



A WAVERLY OWL ALWAYS TURNS  
A DEAF EAR TO GOSSIP.

The crisp smell of autumn at Waverly Academy had been replaced by the undeniable scent of smoke – and not the pleasant, leaf-burning kind. It was an acrid, nose-hair-tingling burned-hay stench that reminded Jenny Humphrey that *someone* had set the barn at the Miller farm ablaze at last night's Cinephiles party. Maybe it was an accident. Or maybe not.

Jenny pushed open the dining hall's heavy wooden door and made her way across the cavernous room toward the food line. It was a long walk in plain view of every packed table, and Jenny tried to focus on the morning sun pouring through the stained glass windows rather than on the whispers that reverberated off the cathedral-like ceilings. Waverly Owls were notorious

gossips, but there was even more to talk about today than usual.

She filled her tray with special Saturday morning apple-cinnamon pancakes and maneuvered her way through the long oak tables toward the corner, where she spotted Alison Quentin's head of glossy black hair. A small blonde girl was wedged in between Alison and Sage Francis. Jenny checked to see that her roommate, Callie, and her ex, Easy, weren't seated at the same table. After catching Callie and Easy *together* in the barn last night, she never wanted to see either of them again. If she hadn't shared that unexpected, unbelievably sweet kiss with Julian McCafferty right afterward, she might have skipped out on breakfast/Waverly/life altogether. Her stomach fluttered just thinking about it.

'New meat,' came a voice from behind Jenny. She turned to see Celine Colista, the olive-skinned cocaptain of the field hockey team, gesturing toward the small blonde girl sitting between Alison and Sage. She watered down some fresh-squeezed OJ and placed it on her tray. 'They're around all week.'

'New meat?'

'Prospective students,' Celine explained impatiently as they approached the table together. 'We're not supposed to say pre-freshmen because it's, you know, sexist and all.' Jenny and Celine set their trays down next to Alison.

Jenny leaned forward and smiled at the blond pre-frosh. The girl was even tinier up close. 'Hi. I'm Jenny.'

'I'm Chloe.' The girl pushed up her black rectangular-framed Ralph Lauren glasses and nodded in Jenny's direction.

'She's following Alison around,' Benny Cunningham announced loudly, leaning her elbows on the dark wooden table. She pushed her long, stick-straight brown hair away from her horsey but pretty face. 'Where you from again, new meat?'

'Putney,' Chloe answered timidly. She picked an invisible piece of lint off her pale blue J.Crew cable-knit sweater. 'It's in Vermont.'

With her pale skin and wide innocent blue eyes, Chloe looked like Dakota Fanning. It was hard for Jenny to imagine being mean to Dakota Fanning. 'Vermont is really pretty,' she offered, hoping to make the younger girl feel more comfortable. Jenny knew what it felt like to be the awkward new girl at Waverly. She cringed, remembering how clueless Old Jenny had been when she first arrived several weeks ago. But New Jenny sat at the coolest table in the dining hall, went to crazy parties in burning barns, and kissed adorable boys under the moonlight. Take that, Old Jenny.

Suddenly a cheer echoed off the high, sloping ceilings of the dining hall, and Jenny turned to see Heath Ferro standing at a nearby table, his arms thrown up in triumph. Sunlight glinted off his artfully tousled dirty-blond hair, and cracker crumbs spewed out of his mouth. He'd obviously just completed the saltine challenge, a feat much

attempted in the Waverly dining hall: downing six of the super-dry crackers in less than a minute without drinking any water. Heath collected high fives from a group of guys gathered around him, including some prepubescent ones. Jenny noticed then that there were at least a dozen prospectives scattered at various tables, all staying close to their assigned Owls, like city tourists too afraid to stray more than a few paces from their guides.

‘So, did you hear the latest?’ Sage leaned forward in her chair, her aqua blue eyes shining. She pulled up the sleeves of her Elie Tahari midnight blue tunic sweater, as if spreading gossip would entail getting her hands dirty.

‘What?’ Jenny asked as she forked a piece of pancake and swished it through a puddle of pure New England maple syrup. She wore her favorite Earl jeans and a black turtleneck from the Gap that she’d had since eighth grade. She was underdressed compared to Sage and Benny, but that was only because girls at Waverly used almost any activity as an excuse for a fashion show.

‘They found a lighter in the barn.’ Benny grinned mischievously. Her white teeth matched her white Vince double-gauze tee, making her look like an advertisement for Crest Whitestrips. Though given her multimillion-dollar trust fund, it was probably due to professional whitening. ‘It had a student’s initials on it. Julian McCafferty’s.’

Jenny put the forkful of pancake down on her plate.  
*Julian?*

‘I heard it was some guys from St. Lucius,’ Celine said in a half whisper, leaning forward and tucking a lock of black hair behind her ear. ‘But I also heard it was that skeezy Dan guy, Heath’s liquor store connection?’ She ran her tongue across her front teeth, finally dislodging the spinach from her omelet that had been stuck there the whole meal. ‘Oh, and Simone said it was some townie pyro who didn’t get into Waverly.’

