeroom who weren't even Chanel's friends. They started laughing at Chu Hua, too, and called her "slant eyes" when Tiffany wasn't around.

Soon it seemed like the whole class was in on it. Chanel would walk past Kallie and say it smelled like rotten eggs, and other people would snicker, like it was some kind of floor show. At first, I thought it was a mistake, that they were laughing at something else. But it happened again and again. These people didn't bother to tease Kallie themselves, they just acted as a laugh track for Chanel, cracking up whenever she wanted them to.

But Kallie never bowed down. After that first day, she fought back at every dirty look or insult. When Tiffany came up to her and sighed, "Kallie, where were you when the brains were handed out?" Kallie fired back, "Way ahead of you in line." When Burgundy put a piece of fake poop in Kallie's desk and the entire class exploded in laughter, I cringed. But Kallie picked it up calmly, marched over to Burgundy's desk, and plopped it down, making the class laugh even harder and Burgundy's face turn red.

I wished I had Kallie's courage. I didn't think I'd be able to defend myself the way she was if someone started picking on me. Which was exactly why I was afraid to say

anything to Chanel. But after a few days of this, I couldn't watch them insult Kallie any more, and I decided to confront Chanel.

So one day we were standing around outside after school. Chanel, Burgundy and Tiffany were smoking. I don't know why I was so shocked at this, I'd heard Burgundy and Tiffany smoked, but I guess I never expected that Chanel would too.

"I'd really like to get that little bitch," said Amber nastily. She never referred to Kallie by name any more, only by one of many offensive terms.

I frowned at Amber's squinty eyes and water-balloon lips. She'd never been my favourite of Chanel's friends, and now I began to realize I hated her. She was poisonous and vindictive, and she was enjoying hurting Kallie a little too much. I decided to make my move.

"Chanel," I began nervously. They stared at me like I was an intruder. "I know what Kallie said was really mean, but she did apologize so maybe you should just... well, forget about it and ignore her... for your sake, I mean.... why bother with someone like her?"

Chanel narrowed her eyes. "God," she snorted. She threw her cigarette on the hard ground, crushed it with her heel, and headed for the bus stop. Burgundy, Tiffany and Amber followed, each giving me a contemptuous glance.

"That was really brilliant, Hilary," came Heather's annoying voice. "Congratulations on another stupid remark. Just like your friend Kallie."

Then she stomped off, leaving me with Lynn. That gave me an idea. Maybe I could get Lynn to talk to the others about leaving Kallie alone. After all, Lynn was closer with them than I was. And she'd never really taken part in the war. I mean, sure, she laughed when Chanel or someone made fun of Kallie, but she never said anything to Kallie herself. Maybe she'd be willing to stand up for Kallie if I asked her to, and the maybe the cool gang would listen to her. It was worth a shot.

But before I could speak, Lynn murmured, "I can't believe you just said that."

"About Chanel forgetting what Kallie said? Why not? It makes sense."

"You can't expect Chanel to just forget an insult like that."

My shoulders stiffened. "Oh, I get it. I'm supposed to forgive Heather—who by the

way has never apologized to me—but Chanel can't forgive Kallie even when Kallie didn't mean to insult her and apologized? That's not fair, Lynn."

She rolled her eyes carelessly. "Well, life's not fair, Hil."

I grabbed on to her last words. "And Chanel and them aren't being fair to Kallie. Can't you say something to them?"

"Like what?" she demanded.

"Tell them they're being too mean. Convince them to stop."

"Hil, they're not going to listen to me. Besides, I think you're making a big deal about nothing."

"Nothing?" I gasped. "You've seen what they've been doing to her, or at least heard about it. Calling her names like 'stick girl' and 'vomit face?' You think that's nothing?"

Lynn sighed. "A lot of people get picked on. So what? I can't do anything about it. And I don't see why you're so upset at what Chanel's doing. You picked on Marcia."

I bit my lip. "I know, and now I'm really sorry I did."

Lynn looked annoyed. "Whatever. That doesn't make any difference here. And you better stop defending Kallie. Chanel might get the wrong impression. She might think you're on Kallie's side."

"I'm not on Kallie's side.... I'm on my side," I said, trying to sound superior.

"Yeah, whatever, Hil."

I watched her walk off to join the others at the bus stop.

But I wasn't going to sit back and do nothing like Lynn. So I thought up new ways to get the cool gang to stop teasing Kallie. Whenever they'd make some nasty remark about her, I'd change the subject. Whenever they'd make some nasty remark *to* her, I'd look away like the whole thing bored me. I figured if I acted like nothing was going on, maybe they'd realize how stupid they were being and stop. But it didn't happen.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking if I was really Kallie's friend, I should've defended her to the cool gang. After all, I criticized the people in her grade five class for not doing that. Well, I soon found out it wasn't that simple.

Of course I felt sick about what was happening to Kallie. Mixed in with this sickness

was a heavy dose of guilt. Kallie was right, I thought. I should've told her about Chanel's father, especially after that whole thing with the ethnic shield. Maybe I could've prevented all this.

But see, going over to Kallie's side would've meant setting myself up to be picked on too. It was like... Kallie was a prisoner in some war-torn country, and her captors were beating and starving her. I could've declared myself on her side, but then we would've both been beaten and starved. And how would that have helped Kallie? It wasn't like I had much power, you know. Chanel had a lot of people on her side.

Wimp, said the snarly voice. You could do it if you wanted to. You're just too chicken. Too chicken to laugh off what Chanel's doing and too chicken to stand up to her.

The snarly voice's comment made me wonder whether I had what it took to be cool. Before I'd always assumed that if I couldn't be cool, it would be because of the way I looked. I was too fat, I wasn't pretty enough, my hair was the wrong colour. But now I realized it wasn't just my body, it was my mind too. If being cool meant watching my friends torment someone, I didn't think I could do it.

This war was taking its toll on me. Forget about forcing myself not to eat sweets—I didn't have an appetite left for anything, not even cheeseburgers. My parents became concerned about my lack of appetite, but I kept telling them I wasn't hungry, I had too much work to do, I'd had a big lunch. Or I'd take a long time over dinner, and when they left to go watch T.V. in the family room, I'd scrape the remains of my dinner into the garbage, making sure to hide them under some paper or a cardboard box.

It wasn't too difficult to fool my parents because they didn't pay very close attention. After their first rush of interest in my schoolwork and classes, they found other things to do, like building shelves or reading. My mom often went after dinner to see Mrs. Carruthers, who had twisted her ankle or broken her hip or something like that. I was grateful for the distraction but also resentful. Why did my mom have to pay so much attention to Mrs. Carruthers? She didn't pay that much attention to me, and I was sure my problems were much bigger than Mrs. Carruthers's.

And soon they got even bigger. I started to feel I was being pushed aside by the cool

gang. It started off with little things. Like how the girls would go on and on about what had happened in home ec that day, knowing I couldn't possibly join in the conversation. Then I found out they'd gone to a movie without me. "Oh, we were going to call you," said Amber, "but there wasn't time. It was really last minute." Once I was late for lunch, and they were all whispering and laughing, but when I sat down they stopped and wouldn't tell me what it was about. I looked at Lynn, but she averted her eyes.

I didn't have too long to wonder why they were treating me this way. One day after school, I was standing at my locker in the deserted hallway, when I turned around to find Amber and Tiffany only inches away, arms crossed, staring at me. I gasped, wondering how they'd snuck up on me.

"We want to talk to you about something. It's important," said Tiffany haughtily.

"Yeah," Amber chimed in. "We want to know whose side you're on."

"What do you mean?" I stammered.

"Are you friends with Chanel or Kallie?" Tiffany demanded. "Because we're not sure any more. You told Kallie all about Chanel's father so she could blab it all over the school. And whenever we start talking about her you always try to change the subject. You think we don't notice that?"

"Yeah," said Amber, "you think we don't notice that? And we know you used to eat lunch with her every day before you started eating with us."

I tried to hide my fear by acting offended. "Who told you that? It was Heather, wasn't it? She hates me. She'd say anything—"

"Oh, save it," groaned Tiffany. "It wasn't Heather. It was your best buddy."

I searched my brain, but only one name came to mind. "Kallie?"

They exchanged satisfied smirks. "Told ya," sang Amber. She began humming.

But I no longer cared. "Who?" I demanded. "Who told you that?"

They kept smiling. Tiffany started to walk away. Amber looked at me, moving her head from side to side and humming, until she leaned forward and hissed, "It was Lynn."

"How could you do something this like to me?" I yelled into the phone.

“It’s not *my* fault,” retorted Lynn. “They asked me whether you sat with her. What was I supposed to do, lie?”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “Would that have been so hard? You have no idea how difficult you’ve made things for me! Chanel is going to hate me! She’ll think I’ve betrayed her!”

“Not if you tell her you’re not friends with Kallie.”

I bit my lip. “It’s too late. I already told them we’re friends.”

“Well, that was stupid, Hil. I told you you should’ve dumped Kallie at the end of the summer. I knew she’d be trouble, but did you listen? No. So I don’t know what you want me to do about it now. It’s not my fault.”

I hung up, irritated. According to her, nothing was her fault, and she wasn’t involved at all. But she was involved, everyone was. Didn’t she see that?

But it wasn’t until lunch the next day that I understood how deeply I was now involved. When I sat down at the table, everyone fell silent. I said a friendly hello, but Chanel just stared at me and the others exchanged nasty smirks.

Then Chanel said loudly, “I’ve heard someone at this table is friends with Kallie. You know, that bitch who’s been so mean to me.”

“That’s fucking rude,” spat Kyle. I was so shocked I nearly dropped my diet Coke.

“I think that *person* better be very careful about what she does,” emphasized Chanel. “I think she better be especially careful about not lying to us.”

“Yeah, because if we found out she was lying to us, she wouldn’t like our reaction,” added Burgundy.

Maybe it was silly to confess now. But I took Burgundy’s words literally. That if I lied to the cool gang right now, it would be even worse than if I’d lied to them in the past. So I said nervously, “Well, yeah, it’s true, I did used to hang out with Kallie in the summer.”

Everyone turned to look at me. I saw disgust in Tiffany’s and Burgundy’s faces, surprise in Brett’s, and triumph in Heather’s. I couldn’t see Lynn’s and Chanel’s was cold and blank.

My voice grew accusatory. “I mean, she is my next-door neighbour and Lynn was away all summer.”

“Aww,” moaned Amber.

Chanel rolled her eyes. “So are you still friends with her or not?” she demanded.

And then it struck me that I didn’t know the answer. Ever since the cool gang had started picking on her, Kallie had refused to speak to me. I mean, it’s not like I talked to her when Chanel or anyone was around, but if no one was looking, I’d shoot her a sympathetic glance. But she always looked away coldly. And she didn’t answer the notes I left in her locker telling her I was really sorry about what was happening and was trying to get Chanel to stop picking on her. She didn’t even return my phone calls. But she’d never told me she didn’t want to be my friend, so I didn’t know if we were in a fight or if we’d really broken up.

So even if I wanted to tell the truth, I didn’t know what the truth was. Ten pairs of eyes glared at me, waiting for an answer. Finally I mumbled, “I don’t know.”

“I don’t know,” mimicked Chad, in a high-pitched, wimpy voice.

The girls cackled like members of a witches’ convention who’d been told a joke by the opening speaker. It was a high, evil, mechanical sound that went on and on, ringing in my ears.

“Come on, girls, let’s go,” sighed Chanel. “A sudden smell has developed at this table.”

The other girls rose and departed. Lynn didn’t turn her head in my direction when they left. But I wasn’t free yet because the guys were still there. I’d never talked to them much because I was too shy, but they’d always seemed nice and I assumed that meant they wouldn’t pick on me the way the girls just had. So what happened next was a painful shock.

“So Hilary Boles, Hilary Toilet Bowl, how’s it goin’?” demanded Kyle.

The guys burst into a hot, guttural laughter, evil as an axe murderer.

I ignored them and chewed and chewed my dry vegetarian pizza as they made up all the names they ever called me. All the ones specially designed for me, I mean. Toilet Bowl, Toilet Face, Bowl Head, Bowling Ball. Foal, Hole, Mole, Pole, Roll. I’m not counting things like loser, retard, and bitch. You can use those on anyone.

I suppose you’re wondering why I didn’t just get up and leave. It would’ve been

easier than sitting there listening to them insult me. But I wouldn't let myself. Leaving would've been admitting that they'd gotten to me, that I couldn't take what they dished out. It was like Kallie, when she'd continued eating her lunch after the spaghetti incident. Now I understood why she'd done that. She didn't want to give in.

