

THE WEDNESDAY CLUB

"I've always wanted to be a redhead," says my mom. "Redheads know how to live it up." She fits the spiky-haired wig on her thinning head of hair and flashes me a smile. "Well, is it me?"

I force myself to smile back.

Mom catches my expression and takes off the wig. "I guess I'll stick with the mousy brown." She sighs and hands the red wig back to the saleslady. "You have to accept the genes you're born with."

I feel bad. Mom's trying to keep up appearances. I'm not being much help. I've got my mom's brown hair and her green eyes that turn lighter in the sunlight. We both wear a size seven shoe, except in boots when we have to up it a half size. We are obviously mother and daughter. Except now there's this big difference between us.

Mom waited to tell me until after my final exam in biology. "Cancer," she said.

At first I was speechless. "That's impossible." It only happens to other people, I was thinking. "We're Capricorns," I said, knowing how foolish I must sound. "It's not in our horoscope."

"Ella, I know this isn't going to be the way you planned to spend your summer, but I need you to help me with this. I need someone to come with me to the treatments.

You'll be able to cope. Zachary is still little. He needs to have Dad close by while I'm away."

Treatments. I've seen enough soap operas and sappy movies to know that this is one episode I'd rather miss. I guess I should be honored. Mom has chosen me so Zachary, my younger brother, will remember treatment days as those special times he spent with Dad.

But Mom has also chosen me because I'm the dependable one, the mature one, the one who can cope with everything. So that's how I, Ella B., at the age of sixteen when I could have been taking an accelerated pre-college summer math course on Wednesday mornings at 9:00 am, have become an unofficial member of the Wednesday Club.

We arrive at the hospital entrance for Mom's first treatment at 8:45 on the first Wednesday morning in July. Oncology is on the sixth floor.

Mom shoots past the elevator and pushes open the door to the stairwell.

"I hate being in a closed box with a bunch of people who could have a hundred infectious viruses," she says. "We're taking the stairs."

All of a sudden she's worried about catching a cold. I decide not to point out that catching a cold is the least of our problems. We trudge up the stairway, counting off the floors as we pause then pass them.

Panting from the long haul, we finally reach the oncology department. The waiting room has soft blue chairs, classical music, nurses with rubber-soled shoes that barely squeak against the polished floor, and the latest selection of magazines. It's a five star waiting room – though I doubt it fools anyone. We all know why we're here. Mom and I tiptoe in, find seats, and sit down side by side.

I feel like taking her hand but don't know how she'll interpret it. Instead I pick up two magazines and set one on her lap. As I flip through my magazine, I sneak sideways glances to see how she's doing. While watching her, I feel that someone is watching me and squirm in my chair. Mom and I are being careful to avoid eye contact with everyone, even each other.

"You took the stairs?" asks the guy who's been watching me.

"Is it that obvious?" I glance up, feeling my rosy cheeks, which I've inherited from my mom, turn even redder.

He laughs and I'm blown away by his smile which spreads across his whole face. He lowers his voice conspiratorially. "Nobody likes pressing the button for the sixth floor."

"Excuse me?"

"Sixth floor," he repeats. "Oncology? Cancer ward? Top story. The only way out of here is down." He grins. And again, I find myself smiling but this time at the blueness of his eyes and the slant of his cheekbones. Then it hits me. He's bald. But I mean, completely bald! He wears it with so much style, it takes a second glance to notice.

"Welcome to the Wednesday Club," he says. "I'm Aaron." He holds out his hand and moves a chair closer.

"Ella," I say and hesitate, not sure if I should shake his hand – this isn't exactly the place to start socializing. I wonder if he thinks it's me who is sick. I want to explain that I haven't actually chosen to join this club – but then I'm sure he hasn't either.

We exchange smiles. And I turn back to the fashion magazine.

THIN IS IN screams the headline in bold.

"Look at this list," I say, turning the magazine to show him. "It's all about the pros and cons of the latest fad diets. 'C' Diets are the latest craze: The Cabbage Soup Diet, The Cucumber-Cheese Diet, or Cut Those Carbs Diet."

"The only 'C' diet they don't mention is Cancer." Aaron leans over my shoulder. He's wearing Musk aftershave. "Take a look around *this* room. It's obvious that cancer sure cuts your calorie intake."

I steal a look at the members of our group.

"The side-effects aren't worth it," he whispers.

I stifle my giggle. Cancer is no laughing matter. But something about Aaron makes me feel silly. I sneak a closer look at him. He catches me at it. I scramble for words to fill in the awkward moment.

