

The book cover features a stylized illustration of a young woman with long, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a red headscarf and a dark green hoodie. She is looking slightly to the side with a gentle smile. The background is a vibrant mix of pink, purple, and blue, with a geometric pattern of stars and diamonds. In the bottom right corner, there is a blue circular badge with the text 'FREE SAMPLER!' in pink. The title 'Free Radicals' is written in a large, white, brushy font across the center. At the bottom left, the author's name 'LILA RIESEN' is written in pink. The bottom of the cover shows a stylized illustration of a mosque with domes and minarets in shades of blue and purple.

FREE
SAMPLER!

Free Radicals

LILA
RIESEN

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LILA RIESEN



Nancy Paulsen Books

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[Dedication t.k.]

1

I HAVE four rules as Ghost.

Don't get caught rooting around in the SOL tree. Never reveal my identity. Ensure justice is served without police involvement. And most important . . . don't get emotionally invested.

In the fall of my sophomore year, I broke every rule.

Rafi has *It* over again. America and its paper-thin walls.

Mom and Dad are downstairs and I know they can hear it, too. But Rafi's the firstborn male in our Afghan family, so when the chandelier shakes in the living room, Dad pretends it's Mr. Meowgi galumphing upstairs, orange belly swaying. And it's not like Baba notices much; he's nodded off on his pea-green rocker listening to ancient rubab music on his equally ancient Walkman.

Chunky as he is, the cat can't make the chandelier shake like that.

Mom drowns the noise by vacuuming the Daulatabad rugs with the circles, triangles, and tassels, lost in her own

Geometric Daulatabad Dimension of Denial, soon rousing Baba and cueing his usual “Watch the fringe, the *fringe*! Your baba brought the rug all the way from—”

“Kabul, yes, yes.”

Mom’s thinking about her son, upstairs, yesterday only a smiley squish splashing in the kitchen sink, now seventeen and untamable, putting his girlfriend’s *my body my choice* into action. *It*. And *It* chose Rafi.

I say *It* because she’s basically this thing that’s attached herself to my brother. It wasn’t always like that.

God forbid if I brought a guy over. No boy—friend or no—has been allowed past the threshold and upstairs to my room. They can only sit on the curb, like stray dogs.

My grandpa Baba thinks dogs are nejin. Unclean.

Tired of Mom’s obnoxious vacuuming, I fill Dad’s colossal UC Irvine Mathematics Dept. mug with jumbo marshmallows and homemade hot cocoa, my favorite fall creation. Then retire upstairs to my room, slather on one of those clay face masks, and shut-ish the door, since Dad gets mad when our bedroom doors are closed. Rafi’s ignoring the *door open!* rule tonight, and thank god.

I rummage for my headphone case in a pile of dirty laundry, pull up Spotify, and wheedle out the dog-eared California DMV manual from underneath my A&P textbook. Baba likes to remind me he failed his driver’s test twice before he got his license. I cannot, *will not*, follow in the old man’s footsteps. Because driver’s license = freedom. And freedom = boys.

One boy in particular.

Honestly, the DMV should’ve failed Baba on his third attempt. When he backs out of the drive, he putters onto the

wrong side of the street, flamenco music blasting from the blown-out speakers.

“California’s Basic Speed Law says . . . ,” I read aloud, then gingerly tip the mug to my lips; spongy marshmallows tickle my nose.

Tap! Tap!

Blergh!—cocoa dribbles down my chin. Through the window’s sheer curtain crouches a stooped silhouette.

About the no-guy rule: Cole Dawicki is the only exception. Not that he counts. First, he’s my neighbor. Second, he’s a pubescent.

Cole brings me letters once or twice a month, depending on the season, maybe three times. Especially come fall because that’s when everyone at Santa Margarita North crawls over each other like the undead looking for a beating heart in a pile of bodies. So fall is cheating season and winter, breakup season. Why smash the piggy bank to buy a gift for your S.O. if you’re gonna call it quits anyway?

My classmates, whatever shenanigans they get up to, they leave the Final Ruling to the Ghost.

Me, Mafi Shahin.

And if found guilty, Ghosting—my brand of it, anyway—is worth shattering the piggy bank for.

2

THE GLOW of the desk lamp that pours onto the roof, Cole's face is splotched in the telltale reds and purples of exertion. He's panting from tearing around on his bike and climbing the oak tree. Wind turns his XL gray sweatshirt into a parachute. Cole wants to be a baller like Rafi, but Coach Gordan told him he needs to grow before high school. So his rationale is if he sizes up, the Baller Genie will help him fill out his clothes overnight like she did for my big brother.

I know Cole'll be a heartthrob one day but I feel pervy thinking about it. The kid's twelve.

"Beavers?" he says with a snide look at my pajama bottoms.

He doesn't say anything about the witchy green clay mask.

Cole smells like rain and smoke. Mrs. Dawicki's cigarette smoke's inlaid in all the furniture in his house. His bedding. His dog. In Cole, too. Smoked while she was pregnant with him. I overheard Mom gossiping about it with my big sister, Kate, when she visited from UCLA.

According to Grandma, Kate is not a proper Afghan name. Dad chose it.

But now it's only Baba who wants us to be Afghan, anyway. Just say *Afghanistan* out loud and Dad will turn into a turnip. Meanwhile, Mom wants us to be whoever we want, but says *life is easier without men, without boyfriends*. Whatever that means.

"Note, Coleslaw." I cinch my robe, suspicious of Cole's downturned chin—where those big eyes might be looking from underneath his rain-spattered hood. This is a drive-thru transaction. Get the notes, hand over the cash, and buh-bye.

"Note—s," Cole says.

His scrawny sweatshirted arm slips through the window, clutching two folded notes.

"Two?" He doesn't let go.

"Ten dollars."

"Hell no!"

I let go so quickly he has to catch himself. The little gremlin.

"Heavens," he says, hand fluttering over his heart. "I'm just a child, you know. Let's break it down . . . five extra for climbing the tree," he says, matter-of-factly, like a lawyer. A learned tactic from watching Mr. Dawicki prepare for court. "With this flimsy branch, I could get you for negligence. I mean—" He tugs on the branch and it creaks. "*And* you've got me going into the woods in the middle of the night. Trespassing on school property, you know."

"It's eight thirty!"

"Bedtime's nine." He flashes his gap-toothed smile. Cole's mom nearly put him in braces but Cole talked her out of it; he said the gap gives him an edge. Twelve-year-olds are already worried about being edgy these days.