I thought a lot about Kallie that afternoon, mostly about how horrible it must've been for her to be picked on all these weeks, with no one on her side except Chu Hua. And I figured she couldn't be much help, she seemed so scared and confused about what was happening. All those times I'd told Kallie I was sorry for the cool gang's behaviour and I understood how she felt... I realized now I hadn't understood, but I did, finally. Maybe if I apologized to Kallie, we could patch things up and still be friends.

So I waited around for her after school that day, hiding in the library until I was sure the cool gang had gone home. I could afford to do this because I'd noticed Kallie often stayed after school these days, practicing with the track and field team in the gym or using the art room to work on her art fair project. Something I'm really going to have to get going on, I reminded myself, it's due in a few weeks.

When Kallie saw me standing at her locker, she looked like she wanted to run away. But the hallway was deserted and she needed to get to her locker, so she couldn't escape.

I said hi to her, but she ignored me.

"How's the art fair thing going?" I tried.

She sighed, throwing a textbook into her locker. "What do you want, Hilary?"

I took a breath to steady myself. "I want to say I'm sorry about what's been happening to you. I mean, I'm really sorry for the way those people are treating you. I know it's really hard, especially when so many other people are joining in."

"At least I have Chu Hua," she said shortly. "She's been a really good friend." I couldn't help taking that as a personal insult, but I supposed I deserved it.

"I hate those people," I continued, "the way they tease you and call you names... it's horrible. Look Kallie, I know I haven't been a very good friend to you these past few weeks, but I still really want to be friends. And don't worry, I'm not hanging around with those people any more."

“Just like that? All of a sudden you’re not friends with them?” she demanded suspiciously. “Why? Did they call me a barfbag one too many times? Unless...” She looked at me craftily. “Unless they did something to you. That’s it, isn’t it? You got in a fight with them and now you’re coming crying to me because you don’t have any friends.”

I looked away. My mouth felt dry.

“Well, forget it, Hilary. It’s a little late now.”

“Why?” I mumbled. I knew it was a stupid question.

“You can’t just be my friend whenever it’s convenient!” she shouted. “Real friendship means being friends with a person in the bad times, not just the good. Chu Hua is a real friend. You’re not.”

I chewed the insides of my cheeks.

“I should’ve known you’d be like this,” she continued angrily. “Ever since I met you, you’ve been obsessed with wanting to be part of the ‘cool group.’ Like that time at the mall when you were embarrassed to be seen with me and you shoved me behind the postcard rack.”

I was quiet.

“But I really should’ve known after you lied about Marcia.”

“That was different—” I began.

“Yeah, it’s always different with you, isn’t it? There’s always an exception for you. Do you think you’re so special? Well, you’re not.”

My heart pounded in my chest like it was trying to get out of a locked room.

She said more quietly, “You know what the worst part of all this is? I would never have treated you this way. That time at the beach... when you were so worried about your weight... you didn’t get it. It didn’t matter to me whether or not you were fat. You could’ve been three hundred pounds for all I cared, and I still would’ve been your friend. Well, not any more.” She shut her locker door and began walking quickly down the hall.

I called to her and tried to keep up, but a pain in my stomach made it hard for me to run, and soon she was out of sight.

And so began the worst period of my life. They—well, I really don’t want to

describe it all again. You can look at what I wrote a few pages earlier and fill in the blanks. Let's just say they found a new target they could use all that ammunition on. Someone more fun to pick on than Kallie. Someone who responded to their name-calling and dirty looks by looking at the ground or blinking back tears. Someone who allowed herself to be slammed against lockers and walls and doors and would calmly pick up her books from where they'd scattered like leaves on the floor. Someone who answered their rude questions by saying, in a small voice, "I don't know."

Once Miss Stephanopoulos asked me whether I was O.K. I smiled a weak smile and told her I was fine, I just had a headache.

And the fear. You know that hot anxiety that begins in the pit of your stomach and feels like a bunch of worms swimming in a sea of acid? And how it moves up so your chest is pounding and spills over onto your skin and the red spreads in blotches like a disease all over your face, your neck, even your arms?

Yeah. Well. That happened every time they looked at me or said something to me. Every time I got on the bus to go to school. Even when I was lying in bed on a Friday night, it happened.

Because, see, that kind of fear and anxiety... it isn't limited to school. It overflows into the rest of your life like spilled oil and when you try to run, the oil hardens into tar and you're trapped.

For several weeks I'd had very little appetite, and now I had none. I could only manage a piece of toast for breakfast, I skipped lunch entirely except for a peanut butter sandwich on weekends, and it was an accomplishment if I could eat more than half my dinner.

My mother was becoming very concerned about my eating habits. "Are you sure you're all right, Hilary? You seem thin. It's not normal for a growing person to lose her appetite. Do you feel sick? Does anything hurt?"

"It's just stress," I insisted. "We have so much work between now and Christmas, I just don't feel hungry."

"Well, if you don't get your appetite back soon, I'm going to take you to Dr. Roy."

That scared me straight for several days. I forced myself to eat more, even though the thought of food made me gag. I wore baggy sweaters so my mom wouldn't notice how my stomach no longer stuck out. I hadn't weighed myself for a long time, so I didn't know how much weight I'd lost, and I didn't care.

I abandoned the stationary bike because I didn't have the energy for it. I'd long since achieved my goal of pedalling for half an hour, though I remember I wasn't satisfied when I did. I wanted to go for forty-five minutes.

Homework didn't interest me either. It just reminded me of school. Forcing myself to complete my assignments was like forcing myself to tear out my nails with my teeth. Even the subjects I liked didn't do anything for me. Every time I tried to work on the art fair, I remembered Kallie, and it was too painful to continue. And all the creative assignments I did during this time were dismal. I had another short story due soon, and I was dreading it.

And the worst thing was I was completely alone. Kallie never spoke to me, not even when we sat together in art. But once when someone shoved me against a locker, she helped me pick up my books. I tried to thank her, but she walked away. And I was too afraid to phone her. Whenever I thought of her, I remembered the way I'd treated her, and I told myself I deserved to be alone.

I did call Lynn at first. I told her how Kallie was mad at me for hanging out with the cool gang and how they were picking on me. I asked her what she thought I could do to make them stop. She advised me to write a note to Chanel, apologizing. Apologizing for what, I never understood. But I did write a note and left it in Chanel's desk. She never responded, so I didn't know whether Burgundy or Tiffany had stolen the note before Chanel could see it or whether Chanel was just ignoring me.

When Chanel didn't reply, I phoned Lynn again. "What should I do now?" I asked anxiously.

She sighed. "I don't know, Hil. Look, I have to go. I've got a lot of homework." I listened in shock as she hung up on me.

After that, whenever I'd call, Morgan or Nicole would tell me Lynn wasn't available,

and she never returned my calls. It slowly dawned on me that Lynn wasn't going to help me, that she didn't care about what was happening to me, and my insides turned cold like the air from space.

I did think of confiding in my mother about all this. She'd been really nice the past few weeks. Once when she came into my room and found me staring vacantly out the window, she asked if I was O.K. and said if I ever needed to talk, she was always there. But in the end, I was too afraid she might somehow find out about how I hadn't been eating on purpose, and I dreaded her reaction. So I let her believe everything was fine at school, but I was too busy with homework to talk much about it.

Meanwhile I'd go to school, take their abuse, and try to concentrate enough in class so I'd do decently on my upcoming report card. Otherwise my parents would get suspicious.

But then one day, I couldn't take it any more.

I'll never forget it. It was after school, around three weeks after they'd first begun teasing me. I was alone at my locker, and I'd just gotten out of detention. It was my first time in detention, and I was there because I'd forgotten to do my math homework.

I'd just closed my locker when I saw Chanel, Amber, Tiffany and Burgundy swaying towards me from one end of the hall. I panicked, glancing at the other end. But I couldn't get out that way. I thought of running up to another floor, but I knew they'd chase me up there. It was better to swallow my fear and head straight for the front door, as if they weren't even there. Because, as I'm sure you know if you're ever been in this kind of situation, they can smell fear and they pounce on it.

When I came level with them, they formed a circle around me.

"Oh, Hilary, that's such a beautiful sweater," said Tiffany, in her I'm-pretending-to-compliment-you-but-I'm-really-insulting-you tone. "You must've got it from that welfare bum Marcia."

"Yeah, ever notice how all losers dress alike?" snickered Amber.

"No," said Chanel suddenly. "You're wrong, Amber. She could never wear Marcia's clothes. Marcia was skinny. She's fat."

My heart felt like someone had struck it with a hammer. I looked up into Chanel's

eyes, searching for some compassion or regret or even uncertainty. But there was nothing in them except a cold, hard glaze, like a mirror painted black. And that's when I finally understood. After all these months, all my hoping and dreaming and planning, I finally got it. Chanel Winters was a bitch.

Their laughter echoed in my head as I pushed my way out of the circle and ran down the hall. I can vividly remember glancing at the ethnic shields on the walls, and how their bright colours and shapes made me sick.

I ran all the way home. I still don't know how I did it, in the cold twilight of early December, in several inches of snow, and it must've been at least, what, three or four kilometres? By the time I stumbled across the lawn, my body felt like vicious dogs had been snapping at my flesh.

I saw Kallie's mother hurrying out their front door. I suddenly remembered our first meeting and how her hand had felt warm. Kallie's mother will help me, I thought, she won't turn away from me like everyone else.

I went over and said hello.

"Oh, hello, Hilary," she said quickly, fumbling with her car keys. "How are you doing?"

"Not that good," I mumbled. "I'm having a problem with these people at school. They're being really mean to me. I don't know what to do. I thought... you might be able to help?"

She furrowed her brow and said softly, "I'm really like to, Hilary, but... I think it might be best if you talked to your own mother about this. I'm sure she'd be more help to you than I would, and I know she'd like it if you felt you could come to her with a problem."

I looked down at the snow, and she continued, "I'm really sorry, Hilary, but I'm late for a meeting. I'm sorry. Please talk to your mother and let me know how it turns out?"

I managed to nod. I watched her get in her car, wave and drive away.

I unlocked our front door to be greeted by my mom's voice from the kitchen.

"Hilary, is that you?"

"Yes," I called. My voice sounded weak and irritable.

My mom came down the hall, adjusting the cuff of her sleeve. “Hilary, I’m just going to see Mrs. Carruthers down the street for a minute. Would you mind putting—” She stopped when she saw me. “My God, Hilary. Are you all right? What happened?”

I stood there in the hall, snow dripping from my soaked coat and mittens, my nose running, my eyes red. I stared at her as alarm traced a crazy pattern on her face like an etch-a-sketch. Then suddenly I was overcome with disgust and fury. I threw my school bag at her head, and she ducked, staring at me.

“I hate Mrs. Carruthers!” I screamed. “How can you go see her after what happened to me!”

“What happened?” she cried.

Heat like spilled sun was burning my insides. Without removing my boots or coat, I tore upstairs and into the bathroom. I threw myself down in front of the toilet, where I vomited again and again until I thought there must be nothing left in me to throw up.

I—

Chapter Sixteen: I Meet the Empress

It's March.

I haven't written in this journal or diary or autobiography or whatever it is for who knows how long. It's weird, you know? I thought writing this would be easy. I'd just be telling you something that happened to me. It's not like I had to worry about making up a story because the story was already there. All I had to do was remember. But it's a lot more complicated than that.

Maybe you'll know what I mean, if you've ever tried writing about something that happened to you. Your writing spills over into the rest of your life and you can't stop remembering stuff about that time, the time you're writing about I mean. Smells, bits of conversations, dates. And it's like you're living through that time all over again. Only you're not participating in it, you're just an observer.

Oh, what am I saying? I don't even know who you are. Maybe you've no clue what I'm talking about. Maybe you don't exist. Sometimes I just think, why bother?

But a few days ago I was talking to a friend—the person who suggested I write my autobiography—and she convinced me that even if no one ever read any part of this, it would still be worthwhile for me to write it because I'd learn something about myself. Well, the only thing I've learned so far is that I can't not finish this story. I've tried forgetting about it, but it keeps popping up in my mind. I've tried telling myself I'm not going to write any more, but every time I think of abandoning it, I feel this uncontrollable urge to go back to it. So here goes.

The next thing I can remember is sitting in my bed, surrounded by the glow of my reading lamp. I was wearing my pyjamas and the sick feeling was gone. My stomach felt like a big empty space that hurt around the edges.

