

## **Chapter One**

Let me tell you something about me, something you might have guessed. I have, since I was very small, secretly supposed that the rest of the world understands things I don't. It's this sense that everybody—you, my mother, my ex-boyfriend, the Santa Claus at the mall—possesses some innate knack for recognising truths when they hear them. I've always (not always consciously) felt I was deficient in this human norm, unusually daft or naïve. So, when everybody else is dead-set on one belief, and I have an opposing one, I'm predisposed to doubt myself. The problem must be me. That's why I've stayed silent, till now, on the subject of you.

What I've discovered is that even when the majority agree on something important—*Laurel's a sweetheart, Laurel's inspiring, Laurel's a fucking saint*—it means nothing. The majority get things wrong. The entire world, all seven billion people, could shout to the winds about your goodness, your brilliance, your impeccable moral character; they could put me in a straitjacket, lock me up in a mental hospital; and I'd still say all seven billion had been duped.

I'm writing this because I want you to know that I see you. What you are, what you've done. Nobody else sees you, but I do.

Did you know your hair was the first thing I noticed about you?

Maplewood High. Twelfth grade. Winter semester 2004. America had invaded Iraq almost a year earlier, but our school was still playing excerpts of 'War! (What is it good for?)' on the morning announcements. Biology class, and Mrs Agatha Noble, whose snippiness earned her the nickname Hagatha. She taught with a level of fuck-my-life impatience which, alongside her Adidas tracksuit, suggested she wanted to be teaching Phys.

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Ed. Lost in the marathon of terminology—*cytoplasm, mitosis, angiosperm*—I'd sit at my desk and stare at the back of classmates' heads.

Lisa Wong, whose eye-wateringly tight bun was surrounded by a rainbow of snap-clips.

Sean Wright, with his gelled and bleached tips, imitating the boy bands that were popular.

Kiara Blue and her glossy, russet-tinted cornrows.

Jess Perez, who had a beautiful face and wanted to be a model, but she used a straightener every day and her hair looked desiccated.

Saba Rafiq and her zigzagging part.

The quiet boy with the buzzcut, who I think was one of the Mikes. He had pimples on the back of his neck and a snowfall of dandruff on his shirts.

Adeline Becker, the only short bleach-blonde in the group of tall bleach-blondes, and also the only bleach-blonde in Biology. Her hair shone thick and platinum as a Barbie's.

Your hair stood out by a mile. That natural honey shade that silvers when the light touches it. Those loose, silky waves—waist-length, fairy-wild. Days before we first spoke, I'd gotten to know your shampoo routine. If your hair shone on Monday, then on Tuesday it was a little flatter and duller. By Wednesday your roots were greasy. On Thursday they shone again. I worked out the state of your hair over the weekends, and sure enough, your Monday hair was always the same as your Friday hair: you washed your hair every three days, as regular as clockwork.

You were the new girl that semester. I wasn't the only one who noticed you. That voice of yours—deep, mellifluous, sophisticated for a teenager, unlike the nasal, *Clueless*-infused tones of so many others. You were noticeably attractive, with your big cat-eyes and heart-shaped face. At the same time, you gave off a vibe of apathy: you left your gorgeous

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hair uncombed, your bellbottoms were faded white at the knees, the fleece of your pink Gap hoodie was pilled and greying. I later learned—after I became as familiar with the front of your head as the back of it—that you wore no mascara on your ethereally pale lashes, no drop of foundation over your acne scars.

You conversed with, from what little I observed, warmth and ease. When I spotted you between classes, however, you were usually alone. You even ate lunch alone, at the same table in the corner of the cafeteria. With your back to the wall, you munched on an assortment of fruit—Golden Delicious apples, browning bananas, cinnamon-dusted pear slices—and watched the room with an unreadable silence. When people called, ‘Laurel, sit with us!’ you smiled enigmatically and shook your head.

I wondered if you were shy and lonely, as I was. People liked you, even sought you out. With some minor upgrades to your grooming, you could have been glamorous. Popular. It was difficult to imagine that you lacked self-belief. Now I see you didn’t: your distance was a choice. You were well aware that you could be anyone’s friend, but you chose me.

