
THE BRIGHT LIGHTS



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THE BRIGHT LIGHTS

First edition. December 22, 2021.

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Written by Christy Brown.

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Chapter 1

The sun crept through the shades of my window as long fingers of a fictional villain coming to wake me from my dream. I never wanted to wake from the wonderful dream that revolved around him but then, all my dreams revolved around him these days. I wrapped the fluffy purple comforter around my body and pulled it up over my eyes as a shield to remain in a dreamlike state. The plan didn't work and my cell phone alarm swooped in like the villain's accomplice to ensure I woke up. Hearing the buzzing of the alarm annoyed me enough to get out of bed. The charging cord kept it from falling off the old, rickety table shoved between the wall and the bed that took the place of a nightstand. I reached over and cut the alarm off, sitting up on the edge of the bed. Still fighting the urge to turn over and wrap up in a cocoon of blankets, I hung my legs over the side of the bed and stretched.

Today I couldn't ignore my alarm and miss my opportunity to make myself presentable. Ever since freshman year, I dreamed of this morning. Today marked the first day of my senior year of high school. I needed the extra time to put on makeup and curl my hair, things I hadn't done all summer long. I even hung up my clothes on my closet door so they would be ready to go this morning. A first day was a fresh opportunity to make a new impression, albeit, on the same kids I had gone to school with for the last three years. Today, every moment counted.

"Allie, time to wake up," my mom said as she knocked on the outside of my bedroom door, a third reminder to get my butt out of bed. The lazy days of summer had ended and my new routine of waking up before seven had begun.

"I'm up, I'm up," I grumbled.

"You don't want to be late on your first day," she reminded me, her voice echoing into my room.

Begrudgingly, I pulled back the purple comforter that had been on my bed since middle school. In sixth grade, my mom allowed me to redecorate my room. I went from a pink ballerina theme to a more sophisticated purple palate. My room still looked the same. Except for the Robert Pattinson and Taylor Lautner posters, I removed those. Back then, my world revolved around twilight and I covered my walls in Team Edward paraphernalia. Jacob filled a small section. But my heart belonged to Edward Cullen and I

had the posters to prove it. A few remained taped inside my closet. I would always be Team Edward.

A couple of years ago, my school switched to mandatory uniforms, making my first-day outfit easy to pick out. The night before, I had grabbed a navy blue pleated skirt, a white polo and navy knee-high socks from the dresser drawer. Uniforms required no planning because everything matched. Our school allowed navy blue, khaki, baby pink or white. With few options, the colors complimented each other even if you got dressed in the dark. With the dress code, I never worried about impressing anyone with labels, brands or an expensive wardrobe but, as with any rule, a group of students hated the constricted choices, accusing the principal of manipulating their ability to express their true selves through their clothing. Uniforms did what they said; they made everyone uniform.

After getting dressed, I knocked on the door to the Jack and Jill bathroom that separated my room from my brother, Auggie's. When no one answered, I opened the door and found the bathroom empty. I breathed a sigh of relief. I needed space to get ready for our first day. He would solicit unwarranted judgments over the amount of makeup I wore or accuse me of using too many products or styling tools. I preferred silence over the comments from the peanut gallery.

My hip rested against the counter as I placed my legs in a flamingo pose. I brushed my teeth, washed my face and put on a light coating of makeup. My staples these days had been powder, blush, mascara and lip gloss but I've been toying around with a little eyeliner just to make my eyes pop. Every year I tried enhancing my look. This year I no longer wanted the other kids to see the freckled-faced kid everyone remembered. This year, I wanted everyone to see me as a more mature version of myself.

As I applied a light coating of powder, I stared at my face in the large mirror spanning the entire length of the bathroom. Luckily, we had two sinks and I didn't have to share. Water stains splattered across Auggie's side of the mirror as a disgusting mess of caked-on toothpaste covered his sink. It had been years since he'd cleaned his side of the bathroom. My mom grew tired of being our housekeeper and the old chore chart became irrelevant when she stopped doling out an allowance.

