

FABULOUS

TERRIBLE™



The Adventures of You™

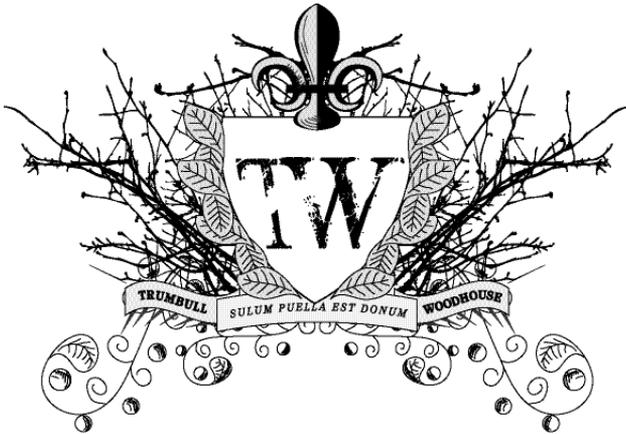
BY SOPHIE TALBOT

FABULOUS TERRIBLE™

The Adventures of You™

FABULOUS TERRIBLE™

The Adventures of You™



Sophie Talbot



CHOOSECO

WAITSFIELD, VERMONT

Text and design © 2008 Chooseco LLC.
For personal use only, not for distribution or resale

FABULOUS TERRIBLE, THE ADVENTURES OF YOU, CHOOSECO and Dragon design are trademarks of Chooseco LLC and are registered in the United States and may be registered in jurisdictions internationally. Chooseco's trademarks, service marks, and trade dress may not be used in connection with any product or service that is not affiliated with Chooseco LLC, or in any manner that is likely to cause confusion among customers, or in any manner that disparages or discredits Chooseco LLC.

Fabulous Terrible: The Adventures of You © Chooseco LLC, 2008.
Waitsfield, Vermont. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any other means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher and Chooseco LLC.

Cover Design: Dot Greene, Green Dot Design
Book design: Stacey Boyd, Big Eyedea Visual Design

For information regarding permission, write to:



CHOOSECO

P.O. Box 46
Waitsfield, Vermont 05673
www.cyoa.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-933390-76-5
ISBN-10: 1-933390-76-X

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada
Printed in Canada

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Text and design © 2008 Chooseco LLC.
For personal use only, not for distribution or resale

For Jenny Paul, In Memory

Special acknowledgment to
Nicki Renna for her writing help.

"A girl should be two things: classy, and fabulous."

— Coco Chanel

All changed, changed utterly;

A terrible beauty is born.

— W. B. Yeats, Easter 1916



You press your hands firmly against the frosty glass window, and stare in at the rows of big plastic buckets filled with vibrantly colored ice cream. 129 flavors in all.

Like everything else in Hatterly, South Carolina, Ice Cream Dreamz started out quaint and quiet. But when Baskin Robbins moved in up the street, the owners faced their big chain bully head on: they installed flat screens, pumped in loud music, and hosted The Hatterly One-Hundred, a contest to name and create that many new flavors. In the end, afraid to offend a single potential customer, they made every entry a winner. A whopping 107 new flavors were born and branded, including the one by your 9-year-old foster brother Mason, oh so humbly named “Mason’s Masterpiece.” It consisted of vanilla ice cream with chunks of white chocolate, coconut shavings, and white sprinkles.

“Momeeee!” Mason whines on cue. “I want my ice creeem noooowww!”

"Hang on, Pumpkin," your foster mom Karen pleads to her son. "Just a few more seconds. Those other people were ahead of us in line."

One look at Karen's platinum blonde hair, pallid complexion, and whitewashed, shabby chic, spotless, colorless, odorless home, and it's pretty easy to figure out who was the real "mastermind" behind Mason's winning flavor. She's not a germa-phobe or anything, she just likes things to be neat and orderly. "Everything has a place," Karen always says, and she has no problem telling you where it is as long as you put the thing there, the right way, of course.

While he stops complaining momentarily, Mason continues to moan.

"Moooooooooooooooooooo," he simpers.

You gotta give it to him, he's good. You were halfway to the mall when Mason managed to throw a screech fest so nasty that Karen immediately diverted the family SUV, and steered straight for the one place — the only place — that sells his kryptonite by the cone.

Mason didn't start out this spoiled or rotten. He was hit by a car when he was three, and...wait for it...Karen was behind the wheel! She didn't mean to hit her own kid, of course. It was one of those horrible accidents that happen in the blink of an eye. Karen was backing out of the driveway and thought Mason had gone inside with the babysitter. The babysitter thought he was with Karen. You know the story.

Miraculously, he turned out okay, suffering a minor concussion and some scrapes that healed up without a trace. Karen, on the other hand, was permanently scarred by the incident. Now she doesn't let him leave her side. Karen's guilt about the accident crippled her ability to say no, even when Mason is bad. Like

a little genie in a bottle, all he has to do is rub Karen the wrong way and his every wish is her command.

Like today. It was supposed to be girls' day out, last minute errands before you left for school and for good. But then Mason whimpered that he wanted to come and *poof!* he got his wish. Karen could have left Mason at home with David, your foster dad, who is working in his garage like he does every Saturday afternoon. David is a really nice man who works hard, loves his family, and likes to be told what to do — so it makes sense that he married Karen, because she's really good at that. He doesn't mind running to the grocery store late at night for something Karen forgot but can't live without (like bleaching strips or fat free mayo), or planting a new row of pansies on a Sunday morning after church. He'll do all the "honey-do's" she can dream up as long as he's left alone for a few precious hours of "David Time" every Saturday.

"Which flavor are you feelin' today?" the college kid behind the counter shouts enthusiastically over the latest Avril Lavigne single blasting through the sound system.

You snap out of your own little ice cream dream and peel your numbed hands off the glass.

"Metaphorically speaking, I'm Rocky Road, but in reality, lactose intolerant, so nothing for me, thanks. Just give that kid over there his cone? So we can get back on the yellow brick road..."

He cocks his head, gives Mason a quick glance, then winks at you and cruises down the counter, head bobbing to the music. This guy gets it. He's kind of cute, too, like a less GQ version of Jake Gyllenhaal, and with a much smaller head. Could he be the one? His lips look a little chapped. Otherwise, he's got rhythm, clear skin, nice hands, good bone structure. Just as you're imagining what it would be like to plant one on him, he glances over

at you and catches you staring. You pretend to be engrossed in the sign posted over his head explaining the nutritional contents of ice cream. This happens a lot lately — you imagining kissing random guys, and then getting caught in some embarrassing moment. Ever since your best friend Emily wrote to you from sleepover camp last month giving you the juicy details of her first kiss, you've become obsessed with procuring yours.

Luckily, Ice Cream Guy gets distracted when Karen empties the contents of her tote bag onto the counter in search of her frequent buyer card. Three lipsticks, a tube of breath mints, and a tampon roll off the counter and onto the floor by his feet. He fumbles to collect all but one lipstick, which he has to get down on his hands and knees to search for under the milkshake machine. Mortifying. And a total buzzkill for your fantasy kiss.

"Go find us a table, will you, sweetie?" Karen pleads to you as Mason clings to her leg yelling, "I want my ice cream NOW!" You wander past the discarded spoon bucket...gross...and take a seat by the door. The tiny bells above the door jingle as a slow paced pack of Senior citizens hobble in. That's when it happens.

It always starts the same way: a gentle tingling that begins in your feet and slowly creeps up your legs. Your face feels flushed. Your palms grow hot, even though they were freezing moments before. The noises in the room become a muffled echo, as if you're underwater. And finally the shimmer itself: a hazy image that glimmers around the edges, like a movie playing in your head.

