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Sometimes I feel like my hometown of Briar Glen is just showing off. I can't tear my eyes away from a brilliant maple tree right outside my classroom window. All week I've been watching its leaves slowly change from light green to orange and red, glowing against the backdrop of a mountain in the late-afternoon sun. I inhale deeply, and I swear I can almost smell the fall breeze, the crisp scent of a nearby bonfire, even from inside this stuffy room.

"Lucy? You okay?" my teacher Mrs. Ryan asks me. "You're breathing kind of hard."

I snap out of my daydream and look around the room. Everyone in my sophomore English class is looking at me—including the new guy, Jack Harper. He just moved to Briar Glen, and he has been the single topic of conversation around school. As I take in his features, I'm still not convinced he's actually a person and not a robot. People like him don't exist in real life. His eyes are green, but like the green in a crayon box green. Not hazel. Not

I

greenish. Pure, one-hundred-percent green. And even a brick wall would notice the muscles in his arms. Yeah, no, he's not real. Definitely some kind of robot.

But then he smiles at me, and I don't think robots can smile like him. Robots shouldn't make me blush, right?

I quickly turn back to Mrs. Ryan. "Yep!"

Mrs. Ryan looks at me a second longer, unconvinced. "Okay," she finally says, "*Great Expectations!* Who wants to tell me why they think Pip is ashamed of Joe?"

I dig through my backpack, trying to find my paperback copy of *Great Expectations*. Maybe if I look busy, Mrs. Ryan won't call on me, because I might have sorta fallen asleep during the assigned reading last night. But where is my book? I know I put it in here somewh—Aha! There it is, under my history book. I try to pull *Great Expectations* out, but it's stuck on something. What the heck is in my bag? I give the paperback a big tug and then—

Riiip!

Sigh. Of course. I hold *Great Expectations* in my hand, sans cover, and look up.

Mrs. Ryan clears her throat, an eyebrow raised. "You sure, Lucy?"

Everyone is staring at me. Again. Including Jack Harper.

This time I glance at Melanie Craddock, who sits right next to

Jack. The head of the cheerleading squad. Could they be a more cliché good-looking couple? Not that they are a couple yet. They definitely will be by Halloween, though. At the latest.

Melanie leans forward in her desk and says something to Jack, flashing her million-kilowatt smile, then flips her long brown curly hair over her shoulder.

“All good!” I say to Mrs. Ryan, turning back to face her, still holding my torn book. I listen as everyone talks about Pip’s shame.

Toward the end of class, I turn to look at the clock and . . . it almost seems like Jack is staring at me? Weird. Must be some kind of programming error.

Finally—*finally*—the bell rings, and I hop out of my seat. It’s three o’clock, which means I need to get to my mom’s coffee shop, Cup o’ Jo, like, *now*. It’s a Friday afternoon in October, and I know she’s slammed with leaf-peeping tourists.

I head to my locker, where one of my best friends, Evie, is waiting for me. “I knew you weren’t a huge Dickens fan, but wow, a bit dramatic?” she says, looking at the coverless book in my hand.

“It got stuck on something. The cover ripped. Like, in the middle of class. Which was apparently hilarious to everyone, including Jack—”

“Harper, who is heading this way!”

“Huh?” I start to turn but in my haste, I somehow manage to tip over my bag, spilling its contents everywhere. Great. I bend down, trying to shovel everything back in it.

Evie kneels to help me. “Not to alarm you or anything,” she whispers, “but he’s, like, two feet away.”

“*What?*”

“Hey, uh, Lucy?” I hear a voice behind me say.

I look at Evie, who smirks. She stands up first and I follow, turn, and . . . Jack Harper is standing right in front of me.

I’ve only ever seen him from across the classroom, and this close up, I realize how much taller he is than me (I barely clock in at five feet two). He has freckles across his nose and cheeks. And I can see that his eyes are even more sparkly, and wow, his eyelashes really are long . . .

I also realize he has just asked me something, but I have no idea what. “Sorry, what did you say?”

He registers my confusion. “I said, I know, it’s weird, but . . . I have copies of a few different editions of *Great Expectations*. It’s my favorite Dickens novel.”

“That’s . . . cool,” I say, my brain short-circuiting. Why is he telling me this?

“Do you want one of my copies?” he asks, as if he can read my mind. “Without a ripped cover?”

“Oh, right. Thanks, that’s . . . nice of you,” I say, finally understanding why Jack Harper is standing at my locker, talking to me.

“How, uh, how are you liking it so far?” he asks.

“The book is . . . fine. Still readable. Or apparently readable.”

“She hates Dickens,” Evie says. I’d almost forgotten she was there.

“Hates Dickens?!” Jack mimes stabbing himself in the heart.

“You can’t hate *all* Dickens. What about *A Tale of Two Cities*?”

“It cured her insomnia,” Evie says brightly.

“Evie!” I say, feeling my face flush.

“Just drive that dagger in farther!” Jack says, his hand on his chest.

“Um, sorry,” I say. “I mean, thanks. I’m cool with the book I have. But if I change my mind . . . I’ll let you know?”

Jack sighs. “How can you not like *Great Expectations*?” He looks at Evie as if she’ll have an answer, but she just shrugs.

“Different strokes?” Evie suggests.

