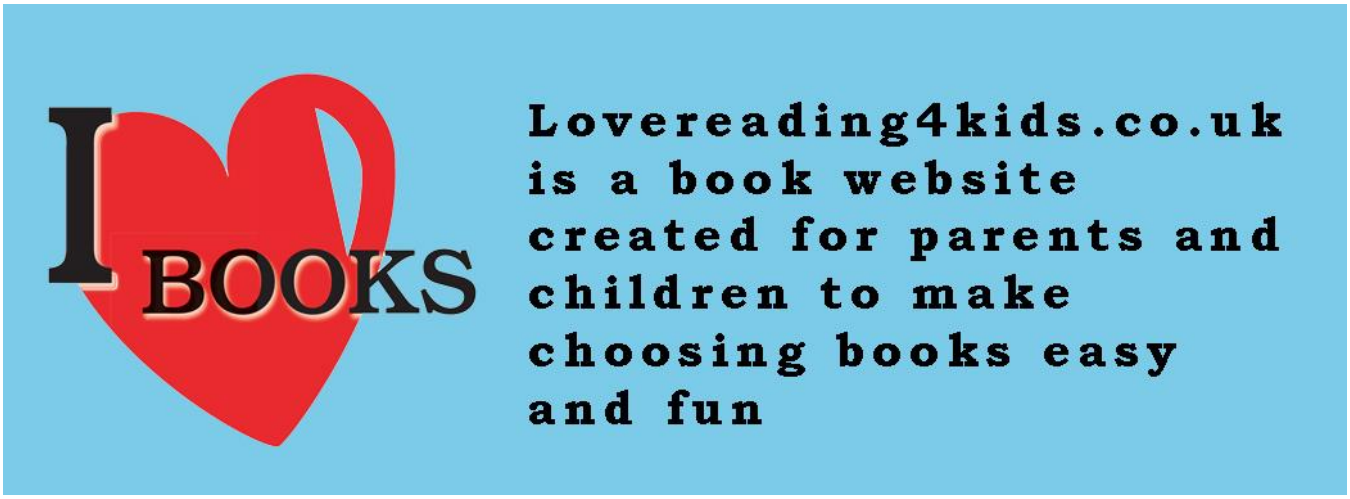


Opening extract from

A Step Towards Falling

Written by

Cammie McGovern

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For everyone who has ever worked at
Whole Children/Milestones, and for every family
who has come through the door and found a home.

And especially for Carrie,
who started it all. . . .



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CHAPTER ONE
EMILY

AT OUR FIRST MEETING with the director of the Lifelong Learning Center, Lucas doesn't speak to me once. Elaine, the director, thanks us for "volunteering our time" even though she knows we aren't here voluntarily. We all know this.

"You have a choice," she says. "You can come in Saturday mornings and do office work or you can come Wednesday evenings for a class called Boundaries and Relationships that goes over basic rules about socializing and dating for young adults with developmental disabilities. Even though you're a few years younger, you'll provide examples of a typical peer's approach to friendships and dating. They'll be interested in what you do on dates and how you go about making new friends, that kind of thing."

I can just imagine what my friend Richard will say when I tell him this: "Wait, they're looking at *you* as a dating role model?"

I turn and look at Lucas. I expect him to say, "I'll take the office work, please." All things considered, the idea of sitting with a group of young adults with disabilities looking for dates seems like—well, like more than either one of us bargained on. Except here's the surprise: I want to do the class. I'm terrible at office work. Plus, I'm curious.

Then, before I can say anything, Lucas announces: "Yeah, I'll do the class." He doesn't even look at me. He seems to be pretending I'm not in the room.

"I will, too," I say. I'm not going to do office work just because sitting in the same room with Lucas will be super awkward. Forget that.

The following Wednesday, we come in an hour before class starts to meet with Mary, who teaches the class, and go over what she expects from us. Apparently not too much, at least in the beginning. She says we'll mostly do the activities along with the group. "We do a few role-plays every class and I may ask you to join some of those. Do either one of you have acting experience?"

I glance at Lucas, who still refuses to look at me. "No," he says.

"Some," I say. "When I was younger. Not for a while."

Mary smiles at me like she can tell that I'll probably be better at this than Lucas. Lucas plays football at our school, meaning he's huge and—not to be mean—a little scary-looking.

