



IT BEGINS

The room is as cold as a secret, but nowhere near as dark. I see their faces clearly, and I recognize them, and it's strange because they're all looking directly at me, too, as the door closes firmly behind me.

It smells like hunks of clay in here. I know the smell because I took an art class in this room last semester. It's a damp, earthy, springing aroma that adds to the weirdness of things.

The others are sitting at a round tabletop near the chalkboard. It's the table where the art teacher, Ms. Hanover, lays out samples during class. I've never seen it empty of artwork before.

It's not totally empty now. In the middle of the paint-flecked wooden surface stands a deck of cards and a small brown box. And everyone's hands, resting loosely around the edges.

There are four people seated, plus two empty chairs. They are all juniors and seniors.

Janna Collins, co-captain of the Spirit dance team, holds out one hand, palm up, indicating that I should join them. Her hair hangs perfectly, a dark curtain around her face. No bangs, just a part down the middle like one of those seventies pop singers my sister got really into right before she went off to college. Totally randomly, I picture Janna's would-be album cover—featuring

pom-poms and a really short flouncy skirt. My sister's voice pops into my head: *She's got the looks all right, but can she sing?*

I shake off the thought and slide into the chair Janna indicated, which is next to Simon Rogers. He's a year ahead of me, a junior. I don't know him well at all. He's on the chess team or math league or something geeky like that, and he was voted junior class treasurer, so he must have a lot of friends.

The others are Celia Berman and Patrick O'Halloran. Celia's a junior, and that's all I know, although she has clay under her fingernails and brown stains on the tips of her fingers so maybe she's in art class, which tells me she's not a lost cause. Patrick's a senior. He plays football and runs track or cross-country or something, I think. He's a big deal in the school sports world, which is far on the other side of what I know.

They all look at me. Celia picks at the remnants of clay on her hands. Simon drums his fingers on the table. Patrick remains perfectly still, hands folded. Maybe it's an athlete thing. Janna gazes at me, quiet and steady, and the whole thing gets weirder by the second.

"Hi," I say.

No one answers.

All told, this is one of the more surreal things that's happened to me this week. Which is saying something.

The deck of playing cards on the table is the traditional kind, with the familiar red design on the back. My eyes stray to it, over and over, and away from everything—everyone—else.

The small brown box is similar to the file on our kitchen counter where my mom is supposed to keep her recipes neatly organized and printed on index cards. Really, most of them are

in a Tupperware case on the middle shelf of the pantry, torn loose leaf out of magazines or scrawled on scraps of paper where she or my sister jotted something down while watching TV or surfing the internet.

I'm scared to speak again, into the silence. It isn't really silent, though, because outside the art room door, I can hear lockers slamming and kids talking and sneakers squeaking and the after-school bell ringing for reasons I've never understood. Does it ring every forty-two minutes all night long?

I reach into my pocket and pull out the index card I found in my locker this morning, with its cryptic message. I read it again, for the thousandth time, fold and unfold it. Try to remind myself that I was summoned here, and there must be a purpose. Plus, they all outrank me by like a dozen rungs, popularity wise. So I keep my mouth shut and sit and wait and try not to think too hard about things like pickup trucks and funerals.

The door blasts open, bringing a fresh wave of outside noise. "I'm so sorry, guys. So sorry. I got held up after class. I mean, geez, once Mrs. Markey gets on a roll there's just no stopping her."

My throat clogs instantly at the sound of his voice. *Oh God. Oh God.* It chokes me like a prayer, although I stopped believing in God six and a half days ago.

Matthew Rincorn tosses his gorgeous, sculpted self into the empty seat next to me. "Why is nobody talking?"

Still no one speaks. Janna reaches for the small brown box and flips it open. Sure enough. Index cards. A very thin stack.

"Geez, you guys," Matt says. "Are you trying to freak him out?"

"It's a ceremony, Matthew," Janna says super seriously. "Get with the program."

“You sadistic freaks,” Matt says. Simon and Celia start to laugh.

Matt touches my shoulder. Actually touches me. I get goosebumps all over. “Hi, Kermit,” he says. “Welcome to the Minus-One Club.”

