



"A deliciously dark tale."

—AMY PLUM, INTERNATIONAL
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE
UNSEEMLY
EDUCATION
OF ANNE
MERCHANT

JOANNA WIEBE

Praise for
The Unseemly Education of Anne Merchant

“From the very first pages, I was spellbound by this deliciously dark tale of mysterious attraction, cutthroat ambition, and how far we will go to keep the ones we love.”

—**AMY PLUM, international bestselling author**

“An original, breathtakingly written, and often chilling tale of what lengths people will go to for love. Joanna Wiebe has crafted a book that is unputdownable, so much so that I was forced to read part of it at work because I couldn’t stop thinking about Anne and Cania Christy. (Shh, don’t tell!) Joanna has officially made my instant-buy list.”

—**LINDSEY R. LOUCKS, author of *The Grave Winner***

“She had me at the introduction of the spooky setting—the kind of stuff readers can lose themselves in. Joanna Wiebe is a fun new author to be on the lookout for!”

—**WENDY HIGGINS, author of *The Sweet Trilogy***

“School grounds shrouded in mystery, beautiful student body obsessed with the race to be valedictorian, and a gorgeous, infuriating, unobtainable guy. Welcome to Cania Christy.”

—**A.E. ROUGHT, author of *Broken***



THE
UNSEEMLY
EDUCATION
OF ANNE
MERCHANT

By Joanna Wiebe



BenBella Books
Dallas, Texas

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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BENBELLA

BenBella Books, Inc.

10300 N. Central Expressway, Suite #530 | Dallas, TX 75231

www.benbellabooks.com | Send feedback to feedback@benbellabooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wiebe, Joanna.

The unseemly education of Anne Merchant / by Joanna Wiebe.

p. cm.

Summary: From the moment Anne Merchant arrives at Cania Christy, a boarding school for the wealthiest teens, she has questions that remain unanswered, including why everything is a competition to be valedictorian and what mysterious reward comes with that title.

ISBN 978-1-939529-32-9 (hardback) — ISBN 978-1-939529-33-6 (electronic)
[1. Supernatural—Fiction. 2. Boarding schools—Fiction. 3. Schools—Fiction. 4. Wealth—Fiction. 5. Islands—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.W63513Uns 2014

[Fic]—dc23

2013027277

Editing by Glenn Yeffeth

Copyediting by Debra Kirkby

Proofreading by Amy Zarkos and Michael Fedison

Cover design by Kit Sweeney Photography & Design

Text design and composition by Silver Feather Design

Printed by Bang Printing

Distributed by Perseus Distribution | www.perseusdistribution.com

To place orders through Perseus Distribution:

Tel: (800) 343-4499 | Fax: (800) 351-5073 | E-mail: orderentry@perseusbooks.com

Significant discounts for bulk sales are available. Please contact Glenn Yeffeth at glenn@benbellabooks.com or (214) 750-3628.

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one



WORMWOOD ISLAND

HERE'S SOMETHING NOBODY TELLS RICH PEOPLE: THEY die, too.

There's this sense, you know, this *misconception* that wealthy people are invincible. Like when Fortune 500 execs get cancer or something equally awful, they think they can coerce a massive, aggressive, bumpy tumor straight out of their body by throwing bundles of cash at it. As if you can swipe a black American Express card through your armpit, and—*ch-ching!*—you've just paid off the Grim Reaper, you've gloriously extended your life of leisure... and you've been given a bump in your Air Miles account to boot.

Idiotic.

But strangely common thinking among the wealthy.

In lovely, sunny Atherton, California—the most expensive neighborhood in America and my home up until, oh, yesterday—this notion that rich people are invincible is so prevalent, people go into a state of absolute shock when someone in our fancy 94027 zip code gets sick. Or crashes their Bentley. Or accidentally

inhales Beluga caviar (which happens way more often than you'd think). I see it every day.

Scratch that. I *saw* it every day.

I saw it before my dad shipped me across the country to doom-and-gloom central, aka Wormwood Island, Maine, for what one might call a “fresh start.”

I saw those delusional richies on a regular basis, back when I would sit quietly in the shadows at the top of the stairs and, with my sketchbook in hand, observe black-veiled parades marching somberly through the hallways of my house. See, our home is the second story of the Fair Oaks Funeral Home, where my dad's the lowly mortician and terribly paid funeral director and where we Merchants have the distinct pleasure of being the only broke-ass family for miles.