The unflattering fluorescent lighting did nothing for my appearance. The girl reflected in the mirror had pale skin without a hint of sun to her face. Even though I spent an entire summer at a country club pool as a

lifeguard, my skin complexion remained a creamy milk color. A soft shade of bronzer faked a soft glow, so kids would know I spent my summer in the sunshine. It also helped camouflage the freckles spanning from cheek to cheek. My Irish father boasted plenty of wonderful traits but sharing his complexion didn't bode well in a state known for its sunshine. After years in the sun, my dad's skin looked to be one giant freckle but my mom made sure I applied generous amounts of sunscreen to avoid the brown spots. Besides his complexion, we had the same shade of golden-brown hair. Mine hung in long waves below my shoulder blades, the way he used to wear it in his younger days.

The purple tube of brown mascara I bought from the convenience store two years ago still worked wonders with my eyelashes. In an interview, Beyoncé once claimed old mascara made the best mascara. When she spoke, I listened, so I used the dried-up wand to apply a light coat to my green eyes, another trait I inherited from my dad. I wrapped my hair in a trendy knot headband, the one accessory allowed to individualize our uniforms. By the time I finished, Auggie had rolled out of bed and started pounding on the door.

"Allie, open up," he growled. "I have to pee."

"Hold on," I snapped, as I put my makeup away. When he came in, he would kick me out.

"Seriously," he shouted, pounding louder. "I have to go."

As I unlocked the door, he pushed past me to the water closet without acknowledging me. "You're welcome," I yelled as I exited into my room to gather my things. Even after years of early morning football practices, he hated mornings.

As fraternal twins, we looked nothing alike. Most kids didn't recognize us as siblings, let alone twins. Auggie has bright blonde hair, arctic blue eyes, as my mom describes them and stands a foot taller than me. Ever since high school, he grew at least two inches every year, getting taller by the minute, while I mirrored my mom's height and hadn't grown an inch in four years.

Auggie spent most of the summer in a training facility preparing for football yet he looked as though he spent his summer by the pool. He had a nice sun-kissed glow year-round, which always made me jealous. The sun loved him, gifting him with a gorgeous tanned complexion while it hated me and reprimanded me for sitting outside. Even the sun made me feel

inferior to my twin brother. Not only did everyone love him but he held a superstar status around our high school.

As the quarterback for Orange Grove High School, I spent the last three years hearing everyone singing his praise. My mom drank the Kool-Aid and echoed his star treatment at home. In my house, my name might as well have been Cinderallie. Auggie didn't lift a finger during football season because it might affect his playing abilities, while I picked up his slack. My mom would never admit to treating us differently but her words and actions contradicted each other.

Our bedrooms ran along the front of the house. There was also a den and formal dining room we hadn't used since Thanksgiving dinner six years ago, before my parent's divorce. A long hallway connected the front and back of the house and my mom filled it with photos of me and Auggie through the years. The images acted as a constant reminder of my awkward phase, including braces and glasses that lasted longer than I would have liked. Before my metal braces, I had to wear a torture chamber called headgear. The number of horrible nicknames I accumulated during that time left a large scar over my self-esteem. The photos made me twitch and reminded me of a traumatizing period in my life. My mom called them memories and refused to take them down, in part because her superstar son looked "handsome" in them—her words, not mine.

When my parents split seven years ago, my dad moved out and allowed my mom to keep the house so my brother and I wouldn't have to move. My mom kept saying, "Just because we can't get along doesn't mean we should displace our kids." We were only ten at the time and it broke me to watch my dad move out of our home. When he left, a void appeared in the house. No matter how much new furniture my mom bought, his memory remained. She didn't come out and say she replaced the furniture for that reason but my brother and I figured it out. She wanted to replace everything he had once sat on.

"Ready for your first day of school?" Mom asked. She stood in her usual pose at the counter. "I can't believe it's senior year. I might cry."

"Please don't," I said dryly. I threw my backpack on a barstool at the center island. "I'm as ready as I can be," I stated, my voice lacking enthusiasm.

"Well, this will be your best year yet," she replied. She repeated the phrase every year and every year I rolled my eyes.

I replied with my standard, “Maybe.” Though this year, I had optimism. For one, I wouldn’t get a repeat year, so it had to be good. For another, I had my first boyfriend.

“Was your brother up?” she asked, sounding frustrated. “I knocked on his door at least five times trying to get him up. I heard him playing video games late into the night. He knows summer is over and so are his nights of staying up late.”