Cole knows he's got me. I *need* those notes. If he reads them, my life as I know it—*Ghost* in the shadows—could be over. If he connects the dots, that is. The kid's smart, and even though he doesn't go to SMN yet, I can't chance it.

I've made being invisible a superpower. But Cole doesn't need to know any of that to be my efficient sidekick. And no one can know about our Courier-Ghost arrangement.

"Jesus. Fine." I pray my voice is steady. These kids can sniff out fear.

Cole's changed. When he was in sixth grade, he was my doe-eyed courier. He'd get the notes from the SOL tree and bring them to me, no questions asked. He's wising up as a seventh grader. Money won't satisfy him forever.

It's called the SOL tree because if your name ends up in the knot . . . you're Shit Outta Luck. Everyone knows it. Karma has spoken. Karma being me. I'm the Ghost of Santa Margarita North. Only no one at SMN knows it's me doing the pranks.

A light flicks on across the street and streams through the branches. With an anxious look toward home, Cole snaps his fingers. "C'mon, Mom'll notice."

"Ughhh." I open my desk drawer and slip him ten dollars. Cole flattens the bill on a roof tile then holds it up to the moonlight. His hood slips off to reveal straight black hair.

"It's not Monopoly money," I say. "I'm good for it."

Without donations left in the notes, I wouldn't be able to pay Cole. I don't know what he's saving for, but I've never seen him spend a dime. He keeps everything in his Velcro wallet with the black butterfly on front.

He gives me a sideways look. "You know, you can have it back if you tell me who's writing to y—"

“Notes, Coleslaw.”

With a *your loss* shrug, Cole pockets the money and flings the notes into my room. I catch them in midair, cursing.

One is written on heavy paper, the expensive kind from Paper Source. The other, composition grade.

I turn my back to Cole. I don’t want him to see it, this energy that runs through me whenever I’ve got one in my hand. Excitement. Fear. Who will be next?

Cole’s shoes squeak, heel reflectors winking in the dark. Perched at the edge of the roof, Cole makes a move for the tree branch, swaying in the breeze.

There’s a chill in the air tonight. November’s almost here. We’re about to go on the holiday roller coaster. First, Halloween. Thanksgiving. Christmas. New Year’s.

Cole used to say bye. Not anymore.

I miss the kid I used to babysit. The one who didn’t straighten his hair. The one who squealed when I chased him with the garden hose. The one whose second-grade showcase project was about the conservation of monarch butterflies, something he felt so passionate about he cried when a girl stamped on the paper wings we’d cut together with serrated craft scissors.

Every year, I’ve gotta get to know the kid all over again. Is this how it is to be a mother?

There’s a weighty bonk and a muffled giggle on the other side of my bedroom wall.

It is still here. And Cole heard it, too.

His hand falls from the branch. “Oh, *brother*,” he says, amused.

“Cole, don’t—”

He crouches, crab-walking past my window . . .

“*Oi!*” My arm flails. There’s the brush of his sweatshirt against my fingertips. I can’t go after him. I’m barefooted and the contractors left nails half-hammered all over the roof—toe mines. Sometimes I wonder if Dad told them to do it on purpose to prevent us kids from sneaking out.

“It’s a no-go anyway,” Cole whispers below Rafi’s window. “Curtain’s shut. Wait . . .” He’s spotted the old silver BMW in the driveway. “*It* again? You must be haaaating this.” Cole laughs in a chorus of pubescent croaks and squeaks.

He says *again* like that because my bro and *It* break up like every other week.

Before last year, Raf was nothing but a benchwarmer and *It* ignored him. He was put on the radar when he basically became a giant (the dude grew a foot in a year) and Coach Gordan tripped over himself to put Rafi in the starting lineup.

Now six foot eight and a center, Raf’s King of the Court at Santa Margarita North—along with the other Ball Giants.

But Big Bro still leaves skid marks on his tighty-whities, and that’s knowledge no one can ever take from me.

Cole’s laugh swells in the night.

Downstairs, the vacuum’s concluded its fringe-chomping quest, powering down. Every time *It* comes over, the rug fringe looks like Meowgi when he had a showdown with Nutter Butter, the squirrel that lives in the tree outside my window. He got his name after I woke to the thief helping himself to the open Nutter Butter on my desk.

If the wind carries Cole’s laughter into the living room window . . . Dad’s a *no weapons* type of guy but Baba does have some ancient pulwar sword mounted above his bed.

“*Shh!* Damnit, Cole!”

“Reeeelax,” Cole says. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen online before.”

“Ew. You’re like—eight.”

As his former babysitter, a burning rises in my chest. I’ve got an urge to scold him for watching porn at such a young age. But I was twelve, too, when I first watched it with my best friend. Well, ex—best friend, now.

Cole won’t budge from Rafi’s window, hopeful the curtain will miraculously swish. There’s sniggering coming from the other side now, which means it’s likely over.

There’s another *thump* and I cringe.

Part of this is Dad’s fault; he bought Raf a king bed since his calves stuck halfway off the twin like hairy tree trunks. More space, more room to romp with *It*.

“Ope, it’s a boob!” Cole squeaks in his maniacal voice, to get a rise out of me. “I saw boob!”

It works.

“*COLE DAWICKI!*” I whisper. There’s nothing worse than when a kid disobeys orders and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it. He hobbles past my window again, fist-bumps my head with a “*Pew*,” and leaps for the branch.

I want to tell him to stop swinging like an orangutan, to be careful. Instead, I say, “I can find another courier, you know.”

“Just say *messenger*,” he says, anchoring his foot on the branch below. “You’re turning into Kate.”

“You take that back!”

“You’re turning into Kate, Rafi’s sis! Accept it!”

“*Rafi’s sis?*”

Cole shrugs. “Jalen says it sometimes.”

“He talks about me?” I place a hand on the ledge.

Cole snickers and rests his chin on the branch. “Not you, too.”

“What?”

“*You like JT.*”

Jalen Thomas.

Aka walking thirst trap. Junior. And to top it off, hella smart. A ball player at SMN, so a quick thinker by nature.

“I don’t”—then realizing I don’t need to explain myself to a middle schooler—“you’re the one who follows him everywhere.”

“We’re friends,” Cole says in a *duh* sort of way.

“Uhhh seventeen-year-olds aren’t friends with middle schoolers.”

“Jalen’s not like other guys, Rafi’s sis.”

I’ve got nothing.

Jalen’s invited Cole for sleepovers, and vice versa. It’s not weird. It’s just—Jalen.