"Wonderful, Emily," Mary says now. "Do you have any improv experience?"

"A little," I say. "I was in a comedy troupe once, except

we weren't very funny." In middle school, the drama club tried to start an improv group. We lasted one semester and then gave up.

Mary laughs. "Oh, I know all about that. Don't worry, we're not playing for laughs here, thank heavens."

We finish up with twenty minutes before class starts, so Mary tells us to wait in the lobby until the other students arrive. It's awkward, of course, as sitting in every waiting room with Lucas has been for the last two weeks. He pulls out his phone as he always does. I pull out a book as I always do. After five minutes, I can't stand it anymore and lean toward him.

"I'm Emily, by the way. I know you're Lucas, but maybe you don't know my name, so there you have it. Emily."

He looks up. "I know your name."

Richard always warns me not to get too sarcastic with people who have no visible sense of humor. "They don't take it well," he tells me. "They think you're making fun of them. Because usually you are." But I can't help it.

"Oh, okay. Well, as long as we're doing this together for the rest of the semester, I just thought I'd make sure. We don't need to be friends or anything, but maybe the odd hello wouldn't kill us."

"I don't know about that," Lucas says, twisting around in his chair. "This may kill us. We'll have to see."

I can hear Richard's voice in the back of my head: *You shouldn't go around telling stupid people what you think all the time. First of all, they won't understand what you're saying because they're stupid. Secondly, they'll hate you.*

I want to, though. I want to say, *Look, Lucas, why don't we try and do this thing right? Why don't we acknowledge the guilt we both feel about Belinda by doing a decent job here?* Maybe for Lucas I should say it differently: *Why don't you stop being such a jerk about this?*

Mary comes out before I can say anything more: "Hello again! This group usually comes in the back door so they're all here, ready to meet you guys."

We stand up and suddenly I'm more nervous than I expected to be. I don't know any people with disabilities. I'm not sure why I thought this would be a good idea.

Mary walks us up the hallway and opens the door to a brightly painted room with about a dozen people sitting in a circle. It's pretty obvious they're all disabled. Though no one's in a wheelchair, they all look a little different. One woman is wearing a bright lime-colored sweater, sweat pants, and flip-flops. Another man is wearing a wool hat and gloves on his hands though it isn't cold in the room, or outside for that matter.

"Okay, everyone, I want to introduce Emily and Lucas. They'll be our new volunteers for this session. They're both in high school, which means they're a little younger than you folks, so you remember what that means?" She smiles as if they have an inside joke about high schoolers.

Apparently they do, because a ripple of laughter travels through the group.

Mary keeps going: "It means you're not going to say anything too shocking, especially not on their first day, right, Simon? Right, Thomas?" Everyone laughs again.

"Okay, what do we do when new folks join our class?"

Two hands go up. The woman in the green sweater says, "Ast the kesah."

Lucas and I almost look at each other, then don't. It's impossible to understand what she's saying.

"That's right, Francine," Mary says. "Everyone gets to ask them one question each. Who would like to go first?"

Six hands shoot up. Mary laughs. "Remember, they have to be *appropriate* questions." Two hands go down. Mary laughs again. "Okay. Sheila, why don't you start?"

A tall woman with curly brown hair stands up and twirls around in a circle so her skirt flies out a little. "This is a question for the girl. Do you know my friend Susan?"

I look at Mary. *Am I supposed to know Susan?* "I don't think so. Is she in this class?"

"No, but I could introduce you! Do you want to meet Susan?"

"That's two questions, Sheila," a man with thick glasses seated beside her says. He looks like he probably has Down syndrome. "Mary said one question each."

Mary nods. "I *did* say that, Sheila. I'm sorry. You can ask Emily your second question at break. Thomas, do you have a question for Lucas or Emily?"

"Yes." The man sitting next to Sheila stands and looks at the ceiling as he speaks. "This is for the boy. Do you have any favorite movies or TV shows or activities?" He sits back down.

"Um, let me think—" Lucas says. His voice sounds strange, almost breathy. I wonder if Lucas is as nervous

as I am. I don't know what I was expecting, but now that I'm here, these people suddenly seem—well, *really* disabled. One is blind, judging by the cane he has laid sideways across his lap. Another is paying more attention to picking his nose than to anything we're saying.

