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My best friend Wren and I sit in the school cafeteria, waiting for the bell. Bleary students in light woolen coats shuffle through the double doors, their eyes puffy, while sunlight glows from translucent windows. Everything is warm and golden. This moment, this still, soft space in which Wren and I sit together before the first bell, is when I get myself sorted out for the day. It's the second week of our senior year. I close my eyes and press on my temples.

Economics quiz. Should be fine; I can go over my notes one more time in study hall. I should also reread the end of Murder in the Cathedral, just in case there's a pop quiz.

My hair is damp from my post-run shower. A mile every morning, the Scruton Back Road loop, like clockwork. That's me. Clockwork. Emphasis on the *work*. I'm finally in the home stretch; this is my year. I just have to stick to the plan—perfect grades, perfect extracurriculars, perfect recommendations. Then a perfect

launch, an upward trajectory at last, into the life that's always felt out of reach. No distractions allowed. Almost there.

Muffled clangs emanate from the kitchen, the smell of bread and tomato sauce and just a hint of industrial cleaner. It's not unpleasant. Wren peers at their phone and scribbles in a glittery notebook while I find myself absentmindedly drawing long lunch tables in my sketchbook, their plastic seats occupied by large-mouthed creatures with googly eyes. I had a "how to draw the Muppets" book when I was a kid, and now they find their way into all my doodles.

Wren has a creative mind and a sparkling personality. Me? I draw Muppets a lot.

"You should try something new today, Viveca," Wren says. They never look puffy-eyed or damp or bleary. They're always put together. Even though we both thrift, Wren pulls it off like a runway model, while I tend to give off raccoon-that-raided-grandma's-closet vibes.

I squint at their notebook. "Are you doing my horoscope again?"

They hold up a finger. "*Anti*-horoscope."

"Right." This is Wren's new thing. It seems to involve an awful lot of calculating, despite the fact that, from what I can tell, it just means doing the opposite of whatever the official daily horoscope says.

Wren circles something in their notebook, then looks up with a crooked smile. "Yep, definitely a day to throw caution to the wind." They light up. "Let's overthrow the administration! Or get wasted! Or learn how to knit!"

A voice like a Disney prince's, deep and luxurious, cuts through my laughter. "What time's the revolution?"

My head jerks upward. Someone I've never seen before is standing over our table, blue eyes sparkling. There's a light scent hanging off him I can't even describe, like jasmine, or the moon, or Saturday. "You must be a Leo," he says to Wren.

"Virgo," Wren says. "I just live dangerously."

He laughs. "Flipping the universe a big old bird. I like it." He has shining blond hair, broad shoulders, and delicate ears. The fairy-king-slash-Greek-god extends a hand. "I'm Jamison Sharpe."

Wren laughs and shakes Jamison's hand. "Wren," they say. "Just Wren." Wren's last name is Beagle, but apparently they're being all mysterious right now. "Are you new?"

Jamison nods. "Yep. We just moved here from Paris." He says it casually. *Paris. No big deal.*

He turns to me for the first time, and I give a little start of surprise, like I've just won his attention in a lottery.

"I'm Jamison," he says.

"Viveca." Why am I grinning like a nitwit?

He leans in, delighted. "Viveca? Not Viveca North?"

". . . Yes?" The tips of my ears are getting hot. Crap. It's probably super obvious. "You've heard of me?"

Jamison winks and points to the bulletin board next to the lunchroom's double doors. At the top, bright cutout letters that look like they escaped from a kindergarten classroom spell out *Race to the Top!* My name crowns the short list posted below, the Senior Top Ten.

Viveca North. I can see it if I squint. My name has been destined for the top of that list since I was a freshman. Since eighth grade at West Bore Junior High, when I convinced Mrs. Halbert to let me do an independent Algebra I course a year early. Since fourth grade, when I won the county spelling bee—*obstreperous*, thank you very much.

“Looks like you’re headed for that number one spot,” Jamison says.

“I mean—I’m *in* the number one spot,” I say. Wren gives me a look like *Really?* What, did that sound snooty? It’s true, though. Why would Jamison say I was only “headed for” valedictorian? It’s a little thing, but I can already tell he’s the kind of person who means what he says. My skin prickles, and I feel the rosiness drain from my face. Who is this guy?

Jamison laughs. “Well done, *Viveca North!*” He adjusts his army-green messenger bag. “Looks like we have a lot in common. Back in Paris, *my* name was in that shiny number one spot.”

Yeah, well, that spot’s already taken here, I think. Okay, *that* was snooty.

“At my old school,” Jamison goes on. “My old *lycée*, I should say.”

Wren leans forward. “Wait, so that thing about Paris—is that really where you come from? It’s just you don’t have an accent.”

“Oh! Sorry, no, not at all,” Jamison says with an air of modesty, shaking his head. “I’m from L.A. I’ve just been in Paris for the last year or so.”

“Ah, okay.” Wren’s face is calm, but I know they’re thinking about the half dozen French comic books in their backpack they’re

just dying to geek out with someone about. Too bad I took Russian.

Jamison grins and swivels his hips toward the door. “Well, it’s great to meet you two. I hope you’ll show me the ropes. I haven’t made any friends yet.” Then he makes eye contact with me. It’s intense, but I’m not grinning anymore. To be honest, he’s kind of creeping me out. “Although I know you’re busy with academics, Viveca,” Jamison says. “I know how much work it is to stay on top.” His tone is gentle, but it rubs me the wrong way. He doesn’t know anything about how hard I work.

Then, with a bright smile, he’s gone. He breezes away through the double doors, the *Race to the Top!* list fluttering in his wake.

“So *this* year just got a little more interesting,” Wren says. “Did you see that perfect hair?”

“Yeah. And perfect grades apparently.” My words come out snarkier than I want to let them.

Wren snorts. “Wait, are you *jealous*? Of the charming new guy?”

“No, I just—he had to bring up the fact that *he* was valedictorian at his old school. Like he already earned it *there*, so now he deserves it *here*. Instead of me.” I flop my head down onto the table as the homeroom bell rings. “It sounds petty when I say it, I guess.”

“It’s not petty,” Wren says as we gather our stuff. “It’s adorable. But I do think you’re too stressed, Viveca. Are you worried about your Everett interview tomorrow? Because you’re going to kill it, my friend. You’re going to murder that interview in the first degree.”

“Thanks.” I hope they’re right.

Wren wiggles their backpack on. “Besides, it’s only October.

Nobody's been named valedictorian anywhere yet, not until the end of third quarter."

"Yeah," I say, but the moments replay in my mind, Jamison's words. *My name was in that shiny number one spot . . . I know how much work it is to stay on top.* Was that a challenge? What if he went to some fancy genius school—sorry, *lycée*—and finds all our classes super easy?

Wren skips beside me as we head through the lunchroom doors and turn left into the crowded hallway. "Maybe you should ask Jamison out. Defuse some of this angst or whatever."

"Maybe *you* should."

Wren smirks. "I mean, not gonna lie, I would ride that all the way to town."

I adjust my backpack. "You've never ridden anybody even half-way to town."

"Except Principal Washington."

Okay, I laugh. Wren knows how to crack me. Maybe I am starting to feel the stress of senior year. After school today, I'm tutoring a sophomore who's worried about geometry, then a freshman having trouble getting solid on his state capitals. Not to mention looming scholarship application deadlines and my online editing work. Oh, and, you know, my actual homework.

But I've got them covered. I've got it all covered. College is so close I can smell it—the fresh scent of three hundred miles between me and this town. The first North to escape. The first North to be valedictorian.

. . . Unless it's Jamison Sharpe.