



# THE LUCKY LIST

Rachael Lippincott

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**Everyone in Huckabee knows that you can't go to a bingo fundraiser** in the summer without going to get ice cream after. It'd be like going to the movies and not getting popcorn. Or going to the pool and forgetting your swimsuit.

There would be no point in going.

Sam's Scoops is a block away from Huckabee Elementary, and the large crowd of people leaving the cafetorium and heading toward it trails the entire distance between the two.

Luckily, we're one of the first few groups out the door.

I power walk across the gravel parking lot, my dad and Johnny a few steps ahead of me, Blake crunching noisily just behind them. I have to jog every couple of seconds just to keep up with this above-average-height crew.

"You're bringing your prize basket to get ice cream?" Blake

asks me, cutting through my staring contest with a Carson Wentz bobblehead wedged between a rolled-up T-shirt and an Eagles hat. She slows down ever so slightly, until our feet fall into a steady rhythm on the gravel. “You doing a victory lap or something?”

I try not to snort at the idea of me parading proudly around with my dad’s “Football Fan Fiesta” basket like I’d just won a Golden Globe. Although, to be fair, that’s not out of character for some people in this town. I’ve heard of someone keeping the highly coveted, still shrink-wrapped “Wine ’n’ Cheese” basket on their mantel for ten years, just to spite their in-laws. The cheese definitely got moldy, but it was never about that anyway.

I tighten my grip on the wicker basket, the plastic around it crinkling noisily. “If I put it in the car, we’ll be waiting two hours to get ice cream.”

It’s the truth. The army of bingo goers converging on Sam’s Scoops right now should be enough to give Sam and the three servers at the window carpal tunnel. A trip to my dad’s car would have put us at the very back of the line, just as their arms are about to splinter into a million pieces. My mom and I figured out that scoops got 25 percent smaller and drippier if you got stuck near the end.

And after today I’m pretty sure I deserve a full-size scoop.

“So I guess you come here a lot,” she says as the end of the line approaches. We’ve managed to walk fast enough to have only about ten people standing in between us and homemade iced sugary goodness.

“Not so much anymore,” I say.

Thankfully, she doesn't ask me why. Instead, her eyebrows lift. "Wait. Please tell me this place is *actually* called Sam's Oops?"

The red-lettered light-up sign just above the white and blue shack has the "Sc" in "Scoops" out, and I laugh at the fact that most of the town is so used to it, we don't even notice it anymore. "Kind of? That sign hasn't been fixed in five years, so it's become the unofficial nickname for this place."

"What's your go-to?" she asks as she cranes her neck to squint over the long line of people at the menu board. It makes me wonder if she still wears those big-as-Texas glasses at night when she takes her contacts out.

"Chocolate and vanilla twist on a cone with rainbow sprinkles," I answer automatically, turning my attention to the front window. "I haven't had one in *years*, though." I can already feel my mouth watering, despite the pang of sadness that comes with the realization that the last time I was here was with my mom.

"Man. If you think *you* haven't had an ice-cream cone from Sam's in years," Johnny says, tallying it up on his fingers. "Clark, it's gotta be two decades since we last came here together. The summer before senior year. You remember?"

My dad nods, grinning. "You got mint chocolate chip in a cone, and I smashed it into your face about fifteen seconds after you paid. Had to get you back for pantsing me in front of the whole cheer-leading squad."

They both start laughing, shaking their heads in unison.

I exchange a quick look with Blake, both of us rolling our eyes at the long night of nostalgia ahead of us.

“Your mom was so mad at him,” Johnny says, turning to look at me, the bright light from the street lamp overhead shining directly on my face. He stops laughing, giving me a long, slightly uncomfortable look. I know exactly what’s coming before he says it.

“Phew. I just can’t get over how much you look like Jules.”

It’s a variation of a sentence I’ve heard more times than I can count.

“You look just like your mom.”

“You’re practically a clone of Julie!”

“You two could be twins!”

I used to love when people would say things like that. Now I can’t seem to get away from it, her face haunting me every time I look in the mirror. Long, pin-straight brown hair, strong eyebrows, full lips.

But not her eyes. The eyes that I miss so much are never there looking back at me, no matter how much I wish they were.

Instead of her blueberry blue, I have my dad’s dark, dark brown. If it weren’t for that singular feature, you would never guess I was related to him. His height gene whizzed right on past me.

“Doesn’t she?” my dad says, giving me one of his sad smiles.

And just like that he clears his throat and clams up, like he always does when Mom comes up. I watch as he pulls his eyes away from mine. “Did I tell you about that construction gig I had on Luke Wilkens’s property? With the glass ceiling?” he says to Johnny, and suddenly we are back to boring construction talk, which I get more than enough of at home.

“So,” I say, looking over at Blake as we shuffle forward. “How are you liking Huckabee so far?”

“Well, I’ve only been here two days, and I slept most of the first since we took a red-eye,” she says, hesitating a little. “But, uh, to be honest with you? It feels almost like an alternate universe.”