“Yeah, I saw him in the bathroom,” I replied, remembering how he knocked me over. I also heard him on the phone with Madison, his girlfriend, when I fell asleep around eleven but I didn’t dare tell my mom. She seemed annoyed enough with her superstar. “He seems to be in one of his famous moods.”

“OK, well, at least he is up,” she said, going back to making our lunches and packing them in a brown paper sack. She bought reusable lunch bags a couple years ago but Auggie refused to use them. He claimed a lunch box made him look to be a third-grader. I preferred to use reusable bags to help the environment but Auggie made such a big deal out of it, she packed mine in a brown sack as well.

“Bye, Mom,” I announced, grabbing the lunch and my backpack as I headed toward the front hallway.

“Wait, aren’t you riding with Auggie this morning?” she asked, looking confused. When the two of us turned sixteen, my parents came together and they bought us a car to share. It hadn’t been the easiest to share a vehicle with Auggie, so I let him have it and I typically hitched rides with my best friend. The white Honda Accord fit my style but Auggie wished they had bought us an Audi, BMW or Range Rover. He couldn’t show off a Honda with his friends, who all drove the same car. I didn’t care about the make or model. The car had four wheels and it blended in with all the other Hondas and Toyotas in our school parking lot.

“No, Auggie can take the car,” I said. “Ellis is going to drop me off.” My cheeks flushed in anticipation. Other than my brother, he would be the first boy to drive me to school. It would be a banner year.

“OK,” she said, looking disappointed. “I hoped to get a photo of the two of you. It’s your senior year. That’s a big deal.” She had taken a first-day photo every year since pre-school. Most of those pictures lined the hallway by our bedrooms.

“Mom,” I announced as my purse buzzed, notifying me that Ellis arrived. “Can you just take a photo of us separately? I have to go.”

“Allie, please,” she said, her face riddled with disappointment. She mapped out our senior photos, even picking out a frame to hang with all the others.

“Mom, no,” I groaned.

Auggie and I had grown apart over the years. We loved each other but when we entered high school, Auggie started playing football and hanging out with the popular crowd. He dropped his friends from elementary school, stating he’d moved on. It rubbed me the wrong way and highlighted his lack of remorse. We barely spoke either, outside of the grunts and groans he made when we passed each other in the bathroom. At least I had Abbey, my best friend since pre-school. She would never leave me for the “in” crowd. In fact, we had a pact to be best friends until we are old and grey, sitting on a front porch together, gossiping about the ladies from our knitting circle or bingo club.

Mom grabbed a quick photo of me in front of the fireplace, my choice of backdrop because I didn’t want Ellis to watch my photoshoot. She made me hold up an embarrassing sign with my name, age, date and year. Then she would hand me the piece of chalk and make me write my career choice. This year I filled in “artist.”

Around the age of six, I outgrew my desire to become a princess. My mom also crushed my spirit and informed me the career didn’t exist unless I lived in the UK and became Kate Middleton. From then on, I used artist as a standard answer. The two careers landed on opposite ends of the spectrum. One came with wealth and status and the other guaranteed I would struggle as I defended my paintings. I would have to live off three jobs to afford my passion projects but art made me happy. In my mind, a life of struggle equaled happiness.

“Can you shift toward the center of the fireplace?” She motioned as a director. In our seventeen years in this house, we never built a fire in the stucco fireplace anchoring the living room. Instead, we used it to hang Christmas stockings during the holidays or as a backdrop for formal photos. The Florida winters brought a few chilly nights each year but it was a lot of work to start a roaring fire for one cozy night. Plus, my mom and I preferred cozying up on the couch with the fake fire on the television screen.

“Is this better?” I asked, shuffling to a spot that appeared centered.

“Close enough,” she said, in a tone that gave off a clear *no*. door.

To appease her, I smiled pretty before prancing to the “Have a great first day,” she called. Her lower lip quivered, the telltale sign she was about to cry.

“Thanks, Mom,” I added, before she could rope me in for any more photos.

“Love you,” she called out.

The humidity slapped me in the face as I stepped outside. We lived in a suburb of Orlando and lacked an ocean breeze to dissipate the thick humidity looming in the air on most days. The morning dew glistened off the tall blades of the thick Florida grass. As the man of the family, my brother took care of the grass but we entered football season, which meant he could slack off.