Yes, that means I'm *that* girl.

I'm the weird mortician's daughter. The creepy girl the kids at school call Death Chick or Wednesday Addams. The eerie girl they shy away from whenever I wear black or look unusually pale. The poor girl raised with dead bodies in the basement, zombies scratching at the cellar door, and ghosts around every corner. I'm that girl.

“No, you *were* that girl,” I remind my reflection as I adjust a blue-and-gold tie over the crisp white shirt of my new school uniform. “Now you're just Anne Merchant, a junior at the Cania Christy Preparatory Academy. No one knows anything about you, which means—” I pause to tweak the tie so it draws a little less attention to my chest “—you can rewrite your history.”

I am standing in front of a small mirror, which is on top of a small dresser in the small attic bedroom of the small cottage that's going to be my home for the next two years. I'll be here until I graduate from Cania Christy. Fingers crossed: I'll graduate as valedictorian. Becoming valedictorian is a critical part of my plan—my future hinges on it. If I don't graduate at the top

of my class, I won't qualify for the scholarship money I'm going to need. But if—no, *when*—I graduate as the valedictorian, I'll be almost guaranteed a full scholarship to the school of my dreams, Brown. From there, my life is perfectly plotted: spend four years in undergrad, open a gallery in New York City, promote my own art while discovering new artists, and make enough money that my dad can leave behind his life of death to come out east for a fresh start of his own. Since I first put chalk to paper as a toddler, I've known my life's purpose: to create art. Art that presents a different version of the world to the world; art that looks closer. I lost sight of that vision over the course of the last two years, but it's back now. In full force. And to realize that vision, I'll need to be valedictorian. Which shouldn't be too hard. After all, I spent the first sixteen years of my life at the top of my class—the upside of being shunned as Death Chick is that you have plenty o' time to study.

Stepping back from the mirror, I assess myself. Turn left, turn right. And give up. I shake my head at my uniformed reflection.

“You look like some sort of *anime* floozy.”

Everybody on earth has something they don't like about the way they look; for me, it's always been my one crooked tooth (which I've learned to mask with a closed-mouth smile) and my wildly curly blonde hair. That's *usually* what I'm up against. But today, I've discovered two new problems that had never seemed like problems before: my breasts. It's like they doubled in size overnight. This would not be a bad thing if I had a closet of clothes to choose from for my first day of school, but it is a significant issue given that I have only the uniforms that were waiting for me when I arrived here late last night. Uniforms that are decidedly form fitting. By which I mean they are decidedly three sizes too small.

Giving up, I button a cardigan over the shirt, trace my fingers along the golden Cania Christy emblem on it, mentally untie the knots in my stomach, and turn to fiddling with my wonky curls.

“Who would you like to be?” I ask myself lightly. “The daughter of a zillionaire turned yogi? The fabulously wealthy love child of a famous ballerina and a recluse artist?”

As if to drive home the point of who I really am and where I really come from—and the inescapability of both—a glint of sunlight shines through the attic window and reflects off my late mother’s barrettes, which sit atop my dresser, sending a beam of light at my eyes. As if my mom’s trying to get my attention from above. As if she refuses to be forgotten.

As if I could ever forget her.

It only takes the span of a breath, it only takes the lightest touch of my fingertips on those silvery barrettes, for visions of my beautiful mother’s last moments to come rushing at me. The quiet desperation in her glassy stare when I found her on the kitchen floor. Her frail body hanging loosely in my arms as I rocked her and begged God for her life. The dampness of her lovely face as my tears rained down on her. I discovered her body when I was fourteen—well over two years ago—but the pain is so raw and the ache in my chest feels so *bright red*, it’s as if she died yesterday.

My dad disapproves of my style of mourning. Particularly the length of time I’ve been in mourning and the life I’ve turned away from since she died. That’s why I’m here. Because I can hardly breathe when I think of her. And because he is so used to death, he can’t understand what’s taking me so long to get back to my old overachieving self.

I pull my hand away from my mother’s barrettes.

The sun disappears behind the clouds, leaving me to stare into the whiteness of the endless sea of fog separating me from the mysteries—the distant school, the sprawling campus, the teachers, the other students, the people on this island—that lie in wait.