“Don’t call me *Rafi’s sis*, Coleslaw!”

But he’s still singing his little jig as he shimmies down the tree. “*Rafi’s sis, sis, sis.*”

I hold my breath. The tree shakes. Then there’s the unmistakable *fwump* of shoes against dirt. I exhale.

Shoulders hunched, Cole’s scrawny figure skulks across the street, sneaker reflectors flashing with each step. One, two. One, two.

3

COLE'S INVOLVEMENT in the SOL tree was an accident.

Getting to the SOL tree is tricky. It's on this steep slope covered with slick leaves that'll sweep your feet if you don't edge down sideways. On one letter run, someone followed me. It's difficult muffling footsteps with so many twigs underfoot.

I pounced, pinning my shadow to the forest floor.

Damn you, Cole Dawicki.

And it was an either *I'll tell you but then I'll have to kill you* or *Bring me the letters from now on or I'll kill you* sort of deal, and Cole chose the latter—especially when he found out there'd be money involved.

How I got him to promise not to read them was easy. I know the kid. He worships Jalen. He worships ball. So I told him if he read them, he'd never grow taller, never get to the NBA. Like lots of athletes, Cole's superstitious.

That, and I said I'd tell Dad *he* was the one who broke his rubab when he tried spinning a basketball on his finger. Dad spent one hundred dollars to have it fixed.

I take a swig of cold cocoa as Raf's door creaks open. There's giggling in the hall, and I imagine *It* fixing her hair in the bathroom mirror to look presentably innocent on her way out.

I stick the notes inside my diary.

Now, according to my big sister, Kate, since *It* and my brother are in a relationship, they're free to do as they please. Kate tells me there are two types of girls in high school: Girlfriend Material and Hook-Up Material.

I wanna be Girlfriend Material. This year, I've pledged an oath to myself, which is the highest of oaths. It's written in my diary, in ink: *Jalen Thomas, this year, you will be mine.*

My first boyfriend.

Sure, I could go after someone easier. Someone, I guess, *on my level*. A sophomore like me. Someone who doesn't stand out, maybe. But when I think about dating anyone else at SMN, a manor of thousands, my heart's not in it.

Some people fall into stuff, like Raf and his Ball popularity, and others have to make stuff happen for themselves. That's me. On my queen bed. Thinking about throning me a King of the Court.

I wonder if Jalen has a king bed?

I don't agree with Mom that life is easier without a boyfriend.

With Rafi's sporadic climb up the social ladder, perhaps there *could* be hope for me. He's living proof wishes do come true.

But my big bro's existence is also the reason I'm doomed. *Protective older brother* is an understatement. Case in point: my ex—bestfriend Annalie's homecoming party freshman year.

Raf called in a noise complaint after he heard I'd gone into the basement with three skater dudes from San Viejo Prep.

I became popular in the worst way—labeled Hook-Up Material—then just like that, invisible.

Shine a spotlight on a Ghost and you won't see anything. But just because they can't see me . . . doesn't mean I'm not there. Making an impact.

I stuff my diary underneath my blankets, for later. I can't read the notes while anyone's awake. The heat kicks on, rattling from the vent above my bed. Baba misses the Kabul desert and oppressive summer heat. That's why he treats us like we're bread rolls in need of baking.

Inside the vent is the jewelry box Baba gave me for my thirteenth birthday. All the notes Cole's ever delivered from the SOL tree are inside, crusted at the edges from enduring the constancy that is Baba's furnace.

If Rafi finds out what I'm doing. If anyone does.

There'll be no rising from the dead.

4

LATER THAT evening, once *It* takes the West Wind with her, there's a knock at my door. My phone sails across the room in surprise.

"Go away, Beelzebub!"

"It's Mom." Her fuzzy slippers are visible from the crack in the door. "And please don't call your brother Beelzebub. Can I come in?"

"Hold—hold on!" I crawl on elbows and knees like a leg-chomping zombie, grab my phone from a pile of dirty laundry, reverse my caboose, and hide it under the blankets. I don't know why. Mom would never go through my phone.

I cast a nervous look to the vent above my bed.

"Ok!" I call.

My door opens a sliver. "How's your head, Mama?" I feigned a headache when the vacuuming started.

Mom calls me *Mama*. Ironic, I know. It's weird the pet names parents have for their kids. First it was *Maforama*. Then *Moo-Moo*. Then *Mama*.

"Better *now*." Mom catches my meaning. She knows I despise *It*.

Dad and Baba call me Gojeh Farangi. *Gojeh* actually means *plum* and *farangi* means *foreign*. Together, that somehow equals *tomato*. I was nine pounds as a newborn and came out, according to Baba, red as a tomato. I'm different from the other tomatoes on the familial vine. Rafi and Kate were both premature. Baby tomatoes.

Mom sits on my bed and gazes at the photo of us kids on my wall.

Looking at the photo, you'd think Kate, Raf, and me were strangers. We're passed out in the same hotel bed at Universal Orlando, three side-facing spoons. Well, two tablespoons and one teaspoon: me. We three share only one Mongoloid feature, that's Baba's eyes: Baba's half Hazara, an ethnic minority in Afghanistan. Grandma was full Pashtun, the Afghan majority.

I like this photo because Raf's not jerking me into a head-lock (his go-to brotherly pose) and Kate's not fussing, telling Dad photos are *tedious* or something.

From my Afghan side, I got excess body hair (at least three hairs per pore) but I'm basically all Mom, with pale skin and dark blond hair that I bleach blonder. Mom's not Afghan. She's as pale as they come, born and raised in Michigan.

Dad's family was driven out of Kabul in 1979 by Soviet tanks, and though he's got a U.S. passport, he recollects the sleek black cars with government plates that skulked down our street after 9/11. I wasn't born yet, but I've heard the stories. I get why he tells us to "Act American. Look American." I just wish he weren't so paranoid all the time.

Mom's gaze shifts to the watercolor on my wall, the one she calls *the troubled teen* because the girl's in some dark alley

with her hood up and foot against a wall. Mom misses all my old posters, ones with glammed up models in dresses.

Mom forces enthusiasm into her voice. “I was thinking, Mama, how about some new outfits for your birthday?”

I roll my eyes. “Why?”

“Sweatpants and hoodies . . . it’s all you wear lately. You don’t want your teachers to think you don’t care . . .”

“My grades speak for themselves, Mom. Well, except synchronized swim. But to be fair, swim’s the only class I *can’t* wear a hoodie. Those school-issued swimsuits . . .” I shudder.