Excitement built as I saw my driver, in the black Audi Sport, waiting at the edge of the driveway. My mom followed me out to the front porch and waved goodbye along with shouting “stay safe,” leaving me wondering if it was a double *entendré*. She approved of Ellis but would rather watch her two kids drive off together on our first day of senior year; instead of watching me hitch a ride with my boyfriend.

“Good morning,” I sang as I opened the passenger door and slid into the clean black interior. The leather seat felt as butter on my legs and his cologne—a light, crisp scent—filled my nose, drawing me into the car. He smelled good. I wished to wrap his scent around me as a blanket or bottle it into a spray.

“Hi,” he responded, his deep baritone voice matched his large physique. Ellis wore a smile, showing off his beautiful, straight teeth, the successful outcome of years of braces. A pair of Aviators hid his light green eyes and showed my reflection in the mirrored lenses. I much preferred looking into his eyes than seeing my own but could sense his eyes on me. The car reversed as he backed out of the driveway in one smooth motion.

When out of my mom’s sight, he pulled off to the side of the road at the end of the block. Just as I was about to ask, he placed his hand behind my neck and drew me in for a kiss. This year already started off as the best year yet.

“Good morning,” he responded with a smile.

“Good morning,” I repeated as emoji hearts floated around my eyes. I kept my left hand on the nape of his neck, stroking the short hair he wore in a faux hawk. “I’ve missed you.”

Ellis played football for his school and we hadn’t seen each other much over the last week because of his intense practice schedule. With the season gearing up, he had double practices every day leading up to the school year. Today would be his only chance to drive me to school.

“I’ve missed you too,” he stated, taking my hand and kissing my knuckles, the sweet gesture that became our thing.

Even though we had this conversation before, today, the topic had more impact. Over the summer, we lived in our own little bubble and today that bubble popped as we headed off to two different high schools.

Ellis lived in a town called Windermere and I lived in Winter Garden. Although they were located right next to each other, the two towns were very different. Windermere was composed of old money mixed with new money, with gigantic mansions sitting on lakefront properties and celebrities flocking to live behind the golden gates of some of the wealthiest communities in Florida. The Windermere 34786 zip code provided its residents with a level of prestige that Winter Garden’s 34787 couldn’t match, much to my mother’s disappointment.

Winter Garden was an established community where people came to start a family. It had cookie-cutter subdivisions around every bend, a Target anchoring the large shopping district and parks where little kids played. People called it the ideal place to grow up. The sun shined year-round and theme parks outlined the perimeter. Our small single-story stucco home had enough bedrooms for the three of us and was located in an average neighborhood. It bore nothing fancy, with five repeated house layouts all painted with a different shade of beige. The builder bundled the same landscaping package into each that included one palm tree, one maple tree and a few dozen yellow banana bushes.

A comfortable silence filled the air as Ellis pulled out onto the main road. I loved how we didn’t need to fill every second with conversation. Most of our relationship revolved around music, so as he held my hand and kissed my knuckles, I hummed along with a Queen song that played through the car.

Chapter 2

My high school touted the bland architecture that could transport you back a few decades. The parking lot filled up with Toyotas and Hondas peppered in with some older vehicles parents bought their child as a starter car. As seniors, we received an assigned parking spot we got to paint over the summer. Because Auggie and I shared a car, we had to share a parking spot and the two of us fought over the design. Of course, he wanted an obvious sports theme, preferably highlighting the Florida Gators, his dream school. As the family artist, my artistic ability won the battle and I painted it over the summer. I tried to incorporate both of us in the design but he drove more than me because of football practice, so I leaned into his style. If he hated it, I would hear the grumbles every day and I didn't want to fight over minor details. In the end, I mixed the Gators with lyrics from my favorite band. The song played at his football games when they captured a victory, so the two tied together.

"Are you nervous?" Ellis asked.

His voice startled me. I hadn't realized my people watching turned into a daydream. "No," I replied. "I'm excited for this year. We're at the top of the food chain."

Ellis laughed. "I've waited three years to say that."

"Me too," I agreed. "I'm excited about our senior status." "Is your locker near Abbey's?" he inquired. My best friend Abbey Greene had lifeguarded with us over the summer and she and Ellis had become friends.

"Yeah, we've had the same lockers since freshman year," I stated.

