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**UGLIES**

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# UGLIES

SCOTT WESTERFELD

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*This novel was shaped by a series of e-mail exchanges  
between myself and Ted Chiang about his story  
“Liking What You See: A Documentary.” His input on  
the manuscript was also invaluable.*



# Part I

## TURNING PRETTY

Is it not good to make society full  
of beautiful people?  
—Yang Yuan, quoted in the *New York Times*





# NEW PRETTY TOWN

The early summer sky was the color of cat vomit.

Of course, Tally thought, you'd have to feed your cat only salmon-flavored cat food for a while, to get the pinks right. The scudding clouds did look a bit fishy, rippled into scales by a high-altitude wind. As the light faded, deep blue gaps of night peered through like an upside-down ocean, bottomless and cold.

Any other summer, a sunset like this would have been beautiful. But nothing had been beautiful since Peris turned pretty. Losing your best friend sucks, even if it's only for three months and two days.

Tally Youngblood was waiting for darkness.

She could see New Pretty Town through her open window. The

party towers were already lit up, and snakes of burning torches marked flickering pathways through the pleasure gardens. A few hot-air balloons pulled at their tethers against the darkening pink sky, their passengers shooting safety fireworks at other balloons and passing parasailers. Laughter and music skipped across the water like rocks thrown with just the right spin, their edges just as sharp against Tally's nerves.

Around the outskirts of the city, cut off from town by the black oval of the river, everything was in darkness. Everyone ugly was in bed by now.

Tally took off her interface ring and said, "Good night."

"Sweet dreams, Tally," said the room.

She chewed up a toothbrush pill, punched her pillows, and shoved an old portable heater—one that produced about as much warmth as a sleeping, Tally-size human being—under the covers.

Then she crawled out the window.

Outside, with the night finally turning coal black above her head, Tally instantly felt better. Maybe this was a stupid plan, but anything was better than another night awake in bed feeling sorry for herself. On the familiar leafy path down to the water's edge, it was easy to imagine Peris stealing silently behind her, stifling laughter, ready for a night of spying on the new pretties. Together. She and Peris had figured out how to trick the house minder back when they were twelve, when the three-month difference in their ages seemed like it would never matter.

"Best friends for life," Tally muttered, fingering the tiny scar on her right palm.

The water glistened through the trees, and she could hear the wavelets of a passing river skimmer's wake slapping at the shore. She ducked, hiding in the reeds. Summer was always the best time for spying expeditions. The grass was high, it was never cold, and you didn't have to stay awake through school the next day.

Of course, Peris could sleep as late as he wanted now. Just one of the advantages of being pretty.

The old bridge stretched massively across the water, its huge iron frame as black as the sky. It had been built so long ago that it held up its own weight, without any support from hoverstruts. A million years from now, when the rest of the city had crumbled, the bridge would probably remain like a fossilized bone.

Unlike the other bridges into New Pretty Town, the old bridge couldn't talk—or report trespassers, more importantly. But even silent, the bridge had always seemed very wise to Tally, as quietly knowing as some ancient tree.

Her eyes were fully adjusted to the darkness now, and it took only seconds to find the fishing line tied to its usual rock. She yanked it, and heard the splash of the rope tumbling from where it had been hidden among the bridge supports. She kept pulling until the invisible fishing line turned into wet, knotted cord. The other end was still tied to the iron framework of the bridge. Tally pulled the rope taut and lashed it to the usual tree.

She had to duck into the grass once more as another river skimmer passed. The people dancing on its deck didn't spot the rope stretched from bridge to shore. They never did. New pretties were always having too much fun to notice little things out of place.

When the skimmer's lights had faded, Tally tested the rope with her whole weight. One time it had pulled loose from the tree, and both she and Peris had swung downward, then up and out over the middle of the river before falling off, tumbling into the cold water. She smiled at the memory, realizing she would rather be on that expedition—soaking wet in the cold with Peris—than dry and warm tonight, but alone.

Hanging upside down, hands and knees clutching the knots along the rope, Tally pulled herself up into the dark framework of the bridge, then stole through its iron skeleton and across to New Pretty Town.

She knew where Peris lived from the one message he had bothered to send since turning pretty. Peris hadn't given an address, but Tally knew the trick for decoding the random-looking numbers at the bottom of a ping. They led to someplace called Garbo Mansion in the hilly part of town.

Getting there was going to be tricky. In their expeditions, Tally and Peris had always stuck to the waterfront, where vegetation and the dark backdrop of Uglyville made it easy to hide. But now Tally was headed into the center of the island, where floats and revelers populated the bright streets all night. Brand-new pretties like Peris always lived where the fun was most frantic.

Tally had memorized the map, but if she made one wrong turn, she was toast. Without her interface ring, she was invisible to vehicles. They'd just run her down like she was nothing.

Of course, Tally *was* nothing here.

Worse, she was ugly. But she hoped Peris wouldn't see it that way. Wouldn't see *her* that way.

