

a NEW LEAF

As Jackson Greene sped past the Maplewood Middle School cafeteria — his trademark red tie skewed slightly to the left, a yellow No. 2 pencil balanced behind his ear, and a small spiral-bound notebook tucked in his right jacket pocket — he found himself dangerously close to sliding back into the warm confines of scheming and pranking.

Ignoring his empty stomach, he wove through the mob of students at the vending machines and continued toward the exit. Maybe he could convince Mrs. Kau to let him raid the machines during study hall next period. He could even offer to share his food with her — surely she had skipped the cafeteria's chicken enchiladas too.

Or maybe he could just forge a pass from the main office. Slip out of class. Pick the lock and sneak into the teachers' lounge. He knew all about the Hershey's bars Coach Rainey hid behind the stacks of dust-coated Styrofoam cups. The extra ham and swiss sandwich Mr. James, the security guard, always packed for a light

afternoon snack. The box of mocha-caramel cupcakes Assistant Principal Nelson brought for the Junior National Honor Society's "Welcome Back" social.

It would have been easy. So easy.

Jackson pushed these thoughts out of his head. It was only September. He refused to jeopardize four months of model behavior for a quick snack, no matter how hungry he was. No matter how simple it would be.

No matter how much the idea tingled his spine.

He paused at the door and glanced at the GABY DE LA CRUZ FOR PRESIDENT poster, her name in big, bold, loopy letters. His fingers tightened around the note in his pocket.

When he reached the garden, he moved the note to his shirt pocket, then peeled off his blazer and folded it across the wooden fence. He was probably the only student at Maplewood — if not in all of Columbus, Ohio — who received notes the old-fashioned way. Most students used their cell phones to send messages, but he wasn't allowed to carry one during the school day. Yet another consequence of the Kelsey Job.

He pulled a pair of shears from the toolshed, then walked past red rose bushes and maroon marigolds to the far corner of the garden. He was almost finished pruning one of the peony bushes when he heard footsteps.

His long brown fingers tightened around the shears. "You're late," he said.

Charlie de la Cruz raised his hand to block the sun from his eyes. "Got stuck in the newsroom."

Of all the places they could meet, Charlie couldn't believe that Jackson wanted to talk out here. Sure, he knew that Jackson liked the Botany Club — probably as much as Charlie enjoyed being editor of the *Maplewood Herald* — but it was noon, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Charlie had only been outside for a few minutes, but his eyes were already beginning to burn, and he could feel the perspiration spreading across his forehead.

Of course, Jackson hadn't broken a sweat.

"Any day now," Jackson said, snipping another leaf. "You're the one who said Gaby needed help."

"She does." Charlie sneezed. "Stewart Hogan dropped out of the election. Keith's running for president."

Jackson missed the brown leaf he was aiming for and snipped a healthy green one instead. "Are you sure?"

"I just interviewed Naomi. She told me." Naomi Sinclair was running for Student Council secretary. She was also Keith Sinclair's cousin. If anyone would know, she would.

"Didn't the deadline to turn in applications already pass?" Jackson asked.

"According to my sources, there's some loophole that allows the school to extend the deadline in special circumstances."

"That's crazy. Mr. Pritchard would never —"

"Wasn't his call. From what I hear, Dr. Kelsey overruled him."

Jackson looked at Charlie. "Does Gaby know?"

"I don't think so. But word's beginning to spread. She'll find out soon enough." He paused to stifle another

sneeze. “So what’s the plan?” he asked, wiping his nose. “What should we do?”

“Nothing.” Jackson cut another healthy leaf, barely missing his tie. “Gaby can still win.”

“I don’t know, Jackson. I don’t trust Keith.” Charlie stepped around the peony into the narrow space between flowerbeds. As he knelt beside Jackson, his stomach grumbled.

“There’s a whole cafeteria full of food back in the building, you know.”

“Do I look like I have a death wish?” Charlie asked.

Jackson finally smiled. “What did Naomi say? Did she give you any reason to believe that Keith was up to something?”

“She didn’t tell me anything concrete. It’s just a hunch.” He elbowed Jackson. “You’re the idea guy. If you were Keith, how would you guarantee your win?”

“I’d make signs and encourage students to vote.”

“Come on. This is Keith Sinclair we’re talking about. The guy you beat in the Blitz at the Fitz. The guy who squealed about the Mid-Day PDA —”

“Can’t you call it the Kelsey Job?”

“You’re the only one who calls it that.” Charlie sneezed again. “And can we talk somewhere else? My allergies are killing me here.”

“It’s probably the cedar trees surrounding the football field that are making you sneeze.” Jackson rose from his crouch, then helped Charlie to his feet. “And I don’t plan cons anymore. Period.” He squeezed past Charlie and walked to the toolshed.

Charlie's stomach grumbled again as he followed Jackson. "You can't stand by and do nothing."

Jackson returned the shears to the shed. "That's exactly what I plan to do."

"But —"

"I'm done talking about this." He turned around and waved a gray vinyl wallet at Charlie. "Look what I found."

"Hey!" Charlie felt his now-empty back pocket. "At least you can still make a decent pull."

"There's only one person I know who can do it better." Jackson opened the wallet, then turned it upside down. It was empty.

Charlie shrugged. "Information doesn't come cheap, you know."

Jackson pulled a few bills from his pocket and stuffed them into the wallet. "Get yourself some lunch. I'm sure you can find something in the vending machines." He tossed the wallet to Charlie, grabbed his jacket, then turned toward the building.

"Wait! What about Gaby?"

"You know your sister better than anyone." Jackson loosened his tie, pulling it even more to the left. "The last thing she wants is help from me."