Unlike rich people, poor folks know all about death. I know everything there is to know, from the temperature of the refrigerator they keep the bodies in to the weight of the thread they use to

stitch eyelids tightly closed. I know that embalming fluid can be used for a cheap high. I know you instantly lose twenty-one grams of weight when you die. I even know the superstitions, like it's bad luck to have a mirror in a funeral hall because it traps the spirit of the dearly departed. If anyone should be comfortable with the idea of death, it's a mortician's daughter.

But nothing can prepare you for losing your mother.

Nothing can prepare you for the suddenness of a constant source of love and support vanishing so quickly. And so permanently.

"Annie!" my housemother, Gigi Malone—who, may I add, is certifiably crazy with a certifiably crazy dog—shouts at me from the bottom of two flights of rickety stairs. My door is closed, but this teetering cottage is so old and flimsy, it sounds like Gigi's standing right next to me and screaming into my ear. I can hear her little Pomeranian, Skippy, yelping wildly, just as he did the moment he met me last night. "You don't want to be late for your first day of school!"

I march on the spot for a moment, and the floorboards squeal. That's my way of telling Gigi I'm up without actually shouting back at her. You learn to communicate soundlessly under the constant weight of respectful silence in a funeral home. The year before my mom died, when she was in the hospital receiving treatment for what the docs called "rapid cycling bipolar disorder," my dad and I had the house to ourselves for nearly three months, and we might have spoken a half-dozen words to each other. Since her passing, things have become even quieter between us. But my dad was never one for words.

I hear Gigi walk away.

Then I slip on my knee-high boots, straighten my tights, smooth my skirt, and make a last-ditch effort to keep my shirt from busting open. I've got time for one more pep talk before I head downstairs and this new life of mine truly begins.

I start to tell myself, “You are a great artist,” but my voice cracks.

So I take a deep breath. And I push out the loud voices that would hold me back. *They’re all going to laugh at you. You’re never going to fit in. You’re still just Death Chick. Your dad can’t afford to send you here, and you’ll probably end up being shipped back to California when his check bounces.*

Squaring my shoulders, I stare harder into the tiny mirror on top of the dresser and, making every effort not to groan at my Einstein-inspired hair or to mask my crooked tooth with a slanted grin, say in my most confident tone, “Anne, you are a great artist. You are as gifted as any other student here. This is your chance to get your life back on track.” Proving I’m not great at pep talks, I finish with, “So don’t blow it.”

As I open my bedroom door, leaving behind scents of shampoo and deodorant, and start down the creaky stairs, the smell of the sea—that slimy, green, salty smell—hits me with a wallop. *Welcome to Maine.* Small, square stained-glass windows line the narrow staircase that leads me down to the second floor, where Gigi’s bedroom, the bathroom, and a tiny guest bedroom are; the windows extend down the next staircase, which is the main staircase, which will bring me to the living room and kitchen. When I pause to peer through the stained glass just steps above the main floor, I find the bluish-gray landscape of Wormwood Island distorted by red, orange, and green triangles. A permanent mist hovers two feet over the ground, running through a world of overgrown ferns, clouding moss-covered tree stumps, and wrapping like a thick cotton scarf around the beech trees that line the shores. There seems to be no beginning and no end to the island. It’s as infinite as death itself.

“On the bright side,” I say, gazing through the multicolored glass until my breath steams it, “you can hear the ocean here. *That’s like California.*” The glass squeaks as I rub the side of my

fist through my breath-mist and see a break in the fog not fifty feet from Gigi's cottage. For the first time, I glimpse the outlines of a nearby row of houses and whisper, "Howdy, neighbors."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spy Gigi poking her head around the corner.

"You're talking to yourself, kid," she says.

Her voice sounds like a piano that's been played too long without tuning. Skippy races around his master's feet and barks at me with such force, his puffy orange body bounces a foot into the air; Gigi shoos him away.

Without looking at Gigi, I ask, "Who lives next door?"

"Don't you mind who lives next door. It's the Zins' place, but don't mind them."

"The Zins' place? It's one house?" The fog rolls along, and I can make out the connection between what appeared to be multiple small homes. I count six chimneys on the mansion's rooftop. "They must be rich."

"Everyone here's rich. Except you and me. But even I was rich once. Now I clean the Zin house and watch his kid when Dr. Zin's away on business, and they let me stay in this cottage."

