

Part Three



SUMMER

You are beautiful no matter what they say

Words can't bring you down

You are beautiful in every single way

Yes, words can't bring you down

—Christina Aguilera, "Beautiful"

Weird Kids

SOME KIDS HAVE actually come out and asked me why I hang out with "the freak" so much. These are kids that don't even know him well. If they knew him, they wouldn't call him that.

"Because he's a nice kid!" I always answer. "And don't call him that."

"You're a saint, Summer," Ximena Chin said to me the other day. "I couldn't do what you're doing."

"It's not a big deal," I answered her truthfully.

"Did Mr. Tushman ask you to be friends with him?" Charlotte Cody asked.

"No. I'm friends with him because I want to be friends with him," I answered.

Who knew that my sitting with August Pullman at lunch would be such a big deal? People acted like it was the strangest thing in the world. It's weird how weird kids can be.

I sat with him that first day because I felt sorry for him. That's all. Here he was, this strange-looking kid in a brand-new school. No one was talking to him. Everyone was staring at him.

All the girls at my table were whispering about him. He wasn't the only new kid at Beecher Prep, but he was the only one everyone was talking about. Julian had nicknamed him the Zombie Kid, and that's what everyone was calling him. "Did you see the Zombie Kid yet?" Stuff like that gets around fast. And August knew it. It's hard enough being the new kid even when you have a normal face. Imagine having his face?

So I just went over and sat with him. Not a biggie. I wish people would stop trying to turn it into something major.

He's just a kid. The weirdest-looking kid I've ever seen, yes. But just a kid.

The Plague

I DO ADMIT August's face takes some getting used to. I've been sitting with him for two weeks now, and let's just say he's not the neatest eater in the world. But other than that, he's pretty nice. I should also say that I don't really feel sorry for him anymore. That might have been what made me sit down with him the first time, but it's not why I keep sitting down with him. I keep sitting down with him because he is fun.

One of the things I'm not loving about this year is how a lot of the kids are acting like they're too grown-up to play things anymore. All they want to do is "hang out" and "talk" at recess. And all they talk about now is who likes who and who is cute and isn't cute. August doesn't bother about that stuff. He likes to play Four Square at recess, which I love to play, too.

It was actually because I was playing Four Square with August that I found out about the Plague. Apparently this is a "game" that's been going on since the beginning of the year. Anyone who accidentally touches August has only thirty seconds to wash their hands or find hand sanitizer before they catch the

Plague. I'm not sure what happens to you if you actually catch the Plague because nobody's touched August yet—not directly.

How I found out about this is that Maya Markowitz told me that the reason she won't play Four Square with us at recess is that she doesn't want to catch the Plague. I was like, "What's the Plague?" And she told me. I told Maya I thought that was really dumb and she agreed, but she still wouldn't touch a ball that August just touched, not if she could help it.

The Halloween Party

I WAS REALLY excited because I got an invitation to Savanna's Halloween party.

Savanna is probably the most popular girl in the school. All the boys like her. All the girls want to be friends with her. She was the first girl in the grade to actually have a "boyfriend." It was some kid who goes to MS 281, though she dumped him and started dating Henry Joplin, which makes sense because the two of them totally look like teenagers already.

Anyway, even though I'm not in the "popular" group, I somehow got invited, which is very cool. When I told Savanna I got her invitation and would be going to her party, she was really nice to me, though she made sure to tell me that she didn't invite a lot of people, so I shouldn't go around bragging to anyone that I got invited. Maya didn't get invited, for instance. Savanna also made sure to tell me not to wear a costume. It's good she told me because, of course, I would have worn a costume to a Halloween party—not the unicorn costume I made for the Halloween Parade, but the Goth girl getup that I'd worn to

school. But even that was a no-no for Savanna's party. The only negative about my going to Savanna's party was that now I wouldn't be able to go the parade and the unicorn costume would be wasted. That was kind of a bummer, but okay.

Anyway, the first thing that happened when I got to her party was that Savanna greeted me at the door and asked: "Where's your boyfriend, Summer?"

I didn't even know what she was talking about.