‘Juicy,’ Alison chimed in. She took a sip of her orange juice, seemingly unfazed by the idea that there might be a jealous Rhinecliff local lashing out at Waverly students.

‘I heard there were some people *smoking* in the barn,’ Chloe piped up helpfully. She stabbed at a slice of French toast.

‘Where did you hear that?’ Jenny managed to ask. Last night, she’d confronted Callie about the fact that she and Easy had been smoking in the barn right before it went up in flames, but she wasn’t sure anyone else knew. Callie had retorted that *Jenny* probably set the barn on fire out of jealousy. She knew Callie was just being defensive and melodramatic, but she was still angry about it. If the rest of Waverly found out that Callie and Easy had been smoking in the barn – well, Jenny wasn’t going to stop *that* rumor from spreading. She honestly wouldn’t be sorry to see them go. It would serve them right for being such . . . horny *jerks*.

‘Yeah. And *who* was smoking?’ Benny demanded,

looking at Chloe with interest for the first time. 'You've only been here like an hour. How would you even know?'

'I just heard it.' Chloe shrugged, seemingly unfazed by the elder girl's aggressive stare. 'I can't remember where.' She looked around the dining hall and then added, 'Is there powdered sugar anywhere?'

Jenny didn't know why she'd been worried about Chloe. She was going to be fine.

'I heard it was Easy and Callie,' Sage offered quietly, pushing her tray of half-eaten food toward the center of the table. She pulled her flaxen hair back into a loose ponytail. 'We all saw them coming from the barn . . . and you know they both smoke.' She shrugged, leaving everyone else to put the pieces together.

'Who smokes?' Ryan Reynolds demanded as he crashed his heavily laden tray down on their table, his full Coke glass sloshing onto his plate of food. Jenny recoiled. Soda at breakfast? Gross. He scooted the chair closer to Sage and perched his head on his hand, waiting for her to continue.

'Uh, me.' Sage's pale cheeks turned pink. 'And, like, half the campus.'

'Tell me something I don't know.' Ryan tried to grab a piece of Sage's long, butter-blond hair, but she squealed and squirmed out of his reach. 'Has anybody seen Callie this morning?' he asked. Jenny looked at Ryan curiously,

trying to figure out what was different about him this morning. He looked . . . more responsible, somehow, which was the last word that usually came to mind when describing Ryan Reynolds. She quickly realized it was because she'd never seen him wear glasses before. Given that his dad invented soft contact lenses, he was probably never in short supply of those. 'I need to copy her Latin homework.'

'Stables,' Benny replied instantly, shoveling a mouthful of bacon. 'With Eaaassssyyyyy.'

'What would they be doing in a stable?' Chloe asked innocently.

Benny and Celine laughed knowingly. 'Rolling and jumping in the hay!' Celine snorted gleefully. She took off her Waverly field hockey zip-up sweatshirt, revealing a tight black T-shirt underneath, and Ryan immediately stole a sideways glance at her chest.

'Let's hope they don't set it on fire, too.' Sage laughed. Chloe looked perplexed but didn't say anything, lowering her eyes to her French toast instead.

Jenny stood up from the table and mumbled something about an upset stomach, her fluffy pancakes practically untouched. She grabbed her cell and headed for the door.

Five minutes later, she stood on the gray stone steps of the dining hall, waiting for Julian. As soon as she'd gotten up from the table she'd texted him, asking him to meet her. If he was in trouble, she needed to warn him right away.

And of course, she didn't exactly mind having an excuse to see him again.

Rumors about the fire swirled around her head. Could Dan the Liquor Man really have had anything to do with it, besides supplying a bunch of rowdy kids with booze? Was it possible some crazy townie hated Waverly kids enough to try to set them on fire? And what was Julian's lighter doing in the barn? He'd lost it, hadn't he? She thought she remembered him saying something about losing it . . . and he couldn't really have started the fire, because he'd been with *her*, kissing her so sweetly outside the barn and making her forget all about Easy and Callie and what she'd just seen. Another thought occurred to Jenny then: *Could* Easy and Callie have started it? She pictured them lying together in the hay, laughing and smoking and being careless as ever. They might have been careless about *her* feelings, but surely they weren't arsonists. Just liars. She shook her head, her brunette curls swinging like thick vines. No matter how hard she tried to shake the thought away, Jenny kept coming to the same conclusion: She was just a blip on Easy's radar, a distraction in between breaking up with Callie and getting back together with her.

'Hi.'

She spun around to see Julian's grinning face. He tugged the zipper of his faded gray Everlast hoodie up to his chin.

'Hey,' Jenny replied, a wave of pleasure washing over

her at the sight of the tall, shaggy-haired freshman. She took a step toward him and craned her neck to look into his warm brown eyes. She wanted to kick herself for wearing her flat navy Keds with the little butterflies on them. If she was going to spend more time with Julian in the future, she'd need to wear her tallest Michael Kors wedges.