Mom’s enthusiasm fades. She grabs my hand. “Has something happened at school, Mama? A teacher? Or a bully—?”

“Because I like sweats?”

“And you haven’t had Annalie over in a long time.”

I scratch my forehead. “She’s busy with track.”

“Which you pulled out from.”

“I still run sometimes!” It’s been months.

“And then there’s this ’tude, miss lady—”

“I’m really not feeling the full daughter audit right now, Mom.”

“Okay, okay. But Mama, whatever it is”—she reels me in and gives me a squeezing shake—“remember, high school isn’t forever.”

I never did tell Mom about Annalie’s party. How me and Annalie are history. *Or* what Rafi did. Mom would probably hear *I went into the basement with three guys* and go momentarily deaf.

Maybe before Annalie’s party I was into dresses and contouring and eyeshadow and stuff, but sweats and hoodies are hella comfortable, so what’s the big deal?

Still holding me, Mom thinks aloud. “I don’t understand what it could be. High school years were some of the best of my life.”

I’ve *seen* pictures of Mom in high school. Mom developed early, had a booty, and in those tight plaid pants, there’s no question she was popular.

Cheek still squished against her shoulder, through fishy lips, I blub, “High school is overrated. How about starting a beauty school at the salon, and I’ll—”

“Nope, my youngest daughter is going to be a scientist,” Mom says. “Or a judge. But before you grow up and leave me, too, let’s practice your parallel parking before the big test, mm? Tomorrow, before school?”

As if starting school at 7:45 a.m. isn’t early enough.

My reluctance is palpable, so she goes, “Unless you’d like to go with Dad or Baba . . .”

“Negative.”

Dad takes after Baba in the driving department. He never looks at roundabouts, stresses when I’m at the wheel and we get honked, and there’s a lot of noisy gum chewing and looking out the window.

“Oh!” Mom lifts a finger, scurries into the hall, then comes back and places salon shampoo and conditioner on my desk.

“If your father asks,” she whispers, “it wasn’t more than five dollars for both.”

Mom’s sneaky. Like daughter like Mom, I guess.

“Thanks, Mom. Okay, love you!” I know I shouldn’t use those words to get Mom to leave, but I have notes to get to.

When the house goes quiet and everyone's in their rooms, I pull the new notes from my diary, the ones damp with Cole's sweat.

Then prop myself up. I have to be ready. The things I read aren't always pretty. You know when you read a good book and it's like a movie's playing in your head? It's like that. And I'm a good librarian—I know when to file as *fiction* or *nonfiction*.

How? Might be some SOL magic. Or maybe Afghan djinn magic.

Composition grade note first. I take a deep breath and sever the tape with a blue polished nail. A twenty wilts onto my lap like a leaf. A weighty donation.

The words are sprawled in big block letters. The note's about some freshman, how she's a back-stabbing bitch for having sex with Tommy Lewis last weekend when she knows this other girl likes him.

The heat kicks off. Meowgi bats at a scrunched water bottle on the floor.

Ink's pooled on the words *had sex*, as if the author spent a lot of time there, dreaming up the offense. That, and Tommy Lewis was at Lake Havasu last weekend with his dad.

Fiction.

People are always wanting revenge for stuff that never happened. To start rumors. For reasons I'll never know.

Dirty money is donated to Heart to Paws Rescue down the street. There's no return to sender or I'd blow my cover.

I crumple the note and toss it; Meowgi takes chase as I slice the tape from the heavier note. No donation. It's written in pretty cursive.

From the dented crease, it's clear the writer has folded and unfolded it over and over, reading and rereading, wondering if it should be sent. The heat's on Fallon McElroy, whose name is underlined three times.

Fallon is just generally an asshole, and generally gross (he's a known classturbator, for one). He's that popular guy who no one knows *why* he's popular. Maybe it's because he won this surfing contest in Huntington Beach once, *once*, in elementary school. He also appeared as an extra in *Blood Jurors*, this sexy vampire TV series. But I think Fallon's the definition of "peaked in high school."

There's a tingling in my fingers. That's how it always starts. Then a fluttering in my head, as if Cole's paper butterflies are flapping in my brain . . . I read the first sentence. *Nonfiction*.

Fallon has been dating Josefina for a year . . . but the author says *they've* been sexting Fallon for a month. They even made out, once.

Fallon invited the author to a movie. Instead of driving the author to the theater, he drove them to Black Star Canyon and tried feeling them up. When the author said no, Fallon called them *a goddamn tranny* and took off. For thirty minutes the author waited for their ride with waning cell service, listening to the raspy shrieking of mountain lions skulking in the canyon.

My jaw drops. I know who wrote the note. *Brit*.

Brit Rossi.

She's transitioning, and has over five hundred thousand followers on Instagram as this badass activist.

That this could happen to someone like *Brit* . . .

Us sheep are doomed.

Mountain lions aside, everyone knows Black Star Canyon is haunted. Some school bus crashed there in the '70s, killing all the kids inside. Last October, there was an article in the paper about some guy who was stuck in the neck by a needle dart while hiking there. To this day, hikers have reported gray shadows stalking them through the trees. It's also a known hook up spot for high schoolers. I guess we like the danger.

My cheeks burn and my fists clench.

Oh, *Fallon, Fallon. Fallon.*

I'll get confirmation at school tomorrow. As a future judge, I've gotta be objective. Gotta know the facts. And *when*—not *if*—I do, Fallon's going down.

5

How I became the Ghost goes like this.

When I was nine and Kate fourteen, she convinced me there were fairies living in the forest behind SMN. We used to leave Wish Notes for them in this tree knot that looks like a swirly treble clef.

The notes had always disappeared by the next day. Granted, it was probably the wind, or one of Nutter Butter's squirrel relatives, but I wanted to believe it was fairies. That between track and piano lessons, *reality* was not the only plane of existence available to my nine-year-old self.

After Kate decided she was too old for fairies and took up figure skating and sneaking out to meet boys, I visited the Fairy Tree on my own.

I had to create my own magic.

But growing up is not always so magical.

I left a wish in the tree. *I wish I was popular. I wish I was seen.*

My wish was granted at Annalie's party freshman year. But I didn't know the winds had shifted in the boughs; the fairies had turned on me.

It was the first party of freshman year and Annalie's parents were out of town. We agreed it was time to reinvent ourselves. No longer gangly track-and-field middle schoolers, we were morphing into dateable freshmen. Okay, so even if our bras were padded, we would fake it till we made it. And making it meant getting boyfriends.