Some would call it a gift, but to you it's a curse. You never know when you're going to shimmer, how long it will last, or what you'll see. But what you do know is that some time in the following days/weeks/months, the shimmer will come true.

Shimmers, you see, tell the future.

This one is extra weird.

A thick stack of aged paper sits on a tabletop. The once white sheets have turned a faded umber tinged with brown spots. The edges are tattered from being fingered and turned and the spine is curling from exposure to moisture in the air. A woman's hand puts a radiant gold fountain pen to the page and begins to write. The ink sparkles as though it is mixed with stardust that bleeds into the fibers of the paper like little sunbeams forming a halo around each letter. Her handwriting loops and curves slowly, but her palm is blocking the word she is forming. Just as you are about to see the first letter...

"You ready to go?" Karen suddenly asks. The ice cream shop begins to come back. The shimmer fades. You're looking at Mason sitting smugly next to his mom, slurping up the last bits of coconut and sprinkles from his cone. Your shimmer must have lasted a couple of minutes.

"Sure," you say brightly, standing up. You look around. No one is staring, pointing at you, or whispering. No one is even looking in your direction. Good, no one noticed.

"Okay, then," Karen says. "Time to do some serious shopping." You force a big smile and nod.



Back at home that evening, you stand in your room and stare at the contents of a large Macy's bag dumped out on your bed. You can't believe your eyes. The underwear Karen got for you are so not cool. First of all, they are cotton. Boring old cotton. And second, they're pink, lavender, and blue with little white flowers. That's right, flowers, people!

"Oh, they are so shabby chic!" she squealed when she saw them.

Shabby, yes. Chic, not so much. But they were on clearance, a feature that immediately makes Karen want to buy something, at least when it comes to you. It's not that you're not grateful. You are. But you were hoping for something a little less American Girl and little more Girls Next Door. You're about to go to Trumbull Woodhouse, one of the "Ten Best Boarding Schools" in the country and the only all-girls school on the list. Trumbull Woodhouse, where they're rolling in it.

Seriously, the school catalog looked like a Ralph Lauren ad, for God's sake. Those girls are probably going to have designer sheets and the satin underwear to go with them, like some Victoria's Secret catalogue shoot. And there you'll be, in your shabby granny panties. Great. You couldn't be any less cool if you tried. But then again, you've never been one of the cool kids.

You cross over to your full-length mirror and check yourself out. Luckily, a fourteen-year-old orphan who occasionally flies the freak flag in a big way can throw on some knock-off designer jeans, espadrilles from the Gap, and a hoodie and blend in with all the other girls her age. And you are all about blending in. As a foster kid, you've learned to keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. No complaining, no fighting, and whatever you do, don't rock the boat, cause if you fall into the dark, murky water, there is no one to save you.

Okay, maybe that's a little heavy for packing on a Thursday night, you think. Save it for your journal, sister.

Later that night, after you've scrubbed your face with the new alpha-hydroxy soap Karen got you that feels like you're rubbing Icy Hot on your cheeks, you lie in bed and think. This is your favorite time and place to go over things and make your lists. Lists help pull things together, put them in order, and make them make sense. It's the only way you can calm down and enjoy the peace and quiet.

Tonight, you wonder about where you're going and where you've been. You have no clue what these other girls will be like at your new school, but you're almost positive none of them will have a story like you do.

#1 You don't know who your mother and father are. You don't even know if they are even dead or alive.

#2 Someone left you off at an orphanage when you were

three months old. In a basket!

#3 You have no relatives that you know of. And if you do, what really sucks is that the sympathetic State of South Carolina won't let you learn about them until you turn eighteen. In the meantime, what do they expect you to do:

- just not think about it,
- figure things out on your own,
- or use your imagination?

Well here's a newsflash for them — that's exactly what you've done. You've lived in two state run girls' homes and three foster homes, located in four different cities. The Donovans were your third family, and you were hoping your last. Karen always wanted a daughter, but couldn't have kids after Mason was born. It was some kind of birth complication.

Things were great when you first came to live with them. They converted Karen's scrap-booking room into a bedroom, the first time you've ever had your own. Karen is a pretty good cook. She was really cool about showing you what to do and talking to you about your body when you got your period for the first time last year. David is always home in time for dinner and tries to help you with homework, even though he usually just ends up watching. But right after your thirteenth birthday, everything changed. That's when the shimmering started again.

You have a few memories of shimmering when you were little. You saw the mailman's lottery win four months before it happened. Ralphie Teener broke his leg falling off the jungle gym exactly five days after you saw it in a shimmer. That was back when you thought everyone got them, these little visions of the future. Then one day when you were about six or seven, an older couple came to the girls' home where you were living and took you to McDonald's for lunch. They let you order whatever you

wanted, so of course you opted for the happiest meal on the menu.

You'll never forget that the little prize inside the box was a miniature, plastic Dalmatian from the Disney movie that had just come out. Then they took you to the park, played hide and go seek with you, and bought you an ice cream. The man wore a thick blue sweater and glasses, and she smelled like lavender. You accidentally got some ice cream on his sleeve, but he didn't seem to notice. They were too busy asking you if you wanted to come live with them. Although you had just met them, you remember thinking: you got to eat a cheeseburger, get a new toy, have some ice cream, and go extra high on the swing set all in the same day with them, so you said yes. Dude, if you ask a child a serious question, you're gonna get some serious child logic, what do you expect?

"We're gonna come back tomorrow and take you home with us, okay? Would you like that? To come live with us?" the man asked in the car on the way back.

Not have to go back to the lumpy bed and lumpier mashed potatoes at the girls' home? 'Mister, how fast can this thing go?' you wanted to say.

For the rest of the ride, you told them about your shimmers. Their eyes darted from you to each other, and it looked like it hurt their faces to smile. But all they said was, "what an active imagination you have." The next morning, you woke up and packed your little suitcase, shoved the Dalmatian in your pocket and waited, but...they didn't come. Anita, the house-mom, made you unpack your suitcase that night, but when you got up the next morning, you repacked it and waited again. They still didn't come. You packed and unpacked your bag everyday for three weeks until finally, you gave up and chucked that damn lit-

tle dog into the trash.

One of the kids in the room next to yours said you must've done something or said something to make them not want you. At first, the only thing you could think of was the ice cream stain, so you vowed never to eat ice cream again. But later that night, while you were lying in bed, you remembered the funny looks on their faces when you described your shimmers, and you realized you couldn't tell anyone about them again. You also decided to put an end to these stupid pictures in your head.

The first vow was easy to keep, no ice cream. The shimmers were harder to control. When a shimmer came on, you did whatever it took to stop it: shook your head, screamed out loud, clapped your hands, rubbed your feet, turned on loud music, anything to distract you and snap you out of it. And while those things worked to drive the freak flashes off, that kind of behavior didn't fly with the other kids your age or your first two foster families. You were labeled a "problem child."

Over the next two years, you were poked, prodded, and pointed at by doctors, teachers, and the other kids around you. Funny thing was, all your tests were normal. Go figure, right? Eventually they stopped looking, and lucky for you, the shimmers stopped coming. That's when the Donovans came into the picture, and it felt like you finally had a shot at a normal life.

Or so you thought, my pretty...

Fast forward to your thirteenth birthday last year. Karen worked for three days straight to transform the backyard into a full Hawaiian beach blowout. David and Mason were recruited to hand the guests fruity drinks in coconut shells with little paper umbrellas. Kids from the neighborhood who you ride bikes with, a few girls from your soccer team, and your best friend, Emily, who's in your class, came ready to party.