“Fair enough.” Jack laughs. “See you later.”

“You too!” I say.

For a moment, Jack gives me a confused look, and then he’s on his way down the hall.

It’s not until he’s on the staircase leading outside that I realize what I said to Jack Harper makes no sense. But

it's okay because Jack Harper makes no sense to me.

“You too?” Evie says, looking at me, one eyebrow raised.

“I'm in a hurry!”

“Uh-huh,” Evie says. “So he's cute and he likes to read. And he just offered to give you one of his books and you said no. I think that's, like, a cardinal sin, to turn down a book when a book nerd offers you one.”

“He's not a book nerd!” I say. “He was just being nice.”

“Uh-huh,” Evie repeats.

“I think you're just jealous that you're not the newest kid at school anymore.” It had been a bit of a running joke between Evie, me, and our other best friend, Amber. Even though Evie moved to Briar Glen two years ago, in eighth grade, we still call her the new kid.

“I'm green with envy,” she says sarcastically.

I roll my eyes, then check the time on my phone. “Oh man, I really gotta go.”

“Yeah, don't want your boss to fire you,” Evie teases. She pulls a compact out of her pocket, examining her cat's-eye eyeliner. “I need to fix this,” she says with a sigh, then turns in the direction of the bathrooms. “See you this weekend!”

I close my bag, pick up my pace, and head out of the building. But I don't get far before I hear—

“Lucy!” Amber says, jogging over to me from the soccer fields. “We have to run a million laps today at practice for no reason. I’m warming up,” she says, impatiently swatting her long blond ponytail away from her head.

“Poor Amber,” I say. “It must be hard to be such a soccer star.”

Amber squints her brown eyes at me. She’s on the varsity team even though she’s only a sophomore. “Seriously! You try running all those laps! I’m going to get shin splints.”

“No thanks!” I say brightly. Amber and I have a lot in common—a shared addiction to competitive cooking and baking TV shows, a severe dislike of the color beige—but athleticism is not one of them.

“I’ll stop by the shop tomorrow? Save me a corner Rice Krispies treat?”

“Always,” I promise. With a smile and a nod, Amber heads back to the soccer fields.

It’s a ten-minute walk to Main Street. A walk I can do in eight minutes when I’m in a hurry, like I usually am. My mom has a handful of part-time workers, but I still want to get to the shop as quickly as I can to relieve her of some of the craziness.

I pull my dirty blond hair up in a messy bun as I walk quickly down the quiet, treelined streets, which are a mixture of colonial and craftsman style and even a few Victorian houses. Paper

cutout pumpkins, ghosts, and spiders fill the windows, and pumpkins, jack-o'-lanterns, and gourds of all shapes and sizes adorn the porches. I pause for just a second outside my favorite Halloween house: the one with the huge pirate ship with a literal skeleton crew. There is some sort of human-size sea monster with long tentacles at the helm of the boat. Every year on Halloween night, the sea monster actually steers the ship, and it's been a debate among Briar Glen residents whether there is someone inside the sea monster costume or if it's operating through animatronics. Something about the way the monster looks at me through those beady eyes every Halloween . . . I shiver and move on.

I round the corner onto Main Street, and as usual at this time of year, it's bustling with tourists. People milling around in our brick brownstone local artisanal shops and galleries. People taking selfies and pictures of one another on the narrow sidewalk, oblivious to me or really anything other than the foliage surrounding them. I can't blame the tourists, though. The leaves are on fire with color, the sun is lighting up the mountain, and there's a crisp fall breeze gently blowing down Main Street.

As I try to squeeze past one group slowly strolling on the sidewalk and attempting to take a selfie, a woman turns to me. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" she says. "We're totally blocking the sidewalk, aren't we? It's just so—"

“Beautiful.” I smile. “I know. It’s okay. I live here, and fall still amazes me every year.”

“You get to live here! Lucky girl.”

I look at the glowing mountain again, the vibrant leaves dancing in the wind. “Yeah, I am.”

The group follows my gaze and gasps. They ready themselves for another selfie.

“Enjoy your visit to Briar Glen,” I say, but they don’t hear me—and it’s okay. The mountain and the multi-hued leaves speak for themselves. My words would never be enough to describe Briar Glen in the fall.

I take a step in the street to go around the group, then hop back onto the sidewalk. I’m about to cross the street to my mom’s coffee shop, but I take a quick look behind me at the empty storefront, which was a florist shop for as long as I can remember. I’m not really a flower kind of person, but I still used to love watching Jen make arrangements, listening to the stories she’d tell me about bride- and groomzillas. The shop has been empty since spring, when Jen decided to retire and move down south somewhere. I think South Carolina? I can never remember where exactly. I don’t know why anyone would ever move away from Briar Glen. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.

Everyone has been guessing what’ll go in the space. My

favorite guess was Lucky's, the town barber: a Froyo place where you can add as many toppings as you want.

But as I look at the empty storefront again, I notice a flier taped to the inside of the door. That wasn't there yesterday. I can't see what it says, so I get closer.

SEE YOU SOON! EVERYONE'S FAVORITE COFFEE SHOP WILL BE
HERE SHORTLY!

And then I gasp.

Underneath the words is a logo for one of the most popular coffee chains in the world: Java Junction.

Which is opening across the street from our coffee shop.