Tally had no idea what would happen if she got caught. This wasn't like being busted for "forgetting" her ring, skipping classes, or tricking the house into playing her music louder than allowed. Everyone did that kind of stuff, and everyone got busted for it. But she and Peris had always been very careful about not getting caught on these expeditions. Crossing the river was serious business.

It was too late to worry now, though. What could they do to her, anyway? In three months she'd be a pretty herself.

Tally crept along the river until she reached a pleasure garden, and slipped into the darkness beneath a row of weeping willows. Under their cover she made her way alongside a path lit by little guttering flames.

A pretty couple wandered down the path. Tally froze, but they were clueless, too busy staring into each other's eyes to see her crouching in the darkness. Tally silently watched them pass, getting that warm feeling she always got from looking at a pretty face. Even when she and Peris used to spy on them from the shadows, giggling at all the stupid things the pretties said and did, they couldn't resist staring. There was something magic in their large and perfect eyes, something that made you want to pay attention to whatever they said, to protect them from any danger, to make them happy. They were so . . . pretty.

The two disappeared around the next bend, and Tally shook her head to clear the mushy thoughts away. She wasn't here to

gawk. She was an infiltrator, a sneak, an ugly. And she had a mission.

The garden stretched up into town, winding like a black river through the bright party towers and houses. After a few more minutes of creeping, she startled a couple hidden among the trees (it was a *pleasure* garden, after all), but in the darkness they couldn't see her face, and only teased her as she mumbled an apology and slipped away. She hadn't seen too much of them, either, just a tangle of perfect legs and arms.

Finally, the garden ended, a few blocks from where Peris lived.

Tally peered out from behind a curtain of hanging vines. This was farther than she and Peris had ever been together, and as far as her planning had taken her. There was no way to hide herself in the busy, well-lit streets. She put her fingers up to her face, felt the wide nose and thin lips, the too-high forehead and tangled mass of frizzy hair. One step out of the underbrush and she'd be spotted. Her face seemed to burn as the light touched it. What was she doing here? She should be back in the darkness of Uglyville, awaiting her turn.

But she had to see Peris, had to talk to him. She wasn't quite sure why, exactly, except that she was sick of imagining a thousand conversations with him every night before she fell asleep. They'd spent every day together since they were littlies, and now . . . nothing. Maybe if they could just talk for a few minutes, her brain would stop talking to imaginary Peris. Three minutes might be enough to hold her for three months.

Tally looked up and down the street, checking for side yards to

slink through, dark doorways to hide in. She felt like a rock climber facing a sheer cliff, searching for cracks and handholds.

The traffic began to clear a little, and she waited, rubbing the scar on her right palm. Finally, Tally sighed and whispered, “Best friends forever,” and took a step forward into the light.

An explosion of sound came from her right, and she leaped back into the darkness, stumbling among the vines, coming down hard on her knees in the soft earth, certain for a few seconds that she’d been caught.

But the cacophony organized itself into a throbbing rhythm. It was a drum machine making its lumbering way down the street. Wide as a house, it shimmered with the movement of its dozens of mechanical arms, bashing away at every size of drum. Behind it trailed a growing bunch of revelers, dancing along with the beat, drinking and throwing their empty bottles to shatter against the huge, impervious machine.

Tally smiled. The revelers were wearing masks.

The machine was lobbing the masks out the back, trying to coax more followers into the impromptu parade: devil faces and horrible clowns, green monsters and gray aliens with big oval eyes, cats and dogs and cows, faces with crooked smiles or huge noses.

The procession passed slowly, and Tally pulled herself back into the vegetation. A few of the revelers passed close enough that the sickly sweetness from their bottles filled her nose. A minute later, when the machine had trundled half a block farther, Tally jumped out and snatched up a discarded mask from the street. The

plastic was soft in her hand, still warm from having been stamped into shape inside the machine a few seconds before.

Before she pressed it against her face, Tally realized that it was the same color as the cat-vomit pink of the sunset, with a long snout and two pink little ears. Smart adhesive flexed against her skin as the mask settled onto her face.

Tally pushed her way through the drunken dancers, out the other side of the procession, and ran down a side street toward Garbo Mansion, wearing the face of a pig.



## BEST FRIENDS FOREVER

Garbo Mansion was fat, bright, and loud.

It filled the space between a pair of party towers, a squat teapot between two slender glasses of champagne. Each of the towers rested on a single column no wider than an elevator. Higher up they swelled to five stories of circular balconies, crowded with new pretties. Tally climbed the hill toward the trio of buildings, trying to take in the view through the eyeholes of her mask.

Someone jumped, or was thrown, from one of the towers, screaming and flailing his arms. Tally gulped, forcing herself to watch all the way down, until the guy was caught by his bungee jacket a few seconds before splatting. He hover-bounced in the harness a few times, laughing, before being deposited softly on the

ground, close enough to Tally that she could hear nervous hiccups breaking up his giggles. He'd been as scared as Tally.