You posed for funny pictures with your friends on David's old surf board as though you were catching huge waves in the middle of the ocean, played water balloon volleyball, and made paper leis. Later that afternoon, you sat at the head of the picnic table with all your friends and family gathered around you singing Happy Birthday. Karen made your favorite red velvet birthday cake in the shape of a whale. She set it in front of you ablaze with 13 candles.

You've always found blowing out the candles a little awkward. You don't like being the center of attention. Everyone looking at you, smiling and singing, makes you want to crawl into a hole or at least under the table. But you forced yourself to stay above ground and stare at your cake. Then, right at that moment, the familiar tingling started in your feet. You shifted a little on the bench seat. It had been a while, so you were hoping it would go away. But when it started to spread higher and higher, and you felt the heat in your hands, you knew. And panicked. You tried not to let on that you were about to check out, but this one came hard and fast.

You are standing on the edge of a an isolated forest, the sunlight filtering through the forest canopy. The smell of wood smoke wafts from a fire somewhere nearby. The floor of the forest is covered with wild berries, ferns and slippery, spongy moss. Just past the edge of the woods is a pond. Mountain laurel and hemlock stand out like confetti on the muddy banks and tangled vines hang from the trees tickling the water's surface. It is silent except for the faint, rhythmic recitation of some kind of chanting. You are not alone. A gust of wind causes the vines to sway and brings the distinct sense that something is about to happen...

Thud...Thud...Thud... You opened your eyes and turned your head to see Mason sitting in a lawn chair kicking his feet against the metal base. A cold washcloth was spread across your forehead. Thud...Thud...Thud...“Why are you so weird? Why can’t you just be normal like the rest of us? You made Mommy cry,” Mason shouted.

“Mason, that’s enough. Karen, she’s up,” David said urgently.

Karen and David helped you sit up. You looked around the yard; all of your guests were gone, your whale cake was still intact, and the candles blown out.

“You all right, sweetie? You gave us a little scare,” Karen said as she wiped your face with the washcloth.

“I bet she just had too much sun. Or maybe too much sugar.” David ruffled your hair and began clearing the party favors and used plates from the table. But underneath his casual dismissal was a note of concern. You were worried too. Was the shimmering back? Why now? Why you?

You didn’t have to wait long to find out. The shimmers came more than ever, and you couldn’t always hide them. You knew before anyone else that Mason had 3 cavities. And that the guinea pig in the science classroom was going to have babies. And you didn’t want to tell her, but the owner of the craft store where Karen buys her favorite ribbon was going to break her wrist when she trips over a box in the store room. A few months later you overheard Karen and David talking late one night. They hadn’t heard you come into the kitchen for a glass of milk. It was technically already lights out. They were sitting in the dining room, and Karen was crying.

“You know I love her, and I’ve always wanted a daughter. But this just isn’t working out, David. Those episodes she has, it’s like she goes into her own little world. I mean I knew she had some

behavior issues before she came to us, but I thought it was just acting out or being bounced around as a foster kid. I thought once we gave her a loving home and some stability, she wouldn't act like that anymore." Karen stopped to blow her nose loudly into a tattered Kleenex.

"Maybe we'll have to get her some counseling or..I don't know...work with her for a while," David said, trying to comfort Karen.

"We can't afford that. Plus, what if this is the sign of something more serious? It could just get worse. I don't want Mason growing up around someone like that," Karen said through more tears.

"We'll figure something out," David said quietly. You knew what this meant. They were going to send you back. Back to a seedy, smelly bunk bed and two drawers at some drab girls home, probably in a different city. At fourteen, with a file like yours, you had about as much chance of getting adopted, or even fostered, as that kid in Texas who just stabbed his family to death with a screwdriver in the middle of the night.

No, you would figure something out. You had to. Fast. Where could you go where you could live safely on your own, go to school, and not stick out because you don't have any parents hovering over you? It seemed like a miracle when Emily mentioned Susan Short the next day.

"She's two years ahead of us. You know. The only child of the owners of the Short Shoe Factory?" Emily said.

The Short Shoe Factory was the largest business in Hatterly. And the Shorts were the richest family in town.

"What about her?" you asked.

"She went off to boarding school in 10th grade and fell in love with some guy from California. Now she never comes home

on school breaks and her parents are thinking of moving to San Diego," Emily answered.

"Boarding school?" you asked. Suddenly you realized it was your answer.

"Yeah, school where you go and sleep over in dorms. Before college. They're supposed to be really hard," Emily added.

Boarding school! It was brilliant! It took care of all of your needs. No one had their parents around. Everyone would be in the same boat as you. Kind of. They would probably let you stay over during school vacations. Somebody would stay behind for breaks.

"Emily, that's it! That's my answer. Boarding school!" you cried out, grasping her shoulder.

Emily squinted at first and looked perplexed. "How would you get in? How would you even figure out where to go?" she asked.

"We'll Google it!" was your retort. Which is exactly what the two of you did that afternoon on Emily's computer. You found an article online entitled, "Tomorrow's Leaders: The Top Ten Boarding Schools in the Country."

"You have awesome grades, and you're in a ton of clubs," Emily pointed out. "You could probably get in to one of these places."

Karen and David couldn't find out about this until you knew for sure if you got in. What if they tried to stop you?

"How do I keep it secret?" you wondered.

"You can use my address. I'm the first one home, and I always check the mail. No one will know but us," Emily announced.

Soon Emily's mailbox began filling up with big white packets, thick questionnaires, writing sample requests, and glossy

foldouts of sprawling campuses and grinning, rosy-cheeked students.

"Anywhere but here," was your mantra.

A nice woman in the admissions office at one of the schools explained to you how the entrance exam worked. The good news was that all of the accredited boarding schools used one standardized exam, the SSAT, and there was a test site downtown where you could go and sit for it. The bad news was the test site was downtown and you had to go and sit for it. This meant lying to Karen, something you'd done on occasion but were not very good at.

"Karen, I need to go down to the library tomorrow to research this new history project," you said coolly as Karen finished sewing Mason's Spring Fling costume at the kitchen table.

"Ok, no problem." Karen chirped, not even looking up from her needle and thread.

So that part was easy, but the rest was harder than you thought. While your nose was supposed to be buried in a book, you were catching a stinky bus filled with cranky riders, taking a monster exam that made your brain ache, catching a stinkier bus back, and sprinting to the library steps by five to meet Karen. Somehow, you managed to pull it off.

Then the waiting game began. Most acceptances were sent out the week of March 1st. You and Emily ran to her mailbox each day starting that day.

"Just in case," Emily said. "We don't want to miss one."

On the 3rd, your first answer arrived. The envelope was pretty thin. You sliced it open neatly and began to read. Emily leaned over your shoulder and read along...

"We regret to inform you that this year due to a record number of outstanding applications..." Her voice trailed off.

"It's a no," you said, trying to hide the disappointment in your voice, as you finished reading. Something about more qualified applicants than openings, they encourage you to re-apply the following year, your application was very promising, etc. etc.

"Well that sucks," Emily said. "If they turned you down, it's because that place wasn't right for you." She knit her brow, then got one of her good "Emily" looks.

"I know. We'll burn it," she stated flatly. "Gets rid of the negative energy. Or at least that's what my mom says. Follow me."

Emily's mom is a yoga teacher and knows about these things. She's always talking about energy and vibrations. You once thought about asking her about your shimmers, but you remembered your vow and decided against it.