"I wonder what sort of business he's in to afford a place like that."

"Not that you need to mind, but he's the head of admissions for Cania."

"Why's everyone rich here?" I don't know much about Cania or Wormwood Island—the decision for me to come here was made hastily—but I recall hearing something about the island once being a fishing village. Of all the wealthy people I've met, I can't recall any of them being fishermen.

Flitting her hands, Gigi mutters something and turns away.

Passing a growling Skippy, I follow Gigi through the front room and into the kitchen, which might have been nice twenty years ago, where I watch her shimmy onto a hard wooden bench

behind the table before shoving half a piece of toast into her mouth. Glancing around, I notice a whitewashed curio cabinet, which holds what remains of an expensive-looking teapot collection. An open case on a shelf displays the last few pieces of silver flatware. The fingerprint-smudged glass of two cabinets reveals a wide selection of half-full liquor bottles.

Trying not to think much of the missing items and the booze—and trying even harder not to mentally weave a sad story of Gigi Malone, crazed woman in a stretched-out homemade sweater—I pour myself a cup of coffee as she leans over her crossword puzzle. I offer her a cup, too; she scowls and grumbles that I ought not to go around stunting my growth with caffeine.

I'm just over five-ten. Not exactly a hobbit.

"So my dad never explained why I'm living with you instead of in the school dorms," I begin, walking to the end of the kitchen and gazing out the garden window as I sip my coffee.

"Of course he didn't," she says under her breath.

Gigi's cottage may be old and small and the kitchen may be lined with plates commemorating the Reagan administration, but it has one redeeming quality: it's just feet from the edge of the east side of the island, giving a spectacular view of the endless Atlantic (when the fog breaks, at least). The lush land drops off sharply, suggesting a cliff. My gaze follows the island's dark green border as it runs mere steps from where I'm standing, behind the Zin mansion next door, and gets lost in the dense woods, only to appear again high in the distance, where the black slate rooftops of Cania Christy rise like the pointy teeth of a saw. There are no gentle slopes into the water, at least none that I can see from my vantage; there are just towering rocky cliffs, abused at their bases by hungry waves. It's rugged and harsh and absolutely perfect looking.

"You've only been here since last night," Gigi continues, "and already you don't like it."

“I like it. I’m just surprised. Does everyone live off-campus? I mean, there are dorms, aren’t there?”

“You and the Zin boy are the only students living off-campus.” Gigi shuffles her crossword around. “There are dorms, yes.”

Her watery, drooping gaze rolls my way then trails out to the whitecaps of the ocean. A spot of toast with strawberry jam is stuck to her lip.

“But the dorms are full,” she explains, chewing out each of her words in a slow, deliberate manner. “Headmaster Villicus approved your application a mere two days ago. You should be glad I opened my home to you.”

“I *am*, Gigi.”

“Because not many would do what I’ve done,” she finishes sharply.

Our gazes meet and stick. To look in her eyes, you’d think she could be a hundred years old or five; she is at once a wise old woman and a lost child. The combination is, I have to admit, frustrating—the condescension of her wisdom fused with the weakness of her vulnerability. As if I should revere her and protect her at once. Either she’s going to be a pain in the butt to live with, or I’m in a bad mood thanks to my intense jet lag. Or both.

She is the first to drop her gaze.

“Well, maybe something will open up at the dorm soon,” I say. “In the meantime, Gigi, thank you for taking me in. It’s—” I start looking around but stop quickly, which is the only way to keep a hint of believability in my tone “—nice here.”

She doesn’t look up. “You’ve got orientation today, right?” She scribbles over her crossword. I’m not even sure she’s putting letters in the boxes. “Big day for you, between getting your *Guardian* and choosing your PT. Big day.”

“Sorry?” This is the first I’ve heard of a *Guardian* or a *PT*. “What are those?”

Still staring down, her eyes dart left, right, up, and down. “Oh, pish posh,” she sings, getting chirpy suddenly. “It’s not my job to walk you through your whole orientation day in advance, is it? No. I’ve got strict orders from Headmaster Villicus. Let you bunk here. Stay out of it. And get paid.”

“Is there something in particular you’re staying out of?”