"I play football so I practice most afternoons," Lucas continues, and I'm surprised. He *is* nervous. I can tell by the way he's wiping the palms of his hands on his shirtfront. "So I don't get to watch a lot of movies or TV shows."

Another hand goes up. "What team do you play for?"

"Westchester High," he says. In any other crowd, hearing this would produce a few whistles, or some applause, because we are currently the undefeated leaders of our division, headed toward the first state championship our school has ever had. By "we" of course I mean the football team, which I have no friends on and no relationship to. Still, you can't walk down the same locker-lined halls and not know the stats. Everyone's a little starry-eyed around our football players this year.

Everyone except this crowd, apparently, because no one says anything.

After this, the questions get more random. Have we ever been to the Grand Canyon? Do we know how to make lasagna? Did we know that one person in the class won a gold medal in the Special Olympics?

At this, Lucas raises his eyebrows in surprise. *"Really?"* he says, sounding genuinely impressed. "Who?"

A short woman with a bowl haircut raises her hand. "It was *Winter* Olympics for *bowling*." She sighs heavily, as if

she's a little tired of talking about it.

Lucas laughs. It's the first time I've ever him seen do this. I'm not sure if I'm imagining this, but it seems like talking about football, then getting *off* the topic of football, has put him in a better mood. "A gold medal!" he says. "That's really great."

After everyone has asked their question, Mary tells us there's a second tradition for new volunteers. While the rest of the class works on another activity, Lucas and I will each be paired with one class member who will interview us so we can be introduced in a fuller way at the end of class.

"Great!" I say too loudly because I don't want her to see how nervous this makes me. I don't know if Mary realizes about half these people are almost impossible to understand. We only got through their questions because she was here, translating. Luckily, I get paired with Harrison, the blind one, who is easy to understand.

Mary points to two desk chairs in the corner and says, "Emily will show you where you're going, Harrison." She puts his hand on my elbow and he stands up. I'm surprised at what a relief this feels like, leading him across the room. *I can do this,* I think. *I can be a decent helper.* Then we sit down in two desks facing each other and for a long time, neither one of us, it seems, can think of anything to say. After a fairly excruciating silence, he says, "Okay, so do you like Wiffle ball?"

"Um. I don't think I've ever played it."

He nods. "Okay."

There's another long silence, as if, as far as Harrison's

concerned, we're now done with the interview. Finally I lean forward and whisper, "Do you want to ask me something else?"

"No," he says. "It's your turn."

"Oh." I look over at Lucas and his partner and realize he's right. Apparently we're meant to be interviewing each other, because Lucas is asking his partner a question. "What do you like to do?"

Harrison shrugs. "I don't know. Eat, I guess."

"Okay. Do you have any hobbies?"

"It's my turn."

"Oh, right, sorry."

"Do you have any hobbies?"

Now that he's asking me, I realize it's a hard question. I'm a high school senior taking three AP courses with college applications hovering over me like a black cloud. I co-chair our school's Youth Action Coalition with my friend Richard, which I feel very committed to but don't think of as a hobby really. I start to explain all this, but Harrison stops me. "Okay, that's enough. Your turn to ask a question." Of course that's enough. He's blind and has no way to write anything down.

I look over at Lucas to see if he's faring better with his partner. It seems like he is, but he got Francine, the bowling gold medalist, who is friendly and easy to talk to.

"How long have you been taking this class?" I ask. Mary had told us most students have been in this class for at least a year, so they know one another pretty well.

"Six years," Harrison says. "Technically, six years and

fourteen weeks."

"So you like it?"

"I like some parts of it. Some parts I don't like. My turn to ask a question."

"Right. Sorry."

"How long have you been taking this class?"

"Well—" Now I'm desperate. I look over at Lucas, who seems to be sharing a great joke with Francine. He's laughing and pointing to her piece of paper. "Just write it," he's saying.

"This is my first day!" I say with a fake laugh so it will look like Harrison and I are having fun, too. "I'm new, remember?"

He pulls his earlobe. "That's right. I forgot."

I don't know if he's mad about me laughing but he falls silent as if he is. "Do you want to ask me anything else?" I finally say. I feel terrible. I thought I would be good at this—or better than Lucas Kessler, at least—but apparently I'm wrong. I'm awkward and self-conscious and I have terrible instincts. I wonder what Harrison will say when he introduces me. In this group, there seems to be a tendency toward honesty that worries me.