She shivered, though jumping was hardly any more dangerous than standing here beneath the looming towers. The bungee jacket used the same lifters as the hoverstruts that held the spindly structures up. If all the pretty toys somehow stopped working, just about everything in New Pretty Town would come tumbling down.

The mansion was full of brand-new pretties—the worst kind, Peris always used to say. They lived like uglies, a hundred or so together in a big dorm. But this dorm didn't have any rules. Unless the rules were Act Stupid, Have Fun, and Make Noise.

A bunch of girls in ball gowns were on the roof, screaming at the top of their lungs, balancing on the edge and shooting safety fireworks at people on the ground. A ball of orange flame bounced next to Tally, cool as an autumn wind, driving away the darkness around her.

"Hey, there's a pig down there!" someone screamed from above. They all laughed, and Tally quickened her stride toward the wide-open door of the mansion. She pushed inside, ignoring the surprised looks of two pretties on their way out.

It was all one big party, just like they always promised it would be. People were dressed up tonight, in gowns and in black suits with long coattails. Everyone seemed to find her pig mask pretty funny. They pointed and laughed, and Tally kept moving, not giving them time to do anything else. Of course, everyone was

always laughing here. Unlike an ugly party, there'd never be any fights, or even arguments.

She pushed from room to room, trying to distinguish faces without being distracted by those big pretty eyes, or overwhelmed by the feeling that she didn't belong. Tally felt uglier every second she spent there. Being laughed at by everyone she met wasn't helping much. But it was better than what they'd do if they saw her real face.

Tally wondered if she would even recognize Peris. She'd only seen him once since the operation, and that was coming out of the hospital, before the swelling had subsided. But she knew his face so well. Despite what Peris always used to say, pretties didn't really all look *exactly* the same. On their expeditions, she and Peris had sometimes spotted pretties who looked familiar, like uglies they'd known. Sort of like a brother or sister—an older, more confident, *much* prettier brother or sister. One you'd be jealous of your whole life, if you'd been born a hundred years ago.

Peris couldn't have changed that much.

"Have you seen the piggy?"

"The what?"

"There's a piggy on the loose!"

The giggling voices were from the floor below. Tally paused and listened. She was all alone here on the stairs. Apparently, pretties preferred the elevators.

"How dare she come to our party dressed like a piggy! This is white tie!"

“She’s got the wrong party.”

“She’s got no manners, looking that way!”

Tally swallowed. The mask wasn’t much better than her own face. The joke was wearing thin.

She bounded up the stairs, leaving the voices behind. Maybe they’d forget about her if she just kept moving. There were only two more floors of Garbo Mansion to go, and then the roof. Peris had to be here somewhere.

Unless he was out on the back lawn, or up in a balloon, or a party tower. Or in a pleasure garden somewhere, with someone. Tally shook away that last image and ran down the hall, ignoring the same jokes about her mask, risking glances into the rooms one by one.

Nothing but surprised looks and pointed fingers, and pretty faces. But none of them rang a bell. Peris wasn’t anywhere.

“Here, piggy, piggy! Hey, there she is!”

Tally bolted up to the top floor, taking two stairs at a time. Her hard breathing had heated up the inside of the mask, her forehead sweating, the adhesive crawling as it tried to stay attached. They were following her now, a group of them, laughing and stumbling over one another up the stairs.

There wasn’t any time to search this floor. Tally glanced up and down the hall. No one up here, anyway. The doors were all closed. Maybe a few pretties were actually getting their beauty sleep.

If she went up to the roof to check for Peris, she’d be trapped.

“Here, piggy, piggy!”

Time to run. Tally dashed toward the elevator, skidding to a halt inside. “Ground floor!” she ordered.

She waited, peering down the hall anxiously, panting into the hot plastic of her mask. “Ground floor!” she repeated. “Close door!”

Nothing happened.

She sighed, closing her eyes. Without an interface ring, she was nobody. The elevator wouldn’t listen.

Tally knew how to trick an elevator, but it took time and a penknife. She had neither. The first of her pursuers emerged from the stairway, stumbling into the hall.

She threw herself backward against the elevator’s side wall, standing on tiptoe and trying to flatten herself so they couldn’t see her. More came up, huffing and puffing like typical out-of-shape pretties. Tally could watch them in the mirror at the back of the elevator.

Which meant they could also see *her* if they thought to look this way.

“Where’d the piggy go?”

“Here, piggy!”

“The roof, maybe?”

Someone stepped quietly into the elevator, looking back at the search party in bemusement. When he saw her, he jumped. “Goodness, you scared me!” He blinked his long lashes, regarding her masked face, then looked down at his own tailcoat. “Oh, dear. Wasn’t this party white tie?”

Tally’s breath caught, her mouth went dry. “Peris?” she whispered. He looked at her closely. “Do I . . .”