"Emily, you know you aren't allowed," you warned. Last year Emily got in trouble for starting fires at school during recess. She was burning up her exams marked lower than a B-. Ever since, she has had to fight a pyromaniac rap.

"This is different," she announced airily. She led you to the backyard and lit the letter and envelope with a match.

She did seem to get a gleam in her eye while the paper burned. Actually, over the next week, she got the gleam five more times when she burned five more rejections.

"We're running out of schools," you said feeling disheartened. "Do you think they can tell I'm a foster kid?"

This is your big fear. That foster kids are on some kind of a "Do Not Touch" list that gets passed around schools. Look out, troubled child coming through!

"Of course they can't," Emily answered. "We didn't mention it anywhere. We made sure. Besides, they can't discriminate against you just because you don't have parents. There's gotta be a law against that or something."

"What about the teacher references? We didn't see those," you replied.

"Sure we did," Emily retorted. "I steamed them open. They were good. Ms. Keiffer thinks you're perfect."

Add mail tampering to the list of Emily's foibles.

"Emily!"

She shrugged happily and stuck her tongue out.

For two days nothing arrived. But on March 11th, a gloomy, rainy Tuesday, a huge cream-colored envelope from Trumbull Woodhouse landed on her doorstep. You sat with Emily on her daybed and stared at it.

"I'm afraid," you said. "What if it's another rejection?"

"Just open it! It's big, not like the others. I think that means you got in!" she sang, clapping her hands rapidly like little butterfly wings.

You ripped the envelope open. The paper was so thick it could be fabric. Expensive fabric.

That's when you saw the words you will never forget, "Congratulations, the Admissions Committee of Trumbull Woodhouse has chosen you for a place in the class of ..."

You felt a lump in your throat, and your eyes started to sting as hot tears pooled and fell.

"You got in! Oh my god, you got in!" Emily leapt up and ran around her room, laughing and clapping.

You dragged the back of your hand across your eyes to blot your tears and looked up at her. She grabbed your hands and led you around the room in a ring-around-the-rosy style skip fest worthy of Riverdance.

"And it's the best girls' school in the whole country!"

You and Emily celebrated some more the next few days by dancing, singing, cookie baking, and sage burning (of course!).

The ceremonies felt good in the moment, but you couldn't ignore this little panicky, not-so-rosy feeling that kept fluttering in your stomach. Tuition at Trumbull Woodhouse was over \$48,000 a year. Before books, travel, and uniforms. Now that you were accepted, you had to start worrying about the money part. Your acceptance letter had said that your financial aid package would be forthcoming in approximately ten days. When it arrived, you were nearly as nervous as you were before your acceptance.

"Why did it come to your house?" Emily asked as the two of you closed the mailbox at the end of the driveway. "We never listed your real address. Did you tell Karen and David?"

"No, we agreed I would wait until I had the whole package, remember? I haven't said a thing," you replied.

"That's so weird," Emily replied, stumped by the mail mix up.

You got a tiny shiver up your spine. It was strange, you thought.

Moments later you forgot any suspicions when you read the envelope's contents. In one instant, with one sentence, your future goes from terrible to fabulous.

"We are pleased to inform you that a benefactor who wishes to remain anonymous has stepped forward to pay your entire tuition to Trumbull Woodhouse. Provided you maintain a B average or higher, this support will continue for all four years of your time with us."

WHAT?! This was unbelievable! Too good to be true!

"I feel like I could burn my whole house down!" Emily exclaimed, jumping up and down.



Now Karen, David, and Mason stand on one side of the security gate at the Greenville-Spartanburg International airport, and you stand on the other waving good-bye. The airport is only two hours from Hatterly, but you had to stop twice on the way, once for Mason to go to the bathroom and once to get him ice cream. Big surprise. Because of the stops, there was only time for quick hugs. Which is probably better anyway. The closer you got to leaving, the less Karen mentioned coming back for Christmas. The message was clear: you were out of the Donovans' lives for good.

Karen and David wave enthusiastically back as you walk through security, but Mason just stands there in shock. He's not even eating his dip cone from Dairy Queen. That's because on your way to your flight, you left him with some food for thought.

"Scientists just discovered that eating ice cream every day makes your privates fall off. I read it in a magazine, so it has to

be true," you whispered in his ear, giving him a little squeeze.

Ok, it was a little mean, but the brat had it coming...

You look at your boarding pass.

"Here you go," the flight attendant says as she points you to your seat. It's a short trip to the third row. "Can I hang your jacket?"

First class? You?

"It's your lucky day because we're serving ice cream to first class after our lunch service," the attendant adds with a wink. You can't believe it. The ticket the school sent was actually first class. You've flown three times in your entire life and always in the cheap seats.

What next, ruby slippers?

You twist in your seat to check out the rest of the plane. A woman a few rows behind in coach you looks up from her magazine and meets your gaze. She smiles over her glasses and you smile back. She looks normal enough, late forties, light grey blouse, curly dark hair, but there's something intense about her stare. It feels like she can see straight through your skin and bones and into your head to read your thoughts. She gives you a little nod and returns to her magazine. You turn back around in your seat. That was a little creepy. Or was it? You don't trust your perceptions lately. All of your senses have felt a little off since you got permission of the state to leave the Donovans (with their rapid blessing) and go to Trumbull Woodhouse.

You pull your book from your backpack, but it's hard to concentrate. You glance up and notice a boy step into the cabin of the plane and pause in the line of passengers filing down the aisle. His shaggy mop of brown hair falls haphazardly over his eyes. Despite the late summer heat, he's wearing a striped blazer, like the one Emily's brother has from Urban Outfitters, a local band t-shirt, scores of colorful plastic club bracelets, tight jeans and black

Converse. You don't really think he's cute, but he could be –

Thwack!

He trips and stumbles face first into your lap.

"Oh geez, s-s-sorry," he stammers. Up this close you notice his big green eyes. "I don't even know what made me trip. Are you okay?"

"I'll survive. I think my pinky got crushed," you reply. You try to sound casual, but your finger really does hurt. You take a look. "The nail is still there."

"Ah, yeah. Okay. I'm gonna go find my seat now that I've...tested out yours," he says, standing awkwardly. He smells fresh, like soap and leaves. "Maybe I'll get lucky and take out a few old ladies or someone in a wheelchair," he adds dryly.

"Fifty bonus points for babies," you call over your shoulder.

He laughs and gives you two thumbs up. This reminds you of Emily. She always uses the thumbs up sign, only she meant it sarcastically, as if to say 'yeah right.' That was the hardest part about leaving, saying good-bye to Emily.

She was a mess when you went to her house to hang out one last time the night before last. Her mom made you guys vegan burritos and wild rice, and you had a carpet picnic in Emily's room. (One thing you won't miss about Hatterly: dinner at Emily's.) Emily was crying so hard she choked on a chunk of tofu. You were sad too, but you've been through this many times before. Each time you've switched foster homes or changed schools, you've had to say good-bye to friends, family, teachers, even pets. It's a process that's filled with lots of tears, promises to write, and extra long hugs. The only thing that makes it easier is to not get too attached in the first place.

After takeoff, you pull out the large accordion folder Karen got you to organize the bajillions of papers Trumbull Woodhouse

has been sending you all summer. You find the questionnaire you were supposed to have filled out by the time you arrived but have been putting off for weeks. Likes, dislikes, hobbies, fears, dreams...yadda, yadda, yadda. You hate filling out things like this. Just because someone knows you love breakfast for dinner or singing in the bathtub or that feeling you get when you take your feet off the pedals and coast down the hill, or that you hate cauliflower and water getting stuck in your ears doesn't mean they know you. You are greater than the sum of your parts, you want to write. But you begin to fill it out anyway. Just as you get to question 11, you feel a shimmer coming.