"I guess he doesn't have to wear a mask at Halloween, right?" she added. And then I knew she was talking about August.

"He's not my boyfriend," I said.

"I know. I'm just kidding!" She kissed my cheek (all the girls in her group kissed each other's cheeks now whenever they said hello), and threw my jacket on a coatrack in her hallway. Then she took me by the hand down the stairs to her basement, which is where the party was. I didn't see her parents anywhere.

There were about fifteen kids there: all of them were popular kids from either Savanna's group or Julian's group. I guess they've all kind of merged into one big supergroup of popular kids, now that some of them have started dating each other.

I didn't even know there were so many couples. I mean, I knew about Savanna and Henry, but Ximena and Miles? And Ellie and Amos? Ellie's practically as flat as I am.

Anyway, about five minutes after I got there, Henry and Savanna were standing next to me, literally hovering over me.

"So, we want to know why you hang out with the Zombie Kid so much," said Henry.

"He's not a zombie," I laughed, like they were making a joke. I was smiling but I didn't feel like smiling.

"You know, Summer," said Savanna, "you would be a lot more popular if you didn't hang out with him so much. I'm going to be completely honest with you: Julian likes you. He wants to ask you out."

"He does?"

"Do you think he's cute?"

"Um ... yeah, I guess. Yeah, he's cute."

"So you have to choose who you want to hang out with," Savanna said. She was talking to me like a big sister would talk to a little sister. "Everyone likes you, Summer. Everyone thinks you're really nice and that you're really, really pretty. You could totally be part of our group if you wanted to, and believe me, there are a lot of girls in our grade who would love that."

"I know." I nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she answered. "You want me to tell Julian to come and talk to you?"

I looked over to where she was pointing and could see Julian looking over at us.

“Um, I actually need to go to the bathroom. Where is that?”

I went to where she pointed, sat down on the side of the bathtub, and called Mom and asked her to pick me up.

“Is everything okay?” said Mom.

“Yeah, I just don’t want to stay,” I said.

Mom didn’t ask any more questions and said she’d be there in ten minutes.

“Don’t ring the bell,” I told her. “Just call me when you’re outside.”

I hung out in the bathroom until Mom called, and then I snuck upstairs without anyone seeing me, got my jacket, and went outside.

It was only nine-thirty. The Halloween Parade was in full swing down Amesfort Avenue. Huge crowds everywhere. Everyone was in costume. Skeletons. Pirates. Princesses. Vampires. Superheroes.

But not one unicorn.

November

THE NEXT DAY at school I told Savanna I had eaten some really bad Halloween candy and gotten sick, which is why I went home early from her party, and she believed me. There was actually a stomach bug going around, so it was a good lie.

I also told her that I had a crush on someone else that wasn’t Julian so she would leave me alone about that and hopefully spread the word to Julian that I wasn’t interested. She, of course, wanted to know who I had a crush on, and I told her it was a secret.

August was absent the day after Halloween, and when he came back, I could tell something was up with him. He was acting so weird at lunch!

He barely said a word, and kept looking down at his food when I talked to him. Like he wouldn’t look me in the eye.

Finally, I was like, “Auggie, is everything okay? Are you mad at me or something?”

“No,” he said.

"Sorry you weren't feeling well on Halloween. I kept looking for Boba Fett in the hallways."

"Yeah, I was sick."

"Did you have that stomach bug?"

"Yeah, I guess."

He opened a book and started to read, which was kind of rude.

"I'm so excited about the Egyptian Museum project," I said. "Aren't you?"

He shook his head, his mouth full of food. I actually looked away because between the way he was chewing, which almost seemed like he was being gross on purpose, and the way his eyes were just kind of closed down, I was getting a really bad vibe from him.

"What project did you get?" I asked.

He shrugged, pulled out a little scrap of paper from his jeans pocket, and flicked it across the table to me.

Everyone in the grade got assigned an Egyptian artifact to work on for Egyptian Museum Day, which was in December. The teachers wrote all the assignments down on tiny scraps of paper, which they put into a fishbowl, and then all us kids in the grade took turns picking the papers out of the fishbowl in assembly.

So I unfolded Auggie's little slip of paper.