She started to reach out, but remembered to press back flat

against the wall. Her muscles were screaming from standing on tiptoe. “It’s me, Peris.”

“Here, piggy, piggy!”

He turned toward the voice down the hall, raised his eyebrows, then looked back at her. “Close door. Hold,” he said quickly.

The door slid shut, and Tally stumbled forward. She pulled off her mask to see him better. It was Peris: his voice, his brown eyes, the way his forehead crinkled when he was confused.

But he was so *pretty* now.

At school, they explained how it affected you. It didn’t matter if you knew about evolution or not—it worked anyway. On everyone.

There was a certain kind of beauty, a prettiness that everyone could see. Big eyes and full lips like a kid’s; smooth, clear skin; symmetrical features; and a thousand other little clues. Somewhere in the backs of their minds, people were always looking for these markers. No one could help seeing them, no matter how they were brought up. A million years of evolution had made it part of the human brain.

The big eyes and lips said: I’m young and vulnerable, I can’t hurt you, and you want to protect me. And the rest said: I’m healthy, I won’t make you sick. And no matter how you felt about a pretty, there was a part of you that thought: *If we had kids, they’d be healthy too. I want this pretty person. . . .*

It was biology, they said at school. Like your heart beating, you couldn’t help believing all these things, not when you saw a face like this. A pretty face.

A face like Peris's.

"It's me," Tally said.

Peris took a step back, his eyebrows rising. He looked down at her clothes.

Tally realized she was wearing her baggy black expedition outfit, muddy from crawling up ropes and through gardens, from falling among the vines. Peris's suit was deep black velvet, his shirt, vest, and tie all glowing white.

She pulled away. "Oh, sorry. I won't get you muddy."

"What are you *doing* here, Tally?"

"I just—," she sputtered. Now that she was facing him, she didn't know what to say. All the imagined conversations had melted away into his big, sweet eyes. "I had to know if we were still . . ."

Tally held out her right hand, the scarred palm facing up, sweaty dirt tracing the lines on it.

Peris sighed. He wasn't looking at her hand, or into her eyes. Not into her squinty, narrow-set, indifferently brown eyes. Nobody eyes. "Yeah," he said. "But, I mean—couldn't you have waited, Squint?"

Her ugly nickname sounded strange coming from a pretty. Of course, it would be even weirder to call him Nose, as she used to about a hundred times a day. She swallowed. "Why didn't you write me?"

"I tried. But it just felt bogus. I'm so different now."

"But we're . . ." She pointed at her scar.

"Take a look, Tally." He held out his own hand.

The skin of his palm was smooth and unblemished. It was a hand that said: *I don't have to work very hard, and I'm too clever to have accidents.*

The scar that they had made together was gone.

"They took it away."

"Of course they did, Squint. All my skin's new."

Tally blinked. She hadn't thought of that.

He shook his head. "You're such a kid still."

"Elevator requested," said the elevator. "Up or down?"

Tally jumped at the machine voice.

"Hold, please," Peris said calmly.

Tally swallowed and closed her hand into a fist. "But they didn't change your blood. We shared that, no matter what."

Peris finally looked directly at her face, not flinching as she had feared he would. He smiled beautifully. "No, they didn't. New skin, big deal. And in three months we can laugh about this. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" She looked up into his big brown eyes, so full of concern.

"Just promise me that you won't do any more stupid tricks," Peris said. "Like coming here. Something that'll get you into trouble. I want to see you pretty."

"Of course."

"So promise me."

Peris was only three months older than Tally, but, dropping her eyes to the floor, she felt like a little again. "All right, I promise. Nothing stupid. And they won't catch me tonight, either."

"Okay, get your mask and . . ." His voice trailed off.

She turned her gaze to where it had fallen. Discarded, the



plastic mask had recycled itself, turning into pink dust, which the carpet in the elevator was already filtering away.

The two stared at each other in silence.

“Elevator requested,” the machine insisted. “Up or down?”

“Peris, I promise they won’t catch me. No pretty can run as fast as me. Just take me down to the—”

Peris shook his head. “Up, please. Roof.”

The elevator moved.

“Up? Peris, how am I going to—”

“Straight out the door, in a big rack—bungee jackets. There’s a whole bunch in case of a fire.”

“You mean jump?” Tally swallowed. Her stomach did a back-flip as the elevator came to a halt.

Peris shrugged. “I do it all the time, Squint.” He winked. “You’ll love it.”

His expression made his pretty face glow even more, and Tally leaped forward to wrap her arms around him. He still felt the same, at least, maybe a bit taller and thinner. But he was warm and solid, and still Peris.

“Tally!”

She stumbled back as the doors opened. She’d left mud all over his white vest. “Oh, no! I’m—”

“Just go!”

His distress just made Tally want to hug him again. She wanted to stay and clean Peris up, make sure he looked perfect for the party. She reached out a hand. “I—”

“Go!”

“But we’re best friends, right?”

