

Back from Winter Break

Despite what Tushman said, there was no "clean slate" when I went back to school in January. In fact, things were totally weird from the second I got to my locker in the morning. I'm next to Amos, who's always been a pretty straight-up kid, and I was like, "Yo, what up?" and he basically just nodded a half hello and closed his locker door and left. I was like, okay, that was bizarre. And then I said, "Hey, what up?" to Henry, who didn't even bother half-smiling but just looked away.

Okay, so something's up. Dissed by two people in less than five minutes. Not that anyone's counting. I thought I'd try one more time, with Tristan, and boom, same thing. He actually looked nervous, like he was afraid of talking to me.

I've got a form of the Plague now, is what I thought. This is Julian's payback.

And that's pretty much how it went all morning. Nobody talked to me. Not true: the girls were totally normal with me. And August talked to me, of course. And, actually, I have to say both Maxes said hello, which made me feel kind of bad for never, ever hanging out with them in the five years I've been in their class.

I hoped lunch would be better, but it wasn't. I sat down at my usual table with Luca and Isaiah. I guess I thought since they weren't in the super-popular group but were kind of middle-of-the-road jock kids that I'd be safe with them. But they barely nodded when I said hello. Then, when our table was called, they got their lunches and never came back. I saw them find a table

way over at the other end of the cafeteria. They weren't at Julian's table, but they were near him, like on the fringe of popularity. So anyway, I'd been ditched. I knew table switching was something that happened in the fifth grade, but I never thought it would happen to me.

It felt really awful being at the table by myself. I felt like everyone was watching me. It also made me feel like I had no friends. I decided to skip lunch and go read in the library.

The War

It was Charlotte who had the inside scoop on why everyone was dissing me. I found a note inside my locker at the end of the day.

Meet me in room 301 right after school. Come by yourself! Charlotte.

She was already inside the room when I walked in. "Sup," I said.

"Hey," she said. She went over to the door, looked left and right, and then closed the door and locked it from the inside. Then she turned to face me and started biting her nail as she talked. "Look, I feel bad about what's going on and I just wanted to tell you what I know. Promise you won't tell anyone I talked to you?"

"Promise."

"So Julian had this huge holiday party over winter break," she said. "I mean, *huge*. My sister's friend had had her sweet sixteen at the same place last year. There were like two hundred people there, so I mean it's a *huge* place."

"Yeah, and?"

"Yeah, and . . . well, pretty much everybody in the whole grade was there."

"Not everybody," I joked.

"Right, not everybody. Duh. But like even parents were there, you know. Like my parents were there. You know Julian's mom is the vice president of the school board, right? So she knows a lot of people. Anyway, so basically what happened at the party was

that Julian went around telling everyone that you punched him because you had emotional problems. . . ."

"What?!"

"And that you would have gotten expelled, but his parents begged the school not to expel you. . . ."

"What?!"

"And that none of it would have happened in the first place if Tushman hadn't forced you to be friends with Auggie. He said his mom thinks that you, quote unquote, snapped under the pressure. . . ."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "No one bought into that, right?" I said.

She shrugged. "That's not even the point. The point is he's really popular. And, you know, my mom heard that his mom is actually pushing the school to review Auggie's application to Beecher."

"Can she do that?"

"It's about Beecher not being an inclusion school. That's a type of school that mixes normal kids with kids with special needs."

"That's just stupid. Auggie doesn't have special needs."

"Yeah, but she's saying that if the school is changing the way they usually do things in some ways. . . ."

"But they're not changing anything!"

"Yeah, they did. Didn't you notice they changed the theme of the New Year Art Show? In past years fifth graders painted self-portraits, but this year they made us do those ridiculous self-portraits as animals, remember?"

"So big freakin' deal."

"I know! I'm not saying I agree, I'm just saying that's what she's saying."

"I know, I know. This is just so messed up. . . ."

"I know. Anyway, Julian said that he thinks being friends with Auggie is bringing you down, and that for your own good you need to stop hanging out with him so much. And if you start losing all your old friends, it'll be like a big wake-up call. So basically, for your own good, he's going to stop being your friend completely."

"News flash: I stopped being his friend completely first!"

"Yeah, but he's convinced all the boys to stop being your friend—for your own good. That's why nobody's talking to you."

"You're talking to me."

"Yeah, well, this is more of a boy thing," she explained. "The girls are staying neutral. Except Savanna's group, because they're going out with Julian's group. But to everybody else this is really a boy war."

I nodded. She tilted her head to one side and pouted like she felt sorry for me.

"Is it okay that I told you all this?" she said.

"Yeah! Of course! I don't care who talks to me or not," I lied.

"This is all just so dumb."

She nodded.

"Hey, does Auggie know any of this?"

"Of course not. At least, not from me."

"And Summer?"

"I don't think so. Look, I better go. Just so you know, my mom thinks Julian's mom is a total idiot. She said she thinks people like her are more concerned about what their kids' class pictures look like than doing the right thing. You heard about the Photoshopping, right?"

"Yeah, that was just sick."

"Totally," she answered, nodding. "Anyway, I better go. I just wanted you to know what was up and stuff."

"Thanks, Charlotte."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything else," she said. Before she went out, she looked left and right outside the door to make sure no one saw her leaving. I guess even though she was neutral, she didn't want to be seen with me.

Switching Tables

The next day at lunch, stupid me, I sat down at a table with Tristan, Nino, and Pablo. I thought maybe they were safe because they weren't really considered popular, but they weren't out there playing D&D at recess, either. They were sort of in-betweeners. And, at first, I thought I scored because they were basically too nice to not acknowledge my presence when I walked over to the table. They all said "Hey," though I could tell they looked at each other. But then the same thing happened that happened yesterday: our lunch table was called, they got their food, and then headed toward a new table on the other side of the cafeteria.

Unfortunately, Mrs. G, who was the lunch teacher that day, saw what happened and chased after them.

"That's not allowed, boys!" she scolded them loudly. "This is not that kind of school. You get right back to your table."

Oh great, like that was going to help. Before they could be forced to sit back down at the table, I got up with my tray and walked away really fast. I could hear Mrs. G call my name, but I pretended not to hear and just kept walking to the other side of the cafeteria, behind the lunch counter.

"Sit with us, Jack."

It was Summer. She and August were sitting at their table, and they were both waving me over.