You say you can hardly remember our friendship before Cameron Lord disappeared. Which I can well believe. There isn’t, let’s face it, much to remember—less than four weeks between the day you befriended me in class and that night in the old farmhouse. You said once that I have a scarily good memory. That may be true, but I also think remembering is about emotion. I doubt our first interaction moved you at all.

This, at least, you’ll recall: the foetal pig. In the lab with dissecting equipment, that cold little hunk of would-be bacon on the table between us. Mrs Noble—I’ll call her Hagatha, since most students did behind her back—had grouped our class into random threes. You and I were the only duo, the excess.

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Biology was my concession to my mother's insistence that I take a senior science course—she held out hope that I'd smarten up and abandon my applications to English Lit degrees. If anything could make me wish I'd opted for Chemistry or Physics, it was this dissection. Around nine inches long, the piglet's body was pale pink, nearly white, from the snout and tongue to the dainty hooves. It looked clammy and slightly shrivelled, like the top of a deflated sponge cake. The bare sight of it didn't make me want to vomit, nor did the chemical stench of formaldehyde, but I wasn't eager to test my limits. I wasn't alone: at the next table, Adeline Becker's bejewelled fingers were clamped over her mouth, as if she feared her group's pig would fling itself off the tray and orally impregnate her like the face-hugger in *Alien*.

With your blue-gloved hands you picked up our piglet from under its arms. Its mouth hung open, the tongue flaccid and swollen. You angled it towards me—with its eyes sealed shut it looked like it was grimacing—and you smiled.

'He's so light! A little creampuff! Oh my god, Mae, isn't he so *cute*?'

It was surprising to hear your distinctive voice addressing me, saying my name as if you'd said it a thousand times before. Different, too, to see the front of your head up close, your eyes—hazel, though you still claim they're green—framed by the lab goggles. For once you'd clipped your hair back. Your part shone; it was shampoo day.

'A little bit cute,' I said, not meaning it. Maybe you didn't mean it either, so I added a disclaimer: 'In a disturbing kind of way.'

Adeline was watching you from the next table, where her more studious team-mates were deep in discussion. 'Shit, Laurel,' she giggled, behind her fingers, 'I can't believe you can pick that thing up like it's no big deal.'

Shrugging, you lay the piglet down on its side, gentle as a mother with a newborn. You addressed me again. 'Are you going to be okay?'

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‘Yeah. Why?’

‘You’re standing, like, five feet back, and you haven’t put your goggles on.’

From anyone else, the statement would’ve sounded critical, but you managed to be sensitive. Even so, blood warmed my cheeks. The goggles I was avoiding partly because they were the kind with an elastic band and taking them off would be risky: I imagined the daisy-flecked triangle of my kerchief flying up, cool air on my bald patch, classmates’ shock and disgust. I’d made it almost to the end of high school without most people knowing about my problem. I wanted a larger kerchief, better yet a high-quality hairpiece, but my mother refused. *If you’re going to pull out your hair, you deal with the social consequences.*

‘I’m so sorry,’ I said, stepping closer to the table, stretching the goggles down over my head.

‘Don’t worry,’ you said brightly. ‘If you’re more comfortable just reading out the instructions, I don’t mind doing the dirty work.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I’ll read out the instructions, then, if that’s okay.’

What was wrong with me? You’d literally just said it was okay. I didn’t get enough social interaction in those days, and the people I did interact with were undemanding. Those friends could be roughly slotted into two categories. There were the ultra-smart kids who played games like euchre, debated the merits of Bush versus Kerry, wrote software for the hell of it. Many were Chinese, so were assumed by others—stereotypically and not always accurately—to be in the gifted programme. They were happy to let me sit with them at lunch but rarely invited me to meet-ups outside school. Kids in the second category were the opposite: part of what nasty people referred to as the Sped class, or riders of the short bus. Take Katie Snell: obsessed with *Teletubbies*, sweet on any boy who’d look at her. Once I tried—and duly failed—to explain to her why male-female twins cannot be identical.

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Not quite brainy enough for one group and far too brainy for the other, I wasn't at home in either. What affinity I did feel with my friends—both the geniuses and dummies—was one of common difficulty. Many of them had been name-called or worse. Real friendship, though I wanted it, was risky: even without the drawback of my shyness, there was my hair-pulling habit—my dirty, disgusting secret. There was no way anyone could be okay with that.

