

Can You Hear Me?

The crowded hallway was swarming with voices, all uniting into one loud hum. Entangled in the roar was the sound of lockers opening and closing and, every once in a while, a teacher yelling over the clamor. I was standing in front of my locker, taking another look at my new schedule for the second semester. I have a bad memory for schedules. I strained to see the words, my own shadow blocking most of the light.

Is she just going to stand there all day? An irritated voice rang through my head. I looked over my shoulder. Ashley Garland was standing behind me, eyes glowering behind mascara-coated lashes, recently glossed lips parted slightly in an impatient scowl. She was waiting to get into the locker next to mine. I knew she hadn't spoken out loud, but I had heard her nonetheless. I felt the blood rush to my cheeks as I closed my locker and stepped out of her way.

With an exaggerated sigh, she slipped past me. *Finally*, her voice murmured in my head.

It started a year ago, this whole "hearing what other people think about me" thing. At first it was interesting, being able to see behind each fake smile and insincere "How are you?" But soon it got depressing. I had always known that people could be cruel, but I had no idea they were a thousand times worse in their heads. Why hold back if you don't think anyone will find out?

I'm not a mind reader. I don't know anybody's deep, dark secrets. I can't go looking through people's memories. I only hear what others think when it's about me. And, trust me, knowing how people really see you – well, it hurts.

I walked to homeroom with my head down, hoping no one would notice me as I slid into an empty chair. No such luck.

Shy girl should do something with her hair. I recognized Jessica Lander's voice.

You should burn that jacket, fatty. That had to be Faith Palmer. *Hobos dress better than you.*

I tried to block out the voices. I told myself over and over – as I had many times before – that it was just human nature, an automatic response; everyone does it. It didn't help.

Why'd she have to sit here? I looked to my right. This voice was coming from the guy at the desk next to mine:

Josh Taylor. My eyes caught his. He looked away. *She's so awkward.*

Think of something else, I told myself. *Don't let them get to you. They don't know you can hear them.*

Anna looks like she's going to cry, I heard Matt Hammond scoff to himself. *That'd be hilarious.*

I slid down as far as I could in my chair and let my hair fall over my face. I wouldn't let them have the pleasure of seeing me fight back the hot flood threatening to fall from my eyes. No, I wouldn't give them that.

The rest of the day passed in pieces. Sometimes it felt as if time moved quickly. Sometimes it barely seemed to move at all. I was infuriated with myself. I had been dealing with this long enough that it shouldn't still hurt me. But every time I heard a voice in my head, I couldn't help but feel the sting. I didn't want to hear any of them ever again! What right did they have to judge me? I pulled myself up off the chair and to the door.

As I walked to my locker I fumbled furiously with my binder, checking my schedule one last time. So what was going to be my final torture of the day? Gym. My stomach twisted into a knot. Someone must really have had it in for me.

Dreading the locker room, the imminent mental remarks on my lack of coordination, the unsympathetic coach, I put away my books and slammed the locker. I felt numb as I walked to the gym. Each stride propelled me forward on stiff, quickly moving legs. Everyone I passed was a blur. Every voice in my head was just background noise. I had finally snapped.

I can't remember what I was thinking when I got to the gym doors. I doubt I was thinking at all, which is probably why I walked right into them. My body slammed against the heavy metal and the force sent me reeling back. Next thing I knew, I was on the floor, my head spinning. I should have remembered they were pull doors.

I was jolted out of my zombie-like trance. I could hear people laughing all around me. I was immediately bombarded by their thoughts. It was a cascade of voices. Some were a little concerned; most were hurtful.

I closed my eyes and everything went silent. I was free. No voices, no laughter, no staring eyes. Nothing. I let myself get swept away in it. So this was what it was like not to care? It felt like I was sleeping for the first time in

my life. I was at peace.

"Hey, are you all right?" The voice sounded so far away. Someone was shaking my shoulder. "Somebody get the nurse." I couldn't tell if the voice was out loud or in my head. I forced myself to look. A pair of nervous brown eyes slowly came into focus. Dark hair dangled around his face – a face that looked at me without scorn, without sneering, just looking, seeing me. "Can you hear me?"

I nodded, sending a jolt of pain through my skull and down my neck. I winced.

"Don't move," he said. "I think you hit your head." His eyes flitted around my face. "The nurse is coming."

"It hurts." My voice sounded pathetic.

"You might have a concussion," he said. I agreed. My thoughts felt muddy. It was as if I were a little girl again – scared, confused. Through the mire of my mind a thought began to form: I didn't know what he was thinking.

My tongue betrayed my thoughts before I could stop it. "Why aren't you thinking something bad about me?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You don't think a concussion is bad?" he asked with a little chuckle. There was something in his eyes – maybe I was imagining it, but it looked like he was figuring something out.

People were staring at me, looking anxious and concerned. They must have been thinking about me, but I couldn't hear them. A wave of relief melted over me. The voices were gone!

I looked back at the brown eyes. He looked so concerned. No one had ever looked at me like that. I wanted to thank him. He made me glad that my heart hadn't stopped. I felt silly, considering I had never met him before, but I decided that he was my personal angel.

He looked up. The nurse had arrived. "An ambulance is coming," she said. "Everyone, go to your classes, please."

The boy looked down at me, then up at the nurse, as if trying to decide what to do. Panic gripped my rattled brain. No! I didn't want him to ever go away. I needed him. He was the only one who had bothered to be nice; I couldn't lose him now. I grabbed his arm. "Don't leave," I said. I felt connected to him even if I didn't know anything about

him.

He smiled gently. "I won't."

"I'm Anna," I said, glad that I could remember my name.

"Ryan."

While the nurse was busy checking if I was all right, I couldn't take my eyes off Ryan. His deep brown eyes locked with mine and for a moment I wished I could hear his thoughts. Just maybe for a minute. The way he looked at me – it was as if he was asking me something.

I heard sirens approaching.

Can you hear me, Anna? The gentle voice echoed in my head, taking me by surprise. It was his. Was it a memory or was I really hearing him?

Yes, I can hear you, I thought. *If it is you.*

A slow, gorgeous smile crept across his face. *I knew you could.*