He sighed, dabbing at a brown stain. “Sure, forever. In three months.”

She turned and ran, the doors closing behind her.

At first no one noticed her on the roof. They were all looking down. It was dark except for the occasional flare of a safety sparkler.

Tally found the rack of bungee jackets and pulled at one. It was clipped to the rack. Her fingers fumbled, looking for a clasp. She wished she had her interface ring to give her instructions.

Then she saw the button: PRESS IN CASE OF FIRE.

“Oh, crap,” she said.

Her shadow jumped and jittered. Two pretties were coming toward her, carrying sparklers.

“Who’s that? What’s she wearing?”

“Hey, you! This party is white tie!”

“Look at her face. . . .”

“Oh, crap,” Tally repeated.

And pressed the button.

An ear-shattering siren split the air, and the bungee jacket seemed to jump from the rack into her hand. She slid into the harness, turning to face the two pretties. They leaped back as if she’d transformed into a werewolf. One dropped the sparkler, and it extinguished itself instantly.

“Fire drill,” Tally said, and ran toward the edge of the roof.

Once she had the jacket around her shoulders, the strap and

zippers seemed to wind around her like snakes until the plastic was snug around her waist and thighs. A green light flashed on the collar, right where she couldn't help but see it.

"Good jacket," she said.

It wasn't smart enough to answer, apparently.

The pretties playing on the roof had all gone silent and were milling around, wondering if there really was a fire. They pointed at her, and Tally heard the word "ugly" on their lips.

What was worse in New Pretty Town, she wondered? Your mansion burning down, or an ugly crashing your party?

Tally reached the edge of the roof, vaulted up onto the rail, and teetered for a moment. Below her, pretties were starting to spill out of Garbo Mansion onto the lawn and down the hill. They were looking back up, searching for smoke or flames. All they saw was her.

It was a long way down, and Tally's stomach already seemed to be in free fall. But she was thrilled, too. The shrieking siren, the crowd gazing up at her, the lights of New Pretty Town all spread out below like a million candles.

Tally took a deep breath and bent her knees, readying herself to jump.

For a split second, she wondered if the jacket would work since she wasn't wearing an interface ring. Would it hover-bounce for a nobody? Or would she just splat?

But she had promised Peris she wouldn't get caught. And the jacket was for emergencies, and there *was* a green light on. . . .

"Heads up!" Tally shouted.

And jumped.

# SHAY

The siren faded behind her. It seemed like forever—or only seconds—that Tally fell, the gaping faces below becoming larger and larger.

The ground hurtled toward her, a space opening in the panicking crowd where she was going to hit. For a few moments it was just like a flying dream, silent and wonderful.

Then reality jerked at her shoulders and thighs, the webbing of the jacket cutting viciously into her. She was taller than pretty standard, she knew; the jacket probably wasn't expecting this much weight.

Tally somersaulted in the air, turning headfirst for a few terrifying moments, her face passing low enough to spot a discarded bottle cap in the grass. Then she found herself shooting upward

again, completing the circle, so that the sky wheeled above her, then over and downward again, more crowd parting in front.

Perfect. She had pushed off hard enough that she was bouncing down the hill away from Garbo Mansion, the jacket carrying her toward the darkness and safety of the gardens.

Tally spun head over heels twice more, and then the jacket lowered her to the grass. She pulled randomly at straps until the garment made a hissing sound and dropped to the ground.

Her dizziness took a moment to clear as she tried to sort up from down.

“Isn’t she . . . ugly?” someone asked from the edge of the crowd.

The black shapes of two firefighting hovercars zoomed past overhead, red lights flashing and sirens piercing her ears.

“Great idea, Peris,” she muttered. “A false alarm.” She would really be in trouble if they caught her now. She’d never even *heard* of anyone doing anything this bad.

Tally ran toward the garden.

The darkness below the willows was comforting.

Down here, halfway to the river, Tally could barely tell there was a full-scale fire alert in the middle of town. But she could see that a search was underway. More hovercars were in the air than usual, and the river seemed to be lit up extra bright. Maybe that was just a coincidence.

But probably not.

Tally made her way carefully through the trees. It was later than she and Peris had ever stayed over in New Pretty Town. The

pleasure gardens were more crowded, especially the dark parts. And now that the excitement of her escape had worn off, Tally was beginning to realize how stupid the whole idea had been.

Of course Peris didn't have the scar anymore. The two of them had only used a penknife when they'd cut themselves and held hands. The doctors used much sharper and bigger knives in the operation. They rubbed you raw, and you grew all new skin, perfect and clear. The old marks of accidents and bad food and childhood illnesses all washed away. A clean start.

But Tally had ruined Peris's starting over—showing up like some pesky little who's not wanted, and leaving him with the bad taste of ugly in his mouth, not to mention covered with mud. She hoped he had another vest to change into.