There's a red van driving down a highway, weaving gently. It drifts a little into the next lane and then swerves back sharply, as if the driver fell asleep and then woke up and yanked the wheel in terror. But it weaves again. You get this bad feeling that the van is going to crash.

Then just as quickly as the shimmer started, it stops. Thanks a lot, brain, you think to yourself. At least you didn't shimmer a plane crashing, right?

When you return from splashing water on your face in the bathroom, the flight attendant has left a bowl of ice cream on your tray. You sit down and stare at the little mountains covered in hot fudge. You're not really lactose intolerant. That's just one of the excuses you've used over the years, ever since that fateful day in the park with that couple. But now your fate has changed. You changed it. You planned your work, worked your plan, and it actually worked! You have a chance to start a new life, in a new place, with new friends, under new rules, and as a whole new you. Whoever you want to be. So why not be someone who eats

ice cream? You plunge your spoon deep into the dish of sweet, gooey, ice cream and take your first wonderful, melt-in-your-mouth bite.

If you had to come up with a name for this flavor, you'd call it Destiny.



Oh my gosh, you're so smart. Only bring the essentials and FedEx everything else, right?" a girl with long blonde hair and ginormous movie star sunglasses says to you as she puts on another coat of soft pink lip gloss. Her glassy lips move fast and her hands never stop moving through her hair.

You look down at your two suitcases. The truth is, the contents of these two suitcases make-up your entire life and all of your personal possessions. You have some clothes, four pairs of shoes, toiletries, your journal, an iPod Nano David and Karen gave you for your birthday, don't forget your fabulous new underwear, and that's about it, folks.

She, on the other hand, is surrounded by mounds of matching canvas bags and hard luggage pieces with the letters LV plastered all over them. This time last year you would've assumed these were her initials and maybe tried to guess her name out loud, but David surprised Karen with a Louis Vuitton drawstring

tote bag for Christmas, so now you're in the know. Thank God. That would've been so embarrassing. The flutter of relief, however, is quickly tugged down by a queasy feeling in the pit of your stomach. There have got to be a million more possible missteps ahead of you, and Karen's Christmas list was only so long. This school, these people, this whole experience is a virtual mine field of humiliation. You decide to stick to the golden rule and keep quiet.

"You'd think I would've learned," the blonde girl continues. "It's not like I'm a Third Former, anymore. My mom had to pay like a bazillion dollars so the airline would let me check all this stuff. She was so pissed..."

The shellacked girl trails off as the driver begins loading her bags into the back of the school van sent to shuttle you and the other arriving girls from the Boston airport to Harrowgate, the town where Trumbull Woodhouse is located.

"Thanks George! How was your summer?" she chirps.

"Fine, thanks, Miss Armstrong," he grunts, as he heaves one of her trunks onto his back. You soon realize that George grunts a lot. And he has freakish upper body strength for a man his age.

"Hailey?! Hi-yeeeeee! You look so cuuuuute!" another blonde in similar glasses coos as she runs up and throws her arms around the lip-glossed girl.

The airport doors slide open and two more girls in wispy, flowing summer dresses anchored by rows of delicate gold chain necklaces, charm bracelets, and, yes, even bigger sunglasses spill out. Their flip-flops clap loudly against their feet and their jewelry jingles as they jog up to greet their friends. You all pile into a shiny black passenger van, with the school's name painted discreetly in white.

You notice automatically that it is nothing like the one from

your shimmer. Not that you wanted it to be, of course. But once you've had a shimmer, you learn to watch for what it contained. Occasionally you have a random shimmer that doesn't seem to have anything to do with your life and never gets played out in reality. Like the strange forest scene at your Hawaiian-themed birthday a year ago or the woman writing unknown text in glimmering ink when you shimmered at the ice cream shop. But mostly things show up. For the millionth time, you silently wish you understood how this stupid shimmering worked.

The girls chatter straight through the first hour of the drive, through downtown Boston and onto 495. You gather that Hailey is going into her second year at "Trumby," as she refers to it, and Brooke just flew in from her parents' summer home in the Hamptons to begin her third year. Hailey hails from Ohio. You shake your head as you recall the way Hailey spoke at the airport, like she was so far from her days as a freshman, or Third Form as they call it here. Mary Kate and Jasmine are Fifth Formers from Los Angeles. Somehow, Mary Kate and Hailey's older brother dated briefly two summers ago but she insists she's "so over him," which everyone so doesn't believe. Brooke's parents have recently reconciled after a long separation, and Jasmine tried pot for her first time while visiting the set of a music video her father was producing.

It's like reading *US Magazine*, only with normal people's lives substituted for celebrities. All of these girls are so comfortable with one another, you think; they talk alike, dress alike, and even wear the same sunglasses. They all seem to belong. They also have one other thing in common: none of them seem to notice you. This is actually better, you decide. You haven't quite figured out how you're going to spin your past or what details of your life you want to reveal. The less people know about you for now, the better.

"Who are you?" Jasmine finally shouts over the drone of gossip and chatter from the other girls.

Their shared brain must have given the signal to turn around, because the three other girls simultaneously shift around in their seats to look at you.

"Wait...wait...Don't tell me. I should know this. Lemme think for a second," she barks before you can even say a word. "You're definitely a Third Former. You're not the equestrian rider with the big boobs, no offense. You're not the flute player from New Jersey. Are you the girl from D.C. who's dad is that big lobbyist who was caught in a motel with a hooker a couple years ago?"

"No, that's Krissy Christler, remember?" Mary Kate chimes in. "I can't wait to see her."

"Oh yeah. Well, I know you're not the swimmer from Maine, I remember she had red hair..." Jasmine gazes up towards the ceiling, twirling her hair back and forth around her finger as she thinks.

"I know, you're the mystery girl from South Carolina, right?" Jasmine interrupts. She sits up straight. "You never posted a photo, or anything for that matter. There's just a little silhouette outline where your face should be. Nice touch, really."

"What? Post a photo of...myself? Where?" you ask, absolutely gobsmacked by the fact that they know who you are, or at least where you're from.

"The Field," Hailey says casually applying another coat to her lips.

You stare blankly at her. She stops mid-swipe, her bottom jaw dropping open.

"Trumby's version of Facebook? The way we keep up with each other over the summer and get all the gossip before we get back to school? Don't tell me you didn't know about it!" she exclaims in amazement.

You shake your head no.

"Oh, how sad," Brooke cries.

The other girls nod in agreement. You feel the familiar sting of pity as it pierces your pride. And the tug of that feeling in your stomach as you realize a beehive of social interaction has been buzzing and swarming all summer in the airwaves just above your head, and you've been completely left out. Girls were swapping pictures, spreading rumors, sharing inside jokes, funny stories, and favorite things, while friendships formed and bonds crystallized like thick honey.

"Everyone knows everything about everyone at the Crackhouse," Mary Kate explains, using her own nickname for the school. "Think about it. There's only like eighty girls in each class. We go to school together, live together, eat together, play together. That's just the way it is. You'll get used to it."

"At least people know who you are," Brooke says trying to comfort you. "Trust us, there's nothing worse than going faceless all four years. You wanna be known for something. That's very important at our school. Otherwise, you may as well go to public school."

The other girls recoil in disgust at the thought.