Mom was sitting beside me, one arm around my shoulders, the other bent into a crook with her hand on mine.

I blinked as if waking up, although as far as I can remember, I hadn't been asleep.

"How do you feel, honey?" Mom asked gently.

“Fine.” My voice sounded crackly, as if I hadn’t used it in a long time.

“Do you feel ready to talk about what happened?”

I wasn’t prepared for this question. But her voice was so quiet and gentle that the whole story spilled out of me like a corrosive liquid spilling out of a vat. When it was over, I let myself cry, and my mom patted my back.

“I hate school! I don’t ever want to go back there!” I howled.

“Well, you won’t have to go back for a few days, anyway. You need to stay at home and recover from being sick.”

That was a small victory, although I knew I was only postponing my date with doom.

“I don’t have any friends!” I wailed.

“Oh, I don’t think that’s true.”

“It is true, Mom, they hate me, all of them! They’re all being horrible to me, even Kallie.” When she didn’t respond, I said, “I don’t understand why those people are picking on me. What did I do to them?”

“Oh, honey, you didn’t do anything. Sometimes people are just cruel, and it’s not fair. It’s a hard lesson to learn, but unfortunately there’s a lot of injustice in the world.”

“But why can’t they just leave me alone?”

“Well, from what you’ve told me about Chanel’s family, she’s probably a confused and unhappy young lady, and she’s taking that unhappiness out on people like you.”

“But how can she be unhappy? She has a pool and a big house and... she models,” I stammered. But those reasons sounded lame even to me. “And her mom’s really cool, I mean no offense or anything, but her mom lets her do what she wants. She doesn’t even have a curfew.” I frowned. “She doesn’t *seem* unhappy.”

“Well, she probably doesn’t want people to know she’s unhappy. So she thinks if she acts happy and confident, people will believe she is.”

Just then I remembered something. “Remember once you told me that if you don’t believe in yourself, no one else will? What does that mean?”

She stroked my hair. “It means that before other people can like you, you have to like yourself. After all, you probably know yourself better than anyone else does, and if you

don't think you're worth anything, why should other people?"

I stared down at the pink and blue flowers on my duvet.

"Now from what you've told me," Mom continued, "Chanel doesn't like herself, only she's convinced other people she does, so they look up to her and follow her because she seems to have self-confidence, something they're probably lacking."

"So you mean that's why people like Amber are mean to me? Because they don't have self-confidence and they're just following Chanel?"

"Yes, I think so. It doesn't sound like any of those girls is very independent."

I thought about this. It made sense but...

"But I think Kallie has self-confidence, too," I objected. "She does what she wants, even if people make fun of her. So why don't people follow her?"

"Well, she probably doesn't try to make people follow her because she doesn't need to be popular like Chanel does. Kallie has two parents who love and support her, and it doesn't sound like Chanel gets much love or support from either of her parents."

"But what about her mom?"

Mom shrugged. "You may think her mom is being cool by not giving her a curfew, but I'm not so sure. When your dad and I set down rules for you, like a curfew, we're not trying to spoil your fun. We're doing it because we care about you and we don't want you to get hurt. It sounds like Chanel has two parents who don't care about her, and that must be very hard."

I tried to picture Chanel feeling sad or alone, running to the washroom to throw up, arguing with a snarly voice. But when I thought of her all I could see was a hard black glaze.

"Well, I still don't think it's fair," I sniffed. "If Chanel wants to be mad at someone, she should be mad at her parents. I don't think it's a good enough reason to start teasing other people."

"She probably is mad at her parents, only she takes it out on people like you and Kallie because it's easier. After all, you can't cut off her allowance. But I agree that it's not fair. What happened to Chanel may be an explanation for her behaviour, but it's not an excuse."

I thought about the way I'd treated Marcia and Kallie. I'd picked on Marcia and I'd turned my back on Kallie when she needed me most. And I didn't even have an explanation like Chanel did. Or did I? I'm still not sure.

I told my mom how bad I felt for the way I'd treated Marcia and Kallie.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," she said. "It's true, teasing Marcia wasn't very nice. But the fact that you feel so bad about what you did to her shows you have a good heart. And as for Kallie, it's hard to go against a crowd, especially at your age."

This made me bristle. "Yeah, but... friends are friends, no matter what age you are. Just because I'm only twelve doesn't mean it's O.K. for me to turn my back on my friends. I don't think age is an excuse."

Mom lowered her gaze. "No, you're right," she said softly. "In some ways, it's not."

I sighed. "But... I was just too scared to talk back to Chanel. I wanted to be her friend for so long, and I just really wanted to be popular. I guess that was pretty dumb," I muttered.

"No, it wasn't. Wanting to be friends with Chanel was perfectly valid. And there's nothing wrong with wanting to be popular, either. Most people want to be popular, and it's wonderful to have a lot of friends, as long as you're not blind to their faults. If you are, it's no longer friendship. It's idolatry, and that's what you felt for Chanel."

"Is that bad?" I asked quietly.

"No, I think a little idolatry is fine." She looked at my poster of Damian Sámos, the one where he was slouched against a piece of chicken wire, surrounded by inflatable yellow chickens, his face looking as if he'd just drunk a shot of vinegar. I smiled sheepishly. "But if it gets out of hand, then it's a problem."

"But I don't think I was a very good friend to Kallie. You even said I discriminated against her."

She raised her eyebrows. "When did I say that?"

"The first time I hung out with her, in the summer. You said I needed to be more tolerant of people who were different."

She looked pained. "I didn't mean to imply you'd discriminated against Kallie, I just

meant you had to keep a more open mind and not write someone off just because that person is a little different than you. And you did keep an open mind. I've watched you over the summer with Kallie. You've really grown, Hilary."

I shrugged morosely. Mom rubbed my shoulders and said, "I want to tell you a story."

I'll always remember this story.

"I was a little older than you when we moved to northern Ontario," she began, "and the first year I was in school there, I was very shy because of my French accent. I didn't have many friends, and there was this one group of girls...." She shook her head. "They were horrible to me. They used to do all kinds of things to me, pull my hair, shove me around at recess, put gum on my seat. I'll never forget the ringleader. Doris Howard." Mom said the words as if they were doused in cod liver oil. "She detested me. I think she would've used my skin as a lampshade if she could." I shuddered, and Mom squeezed me.

"But why did she hate you so much?"

"Partly because I was Catholic and French-Canadian, and she was Protestant and English. But mostly because I came from a close-knit family. We didn't get a lot of one-on-one time with our parents, but we knew they loved us and were there for us when we needed them. This girl didn't have that. Her father was a banker, but he was also an alcoholic who used to trash the house in a drunken rage. It was one of those well-kept secrets that's not really a secret, since everyone in town knew about it but didn't do anything.

"One day, these girls followed me home and started throwing berries at me. I ran inside crying. My mother was in the kitchen, preparing a tourtière for dinner, and when I told her what had happened, she ran outside—and you know grandma's not a tall woman, some of those girls were taller than her—but she ran out and yelled at them to leave me alone or she would tell their parents. They laughed even harder and started throwing berries at her. So she marched inside, picked up the tourtière, marched back out, and threw it right at Doris Howard!"

I laughed so hard the edges of my stomach throbbed. "What! Grandma?"

Mom was laughing too. "It's true. Doris stood there with this horrified expression

on her face, pork and gravy and pie crust dripping down her school uniform, and she knew she was in trouble. She knew that if she ever teased me again, my mother would go to her father. And she knew she'd get a thrashing from her father if he found out she'd disgraced herself by picking on some poor French-Canadian girl. You see, he liked to pretend he and his family were very open-minded. So after that, she was much more careful around me. I won't say she didn't still tease me, but she kept her distance, and I was so grateful I didn't worry about the odd comment or look."

"I still can't believe that about Grandma," I snickered. And I'd thought my grandma was boring. But she threw tourtières at mean girls named Doris. Who knew?

"Maybe Grandma could come and throw a tourtière at Chanel?" I asked hopefully.

Mom laughed. "Oh, Hilary. I'm telling you this so that you know you're not alone."

"You never told me you were picked on."

"Well, I guess it's something you only talk about when someone else is going through a similar experience." She cocked her head. "But it shouldn't be. We should be able to talk because we want to, not just because we have to."

I gave her a little smile.

"I'm glad you told me about this, Hilary. We haven't talked much this past year."

"Well, I didn't feel like I could talk to you," I admitted.

Her lips parted. "Why not?"

I squirmed. "I don't know exactly. It's just... we've been fighting a lot. You know, about le château and that. I thought maybe you thought I was bad for wanting to shop there. And I wasn't sure you cared. I mean, I knew you did, but I wasn't sure how much. Like that time we went shopping and we got in a fight and you said it was a mistake to try to make me feel better. I thought you might be mad if I came to you."

"Oh, Hilary, I would never have been mad! And when I made that comment, I only meant it was a mistake to take you shopping to make you feel better. I should've known we'd get in a fight!" We exchanged rueful smiles. "And if I disapproved of things like le château clothes, it wasn't because I thought you were wrong for wanting them. I just felt they were too mature for someone your age. You don't have to be in such a hurry to grow

up.” She smiled a watery smile.

“O.K.,” I mumbled.

She frowned. “But I should’ve tried to reach out to you more. I was just worried that if I asked too many questions, like at dinner that time, you’d think I was being nosy. I wanted to give you space, and for a while, it seemed like you were opening up. But then you shut down again, and I didn’t know what to do. I even asked your Aunt Marie and Mrs. Foster mother for advice.”

“Really?” I was embarrassed and honoured at the same time. “You mean, parents ask other parents for advice?”

She laughed. “Yes, all the time. Especially first-time parents. In case you didn’t notice, Hilary, you’re the only experience I’ve got being a parent,” she said warmly.

“What did they say?”

“Marie told me I should keep giving you space but let you know I was there for you. Mrs. Foster said the same thing. She even said she’d try to encourage you to talk to me.”

So that’s why Kallie’s mom had brushed me off that afternoon. She hadn’t been abandoning me, she’d been directing me to my mom.

“I knew you were anxious about junior high,” continued my mom. “But then everyone is. I figured it was the usual concerns: too much homework, feeling awkward around boys. I thought that when the time was right, you’d talk to me about it. I had no idea all this was going on. But I should’ve tried harder to make you feel like you could come to me.” She hung her head.

A warm feeling spread through my chest, and I wanted to reassure her that it wasn’t her fault. “I think you did make it clear,” I said, in a small voice. “You asked me if I was O.K., and you took me shopping downtown. And... I’m sorry I threw the bag at your head. It was really stupid, and I’ll never do it again.”

Mom reached up to smooth my hair. “Oh, sweetie, it’s O.K. I know you were extremely upset.” She frowned at me. “It must be hard for you, being an only child.”

“Yeah, sometimes it is.”

“Well, if you ever need to talk, I’m always here. And you can tell me anything. You

don't have to be afraid."

"I know," I said warmly.

"Good. Because I want to talk to you about something. You haven't been eating enough these past few weeks. I know you told me it was because you had a lot of work and didn't feel hungry, but after everything you've told me today, I think there might be something else going on?"

I averted my eyes. "No, nothing else is going on."

"Are you sure?"

Suddenly I felt like I was talking to the old, nosy mom of several months ago. "Yes, I'm sure," I snapped.

Without warning, she lifted up my pyjama top to reveal my stomach. I screeched and jumped away.

"What did you do that for?" I yelled.

"Just what I thought. You've lost weight," she said accusingly. "Have you been doing this on purpose?"

I looked away, widening my eyes innocently.

"Why do you want to lose weight, Hilary?" she asked. She sounded like she was conducting a survey.

"Because I'm fat!" I exclaimed. "I know you don't think so, but you haven't seen me compared to most girls my age. I am fat!"

"I don't live in a cave, Hilary. I've seen plenty of other girls your age. And you're not fat compared to them or to anybody else, no matter what Chanel and those other little witches say. You were a perfect weight for your age and height, and now look at you. My God, you must've lost ten to fifteen pounds." She put a hand to her head. "I had no idea all this was going on," she murmured.

I smiled secretly. My baggy sweaters had worked.

"It's not funny, Hilary, and it's not a game," said my mom sharply. "Now I want you to start eating again and forget all this nonsense about losing weight and being too fat."

"It's not nonsense," I retorted. "Besides, if I gain back all the weight I lost, then

what was the point of losing it?"

"There never was any point."