I stood there, my hand sweating onto the instruction sheet Hagatha had distributed. You'd cut a length of string, perhaps half a metre long, and tied an end of it to one of the piglet's fore legs. As I watched, you slid the longer end snugly beneath the metal tray before tying it to the opposite leg, so the two limbs were splayed. You cut more string and repeated the process for the hind legs.

'I keep wanting to tell you how much I like your name,' you said as you tackled the final knot, your fingers working around the pig's colourless hoof. 'Every time Mrs Noble takes attendance, I'm like, *ah*, Mae Welsh. So pretty! It sounds like the name of somebody famous.'

'There *was* a famous actress called Mae *West*,' I said, relieved to have something to say. 'My first name's spelled like hers, actually. M-A-E.'

'I love it! Much more unique than M-A-Y.' Your upper lip curled, as if the Y tasted bad. 'I love my name too. I'm glad I'm not Laura or Lauren.'

'Laurel is very pretty,' I said. Your name felt round and fresh on my tongue, like a cold green grape. I didn't know any other Laurels, had hardly realised it could be a name.

Our piglet was now fully spreadeagled. Its tied limbs gave it the look of the submissive partner in some sexual bondage game (so I think now, more dirty-minded at thirty-four than at seventeen).

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‘We’re all set,’ you said, running your finger over the dissection tools—scissors, forceps, scalpel, probe.

I was still staring at the piglet, at the umbilical cord stump that protruded from its soft belly between two rows of pinhead-sized nipples. Too fast for me to look away, you’d picked up the scalpel and sliced the belly open, from the base of the throat to the cord stump, as straightly and seamlessly as if you were cutting paper with an X-Acto knife. Inside was bloodless; the organs, like the skin, were watered-down pink, just slimier.

The first cut was made, but contrary to the nausea I’d been expecting, I felt pure, non-queasy horror. I raised my eyes from the gruesomeness on the tray to the freshly washed top of your head, the naturally diagonal line of your part.

You asked, ‘What name should we give *him*?’

I was grateful for your distracting question, which was also a fun one. ‘Hogwash? Pigment?’

You grinned. ‘I was gonna say Porky or Crispy, but yours are more creative. I don’t think we’re there yet though.’

‘Porcino,’ I offered. ‘If it’s a girl, *Porcina*.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘Like “porcine”. It’s a word—adjective—for something that’s piglike.’

‘*Oh*. Well, that’s clever, but I feel like he needs something with more dignity...’

‘*Pignity*?’

Your head tilted back and you laughed heartily. Muffled applause came from your gloved hands, one of which still held the scalpel.

‘That’s fabulous, Mae! *Pignity*! I don’t think a pig’s name could be more dignified than that. I mean, more—’

‘*Pignified*,’ we both said, and we laughed together.

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A rare feeling, warm as bathwater, was spreading in my chest. You were easy to talk to; you even shared my lame sense of humour. Or maybe you were just being nice to keep me from getting the creeps. I entertained a passing vision of how you'd react to my hair problem. It was just possible you wouldn't find it disgusting. Were you friend material? I only knew I wanted to keep our conversation going. My mother was paying me to read Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—one golden rule was, unsurprisingly, to encourage others to talk about themselves.

'Why'd you come to Maplewood, Laurel?' I asked. Another rule was using the person's name. 'Did you move houses?'

You shook your head. 'Transferred. I was at Peterville but I hated it. I still have friends there, great people, but it's such a sketchy part of town, near the Dog Patch. I just had a nice feeling about Maplewood, so I thought, okay, let's give it a go. So here I am.'

I'd never heard of anybody transferring schools based on a feeling, let alone for the final semester of high school, and imagined my parents' reaction if I'd suggested the same thing to them. At that time, though, I had no reason to be suspicious about why you were at Maplewood, which had nothing to do with me. Unwillingly I felt my eyes pulled downwards, towards Pignity, and resisted.

'Do you want to be a vet, Laurel?'

Your brows dipped inside the goggles. 'What gives you that idea?'

'You just seem interested...' I gave a nod to Pignity.

'Oh,' you caught on. 'No, I'm not exactly *interested*. I just don't *mind*. Dead things, they don't seem to bother me. My grandpa was a beef farmer. So was his dad, my great-grandpa, so maybe it's in my DNA or something.'