"Oh, cool!" I said, maybe a little overexcited because I was trying to get him psyched up. "You got the Step Pyramid of Sakkara!"

"I know!" he said.

"I got Anubis, the god of the afterlife."

"The one with the dog head?"

"It's actually a jackal head," I corrected him. "Hey, you want to start working on our projects together after school? You could come over to my house."

He put his sandwich down and leaned back in his chair. I can't even describe the look he was giving me.

"You know, Summer," he said. "You don't have to do this."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to be friends with me. I know Mr. Tushman talked to you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You don't have to pretend, is all I'm saying. I know Mr. Tushman talked to some kids before school started and told them they had to be friends with me."

"He did not talk to me, August."

"Yeah, he did."

"No, he did not."

"Yeah, he did."

"No he didn't!! I swear on my life!" I put my hands up in the air so he could see I wasn't crossing my fingers. He immediately looked down at my feet, so I shook off my UGGs so he could see my toes weren't crossed.

"You're wearing tights," he said accusingly.

"You can see my toes are flat!" I yelled.

"Okay, you don't have to scream."

"I don't like being accused of things, okay?"

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"You should be."

"He really didn't talk to you?"

"Auggie!"

"Okay, okay, I'm really sorry."

I would have stayed mad at him longer, but then he told me about something bad that had happened to him on Halloween and I couldn't stay mad at him anymore. Basically, he heard Jack bad-mouthing him and saying really horrible things behind his back. It kind of explained his attitude, and now I knew why he'd been out "sick."

"Promise you won't tell anyone," he said.

"I won't." I nodded. "Promise you won't ever be mean like that to me again?"

"Promise," he said, and we pinky swore.

Warning: This Kid Is Rated R

I HAD WARNED Mom about August's face. I had described what he looked like. I did this because I know she's not always so good at faking her feelings, and August was coming over for the first time today. I even sent her a text at work to remind her about it. But I could tell from the expression on her face when she came home after work that I hadn't prepared her enough. She was shocked when she came through the door and saw his face for the first time.

"Hi, Mom, this is Auggie. Can he stay for dinner?" I asked quickly.

It took a second for my question to even register.

"Hi, Auggie," she said. "Um, of course, sweetheart. If it's okay with Auggie's mother."

While Auggie called his mother on his cell phone, I whispered to Mom: "Stop making that weirded-out face!" She had that look like when she's watching the news and some horrific event has happened. She nodded quickly, like she hadn't realized

she was making a face, and was really nice and normal to Auggie afterward.

After a while, Auggie and I got tired of working on our projects and went to hang out in the living room. Auggie was looking at the pictures on the mantel, and he saw a picture of me and Daddy.

“Is that your dad?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know you were ... what’s the word?”

“Biracial.”

“Right! That’s the word.”

“Yeah.”

He looked at the picture again.

“Are your parents divorced? I’ve never seen him at drop-off or anything.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “He was a platoon sergeant. He died a few years ago.”

“Whoa! I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, handing him a picture of my dad in his uniform.

“Wow, look at all those medals.”

“Yeah. He was pretty awesome.”

“Wow, Summer. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, it sucks. I really miss him a lot.”

“Yeah, wow.” He nodded, handing me back the picture.

“Have you ever known anyone who died?” I asked.

“Just my grandmother, and I don’t really even remember her.”

“That’s too bad.”

Auggie nodded.

“You ever wonder what happens to people when they die?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not really. I mean, I guess they go to heaven? That’s where my Grans went.”

“I think about it a lot,” I said. “I think when people die, their souls go to heaven but just for a little while. Like that’s where they see their old friends and stuff, and kind of catch up on old times. But then I actually think the souls start thinking about their lives on earth, like if they were good or bad or whatever. And then they get born again as brand-new babies in the world.”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“Because then they get another chance to get it right,” I answered. “Their souls get a chance to have a do-over.”

He thought about what I was saying and then nodded. “Kind of like when you get a makeup test,” he said.

“Right.”

“But they don’t come back looking the same,” he said. “I mean, they look completely different when they come back,

right?”

“Oh yeah,” I answered. “Your soul stays the same but everything else is different.”

