

the
other
girl

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



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chapter seven

I had been in Gid's head once before when he and Pilar spent a whole party hanging out together. It was a house party on Cape Cod, at this girl Fiona Winchester's house. . . . Fiona was one of Cullen's little playthings for a while. At any rate, Gideon and Pilar had snuggled in a big chair and then slept in the same bed in a beautiful room overlooking the ocean. Nothing had happened, unless you count Gid getting very agitated and crushed out.

But probably not as agitated and crushed as I'd gotten, and we weren't even going out then. In fact, officially, we hardly even knew each other, and still it traumatized me so much I don't think I ate for a week afterward.

I didn't even want to think about how disturbing it would be to see them together now that I loved him. Now that we had slept together.

I'd seen him chat with Pilar. But not alone. In the dark. With drinks.

God, I wished I could get out of Gid's head.

But it just had to be impossible. Of course, I hadn't ever tried. It had to be worth a try. It had never occurred to me to try. I had been so busy trying to make being inside his head work for me that it had never occurred to me.

I obviously didn't have the faintest idea of how to do it myself.

I Googled "inside someone's mind." Some bullshit stuff came up, like, women's magazine shit about how to read his mind. Ha. Those people didn't know how good they had it in their ignorance. A guy named Linus Anderson in San Rafael, California, had written an article called "Inhabiting Consciousness," but it had phrases in it like *cognitive mechanisms* and *morphogenetic field*, and all this math and stuff in it and graphs of brain activity. I was just about to look for something else when I read something I actually understood: "Shared consciousness is really not as rare as people think. This is especially true as our minds get more powerful, and as more and more people accept the notion that energy and thought are capable of dynamic movement."

This was a quote from a Dr. Stanley Whitmeyer, who had written a pamphlet called, simply, "Shared Consciousness."

Now I Googled him. He identified himself as an independent scholar, and there was an e-mail address and an instant message handle on Google. I wrote to it.

My Name is Molly Mcgarry. I'm 16, and you have to help me get out of my boyfriend's mind.

A few seconds later this message popped up on my screen.

TELL ME WHAT KIND OF STUFF IS HAPPENING TO YOU.

I typed feverishly.

Uh. Well, I hear everything that's inside Gid's—that's his name—head. I don't know what else to tell you. I know what he's thinking. I hear everything from, i hate asparagus i think . . . and that girl's hot. Well. I mean, what if I didn't have a girlfriend . . . I would think she was hot but wait. I can think she's hot. I just am not supposed to, like, hit on her.

I get it.

You do?

Yes. It is not common but it does happen.

OK. What is it?

If I knew that, I'd be very rich.

LOLIICL. That's lol if i could laugh.

LOLFR. LOL for real.

Can you help me?

The power of thought when it connects to love is always very strong.

OK. But what does that have to do with me?

I don't know exactly what this stuff is. But it is basically just an advanced form of empathy.

OK.

You are in his head for some reason.

Other than to drive myself crazy?

The less sarcasm you can display about this the better. Sarcasm is just a defense mechanism. If you want to get out of his head, you need to think about why you want to get out.

Well, I am trying to get this scholarship. It's dependent on my team winning a championship on this quiz team thing . . . It's like *Jeopardy*, but with teams, and I can't concentrate with this girl in my head . . .

Forget about that. That's intellectual. It's not emotional. Why do you want to get out?

Because i can't study.

That's an effect. What's the cause? Ask yourself, Why can't you study?

Because I can't concentrate.

And why can't you concentrate?

Jesus. Because i am sad.

There was no response and I wondered if I had gotten it.

Can you say more?

Because i love him, and it hurts. And now that I'm not going out with him anymore, it's like, what am I doing here? I just want to be in my own mind. There's absolutely no use to being in Gid's mind anymore.

OK. Now we're getting somewhere. Tell your mind that. Tell your mind that at the precise moment you really think you can't stand it anymore.

To tell you the truth, Dr. Whitmeyer, every moment seems pretty excruciating.

One thing i've learned . . . There's always a more

*excruciating moment. You'll know it when you see it. I
have to go. Nova is on.
Dr. Whitmeyer?*

But he was gone.