I rolled my eyes, and she studied me. "I want to tell you something," she continued. "A lot of girls your age want to lose weight, and they all start by thinking they just want to lose a few pounds. But some girls can't stop themselves. After they've lost a few pounds, they want to lose more and more and it's never enough. No matter how much weight they lose, they still think they're fat. They end up with this disease called—"

"Anorexia. I know. Kallie told me all about it."

Her face lightened. "You've been talking to Kallie about this?"

"No, she said something about it. A long time ago, before all this started. But it won't happen to me. I'm not going to keep losing weight until I'm starving. I'm not anorexic."

"That's what most anorexic girls say. But it's a very dangerous disease, Hilary. It can kill you. People have starved to death because of this disease. You have to realize that you have a problem," she said emphatically.

But I refused to be frightened. "I don't have a problem! So I wanted to lose a little weight and I did. Big deal. It doesn't mean I'm anorexic. Besides, it's my body, and you can't force me to gain weight if I don't want to."

A silence crackling with tension was broken by my mom declaring, "I'm going to take you to Dr. Roy tomorrow. You can talk to her about this."

"Oh, so what happened to 'you can tell me anything, you don't have to be afraid'?"

"You can tell me anything, but I can't help you the way Dr. Roy can. She's a professional, and she's dealt with people who have these kinds of problems. She'll be able to answer all your questions and explain why your dieting has to stop."

"I don't have any questions!" I cried. "And I'm not dieting any more. I'm happy with the weight I am now, and I promise I won't try to lose any more. So you see, I'm not like those anorexic girls. Let's just forget about the whole thing."

"It's not that simple, Hilary."

"Why? Don't you trust me?" I demanded.

Mom was quiet, and for the first time, I noticed the ticking of the clock on the wall. “It’s not a matter of trust, Hilary,” she said softly. “You need help.”

“No, I don’t,” I insisted.

“Well, if you’re happy with the weight you are right now, why did you say, ‘I’m fat’?”

I hated it when she tricked me like this.

“You’re probably going to make me go back to Mackenzie too,” I muttered.

When Mom didn’t respond, I said, “You are, aren’t you? Thanks a lot, Mom. I thought things were finally O.K. between us.”

“They are. But running away from a problem—whether it’s anorexia or being bullied—isn’t the solution. You have to face the problem head on and deal with it. Otherwise you’ll never be rid of it. You become a stronger and a better person by going through tough experiences.”

“But Chanel didn’t,” I said instantly. “If I’m teased every day, I might become mean like her.”

Mom laid a hand on my shoulder. “You’re not Chanel, Hilary. I trust you. You’re a good person, and you will come out of this even better.”

When I didn’t answer, she said, “I’ll make you a deal. You stay at Mackenzie for the rest of the school year, and if you still don’t like it after that, we can talk about changing schools.”

I nodded glumly. Next June seemed like a billion light years away, and I didn’t know how I was going to survive until then. “What I am supposed to do in the meantime?” I asked.

“Just try to ignore those girls.”

“I already tried that and they just laugh at me for being quiet. And don’t try telling me to stand up to them because Kallie does that and it doesn’t work.”

“If neither of those things work, you may have to accept that those people want to laugh at you and that they will find a way. But you can’t let it take over your life. Focus on something you enjoy, like the art fair or writing stories. Try to be friendly with other people,

and I'm sure some of those people will respond. And if you still feel awful, tell the teacher. Maybe she can talk to those girls and make things better."

Yeah right, I thought.

"And the other thing to remember, Hilary, is that people like that have a short attention span. I bet that in a few weeks, they will've found someone else to pick on."

But I was saved from having to disagree by a knock at the door.

"Come in," I called.

My dad eased open the door and hovered there, like a giant afraid to enter a child's room for fear he might knock over her tea party.

"How are things here?" he asked softly.

"Fine," I piped up. When he still hovered, I said, "You can come in."

Dad stopped near the bed. I put out my arms to him as I would've to a favourite teddy bear when I was small. Sometime during our hug, I felt my mom lay her hand on my back.

"I'm glad you're O.K.," said my dad, his voice catching.

"Thanks, Dad," I whispered.

"We're always here for you, Hilary," Dad said.

"Yeah, I know," I answered. We all exchanged a smile.

"Now, I think you should eat something," said Mom. "You haven't had dinner yet. How about a bowl of soup?"

"Good idea," interjected Dad, before I could say anything.

I was outnumbered. My mom helped me get under the covers and told me to stay right there—as if I was going somewhere—while she and Dad prepared the soup. Then they both went downstairs.

When they came back with the soup, they sat down and started talking about Christmas and the cold weather and movies they'd like to see. But I knew the real reason they were there. They wanted to make sure I was eating the soup. I tried blowing on it and sipping it without swallowing much, but it was no good. They sat there until I'd eaten the entire bowl. And though I didn't want to admit it to myself, the soup was pretty good. It

was the first thing I'd really tasted in weeks.

My mom lifted the tray with the bowl and placed it on my desk. "Now I think it's time you got some sleep, O.K.?"

I suddenly realized how tired I was. Mom tucked me in, handing me Muffinitis, a one-footed rabbit that was one of my favourite stuffed animals. Then she hugged me so hard my bones felt squeezed.

"You're a wonderful person, Hilary," she said, her voice cracking. "You're strong and smart and beautiful. Always remember that." She kissed my cheek.

Dad hugged and kissed me. As they turned out the light and left the room, Mom whispered, "If you need us, don't be afraid to ask, night or day."

I settled into bed, thinking. My mom had been really cool about everything—except for that dumb idea that I'm anorexic, I thought. She hadn't even been mad at me for lying about the dance. I wished I'd told her all that stuff a long time ago. I felt so much better knowing I had someone I could talk to. For the first time in weeks, I didn't have that hollow feeling in my stomach. Thinking of this, I splayed out like a star and went to sleep.

Of course I didn't want to go to the doctor. But I knew if I didn't, there'd be a big argument. I figured it was easier to see Dr. Roy, answer her questions, and try to convince her that if I ever had been anorexic—which I doubted—my mom's talk had cured me of it. If Dr. Roy was satisfied, I was sure my mom would be.

But convincing Dr. Roy was even more impossible than convincing my mom. She was nice at first, but then she started asking all these questions about everything I'd eaten and hadn't eaten in the last few weeks and when I'd started exercising on the stationary bike and for how long. When my voice grew dry and she handed me a cup of water, I frowned suspiciously. Was she trying to make gain weight right then and there?

Then she asked me what my thoughts about all this were. I explained that my mom was making a big deal out of nothing, I didn't have anorexia, and I wasn't going to diet any more. But Dr. Roy obviously didn't agree because she started telling me about the dangers of dieting and how people my age shouldn't diet because our bodies were still growing and

it was unhealthy to mess with the growth process. Then she gave me a dietary plan I had to follow every day.

I came home grumpy. I didn't want to eat what everyone else was telling me to eat—it was almost as bad as wearing what everyone else was telling me to wear or acting how everyone else was telling me to act. But when I mentioned this triumphantly to my mom, she said the situations were completely different. She was doing this for “for my own good,” while Chanel was doing things for *her* own good.

So I had no choice. My mom sat with me at every meal and watched until I'd eaten the entire thing. I didn't like this. I even thought of making myself sick to get rid of the food, but I didn't know how to do it and somehow the idea scared me, so I never did.

That evening, I was looking out my window at the moon, and I suddenly thought of my Tarot fortune. Boy, Kallie's grandma was right on about some stuff, I thought. I did have problems with women—beyond my wildest expectations. Then I thought of the Fool. I realized maybe my journey hadn't begun with junior high, but with meeting Kallie. That had changed things completely. I wondered if junior high would've been better if I'd never met her. Right now it didn't seem like anything could make it better.

After the Moon came the Empress. The Empress was a woman who would help me, if I let her. That must be my mom or maybe Dr. Roy. “If I let her.” Did that mean I really did have a problem with my weight and needed help with it? I brushed the thought aside. Then there were the Hermit and the Lovers, which meant I had to meditate and make a choice. Is it a choice between Chanel and Kallie, I wondered. If so, it's not much of a choice. They both hate me.

The Tarot cards made me uncomfortable, so I decided to do something to take my mind off them. But watching T.V. didn't interest me and I didn't have any more Nancy Drews to read. Instead I did something I hadn't felt like doing in a long time. I wrote a story.

Chapter Seventeen: The Hermit's Choice

I spent the next few days with my parents playing Trivial Pursuit, watching movies and talking. I still wasn't happy about the dietary plan I had to follow. But one night, my mom told me she'd cook whatever I wanted for dinner. When I told her I didn't care what I ate, she made cheeseburgers. She always knew how to get to me.

She also "suggested" I help Dad make pancakes, meaning if I didn't help him, I'd never hear the end of it. So he and I got up early the next morning, and we were in the kitchen for about an hour. I don't think I'd spent so much time alone with my dad since—I don't even remember. Having a conversation with him was even stranger than having one with my mom, but there we were, talking about everything from how silly the movie was to what we wanted for Christmas. We decided to make our pancakes in different shapes, and I made mine in the shape of Mackenzie's face. I wasn't hungry for them or at least I pretended not to be, but I had fun making them.

That weekend, I found out a ton of stuff about my mom. Like why she went to see Mrs. Carruthers so often. Aside from her injury, Mrs. Carruthers had bad arthritis and couldn't do housework. None of her children could help her because they all lived in other cities, so my mom had offered to help.

"She's an interesting person," said my mom, as she handed me a dish to dry. "Did you know she used to be an actress during the Depression? She and her family made money travelling from town to town out West and performing comedy skits."

I was fascinated by this. I'd never thought of Mrs. Carruthers as an actress or as anything at all, and it made me wonder what other secrets my mother was hiding.

"What do you do all day?" I asked.

It turned out she belonged to a book club. She also did volunteer work and projects around the house.

"You know the new shelves we're building for the basement? I've been working on those."

I was amazed. I'd assumed my dad had been building the shelves after he got home

from work. But here my mom had been working on them in the middle of the afternoon. And I thought she spent her days washing my socks!

When I asked why she didn't have a paying job like Dad, she told me she used to work in public relations, but after I was born, she quit to spend time with me. I didn't want her to feel like I was holding her back, so I told her I was old enough to take care of myself and she could go back to work. She smiled and said maybe she'd think about it, in a few months.

In the few days I spent at home with my parents, I was happier than I'd been since the summer.

Of course this couldn't last and on Monday my mom told me I was well enough to go back to school. But when I stepped through the front door at Mackenzie, I felt different than I had the last time I'd come in. As if I had a secret source of power. I walked with my chin up, and whenever anyone looked at me, I flicked my eyes away, as if disgusted. It didn't matter what anyone there was saying or doing because none of it involved me. If my classmates were zigzaggy lines crashing into one another, I was a line far off in the distance, a line that would never touch the others.

Several people looked at me with widened eyes. Even the cool people were quieter. Whoever I was, I was a different person than the one I'd been when they'd seen me last. They were dealing with someone new, and they didn't quite know how to handle her.

This new person didn't hang around to be teased. She went to the library at lunch. She tuned out all conversation except what was being said by the teacher. She became fascinated by Mr. Benson's lectures on fractions, thinking he was quite dynamic once you dusted him off. She wrote stories and drew pictures, and she never spoke to anyone because she had nothing to say to anyone. She was a high priestess. Not the high priestess from Jason's. This one had no followers, and she didn't need any. She was there but not really there.

Once Kallie asked this person whether she was O.K.

"I'm fine," she said coldly, walking away.

Then one day this person was at her locker during lunch time. The cool girls were at theirs. They were playing we're-going-to-push-you-into-a-locker. By now they'd stopped pretending they were sorry and just shoved and squealed.

The first shove knocked Kallie over, sending her books flying. As she was picking them up, the others giggled, and she snapped, "I'm really sick of your dumb games! You better not shove me again, or I'll—"

"You'll what?" asked Amber. Then she ran at Kallie. But this time Kallie was ready, and she elbowed Amber sharply, sending her flying backwards into Tiffany like a Barbie doll tossed into a basket of toys. The person nearby smiled.

Amber's face twisted in rage, making her even uglier, and she was about to lunge at Kallie when Chanel intervened.

"Forget it, Amber. She's not worth it. It's better not to touch her, anyway. She's contaminated."

They stood there, expecting a response so they could make some sarcastic comment and head to the caf. But none came. Kallie looked at them, then lowered her head. They smiled viciously.