At least Peris hadn't seemed too angry. He'd said they'd be best friends again, once she was pretty. But the way he'd looked at her face . . . maybe that was why they separated uglies from pretties. It must be horrible to see an ugly face when you're surrounded by such beautiful people all the time. What if she'd ruined everything tonight, and Peris would always see her like this—squinty eyes and frizzy hair—even after she had the operation?

A hovercar passed overhead, and Tally ducked. She was probably going to get caught tonight, and never be turned pretty at all.

She deserved it for being so stupid.

Tally reminded herself of her promise to Peris. She was *not* going to get caught; she had to become pretty for him.

A light flashed in the corner of her vision. Tally crouched and peered through the hanging willow leaves.

A safety warden was in the park. She was a middle pretty, not a new one. In the firelight, the handsome features of the second operation were obvious: broad shoulders and a firm jaw, a sharp nose and high cheekbones. The woman carried the same unquestionable authority as Tally's teachers back in Uglyville.

Tally swallowed. New pretties had their own wardens. There was only one reason why a middle pretty would be here in New Pretty Town: The wardens were looking for someone, and they were serious about finding him or her.

The woman flashed her light at a couple on a bench, illuminating them for the split second it took to confirm that they were pretty. The couple jumped, but the warden chuckled and apologized. Tally could hear her low, sure voice, and saw the new pretties relax. Everything had to be okay if she said it was.

Tally felt herself wanting to give up, to throw herself on the wise mercy of the warden. If she just explained, the warden would understand and fix everything. Middle pretties always knew what to do.

But she had promised Peris.

Tally pulled back into the darkness, trying to ignore the horrible feeling that she was a spy, a sneak, for not surrendering to the woman's authority. She moved through the brush as fast as she could.

Close to the river, Tally heard a noise in front of her. A dark form was outlined in river lights before her. Not a couple, a lone figure in the dark.

It had to be a warden, waiting for her in the brush.

Tally hardly dared breathe. She had frozen in midcrawl, her weight all poised on one knee and one muddy hand. The warden hadn't seen her yet. If Tally waited long enough, maybe the warden would move on.

She waited, motionless, for endless minutes. The figure didn't budge. They must know that the gardens were the only dark way in and out of New Pretty Town.

Tally's arm started to shake, the muscles complaining about staying frozen for so long. But she didn't dare let her weight settle onto the other arm. The snap of a single twig would give her away.

She held herself still, until all her muscles were screaming. Maybe the warden was just a trick of the light. Maybe this was all in her imagination.

Tally blinked, trying to make the figure disappear.

But it was still there, clearly outlined by the rippling lights of the river.

A twig popped under her knee—Tally's aching muscles had finally betrayed her. But the figure *still* didn't move. He or she must have heard. . . .

The warden was being kind, waiting for her to give herself up. Letting her surrender. The teachers did that at school, sometimes. Made you realize that you couldn't escape, until you confessed everything.

Tally cleared her throat. A small, pathetic sound. "I'm sorry," she said.

The figure let out a sigh. "Oh, phew. Hey, that's okay. I must



have scared you, too.” The girl leaned forward, grimacing as if she was also sore from remaining still so long. Her face caught the light.

She was ugly too.

Her name was Shay. She had long dark hair in pigtails, and her eyes were too wide apart. Her lips were full enough, but she was even skinnier than a new pretty. She’d come over to New Pretty Town on her own expedition, and had been hiding here by the river for an hour. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” she whispered. “There’s wardens and hovercars everywhere!”

Tally cleared her throat. “I think it’s my fault.”

Shay looked dubious. “How’d you manage that?”

“Well, I was up in the middle of town, at a party.”

“You crashed a party? That’s crazy!” Shay said, then lowered her voice back to a whisper. “Crazy, but awesome. How’d you get in?”

“I was wearing a mask.”

“Wow. A pretty mask?”

“Uh, more like a pig mask. It’s a long story.”

Shay blinked. “A pig mask. Okay. So let me guess, someone blew your house down?”

“Huh? No. I was about to get caught, so I kind of . . . set off a fire alarm.”

“Nice trick!”

Tally smiled. It was actually a pretty good story, now that she had someone to tell it to. “And I was trapped up on the roof, so I grabbed a bungee jacket and jumped off. I hover-bounced halfway here.”

“No way!”

“Well, part of the way here, anyhow.”

“Pretty awesome.” Shay smiled, then her face went serious. She bit at one of her fingernails, which was one of those bad habits that the operation cured. “So, Tally, were you at this party . . . to see someone?”

It was Tally’s turn to be impressed. “How’d you figure that out?”

Shay sighed, looking down at her ragged nails. “I’ve got friends too, over here. I mean, they *were* friends. Sometimes I spy on them.” She looked up. “I was always the youngest, you know? And now—”

“You’re all alone.”

Shay nodded. “It sounds like you did more than spy, though.”

“Yeah. I kind of said hello.”

“Wow, that’s crazy. Your boyfriend or something?”