All SMN freshmen were at the party. One or two sophomores, too. Even these cute skater dudes we met at Starbucks that afternoon came through. From Viejo Prep, these dudes were seniors! So by those standards, our party was a success. Maybe even cool.

Mikey, the skater with a lip piercing and sideswept hair, had hurt his shoulder doing some skate trick called the *laser flip* before the party. Probably because his hair skewed his vision. I offered to give him one of my famous back massages on the couch. Kate and I used to nab the egg timer from the piano and practice our massage skills before bed. I always had to give Kate a massage first. Whenever it was my turn, big sis was (conveniently) too drooly and noodly to reciprocate.

The couch in the living room was occupied, so I suggested the futon in Annalie's basement. Two of Mikey's friends followed, wanting to test out the Ping-Pong table Annalie kept bragging about.

But trouble was brewing upstairs.

These other dudes Mikey invited had turned up, and they were in the backyard, making a sport outta throwing empty beer bottles at Annalie and our friends.

And someone else unexpected was at the party, too. A mole in a hood. A junior, from the baseball team—a spy, sent by Raf after he got wind of the party. Being six foot eight, Raf knew *he* couldn't go 'cause he'd stick out.

The mole texted Raf I was in the basement with three dudes.

Thirty minutes. That's all it took to set the trajectory of freshman year.

I missed tons of SOS texts from Annalie. The beer-bottle chucking had escalated. Annalie and the others took cover in the tree house; the bottles kept coming like torpedoes. Soon, blue and red flashed outside the basement windows. Then an amplified voice saying, *Party's over, everyone out*. Raf had called in a noise complaint.

Pushing and shoving, Mikey and his friends bolted out the basement door.

When I emerged upstairs, the cops were gone. Annalie, she was pissed. Not so much about the torpedo bottles, the mess, or the vomit in her knockoff LV purse. She was mad I went into the basement with Mikey, the boy she'd deemed *hers*.

There's no such thing as BFF. Annalie proved that soon after.

She started a rumor, and for the rest of the year, I was a C.J.

Circle Jerker. That one freshman who jerked off three seniors from Viejo Prep in Annalie's basement.

I lost my crew, all six of them. I quit track because, well, what I was sprinting for anyway?

My soul had left my body. I'd effectively become the Ghost.

I *did* fix Mikey's shoulder with my killer massaging skills. After he graduated, he went off to college in Virginia and I haven't heard from him since.

There was a solution, to undo the last wish I'd left for the fairies: *I wish I was popular. I wish I was seen.*

I'm a math girl, and it was simple. Rumor $(x) \times (0)$ always $= (0)$, so I started my own *nothing* rumor, to nullify the other one. To get them to forget.

My rumor—

—has it that SMN injustices are taken care of with a little help. Letters left in a tree knot on school property. No longer the Fairy Tree—*that name was kids' stuff, now*—it had become the SOL tree. Sole purpose: vengeance. Because being CJ sucks. I never wanted anyone else to feel that.

6

ON THE way to school the next morning, it's raining. The teensiest of drizzles is lethal in California; you'd think it was raining baby oil. Even SUVs with all-wheel drive won't chance going over thirty on the highway.

Parallel parking's no biggie in the Tesla, but Mom insists I learn to drive a stick *in case of an emergency where there's only a stick shift available*. So we've been using Dad's beater car, an old Honda.

In addition to my bro leaving the pathetic loaf butt for my PB banana toast, we're already running late, my period cramps are having a goddamn rager, and I was hoping to cover the pimple farm budding on my chin in the visor mirror. I tell Mom, "Forget the lesson," but she says, "Nonsense, you need to learn to drive in all weather!"

It starts out fine, albeit a little clunky. I don't have to go on the highway, thank god, because SMN is only a mile away.

"Turn on Covenanter," Mom says.

"But—" I'm not used to taking Covenanter. I usually take High.

“Calm, *Mama*.” Her eyes are wide like Meowgi’s when he spots Nutter Butter. Mom knows blinking could mean life or death; she can’t miss a moment as copilot. “Just put in the clutch, brake, downshift, and turn the wheel.”

That’s all, is it? It’s like math class, maybe geometry, because all I can see is this triangular shape closing in—

“Yield sign, Mama. Clutch and slow down!”

I put in the clutch with a trembling foot. The car cranks as I downshift. I turn the wheel—

“Okay, Mama, now brake. *BRAKE!*”

I’d like to say the yield sign never saw me coming, but I’d be lying. I roll at a snail’s pace into the sign, toppling it with an awful crunch. Ol’ Honda lurches and dies. Mom spits her annual curse word.

Cars shhk by, people gawking. With my luck, classmates. Did I just see *It*’s silver BMW?

Stray pieces of Mom’s golden hair have dislodged from her braid. She holds a hand to my face. “Are you all right?”

“Fine.”

She exhales. Her cheeks flush from pale to red. “These things happen,” she says, though her voice shakes with irritation. “The signpost has holes for a reason.”

Yeah. So it’ll topple easily when a fifteen-year-old snaps it in two.

“Let’s call Dad,” I say in a rush, and Mom gestures for me to breathe. Mom’s more of an *I can do it myself* kinda person but usually does more harm than good.

Smoke emanates from the hood in black wisps.

“Did I—damage the car?”

“Don’t think so,” Mom says, “we weren’t going fast.” But the engine won’t fire when we switch places.

Mom’s tapping wildly on her iPhone. “We’ll Uber to school, call in a tow, alert the city about the sign, then I’ll Uber to the salon, and—”

Mom yelps. Her phone’s tapped out. Mom never remembers to charge her phone at night. She looks at me expectantly and I go: “Yeah, hold on.”

I root through my backpack, only to have dread shoot through my arms and legs. Rain clobbers the roof like pebbles in a tin can.

Mom doesn’t hear me when I tell her the bad news. Or maybe she does and doesn’t want to believe it.

“*You what?*”

“My phone’s on my bed. I left it at home.”

Walk of shame, I think, is more aptly used for times like this, times you’ve left your dad’s car sitting atop a broken yield sign and have to trudge one mile to school with your mother in wet Converse, silent except for the rain spattering on your hoods. I’m like a duckling trailing its mother. Cute, sure, but a bit pathetic.

“You don’t have to walk me, Mom.” *Aka, Don’t.*

Mom turns, wind whipping blond hair in her face. “A girl your age was abducted in Sherman Oaks just last week.” Her eyes skim my sweats and hoodie.