That was pretty weird. I would have thought it was weirder, but since I'd been in someone's mind for six months, my definition of weird was definitely expanding.

I tried doing more searches, but all I came up with was that Dr. Whitmeyer was an independent scholar who'd written a pamphlet called "Shared Consciousness," in 1979.

It was out of print. Big surprise there.

Two hours later thirty marooned teenagers had stuffed themselves into boys' hotel room and embarked upon the project of getting completely shitfaced. Pilar and Madison arrived just as that second-drink euphoria was kicking in, or maybe they were the cause of it, but suddenly the music got louder, the chatter sped up, and the flashing lights of snowplows in the parking lot gave the grim room a disco feel.

Gid stared at Pilar and watched everyone else in the room staring at her. *Something about that face. Why can't you look away from beauty like that? Why can't anyone in this room? She's coming over to me. The girl everyone is looking at is walking over to me. Some people look awestruck, some people look mad. God, she is so beautiful it makes people mad. That's insane.*

She leaned in to hug him. *The girl everyone was looking at just hugged me.*

Pilar wore jeans and a sparkly T-shirt. Against the window, snow falling in the darkness, she was part of the glitter-

ing winter world. Gideon had drunk a glass of Cutty Sark, and a layer of chemical giddiness lay over his despair like a silk sheet as the two of them sat apart from everyone, on the floor between the second bed and the window.

“I love esnow,” Pilar said, and Gid saw her beauty as he had never seen it before. It really was so cute how she said “esnow.” It was this gorgeousness mixed with the naïveté of not quite getting things right. That’s what made her so special.

I was so grossed out. I mean, she was a hot girl and English was her second language. It wasn’t fucking science. And she hadn’t invented the sexy accent.

He reached under the nightstand. “Have you seen my hat?” He slapped it on his head. “I call it the Hat That Changes Everything!”

He’d said that because he knew I thought it was cute. He was even thinking to himself, Gid, this is a lame trick. But Pilar laughed and clapped her hands. She liked it too! As she threw her head back the light caught the glint of her lip gloss—and Gid thought of the way that the light in Target had shone on those pink panties, and then he thought of me, and then he took a bigger swill of Cutty Sark.

Alamo, Gid thought, letting his brain cloud sink into icy alcohol bliss. Molly. Pilar shifted on the floor, and her knee pressed into his thigh. Alamo.

It was bad, but it wasn’t worse than last time. I had no idea if Dr. Whitmeyer was a lunatic or not, but I did kind of like what he’d said. It was worth a try. I concentrated on the main reason I wanted to get out of Gid’s head—it was just painful noise, not serving any purpose.

Nicholas was walking around wearing a snorkel with the tube part of it stuck inside a bong. Five girls danced on the

desk to some Brazilian lounge music. Madison was there, sitting on the bed with the pretentious guy who'd come, promising to stay only if everyone would listen to his iPod, and no one was sober enough to argue. Madison's heavily lined eyes drooped with intoxication and boredom. One of the dancing girls tripped over the docking station and fell down into Madison's lap. "Watch it," Madison snapped. "Hey, Pilar, let's get out of here soon. I think we can get that 5 A.M."

"Let's just take the later one," Pilar said. "I'm having a good time." She looked up through her lashes at Gideon.

Cullen was suddenly at Gid's side. He had folded the desk blotter into a three-cornered hat. "Ahoy," he said. "Are you getting ready to board this vessel?" He cocked his head in the direction of Pilar.

Gid shook his head and squared off his body so that their conversation was more private. "I'm not ready for—"

"Hold up, hold up," Cullen said, kneeling down next to him. "You do realize that fate has stranded you in a hotel room with Pilar Benitez-Jones?"

"There are, like, eighty other people here," Gid said.

"She has her own room," Cullen said.

"How do you know that?"

"She made a point of telling me."

"Well, maybe she likes *you*."

"You are hopeless," Cullen said. "I mean, the Alamo has shown up right at your door. All you have to do is walk over to the sidewalk and puke. And you're fucking up." He shook his head. "Wait," he said, "I have an amazing idea! Nicholas! Take that magic snorkel out of your mouth and give me a hand."

