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Opening extract from

Suicide Notes from Beautiful Girls

Written by

Lynn Weingarten

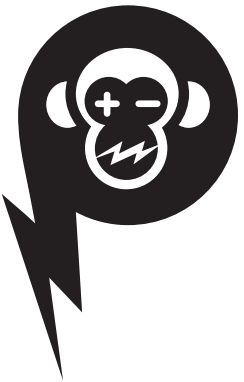
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ELECTRIC MONKEY

HIGH VOLTAGE READING
2015 FICTION PREVIEWS

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EGMONT

Suicide Notes from Beautiful Girls

Lynn Weingarten
July 2015

When June met Delia, she was a lifeline. Their intense friendship gave her a sense of belonging that she'd never had before, and she felt braver, smarter, funnier, more attractive. But then things went wrong and the girls haven't spoken for a year when an announcement is made at their school that Delia has committed suicide. But no one knows that on June's phone is an unanswered message from Delia – sent the night she died. Stylish, sexy and atmospheric, this impressive debut will leave you breathless.

It's so peaceful there, the commotion behind me, the moon reflecting off the flat surface of the water.

I turn and look up at the road. The cop car's doors are open now, the light pours out from within. I see the silhouette of a cop holding a bottle up in the air. Someone was stupid enough to bring it up with them.

I stay right where I am for a long time, as names are taken and tickets handed out. One person is led into the back of the police car, and everyone else is either driven or drives themselves away.

And then I am alone again. And I am afraid. And this time I don't even know why. I start back up toward the

road. My toe snags a root and I lurch forward, I catch myself just in time. My heart is hammering, and I'm not sure if it's the near fall or something else. I keep going, quietly, carefully. I can hear my breath and the wind and the beating of my heart.

Then, footsteps.

Someone else is out here. A square of blue light sweeps by.

I want to turn and run, but I know if I do, this person will hear me. I force myself to breathe. Whoever is here is here for the memorial, same as I am. But still, I reach into my pocket and wrap my fist around my keys so the sharp end sticks out between my knuckles. The light goes by again. It stops on me.

'Hello?' a voice calls out. It's low and male. The footsteps are getting nearer. 'Please,' the voice says. 'Wait.'

Whoever it is, he's close. He holds his phone, up to his face so he glows. Big jaw, thin mouth, short nose. I realize I know who he is.

I saw him with Delia a few months ago, out in the parking lot at school. I remember watching them, curious about her and this guy who wasn't her type at all. He was a wrestler, not tall, but wide and sturdy looking, like a bulldog. Wholesome, somehow, too. Delia had jumped up on him from behind, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. And he ran around the parking lot, fast like she didn't weigh anything at all.

'I recognize you,' he says. 'I'm Jeremiah.'

'We go to school together,' I say, because sometimes

when I meet people from North Orchard outside of school, I have to tell them this.

Jeremiah shakes his head. 'Not from there. From a picture she kept in her room. You both have these hats on. She talked about you. You're June.'

'But we . . .' I know exactly what photograph he means, because I have a copy too. Mine is in the back of my closet, and I haven't looked at it in a very long time.

'I'm sorry, you're too late. For the memorial I mean,' I say. 'People were here before.' I try to slow my still pounding heart. 'Other ones. But the police came.'

'I know. I was watching.'

'You didn't come down.'

'I wasn't here to drink with those people.' He pauses. 'I came looking for answers.'

There is something in his voice then. It hits me in the center of my chest. 'Me too,' I say. 'I'm trying to find out why she did it.'

The wind whistles. I pull my coat tighter.

'She didn't kill herself, June.' Jeremiah leans forward.

I step back.

'Delia was murdered.'

A pulse of energy, white-hot, rushes through me. I stare at his face, half lit under that big yellow moon. 'What are you even talking about?'

'She hung around with a lot of messed up people. She wasn't afraid of anyone or anything. Even when she maybe should have been. She wouldn't have killed herself, and if it looks like she did . . .' He pauses. 'Then maybe it's because someone made it look that way.'

I reach out for something to grab onto. There's nothing but air.

'So I have to figure out who did this to her,' he finishes. 'Because no one else is going to.'

I say, 'If someone . . . I mean, we have to go to the police.'

'I already went. And they wouldn't listen. They pretended to humor me for about two minutes, then gave me some pamphlets on grief and sent me on my way.' Jeremiah leans forward again. 'We have to figure this out ourselves.'

His words are sinking in. 'We?'

'You're here,' Jeremiah says. 'You're the only other person who cares enough to ask the right questions.'

I am silent. My head is spinning. I have no idea what to think.

'She wouldn't have done this to herself, what they're saying she did,' he says.

'But what are they saying? I don't even know.'

Jeremiah is quiet for a long time. 'Come with me,' he says finally. 'There's something I need to show you.'