Tally shook her head. Peris had gone with other girls, and Tally had dealt with it and tried to do the same, but their friendship had always been the main thing in both their lives. Not anymore, apparently.

“If he’d been my boyfriend, I don’t think I could have done it, you know? I wouldn’t have wanted him to see my face. But because we’re friends, I thought maybe . . .”

“Yeah. So how’d it go?”

Tally thought for a second, looking out at the rippling water. Peris had been so pretty, and grown-up looking, and he’d said they’d be friends again. Once Tally was pretty too . . . “Basically, it sucked,” she said.

“Thought so.”

“Except getting away. That part was very cool.”

“Sounds like it.” Tally heard the smile in Shay’s voice. “Very tricky.”

They were silent for a moment as a hovercar went over.

“But you know, we haven’t totally gotten away yet,” Shay said. “Next time you’re going to pull a fire alarm, let me know ahead of time.”

“Sorry about getting you trapped here.”

Shay looked at her and frowned. “Not that. I just meant if I’m going to have to do the running-away part, I might as well get in on the fun.”

Tally laughed softly. “Okay. Next time, I’ll let you know.”

“Please do.” Shay scanned the river. “Looks a little clearer now. Where’s your board?”

“My what?”

Shay pulled a hoverboard from under a bush. “You’ve got a board, right? What’d you do, swim over?”

“No, I . . . hey, wait. How’d you get a hoverboard to take you across the river?” Anything that flew had minders all over it.

Shay laughed. “That’s the oldest trick in the book. I figured you’d know all about it.”

Tally shrugged. “I don’t board much.”

“Well, this one’ll take both of us.”

“Wait, shhh.”

Another hovercar had come into view, cruising down the river just above the height of the bridges.

Tally waited for a count of ten after it had passed before she spoke. "I don't think it's a good idea, flying back."

"So how *did* you get over?"

"Follow me." Tally rose from her crouch onto hands and knees, and crawled a bit ahead. She looked back. "Can you carry that thing?"

"Sure. It doesn't weigh much." Shay snapped her fingers, and the hoverboard drifted upward. "Actually, it doesn't weigh *anything*, unless I tell it to."

"That's handy."

Shay started to crawl, the board bouncing along behind her like a little's balloon. Tally couldn't see any string, though. "So, where're we going?" Shay asked.

"I know a bridge."

"But it'll tattle."

"Not this one. It's an old friend."

# WIPE OUT

Tally fell off. Again.

The spill didn't hurt so much, this time. The moment her feet slipped off the hoverboard, she'd relaxed, the way Shay kept telling her to. Spinning out wasn't much worse than having your dad swing you around by the wrists when you were little.

If your dad happened to be a superhuman freak and was trying to pull your arms out of their sockets.

But the momentum had to go somewhere, Shay had explained. And around in circles was better than into a tree. Here in Cleopatra Park there were plenty of those.

After a few rotations, Tally found herself being lowered to the grass by her wrists, dizzy but in one piece.

Shay cruised up, banking her hoverboard to an elegant stop as if she'd been born on one.

"That looked a little better."

"It didn't *feel* any better." Tally pulled off one crash bracelet and rubbed her wrist. It was turning red, and her fingers felt weak.

The bracelet was heavy and solid in her hand. Crash bracelets had to have metal inside, because they worked on magnets, the way the boards did. Whenever Tally's feet slipped, the bracelets got all hovery and caught her fall, like some friendly giant plucking her from danger and swinging her to a halt.

By her wrists. Again.

Tally pulled the other bracelet off and rubbed.

"Don't give up. You almost made it!"

Tally's board cruised back on its own, nuzzling at her ankles like an apologetic dog. She crossed her arms and rubbed her shoulders. "I almost got snapped in two, you mean."

"Never happens. I've spilled more times than a glass of milk on a roller coaster."

"On a *what*?"

"Never mind. Come on, one more try."

Tally sighed. It wasn't just her wrists. Her knees ached from banking hard, whipping through turns so quickly that her body seemed to weigh a ton. Shay called that "high gravity," which happened every time a fast-moving object changed direction.

"Hoverboarding *looks* so fun, like being a bird. But actually doing it is hard work."

Shay shrugged. “Being a bird’s probably hard work too. Flapping your wings all day, you know?”

“Maybe. Does it get any better?”

“For birds? I don’t know. On a board? Definitely.”

“I hope so.” Tally pulled her bracelets on and stepped onto the hoverboard. It bobbed a little as it adjusted to her weight, like the bounce of a diving board.

“Check your belly sensor.”

Tally touched her belly ring, where Shay had clipped the little sensor. It told the board where Tally’s center of gravity was, and which way she was facing. The sensor even read her stomach muscles, which, it turned out, hoverboarders always clenched in anticipation of turns. The board was smart enough to gradually learn how her body moved. The more Tally rode, the more it would keep itself under her feet.