Your voice held a note that might have been familial pride. With a little grin, you leaned over our piglet, and you spoke in a tone that was soft, almost maternal.



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‘Hey there, Pignity, you poor stupid creature. Thanks for dying for our science project before you were even born.’

Over the years my mind has returned most often to this image: you, Laurel, rosy- and oily-cheeked, simpering down at that half-butchered animal as you reached again for your scalpel.

We got to work. I read out the names of body parts—*liver, spleen, gallbladder*—while you located them inside Pignity. I snuck only rapid glances at the increasingly carved up little corpse. We were almost an hour into the period when Cameron Lord walked in.

I can clearly see him slouching into the lab that day, one of the last times he was ever seen at school—one of the last times, now I know for a fact, when he was ever seen anywhere by anybody.

He’d been a no-show since day two of the semester; I’d practically forgotten he was taking Biology. The only reference to his continued enrolment was made by Hagatha, in the form of a daily huff when, taking attendance, she called out his name and got no response. His appearance now, over a month into the semester, was one of not-totally-futile hope: the dissection was worth a significant chunk of our participation grade. Just by showing up, he was getting his mark that bit closer to the fifty he needed for a pass.

Do you ever think about Cameron, Laurel? Probably only as a generic scumbag, unworthy of space in your head. Of course, my history with him was different from yours. It’s been ages since I told you that history. So I’ll paint a little picture.

When I’d first known Cameron, in eighth grade, he’d had a head of red curls—true boiled-lobster red, as red as genes can make hair. A duckling-like down, fairer, colourless, grew around his plump lips. His eyes were a strange colour—pale, but more green than blue, with lashes black as spider-legs. I guess he was a striking kid. It was that beautiful thirteen-

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year-old who, assigned the seat behind mine in class, noticed me pulling at the hair along my part. Noticed my first bald patch before I knew I had one. One day he leaned forward and whispered, ‘Chemo Chick.’

After that it was incessant: ‘Chemo Chick, Chemo Chick, Chemo Chick,’ from behind me on a daily basis, the syllables accelerating so my awful nickname became a kind of vocal percussion and his spittle misted my neck. At recess, if there were no teachers in hearing range, he’d bark the insult in his newly dropped voice—‘Hiya, Chemo Chick!’ Other kids caught on: by the time we graduated from elementary school that June, a quarter of our class were calling me Chemo Chick.

High school, the following September, proved better: to most fellow ninth-graders at Maplewood, pouring in from seven feeder schools across town, I was another unmemorable face. From day one I wore a kerchief—they were in style for a bit anyway, so nobody looked twice. Most of the name-callers grew up or found more interesting targets. Cameron, who’d started it, was the one hanger-on. Whenever he spotted me at school—a rarity, since he was rarely *at school*—I was practically guaranteed a greeting of ‘Wazzup, Chemo Cunt!’ (apparently ‘chick’ was no longer misogynistic enough.)

The silver lining was that Cameron, despite his default setting of ‘nasty’, had no interest in deep malice, possibly no attention span for it. He’d spew venom if he spotted prey—with enjoyment—but he didn’t go *searching* for the people he liked to insult. I doubt he thought about his victims, never mind gossiped about them. Consequently, unlike most bullies, he didn’t attract a gang of followers. Being out of Cameron’s sight was, mercifully, the same as not existing for him.

As far as I can tell, he enjoyed an unusual status at Maplewood. He wasn’t popular in the sense of having lots of friends, but he was someone you’d heard about. His physical elusiveness, combined with a frowning demeanour and reputation for *misdemeanours*—pot

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dealing, arrests for shoplifting—gave him a kind of mystique in the eyes of students stupid enough to respect those things. Ergo his nickname: The Lord.

By the time Cameron entered the lab during our pig dissection, four years after first targeting me, he was a far cry from the Celtic imp of eighth grade. Growth spurts had made him gangly; drugs had thinned his face to the bone, though it still carried a hint of the pretty-boy. His curls, now limp and shaggy, had darkened to a coppery shade, his soft down hardened to stubble. He wore a chain on the belt-loop of his cargo pants, and a taking-a-hard-shit scowl.

Remember, Laurel?