"This is my mom," I say, gesturing to my left to where she's sitting hunched over the magazine in her lap.

Under any other circumstance, Mom would hop in about now. She's one of those people who can get your whole life history, the reason why you can't stay on a diet, why your boyfriend left you, and who you really wish you could be, faster than Dear Abby can open your envelope. But today Mom's quiet. She keeps her head bent, engrossed in whatever she's reading.

I'm embarrassed at her aloofness, but Aaron shrugs it off. "No one here wants to make friends," he says softly. "This is one part of our lives we want to put behind us, forget the unlucky fluke or unfortunate circumstances that brought us together."

I take a minute to think about what he's said. Dad teases me about how I always have to analyze everything. But something doesn't sit right with me. "The circumstances

might be unfortunate," I say, aware that my fire-engine cheeks are beginning to get hot, "but that doesn't mean that the people aren't worth getting to know."

There's another moment of silence. I hope he doesn't think that I think that cancer is a good enough reason to make friends. "Is it already 9:30?" I ask, and glance over at my mom.

The magazine on her lap is still open to the same page. She is dreading the moment when they call her in, and I feel guilty because talking to Aaron has made the time fly by. I pick up another magazine, or maybe it's the same one.

"What are you doing later," asks Aaron.

"Excuse me?"

This time the color flushes his cheeks. "I mean – I'm celebrating today. It's my last treatment, so if you're free later this evening, there's a Starbucks down the block from here – that is, if you can get away for a little while."

This Starbucks isn't one I've ever been to. I stop outside. Looking in through the big glass window, I spot him immediately. He's sitting at one of the small tables with his long legs stretched out and ankles crossed. Leaning back in the chair, he's talking to some friend of his and doesn't see me watching him.

I suddenly notice my reflection in the glass. What am I doing here? The day started in the oncology department – and now I'm at a café? I lean against the No Parking sign, suddenly overcome with exhaustion. By the time we'd made it home, Mom was totally worn out and went to sleep. I had tried reading, but couldn't concentrate. Tried watching TV, but my mind kept churning over what Mom and I were going through and

the long haul ahead of us. Then my thoughts would drift to Aaron and how he has it all behind him. Finally, I had told Dad that I was going out. Without really planning to, I found myself heading towards Starbucks.

And now there he is. Throwing his head back in laughter. Slapping a high-five with some friend, looking like he has it all together. I don't belong there. Maybe for a second we had shared a moment of common circumstance, but like one of Zach's computer games, Aaron has passed to the next level while I'm still struggling at stage one.

I leave before he can spot me.

Next Wednesday Mom and I reach the hospital a little late. We shoot past the elevator and head for the stairway. Only by the time we hit the second floor, I know it's going to take every drop of energy in her to make it to the sixth floor. She needs her energy for the treatments. I wish my dad were here. He'd know how to convince her to be logical. But Mom refuses to let him come.

"It will crack him," she says to me. "You're stronger, Ella. You're more like me." A year ago I would have beamed at the compliment. Now it makes me wonder. How much am I like you?

"Wait," I say to my mom as I sit down on the first stair up to the third floor.

"What is it?" Her cheeks are flushed, and she's annoyed. "We're going to be late."

"My ankle." I grimace. "I twisted it while running yesterday. Do you mind if we take the elevator this time? It hurts when I put pressure on it."

Mom narrows her eyes. I avoid her distrustful look and concentrate on rubbing my ankle, but I can't remember which is supposed to be the sore one. We walk out of the stairwell onto the third floor. Figures that it's orthopedics. I hobble as realistically as I can, leaning on my mother's arm.

We make it to the sixth floor just as my mom's name is called.

"Should I come in with you?" I ask.

Mom shakes her head. "It's good enough knowing you're close by. I'll call you if I need you."

The magazines are new, but they're really the same old thing. I think how I'd like to point that out to Aaron. "Incredible," I'd say, "how each week they discover a new surefire way to reduce the cellulite they swear they'd found how to reduce the week before."

"Ella?"

The magazine slips from my hand. It's the nurse. She's calling me. My heart jumps into my throat.

"Yes?" My voice comes out too high.

"You have a phone call."

I follow the nurse's rubber-soled shoes, hoping my heart isn't beating too loudly.

"Dad?" I say.

"No. It's Aaron."

"Aaron?" I'm confused and flustered. "What are you doing calling me here?"

