



PARACHUTE



At dinner, Mom passes the salad bowl to Dahlia, who immediately passes the bowl to me.

“Aren’t you having any?” Mom asks my sister.

Dahlia shakes her head.

“Why not?” Dad asks.

“My stomach feels funny,” Dahlia says.

Mom frowns. “What does that mean? How is it funny?”

“Just nervous or something. I don’t know. But I definitely shouldn’t have any salad.”



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Dad dumps half a bottle of ranch dressing on his lettuce.
“What are you nervous about, baby?”

He calls her that even though she’s seventeen and a senior in high school. And with her bouncy blond hair, big green eyes, and high cheekbones, she looks like a TikTok star, not a kid, and definitely not a baby.

“I don’t know,” Dahlia says again. She takes a bite of roll. “The whole college thing, I guess. All the applications.”

I chew a naked slice of cucumber. I never use salad dressing; to me it’s like drowning your vegetables in oily soup.

“You started working on the essay?” Mom asks my sister.

“Eh,” Dahlia says. “Sort of.”

“Because with those schools you’re looking at, it’s really so important! A great college essay can make a huge difference.”

Dahlia tears off a chunk of roll. “Mom, I *know*.”

“And even with your grades—”

“Megan, she said she knows,” Dad says.

“Well, there’s knowing and there’s actually doing something about it,” Mom replies.

Nobody talks for a minute. Underneath the table our scruffy dog, Spumoni, pokes my foot, like he’s giving me a cue to talk.

So I do. “We started writing stories in ELA,” I announce. “Ms. Bowman says we’ll do a little every day. And it’s creative, so it can be about anything.”

Mom and Dad look at me like I’ve just parachuted down to the dinner table. Like they’re trying to remember who I am and how I got there.

“Fun,” Dad says with too much enthusiasm. “What’s your story about, Ly?”

I crunch on a crouton. “Well, it’s a fantasy novel, and it gets really complicated. Mostly it’s about these two sisters, and they live in a world where kids get sorted out, and then assigned to these jobs for the rest of their lives. So like the older sister gets assigned Vanguard, and the younger sister gets Scribe. At first the younger sister is kind of jealous, because Vanguard is supposed to be the best, and Scribe just means writing things, lists and contracts and recipes and boring stuff like that. But then the younger sister finds out what Vanguard really is—basically a sacrifice during war—and she has to rescue the older one. Which means she has to cross the Quagmire and battle enemies. Who are all hunting her down for some reason she doesn’t understand.”

“Enemies?” Dad drinks some water.

“Yeah, a one-toed Beast that’s kind of stalking her for some reason. And a bunch of witches. Also the Defectors,

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who used to be people who tried to rebel, until they got caught and were turned into these horrible Quagmire creatures. Who shriek.”

“Wow. Sounds exciting.”

“I haven’t worked out all the details yet,” I say. “But it can be as long as we want. Mine may even end up a whole series.”

“A series?” Dahlia says.

“Yeah. Lots of fantasy novels are series. Percy Jackson, *The City of Ember*—”

“Lyla, I *know*. I just meant a series is a lot of writing.”

“Not for me! I’m always writing anyway.”

Dahlia’s eyebrows shoot up. “You are? Since when?”

The question stings.

Because doesn’t she know how much I love words? How I’m always reading—and thinking about—stories? And filling up notebooks with amazing ideas? I even got in trouble for it in ELA last June, when Mr. Delgado checked our writing notebooks, and instead of some boring exactly-five-paragraph essay about Why You Should Study a Foreign Language, I’d written a two-page tour of the Quagmire, with maps and pictures.

And I mean, Dahlia is *my sister*, so she should have noticed this about me! Because it’s basically who I *am*.

So then I wonder: *Do Mom and Dad know this about me?*
Does anyone?

Well, Rania does. And Journey, too, I guess, because I've told her. If she was even listening . . .

I shrug like: *Ho-hum, Dahlia, you can't insult me.* "Well, I first started thinking about this story last spring. Mostly I've just been planning little scenes in my head. And writing a whole novel will be totally different, but I've already started, so."

"I'm sure your story will be *excellent*, Lyla," Mom says. "I can't wait to read it."

She slices a tomato with a steak knife. I almost ask how she's sure it will be excellent if she hasn't even read it. But I stop myself.

The table goes quiet.

Dahlia chews her roll like she's thinking something. Then she flips her hair over one shoulder, looks at me through her long eyelashes, and sighs.

"Oh, Lyla," she says. "You're so lucky you're just in seventh grade."