'Did you eat already?' He hopped off the last step and landed with a thud in front of her. His shaggy brown-blond hair fluttered around his face. He looked like a golden retriever who'd found his tennis ball. But in a hot-boy sort of way.

'Yeah,' Jenny lied. After hearing all those rumors, eating had been out of the question. Even now, her stomach was still doing somersaults – but in a different way now.

'Wanna go up Hopkins Hill?' Julian asked, nodding toward the bluffs behind her. She wondered if he was thinking about their kiss last night, too. He *had* to be thinking about it, right?

'Let's go,' she replied gamely.

They started up the path through the woods to the bluffs. The crash of plates in the dining hall kitchen was slowly replaced by the chirping of birds and the soft, wind-in-the-forest sounds Jenny was still getting used to after spending her entire life in New York City. The soles of their sneakers padded against the dry leaves on the path.

They reached a small clearing, and Julian came to a stop. His soft brown eyes landed on her lips, and Jenny blushed.

Was he going to kiss her again? she wondered. 'Did you and Callie talk?'

Jenny felt her face grow hot at the memory of confronting Callie last night. She'd been furious – not that Callie and Easy were together again, but that Callie had lied to her about it and pretended they were all buddy-buddy. Really, she and Easy were probably laughing at her while they snuggled naked in the barn and smoked cigarettes and set the whole place on fire. 'Yeah, sort of. I mean, I don't really know.'

'It's cool.' Julian crouched down, plucked a brilliant red oak leaf from the path, and held it out to Jenny as if it were a flower. She giggled and took the leaf from him, letting her hand brush against his. 'You don't have to go into it. I just wondered if you guys figured it out.' He shrugged his sloping shoulders gently and Jenny noticed he was wearing a very familiar outfit: black Tretorns, dark-wash True Religion jeans with fist-size holes in the knees, and a black T-shirt underneath his hoodie.

'Have you been up all night?' she asked.

He rubbed his hand against the back of his neck, kicking his toes against the dirt path. 'Do I smell?' He lowered his voice a little, as if someone might overhear.

'No.' She giggled. He actually smelled kind of nice, like pine trees. Or maybe it was just because they were in the woods. 'But you're wearing the same clothes as last night.'

'Yeah, I actually walked home.' Julian hitched up the sagging waist of his jeans. His boxers were light green with tiny white sheep printed on them. Jenny blushed at the sight of them. 'There's a shortcut through the gulley behind the Miller farm,' he explained.

'Oh,' she said simply, as if that explained it. Walking around all night by yourself? Boys were so weird. When she'd been with Easy, he'd painted in his special spot deep in the woods. And back home, whenever she'd walk through Sheep Meadow, it was littered with boys smoking joints and communing with the closest thing to nature New York could provide. Or maybe they just wanted to get buzzed. Jenny leaned against a mossy tree trunk, trying to act casual under Julian's steady gaze. She didn't care if she was getting her clothes a little dirty. He was worth it.

His eyes traced her lips. 'The whole sky was lit red and white and blue from the lights on the police cars and fire trucks,' he added. 'It was actually sort of cool.' Jenny smiled at his boyish enthusiasm. She loved the idea of him taking off on a whim, making his way through the woods in the dead of night, replaying their kiss in his mind as he walked.

'Julian,' she began, 'have you seen your lighter recently?'

A strange look crossed his face. She could tell he'd already heard it had been found.

'You can just tell Dean Marymount you lost it,' she went

on. When she first saw him that night in Dumbarton – hiding in the broom closet – he'd been looking for his Zippo. At least, that's what he'd said. 'If you tell them the truth, there's no way you'll get kicked out.'

Julian just shrugged and stared at something over Jenny's head. She hoped a tarantula wasn't crawling down the tree, about to make a nest in her curls. 'I'm not too worried,' he finally answered. He took a step closer to Jenny, planting his hands against the tree trunk on either side of her so that she was trapped. Not that she minded. 'I've got the cutest alibi on campus.' A grin curled the sides of his mouth.

Jenny immediately lost her train of thought, distracted again by the memory of their lips pressed together, alone in the dark. And a moment later, it was more than just a memory.



OwlNet

Email Inbox

**From:** DeanMarymount@waverly.edu  
**To:** Waverly Academy  
**Date:** Saturday, October 12, 10:15 A.M.  
**Subject:** Prospective Students

Dear Students, Faculty, and Staff,

As you're probably aware, we have a number of prospective students visiting our campus this weekend. These visits are an important chance for prospective students to get a taste for Waverly Academy, and I trust everyone has been making the prospectives feel welcome. Thank you to all those Owls who have graciously taken on the role of host. Prospectives will be on campus until Wednesday in order to sit in on two full days of classes, so please continue your hospitality for the duration of their stay.

A special formal dinner will take place Monday night in the dining hall in honor of the prospective students. Dress according to code.

I also trust that the behavior of students over the next few days will be more restrained than it has been in the past few weeks.

Best,

Dean Marymount