"Is Auggie near you too?" he asked. His question made my heart stop. It caught me off guard when he asked about my brother. We had been dating nearly three months but I hadn't introduced the two of them yet. My twin judged everything I did and surely my relationship would be no different. Ellis also played football for Chain of Lakes High School and I didn't want it to turn into a competition.

"No, Auggie is down the hallway with some buddies," I stated. His group of friends changed so much, I didn't even know their names. "Where is your locker located?" I asked, seeking to change the subject.

"Last year, we got upgraded to the quad," he announced, with a smile. "Now we have prime real estate, outside near the picnic tables."

“Score,” I responded, making a gesture with my elbow. It made me smile to see him get excited over little things, such as locker placement. It reminded me of Abbey, who celebrated the little things too, as a bonus fry in our take-out order. “Who is ‘we’?” I inquired. He hadn’t introduced me to his buddies yet. We spent the summer in our lifeguard bubble, hanging out with Abbey and a few lifeguards from the club but I hadn’t met his inner circle.

“Oh, just my football buddies,” he answered, brushing off the question. “I’ve told you a little about Chuck and Snoop, my teammates. We hang out on and off the field.”

“That’s cool,” I replied. Ellis mentioned those names before in conversation. Snoop seemed to be a derivative of his last name, such as Snoopwood or because he looked the same as Snoop Dog. Chuck had a red beard by the time he turned fifteen and resembled Chuck Norris. It made me laugh, imagining Abbey and me creating nicknames for each other.

“They are good guys,” he added.

“I’m sure they are,” I responded. Anyone friends with Ellis had to be good, just the same as him. “Can I meet them someday?” As I urged, I speculated if Ellis acted the same around his buddies as he did around me. My brother turned on jock mode around his friends, grunting, carrying a football and of course, chasing the cheerleaders. I couldn’t imagine Ellis acting one way around me and one way around his friends. It seemed out of character but then again, I hadn’t met his friends yet to compare.

“Of course, you can meet them,” he assured me, before kissing my knuckles again.

“Thank you for driving me,” I added. We crept closer to the front of the line so I gathered my things to make a quick exit. I knew how angry the car line parents became if you held up the line. I wanted to remain in Ellis’ car all day but those parents would scream obscenities if you didn’t move along.

“Anytime,” he responded before leaning over for one last kiss goodbye. “I’ll miss you.”

“I miss you already,” I said as I hopped out. As I flipped my bag around, I noticed a couple of football guys staring at me. My inner monologue told me they speculated over the mystery girl who stepped out of the fancy ride. Then I realized they stared past me to gawk at Ellis’ car and not the girl emerging from it. *Oh, well, at least my arrival had an*

audience, even though they were more intrigued by the Audi. “Bye,” I waved and blew him a kiss.

“Allie,” Ellis called out. He rolled down the passenger side window. “Come here.”

I didn’t even question it; my body floated off the curb to his window. When I got close enough, he pulled me in by the straps of my backpack and kissed me. The kiss felt to be a scene from a movie; the kind that happens at the end when the guy tells the girl he wants to be with her. This kiss was the kiss of all kisses; my knees almost gave out. I worried I might have to waddle to first period.

“Don’t forget me today,” he said, when he released my straps.

“Never,” I answered, my head spinning. “Text you later.”

It took a moment to gain my composure. “Bye,” I waved, as though someone had placed me in a slow-motion movie. That boy left me weak at the knees. I stumbled my way behind the guys who moved along once Ellis pulled away. We filtered into the stucco building that acted as the mouth of the campus, filtering everyone toward their respective buildings for first period.

As I walked inside, the central air conditioning system gave my body a chill. The scent of must and mold dominated the interior of the building. They renovated parts of the interior but no matter how many renovations the school underwent; they just slapped lipstick on a pig. It would never look new and shiny as the high school Windermere built a few years ago.

“Allie,” I heard, as I sauntered past the front office. Instantly, I recognized the singsong voice of my best friend, who rushed to catch up.

“Oh, thank God,” I announced, breathing a sigh of relief at her sight. We wore matching outfits, down to our knee socks.

“Twinning.” She laughed, as she showed off her best feature, her gorgeous wide smile. She got her braces taken off in the eighth grade and her looks changed overnight.

“Hi,” I squealed as we ran to each other and embraced in a hug.

