

*wherever  
nina  
lies*

LYNN WEINGARTEN

POINT

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# ONE

The guy walking toward me is good-looking in a jerk way, like he'd be on a reality show about dudes who won't stop cheating on their girlfriends, or a spokesperson for a line of energy drinks. He has on these big mirrored aviators and a tight black T-shirt with *I CAN BENCH PRESS YOU AND YOUR BENCH PRESS* printed in red on the front.

"Hi," I say. "What can I get for you?" I've been working here for a year but I still find it funny when I hear myself ask that, like I'm a kid playing "coffee shop," instead of a sixteen-year-old who actually works at one.

"Give me a sugar-free skim iced chai," he says. "Large."

"A sugar-free skim iced chai," I say. And I try not to look over at Brad, who I can feel watching us through the glass pastry case he's washing.

"Hey, Ellie!" Brad calls out. He's using his best "casual" voice, which is about twice as loud as his regular one. "Isn't this such a *coincidence*? How we were just talking about sugar-free skim *iced chais* and how much you love them? And now this customer is ordering a *chai*? What was that funny thing you were saying about them? About sugar-free skim iced *chais*?"

The thing that's fun about Brad is that he'll say pretty much anything to anyone; this is also the thing that makes me want to lob a muffin at his head sometimes, one of those scary-huge ones that we sell here for \$6.25.

I turn back to the guy and shrug, like, "Who is this wackadoo?" But the guy is staring at his phone, swiping and swiping the pictures on his screen.

I make his drink and hand it to him. He watches the muscles in his forearm as he pays, starts walking toward the door, then marches back and slams his drink on the counter.

"No way this is skim," he says. He jiggles the cup. "You gave me a different kind of milk, didn't you?"

He takes off his sunglasses and gives me a piercing stare, as though now I'll be forced to fess up.

"I promise I didn't," I say. "That was definitely skim."

"You're positive about that?" He holds the cup up above his head and looks at the bottom of it, as if that's where all the fat has deposited itself.

"I'm positive," I say. "But I can make you another one if you want."

"No," he says. And then he raises his eyebrows. "But I think we *both* know what you're trying to do here." And then he turns and storms out.

I wait two beats after the door closes, then I turn toward Brad. We burst out laughing. "Wow," Brad says. He stands up, holding the spray bottle and rag. "I thought he looked kinda cute when he first came in, but I should have known his big, shiny

glasses were hiding a face fulla weirdo. Never a dull day at the coffee shop!” Brad shakes his head slowly. “Arms like that do not come without a price.”

“Um, speaking of weirdos . . . ?”

“Yeah, but *I* was doing it *as a favor!* It is very generous to give two people your weirdness to bond over!” Brad puts the bottle and rag under the counter and glances at the clock. “Okay, Princess Peach, you’re off soon, so before you go, I’m going to run to the back and restock real quick. If anyone comes in who I might think was your soul mate, make sure to tell him I said that he should give you his number!”

“Ha-ha,” I say.

“I’m serious,” Brad says. “Your very own Thomas could be right around the corner.”

I roll my eyes. Thomas is Brad’s boyfriend who he met while working here. Thomas was a customer and Brad, who never gets nervous around anyone, was so nervous he dropped an entire carrot cake on the floor. And then Thomas was like, *Good job! That’s exactly where carrot cake belongs!* And they have been happily in love ever since.

“Truly though, what’s the point of working in a coffee shop if you don’t get to meet a cute boy because of it?”

“Oh I don’t know,” I say. “My vast and impressive paycheck?”

“Don’t forget your incredible boss!”

“Him, too . . .”

Brad reaches out and boings one of my curls, then flashes me a smile as he disappears into the back room.

I pretend to think it's silly whenever Brad talks about finding me a boyfriend, that I don't even *want* one. But if I'm being honest about it, that's not the case at all. I guess telling yourself you don't have something because you don't want it feels less depressing than wanting something you can't figure out how to have. I'm sixteen and in two months I'll be a junior, and my entire romantic history up until this point consists of three random kisses with three random guys, friends of whomever my best friend Amanda was with at the time. Just once I'd like to kiss someone because we actually like each other, not because we've been left alone by our respective friends, who are hooking up in the next room, and have run out of stuff to say.