I glanced from them to Kallie. A dozen different feelings were fighting inside me, and I didn't know what to do. But I had to decide which one was the most important and act on it.

So I said, "Not as contaminated as some people."

It was a voice I'd never used before, loud and clear, but it was my voice.

One by one, the cool lips formed lifesavers. Their owners stared at me for a full ten seconds before Chanel said, "Ex-key-use me?" But there was more disbelief than sarcasm in her voice.

"You heard me," I said coldly. I couldn't believe how calm I was.

"If you're implying that we're contaminated—" Chanel began.

"There are many kinds of contamination, but the worst kind is contamination of the soul. That's the kind you have." I stared into Chanel's eyes, forcing myself not to blink or look down. For a long time she stared back in her usual disgusted way, but finally her

eyelids fluttered down like a butterfly with a torn wing.

“Come on, let’s go. She’s retarded anyway,” she muttered. The others stared at me over their shoulders until they reached the end of the hallway.

I smiled. Then I noticed Kallie staring at me, her lips in the same lifesaver shape. I smiled even more, shut my locker, and marched past her to the library.

After the bell rang for the last class that day, Miss Stephanopoulos asked, “Hilary, do you mind staying for a bit? I’d like to talk to you.”

“Sure,” I responded, picking up my books. Other students stampeded past me, anxious to get home for the weekend. Chanel walked past, and we looked at one another coldly.

When I got to the front of the classroom, Miss Stephanopoulos smiled. “I’d like to talk to you about your story,” she said.

The hollow feeling returned to my stomach. I’d written this story in two nights the weekend before. But I hadn’t felt like I was pumping it off. More like... spinning it out. I’d felt feverish, but in a good way. It had been the first time I’d really wanted to write in over a year. But maybe I had written the story too quickly. Maybe the subject matter was a problem. Maybe... it just wasn’t any good.

“What about it?” I asked nervously.

“I’d like you to see for yourself.” She handed me a familiar-looking folder. My stomach churning, I flipped to the end and found out I’d gotten...

“A+?” I gasped.

Miss Stephanopoulos’s smile grew wider. “Yes. This is one of the most intelligent, mature, and humane stories I’ve ever read. And it’s beautifully written.”

“Thanks,” I said fervently.

“I wanted to talk to you about this story because it’s very different than the last one you handed in, the one about Diamond Summers.” My cheeks grew red. “In that story, the girl had everything: money, beauty, parents and friends who gave her whatever she wanted. And in the end, she didn’t have to face any of her problems because they all disappeared.

But the girl in this story has a tougher time. She's caught between two friends with very different values, and she has to make a difficult choice. Her problems aren't magically solved, and that's why the story is so intelligent and mature."

I nodded.

"But I'm wondering why the two stories are so different. I don't mean in subject matter because in some ways they're similar in subject matter. I mean in treatment. All of your classmates wrote stories similar to the first ones they wrote. But I wouldn't have guessed the same person wrote the Diamond Summers story and this story. Why do you think the stories are so different?"

I chewed my lip. "I don't know."

She spoke gently. "The last story you wrote... that's something that's happening to you, isn't it?"

For the first time since my talk with my mom, tears welled up in my eyes. I blinked them back. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't do anything other than nod.

Her face softened. "Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked.

I nodded again. "Everything in the story is true. Especially the part where the girl is getting picked on. Some... some people have been picking on me. Maybe you don't know who I mean, but it's the cool group."

She rolled her eyes. "I know exactly who you mean."

"You do? I mean, you've noticed?"

"Yes. I noticed right away when Chanel and her friends started picking on Kallie. Her attitude changed. She became more defiant, and there was a tension between her and the other girls. So I talked with her about it one day after school, and she admitted it. But you're quieter, and it took me longer to figure it out. They started teasing you later, am I right?"

"Yeah."

"I wanted to talk to you about this before, but I know people don't like the teacher interfering in their peer relationships. I didn't realize how bad things were until I read your story. If I'd known, I would've approached you earlier."

It sounded like an apology, but I was impressed she'd even noticed what was going on. I explained that I didn't think teachers ever picked up on these things.

She laughed. "Teachers notice a lot more than you'd expect, Hilary. After all, we were your age once too, so we remember what went on." Her voice grew serious. "But I'd like to make things easier for you. I could rearrange the seating in class or talk to your other teachers to make them aware of the problem. And I'd be happy to talk to those girls, if you think that would help."

"No!" I said, more violently than I'd meant to. "I mean, thanks, Miss Stephanopoulos, but I don't think it would do any good. It might make them angrier."

Her smile was resigned. "All right, I won't say anything to them. But if you ever want anything, even if it's just to talk, remember that I'm here."

"Is that why you let Kallie stay after school? Because you knew she was having a hard time?"

"Yes. I'm more than willing to help students who are having a tough time. If Chanel or anyone else ever does anything to you or Kallie during class, I won't hesitate to say something. I won't allow that kind of behaviour in my classroom. It's even worse when it takes place outside class because it's harder to stop. But I'm going to do whatever I can to try to stop it."

"Like what?" I asked curiously, wondering what power Miss Stephanopoulos could have over Chanel. It couldn't have to do with marks. Chanel didn't care about marks.

"I'll patrol the hallways between classes and at the beginning of lunch, when most people are at their lockers, so those girls have less opportunity to tease people. I'll watch them when they're in class. And I think I will rearrange the seating. Those girls sit together too often. They need to interact with other people. I'll also keep giving projects like the ethnic shield."

I felt better knowing Miss Stephanopoulos wanted to help, although I wasn't convinced any of the things she'd suggested would do any good. I didn't see how drawing an ethnic shield would make Chanel stop picking on Kallie. Chanel had teased Kallie right after we'd made the ethnic shields. And patrolling the hallways sounded like a good idea,

but some teachers did that already and they never managed to catch the cool gang picking on anyone. Teachers are like salesclerks, I mused. They're always there when you don't want them to be, and they're never there when you need them.

Miss Stephanopoulos smiled, and I immediately felt guilty for thinking that way. "No one should have to be teased like that," she said. "Junior high is hard enough without some people making it harder on others."

I looked down at the folder in my hands.

When she saw where I was looking, Miss Stephanopoulos said, "Why don't you write about your own experiences more often? One of the strengths of the story is how realistic its characters and situations are."

I paused to consider this. But when I thought about it, I wasn't sure exactly why I'd stopped writing about myself. Except that... I'd been afraid. Afraid of what I'd find out, maybe. And now I wasn't.

I wiggled uncomfortably. "I guess... it's just painful to write about your own life, especially stuff that's happening right now. And... it's kind of embarrassing to have other people read it." I'd never told anyone all this, but then, no one had ever asked.

"I know it's painful. I write stories and poems too, and I feel the same way sometimes. But it's O.K. for it to hurt. Just because writing's painful doesn't mean you don't feel better in the end for having done it. And I don't think there's anything embarrassing about your story. We've all had similar experiences. People who'd say you should be embarrassed are probably just trying to deny that they've had these experiences. Your honesty in writing them down is commendable. You may not feel that way now, but I bet you'll look back in several years and feel proud that you wrote this story."

I told her I was already proud, and added, "I had a lot more fun writing this story than I did writing the Diamond Summers story. That story was just too Ryann."

I blushed. I couldn't believe I'd mentioned Ryann to Miss Stephanopoulos. I doubted she'd ever heard of Ryann, and she'd probably think she wasn't missing much when I explained who I meant.

But to my surprise, Miss Stephanopoulos knew all about Ryann, though I was right

about her not being into those kinds of books. She had reviewed a couple of Ryanns for an educational journal, she explained, and she didn't think they were very good. Then we started talking about reading. Miss Stephanopoulos said next term she was going to assign us a book report, and I asked whether I could do mine on Nancy Drew because I really liked reading Nancy Drews only I'd stopped because I thought they might be too childish.... We ended up talking for half an hour, and she told me I could do my project on Nancy Drew, who, she said, was way cooler than Ryann.

Finally I said I'd better be going or my mom would think I was in detention. Miss Stephanopoulos laughed and said she was always here if I needed to talk.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll remember that, but for now I have my mom. We've been talking a lot these past few days."

"I'm glad. Your mom can help you in ways I can't. Oh, Hilary. One more thing," she said, as I was heading for the door. "I think that the girl in your story makes a brave and compassionate choice, and that's why the story is humane."

As I was riding the bus home, I thought about what Miss Stephanopoulos had said about my character's choice and wondered if it was connected to my Tarot fortune. Kallie's grandma had said that artistic and creative pursuits would help me in my confusion. She must've been talking about my story, I thought. Did she mean that by writing this story, I'd be making a choice? I supposed she could've been talking about a choice to go back to writing the way I used to, but that hadn't really been a choice. It had kind of just happened. Same with me talking to my mom, so it couldn't be that either.

I still couldn't let go of the idea that the choice somehow involved Chanel and Kallie. But that didn't make any sense. Sure, the girl in the story makes a choice between two friends, but I can't make a choice because no one wants me, I thought. But what else could it be? The only choice I've made recently is...

is that I stood up for Kallie when Chanel picked on her. Could that be it?

When I got home, I told my mom what had happened that day.

"Do you think I made a choice by talking back to Chanel?" I asked.

“Yes, I do,” she said, smiling. “And I think it was the right one.”

I smiled back.

And that’s when I understood how creative pursuits helped me in my confusion. Maybe my story was really telling me I’ve have to make a choice, like the main character, who chooses the nerdy friend over the cool one. Maybe by writing the story, I’d somehow realized I had to choose whether I was going to stand up to Chanel. And I had chosen. I knew it would be difficult to keep going up against the popular crowd and trying to build up my self-confidence when they kept tearing it down. But I’d made a start today. Now I just had to continue doing what I wanted to do and not worrying about what people like Chanel thought. And I knew exactly what I wanted to do first.

Chapter Eighteen: The Intergalactic Supergeeks

“Hurry up, they’re coming!” I exclaimed.

“O.K., I’ve almost got it fixed,” said Kallie nervously.

I couldn’t believe one of Kallie’s paintings had fallen off our collage, just as the judges were making the rounds. The painting showed the planets in our solar system, minus the Earth, and was attached to a painting of the Earth with a piece of tape. Why Kallie had used only one piece, I didn’t know.

“It symbolizes the fragility of our connection to the other planets,” she said.

No kidding, I thought.

When the tape came off, Kallie tried to pick it up but it got all stuck in her hands. We didn’t have any more tape, and we just had to keep the painting in the collage. It was one of Kallie’s best. The planets were delicately painted bright pastels, blue for Neptune, yellow for Mercury, pink for Mars. But the neatest part of the painting was that it showed a girl—at least, I think it was a girl, anyway it was a long-haired figure in loose garments—floating out towards the planets. She started floating from the Earth painting, so we had to keep this painting to show where she floated to.

Kallie flapped her hands to get rid of the tape and cried, “What are we going to do!” I’d never seen her all fluttery like this before, but I couldn’t calm her down because I didn’t know what to do either. The three of us looked at one another. We’d worked so hard. It couldn’t all be ruined!

Then Chu Hua unwound her rainbow hair ribbon. “You can make hole and attach with this,” she suggested.

“What? I don’t understand,” said Kallie frantically.

But I did. “Yeah! You can make a hole in each painting and tie them together with Chu Hua’s ribbon.”

“A hole?” she gasped, as though we’d suggested slicing the paintings in half.

Chu Hua and I exchanged an anxious look.

“Would it really hurt so much to make a little hole?” I asked. “I mean, the Earth’s

a planet too so... I don't know, shouldn't it be more connected to the other planets? And doesn't making a hole connect the paintings more, like they're two pieces of paper instead of one pasted on top of the other?"

I was babbling, and I didn't expect Kallie to agree with me. But to my surprise, she said, "You're right. I already made it clear that the other planets are separated from Earth by painting them on another piece of paper. But if the figure can float from Earth to the other planets, there has to be some connection between them. And like you say, attaching the paintings with the ribbon makes that connection clearer. What a great idea. Thanks."

"Great, just hurry up, O.K.?" I said.

We made one hole in the middle and one at the bottom of the painting and looped the ribbon through the holes, but we needed another at the top. And the judges were only two exhibits away! I unsnapped one of my barrettes.

"Here. Make another hole in the top and use this."

Kallie had just finished fixing the painting when the judges arrived at our table. We stood up straight and smiled.