“Sherman Oaks is like an hour from here, Mom.”

“Not in the mood, Mafi.” No more *Mama*. She’s pissed. “What, are you hurt?” she asks, noticing me hobbling like Quasimodo.

“Cramps.” The sudden burst of movement has reawakened the beast. In addition to my phone, I also forgot to pop a Midol this morning.

Headlights flicker behind us. Then there’s the roar of high revs.

Beep! Beep!

God. Whoever it is, go away . . .

Ford Raptor.

Jalen.

Vroom. The Raptor pulls over onto the shoulder. Down rolls a tinted window, and my face is swathed in cologne-tinged warmth and rap music. Cole’s in the seat next to Jalen, a runt in the leather bucket seat. I forgot: Mrs. Dawicki *just can’t* with the rain.

Jalen and Cole met at Hoops for Hope, an after-school program for those with busy or absent parents.

Cole’s thrilled to see me: hair frizzy, mascara dripping, pimply. His elbow’s on the armrest and he’s vibrating with silent laughter, face hidden in the sleeve of his overlong sweatshirt.

“Morning, Mrs. Shahin!” Jalen shouts over the rain.

“Jalen, you grew again!” Mom accuses in amazement.

She’s fishing. I mean, Jalen’s sitting down, for one. Mom notices Jalen’s stopped coming around and wants the goss—some insight into her own teenage son’s head—which has been progressively off-limits since puberty.

“It’s been a minute, Mrs. Shahin,” says Jalen.

Mom puts her hands on her hips. “So which salon’s stolen my favorite client?”

Jalen gives his half smile and sheepishly rubs his hair, styled in a bleached, textured high top with twists. With Jalen's smoldering eyes, angular face, and thin, curved dimples like parentheses, people at SMN say he looks like Kelly Oubre.

"I'm just kidding, honey," says Mom. "That style suits you. Remember, sulfate-free shampoo only."

Mommmm. Shut upppp.

Jalen's eyes flick my way and I automatically feign a nose wipe to hide my pimply chin.

Mom swivels her head. "Is that Cole I see?" Cole emerges from his sleeve, red faced. "Hi."

Someone honks and Jalen waves the driver on with a "Go 'round, damn!"

A rap verse alive with curses drops from the Raptor's speakers and Mom frowns. I raise my brows at Cole; he catches my meaning and turns the rap music down.

A sin, really.

Mom and Kate hate rap. I think it was Kate who told me rap puts the *-rap* in *crap*.

"Need a ride, Mrs. Shahin?" says Jalen.

Mom must see the hope rising in my face, because she says: "Thank you, hon. It's handled. You just get yourself to school, mm?" She grabs my elbow and we walk.

The Raptor lurks after us, tires *shhk*-ing in the rain.

Go! Just go! I will. But Cole's voice cracks over the drizzle. "That the Honda back there—the one sitting—uh—on top of a yield sign?"

We stop. The windshield wipers sploosh water onto Mom's pants. "We've got help on the way, Cole."

“You sure?” asks Jalen at the same time Cole asks, “Ew, Ma, what’s on your chin—?”

“Just go! *PLEASE!*” My mouth has betrayed me and I scream—no, *implore* it with the ferocity of a Shakespearean actress. Jalen’s elbow hits the horn, double startling us all.

After mistaking the windshield washer for the blinker, Jalen guns the Raptor. Rap music blasts as soon as the truck reaches the next stop sign.

Jalen’s stunned face replays like a GIF in my head. Scare your crush to death, Mafi. That’ll work.

I haven’t said more than two words to the guy in years. When Jalen used to come over, he and Raf would plunder the pantry and take their spoils upstairs to Raf’s bedroom, his floor glittering with Pop-Tarts cellophane and chip bags. Meowgi took care of any crumb-age.

I open my mouth to ask Mom why we couldn’t hitch a ride but she swoops in: “Because you can’t rely on men to save you, that’s why.”

“So walking in the rain is better—?”

Mom’s voice fights the downpour. “You’ve got to learn to take care of yourself, Mafi.”

We walk the rest of the way without speaking, me shuffling ten steps behind this impossibly proud, proud woman I call my mother.

When I finally do get to the white-brick manor that is SMN, there’s a hubbub in the hall. A mob blocks my locker, moving slowly through the corridor. Over the uproar, Principal Bugle’s nasally voice shouts: “Now wait just one second, Ms. Rossi—!”

The crowd parts and there's Brit Rossi, skipping backward, flipping the bird. Her eyes are narrowed in bold cat-eye makeup. *TRANNNY* blazes across her chest in glitter.

She passes Fallon, open-mouthed. He slams his locker door and mumbles something, maybe a prayer. Or a curse. Either way, it's the confirmation I needed.

Brit would stick it to Fallon like that. Flip the script.

"Off—take it off this instant!" yells Principal Bugle, patches of red and white reaching his bald head.

Brit shrugs, crisscrosses her arms, and grabs the bottom of her shirt. Principal Bugle dives in front of her. Brit laughs. "I wasn't actually going to do it, Principal B."

With an eye roll, she follows Principal Bugle's crooked finger to his office.

7

FALLON WILL be Ghosted for his crimes against Brit at Josefina's Halloween party. Saturday.

I've got five days to figure out his punishment. Right now, it's one of my four favorite parts of the day, each part correlating to the times I see Jalen. After he's got gym is my second favorite, because his arms are extra veiny. I mean, my god. Veiny arms are a thing.

There he is.

Hot-pink pants. Teal shirt. Red Jordans. A candy choker necklace and a longer metal chain behind it, a gold bullet hanging on the end. Jalen can pull off anything. Except the beard he attempts to grow every month. The last few days it's looked like he's got pubes growing from his face. Looks like he's shaved today, thank god.

"What's good?" Jalen says, chewing on the necklace.

He doesn't say it to me, of course. To his teammate Tommy Lewis, and they do the fist-bumpy-slappy-snappy-whatever handshake the athletes do.

Jalen's easy to spot not just because he's tall. He and Tommy Lewis are the only two Black students at SMN. The city where

we live, Rancho Santa Margarita, basically consists of sixty+ white men and their golf carts, so Jalen stands out in town, too.

I'm in Jalen's Dolce & Gabbana slipstream. Well, it's more a drip than a stream. His pace is relaxed, with a cool up nod to teammates and a respectful down nod to teachers. Jalen's not a Walk and Scroller like the rest of us.