Once you're on highway, the inside of the van becomes quiet. Two of the girls have dozed off, heads resting on the windows. Hailey is painting her nails, and Jasmine is listening to her iPod. You watch the lush green landscape of Massachusetts speed past and start to drift off yourself when you catch a flash of red out of the corner of your eye. You sit up straight and crane your neck to see the road ahead. George glances at you curiously in the rearview mirror.

You wait for it, scanning the road with anxious dread. Your heart beats faster. Your breath quickens. It's the van you saw in your shimmer on the plane. You've had shimmers that have played out in real life, but never this soon and never about some-

thing so big. So many moments pass that you start to think you imagined the red streak. But then a rusty red van just like the one in your shimmer pulls into the lane ahead of you.

Before you can think, you hear someone call out, "George, can we get off? NOW! TAKE THIS EXIT!"

You suddenly realize it's you who's shouting. So much for keeping your mouth shut. But you couldn't help it. The voice rose up and out of you like you were possessed. Hailey turns around and shoots you a critical look. The other girls stir from the commotion.

"What's going on?" Mary Kate asks, still half asleep.

George gives you a glance in the rearview and deftly shifts into the middle lane, and then toward the exit. He must assume you're sick or something. When you reach the off ramp, he lets up on the accelerator and you glide down the hill, away from the red menace. Right away your stomach begins to unclench. As you reach the stop sign at the end of the exit, there is a massive BOOM! followed by the sick crunch of metal. You look up just as the red van flips and tumbles on the highway fifty yards ahead, exploding in a ball of flame.

"Whoa. Did you see that?!" Brooke shouts. "Look!"

You watch as the highway traffic swerves to avoid the fireball. The air is filled with the scream of squealing brakes as an entire interstate of cars grinds to a halt. George pulls across the street into a parking lot for commuters. The girls surge out of the van and run to the edge, straining to see the calamity. The sound of more metal smashing on metal tells you there are secondary accidents. A cloud of thick black smoke streams into the air from the van which is burning to a crisp.

George wipes his brow nervously and looks at you. "How did you know there was going to be an accident?" he asks simply. Everyone stares at you.

"I.. I didn't," you stammer. "I..I just had to go to the bathroom. Really badly," you add, feeling your cheeks turn red. "Sorry."

Everyone looks back to the wreckage, accepting your explanation. Everyone but George, who holds his stare a beat longer. It's not like you are about to explain your shimmers to total strangers. Much less schoolmates you will be spending the next four years with.

"Come on then, " George says as the sound of distant sirens grows louder. "We need to find a restroom, and get on our way."

"I have to use one too," Jasmine says.

You climb back in the van. Everyone talks about the accident. Or at least everyone except you. You stop at a nearby gas station just as a fire truck speeds past and heads onto the exit ramp you just descended.

Once inside the restroom, you splash your face with cold water and look at your fractured reflection in the cracked mirror. You look normal on the outside. Inside you feel like a tornado has been unleashed in your head. Of course you're glad you saved yourself and the others from harm, but you can't believe you saw that crash so perfectly! What does it mean? Are you going to continue to be bombarded with images of disasters right before they happen? And run around alerting everyone like the Chicken Little of Trumbull Woodhouse? You scowl at yourself in the mirror as a warning to your broken brain.

There is a knock on the restroom door. "We're getting slushies. Do you want one?" Jasmine's muffled voice calls through the door.

You shake off your shimmer and flash a big smile in the mirror. *There, that's more like it.* You open the door.

"No thanks," you reply, trying to sound upbeat.

"Thank God you had to pee or we may have been on the road when that accident happened," she says as she squeezes by. "Ew, it's so gross in here. I'm definitely hovering," you hear her say as she closes the bathroom door.

Thank God they believed your story about needing the bathroom.

George stays off the highway for the rest of your trip, sticking to back roads. About an hour later you reach Harrowgate. You are so preoccupied and nervous, you don't notice much about the town as you pass through. You are still turning over the events with the red van in your head. George turns on to a rolling paved road where traffic thins out. You pass several enormous, rambling houses set back from the street. Some are so big they could pass for small hotels. You read somewhere that Harrowgate was a wealthy farming community founded in the 18th century. It looks like the money just kept piling up. A low stone wall appears on your right, and the fields beyond it are perfectly manicured and neat, not a blade of grass out of place.

"Here we are," George announces, slowing to turn onto school grounds.

The van slips underneath an ornate, iron-scrolled entrance gate framed by huge trees on both sides. Just past the arch, you feel an overwhelming rush of tingling and heat, like a current of electricity is coursing through your veins while the sound of rushing water fills your head. What the heck is this? you think. Then as suddenly as it starts, the tingling and rushing stops. You look around. Jasmine looks a little perplexed. But no one else has noticed a thing.

You look ahead to the largest sprawl of lawn you have ever seen. It's surrounded by all the buildings you recognize from the catalog and website. Three mountains tower in the distance.

Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.



George pulls the van into a procession of cars that snakes through the middle of campus. Cars, vans, and limos are pouring in and pulling up from every direction as the girls of Trumbull Woodhouse return to their home away from home for another year. You watch smartly dressed parents shake hands and show off their daughters all across the lawns and in front of the residential halls. There are twenty-one dorms in all, scattered like popcorn over the four hundred acres of main campus. You notice that their style and architecture hint at the era in which each building was added on. And with names like Bloomer, Winfrey, Curie, Cassatt, and Alcott, every dorm honors an influential woman in history.

One by one, George pulls up to a dorm, unpacks some luggage and a van mate hops out. The last girl to get dropped off besides you is Hailey. Her dorm, Grimke Hall, reminds you of old gothic churches, with puffy stone walls, pointy spires, and men-

acing gargoyles watching you from every corner. She's been very chatty, volunteering Trumby history factoids after a fresh coat of lip varnish. But when George pulls the van to a halt and jumps out, she turns to you, lowers her designer goggles to the tip of her nose, and stares you down with steely gray eyes flecked by bits of amber.

"Tell me something, South Carolina," she says quietly. "You knew that red van was going to crash, didn't you? Before it happened." She chews on her gum, her jaw snapping open and shut like a shiny-lipped crocodile, waiting for your answer. Her confrontational approach takes you by surprise. But you try to stay calm. Don't let your voice shoot up six octaves to a high-pitched squeak like it wants to, you think, taking a deep breath.

"That would be a cool trick, " you fib, "being able to see the future. But like I said, I just had to go to the bathroom. Really, really badly," you add firmly. You try to shrug casually. George pulls open the sliding van door.

"All right, Miss Armstrong," he says.

Hailey's eyes don't move for a moment. They stay locked on yours. As much as you want to look down, you know better.

"Right, how could you?" she says casually. The corners of her mouth flick up into a smile and her glasses slide back into place. "See you around. Good luck with everything." She bounces out of the van and slams the door. You sit back against the warm leather seat. What on earth made her suspect you? Was it the way you had called out to George? There's no way Hailey could know about your shimmers. You just hope your explanation made sense and that your nerves didn't show. Your pulse throbs. You take some more deep breaths. You feel relief when George gets back behind the wheel and throws the van into gear.

"Next up, Rose House," he announces, pointing the van and

you, in the direction of your new home.

Two minutes later you pull up to a three story, weathered brick building with white trim. Terracotta flower boxes line each window, and a blooming rose vine creeps up the sides to the third floor.

"Don't worry," you tell George. "I've got it," you say as you grab your two measly suitcases. You've carried your own bags from home to home since you were five. Trumbull Woodhouse won't be changing that.

"Thanks for the ride," you say cheerily.

"I should be thanking you, young lady," is all he says. He gives you a curt nod — George is not overly active in the smile department — and gets back behind the wheel. The parking area outside Rose House is quiet. Nobody else is unloading right now. A lull, you think. Good timing.