I snort at that generous assessment. “An alternate universe with a lot of cows.”

She nods in agreement, her eyes getting a distant look to them. “A *lot* of cows.”

My shoulders tense as my former friend group trudges past us, towering ice-cream cones in hand, a reward for sprinting over here. I see Jake and Ryan catch sight of Blake, the two of them slowing down, mouths slightly agape, ice cream slowly dripping down their hands as they gawk at her like she’s a dinosaur that’s been spontaneously dropped into the twenty-first century. Olivia jealously swats at Ryan’s shoulder, but she’s just as busy sizing Blake up.

It’s not every day there’s a new girl in town. And definitely not one who’s as pretty as Blake. I’m just relieved that she’s a distraction from the fact that they’re supposed to be judging me.

The only one not looking at her is Matt.

He glances in my direction for a fraction of a second, his eyes peeking out from underneath the swoopy chocolate-brown hair that my mom always said was so adorable.

All I see now is the hurt and disappointment that’s painted across his face.

I stare after him, feeling pretty awful. Which I absolutely

should, since I just broke the heart of the nicest guy in Huckabee.

“What’d you do to *him*?” Blake asks when they’re out of earshot. I was hoping she wouldn’t notice, but that look packed quite a punch.

“Oh, you know,” I say as I let out a long sigh, trying to keep my voice light. “The usual. We dated. We broke up. We dated. We broke up again.” It’s not a lie. It’s not the whole truth, either.

She whistles, raising her eyebrows in surprise. “You think you’ll get back together again?”

“No. I don’t think that’s going to happen this time.” Three years of making up and breaking up cycle through my mind, Matt always finding a way to make things right again. But now that cycle includes the night of junior prom, and it’s ground everything to a halt. He won’t even talk to me. “I mean, you saw the look he gave me. Pretty obvious he’s going to hate me for all eternity.”

“Really? Hate? I didn’t get that.” Blake bites her lip thoughtfully. “Seemed to me like he isn’t over you. Maybe he’s just waiting for you to talk to him.”

Mercifully, Sam’s oldest daughter, Amber, calls “Next!” from the middle window, so I don’t have to acknowledge the tiny bit of hope fluttering into my stomach at Blake’s words.

Hope that there might be a way I can fix all this.

The full-scoop, front-of-the-line cones come out in the blink of an eye, and I juggle the prize basket to grab ahold of mine, taking a big lick before it starts to melt.

In an instant I’m transported back to summer nights with my mom after bingo and pit stops after tough days of elementary school.

I have to remind my feet to keep moving.

The three picnic tables are already filled, so we start the trek back over to the elementary school, the line of people still waiting eyeing our ice cream longingly.

Blake looks over at me and makes a face, rubbing her temple. “Brain freeze.”

“Put your tongue on the roof of your mouth,” I say, hearing Mom’s voice in my head, telling me the same words hundreds of times. I always used to scarf my cone down in under a minute, writhing in pain after. I take a slow, focused lick, no longer rushing straight into my rainbow-sprinkle-covered twist. Or anything, for that matter. “It works like a charm.”

Within a few seconds she nods, her face impressed, the brain freeze gone as she starts right back in on her cone like nothing happened.

I look past her at the line of people, noticing all the eyes drawn to Blake as we pass. She is something new, and shiny, and beautiful in a town where very little changes. If she feels like Huckabee is from another universe, it’s pretty clear that everyone here feels the same way about her.

I look over to see if she notices the stares she’s getting, but she’s just merrily licking her ice cream. Not a single care in the world other than brain freeze. I can’t help but feel a sudden wave of jealousy at that.

My dad nudges me, and I swing my head around to look up at him. “Still good to pack tomorrow? I brought a couple of boxes home from work.”

I grimace as the for-sale sign outside our house pops into my head, my childhood home soon to be ripped out from under me. Just another reason this summer completely sucks.

“*Packing?*” Johnny skids to a stop.

“Didn’t I tell you we’re moving?” my dad asks. Guess Dad didn’t mention it in their monthly phone calls.

“You’re kidding!” Johnny exclaims, his eyes wide, looking almost as shocked as I was when my dad told me. A glob of ice cream drips off his cone and lands smack on the pavement below him, somehow managing to steer clear of his shirt. Ah, to not have boobs. “The second I get to town you’re packing up?”

“Not out of Huckabee,” my dad says, pointing his spoon at Johnny as he replies. “Just into something smaller.” “Smaller” was a code word for “cheaper,” but Johnny probably didn’t know that.

“Like he’d ever leave Huckabee,” I whisper to Johnny as my dad “hi”s and “hello”s his way down the long ice-cream line. Our own unofficial mayor.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” Johnny says with a laugh, turning to say hi to an old classmate.

If Huckabee were the *Titanic*, my dad would definitely be the captain, saluting proudly as the ship nosedives straight into the ocean.