I envision swinging my arms around his middle from behind, calling him some nickname—maybe Pookie. Or something less cringey.

My hand would probably cling to his back. The ninety-one on his shirt's all wet. Shower sweats—must've been a hard workout.

Tommy says something and Jalen laughs, and when he turns I see it's the smile that shows the bejeweled canine tooth. He went to Germany last summer to see his mom and all the dudes there had what they call an *accent tooth*, a diamond stud glued on.

Jalen would've gotten a nose piercing or two like Dennis Rodman, but I know for a fact he's afraid of needles.

I pass the entrance to the girls' bathroom on the second floor, the local watering hole for all the gossips at Santa Margarita North. *It* is there—with Josefina, her best friend. With Josefina's big butt and *It*'s fashion sense and sewing skills, it's no wonder they're the most popular, most well-dressed girls in school. I even overheard the gym teacher asking *It* for advice about her wedding dress alterations.

Okay, yes, *It* has a name.

Bian Hoa.

She's a senior, like Rafi. Last year, when she was a junior and I was a freshman, Jalen made the half-court shot at the

pep rally. Bian kissed Jalen in front of the whole school. Rafi told me that was Jalen's first kiss.

He didn't need to tell me. I knew.

Bian didn't care about Jalen. She's the type that needs to be liked. Needs to be seen.

Jalen blabbered about Bian to Rafi for *months* after that. I'd hear them through the wall, laughing, talking, swiping through her Instagram. When Rafi was put on the radar as this star ball player, Bian freeloaded on his success like a suckerfish hitching a ride on a sexy new shark. Like a fraying rubber band, Jalen couldn't really hold it together. Stopped wearing colorful Jordans for like three months and coming around as much.

It, Raf's Iago, continues to spin lies in his ear so that she. Remains. His. Everything.

Jalen's fine now. He bought rainbow Jordans the other week.

I pass Fallon and our eyes meet. It's like I've taken one of Baba's niacin pills by accident again because my cheeks flare with a prickly flush. I know Fallon's secret, how he deserted Brit at Black Star Canyon.

"All in good time, my love," I murmur when he passes, a promise. Niacin now tickling my ears, I see Brit Rossi at her locker, staring at me. Today, she's wearing pigtails, pearls, and hoop earrings. She looks away.

Can she read minds? Does she know?

"Hey, Jay-Jay!" Bian yells.

I stifle the urge to bark at her; she's already a damn tick on my brother's neck.

No, Bian's not a cheerleader. Tennis captain. Cheerleaders are out and athletes are in, apparently. Someone posted some TikTok in Michigan and it became this thing. Amazing how something so small can completely change the name of the game. Some girls even quit cheer. Social media is powerful.

It pushes past me. Her tan leather backpack whaps me in the shoulder. Then she goes, "Nice job with the yield sign, CJ," and flounces off before I can say anything. I *knew* I saw her BMW this morning.

I hate her.

I hate hate hate her.

Especially when her hand's at the small of Jalen's back—

What in the actual f—?

I narrowly miss running into Principal Bugle. "I'm fine," I say to his hairy crossed arms. "I mean—sorry."

8

MY CRUSH on Jalen is age-old.

Age ten, to be exact. He and Raf had been on the same basketball team growing up and were instant friends. Sometimes, if Mom had a client at the house (before she opened her salon), she'd ask Raf to let me tag along with them to Rose Park while they shot around.

Raf was always trying to shake me. Once, I used the restroom by the courts and when I came out, the boys were gone. A hollow feeling settled into my calves. Did I even remember the way home?

I called for my brother inside the boy's restroom. When only my own voice echoed back, I started to cry.

That's when Jalen came out of hiding from behind the facilities. "Raf!" he hollered. "It ain't funny no more!"

I tried to stop blubbering but couldn't. Until Jalen put an arm around me and told me, again and again, that I was all right. Feeling his touch, I was suddenly more focused on jump-starting my delighted heart than this *silly crying business*.

Raf emerged, huffy Jalen had prematurely blown the prank. A flicker of concern crossed his face when he saw my puffy eyes until he spotted Jalen's arm hanging over my shoulder.

Jalen walked by my side the whole way home. Raf was his usual ten steps ahead.

It has come over every night this week.

On Wednesday, I'd taken a bubble bath and returned to my room only to be subjected to her annoying TV show commentary, like OMG, NO! and Wait, who is she again? And the worst—teehee, Rafi stop!—on the other side of the wall.

On Thursday, I was standing on my bed, about to reach up to the vent to re-read Brit's note when I caught a swish of glossy black hair beyond my door. It's hard to relax with Baba's rubab music, Mom's loud soap operas, and Rafi's video games in this house as it is. Now I've got to worry about an evil spy, too? I'm not about that *keep your friends close but your enemies closer* crap. I need me a can of It-repellant.

School feels less chaotic than home. At school, I can see Jalen. Daydream about Jalen. And . . . talk to Jalen?

No. Never talk.

It's Friday, the day before Halloween and Josefina's party, and my favorite part of the day: AP Anatomy and Physiology. Not only because it's the last period of the day.

Jalen's in it with me.

Or—I guess—I'm in it with him. I did so well on my placement tests freshman year they put me in with the upperclassmen.

Even though I'm missing the parade of costumes in the hall between periods, I get to class early because Jalen's at the whiteboard doing his postgame analysis with his teammate Tommy. Mr. A doesn't mind. Dressed in a vampire cape, he's playing phone games with his feet up on his desk.

The *athletes are stupid* stereotype is just that. A stereotype. Jalen shows Tommy a video of Rodman explaining the Bulls' triangle offense and from what I can hear, the Bulls' triangle offense requires some insane basketball IQ.

Tommy only seems half-interested. His nose is hidden in another steamy romance novel, the type of corny stuff Grandma used to hide in her sewing kit. This week, it's *Sense and Sensuous*. I swear, the dude flies through a new one every week.

Jalen backhands Tommy across the chest, like *pay attention!* and Tommy snaps his book shut and crosses his arms like *proceed!* I love watching Tommy and Jalen because they've got this nonverbal language that cracks me up.

As Rodman's talking, Tommy goes, "*Damn*, that dude. Wish he wasn't friends with a dictator."

Jalen says, "For real," then, "That shit's got me torn."

I'd like to say I gawk at Jalen from the back of class and am so distracted I get bad grades or whatever, but that's just not me. I love anything STEM. I love expounding the processes that make up our everyday lives, things we use every day and take for granted. Like how the hip's a ball-and-socket joint. *I just got chills*. That's why you can go three-sixty with it. The shoulder, too.