"I only have one more question."

"Okay!" I say hopefully. Maybe this will be a breakthrough—he'll ask about school or what I'd like to do in the future.

"Why are you volunteering in this class?"

My face goes red. I don't know why it didn't occur to me that someone might ask this. Obviously I should have

an answer prepared, but I don't. I can't get any words to come out of my mouth.

Harrison nods as if he understands. He may be blind but he's seen all he needs to of me.

Mary waits until the end of class to have our partners introduce us. She asks Lucas's partner, Francine, to go first. "Lucas is eighteen years old and is pretty good-looking even though he's very, very humongous. He likes cats, some TV show I never heard of, and football. He also plays football, but not for the Patriots. He plays for some school but I can't remember the name. His favorite food is . . ." She squints down at the paper. "I don't know. I can't read what I wrote."

He leans across his chair-desk and whispers in her ear.

"Really?" she says. Everyone laughs. "Meatloaf, I guess. But I don't know why."

Everyone claps. Francine smiles and takes a bow.

"Thank you for doing a wonderful job with that, Francine," Mary says. "Harrison, your turn to introduce Emily." My heart races as he stands up. I wonder if he'll say, *Emily seems like she feels very uncomfortable being here.*

But he doesn't. Instead, he says, "The week Emily was born in 1996, the number-one hit song on the Billboard charts was 'Because You Loved Me,' by Celine Dion."

I'm stunned. As we finished our interview, he asked for my birthday with the year, but could this possibly be right? Everyone laughs and claps as if this is another inside joke. Harrison smiles, bows, and sits back down. Mary asks what my birthday is and goes over to her desk in the corner to

check on an iPad. "You're right, Harrison! Well done, sir!"

Everyone claps again, this time with a few whistles.

I'm not sure what just happened. Apparently Harrison isn't just blind, he has a savant's ability to memorize the entire history of Billboard number-one songs and their dates. It wasn't about me, but it also wasn't terrible. We've gotten through it fine, or at least everyone has overlooked the awful job I just did my first day in this class.

BELINDA

LATELY I'VE BEEN WATCHING *Pride and Prejudice* a lot. Not the new version starring Keira Knightly, but the old one that takes longer to watch and stars Colin Firth. It's the only boxed DVD set that Nan owns but she says that's okay, it's the only DVD set she needs. Nan loves Mr. Darcy who is also Colin Firth and so do I.

Lately I've been watching it all day long instead of going to school.

I go to Westchester High School but this is my last year, which means I am supposed to be having a great time. My first day of school this year Mom played a song called "Anticipation," because she wanted to make me feel less nervous. The singer kept saying, "Stay right here 'cause these are the good old days," which made me think maybe I should stay right there at home and not get on the school bus because sometimes at school, I do *not* feel like these are

the good old days.

I got on the bus, though. Then I sat where I always sit, in the first seat behind the driver. Some years the driver changes and instead of a man named Carl, we have a woman named Sue. Even if this happens, though, I never change where I sit, which is right behind the driver. Behind the driver means no bus jerks can make fun of me or do their jokes where they pretend to be my friend and then give me candy that's been on the dirty bus floor. Behind the driver means I usually sit near seventh graders who are scared, too.

I've been going to school so long it shouldn't scare me anymore but sometimes it does. Before the first day of school, Nan reminds me of the things I love about school, like my job in the main office, which is sorting paper for recycling and delivering mail. Nan also makes a list of all the teachers I love like Rhonda, Carla, and Ms. Culpepper. By then, I usually remember other things I love like the mandarin oranges from the cafeteria, the art display cases, and listening to band practice. Nan helps me remember those things better than Mom, who tries but sometimes forgets stuff.

Now everything is different. Now Nan is trying to help me forget. Instead of going to school, she lets me stay home every day and watch *Pride and Prejudice*. If Mom asks her when I'm going to go back to school, Nan says, "For God's sake, Lauren, let her be. At least we know she's safe here."

Usually Mom and Nan don't fight in front of me.

Usually they don't fight much because Mom has limitations and depression. Mom does what she can to help me but I don't need much anymore so she doesn't do a lot. For instance, I used to make my own lunch and pack it in my zipper lunch bag. But that was back when I went to school and took a lunch. Now I don't go to school anymore so I don't pack my lunch either.