“I like that,” he said, nodding a lot. “I really like that, Summer. That means in my next life I won’t be stuck with this face.”

He pointed to his face when he said that and batted his eyes, which made me laugh.

“I guess not.” I shrugged.

“Hey, I might even be handsome!” he said, smiling. “That would be so awesome, wouldn’t it? I could come back and be this good-looking dude and be super buff and super tall.”

I laughed again. He was such a good sport about himself. That’s one of the things I like the most about Auggie.

“Hey, Auggie, can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah,” he said, like he knew exactly what I wanted to ask.

I hesitated. I’ve been wanting to ask him this for a while but I’ve always lost the guts to ask.

“What?” he said. “You want to know what’s wrong with my face?”

“Yeah, I guess. If it’s okay for me to ask.”

He shrugged. I was so relieved that he didn’t seem mad or sad.

“Yeah, it’s no big deal,” he said casually. “The main thing I have is this thing called man-di-bu-lo-facial dys-os-tosis—which

took me forever to learn how to pronounce, by the way. But I also have this other syndrome thing that I can’t even pronounce. And these things kind of just morphed together into one big superthing, which is so rare they don’t even have a name for it. I mean, I don’t want to brag or anything, but I’m actually considered something of a medical wonder, you know.”

He smiled.

“That was a joke,” he said. “You can laugh.”

I smiled and shook my head.

“You’re funny, Auggie.” I said.

“Yes, I am,” he said proudly. “I am cool beans.”

The Egyptian Tomb

OVER THE NEXT month, August and I hung out a lot after school, either at his house or my house. August's parents even invited Mom and me over for dinner a couple of times. I overheard them talking about fixing Mom up on a blind date with August's uncle Ben.

On the day of the Egyptian Museum exhibit, we were all really excited and kind of giddy. It had snowed the day before—not as much as it had snowed over the Thanksgiving break, but still, snow is snow.

The gym was turned into a giant museum, with everyone's Egyptian artifact displayed on a table with a little caption card explaining what the thing was. Most of the artifacts were really great, but I have to say I really think mine and August's were the best. My sculpture of Anubis looked pretty real, and I had even used real gold paint on it. And August had made his step pyramid out of sugar cubes. It was two feet high and two feet long, and he had spray painted the cubes with this kind of fake-sand paint or something. It looked so awesome.

We all dressed up in Egyptian costumes. Some of the kids were Indiana Jones-type archaeologists. Some of them dressed up like pharaohs. August and I dressed up like mummies. Our faces were covered except for two little holes for the eyes and one little hole for the mouth.

When the parents showed up, they all lined up in the hallway in front of the gym. Then we were told we could go get our parents, and each kid got to take his or her parent on a flashlight tour through the dark gym. August and I took our moms around together. We stopped at each exhibit, explaining what it was, talking in whispers, answering questions. Since it was dark, we used our flashlights to illuminate the artifacts while we were talking. Sometimes, for dramatic effect, we would hold the flashlights under our chins while we were explaining something in detail. It was so much fun, hearing all these whispers in the dark, seeing all the lights zigzagging around the dark room.

At one point, I went over to get a drink at the water fountain. I had to take the mummy wrap off my face.

"Hey, Summer," said Jack, who came over to talk to me. He was dressed like the man from *The Mummy*. "Cool costume."

"Thanks."

"Is the other mummy August?"

"Yeah."

"Um ... hey, do you know why August is mad at me?"

“Uh-huh.” I nodded.

“Can you tell me?”

“No.”

He nodded. He seemed bummed.

“I told him I wouldn’t tell you,” I explained.

“It’s so weird,” he said. “I have no idea why he’s mad at me all of a sudden. None. Can’t you at least give me a hint?”

I looked over at where August was across the room, talking to our moms. I wasn’t about to break my solid oath that I wouldn’t tell anyone about what he overheard at Halloween, but I felt bad for Jack.

“Bleeding Scream,” I whispered in his ear, and then walked away.

Part Four



JACK

Now here is my secret. It is very simple.

It is only with one’s heart that one can see clearly.

What is essential is invisible to the eye.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*