It was hard to believe we even had a project to present. A week ago, the consensus seemed to be that we were each going to come with our work and stick it on the board. No one had any idea what anyone else was doing, and no one seemed to care. But I did. I knew I hadn't been a good team member for the last few weeks, but I was going to make up for it then. Kallie and Chu Hua had worked too hard for me to let them down, and I cared too much about the art fair to let myself down. I'd missed my chance with Marcia. She probably thought I was some airhead whose only worry was what brand of gum was the most fashionable to chew. But I wasn't going to miss my chance with Kallie and Chu Hua.

The day after my talk with Miss Stephanopoulos, I gathered up all the work I'd done for the project and headed to Kallie's house. She seemed surprised to see me, but when I told her we needed to start putting the art fair collage together, she eagerly agreed.

We called Chu Hua and asked her to come over, and when she arrived, we all made a plan of how the collage should look.

"Don't forget about Marcia's work," added Kallie.

“Marcia’s?” I asked, puzzled.

“Yeah. I told her we’d include it in the project, so she left it with me.” She looked at me warily.

“Good idea,” I said. “We should include it. Her stuff is some of the best work.”

For the next ten hours, we cut, folded, painted, sculpted, and drew. Kallie’s mom brought us homemade pizza, which we ate under the soft lights in the room. Woof scampered in to sniff Chu Hua and me, and we smiled when we both reached down to pet him at the same time. But otherwise we worked steadily and didn’t say much. It reminded me of the first time I’d been in Kallie’s room, when we’d painted the walls.

The next few days were a flurry of activity. One day, I was rooting around in my closet for some extra paintbrushes, and I found the banner Kallie had made at Mackenzie House. “Kallie Foster and Hilary Boles visited Mackenzie House on July 31st, 1993.” I smiled, tracing the fancy lettering with my fingers.

Then I had an idea. Why not make a banner for our project? So Kallie and I picked neat colours and fonts and used her colour printer to make a banner entitled “Freedom.”

And now here we were, making our pitch to the judges. As Kallie was talking about her part of the project, I looked around the room. Some of the other projects were fantastic. One group had made a papier-mâché rainforest for a project on the environment. Another group had done theirs entirely on women. They had ink sketches of Greek goddesses and little dolls that resembled African women. Even the short whiny guy’s bubble gum wrapper motorcycle looked impressive. I held my breath nervously.

But when I looked at our project, I exhaled. No one else had as many different colours, materials, and shapes as we did. From Kallie’s sculpture of the dancing figures, which sat in front of the big cardboard, to Marcia’s abstract water colours in ice-cream shades. From Chu Hua’s precise pencil drawings of the grocery store her parents owned in Chinatown to my black chalk sketch of an old man sitting next to a stream, looking up from the book he was reading. And the amazing thing was that none of these different colours or materials clashed. They all complemented one another.

When the judges got to me, I was so nervous I forgot my speech and started rambling

on about the old man and the paintings with the face. In these paintings, the face gradually moved away from the crowd, smiling more it each time it moved, so that in the last painting, it was in a field by itself. But some of what I said must've made sense because all three judges, even the stern frowning one, nodded and smiled at the end of my talk.

Then came the final question. "If you had to say one thing, as a group, about what freedom means to you, what would it be?"

Kallie and Chu Hua looked taken aback. This wasn't one of the questions we'd rehearsed. I hadn't thought about it either, but I found myself saying, "I think freedom means you can be yourself and accept other people, even when they're different from you."

Kallie and Chu Hua smiled. "I agree," said Kallie firmly. "Me too," echoed Chu Hua.

The judges thanked us and told us we'd done a very good job.

Now we had to wait until the winners were announced. We wandered around and looked at the other exhibits. I overheard two girls from another school discussing my sketch.

"It means he has the freedom to read and study uninterrupted," said one.

"No, look. He's stopped reading the book. It means he has the freedom to stop studying if he wants. I wish we had that at our school," said the other.

I smiled secretly. The sketch was called "The Hermit," and I'd told the judges it was about the freedom to meditate and make your own decisions. But only I knew what it really meant.

A few minutes later, the judges had made their decision. We'd barely settled into our places before they announced the winners of the bronze medal—us! For a few seconds, we stared at each other, mouths like baseballs, before we broke into amazed gasps.

I can still vividly remember walking to the stage with Kallie and Chu Hua, hearing the applause, shaking hands with the judges, getting congratulated by the principal (and thinking maybe he wasn't such a vulture after all), and being blinded by the flash of cameras as local newspapers and T.V. stations, including YTV, took our pictures. Standing there on stage wearing my bronze medal, looking out at all those people, I felt like a piece of a puzzle, a piece that had finally fit into place.

We were the only people from Mackenzie to win. The group who'd done their project on women won the gold medal, and a group who'd done theirs on joy won the silver. But strangely enough, I wasn't jealous. I felt like I'd just won a YTV achievement award. No, I corrected, like *we'd* just won a YTV achievement award.

By the time the medals had been given out, the rest of the students at Mackenzie were on lunch break. People started coming up and congratulating us. Miss Stephanopoulos hugged us and gave us a copy of the judges' report. "They liked everything," she said warmly, "the use of different media, the banner, the way you shaped everything together. They especially liked how you used the ribbon and barrette to tie the paintings together. They thought it was a creative solution to a last-minute problem." We smiled sheepishly.

Miss Stephanopoulos went to set up our interview with YTV. Kallie turned to us and said, "We did it, guys!"

And we did it together, I thought.

"Gimme five!" exclaimed Kallie, turning to Chu Hua. Chu Hua wasn't sure what to do, and after Kallie demonstrated, she slapped Kallie's hand so hard it flopped over. We all laughed, and I exchanged high fives with both of them.

"Yeah. What-ever."

We turned around to see Amber, Tiffany and Lynn staring at us.

"I don't think it's that great," said Tiffany, crossing her arms.

"Definitely overrated," added Amber, her lip pulled up under her nose in disdain.

Lynn stared at me, silent and still. I looked back at her, and she turned away.

Then I looked at Amber and remembered how I'd thought of her as a jumping bean. A jumping bean with stringy hair and overinflated lips. That's all she was.

"Oh shut up, Amber," I said.

Then I noticed Miss Stephanopoulos standing with the YTV people, waving to us.

"Now if you'll excuse us, we have an interview to do with YTV," I said haughtily.

"Yes, excuse us," said Kallie in the same tone.

"Excuse us," mimicked Chu Hua, looking at Tiffany.

We strutted past them like ostriches. Then we looked at each other and burst into

laughter.

Several hours later, the school was deserted. The T.V. crews had left, students from other schools had dismantled and removed their exhibits, and everyone else had torn out across the snow-dusted fields to the cars or buses that would take them home for Christmas break. But I was lingering in the foyer, where our collage and bronze medal were displayed.

Suddenly I looked up and saw Kallie. We smiled at one another.

“It’s great, isn’t it?” she asked. I knew she wasn’t talking about the bronze medal.

“Yeah. It’s the best work I’ve ever done. Artwork, I mean,” I corrected, thinking of my story.

“Me too.”

“It almost didn’t get this far. We almost didn’t pull it off.”

“But we did, thanks to you. You brought us all together and got us interested in the project again.”

Then we both said each other’s names at the same time. We laughed.

“Kallie,” I said, “I’ve been a really rotten friend to you these last few months, and I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” she said. “I haven’t been a good friend either. Chanel’s been picking on you, and I’ve just been ignoring you.”

“Well, we’re even. I didn’t talk to you when she started picking on you.”

“Yeah but you left all those notes in my locker. And you apologized to me, but I just threw your apology away like it was... comet dust. Besides, it’s different. I know how it feels to be picked on, but you didn’t.”

I looked at the floor.

“But if you want to know the truth,” she continued, “the reason I ignored you was because—” She twisted her mouth. “You’re going to hate me for this.”

“Just tell me.”

“I figured if Chanel picked on you and I pretended nothing was happening... well, you’d know how it felt.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them again, as if I could get rid of the tears that way.

“Told you it was awful,” she mumbled. Then she said, “Are you O.K.? I’ve been kind of worried about you the last couple of weeks. You were absent for almost a week, and when you came back you had this weird zombie look on your face.”

I gave a soft snort. “Zombie look?”

“It’s true,” she said. “It disappeared after we started working on the art fair, but...”

I bit my lip. “I’m better now,” I said, “but yeah. Things have been pretty tough these last few weeks. It’s just been really hard not having any friends.”

She looked puzzled. “What about Lynn?”

I stared back at her. “I thought you knew. But I guess you wouldn’t.” I explained how Lynn had stopped returning my calls. “She’s made it pretty clear she doesn’t want anything to do with me. So I guess we’re not friends any more.”

Kallie looked like someone had told her she’d failed all her classes. “I had no idea. I thought you were still friends with her. Now I’m ten times as sorry for what I did! I’ve been just like... a Pippipalian!” She slapped her thigh in frustration.

I thought about Kallie’s behaviour, and I remembered how she’d said I wasn’t special. At first, I thought she meant I wasn’t a special person. But then I realized she meant I didn’t deserve special treatment, that it wasn’t O.K. for me to pick on Marcia.

I wanted to tell Kallie how much that comment had hurt, but when I saw the look in her eyes, I stopped. She probably doesn’t realize how bad it made me feel, and she probably doesn’t know about my problems with homework and eating, I thought. And what’s the point of telling her about any of these things? She feels bad enough as it is, and there’s been enough bad feelings around here lately. I’m not going to add to them.

Instead I asked, “What happened that time you and Lynn were alone at my house?”

The hurt in her eyes was replaced by confusion. “You mean when you invited us over? Nothing.”

“She didn’t say anything or do anything to you?”

“No.”

“I guess I just thought—nothing. Kallie, did you ever want to be friends with Lynn? You can tell me if you didn’t.”

She fidgeted with her fingernails. “No,” she admitted. “I never really wanted to get to know her. I guess I was too jealous.”

“Jealous? Of who?”

“Of you and Lynn. Your friendship. You guys have been friends for so long. I don’t have any friends like that. You’re the first really close friend I’ve had since... well, you know. And then Lynn came back... Plus everything you told me about Lynn made me think we were as different as a star and an asteroid. I just knew we wouldn’t all end up hanging out together.” She looked into my eyes. “But I did try to like her, honestly.”

I had no idea Kallie was jealous of me and Lynn, but it did explain a few things.

“So it’s all over?” asked Kallie. “You’re not friends with any of those people?”

I shook my head.

“But you wanted to be part of that group so badly.”

I shrugged. “I guess I just decided to stop being like them and start being like myself.”

She smiled. “I loved how you stood up to them.”

“It was kind of fun,” I admitted.

“Did you see their faces?” She imitated them, and we both snickered.

“But you stand up to them all the time,” I said. “How do you do it, Kallie? How can you not care what they’re saying to you? How do you make it not hurt?”

Kallie lowered her gaze. “Well, it does hurt. And I do care what they’re saying. Sometimes I think maybe they’re right and I am a loser. But if I don’t keep telling myself they’re wrong and standing up for myself, they’ll defeat me. That’s what happened with Sheila.”

“But how can you make yourself believe that when they keep picking on you?”

She lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. I’m still figuring it out.”

I looked down again.

“But one thing that helps is to hang around with people who don’t think you’re a

loser or a nerd. People like my parents and my grandma and Chu Hua. And you.”

I smiled wanly. “I thought you said I wasn’t a real friend.”

“Oh, Hil,” she said, her brow furrowed, “I didn’t mean that. I was just really upset. You’ve been a great friend. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

I didn’t bother to squeeze my eyes shut this time.

“Are you doing anything tomorrow?” she asked timidly.

“No. Why?”

“Well, the orgs have been stuck in the Forest of Om for the last few months and I can’t get them out. I wondered whether maybe you wanted to help them?”

I felt a smile stretch from cheek to cheek. “Yeah, I would.”

Then at the same time, as if we were two halves of a child’s Easter egg being put together, each half painted a unique and brilliant pattern, we reached over and hugged each other.

After that things pretty much went back to normal. Well, not really *back* to normal because they’d never been normal. Let’s just say things settled into normaldom. Kallie and I sat together at lunch, took the bus home together, and were at each other’s houses so often my dad joked he would’ve decorated a bedroom for her except he was fresh out of black paint.

Chu Hua sat with us too. I tried harder to understand what she was saying, and I found if I listened carefully and noticed how she used certain words, it wasn’t so difficult after all. I learned all kinds of interesting stuff about her. She had a red belt in taekwando and her description of her taekwando club was so enthusiastic Kallie and I decided to sign up for lessons. But the biggest surprise was that she’d seen *Over the Big Top* with her older brother and she had a crush on Damian Sámos too! Soon I was so comfortable around Chu Hua I didn’t need Kallie to be there.