I watch the screen, where Jane is trying not to cry after Mr. Bingley leaves town without saying so much as a word. Just watching her try not to cry makes me start to cry. Even in *Pride and Prejudice* people are mean. They don't think about other people's feelings. Usually I like imagining I am Elizabeth, but today I close my eyes and feel just like Jane, who thought she'd made a friend and turned out to be wrong.

Sometimes I do things that make other people have uncomfortable thoughts. If I talk too much about Colin Firth, for instance, it gives teachers uncomfortable thoughts. Once Rhonda, my speech therapist, told me her uncomfortable thought: "I'm bored with Colin Firth! I don't know him. He lives far away and I don't want to talk about him anymore!"

We both laughed even though I didn't think what she said was funny. I can't imagine being bored with Colin Firth. That's because I love him and sometimes when he looks out at me from inside the TV screen, I'm pretty sure he loves me, too.

I know I'm not supposed to say this out loud. Because then people will think many uncomfortable thoughts like

I'm crazy. They'll say I've never met Mr. Firth and that means he can't love me. And I'd have to say what my mom told me: that love is a *feeling.* And you don't always kiss people you love. "Sometimes you just love them," she said.

When I asked her, "Does that mean they love me, too?" she said, "Oh sure, Belinda. Everyone loves you."

I think she meant teachers at school mostly, but I think it could also mean Colin Firth. When he looks at me, I feel it. I just do. I know it in my heart.

Rhonda, my speech teacher, doesn't agree: "He's a character. He's not real. He's on TV but TV isn't real."

I'm not sure what to say to that. To me he's real. Doesn't that make him real?

I don't always watch *Pride and Prejudice.* Sometimes I watch different old movies. I like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound of Music* except I don't like it when Maria and the Captain kiss because he's too old and looks like her father. I like Liesl and Rolfe's song even though Rolfe turns out to be a Nazi which is a terrible thing to be. In my mind afterward, I make him not a Nazi and I let them get married and live happily after.

Same with Scarlett from *Gone with the Wind.* In the beginning she loves Ashley who has a girl's name but is a man. Ashley is very nice but doesn't love her back. Then she meets Rhett who is dangerous and handsome and loves her right away. In my imagination, I make Ashley change his mind and decide to love Scarlett. Then she'll have someone she knows she can count on. She can't count

on Rhett. He is exciting but not dependable. Sometimes exciting is exactly what you *don't* want in a boy.

I learned this from other movies about exciting but undependable boys. You have to be careful with them because a lot of times they're handsome, too. So that's confusing.

"I get around some of those men—they're so handsome, I can't talk," Mom says. "I mean it. My tongue gets all dry. It's like someone put glue in my mouth."

I know this feeling. I have it every time I watch *Pride and Prejudice* starring Colin Firth. I can't talk at all. Sometimes I try to watch without blinking and I can't do that either. I get light-headed which my mom says happened to her once on a date. When she stood up to go to the ladies' room, she fell back into her chair and felt embarrassed.

"That's what happens when I like the man," Mom says. "I don't act very likeable."

I know how this is. I've had it in real life, too, not just watching Colin Firth. I felt it every time I was around Ron Moody. Sometimes, just being near him, I felt like I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Or my heart might explode.

I didn't feel like myself. I felt like someone having a heart attack. Except it happened every time I saw him so it wasn't a real heart attack. It was love. That's what Mom said when I told her about him. "You're in love, Belinda, and that's a wonderful, special feeling . . ."

She didn't say it was bad to feel that way, or wrong. She didn't even say, "Be careful, Belinda," which she probably should have. She said, "You deserve love as much as anyone

else," which got me confused for a while. It made me think maybe Ron loved me, too.

EMILY

The truth about Lucas—and why we're being punished—is a little more complicated than I want to admit to anyone, especially Richard, who loves to hate what he calls "the heteronormative class structure embodied by the football team." I'm not sure exactly what he means by this, except for the obvious part. Football players have too much power at our school, especially this year with their winning record. I've seen lunch ladies wave them through the line without paying a dime for a full tray of food. I've seen kids they don't know buy them sodas and carry their backpacks; anything to win three seconds of a football player's approval.

Richard thinks our group of friends is different but we aren't really. We might not prostrate ourselves to win the football team's attention, but we still spend some amount of time every lunch period staring over at their table. Just because we can *see* the problem doesn't mean we aren't part of it.