The two of us met when we were four years old on a swing set. She was swinging all by herself and I wanted to swing too but so did a little boy. I ran faster than him to the swings. He started crying but I met my future best friend. The rest was history and it was quite the premonition of how our relationship would be. We always promised to never allow a boy to come between us. She supported me a hundred percent when my parents

divorced. She invited me over to sleepovers to avoid the emptiness of my house and I would never forget her kindness when I needed her the most.

“Ready to do this?” she asked, as we linked arms and headed to our corner.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I announced. We had already compared our schedules and we only had two classes together, both in the afternoon. We shared English lit and chemistry, two of my least favorite classes. Abbey found the unseen benefit and decided we could bring back the art of note writing.

“Did Ellis drop you off?” she asked, with a coy smile. “Yes,” I smirked, the kiss still lingering on my lips.

“I’m going to miss our summers sitting by the pool,” she remarked, daydreaming of the country club and a certain someone who swam laps every morning.

“More like, you’ll miss Aiden,” I retorted, as I jabbed her in the rib.

“I miss him already,” she declared, as though in despair. Abbey had a crush on a club member but she never worked up the courage to talk to him past the morning pleasantries. We found his name, Aiden Ainsley, from the sign-in sheet at the front office but other than that, he remained a mystery. Neither of us had seen him at Orange Grove, so we assumed he went to Chain of Lakes. We asked Ellis but he didn’t recognize the name either. Our schools were a thousand students each, so it was likely he slipped through the cracks.

“I still can’t believe you never said ‘hi’ to him,” I added. “Even on our last day as lifeguards.”

“I’m kicking myself,” she groaned.

Abbey had a hard time talking to boys. The last boy she liked broke her heart and she never fully healed from the heartache. At the pool, she hid behind her sunglasses up on the lifeguard stand but spent more time thinking about the cute guy swimming below.

“We’ll find him,” I said, trying to convince her we would find the needle in the haystack. “I promise.”

“Eh, it’s OK,” she responded, brushing it off.

“Did you ever wonder if he came to the pool every day to see you?” I urged.

“I doubt it,” she scoffed.

“I guarantee he came to see you,” I suggested. “He came every morning to swim in an empty pool to have your full attention. Well, him and Mr. Gellar.” I laughed. Aiden and Mr. Gellar were sixty years apart yet Mr. Gellar gave Aiden a run for his money. “Maybe he was shy and used the lap pool as an excuse for seeing you.”

“I doubt it,” she repeated. She played it off but her eyes showed her sadness.

“Let’s think positive,” I suggested.

“That’s easy for you to say with your gorgeous boyfriend,” she declared, with a doubtful smile.

“He is pretty handsome, isn’t he,” I stated. Abbey was right; Ellis was gorgeous and I spent the summer wondering why he chose me as his girlfriend. He had the personality to land any girl on the planet and somehow he chose me. He always looked me in the eye when he spoke to me and put his phone down when we were together. Most kids were too busy with their heads in their phones to have a genuine conversation. With me, he was more than just a football player. He painted and we liked music, bonding over our love of musicians, such as Queen and Meatloaf and all the sounds of the 70s and 80s.

His mother passed away a few years ago after a battle with cancer. Because of this, he kept his family life relatively private. I could tell it was to avoid bringing up memories of his mom, which pained him; however, I had met his younger brother a handful of times at the pool over the summer. Ellis was bi-racial and his looks reflected his black father and white mother. He said he looked more as his dad than his mom, with his tall, muscular build and dark curly hair worn in a faux hawk style but he got his mom’s facial features and her light green eyes.

“A total stud,” she echoed. We reached our lockers in the dark corner of the second floor and unloaded our backpacks.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find your man,” I repeated, trying to comfort Abbey. She would lose sleep over the small things. Based on the dark circles beneath her eyes, I wondered if thoughts of Aiden kept her up all night. Even though she looked unsure, I made it my mission to find her man, even if it took me all year. I didn’t want to be alone in the boyfriend experience. This had to be the year we both got a boyfriend.

“Thanks,” she stated, slamming her door. She was over this conversation.

The hallways buzzed with students. Some upperclassmen walked with confidence, while other obvious freshmen students looked timid as they walked the halls with their eyes on alert. We linked arms, joining the sea of kids who flooded the center of the hall on their way to class.

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