Suddenly he and Nicholas were pushing everyone off the

beds. Madison stood up, glowering, holding her cigarette out in front of her like it was a dog she was walking. “What the hell? I am not playing Twister, OK? I have my period.”

“We’re not playing Twister,” Cullen said. “We’re playing spin the bottle.”

It took some time to assemble the circle. There was some question that the carpet was bunched up in once place and the bottle might never make it one side of the circle. “Maybe that side of the circle is just ugly,” someone shouted, and twenty rich teenagers laughed out loud at the absurd notion that any of them were ugly.

“This is a perfect game for you,” Gid said to Nicholas. “You get some contact with girls without having to talk to them before or afterward.”

“Ehh,” Nicholas said. “I prefer higher emotional stakes.”

Pilar made a face at him. “You are esso immature,” she said.

Nicholas said, “You may be right,” and sat down. Gideon sat down next to Nicholas, and Pilar sat down a few feet away.

“Madison, you first,” Cullen said.

“What? Why me?”

“Because you need to make out with someone under thirty.” Nicholas handed her the empty Cutty Sark bottle.

Madison tried to look annoyed, but you could see she liked having her tastes spoken of publicly. She spun.

She got Gideon and did not attempt to conceal her distaste. “Uhhh,” she said, supersizing her eye roll and advancing toward the center of the circle on her knees as Gid did the same. Wow, he thought as they kissed, there was a day when I would have thought this was such a big deal, but now, I just feel like

I'm going to the store. He went back to his place and thought about how far he'd come that he could find a girl as hot as Madison so bitchy that he didn't want to kiss her.

"Dude," Nicholas muttered.

Sorry, Gid said, taking up the bottle. He closed his eyes. As Gid spun, he thought, Alamo.

It landed between Pilar and the girl next to her, a girl who, although she didn't look like me up close, from far away looked like me a lot. We were the same height and weight, with the same hair—a pretty but unspectacular brown-haired look.

Pilar and the other girl both stared at the bottle. It really was directly in between them. Pilar looked brazenly at Gideon.

Gideon looked everywhere else. Cullen had appeared, shirtless, now, still in his hat. He began to chant. "Dealer's choice, dealer's choice!" and everyone reacted to his incredible charisma and joined in.

Gideon wasn't going to argue for Pilar. Besides, wasn't he just supposed to go again, weren't those the rules of a spin-the-bottle tie anyway, a do-over?

But Pilar spoke up. "Eet's pointed more toward *me*," she said. "I mean, you maybe can't see it from that angle, but it is."

Pilar smiled provocatively at the other girl. "Want to fight me for it?"

This is really happening, Gideon thought. This is really happening, and maybe Molly dumped me for a reason. Maybe I am about to get out of the car and puke right now, and I don't even know it. In a good way.

The girl made a be-my-guest gesture, and Pilar strutted right up to Gideon Rayburn. She has amazing posture, he thought. It was like her breasts were floating on top of her body.

He put his hands on her shoulders and let one hand fall a little bit down her arm. Their eyes met. In hers, he swore he saw something like lust and devotion. I might be so wrong, he said, but I might as well kiss her as if I were right.

I could have been in Buffalo right now, Gid thought. What do I think about this? Am I sad? Am I happy? Do I just think life's weird?

He covered her mouth with his.

I felt her mouth close around his, and I felt the hungry way his tightened in response. There was a flash of panic that his mouth wouldn't move, followed by a rush of determination. He thought about a line he had read in both good and bad books: he took her. He almost laughed that he was thinking of that line, but as he thought it, the determination surged more, so he thought it again. Why not? *He took her*. His hands were moving. They were now on her neck, in her hair, on her face. He felt her swoon. *We* felt her swoon. It really was a thing you could feel. Her hips gave way, she felt heavier and lighter at the same time. Her softness was insane, but she was kissing him back *hard*.

He kept kissing her and she kept kissing him. Some people kiss and it's nothing, and Gideon and Pillar weren't nothing. Gideon and Pillar weren't necessarily Gid and me, but we didn't exist anymore, anyway.