Lucas and I have never talked about what happened with Belinda, so I have no idea if he feels guilty the way I do or if he feels like he's being unfairly punished. I assume it's the latter—that he thinks what happened was terrible,

of course, but not his fault. At the very least, he probably thinks it's more my fault than his, which—though I don't admit this to anyone—might be true.

It's still hard for me to understand what happened.

On the surface, it's a simple story. Three weeks ago, I was at a home game with my four best friends: Richard, Barry, Weilin, and Candace. Ordinarily we aren't big football fans, but this year everyone goes to home games. Every week, with every victory, the crowds get bigger.

That night, I was in a terrible mood, though I feel stupid admitting it now. Toby Schulz, a boy I thought I'd been flirting with for the last two weeks with funny texts and Facebook messages, was sitting two rows down from us, on a clear and obvious date with Jenny Birdwell, a cute sophomore with a blond ponytail. Three days earlier he'd sent me a message saying, "We should do something some time," which I had stupidly thought meant *with each other.* Apparently it didn't. Apparently it meant *we should sit near each other at a football game and wave hi while I'm on a date with someone else*.

It wasn't that I was so in love with Toby. He'd seemed smart and a little more engaged than our typical new recruits to Youth Action Coalition, who usually show up angry about one issue and bored by all the others. At the first meeting Toby came to, he stayed after to say he was impressed by the range of our "actions" and all "the cool things we were up to." He had curly brown hair and slightly crooked teeth that for some reason made him even cuter. LGBT support wasn't his main issue, he told

us, not looking at Richard, but he was certainly on board with that. His main issue was the environment. He loved backpacking and wanted the mountains to still be around for his children to enjoy. How could I *not* get a crush on him? And when he messaged me three times over the next week, how could I *not* think maybe he liked me back?

If I'm being honest, though, I'd have to admit: it wasn't Toby being there with a cute sophomore that bothered me as much as a long series of Toby-like misjudgments on my part. It felt like I kept making the same mistakes over and over—thinking classroom joking was flirtation, thinking guys who asked for my phone number to get a homework assignment wanted my phone number more than they wanted the assignment.

I partly blame Richard for this. He loves to pretend that everyone is at least a little bit gay and might have a crush on him. He'll sit beside Wayne Cartwright, our gorgeous quarterback, in the main office waiting for a late pass and claim their arm hairs were reaching out for each other. He knows nothing will happen but he still dwells on these moments. "Arm hairs don't lie. They can't, actually. They don't have individual brains. Just instincts."

For him it's funny. Nobody expects Wayne Cartwright to miraculously come out of the closet and mix arm hairs with Richard, but when I try to dream big and jokingly say, "I think Toby Schulz wants to ask me out, but he's too shy," it's sad the next week to sit behind the evidence of how unshy he is. Richard didn't say anything, which made me feel even more pathetic, if that was possible. Like

suddenly I'd become someone people tiptoed around.

This is one of my explanations for what happened that night. Not an excuse or a justification. Just a way for me to understand how I could be such a disappointment to myself. Toward the end of half time, I slipped away from my group to buy a soda at the snack stand and on the way back to my seat, I started to cry. Ridiculous, embarrassing tears of self-pity. I never cry in public—ever—and I didn't want my friends to see, so I went around the back of the bleachers. I thought if I let myself cry for a minute, I'd get it out of my system and be fine for the second half.

Then I couldn't find my way back. I was near the field house where the players spend half time. It was late; the team had run onto the field to thunderous applause five minutes earlier. We were behind by seven points, which was different for us. We'd gotten so used to winning by comfortable margins that the crowd was anxious and screaming and stamping their feet.

Even with all the commotion, though, I heard a strange noise under the bleachers. It sounded like an animal. A dog maybe, who'd fallen and was stuck in the latticework below the bleachers. That made no sense, of course, but that's what it sounded like. It was dark under the bleachers, and striped with light, which meant my eyes took a minute to adjust. I couldn't see anything at first, so I moved closer. *It must be a dog,* I thought. I could hear a whimpering sound. Then gradually, in the darkness, two figures took shape. I recognized one. Belinda Montgomery, a girl I'd known years earlier in a children's theater program, was pressed

against a fence with a boy standing in front of her. It looked like her hair was caught and her dress was torn. For a second I thought: *She's stuck on the fence and he's lifting her off.*

Nothing else made sense. The last time I saw her, she was playing Little Red Riding Hood.