Seeing him, I froze up. Somehow Cameron and I had gone three years without having a class together, least of all one he showed up for. Silently, futilely, I begged Hagatha to stick him with some group other than ours, on the farthest side of the lab. But you and I were the only dissection duo in a roomful of trios. We were getting him. I knew this even before, over your bent head, I watched him report to the teacher. Before I caught the fragments of her curt welcome—‘worth showing up, Mr Lord’ and ‘miracles happen’. Before I saw her arm lift in its shimmery tracksuit jacket, gesturing towards you and me.

‘What is it?’ you said, clocking my dismay.

‘It’s Da Looord,’ sang one of the cooler Mikes. Unsmiling, Cameron bumped fists with him as he headed for our table.

‘Hiya, Chemo Cunt,’ he grunted, as I’d known he would. At least he wasn’t barking it, not in Hagatha’s hearing, not risking that precious participation grade that might, in turn, help him graduate from high school and still become a pro toilet-scrubber.

My face blazed, but I stayed cautiously hopeful: now that he’d gotten the token greeting out of his system, maybe he’d back off. I think he probably would have, if you hadn’t been a hot girl, or if you’d ignored him.

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Your head had snapped up from whatever you were doing to Pignity. ‘Um, *pardon?* Is that how you normally talk to people?’

Gripping the belt-loop of his low-riding pants, Cameron was hoisting himself onto the vacant stool beside you. He tried to speak, started coughing instead: a loud, phlegmy hack against the back of his hand. You twisted your head away from his viral breath, your upper lip curling in that disgusted sneer—comically disgusted, always genuine—that you still do better than anyone. ‘Jesus! If you’re sick you should’ve stayed home.’

He recovered enough to rasp, ‘It’s a fuckin’ cold.’

‘Germs are germs, Einstein. Do you think anyone here wants your icky cough and sniffles? Plus, SARS is still around. Ever watch the news?’

Recovering, Cameron actually laughed, though it came out more like a gulp. The deep dent between his brows was still there, but the side of his mouth twitched: flicker of a grin. Perhaps he was recalling some weird porn fantasy he wanted to enact with you: blonde in goggles, with knife, over carcass. His eyes dropped below the table, at level with your ass.

‘If I got SARS I’d love giving it to you,’ he said.

Disgust pinched your face harder. ‘I wanna know why the hell you’d call someone such a nasty name.’

I wished you had let it go. ‘Laurel, why don’t we—’

‘Wha—Chemo Cunt?’ Cameron cut in. I glanced around, hoping this wasn’t being picked up by any of our classmates—nope, they were all preoccupied by deader swine. ‘Uh, take a wild guess? ’Cause she’s got no hair?’

Your eyes flicked to me; then, deciding the air between you and Cameron was clear of deadly viruses, you turned back to him. ‘Actually, her hair’s brown and wavy.’

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Which was the nicest thing you could have said about my mouse-frizz. I badly needed the subject changed. ‘Should we get back to work?’ I attempted chipper, as if the Chemo Cunt thing were some harmless old joke.

‘Under that scarf she’s bald,’ Cameron countered, smirking at your chest.

‘Okay, whatever,’ you said, and rolled your eyes at me. ‘You want attention, I get it. Good luck getting it by being a dickhead.’

‘Pulls her hair out,’ he told you. ‘Pick pick pick, all da fuckin’ day—’ he raised his eyes to yours, his voice to a Michael Jackson falsetto: ‘Pick pick pick pick pick.’

Blood swelled harder into my face, my heart thrusting up my throat: a ballooning, burgundy fury. As ever, Cameron’s hostility was meaningless—amped up only to impress you—but the result was no better than if he’d truly hated me. He’d stooped low with those careless *picks*. I was sure that, thanks to him, our friendship was *finito* before it started. You’d view me differently—my kerchief no longer part of Mae’s slightly childish fashion sense, but more like a Band-Aid concealing an ugly wound. People wince at female baldness the way they wince at pus. I’d hated Cameron’s guts for a long time, but not till that point had I—and, mark this, Laurel: at no point since then *have* I—come anywhere close to wishing he was dead.

My voice whiplashed out of me. ‘Cameron, go hang yourself!’

A silence as abrupt as a power cut. Then a chorus of pubescent laughter.

The shock of my outburst killed most of my anger. I’d never yelled at someone in public. I was glad I had my back to most of the class.