“Oh, what do I know? Your life! Your school! All of the above.” Her expression can only be described as panicked when she looks up at me. “You’re the first student I’ve had stay with me. Don’t pay any attention to me.”

With an odd smile, she shakes her stringy hair. Then she’s on her feet, shoving me toward the front door, where Skippy has resumed bouncing and barking madly at me; this dog hates me. And I’m getting the sense that Gigi feels the same way, but she opts to growl and wave away topics rather than bark and bounce. After rummaging through the front closet, Gigi pivots on her heels and pushes a thick fisherman’s coat at me. It smells like old fish carcasses. I take it and stop to look her in the eyes again, forcing her to look at me.

“Are we cool?” I ask.

“This is just a business arrangement,” she says. Then her voice softens ever so slightly. “I can’t say if it’s a good thing you’re here. But here you are. And I can’t change that.”

As I stumble out of Gigi’s, a frigid breeze blows over my back, but I toss the fishy coat behind shrubs—I don’t need to replace my *Death Chick* moniker with *Stinky Salmon* or something worse—and wrap a scarf around my neck. It’s far too cold for September, but I have to remind myself I’m not in California anymore; beyond the fuzzy-looking trees and wide fern fronds is the cold Atlantic, not the warm Pacific. Breaking into a trot to keep from freezing, I dash up Gigi’s gravelly walkway to the main road and tell myself not to run too hard or I’ll show up at school sweating like the devil in a church.

The Zin mansion looms to my right. My hometown is filled with houses designed to make neighbors and tourists sick with envy, and it appears Dr. Zin's mansion was designed with the same thing in mind. But I'm not envious. Really, I'm not. After all, it looks like Dr. Zin's place, cloaked in fog, with sharply pitched roofs stabbing up through the mist, is about one lightning storm away from haunted house status. I turn onto the long, narrow, and empty road and start toward the school. In the distance, over the treetops and through the fog, I can just make out the peaks and steeples of the campus. Even from here, it looks nothing like the big-box school I used to go to.

"What did Dad get me into?" I ask myself and watch my breath freeze.

Until this morning, I'd heard nothing of getting a Guardian or choosing a PT, which, if I had my way, would be txt shorthand for getting Pretty Teeth or Perfect Tests. Having never been to a private school—never mind the most elite one on the planet—I guess it makes sense that I don't know. Maybe Guardians 'n' things are standard at these places.

"It'll be fine," I assure myself. "You'll figure it out."

That's when I notice it: a red line painted across the road right before the Zin property begins. The paint is bright. I near it. I spy layers of faded red below it, as if it's been painted and repainted weekly. For decades.

With a little hop, I cross it. I tell myself to disregard it.

As I start jogging, hoping not to be late, a loud Ducati whizzes by me, sending small rocks and twigs swirling into the air; I have to slow to pick a particularly wiry twig from the wilds of my hair. As I do, I hear the crackle of leaves underfoot and glance over my shoulder. A uniformed girl with a short brown bob and little bangs is walking far behind me. When I look again later, she's gone. I jog the rest of the way to school, alone on the road.

Cania Christy is one towering stone building backed by smaller converted houses and outbuildings, which I can barely distinguish beneath the slowly lifting perma-cloud that drapes campus. Just two things catch my immediate attention: the main building, over the front doors of which the name *Goethe Hall* is etched, and the silence. The campus is so noiseless that a part of me wonders if I'm a day early. I hear only the squealing protest of door hinges opening and closing and the caw of gulls muffled in the foggy seascape and absorbed by greenery that is so lush it's suffocating. In the rare moments a breeze blows a hole through the fog, I glimpse the odd student meandering silently into or out of Goethe Hall; I'm at once comforted to know I didn't arrive on the wrong day and curious to find that, without fail, every student is walking alone. It's a strange but welcome relief to think that this student body may be comprised of people similar to me, people who haven't always been in the in-crowd, people who are more focused on their goals and ambitions than on trying to be popular.

Perhaps there are no cliques here. Perhaps they're progressive enough at Cania Christy to ban bullying and the exclusionary cliques that help create it.

"Now what've we got here?" a girl with a drawl says.

I turn to find four girls in uniform watching me with their arms crossed. They're impossibly well groomed and flawless. Obviously besties. Proof that I was dead wrong about my anti-clique idea.