I look out over the counter. It's quiet in here, pretty average for an early Friday evening, before the nighttime rush. There are a dozen or so people typing on laptops and reading and chatting quietly. A lanky guy with bright orange hair and an earring in each ear dumps his paper cup into the garbage and turns to wave as he walks out. Earl Grey, double tea bags, with extra milk — that's what he drinks when he comes in here, which is every month or so. Why do I know this? It's the funny thing about working in a coffee shop, I guess, the things you get to know about so many random people, the things you notice.

Two girls approach the counter.

One is younger than I am, maybe fourteen or so. The other looks about eighteen. The younger one has this enormous, bright, ecstatic grin on her face. The light is pouring out of her. When you see a smile this genuine, it makes you realize how many of the smiles you see during an average day aren't.

The older one has the exact same smile. And she has the same eyes. And a similarly shaped face and . . . There's a weird tugging inside my chest as I realize something — they're sisters, these girls. Instantly I know everything about them. And I feel a little sick.

They haven't seen each other in a while. The older one was at college, or away on a long trip, and she's finally returned home. When she was gone, it felt like she'd been gone forever, but now that she's back, it's like she never left. Growing up, they fought a lot. Younger was jealous of Older, resented her and all the stuff she got to do that Younger didn't. Older had always thought Younger was a pain who would never leave her alone. But years have passed since then, and all that petty stuff that once seemed so important stopped mattering, the way it always does. Or the way it's supposed to, anyway. They realized they can be friends now, real friends. And it means so much to both of them because they know how much they went through to get here.

I take a deep breath and try to keep my face expressionless. I know it's not fair, but I suddenly hate them.

"Hi!" says Younger, perky behind long bangs. "We would like, um, some banana bread and . . . LaurLaur?" She looks up. "What else should we get?"

"Um, are the brownies good?" Older asks. And then lightly smacks herself in the forehead. "Why am I even asking, right? They're *brownies*. So yeah, a banana bread, and a brownie of course, and a croissant . . ."

Younger starts giggling. "And another croissant! An almond one!"

“And an iced matcha latte,” says Older. “And a cupcake and a smoothie and . . .”

The girls keep ordering, exchanging glances, their smiles growing bigger and bigger, like coming here and ordering all this food is the culmination of a private joke, something they’d been discussing for all the months while Older was gone.

I make their drinks and try to avoid eye contact. They’re chatty in that way people are when they’re giddy with joy, a little high on how happy they are.

“I love this place,” says Younger.

“I know, I really missed it,” says Older. “Come to think of it, it’s probably what I missed most while I was gone. Most of everything and everyone in the world!” She opens her eyes really wide and Younger mock punches her in the arm. Older grabs Younger around the shoulder and kisses her on the cheek and Younger pretends to wipe it off. They both laugh.

I finish lining their food up on the counter.

“Oooh, sorry!” Older says. She pays for everything with crisp new bills. “Thank you so much!” she says.

“Yes! Thank you!” says Younger. “So much!” It’s as though they’re giving me credit for how happy they are, as though by being there to witness it, I had something to do with it.

It takes them three trips to carry all their food over to the table. Normally, I would have offered to help. But right now I don’t. I can’t. Older puts money in the tip jar — three dollars. No one ever puts in more than one.

Less than a minute later Brad is back, standing next to me. He watches me watching them, and puts one arm around my shoulder. “It’s time for you to go,” he says, and hands me a white paper bag. Inside are a dozen broken cookies iced in pink and green and white. “We can’t sell these,” Brad says. “I was going to give them to Thomas, but you should probably take them instead . . .”

I stick my nose in the bag and take a sweet breath of almondy air. The tightness in my chest begins to loosen. I am, I decide, very lucky to have Brad in my life who, for all his ridiculousness, knows exactly when I might need a big bag of cookie pieces. And also knows exactly when I won’t want to talk about why.