I thought about what makes two people kiss well, and I wondered if he liked kissing her more than he liked kissing me, and I wondered also why he wasn't thinking about that. People were clapping. I wished they would stop because the noise was prohibiting Gid from thinking about what I wanted to know. Instead, he was thinking, Do I like kissing Pilar, or do I like having everyone see me kiss the hottest girl at the

party? . . . Well, the hottest girl in the world, maybe. He didn't pull away from her exactly, but he moved his mouth and, aware he was drunk, aware this was stupid, whispered into her mouth in feverish, sleep-talking tones, "The hottest girl in the world."

A voice—Cullen's—shouted "The Alamo!"

Was Pilar the hottest girl in the world?

I thought maybe the party had gone suddenly quiet. For a second I was afraid something terrible had happened, like a drunk person had fallen out a window and everyone was just staring at a corpse and Gid was too numb to think or something, but even when he was too numb to think, I could see what he was seeing. But right now I couldn't see him seeing anything. But there was nothing left of Gid. Just the quiet. Just my head.

Was he *gone*?

Gideon had slipped out of my head. I just sat there on my bed. I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate.

He couldn't just all of a sudden disappear.

But seeing as he had just whispered the words *the hottest girl in the world* against the lips of another woman, why didn't I want him to disappear?

I had a panicked feeling, like I'd lost my wallet with thousands of dollars in it, or like I was driving with no brakes. *How was I supposed to know what he was doing now?* What if he was sleeping with Pilar? I had to know. What had I done?

I lay awake. I waited for him to come back. I worried about what I would see when he did.

He didn't come back.

He was gone for good.

This was the most terrible silence. When I was thinking

about wanting to get out of his head, I was just thinking about not being in pain.

I forgot about this whole *alone* thing.

I wanted to sleep, to escape, but what if he came back quietly and I missed him?

I don't know how long I lay there awake, longing to see Gid, longing to hear him, no matter what he was doing, just to know. The harder I found myself concentrating, the more sure I was he was gone.

chapter eight

I had kind of been hoping to sleep into the next day, but as luck would have it, I woke up at the tail end of afternoon—exactly the time of day when the upstate New York winter dishes out its most heaping helpings of annihilating despair. I lay in bed for a while, wondering how I was supposed to handle being this sad. It was hard to take it all in at once: Gid and I were over. He had kissed Pilar, and he had liked it. Not only had he liked it, he had whispered that she was the most beautiful girl in the world while he had kissed her. I had tried to get him out of my head, and it had worked.

I missed him. I missed him so much.

In my bedside table I found a Spice Girls pencil and a notepad from the Buffalo Marriott. I wrote on a piece of paper: Gideon Rayburn is a fucking dick. I wrote, Gideon Rayburn just wants someone perfect so he can prove to himself he's cool, because he is a loser and he knows it!

I could hate him. I could get myself there.

Predictably, it started to rain. Buffalo, like love, couldn't stay beautiful long. In just a few minutes, the winter wonderland would be a sodden mess.

I heard a sound like water dripping into a bucket. Even with the covers over my head, the sound grew louder and louder. It was definitely water. It wasn't rain. It was water trickling into more water, but with soothing regularity. It was the sound of a fountain. I sat up.

I knew my family did not have a fountain. Buffalo wasn't exactly an in-home fountain kind of town.

I lay back down and shut my eyes. The fountain sound persisted.

Probably I had gone a little crazy.

Then I heard a voice: *I know Madeeson likes these shoes, and she could only pretend she doesn't like them because she knows eef I get them how awesome I will look in them.*

It was Pilar Benitez-Jones's voice. The musical tone. The use of the conditional when the past tense would have been more appropriate. The accent that was pretty much gone except for the inability to produce as soft "I" sound.

If I wear these shoes tonight, that guy will for definitely geeve me that job.

There was no question it was her.

Great. I was back inside of Gid's head, but he was shopping with Pilar Benitez-Jones.

I imagined their cozy morning conversation. She had rolled onto her side, tucked her creamy shoulder into her perfectly shaped chin, and said, "Come shopping with me."

Gid's eyes blazed with desire as he stared at her. "Oh, yes,"

he said. “I never went shopping with Molly once, because I hate it, but I love you so much I will go.”