FLOWERS



After Dahlia and I clear the table, I go upstairs to my room. I sit at my desk and open my math textbook so it looks like I'm doing homework. When I hear Mom close the door to the bathroom, I text Rania: HEY.

I wait twenty-three minutes, then text again. HEY, IT'S ME. You there???

Still no answer.

Probably she's eating supper, even though it's almost seven thirty. By now I've gotten used to the fact that Rania's family is on a different schedule from mine. Her



parents usually get home from work pretty late, and sometimes they don't start supper until eight or eight thirty. So there's no point calling her, because Rania's parents don't allow phones at the table.

I know she'll text back as soon as she can, because she always does. But I wish she'd just answer already.

Bleh.

Well, maybe while I'm waiting I should start my math homework. Although just thinking about exponents gives me a brain-ache. And all I *really* want to work on is my story, even though we're only supposed to do it at school.

Ms. Bowman was very clear about that: "Listen up, cats and kittens," she told us. "This is an ongoing class project, not a homework assignment. So please leave your writing notebooks on my desk at the end of class, okay?"

"Are you going to read what we write?" Noah asked. He looked worried.

"Not unless you're ready to share it with me," Ms. Bowman said. "Although I *will* be checking your progress from time to time."

When she said this, I wanted to ask if we were *allowed* to work on it at home. I mean, if we *chose* to. Because then it wouldn't be homework, just voluntary. But I didn't want her to think I was challenging her, especially since she was

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letting us be creative, woohoo! So I left my spiral notebook on her desk, just like everybody else.

What I'm thinking now is that even if I'm not actually writing in my writing notebook, I can still do *something* useful, right? Like researching names for my characters. Because names are super important! Sometimes I stop reading books when the names feel all wrong for the characters. And in my story I've decided that the main character is called Aster, so it would be good if her older sister had a flower name too—maybe a more show-offy kind of flower than aster. But not Dahlia, obviously. Anything but Dahlia.

I open my laptop and type: *girl names flower*.

What comes up: *Fifty Adorable Flower Names for Your Baby Girl*. Aster's older sister is fourteen—not a baby, obviously—but maybe some of these names would work.

I scroll through the list, which includes *Country of Origin, Meaning, This Name in Popular Culture, and Celebrity Babies with This Name* (like anyone cares). Except it's all Rose, Iris, Daisy, Posy, Lily. Regular, normal names, not names for fantasy characters!

I type something else: *Weird Flower Names*.

This list is way shorter: *Bat Face Cuphea. Naked Man Orchid. Eyeball Plant*—

Okaayyy, a little *too* weird.

How about: *Unusual Flower Names*. Because “unusual” is not the same as “weird.”

Common Toadflax, Swamp Lousewort, Thimbleweed, Cheeseweed, Corn-cockle, Pussytoes, Adder’s Tongue, Sneezeweed, Turtlehead, Mad Dog Skullcap, False Hellebore, Viper’s Bugloss, Monkeyflower, Cow Vetch—

Haha, these are awesome! Although completely wrong for Aster’s sister, obviously. Maybe for other characters, though—possibly low-level villains, like assistants to the witches. Or the king’s minions:

Cheeseweed, fetch me my sword!

Turtlehead, what have you done! And where’s Pussytoes with my cape?

You can’t hide from me, Cow Vetch! Even here, in the Quagmire!

Ooh, I’m so in love with these names! I’ll copy them on a Post-it and add them to my writing notebook tomorrow. Maybe I’ll start a list of cool names on the back page.

Yay! Progress!

Although I still need a name for Aster’s sister. Right now I’m thinking she’s the favorite daughter—beautiful, obedient, and boring. Has perfectly straight long blond hair she spends a lot of time brushing. Never argues, never fights back. A good student—although not as brilliant as

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Aster, who annoys her tutor with too many questions. And refuses to follow directions. And doesn't care that she's kind of plain-looking and messy.

In a lot of ways, Aster and her sister are total opposites. But since they're sisters, they do need names that go together. Kind of.

I type: *Unique Flower Names*. Because "unique" is not the same as "weird." Or "unusual."

What comes up: *Acacia. Hyacinth. Tulip. Verbena. Clover. Myrtle*—

Okay, so now we're getting somewhere! Myrtle sounds like a wrinkly old lady who stinks of cigarettes. Tulip and Clover both sound like cows. Acacia sounds a bit like medicine. But Verbena? Hyacinth? They both could work, actually!

Although which would work *better*?

I'll think about it and decide tomorrow. During fourth-period ELA, before writing time.

Or possibly tonight, after Rania texts me back.