But I *do* watch Jalen when class begins, his gold-polished nails drumming the desk to some silent beat, winking in the sunlight that streams from the ceiling-to-floor windows.

You can tell Mr. A's got kids because he starts class by telling some dad joke about vampires. We all groan, but we secretly like his jokes. We're not five minutes into the lecture about free radicals when Fallon McElroy disrupts class.

“So, carpenter McElroy,” Mr. A says. Fallon’s tossing his pencil into the air at the back of the room. He’s trying to lodge it in the ceiling. “Can you tell me what a free radical is?”

“Pass, Mr. A.”

“There are no passes in life.”

I bubble-circle *free radicals* in my notebook, waiting for Fallon’s response.

“How about breaking down the words to glean some meaning,” says Mr. A, vampire cape flapping around his shins. “Though this is A&P, folks, when in doubt, it’s smart to go at it from a linguistics standpoint. So”—he underlines FREE RADICALS on the board—“what does *free* bring to mind?”

Fallon sits for a moment, mouth open.

Free . . . means cruising in Jalen’s Raptor, window open, one of his hands on the wheel and the other inching toward mine . . .

“I dunno, not being imprisoned in class, for one,” says Fallon.

Mr. A writes *untethered to an institution* next to *free*.

“And *radical*?” Mr. A goes on.

“Afghanistan,” says Fallon, and I sink into my seat. Jalen’s jaw tenses. Tommy gives him a look like, *Here we go again*.

Mr. A removes his glasses and rubs his eyes. “I’m losing patience, Mr. McElroy.”

“I’m just saying,” says Fallon, “like radical Islam.”

“Or like—a radical idea?” says Brit from the front row, shooting Fallon a look.

“You’ve brought up an interesting point, both of you,” says Mr. A, to which Fallon rolls his eyes. “The word *radical* itself is negatively charged, mm?”

So is the word *Afghanistan*, I think. Or the phrase *Allahu Akbar*, which simply means *God is great*. A phrase used to celebrate life.

“The hope and future of the U.S., of the world, even—lies with its radicals. Those who think outside the box and *believe what they say*. Look at history. The suffragettes, at the time, many thought them destructive to the social order. Universal health care . . . there’s a radical idea, yes? Some would argue it’s a basic human right! People fear those who go against the grain, who are agents for change. Who *think*. But radicalism is the only path toward liberation. Towards freedom, yes?”

“So you’re saying you’re cool with terrorists bombing the U.S.?” says Fallon.

A chair screeches and I feel it in my teeth. “Mr. A, for real?” says Jalen, standing. “Enough with this fool.”

“Mr. McElroy,” says Mr. A, gesticulating kindly for Jalen to sit. “Hall. Now.”

I’m only a sophomore, but I swear, Mr. A is on the U.S. President Aging Track. Every month, his salt-and-pepper hair recruits more salt.

Here’s a radical idea: Teachers deserve better pay.

Fallon follows Mr. A out the door. His voice echoes from the hall, something about how *vampires don’t wear capes*, that he knows ’cause he was an extra on *Blood Jurors*.

“Every goddamn time,” says Tommy in Mr. A’s absence, and Jalen’s *tshh-tshh-tshh* laugh makes me swoon. Fallon brings up his cameo on the show every day.

A minute later, Mr. A returns without Fallon. “Moving on,” he says, voice still taut with reprimand. He scans the class. “Book away, Mr. Lewis.”

Tommy had cracked open *Sense and Sensuous* in Mr. A's short absence.

"The scientific definition of *free radical* is that it is a *highly reactive and unstable molecule that can damage cells in the body*. Interestingly enough, we still feel *radical's* negative connotation here, don't we, evidenced by the words *highly reactive, unstable, and damage*? Back in the early twentieth century, anti-suffragists, both men and women, thought the suffragettes unstable molecules of a sort that threatened to do damage to society, a society where gender roles were concrete. In fact, in 1905 many suffragettes began to break windows, handcuff themselves to railings, and went on hunger strikes to garner a public response. Fast forward a few decades to the fifties and sixties to the Civil Rights Movement, where Black women arranged sit-ins, marches, grassroots campaigns, and fought sexism and racism while under the thumb of the patriarchy . . . All free radicals in their own right, wouldn't you say?"

There are a few indistinct murmurs.

"So. From the reading, name some free radical-generating substances."

"Pollutants, pesticides, smoke, and alcohol," says Jalen, twirling his pencil.

"And what, then, *neutralizes* a free radical?"

"White men in Rancho Santa Margarita over the age of sixty," says Brit.

Everyone laughs.

"*Antioxidants*," I blurt, subconsciously emboldened by Brit's comment. I *never* answer Mr. A's questions. Whenever I raise my hand, my mind goes blank when he finally calls on me.

Don't get red.

Don't turn into a gojeh farangi.

DON'T!

"Exactly, Ms. Shahin," Mr. A says. Then adds, "Rafi's sister!" and claps his hands like teachers do when they remember I'm related to the Prodigal Brother.

Someone across the room whispers, "I thought her name was CJ?" and Brit shushes them. I flip up my hood—for two seconds before Mr. A signals for me to remove it.

"Mr. A," says Tommy, saving me from further humiliation, "tryna put two and two together, but what's women voters gotta do with science?"

"Pathways, Mr. Lewis," answers Mr. A, looking pleased with himself. "Pathways! I want you all to *think*. Now, you'll have a pathway to the term, and one rooted in history, at that. I dare you to forget the definition."

Bzz. Bzz.

Our phones vibrate with the bell's dismissal.

In class, we answer surveys with our phones, play interactive educational games with our phones, and are dismissed by them, too. Seems Principal Bugle's given up on the no-phones rule.

Mr. A yells over the chatter. "Two paragraphs on free radicals due online by end of day. You're free! Go be radicals! Change the world—no pressure! And for ghouls' sake, come back alive on Monday, okay? Safety first!"

Mr. A gives Brit a stealthy low five on her way out. At the door, Brit stops and winks. At me.



The daughter of Afghan and Australian immigrants, Lila Riesen was raised in the United States. Her undergraduate studies in English were completed at Indiana University and the Australian National University. In 2017, Lila graduated with a master's degree in English literature and linguistics from the University of Zurich in Switzerland. *Free Radicals* is her first novel, inspired by her cashew-coveting baba and all the Afghans fighting for peace, in the US and abroad.