Then I realized the boy was Mitchell Breski, someone who'd been arrested once at our school and taken away in a police car. We never knew for what, but there were plenty of rumors, mostly about drugs. Knowing that much made the whole scene more frightening and, somehow, less comprehensible. *Wait,* I kept thinking. *Wait a minute.*

I should have screamed that, I know now.

I should have screamed *anything* to make it clear this didn't seem right. I *knew* Belinda, but my brain couldn't process what it was seeing: her pressed against the fence like that, powerless behind him. They couldn't have been a couple, couldn't have even been friends. I should have said her name. I should have called out, "Belinda, is that you?" even if I hadn't said hello to her once in the last three years. I didn't do that, though. I was struck mute in that instant and I remember very little after that. I know that at some point, a football player ran out from the locker room, which must have jolted me momentarily out of my panic. Maybe I thought, *It's okay to leave because he's here now and will take care of this.* I honestly don't remember.

I know I staggered out from under the bleachers to a roar of noise and light from the crowd. I know I found a teacher, Mrs. Avery, wearing a scarf and pompom earrings, screaming "DEFENSE!" between cupped hands, and I

touched her elbow. "There's something happening under the bleachers!" I said. The roar behind us got bigger.

"WHAT?" she yelled.

"There's something happening. To a girl. Under the bleachers." My heartbeat was louder than my voice at that point.

All at once, everyone in the stands was up on their feet screaming. Later I learned, we'd made an interception and carried the ball for a forty-five-yard run. We'd taken a losing game and turned it around. Everyone was ecstatic—screaming and hugging and pounding their feet.

Then I saw the football player from under the bleachers jog onto the field and felt a great flood of relief. *He took care of it,* I thought. *He stopped whatever was about to happen.*

I sat for a few minutes so my heart could slow down. When it did, I walked back to the far end of the bleachers where I'd just come from and saw the flashing lights of a police car pulsing red in the parking lot near the snack stand. I was surprised at first and then relieved by what it meant: *Yes, the football player called the police.*

I didn't sleep much that night, which meant my nerves were raw when I read the newspaper the next morning and saw a small article on the fourth page under the headline INCIDENT BRINGS POLICE TO HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL GAME. Neither student was named, nor were many details given, but seeing the headline made me break down on the spot and confess to my parents what had happened. "I saw this. I walked in on it and—I don't know what happened—I froze. I didn't do anything."

My parents were quick to reassure me. "You were frightened for your safety, sweetheart. You were following your instincts. No one can blame you for that."

"Yes, they can," I told my mother. The more I thought about it, the worse my actions seemed. "I didn't help her. I ran away and let the other guy take care of it. It was terrible."

My mother tried to argue with me, but what could she say? I *hadn't* done anything. Finally she squeezed my hand and said, "Well, thank heavens that other boy was there. It sounds like the girl is going to be fine and it's time for everyone to put this behind us. It's *okay*, Em. Next time will be different."

It was impossible to know if Belinda *was* okay. I didn't see her in school, but then our paths hardly ever crossed, so maybe that didn't mean much. That whole week afterward, I looked for her at school, wandering past the Life Skills classroom where I assumed she spent most of her day. I never saw her, but I saw some of her classmates, joking around with one another, wearing aprons one morning. When one of them looked up and saw me, I asked, "Is Belinda here?"

"No," he said. "We haven't seen Beminda in a while."

What else could I do to find out if she was okay? Instead of going to lunch that day, I stood outside the athletic office and studied the roster of football players. I wanted to figure out which player had saved her. I hadn't seen his face but I remembered his number, which meant it was Lucas Kessler, who I'd never had a class with and didn't know

except for his size. I remembered someone once saying he wore size sixteen shoes that he had to special order because no one mass-produced shoes like that.

It wasn't until the end of that day, when a summons to the guidance counselor told me I would no longer wrestle with my guilt in private but would have to discuss it—extensively, with various authorities, as it turned out—that I also learned this: I wasn't alone. Lucas hadn't done anything either.

It took another week to get the whole story, but when I finally did, I could hardly believe it. It turned out Belinda had saved herself.