I follow Jeremiah back up to the road. *What the hell am I doing?*

I feel like I'm in a dream. I think, *This guy is crazy with grief. Maybe I shouldn't even be following him. Maybe I should leave now.* But I know I won't.

I unlock my car and get in. I lock it behind me.

Jeremiah flicks his lights twice and then slowly pulls out of his spot. So do I.

We make our way down the narrow twisty roads. Up Beacon, down McKenna, then onto leafy Red Bridge.

We're heading right for Delia's house, but instead of pulling up in front, Jeremiah makes a sharp right, goes up a short hill, and pulls into the cul-de-sac that connects to the woods behind it. He parks. I pull in behind him.

For a moment I sit there in the silent dark, the only light the yellow circle from someone's front porch. I squeeze my eyes shut. I press my hand to my chest. I haven't been anywhere near Delia's house in over a year. I used to come here all the time, every day. This was more my home than my actual house was.

I open the door and step out. Jeremiah is waiting for me. I will the memories to stay away. I can't handle them now.

'It's down through the woods,' he says quietly.

But my knees lock and I'm struck with another rush of fear, aware of how very, very much I do not want to go down there. What the hell is he planning on showing me? What if it's something I can't bear to see?

He holds up his phone again, flipping on the blue light. Without another word, he steps up onto the grass between houses and disappears among the trees.

I follow. Within a few moments we're surrounded by darkness. The leaves crunch beneath our feet. I'm breathing heavy. In, out, in. *And that's when I smell it*: this strange scent I cannot understand. It's weak at first, but as we reach the edge of the trees, it hits me like a punch in the face. There's burnt wood and leaves, scorched rubber, melted plastic, gasoline. I pull my scarf up over my mouth and nose. But it doesn't matter – the stench is so strong.

'What the hell is that?' I say.

We are standing at the edge of Delia's backyard now. Jeremiah shines his phone toward the remains of a structure out in the grass. Even with Jeremiah's light, it's impossible to make out what it is.

'This is how they're saying she did it,' he says.

'How she . . .' I stop. I realize something: *This is where Delia's stepfather's shed used to be*. 'He uses it to drink and jerk off,' Delia had said. And now I realize what I'm looking at is what's left of it – half of a wall, a metal frame, and a pile of burnt things.

Jeremiah turns toward me. 'This is how they're saying Delia killed herself. That she burned herself to death in there.'

I gasp. I can taste it. I feel my legs start to shake.

'They're saying there was firewood inside, that she doused it in lighter fluid, herself too, and lit it up. *Whoosh*.'

I can feel the heat crawling up from my stomach. Images flash through my mind – Delia trapped, the fire all around her, scared, screaming for help. It is too much. I close my eyes.

And it's real now. I can't breathe. Delia, who was so tough and brave, who would say anything to anyone, do anything, go anywhere, wasn't brave about everything. The memories come flooding back – I remember her shrinking away from a tiny bonfire on the night she first confessed it. I remember the time she flipped out when a guy was playing around with a lighter too close to her. I remember staying over one night and the look in her eye when she told me sometimes she had awful nightmares of nothing but flames. 'If I have one while you're here,' she had said, squeezing my hands tight, 'you

must promise, promise you will come and wake me up.'

Delia was scared of just one thing. This was it.

'There's no way she did this,' I say. And I know in that moment that what I'm saying is true.

Jeremiah nods. He turns toward me, out there in the dark.

'So now you understand,' he says, 'why I need your help.'

5 years, 3 months, 8 days earlier

Later, Delia would explain to June that that finding a best friend is like finding a true love: When you meet yours, you just know. But the third week of sixth grade when the cool new girl, Delia, invited June for a sleepover, June was a nervous, happy kind of shocked. And she wondered if maybe Delia had made a mistake, thought June was someone else when she invited her. Or maybe it was because Delia hadn't had a chance to make cooler friends yet.

June was painfully, desperately lonely. She spent her weekends by herself, reading and cleaning up after her mother. June liked this new girl with her big turquoise earrings and enormous smile. She liked the fact that this girl didn't seem to give a shit about absolutely anything. So even though June had never had a one-on-one sleepover before and the idea made her very nervous, she said yes.

The night of the sleepover Delia's stepfather was working late, so her mother let them order pizza and cans of Coke and eat in Delia's room. 'My stepfather's

diabetic,' Delia said, slurping on the soda. 'So the only soda we ever have is *diet* which is *poison*. My own mother is trying to poison me.' Delia didn't sit while they ate; instead she walked around the room pointing things out like a museum tour guide – there was a tiny painting of a winter scene that Delia had found at a thrift store, there was the prescription pill bottle nicked from her mom (Delia kept breath mints in there now), there was a cherry stem that she'd knotted using only her tongue (it was the only time she'd ever successfully done it, so she'd saved it as evidence). June had never seen a room like this, one filled with so many interesting things. It was like she expected to have friends over to show things to.