Your arrival is announced by the rhythmic crunch of your sneakers on the pebbled walkway. Just inside the door, there is a knobby legged, antique table covered with envelopes. Each one has a name printed on the front flap, yours being one of them. A tray of finger sandwiches and cookies sits alongside a big pitcher of pink lemonade.

A door is open to the right of the table. A 35-ish man in khakis and a slender woman in a yellow cotton dress and ballet flats are seated in their living room, drinking cups of tea. He's stately; she looks like a chic version of Betty Crocker. Side by side, they look like morning TV talk show hosts.

"Hello! Welcome!" the man says, rising.

"You must be one of our new residents," the woman says pleasantly as she gets up to greet you.

"We're Gordon and Lily Mitchell. Your dorm parents," she explains. You set down your suitcases to shake their hands and

introduce yourself. They both nod knowingly when you tell them your name. "It's great to finally meet you. You were the only one we couldn't read about on *The Field* this summer," Lily Mitchell says.

You grimace. "I know. I never got my email invitation I guess. I heard about it in the van from the airport. So I'm the only one who didn't join in the fun. I wish I had known about it."

"Oh, don't feel bad. Plenty of time to get to know everyone. That's the beauty of boarding school," Gordon assures you. "How was the flight from South Carolina? Not too bumpy, I hope."

Thanks to *The Field* mishap, your place of origin is the only fact everyone seems to know about you. But now that you've seen inside the Emerald City, you're sure they've done their homework on every student.

"My flight was great," you reply, praying they don't ask you about the drive from the airport.

"Well, good. You're in Suite 2B, up on the second floor. And I believe you are the first to arrive?" Lily looks over at her husband for confirmation.

"Yes she is. Follow me." Gordon Mitchell grabs your suitcases and bounds up the stairs. You follow closely behind. A car pulls up into the crescent moon drive in front of Rose House, so Lily heads out to greet the latest arrivals.

"Here we are," Gordon announces. There are three doors at the top of the landing, one to each side and one straight ahead.

"That door leads to the second floor baths and showers," he says, nodding in the direction of the door in the middle. "Rose House has three suites to a floor, and four girls to each suite." He opens the lacquered black door on the left. It leads into a common living room with a thick, patterned rug covering the honey-colored wood floors.

You smell a fresh coat of paint. The white trim glistens, not a spec of dust yet. The room contains a dark tan couch, two red paisley chairs, and two side tables with blue and white Chinese lamps. It looks more like a luxury hotel than the dorm rooms you've seen on TV. Four small single bedrooms lead off the common room.

You follow Gordon to the farther one on the right. The name of each of your suitemates is printed on a card taped to the door of her assigned room. You say the others' names in your head as you pass by and peek in their rooms: Hayden Murdoch, Willa Nash, and Casey Mulligan. You notice that each room contains a twin bed, a petite desk and chair, two small, small closets, and a dresser.

"Here you are. Home sweet home," Gordon says with a wink as he opens the door to your room. You can't believe your eyes.

"This... is my room?" you ask in amazement. You take three steps inside and turn slowly, taking it all in. The room is beautiful and by far the best one in the suite. It has the same furniture as the others, but it's on a corner, so it is a little bigger and doesn't feel as cluttered. You have two windows, where the other girls only have one, and you have your very own...wait for it... marble fireplace! You've seen them in movies and the decorating magazines Karen reads, but never in real life. You rush over to the windows. You can see the tops of peoples' head milling around below and three majestic mountains in the distance.

"Fireplace doesn't work, unfortunately," Gordon says, setting your bags on the floor. "But it's nice to have anyway."

You nod. You are speechless.

"I should get back downstairs," Gordon says. "And I am sure you are eager to unpack. Your roommates will be here soon, so enjoy the quiet while you have it," Gordon warns. "We're right

downstairs if you need anything at all. There's a quick meeting just before dinner at 5:45 to explain sign-in and sign-out. See you then. And I think someone will drop by to take you on a campus tour here shortly. So be aware."

"Thanks," you say.

Gordon pulls the door behind him, leaving it open a crack. You take his advice and sit on your bed, taking a few deep breathes. This is the perfect time to perform a little ritual you like to do each time you land in a new room at a new home. With your eyes closed, you picture the room and every tiny detail you can remember about it. You imagine yourself living in here each day, reading, sleeping, studying, writing in your journal, talking to friends, getting dressed.

You say out loud, "This is my room now. This is where I live. This is my home. I am going to have a fabulous life here."

"Heloooo? Knock-knock," says a girl with a long, horsey face and flat dirty-blond hair, as she opens your door and interrupts your mantra. She wears all-black workout gear and a T-shirt that says "In Trumbull We Trust," and carries a field hockey stick.

"Hi! I'm Regan Jenner. I'm a Sixth Former and your upper-class Orienteer." Regan reaches forward to shake your hand. She has a grip like a Russian lady wrestler.

"Hi," you say. You can't tell why but you immediately feel on guard. Maybe because she's acting so overly friendly and familiar, but in a forced way. Or maybe it's the way her eyes flicker as she gives you the once over.

"Gordon mentioned someone would be around," you add.

"Right. I'm your personal tour guide today. Don't worry, everybody gets one. And any time you have a question about how things work here at TW, I'm here with answers. I live right over there," she adds, pointing to another dorm that you can just

make out through the trees.

You nod. You get a small shiver up your spine and decide to grab a sweater.

“Ready to begin the best year four years of your life? Follow me,” she continues. You can’t tell if she’s being serious, or trying to be sarcastic.

Outside, you and Regan wave to Gordon and Lily who are greeting a new arrival in the parking lot. Regan whips out her campus map, the same one you received in your admissions packet, but hers looks a wee bit different. It’s been blown up, laminated, and tricked out with puff paint, glitter, and comments floating in crinkly clouds.

“I’m sure you took the guided tour when you came to visit, right?” she asks, already assuming the answer is yes. She catches herself when you stare back at her blankly.

“You mean you didn’t come for an overnight during host week? Not even a day visit?” she asks incredulously.

“Uh, no. I’m from South Carolina. My application was... um...a bit last minute. But I went through the photo gallery on the website about a hundred times,” you say, your voice going up an octave on the last word so it sounds more like a question than an answer.

“Wow. My parents and I checked out eleven different schools before I chose this one.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “I can’t imagine choosing a school without seeing it first.”

You just shrug and smile.

“Anyhow,” she continues, “we are standing here.” She points to a spot in the center of the map. “This hot pink area where I drew all the stars is considered main campus.” Her hand traces a large circle rimmed in black. “It’s about four hundred acres total, but a lot of that is taken up by the playing fields, the lake,

and the cross-country running trails that extend up and into the woods. It's basically everything you see around us and where you'll be spending your day-to-day life. All those little glittery squares on the map are the buildings where you'll go to class, eat, study, hang out, workout, go to chapel, etc. I know it looks like a big area, but I'll show you everything you need to know today to survive. And it gets familiar fast. Ready?"

You nod vigorously, trying to keep up as she trots along.

As you crest the hill near the cluster of quaint cottages housing the faculty offices, you reach the Great Lawn. It must be ten acres. The expanse is mostly flat, but on the far side there are marble steps cut into a gentle incline and a mosaic of flower beds. Picnic tables, chaise lounges, and umbrella'd settees dot the grassy cul de sac.