There's silence for a second. I can feel him smiling. "Surprised you, didn't I?" He laughs. I imagine his chin jutting upward and his blue eyes shining. "You didn't come last Wednesday, and I didn't have your phone number."

"But you figured I'd be here today," I finish the thought for him.

He shrugs. I mean, I imagine I can see his lanky shoulders rise up and fall.

"I hope it's okay," he says.

I feel myself blushing. "It's fine. In fact, I wish you were here."

As soon as I say that I realize how bad it sounds. "Wait! I mean, it's good that you aren't here. I didn't mean –"

But he's already laughing in my ear. "Don't worry. I know –"

The receptionist gives me a look.

"I have to get off the phone," I say.

"Why? Is the nurse giving you the evil eye? She isn't so bad. I just wanted to tell you that I'll be at the café again today, if you decide to come in this time."

I catch the words. Did he see me chicken out last week?

"I'll get there a bit later than usual," he says. "I'm going to try biking free-ride style today. One of the guys said that he's found this amazing track in the woods just north of here."

"Free-ride? You mean biking down mountains without a track? You could kill yourself. Are you crazy?"

First he laughs, then there's a pause, and I swear I can feel his mood shift. "Once I thought I would go crazy. I was terrified that I was going to die."

"Aaron, you know I didn't mean it like that."

I hear him breathing. The nurse is about to strangle me with the telephone cord. But I can feel that Aaron wants to tell me something, and so I turn my back on her to give us some privacy. "I'm listening," I say.

"I used to be so angry," he says. "I thought, why me? What did I do to deserve this?"

"I'd be angry too," I answer him honestly.

"Yeah, it made sense at first. I blamed my parents for giving me these messed-up genes, and I was envious of all of my buddies who didn't have to leave their first year of college to hang around with a bunch of sick people they had nothing in common with."

"I'm sorry," I say, thinking how I had been angry that, because of Mom, I couldn't do the college prep course. I feel selfish.

Aaron takes a deep breath. "But then I started thinking, imagine if every kid with a nose that's too bumpy, hair too curly, or feet too big went around cursing his parents for every mutant gene he'd inherited and feeling jealous of his friends. What's the point?"

I'm thinking of how to answer him, when the nurse holds out her hand for the phone. I've no choice and pass it to her.

"Aaron," she says, trying to sound stern, "you really should do your flirting on your own time and leave my phone free for more urgent business."

I turn eight shades of red, my fire engine cheeks always waiting to make any embarrassing situation worse. I'm glad Aaron isn't here to see me – though I imagine he's just as flushed.

She hands the phone back to me. "Say good-bye and say it quickly."

"I'll try and make it today," I say. "But I can't promise."

"I understand. Can you promise to try?"

"I'll try." The nurse takes the phone and hangs up.

When Mom is ready to go back home, she apologizes for having taken so long.

"Were you horribly bored and restless?" she asks.

I shake my head. I can't tell her about Aaron, though I'm bursting to tell someone.

But how would it sound?

Once we're home, Mom says she needs to sleep off the queasy feeling in her stomach. At around 4:00 I decide to head over to Starbucks. I peek in and spot him right away. Aaron is wearing a bright red lycra biking shirt with black lycra biking pants. A green helmet is swinging on the back of his chair. Now he wears a baseball cap. He looks great. He looks so mature. He looks like the kind of guy I'd want to get to know but who wouldn't be interested in me. It suddenly dawns on me that Aaron is probably being nice because he feels sorry for me and my mom.

I'm stunned at the thought. Before I can turn and run, Aaron spots me and waves. "Ella!" He straightens up and breaks into that winner smile of his.

Could he be sincerely glad to see me? I'm not sure. There's only one way to find out. I glance at my watch.

I've time for a quick cup of coffee before my mom gets up.

I push open the door and walk in. I thread toward him and sit down – half rise, and sit again. I should have gone to order first. Now he probably thinks he has to order for me. What is wrong with me?

"Whatchya think'n?" he asks.

My mouth goes dry. I'm thinking I've never had a date with a college freshman before and here I am on a date, or what I think might be a date – and really, at a time like this, should I even be on a date at all?

Aaron laughs. "Sorry, I didn't mean to stun you into silence. It's just an expression." He gets up. "Double latte?"

"Yes, please."

"Sugar, saccharine?"

I shake my head. "Sugar, please. Saccharine has too many chem –" I clamp my mouth shut.

"Tell me about it."