I had wanted to be back in his head. I guess I deserved whatever I got. Gideon had decided not to go to St. John with his buddies and had gone to LA with Pilar? I had never been to LA, but I just knew they were there because I saw blond people in loose, casual, expensive clothes toying with their sunglasses, and this what I had always pictured people did in LA. Outside, satiny palm fronds waved across a blue sky.

I had worried about them kissing, and when I woke up thirteen hours later, they were going out?

Gideon and Pilar were on a romantic vacation in Los Angeles, and I was going to have to watch all of it through Gid’s eyes.

“I really don’t like those shoes, Pilar.” This was Madison Sprague’s voice: lockjaw edged with sneering impatience. “They definitely have this thing about them where they want to be sexy, but they’re just, like, not.”

How was it that Pilar had just talked shit about Madison to Gid with Madison right there? She wasn’t whispering to him, either.

This didn’t make any sense. Gid shopping with Madison and Pilar. Unbelievable. He didn’t even like to listen to me and Edie talk on the phone. “It makes me feel like I’m going to turn into a girl,” he would complain. But now Gid wasn’t complaining, even to himself. Was he having fun with them? I didn’t see how. The place was boy hell: racks of belts, glass cases full of jewelry, wall units stuffed with expensive folded jeans, girls tittering to each other, “Oh sweetie! That is so cute on you!” and “I swear to God, he is going to *die* when he sees you in

that.” I did locate the source of the fountain sound: a concrete wall streaming water into a square concrete tub decorated with tiles reading HOPE, HAPPINESS AND ADVENTURE. Santogold’s “I’m a Lady” pulsed out of invisible speakers.

Pilar’s voice again: *With the right shoes and the right way I put my hair, I will be the eentern to Elias Ganz. Not Madison. And she is trying to stop this from happening, but it weel.*

So apparently every time Madison walked away, Pilar said something nasty about her to Gideon. I had always tried to keep my bitchiness to a minimum around Gideon, thinking it was kind of a turnoff, but apparently she was too good-looking to worry about that sort of thing.

Someone answered a phone: “Fred Segal.” I think I had heard of this place, or read about it, or something. It was like a department store but mini, and superfancy.

Pilar was looking down at the shoe now, pivoting it back and forth, back and forth so she could take in every angle. It was a white patent leather T-strap with a high heel. I heard: *Madison is so clearly just jealous of me. I mean, she has a nice body and everything, but when you do the equation, with my face, mine is better, and really, her body is only, like, better for clothes, and that isn’t in the equation anyway.*

What was the equation? And why wasn’t Gid like, equation, what? Are you insane?

Pilar went on: *This shoe makes me look reech, and that’s good.*

I had a terrible revelation: that endlessly pivoting shoe. I wasn’t looking across at that shoe. I was looking right down at it, *as if it were on my foot.* And Pilar wasn’t saying these things out loud. She was just thinking them.

Pilar looked up from the shoes and stared at herself in the

mirror. I watched her admire the line of her eyebrows, the shine of her hair, the smallness of her waist, and the perfectly articulated swell of everything around it. Behind her, she could see Madison, dressed in super low cut jeans and a white tank top with no bra, and an Hermès belt—her signature look—poking idly though a jewelry display. *Madison is so thin. Pilar now studied her stomach, frowning. My stomach is not perfect. It is not right. My stomach will be perfect, and then everything will be perfect, because with a perfect stomach maybe I am the prettiest girl in the entire—well, Kobe Bryant’s wife might be prettier than me. And maybe Catherine Zeta-Jones, but only in Zorro, and maybe Beyoncé, except my cousin saw her in person once, and . . .*

Pilar stared at herself for so long. I stared at Pilar staring at herself. But I was staring at the mirror. I was seeing Pilar as if I were looking out from her eyes.

Two girls—one tall and brunette, the other black with a blond afro—walked past.

Forty percent, Pilar thought, looking at the brunette, and then, looking at the black girl, she thought, *25 percent*. I didn’t know what she meant, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that I now knew that she wasn’t talking out loud. She was talking to herself, and I could hear her.

I was now inside the mind of Pilar Benitez-Jones.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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