"It's the gathering place for the 'Who's Who,' the 'Who's That?' and the 'Who Cares' of the student body," Regan explains as you walk across the gigantic plush lawn. "Those fields over there in the distance are the Upper Fields, and those way down there are the Lower Fields. Betcha can't guess how they got their names?" Regan says. Now she *is* being sarcastic.

You smile and nod at her joke. But inside you're just glad there will be at least two places you can actually remember.

"That group of buildings to the left and right of the rotunda are all the classrooms. The ones on the right are for Humanities, Languages, and Performing Arts. The buildings on the left are your Mathematics, Sciences, and Visual Arts. And that big rotunda in the middle with all the balloons is the student center. That's where we're headed next."

Regan hurries ahead. She is surprisingly fast for having such stubby legs. You have to speed walk just to keep up. Even so, you are a half pace behind.

As you traverse the Great Lawn, something odd catches your eye. Older men in black suits, mirrored sunglasses, and ear-pieces are lurking around the tables and among the classroom buildings. They stand out like black thumbs among all the greenery. You stare at them for a few moments, your feet slowing, your pumping arms dropping to your sides. They stoop to check under tables and radio inaudible messages into their microphones. What's going on?

"Hey!" Regan shouts, seeing you fall behind. You sprint to catch up and ask her about it.

"What's with the men in black?" you ask.

Her eyes narrow. "Those are the security guards for Chloe LaFleur," she says dryly, rolling her eyes. "She's the daughter of the French Ambassador to the US. It's been all over The Field. You know about The Field, right?"

"Yeah, I learned about it today on my way from the airport."

Regan doesn't seem to think this is strange.

"You should definitely join up. It's a great way to get to know folks," she counsels.

You reach the Student Center and push open the door. You are both met with a blast of cold air and a quiet roar of hubbub and commotion. You follow closely behind Regan as she weaves her way through the human ant farm of activity. Girls and their parents are searching around and taking their place in lines at tables and booths under archways of balloons and streamers.

Regan leads you to a table where you receive a thick white accordion file with the school crest embossed in gold foil on the side. A severe woman whose nametag says "Ms. Moss" checks your name off a master list, giving you a stern once-over through the thick lens of her horn rimmed bi-focals. "You'll do," she says to no one in particular.

You open the folder. It contains your class schedule, the name of your advisor, your laptop voucher, and your mailbox number and key. There is a note attached to the key that says it will cost \$10 to replace it. As you flip through the various papers, reading, Regan stops one more time in front of an imposing antique desk. An old embroidered banner hangs just above that says "The Registry" in script so fancy it's hard to decipher.

A robust woman sits poised at the desk. Her hair is tightly coiled in a bun on the crown of her head. She hands you a jewel-encrusted fountain pen with real ink, and pushes a very large leather bound book toward you.

"This is the official registry for the school," she explains in a soft, steady voice. Her knobby finger points to a line where your full name is printed in big bold letters. The book smells like expensive leather and old paper. The month and year is written out at the top of the page in gold, red, blue and black ink, like an illuminated manuscript from the Middle Ages. "Your signature is your word. It represents your sincere commitment to uphold the Trumbull Woodhouse name and strictly abide by all rules of the institution both on and off campus," she explains. You glance at Regan who nods encouragingly.

Well when you put it that way...who could resist?

Regan and Hairdo Lady watch closely as you awkwardly sign your full name, trying to use your best cursive. At that instant, the front door blows open and a gust of wind sweeps through the hall. Papers flutter and women's hands hold down the hemlines of their skirts. Everyone turns to look, but there's nothing and no one there. Just the wind. So they return to their tasks. One of the administrative aides rushes over to close the door and secure it.

Strange, you think, you were just outside moments ago, and there wasn't even a breeze. Where did that come from?

“Congratulations!” Regan says perfunctorily. “You’re officially a Trumbull Woodhouse Lampyridae!” She notices your nose crinkle and your quizzical look. “Or firefly, in plain English,” she adds. “As in flying bug that glows. It’s our school mascot.”

She checks her watch. “Okay, we need to get you to your mailbox. It’ll be overflowing with snail mail.”

Sure enough, when you unlock your mailbox with your ten dollar key, it’s stuffed!

“It’s like the teachers here have never heard of the internet,” Regan laughs out loud. “The coaches too. They love leaving you notes and reminders. Plus schedules, menus, and personal mail from the real world.”

You unwedge the cards, notes, and slips of paper from the rectangular opening. The schedule for soccer practice and JV try-outs is on top. Ugh. Underneath is a reminder to come by the Counting House tomorrow to discuss your account – bigger Ugh – a time slot to go pick up your uniform tomorrow, a dauntingly thick School Handbook, and a copy of “The History of Trumbull Woodhouse Campus.” Printed on flocked paper with a blue ribbon looped through a hole at the top is an invitation to the Headmistress’s Luncheon on Sunday following Convocation. There is one last piece of mail – a pale blue envelope with your name written in black calligraphy on the cover. But before you have a chance to open it, Regan returns from her mailbox.

“Good thing we came by our boxes. My field hockey meeting got moved up. I want to show you the school store and Snack Shack before I have to go. You’ll thank me later. C’mon.”

When you walk into the Nest, the nickname for the student store, you see why Regan loves it. It’s bigger, nicer, and carries more products than the grocery store and department store combined in Hatterly! The Nest has everything from cosmetics and

magazines to shoes and school supplies, just about anything you would ever need.

“So here’s how it works. It’s open from 8 AM to 7 PM. Come in here, grab whatever you need, and just charge it to your school account. It gets deducted from the money your parents deposit,” Regan explains simply.

Unfortunately, that’s not exactly how it’s going to work for you, but you don’t want to burst her bubble. Connected to the Nest is the Snack Shack where girls can come in between classes for burgers, candy, milkshakes, and some social time. With little booths, couches, and overstuffed chairs, it feels like someone’s living room. Suddenly, a herd of girls roves in and descend upon Regan.

As they ooh and ahh over their summers, you open that envelope with the elaborate calligraphy. It’s another invitation. This one from your advisor, Elizabeth Wilmington, who wants you to come to her cottage late tomorrow afternoon at 4:30 sharp. She actually wrote the word “sharp”. The appointments are racking up but this one stands out because of the handwriting. It’s the same looping, curling, rolling letters in rich black ink as on the outside of the envelope. Every word is perfectly aligned and spaced, like the way fairytales are written.

“Whatcha got there?” Regan asks, returning from her friends.

“Oh, my Advisor invited me to her house tomorrow,” you reply, focusing all your attention on putting the note back in the envelope without bending the corners.

“Oh! Who’d you get?” Regan sticks her face in front of yours forcing you to give her attention.

“Elizabeth Wilmington.”

You see a flash of irritation register on Regan’s face. Her eyes squint as her pupils dilate into two black pools. For a split sec-

ond, she looks almost sinister.

"Are you sure? Willie hasn't been an advisor for quite a while. She's one of the legends around here. I don't think she'd take on an advisee," Regan says trying to hide her suspicion behind a smile.

You carefully pull out the invite and show her the note. "It's also in my paperwork, see?" You flip through the papers in your folder to the page listing the names of your dorm parents, teachers, roommates, and advisor.

"Huh. So it is," Regan says with a firm nod. All traces of her jealousy, annoyance, or whatever that mood was is gone. "Okay, then. I have to go to my meeting, but I'll walk you back to your dorm first."

"I think I'm going to stick around here for a minute and maybe pick up a few things at the store," you tell her. It's a lie, of course. You can't afford to buy anything. But you want to look around a little on your own.

"See ya at supper," she calls as she trots off, crossing off an item on her clipboard. "Good luck with everything."