And again I'm blushing. Great, Ella! I'm worried about the amount of chemicals in a teaspoon size packet of sweetener. Aaron has just finished being pumped with mega doses of them. I watch the way he slides up to the register and chats with the girl taking his order. He picks up two packets of sugar, shakes them in the air, and smiles at me.

He puts the coffee on the table, just in time to slap palms with another friend. "Whatchya think'n?" he asks him, and not waiting for an answer sits down opposite me.

We sip our coffee. I can barely taste it, I'm so nervous.

"Is it sweet enough for you?" he asks, and I know he's teasing.

I nod.

We stir our coffees and smile a lot at each other. Just as I'm thinking that it's time to go, Aaron pulls out something from his backpack and slides it across the table.

"For you," he says.

"Me?"

He nods.

The package is wrapped, but I can feel it's a book. I wonder what kind of book he thinks I'd like to read. I unwrap it slowly, fumbling, trying not to seem overanxious but anticipation makes my fingers clumsy.

"Those magazines can get really dull after a while," he says.

I laugh. We've just shared our first private joke.

Before I finish opening it, I know the book is going to be empty. I recognize it as one of those hard covered journals they sell in the gift section of the bookstores.

I've never known what to do with these. I'm not sure what to say. Aaron sees my hesitation.

"I forgot something," he says. Taking it back from me, he pulls a pen from his back pack and jots a few words down on the first page.

"For Ella, A Gift of Serendipity. From Aaron." At the bottom of the page he's scribbled his cell phone number.

"Thank you." Reluctantly, I stand up. I hold the book to my chest. "I wish I could stay longer, but I have to go. Mom still hasn't figured out the wig thing. I said I'd help her."

He flicks the rim of his cap. "She's not a baseball fan?"

I laugh. "Far from it. She thinks the Orioles are a vanilla chocolate cookie."

This time I make him laugh.

"How is she?" he asks.

"She'll be okay." I say, and then think to myself, will she be?

He stands up, too. We're standing like I've seen other couples standing, like at that moment we're not in a crowded café. There are no people ordering caps and decafs, no sounds of coffee grinding. There's no one else there but us, and we're enveloped in a bubble of silence. I smooth my hand over the journal cover.

"What do you mean by serendipity?" I ask.

He takes a step closer. "Serendipity," he says. "The word comes from a Persian folktale about the Three Princes of Serendip. Their greatest discoveries always happened by chance."

He flashes me one of his winner smiles. I wait for him to go on.

"I've been thinking about what you said about circumstance and things happening by chance. Not all the unexpected things that happen in life are bad. Sometimes the timing is right and that's when, if you're open to it, you can discover great things. Just like us."

"Just like us?" I shake my head. "But I thought the timing was all wrong."

"The timing was all right. If I hadn't been on the sixth floor of the hospital the other week, if you hadn't burst in through the stairwell looking so incredible in a flushed, confused, and frightened kind of way, I never would have talked to you and so I wouldn't be here now asking when we can get together again." He takes a breath. "That," he says, "is serendipity."

"That," I say, "is the most incredible invitation for a second date."

He smiles. "Well?"

"Next Wednesday," I promise, with the confidence of someone who has already penciled it into her schedule.

And then I actually manage to leave without tripping over anyone's foot or walking into the window.

But the following Wednesday morning I know before the day starts that I won't be able to fulfill my promise to Aaron and meet him at the café.

This Wednesday I knew Mom wouldn't even be able to make it to the orthopedics floor. The doctors warned us that as the treatments start kicking in the body gets weaker. Afterwards, once she didn't need the treatments anymore her strength would come back. But that seems so far away.

"My ankle's still a bit sore," I say as we walk through the hospital doors.

Mom grimaces. "Which one will it be this time, the right or the left?" She presses the elevator button for the sixth floor. She'd no intention of taking the stairs.

In the elevator, Mom scratches her head. "I really have to buy a new wig soon," she says. "This one that your aunt Jenna gave me is too itchy."

"Sure, Mom. I'll go with you."

This week is questionnaire week in the magazines. I've no patience for their mindless queries and toss the magazine aside.

I pull the journal Aaron gave me out of my purse. I don't have a pen. The truth is my mind feels blank. The truth is, I have to keep my mind empty. If I don't, I might start thinking too much. The nurse brings me a sandwich and says that there are some complications and it'll take a bit longer today.

At five o'clock I realize I won't make it to Starbucks. I flip to the first page of the journal and call Aaron's cell phone.

"Aaron here. Speak up, there's a lot of coffee grinding!"