Then one day Kallie wasn’t at school, and Chu Hua and I were having lunch together. She was telling me about some paper flowers she’d made in her art class at Chinese school, when we heard barking noises from another table.

“Oh, look,” said a sweet voice, “there’s the toilet bowl having lunch with the dog. Little chihuahua. Here little chihuahua!”

It was Kyle. I scowled. As I looked at his block-shaped head and evil blue eyes, I wondered how I could ever have found him cute. Every time I thought of him touching me at the dance I wanted to scour my arms with baking soda and vinegar.

Chu Hua frowned and turned to me. “What does this mean... chihuahua?”

I stared at Kyle and Amber, who was sitting beside him. Kyle was making faces at us and Amber was laughing her nails-on-a-blackboard laugh. I turned back to Chu Hua.

“Nothing,” I answered. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

And that’s when I started to realize that there are advantages to being a geek. You can be friends with other geeks. I mean, sure, the cool gang still picked on us, and other people still laughed, but even if everyone else thought we were losers, we each had at least two people who didn’t think so. Kallie made up a name for our group, the Intergalactic Supergeeks.

And you know what the weirdest thing was? I think the cool people sensed this—about geeks sticking together—because they kind of laid off a little. Or maybe it was because of the teachers. One day in homeroom Mr. Benson announced that from then on there would be “sporadic desk probes” to “expunge all and sundry foreign objects” and “would Miss Townsend please do the honour of leading the inaugural probe?” Burgundy had to rummage through everyone’s desk, and when she pulled a big wad of kleenex out of mine, the class exploded in laughter, knowing exactly where the kleenex had come from. No kleenex ever came near my desk after that.

Miss Stephanopoulos rearranged the seating in her classes so the cool group was split up. Even my gym teacher was nicer to me. When Tiffany shoved me against the wall during basketball, my teacher blew her whistle, ordered Tiffany to sit out the rest of the game, and asked me whether I was all right. I decided my teacher’s hair wasn’t reptilian after all.

So maybe Chanel realized the teachers were on to her little schemes and told her hounds to back off. But I like to think she smartened up and realized who she was really dealing with in the Intergalactic Supergeeks.

After that, school was pretty good. Miss Stephanopoulos asked us to write a report on any subject we liked. Kallie did hers on Tarot cards, Chu Hua did hers on the different ways an immigrant can learn English, and I did mine on the symbolism of names.

I found a modern name dictionary and looked up as many names as I could think of, including Chu Hua (“rainbow blossom”), Calypso (“hidden lady”), Razi (“hidden truth”), and Elena (“illuminated one”). In my report, I talked about how a name can mean many different things, even if it only has one definition. Like my mom’s name, Sylvie. At first I’d assumed “woods” meant hard, but now I knew it also meant strong and shady and verdant (a word Mr. Benson had used to describe a graph on page 82 of our math textbook).

When I got to Callisto, I realized that “beautiful” was an appropriate meaning for Kallie’s name. I wasn’t sure exactly what “beautiful” meant because I’d used it to describe so many things that were no longer beautiful to me. Well, O.K., The Dress was still beautiful. But so was Kallie. I decided to reserve that word for things I knew would stay beautiful.

There’s really only one more thing I need to tell you about that year. One day, Chu Hua and I were talking, and she started telling me about Tiffany. Apparently, Tiffany had attended the same Chinese school as Chu Hua the year before (and not in grade two like she’d said), and—get this—her real name wasn’t even Tiffany! It was Ushi, which meant “ox”! She only called herself Tiffany because she was embarrassed by her Chinese name. I couldn’t believe all this.

“It’s true,” said Chu Hua. “That’s why she don’t like me. She don’t want to hang around with Chinese people. Remind her too much of herself, how she couldn’t speak English good. I hate people like that!” she said, so violently I started.

Chu Hua continued, “She think she better than me. Why? Because her parents have more money, can afford to send her to private tutor so her English improve. So now all Chinese people with accent are below her. So not fair.”

“You’re right, Chu Hua,” I said angrily. “It’s not fair.”

But I had a plan.

After school, as Kallie and I were trudging across the field, now covered in a foot of

crunchy snow, I told her about my conversation with Chu Hua. "We finally have it, Kallie," I said excitedly. "Ammunition! We can fire back and expose Tiffany as a liar and an imposter. We can embarrass her just like she embarrassed us. And who knows? Maybe her embarrassment will rub off on Chanel."

But Kallie stopped walking and gave me a look. "I don't think that's a good idea, Hilary."

My jaw dropped. "Well, we can't just let her insult a country full of people including Chu Hua and get away with it!"

"Why do you really want to do this?" she asked, squinting at me in the bright sun.

I sighed. "O.K. I admit it. I really want Tiffany to suffer for what she did to me. But it's not only for me. You guys are my friends. I'm doing this for all of us."

But Kallie only repeated that she didn't think we should plot revenge.

"Why not?" I demanded. "Don't you think she deserves it?"

"Maybe, but that doesn't mean we have to be the ones to give it to her."

"Well, if we don't, who will?" I looked at her. "Sometimes I don't understand you, Kallie. It's like that time Chanel called you a hippie bitch, and you didn't say anything. It's like part of you wants to be walked on."

She looked across the field to where students were shoving each other in hopes of being the first on the bus. When she spoke, her voice had that far-away sound. "I don't want to be walked on. I didn't say anything to Chanel the first time because I figured she was just blowing off steam, and I didn't want to start a fight with her. But then when it was obvious she wasn't going to stop picking on me, I had to start defending myself." She turned back to me. "But there's a big difference between defending yourself and attacking another person. And this revenge thing... it's just not the way to go."

"Why not? I mean, we're only attacking them because they attacked us first. We need to teach them a lesson. It's just like Mackenzie, when he led the rebellion to stand up to the Family Compact."

"Yeah and look what happened. His followers didn't want a war, and when they lost, a lot of them ended up losing their homes or even being executed."

“Oh, I see. So it’s O.K. for you to get revenge on me for not sitting with you when Chanel was picking on you, but it’s not O.K. for me to get revenge on Chanel?”

She sighed. “I know I was mean to you, and I’m sorry. But I just want all this to stop. I’m so tired of people hating other people and making plots against them. And revenge is tempting, and part of me wants to hurt Tiffany, but why bother? It’ll just make those people even angrier. And it’s bad enough we have to see them every day at school. I don’t want to spend my spare time making some plot against them. I have more important things to do. Besides, revenge just makes you all bitter and twisted.” When she saw my downcast eyes, she added, “People like Tiffany and Chanel will get what’s coming to them eventually. In the meantime, let’s just forget about them. They’re not worth it.”

I hated arguing with Kallie. Everything she said made so much sense.

But by the time I got home, I was fuming. How could Kallie say we should just forget about Chanel, after all she’d put us through? It would be like letting her win. I told my mom this.

But my mom said gently, “Is that really the reason you’re so upset with her, Hilary? Or is it because you know she’s right?”

I was quiet. My mom and I had definitely grown closer, but I still wasn’t willing to admit when she was right and I was wrong.

Epilogue

So I guess you want to know what's happened since then, in the last six years. Did Chanel realize the error of her ways, throw herself at my feet, and beg forgiveness for all the stinky, under-handed things she did to me? Get real. This is my autobiography, not a Ryann novel.

For the next couple of years, Chanel and her gang kept teasing me, Kallie, Chu Hua, and a few others who didn't fit in. The people who laughed at us when Chanel teased us kept laughing, but not as much as before. When Kallie or I fired back some sharp response, these people were just as likely to laugh at Chanel as at me. And I can still remember something that happened a few days after I told Chanel she was contaminated. I was at my locker after school when a girl I recognized from another grade seven homeroom came up to me.

"Hilary," she said abruptly. I started. "I heard what you said to Chanel about being contaminated, and I just want to say I'm really glad you stood up to her."

"Really?" I stuttered.

"Yeah. I'm so tired of her acting all high and mighty, like she owns the school. No one's even that impressed with her. It's all in her head."

When the girl left, I started to think about what she'd said. Was Chanel's coolness and influence all in her mind? I wasn't sure, but until more people started standing up to her, no one would think it was only in her mind.

This girl made me think about something else too. Maybe those people standing on the sidelines cheering Chanel on didn't think it was funny when I was being teased. I mean, I didn't know this girl, and here she was telling me she was glad I'd stood up to Chanel. Maybe there were others like her who were afraid to say anything. But I never found out, and I guess I'll never know for sure.

By the time we got to high school, though, things had changed. New people came to the school, Burgundy and Heather moved away, and suddenly the Intergalactic Supergeeks were so far beneath the notice of the cool group we weren't worth picking on. Chanel was

too concerned with a new girl named Janae, who was competing with her for Brett's attention, and a new guy named Casey, who was competing with Brett for Chanel's and Janae's attention. I think.

But long after Chanel had stopped picking on me, I still considered her an enemy. Even though Kallie had convinced me to suppress my vengeful urges, they still sizzled deep inside me, like a secret underground stream of lava. I used to play detective and hunt for scandalous gossip about Chanel and then imagine what would happen if I exposed this gossip over the P.A. system at school.

Once after I'd seen a movie with my mom, I commented on how strange it was that so many actresses had blonde hair and dark eyebrows, when most people I'd seen who had dark eyebrows had dark hair too.

Mom gave me a look. "That's because those actresses dye their hair, Hilary."

That's when it struck me. I remembered looking up at Chanel at the dance and noticing she had dark eyebrows. So she wasn't a natural blonde after all. Oooh, that's good, I thought. It was so good just knowing it gave me a warm fuzzy feeling, even if my promise to Kallie meant I could never expose what I'd found out.

Sometimes I went further than this. Like the time in the summer before grade nine when I looked up Chanel's mom in the phone book and rode my bike past their house. When I pulled up next to the rhododendron out front and peeked through its leaves, my jaw nearly hit the pedals. Chanel's "mansion" turned out to be a bungalow painted the colour of a dead fish. And the famous swimming pool wasn't some sprawling in-ground pool with several slides and a walk-up bar. It was an above-ground one barely bigger than a whirlpool.

And a tennis court? Forget it. You'd be lucky if you could fit a ping-pong table in that scrawny yard. I had to cover my mouth to stop from laughing out loud. So Little Miss Chanel wasn't so rich after all. I knew I couldn't tell many people about this discovery (only Kallie, Chu Hua and maybe my mom), but I felt a delicious thrill of victory just for having made it.

I don't do childish things like that any more. I just use Chanel as the model for the villains in my stories.

People talk about forgiving and forgetting, like it's so easy. Let me tell you about my experience. A few weeks after the art fair, I noticed Miss Stephanopoulos was being nicer to Chanel. She started asking her for the answers to questions in class and praising her for some poem she wrote (probably a mushy, self-indulgent piece of toe polish, I huffed to myself). She even asked Chanel if she could stay after class one day. Well, that was the last drop of eyeliner as far as I was concerned. When everyone else had left, I eavesdropped outside the class. I didn't catch what Chanel was saying, other than a few yeses and nos, but I heard Miss Stephanopoulos say, "If you ever need anything, remember that I'm here."

I was outraged. She'd used the same line on me! How could she betray me like that by offering to help my mortal enemy? Obviously she wasn't as sympathetic to me as she'd pretended to be. For weeks after that, I was upset with her, so I was cold and regal to her. Then one day she said she'd like to see me after school.

When I arrived, she asked why I was so upset with her. After I'd explained, she pressed her lips and said, "I know you don't like Chanel, Hilary, and you have every right not to, but she's hurt too. That's why she does all those mean things and that's why I offered to help her." She frowned. "But she hasn't come to see me again."

And she never did. I know because I asked Miss Stephanopoulos later, out of curiosity. I remember thinking, If she never came, then she's not really sorry about what she did to me. Otherwise she would've admitted she was wrong and needed help. So why should I forgive her if she's not sorry?

But when I talked about it with my mom, I started to realize maybe forgiveness doesn't depend on the other person being sorry. Maybe it depends on understanding where the other person's coming from. Sometimes, when I can bury the stream of lava deep enough, certain pictures form in my mind: a father waving goodbye, a house the colour of a dead fish, people with empty faces smiling, a pair of wild flickering eyes. But that doesn't mean I've forgiven her. Maybe I will. Someday. But forget? Never. It would be like forgetting a piece of me.