Adeline was giggling. ‘What the hell? That was *so* random!’

It was random. Beyond the bare fact that it had happened, I couldn’t fathom my word-choice. *Hang?* Either I was too polite for the F-word, or my essay on Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* was haunting my subconscious. Or ‘hang yourself’ simply reflected my true

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sentiments. (Why would we care if our enemies fucked themselves, were it even biologically possible?)

Cameron was still smirking, slouched on his stool. You were staring at me, loose-jawed.

The laughs had mostly faded, reverting to (un)productive chatter, when Hagatha swooped in on me. ‘Mae Welsh, I’m *extremely* disappointed...’

I’ll summarise the next ten to fifteen minutes, since they aren’t as important as the before or after. Following a mini lecture at Hagatha’s desk, during which she wouldn’t let me speak—not that I tried hard—she sent me to the principal’s office. You see, whenever I’d chosen ‘hang yourself’, the phrase amounted to encouragement to commit suicide. It was (quoting her) ‘unacceptable in our school community’. Most teachers would still have let it slide, but Agatha Noble was an officious bitch, a *bored* officious bitch who wanted to be drilling push-ups in a gymnasium, not presiding over swine dissections. She got off, I’m sure, on good students’ bad mistakes.

Goggles painstakingly removed, I washed my hands, collected my things and headed for Mr Petrowski’s office. Not once did I look back at you. I was horrified—getting in trouble at school was a first for me. I had no clue what would happen. Detention? Sessions with the guidance counsellor? A phone call to my parents? Jesus—*expulsion*? I’d told a guy to kill himself; I must be disturbed in the head, like the Columbine shooters. I’d been good about my hair for a week or two; there was new growth on my bald patch, but I felt like shutting myself in a bathroom stall and pulling it all out again. Even as I moved, my hand kept snapping upwards, wanting to slide under the kerchief, and I kept pulling it back against my side. On that two-minute walk through the empty halls, I became so lost in the shame of getting in trouble that I practically forgot *why* I’d exploded.

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As it turned out, I wasn't in much trouble. Mr Petrowski was a man too shrewd and too jaded to waste time on a student who was clearly nobody's problem. I doubt he appreciated Hagatha interrupting his lunch—she must've called him from the lab, since he'd been briefed on my offence. He invited me to sit, wrapped the remains of his Subway sandwich in their waxy paper, and gestured flaccidly at the character education chart on the wall. 'Which attribute do you think your behaviour violated?' he asked wearily, and I skimmed the board-chosen virtues and landed on RESPECT, and he said 'Yup!' with box-ticking satisfaction.

I left in a haze of relief, intending to head back to Biology, but the bell must have rung for lunch, because students were flooding into the hall. Stepping out of the office, I was startled to find you waiting for me. You were standing beside the huge, tinsel-draped Holiday Tree—the board were laughably self-conscious about secularity—that nobody had taken down even though it was February. You'd removed your clip and your hair fell over your shoulders and down your arms, lush, gorgeously messy.

'Are you in trouble, Mae?' I shook my head. 'Good!' you said. 'I tried to tell Mrs Noble what that asshole was calling you, but she wouldn't let me *talk*, the stupid cow.'

It was nice that you were thoughtful enough to try and defend me, check on me, even if the truth about my hair had sabotaged our ever becoming friends. Or had it? 'Thanks,' I smiled. 'I'm okay. I just lost my temper. I should have ignored him.'

'You totally had a right to explode! I would've done the same. Frankly, it'd make the world a better place if douchebags like Cameron Lord *would* go hang themselves.'

You declared it loudly, as much to the stream of passing students as to me. I threw a glance over my shoulder, conscious of the wide-open door of the office and the frosty receptionist just inside it.

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‘Yeah, well...’ I laughed. The relief I’d felt seconds ago, on leaving Mr Petrowski, was buoying into something better.

You grinned, stepped closer. ‘Are you doing anything for lunch, Mae?’

‘Um...no.’ Disbelieving, I shook my head. ‘I’m not doing anything.’

‘Awesome!’ you sang. Then you hugged me, your tresses enwrapping me with your arms—a literally *golden* hug. Stunned stiff, I think I gaped at you.

‘Let’s go to the Grill N Chill,’ you bubbled. ‘I could murder a cheeseburger.’