I hear the background noises of people laughing, chatting, and having a great time. Aaron's voice also sounds so light and easy. Suddenly my throat gets all choked up and I can't talk. I hang up before I give myself away.

A few seconds later my phone rings. Caller ID shows it's from Aaron's phone. He's returning the last call he received. I don't answer.

Mom is finally allowed to go. By the time we get home it's 8:00 pm. Dad has made us soup, salad, and something that looks like a quiche. Mom turns green and beelines for the bathroom where she retches. We look at each other, helplessly.

"Turn on the news, Ella. I'll go see how she's doing."

He pats my head as he passes me. I don't know how he knows, but he knows that I can't take any more today. I turn up the volume so we can all hear about the horrible things going on elsewhere in the world.

By 10:00 o'clock I'm exhausted. I think of calling a friend, just to talk, but I can't deal with any questions about my mom. I want to talk about the things I used to talk about. I want to talk about Aaron, without having to feel guilty about it. As I charge my cell phone, I notice that I have 22 unanswered calls, and one message.

"Ella, if it's you who called, please call back. Aaron."

For the first time that day, something in me snaps. How much more of this can I take? I want it to stop! I want my old life back! I don't want to be with all those sick people anymore.

I roll onto my back, but it's hard for me to breathe. A throbbing feeling in my chest is building up inside, searing my throat. I can't hold it in anymore. Mom hasn't cried

once. But I'm not my mom! My body starts shaking so hard, I have to smother my sobs in my pillow so no one will hear me. Like a swimmer caught in a whirlpool, I reach out for the phone, the line that I hope will save me before I get sucked in too deep to ever rise again. Aaron's number is still flashing. I don't stop to think, but press last call received.

"Ella?" he answers.

"It's me," I say, sure my strangled voice will be unrecognizable.

He's quiet. He doesn't rush at me with words that everything will be all right, not to worry, and it'll all work out. He waits until my sobs are under control.

"How do you live with it?" I ask him, knowing he'll understand that I mean, how do you live with the fear, the sadness, the desire to grab a bag and run as far away as possible.

He takes a deep breath and exhales. I'm hoping he'll share the secret with me. I'm hoping he's got it all figured out.

"I need a break," I say before he can answer, "but how can I take a break knowing that my mom can never escape?"

He's quiet for so long, I think we've been cut off. "Aaron? Are you there?"

"Yes," he says. "I'm here. I'm listening."

And without him saying another word, I realize that he's giving me the best thing anyone could, someone to talk to who will listen, not judge or offer words of condolence that do little to console.

"And will you be there on Wednesday?" I ask him.

"Yes, Ella. On Wednesday, and any other day or night of the week when you need me."

We wait until the storm inside me subsides and I can speak again.

"Thanks," I say.

"Sure," he says. "Anytime." And he waits for me to hang up first.

On Friday, the side effects of Wednesday's treatment are beginning to wear off.

This is the usual cycle. By Tuesday, Mom will be feeling her old self in time for Wednesday and another zap of chemicals. But we've made it to the half way mark. Mom wants to go out to the mall to look for a wig and I've agreed to join her.

"Earth to Ella," says Mom, "you're day dreaming. How's this one?"

I rein in my thoughts about Wednesdays from clinic dates, to dates with Aaron. It's crazy, or maybe I'm being crazy. Aaron would say, "Grab the crazy moments while you can." I feel I've just been hit by one. Mom has on a different mousy brown wig. The saleslady looks at her and smiles sympathetically. She's seen too many women like my mom.

"Well?" Mom asks. "Too short?"

Our reflections find each other in the mirror. Suddenly I see myself seeing her in a whole new perspective. I think about Aaron free-riding down mountain slopes. I think about him calling me up on the hospital phone just to chat, and how he overloaded my message box on the chance that it was me who had called him. And I think about how all last night when I couldn't sleep we stayed awake chatting while I doodled inside the journal he gave me.

And then I look at my mom. She still shows up for work almost every day. Tries to keep everything normal so that no one, especially Zachary, will suspect that things are anything but how they always were.

"Serendipity," I say.

"Sorry?" says mom.

I blush and smile. "Nothing."

"So what do you think?" she asks.

"What do you think?" I repeat, taking a deep breath. "I think red fits you much better."

Mom's eyes turn a lighter green, as if my words have sent down a ray of sunlight. She reaches for the red wig and puts it back on.

"Really?" she asks.

"Absolutely," I say. "It's the new you."