Their cool gazes roll up and down my body, assessing me in a way with which I've grown unfortunately familiar. Every girl knows this drill. These are the cool girls, ostensibly, and they have come to weigh and measure me. Their bodies, hair, makeup—even the way they rock their uniforms—are undeniable signs of their power on campus and their expectations of a perfectly charmed life, which their daddies will guarantee them. Like four slightly over-sexed dolls, they stand at arm's length from me, thrusting out their

cleavage, tossing their straightened silky hair over their shoulders, and pursing their pouty, glossy lips. Their skin is so unblemished it glows. Their eyes are so clear they might see right through me.

With my curls, crooked tooth, and stunningly empty bank account, I am their antithesis. Or, as I prefer to see it, they are mine.

I've never gotten along well with the popular girls. And something in their collective scowl tells me I'm not about to become the fifth member of this particular clique.

"You must be the new girl. The junior?" the ginger begins frostily, her tone warm like a Savannah summer but her eyes dead cold. Her followers—a Thai girl, an Indian girl, and a stark blonde—glare at me. "The California chick who thinks she's some sort of artist?"

"Unless there are two of us," I reply. My years of dealing with rich, bitchy, and beautiful girls have given me a bit of a bite. "Why? Are you the president of my fan club?"

"As if Harper would *ever* be your fan!" the Thai girl exclaims and looks at the ginger—evidently named Harper—for approval.

I narrow my eyes. "I just meant how do you know so much about me?"

With her friends mirroring her every move, Harper curls her lip and glares up at me. She's barely five-two but is filled head to toe with piss and vinegar. "Everyone knows about you."

"And *not* in a good way," the stark blonde adds, her words thick with a Russian accent.

"It's like when a circus freak walks into a room," Harper drawls. "It's hard for everyone else not to notice."

"Gee," I begin, "I'd love to hear more about how your parents met, but I've got to get to school."

I try to cut through the foursome, but Harper shoves her hand against my chest, stopping me. Not cool.

"Truth is, Merchant, we know who you are because it's not every day Headmaster Villicus lets in some poor chick with a crazy mom who killed herself." Harper smirks. "Word gets around."

“Well, you know nothing about my mother. But I’m sure you know *all about* getting around.”

Removing her hand and pushing through their stunned crowd, I take the stairs into Goethe Hall two at a time and ignore the girls’ voices as they tell each other that I’m not worth the hassle, that I’m ugly, that I totally need braces, and that I’m never going to get the “Big V,” which sounds like something sexual but hell if I know. Inside the ornate Goethe Hall, I somehow find my way into the long queue where I try to shake off my encounter, try to stop seeing red, and wait impatiently to collect my orientation package from an old, wrinkled secretary who spits when she speaks.

“Did you say your name’s Martha Cennen?” the secretary asks me as she shuffles through disorganized stacks of orientation packets. She smells like the bottom of an ashtray. She is wearing an enormous emerald brooch. Behind her, a dozen secretaries, also wearing massive pendants, type on typewriters, one finger at a time.

“No, it’s Anne Merchant.”

“Maybe you remind me of someone I used to know.”

I sigh. “I’m a junior in the Fine Arts stream.”

“A junior. Fine Arts. Tanner Chanem.”

“*Anne Merchant*,” I correct.

“It’s not Nate N. Nemrach?” Her gaze meets mine.

There’s an odd, out-of-place playfulness in her expression. And then I realize where she’s getting all those other names from.

“Are you just turning my name into anagrams?” I ask.

Like a caught child, she quickly shakes her head *no* and dives, with a giggle, back into searching the stacks. Or at least putting on a show of searching.

The ticking of single typewriter keys quickly becomes grating. Behind me, a Mandarin guy and an Italian girl—who are, like everyone else in the queue, coldly ignoring their peers—have

started grumbling in their respective languages. I assume the wait and the maddeningly slow secretary are getting to them like they're getting to me. At last, the secretary pokes her head out of the pile of packets, lifts one victoriously, and yanks a sticky note off the front of it.

She reads the note, and a slow smile spreads across her face. "Message for you, Anne."

"From my dad?"

She shakes her head, but, before she can explain, a PA announcement interrupts her: "*All new students, meet at Valedictorian Hall by nine o'clock for your campus tours. All new students.*" A glance at the clock shows it's nearly nine already, and I don't even know where Valedictorian Hall is. I look expectantly at her.

