

ONE

The sun is barely up, but the sky is already blue and cloudless. The cool morning air fills my lungs and I focus on the feeling of my feet hitting the ground, my muscles stretching, my heart beating. Running is the one thing that keeps me from going completely crazy, but today it's not working as well as it usually does. My brain isn't switching off. I run down street after street, past the green lawns, the matching beige houses, the triple garages, the suvs.

We lived in a big city until just over a year ago. We had a cool apartment in the heart of downtown, and I rode the subway everywhere. There was the massive library, six stories high with glass skylights everywhere, a park where I used to run along miles of tree-lined paths, and all kinds of funky used bookstores and antique shops and cafés. Then Dad got transferred halfway across the country—he does something incomprehensible that involves software and a lot of acronyms—and now here we are. The burbs.

The nearest city, the one we're technically a suburb of, is a depressing concrete sprawl. Not that it matters. With no subway, no busses—unless you walk practically to the highway and wait forever—and no driver's license, it's not like I can go anywhere.

I was almost fifteen when we moved, and it hasn't exactly been a smooth transition. At my old school, all my teachers loved me. At my new school? Not so much. Apparently what was seen as "independent thinking" back in the city is called "attitude" here. Last year would have been hell if it wasn't for Beth. She was in my homeroom, and we started to talk because we'd see each other out running all the time. Pretty soon, we were spending every spare minute together. I floated through the rest of grade ten without bothering to get to know anyone else. Then in June, Beth and her family moved away, and I was back to being alone. This summer has been one long sharp ache.

I slow down as I run past the high school. Glen Ridge Secondary School. GRSS. It's a squat, gray, two-level building, as new and as ugly as everything else around here. Since last year, someone has planted a row of trees along the edge of the field. They're spindly little things. None come up past my shoulder. Granted, I'm five foot eleven, but still. The trees just look kind of sad. Anyway, summer holidays are over. By lunchtime today, everyone will be butting out their cigarettes on the skinny trunks.

I glance at my watch. Less than three hours until I'm back inside.



When I get home I head straight to the bathroom and take a long shower, as hot as I can stand, with a blast of cold at the end. I dry myself off quickly and wrap myself in a towel. Mom's left one of her magazines on the counter, and I flip it open and start reading while I brush my teeth. I always have to read something: If the magazine wasn't here, I'd be reading the list of ingredients on the toothpaste tube or the directions on Dad's jar of athlete's foot powder.

Top Ten Tips for Looking Younger the article reads. I snort. Like I want to look younger than sixteen. But I keep reading anyway. *Tip 1: Laugh lines, frown lines... their very names give them away. Every time you wrinkle your forehead or crinkle your eyes, those little lines get one step closer to being a permanent part of your face. The good news? By keeping a serene countenance, you can avoid the aging effects of excessive facial expressions.*

I toss the magazine aside. Unbelievable. I can't believe my mom reads this crap. Oh wait—yes, I can. It's probably half the reason she's always nagging me about my appearance.

I wipe clean a patch of the steam-fogged mirror, and my blurred reflection scowls back at me. My dark hair falls to my shoulders in a wet shaggy mess. Maybe Mom's right: It's time for a new look. I rummage in the drawer until I find a pair of scissors; then I hold up one hank of hair and cut. Then another and another, until I'm standing in a

drift of fallen hair and all that's left on my head is maybe half an inch of thick dark fuzz. Even half-wet, it's already sticking straight up.

This haircut, combined with my sixteenth birthday present, should guarantee an interesting first day of school.



I turned sixteen at the beginning of July. Beth had been gone for two weeks, and it was just beginning to sink in that she had truly, completely and permanently disappeared from my life. I couldn't stand it. Everything hurt, and I felt like crawling out of my skin.

I didn't feel like celebrating, but Mom lives for special occasions. She insisted on doing the whole sweet-sixteen thing—a big pink cake, sixteen candles, all that. It pretty much broke her heart when I flatly refused to invite anyone from school. In the end, Mom and Dad and I sat around eating the cake by ourselves. Dad kept giving me sympathetic glances from across the table, and I kept cramming more cake into my mouth so that I wouldn't have to talk. Happy birthday to me.

Mom's always trying to create these perfect teenage moments and give me the life that she always wanted. Whether or not it's what I want doesn't seem to matter.

Anyway, I'd only wanted one thing for my birthday and that was to change my name. I'd wanted to change it since I was a kid, but it wasn't until this year that my parents had finally agreed. Probably just as well, really. If they'd agreed

when I was six, I'd be called Rufus, after our old neighbor's basset hound.

Mom had cried a little when she gave me the green light. "Emily's such a pretty, gentle name," she said. "It's so feminine."

I feel bad for my mother, in a way. She'd have been such a great mom for a different kid. Not that she's a bad mom for me, but I know it hurts her that I don't want the same things she wants. I've got to give her credit though: Even though it's a lost cause, she never gives up hope that I'll improve. Her outlook is relentlessly positive.

She may not understand me, but it's not like I understand her either. Despite all her fussing and the crap magazines she reads, she isn't someone you can just dismiss. Underneath it all, she's actually pretty smart. Sometimes I think she's stuck in some retro-fifties time warp, trying to be this perfect wife and mother, when really she should have been, I don't know...a cosmetic surgeon, maybe. Or a talk-show host or an interior designer. In her own way, she's ambitious. It's just that her ambitions all seem to involve me. I figure she needs more to manage than just my life and her kindergarten class.

Anyway, it's official. I am Dante E. Griffin. I kept Emily as a middle name, just to make Mom feel better. I needn't have bothered. She always calls me Emily anyway.