Chanel's still at Mackenzie. She's not with Brett or Casey any more; there's a new guy, I forget his name. Brett dated Chanel, then Tiffany, then Lynn. But he hangs out with

a different group now. He's kind of a nice guy, too. Once he asked me for the solution to a question in math, and when I explained it to him, he said, "Thanks, Hilary," in a nice tone. But I don't have a crush on him any more.

Tiffany got into a fight with Chanel in grade ten, and they haven't spoken since, but that hasn't made Tiffany any nicer. The only one of that group who's still friends with Chanel is Amber. And Kyle. They're dating. I think I might start up a petition to stop them from reproducing, for the sake of the health and sanity of the nation. And of course there's Lynn. Or there was Lynn.

I guess now would be a good time to explain what I meant about the thing I found out about someone I used to know. Well, the thing is Lynn's moving. In fact she's already gone. Her dad got transferred to a company in Hamilton, and they left a few weeks ago.

I couldn't believe it when I heard Lynn was leaving. She'd lived in my neighbourhood *forever*, and even though we aren't friends any more, I felt like some comet was leaving our solar system and by the time it came back I'd be dead.

It's hard for me to write about Lynn, but I'll try. After the cool group turned on me, our friendship was over. She didn't call me, I didn't call her. We didn't even return the stuff we'd borrowed from one another. For months, I had to look at magazine photos of Damian Sámos (and I wasn't interested in him any more, I liked Tyler Darcy, you know, the soap star), old Nancy Drews, and dozens of empty raisin boxes we'd collected in grade four and had always meant to do something with. Finally I stuffed everything in a box and hid it in the basement behind the stationary bike.

It would be easy for me to judge Lynn, and for a long time I did. For about three years, I hated her. I was convinced everything she'd done, including going to California, was a part of a plan to betray me. I started to look for signs she'd been plotting this betrayal for a long time. The times she hung with Deirdre. The times she went to the movies with Trish and Stacey and didn't invite me (something I never actually proved, by the way.) It all became part of an elaborate scheme. It was like a spider web descending on me, ready to choke the life out of me. During these times, I wished Chanel would make a plot against Lynn, so she could see how it felt to be lured into friendship and then slowly torn to pieces

by a bloodthirsty insect.

But there were other times when I thought Lynn was caught in Chanel's web. One day during grade eight, I overheard the cool girls talking about clothes. Lynn was going on about how the coolest clothes were in L.A. and how le château was like nothing compared to the stores there. Chanel's facial muscles got tighter and tighter until finally she snapped.

"Would you shut up about L.A. already? We know you're so hot because you went there."

Lynn looked like someone had just pulled the plug on her. "I was just saying the stores there are better than the ones in Canada."

"For your information, le château is just as cool as any of the stores you went to. Just because le château has stores in Canada doesn't mean it's geek chic. If cool companies didn't have stores here, where would we buy our clothes? Maison de la Igloo?"

Lynn looked down, and the others cackled.

At times like these, I wanted to shout, "Why are you hanging around with these people? Don't you see how they're treating you?" But I never did.

Then after a while I didn't think in either of these ways. Lynn was like a toy I no longer played with or a favourite sweater I'd given away.

So what do I think of Lynn now? In a weird way, I feel sorry for her. I'm not sure why, but I do. I feel like she's a frozen in a picture. I remember seeing this picture in her photo album once. She was around eight, and she was sitting in a blow-up swimming pool, wearing a yellow bikini that belonged to one of her sisters, grinning at the camera. When I think of her, that's what I think.

I do have good memories of our friendship. Like the time in grade two when we wanted to build a leafman—like a snowman made out of leaves—but the leaves kept blowing away so Lynn stole some glue from Miss Buddington's class and we glued them to the ground. Or the time we decided to crawl to Lynn's house to see who could crawl the fastest. When we crawled up Lynn's driveway, her mom was horrified and asked us whether we thought we were monkeys. As if on cue, we broke into a chorus of hoo-hoo noises, sounding more like weasels than monkeys. But that's all in the past now.

Who else do I need to tell you about? Oh yeah. Marcia.

For months after Marcia left, I felt bad for the way I'd treated her. My mom told me I should write her a letter apologizing, but for once I wasn't enthusiastic about writing. I tried, but everything I wrote seemed fake and mushy. So I never sent a letter.

But Kallie kept in touch with her, and a few years later, she came to visit. We were all going to meet at the movies. When I arrived and didn't see any of the others, I sat down outside the theatre. Suddenly someone touched my shoulder.

"Hilary?"

I turned around to see a pretty girl with bobbed blondish hair and deep blue eyes standing next to me, smiling. I'd never seen her before, but her eyes were so familiar, like a strip of the Caribbean sea....

"Marcia!" I gasped, feeling like I'd slammed into a brick wall and fallen on my butt.

"Yeah, it's me," she said, still smiling. "Guess I look pretty different, with the hair."

She sat down beside me and we started talking. She did most of the talking, while I sat and marvelled. To say I was surprised at the change in her would be like saying I sort of liked *The Dress*. It was like she was a different person. Literally. She was wearing light-coloured lipstick and eyeshadow and perfume that smelt of strawberries. Why had I ever thought she stunk? Oh yeah. Because of Chanel.

A hozer shirt, jeans and hiking boots had replaced the long, loose dresses Marcia used to wear. But her new clothes didn't make her look like a boy. I realized now that she was prettier than most of the girls in my grade, and while we were talking, two guys walking by looked at her.

But the change went way beyond her looks. It was like she'd had a personality transplant—no, it was like her true personality had emerged from its cocoon. She laughed and smiled and didn't bow her head once. I heard all about her life in Vancouver. She went to a special arts high school, which she loved. She was a member of the drama club, and she'd earned her black belt in taekwando.

After we'd talked for a while and Kallie and Chu Hua still hadn't arrived, a little voice in me said now would be a good time to apologize to Marcia for the way I'd treated

her. So I took a deep breath and did it.

Marcia listened without interrupting, and when I'd finished, she smiled wanly. "That's all right. Kallie apologized for you when she wrote to me. I didn't realize it, but I guess things weren't easy for you at the time either. Anyway, you made up for it when you organized our art fair project. Kallie told me it was all thanks to you that we even had a project. So don't worry about it. We were all kind of... it wasn't a good time. The important thing is we're friends now."

I smiled, and without thinking, I burst out, "I just can't believe the difference in you. You've changed so much since you went to Vancouver."

"Yeah, but in a way, it all started here, with Kallie. She was the first person, besides my mother, who believed in me. She was so nice to me, and she made me realize that people would like me for who I was. That helped a lot when I had to start over at a new school in a new city, especially after everything that had happened here. Kallie is an amazing person."

"Yeah, she is," I said.

This amazing person was the one who suggested I write my autobiography. For the past few years, I'd been writing a lot of stories and poems, and I was happy with them, but I'd reached a dry period in my writing. I needed a change, a new challenge. Kallie said my autobiography would be the perfect thing because it would be so different than anything else I'd written. She was right, kind of. In some ways, it was different, but in others, it was similar. But it was different enough to be a change.

As for me, I'm happy. Not beaming or over the moon, but happy. For several months after my talk with my mom, I had to see Dr. Roy on a regular basis. At first I was upset with this arrangement. I hated the dietary plan, and I felt I must be a wimp for needing so much help from the doctor. But after a while I started to think maybe there was something in what Dr. Roy and my mom were saying. I remembered how I'd been too scared to make myself throw up. So I went to the library and looked up books on anorexia.

In one I found a sketch of a girl who'd died of anorexia weighing 49 pounds. I was horrified, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the pictures. I leafed through several books,

feeling like I was watching a multi-vehicle pile-up crash by crash, and when I put the books away, my hands were shaking. I was so nervous I could barely eat that night, but I made myself because I was too afraid of what would happen if I didn't.

But there was another reason I stopped dieting. One time Dr. Roy told me that maybe I was dieting not because I hated my body—I mean, that might only be part of the reason I was dieting. Maybe I was unhappy about something and I was taking it out on my body. She said if I could find out why I was unhappy and deal with it, I probably wouldn't be so worried about my body. I wasn't sure exactly what I was unhappy about, except that it involved Chanel picking on me. But after I became friends with Kallie again, and we started standing up to Chanel, I felt better and I didn't feel as much need to diet.

So I don't diet any more, and I haven't since that time. Don't get me wrong, it's not like I think I'm really hot stuff. Just ask any of the guys at my school. And sometimes I can still hear the snarly voice telling me I'm fat. But I just tell it to shut up, and I try not to let it bother me. Anyway, I don't obsess about my weight any more. I'm O.K. with it.

I still get along really well with my parents, especially my mom. I can talk to her about anything, and she always has time for me, even though she's gone back to work. And Kallie's parents are great too. The summer after grade seven, I went with her family to the island to visit her grandmother again. Her grandma smiled when she saw me and said, "I knew you'd be back." As I looked around the living room, which was exactly as it had been a year earlier, and watched Kallie talking to her parents and her grandma, I felt warm inside. I liked Kallie, I admired her, but I didn't want to *be* her any more.

I never did end up getting *The Dress*, and it is a regret I will carry like a crumpled rose to my dying day. But when I woke up on my sixteenth birthday, I found sixteen blooming white roses and a gift certificate to *le château* on my dresser. I went out that day and bought some stuff. But the strange thing was that even though I felt it was time for me to shop there—I didn't feel like I was stealing from a pirate's chest any more—I wasn't as enthusiastic about the clothes as I'd expected. Maybe they were tainted by being associated with Chanel. I mean, don't get me wrong, I still liked the clothes, but I didn't *love* them the way I had several years earlier. I'm more into the Gap now.

But I still shop at le château, and I've applied for a job there. It was weird, though, because when I applied I had to send the forms to the head office in Montreal. I wondered if that was a mistake. I'd assumed the head office was in New York or Los Angeles, but I sent them anyway.

And even if I don't get the job, it'll be O.K. because it's not like I'm poor. After the talk with my mom, I went to see Mrs. Carruthers. I'd been thinking about her, and I figured she probably needed someone to shovel her walkway. At first I worked for free because she gave me so many other things—cookies, mugs of hot chocolate, a pair of old-fashioned skates that had belonged to one of her children, and most of all, stories—that I felt guilty accepting money. But she insisted on paying me, and I decided to start up a business. Kallie and I went around to different neighbours and asked whether they needed their driveways shovelled. When spring came, we started cutting grass for people. Because I figured, why should only guys cut grass? And so The Intergalactic Supergeek Driveway and Backyard Grooming Service, or TISDABGS for short, was born.

Kallie and Chu Hua and I are still best friends, and we hang out with several new people now, including some guys. It's my first time having male friends, and it's really different for me. I don't have a boyfriend or anything—I'm interested in Lachlan Maguire, you know, the new T.V. star from Australia, he's really hot—but I'm getting used to hanging out with guys. Our group does all kinds of stuff together, like throw Trivial Pursuit parties and go to concerts and movies (because Kallie's decided a few kissing scenes shouldn't ruin an otherwise fine film). And as for guys... well, let's just say Kallie's decided they're not another species after all. One in particular.

Miss Stephanopoulos—but I keep forgetting I have to call her Mrs. Aramouni now—is still at Mackenzie. I don't have classes with her any more, but she's in charge of the writing club and the school newspaper, so I see her a lot. She's given me lots of helpful advice about my stories and about what university I should go to. For now, I've decided to stay close to my family, so I'm going York for creative writing. Kallie's going to be in the same program, and I can't wait.

And I guess that's all I have to tell you. I can't believe I'm actually finished my

autobiography. I'm really going to miss you out there, even though I don't know who you are. I'm not sure how to end this. Fairy tales always end with a moral but if this is a fairy tale, it's a pretty twisted one. Maybe I'll just end it the way I end everything, with a story. Except it's a story about this story.

It's taken me almost a year to write my autobiography. Sometimes it's been fun. Sometimes it's been scary. Sometimes I wrote all night. Sometimes I had to force myself to type the first letter of a sentence or a chapter. But it's all done, and I'm glad I did it. I'd be glad even if it hadn't been fun. Because now I think I know what I've learned. I've learned that even if something isn't always fun, even if it's really horrible, it doesn't mean it didn't do you good to experience it. Now I know what Kallie meant when she said what happened at the beach didn't have to have a negative effect on my life. I mean, it did have a negative effect, but in a weird way, it also had a positive effect. But then again maybe I didn't learn all that, maybe I just realized I'd already learned it.

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