"You wanna go on the campus tour, don't you?" she asks me. I don't have much patience at the best of times, but she's *killing me*. She knows I have to go. It's like she's taking pleasure in dragging this out and watching everyone in line squirm as we wait helplessly for her.

"I'd like to go, yes."

She glances at the sticky note. "Is your dad named Mr. Merchant?"

"Yes."

She glances at it again. "Well then your dad didn't leave a message for you."

"Who did?"

Her grin spreads. It's yellow enough to be pure gold. "Headmaster Villicus. He'd like to see you. Which I guess means you won't be going on the campus tour."

Handing me my packet, she points me down a long, dark hall, which brings me to a set of empty wooden benches outside the headmaster's closed door. I take an uncomfortable seat, wait to be called in, and briefly admire a selection of Beksinski's beautiful nightmares condemning me from their frames on the walls. I start

absently reviewing my class schedule and syllabuses—all while trying not to stew over my encounter with the girls outside and failing miserably. It sucks to have *already* made enemies of what are surely the most popular girls here, but it's not exactly new territory for me. I thought it'd be different at Cania—I thought I'd have a clean slate and the protection of this school uniform—but tales of my California life seem to have preceded me.

I can feel the slightly optimistic outlook I brought to the island receding like an ocean wave, exposing the oppressive heft of my unshakable life story.

There are no rewrites in store for me here. No blank canvases. What was will continue to be. That Harper and her pack of perfectly coifed skanks knew where I come from—that they knew about my mother's sickness and subsequent suicide—reinforces what a part of me already guessed: if I want a better life, I'm going to have to fight for it. As Anne Merchant. Not as some watered-down, posier, more acceptable version of myself.

A commotion at the end of the hall interrupts my thoughts, and I glance up to see three silhouettes hurriedly heading my way. Two are tall and lean, and the other is shorter and marginally buff. It's clear that one of the tall guys is hauling the other two toward Villicus's office, in spite of their reluctance. Their bickering reaches me before they do.

"It's called the First Amendment," the shorter guy cries. His voice seems to be holding back a laugh, and, as they come into the light, I can see him grinning. "Freedom of speech. Freedom to assemble."

"That's enough, Mr. Stone." One of the tall guys is, in fact, a tall *man*, who is dressed impeccably in an expensive-looking suit with a cashmere scarf and overcoat. His dark hair is brushed elegantly away from his face, and his frosty blue glare glows against his olive skin. Obviously, he's a member of the faculty. I hope he's not my teacher, though, because it would be tragic for my GPA

if I spent my class time gawking at the teacher and stammering through my comments.

“I should be allowed to protest the Big V race,” the Stone boy insists, “without your kid getting on my butt for it and without Villicus tearing me a new one!”

“Pilot, your picket sign read ‘The Only V I Want Is Between Her Legs,’” the tall boy says and, frustrated, sits on the bench across from me. He drops his face into his hands and sighs. “That’s not protesting. That’s peacocking. Aggressively.”

Pilot Stone smirks. His dark gaze dashes my way, and he smiles mischievously. I raise my papers in front of my face so it’s not quite so obvious that I’m eavesdropping.

“Dr. Z, come on,” Pilot says as he squeezes into the bench next to me, forcing me to shove down when there’s hardly space to do so. He smells clean, and his leg and arm against mine are nice and warm. “I won’t tell Villie about Ben here destroying my property—”

“Your property! It was offensive garbage on craft paper!” the tall boy cries out.

“—if you just let this whole thing go.”

The negotiating stops quickly with a long, heavy pause. I wish now that I wasn’t holding my syllabus up as high as I am so I could see their faces. Relying on my peripheral vision, I strain to make out Pilot’s expression, but all I can see is that he is looking in the direction of Dr. Z, who is standing in front of Headmaster Villicus’s office.

“Wait to be called in,” Dr. Z orders before rapping on the door and abruptly disappearing inside.

I lower my syllabus to see Pilot mockingly salute the spot where Dr. Z was just standing and the tall guy with the swimmer’s build—Ben, I believe his name is—run his hands through his thick sandy hair.

At once, both Pilot and Ben turn their gazes on me.

I have to tell myself not to blush. Because if these guys are even remotely representative of the male population in this student body, well, I can feel my optimism returning already.



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