Of course, Tally had to learn too. Shay kept saying that if your feet weren’t in the right place, the smartest board in the world couldn’t keep you on. The riding surface was all knobbly for traction, but it was amazing how easy it was to slip off.

The board was oval-shaped, about half as long as Tally was tall, and black with the silver spots of a cheetah—the only animal in the world that could run faster than a hoverboard could fly. It was Shay’s first board, and she’d never recycled it. Until today, it had hung on the wall above her bed.

Tally snapped her fingers, bent her knees as she rose into the air, then leaned forward to pick up speed.

Shay cruised along just above her, staying a little behind.

The trees started to rush by, whipping Tally's arms with the sharp stings of evergreen needles. The board wouldn't let her crash into anything solid, but it didn't get too concerned about twigs.

"Extend your arms. Keep your feet apart!" Shay yelled for the thousandth time. Tally nervously scooted her left foot forward.

At the end of the park, Tally leaned to her right, and the board pulled into a long, steep turn. She bent her knees, growing heavy as she cut back toward where they'd started.

Now Tally was rushing toward the slalom flags, crouching as she drew closer. She could feel the wind drying her lips, lifting her ponytail up.

"Oh, boy," she whispered.

The board raced past the first flag, and she leaned hard right, her arms all the way out now for balance.

"Switch!" cried Shay. Tally twisted her body to bring the board under her and across, cutting around the next flag. Once it was past, she twisted again.

But her feet were too close together. Not again! Her shoes slipped across the surface of the board. "No!" she cried, clenching her toes, cupping the air with her palms, anything to keep herself on board. Her right shoe slid toward the board's edge until her toes were silhouetted against the trees.

The trees! She was almost sideways, her body parallel with the ground.

The slalom flag zoomed past, and suddenly, it was over. The board swung back under Tally as her course straightened out again.



She'd made the turn!

Tally spun to face Shay. "I did it!" she cried.

And fell.

Confused by her spin, the board had tried to execute a turn, and dumped her. Tally relaxed as her arms jerked straight and the world spun around her. She was laughing as she descended to the grass, dangling by her bracelets.

Shay was also laughing. "*Almost* did it."

"No! I got around the flags. You saw!"

"Okay, okay. You made it." Shay laughed, stepping off onto the grass. "But don't dance around like that afterward. It's not cool, Squint."

Tally stuck out her tongue. In the last week, Tally had learned that Shay only used her ugly nickname as a put-down. Shay insisted they call each other by their real names most of the time, which Tally had quickly gotten used to. She liked it, actually. Nobody but Sol and Ellie—her parents—and a few stuck-up teachers had ever called her "Tally" before.

"Whatever you say, Skinny. That was great."

Tally collapsed on the grass. Her whole body ached, every muscle exhausted. "Thanks for the lesson. Flying's the best."

Shay sat down close by. "Never bored on a hoverboard."

"This is the best I've felt since . . ." Tally didn't say his name. She looked up into the sky, which was a glorious blue. A perfect sky. They hadn't gotten started until late afternoon. Above, a few high clouds were already showing hints of pink, even though sunset was hours off.

“Yeah,” Shay agreed. “Me too. I was getting sick of hanging out alone.”

“So how long you got?”

Shay answered instantly. “Two months and twenty-six days.”

Tally was stunned for a moment. “Are you sure?”

“’Course I’m sure.”

Tally felt a big, slow smile roll across her face, and she fell back onto the grass, laughing. “You’ve got to be kidding. We’ve got the same birthday!”

“No way.”

“Yeah, way. It’s perfect. We’ll both turn pretty together!”

Shay was silent for a moment. “Yeah, I guess.”

“September ninth, right?”

Shay nodded.

“That is so cool. I mean, I don’t think I could stand to lose another friend. You know? We don’t have to worry about one of us abandoning the other. Not for a single day.”

Shay sat up straight, her smile gone. “I wouldn’t do that, anyway.”

Tally blinked. “I didn’t say you would, but . . .”

“But what?”

“But when you turn, you go over to New Pretty Town.”

“So? Pretties are allowed to come back over here, you know. Or write.”

Tally snorted. “But they don’t.”

“I would.” Shay looked out over the river at the spires of the party towers, placing a thumbnail firmly between her teeth.

“So would I, Shay. I’d come see you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Really.”

Shay shrugged, and lay back down to stare up at the clouds. “Okay. But you’re not the first person to make that promise, you know.”

“Yeah, I do know.”

They were silent for a moment. Clouds rolled slowly across the sun, and the air grew cool. Tally thought of Peris, and tried to remember the way he used to look back when he was Nose. Somehow, she couldn’t recall his ugly face anymore. As if those few minutes of seeing him pretty had wiped out a lifetime of memories. All she could see now was pretty Peris, those eyes, that smile.

“I wonder why they never come back,” Shay said. “Just to visit.”

Tally swallowed. “Because we’re so ugly, Skinny, that’s why.”