Shortly after ten, Delia's stepfather came home and started yelling at her mother behind their closed bedroom door, yelling in an unhinged, out-of-control sort of way. That's when Delia said it was time to sneak out.

She climbed out her window and then dropped down onto the grass. June was scared, but she followed. They walked up and down the block a couple of times. They left dandelions in peoples' mailboxes. They peeked into the window of Delia's cute high-school-aged neighbor. They saw him changing out of his clothes, and he got all the way down to his boxers before he shut the curtains. 'Damn it!' Delia said. And then she grinned. 'I have an idea.' And then – and even at the time, June couldn't really believe it was happening – Delia reached around back and unhooked her bra through her shirt, then pulled her arms into her shirt, wriggled around, and

suddenly her bra was off in her hand right there on the street. June stared at it in the light streaming from the windows of the houses. It was black, with an underwire. A real bra, because Delia had real, actual boobs. She convinced June to do the same, taught her how to get it off without taking her shirt off. June was embarrassed that hers was barely a bra at all, more like a shiny little undershirt. But Delia didn't seem to notice or care. 'Um, now what?' June said. She felt breathless and giggly.

'Now we mark our territory,' Delia said. She grabbed June's hand and then snuck around the front of the house, opened up the boy's family's red-barn mailbox, and tossed both bras inside.

'There,' Delia said. 'And now we have a secret.'

June nodded, like she understood. But she didn't until Delia went on. 'Having secrets together makes you real friends,' she said. 'Secrets tie you together.' And June felt suddenly giddy at the idea that Delia would *want* to be tied to her.

Then they snuck back in through the porch. And even though it wasn't cool at all, she told Delia it was probably the first thing she'd done that she wasn't supposed to. Maybe ever in her life. Delia just smiled. 'Guess you haven't been hanging out with me enough, then,' she said. 'We'll have to change that.'

They tiptoed back upstairs, and Delia made a show of locking her bedroom door behind them. Then she leaned over and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'My stepfather is an asshole. So I always keep it locked, in case.'

June felt fear prickling her belly. 'In case what?'

'In case he tries something.' Delia lowered her voice meaningfully on 'something'.

'Has he?'

She shrugged and shook her head. 'But if he ever does . . .' Delia opened her drawer, reached into the back, and pulled out a switchblade. She held it up. 'I'm ready for him.' June opened her mouth in a little shocked O. Then Delia pressed the silver button on the base and a plastic comb popped out. But before June could feel the full effects of her embarrassment, Delia started laughing. It was round and rolling and joyful, her laugh. She wasn't laughing at June, she was inviting June to join in on the joke.

'You should have seen your face,' Delia said. She shook her head. 'You were so shocked, it was amazing.' She put her arm around June. 'My stepfather really is a shit, though. My family in general is complete bullshit, actually. What's yours like?'

'I only have a mom,' June said. 'She's pretty bullshit too.'

And then for some reason – maybe because June liked the sound of Delia's laugh, or maybe because she couldn't even remember a time when she'd been honest, really truly honest with anyone, or maybe just because it was late at night and that's the hardest time to hold things in – June began to talk. She talked about how her mom was out most nights, even when she wasn't working, how she came home early in the morning, knocking into things and stinking of alcohol. She talked about her father who she'd only met twice. She talked about the time her mom fell and sprained her wrist after tripping over June's school bag and blamed June and June felt really

guilty, but also didn't totally know what to think because of what she smelled on her mom's breath.

June talked and talked, feeling the words pouring from her mouth as though she was a faucet and had forgotten how to turn herself off. Finally, when she was done, she was struck with a wave of horrible embarrassment at having revealed too much, and to a near stranger. At probably having ruined her new friendship when it had barely started.

'I'm sorry,' June barely managed to mumble. Her cheeks burned with shame and disgust at herself, at how needy and weak she suddenly felt.

But as she looked up, she saw that Delia was staring at her, her head tipped to the side. She didn't look bored or freaked out or like she thought June was a weirdo. She just smiled in this way that made her look very wise. 'Crazy that we have such messed-up families, and yet somehow we both turned out so awesome, right?'

June felt something lifting inside of her. *We.*

They brushed their teeth after that and put on pajamas. Delia got them three glasses of water ('I need two, in case I dream about a fire,' Delia said), and they lay side-by-side in Delia's enormous queen-size bed. Delia combed June's hair with the switchblade comb – Delia insisted on doing it, because her own curls were too thick and would break the teeth off and she hadn't yet used it on anyone – and June felt almost drugged with happiness and relief. Now that this girl was her friend, everything might just be okay. She wouldn't be so lonely anymore. She wouldn't be alone. This girl was going to change everything.