“We could swing by tomorrow to help you pack for a bit,” Johnny offers when we hit the gravel parking lot and there’s no one left to say hello to but the cars.

“Don’t you guys have some *unpacking* to do?” my dad asks.

“Our boxes don’t come in for another three to five business

days,” Johnny says, grinning widely. “How about we do a trade? We help you tomorrow, and in exchange, you help us later this week.”

“Deal,” my dad says, crushing the empty cup in his fist and holding out his free hand. They do a firm manshake, like this is some kind of solemn oath and not just casual plans.

“Does three work? Or three thirty?” Johnny asks, nodding to Blake as we head slowly to the farthest corner of the parking lot, where they managed to find a space. “This one’s still a little jet-lagged.”

I see it now, in the faint dark circles under her eyes, the rasp encircling some of her words.

“Three is perfect,” my dad says, nodding. “Em works Saturday mornings at Nina’s Bakery in town.”

“Nina?” Johnny asks. “As in Nina Levin?”

“Nina *Biset* is what she goes by now,” my dad corrects, grinning. “But, yes, *that* Nina. Her daughter, Kiera, is best friends with Emily.”

“Was that by choice or predetermined?” Johnny asks me with a wink.

“A little bit of both,” I say, laughing. Kiera and I always joke that we were born best friends, like our moms.

I finish off the rest of my ice cream, the sweet taste lingering in my mouth as we walk slowly through the parking lot. We reach the last row, cars squeezed together just past the fifth-grade wing and right before the soccer field, the forest beyond the goalpost looking dark and ominous in the moonlight.

Back in middle school, after the bingo fundraiser was over, a

group of us used to dare each other to run past the soccer goal and touch one of the big trees just inside the brush. It would take twenty minutes of talking smack and wide-eyed creeping through the grass for someone to be brave enough to actually do it.

Nine times out of ten, I was the one whipping through the darkness to tap the uneven bark, still flying high from my bingo-winning luck.

It's crazy how much has changed since then. How much *I've* changed since then.

"Well, this is us," Johnny says.

I'm looking at an old, rusty, forest-green Jeep, but I'm surprised when the lights on the blacked-out Porsche next to it blink twice as he unlocks the doors.

I exchange a quick look with my dad, trying to hide my shock. I can tell he's just as shook as I am.

Johnny doesn't notice our wide-eyed reaction though and gives me a one-armed hug, the cellophane around the prize basket crinkling noisily as he leans in. "See ya tomorrow, kid!" he says, then gives my dad a handshake before opening the door to the Porsche and hopping in.

This must be a family of huggers, because Blake gives me a hug next, her arm wrapping quickly around me, bringing with it a wave of fresh linen and warm sand and salty ocean water all wrapped together.

She smells like a day at the beach.

"See you," she says, tugging herself away. Apparently, I'm so

busy smelling the ocean that I hold on for a second too long. What is wrong with me?

She waves to my dad. “Bye, Mr. C!”

We watch them pull out, the engine revving gently as they slide smoothly through the aisles and out of the parking lot.

“What is it Johnny does again?” I ask as the headlights slowly fade into the distance.

“Tech stuff,” my dad says with a shrug.

“Tech stuff?” I say as we head to the car, doubling back across the parking lot. “What? Like . . . Google? Matt’s dad doesn’t even drive anything like *that*.”

He looks over at me, the both of us surprised I brought up Matt. He doesn’t know the specifics, and won’t ask unless I tell him, but he *has* to know something big enough is amiss that Matt hasn’t come by and I haven’t left the house to see anyone but Kiera in weeks.

“Yeah,” my dad says, grabbing the basket from me and lightly nudging me. “And to think, neither of them has a bingo prize basket!”

I smile at him, nudging him right back.

“Thanks, by the way,” he says as we get to his red, slightly rusty Chevy. He holds the basket up and smiles at me over the truck bed.

“Nope!” I say, yanking open the truck door, the hinges screeching noisily. “Your card, your money, your basket.”

“I don’t know about that. That card doesn’t win like that for anyone but you and your—” He stops short before saying it, hitting

me square in the chest with more than just the prize basket.

The both of us fall silent, but I can feel the missing word ringing in my ears.

He was able to *go to bingo*, to be in that room and pretend it didn't mean anything, but he can't even say her name.

"Buckle up," I say, eyeing his seat belt as he puts the car in drive. I don't know how many times I have to tell him practically half of all motor vehicle fatalities could be prevented if the person had a seat belt on.

He nods, quickly braking the car and clicking it into place. He shoots me a sincerely guilty look. "Sorry, Em."

I nod, pretending it's no big deal, but I'm already down one parent, and I'd rather not make it two.

We drive off, the elementary school fading into the distance, just like it had hundreds of times in my mom's lemon of a silver Toyota Camry. I watch the people outside Sam's Scoops, kids running around, their parents trying to wrangle them and slowly accepting defeat, a group of middle school girls gossiping in the corner. I try to picture myself in the middle of it all, if everything were different.

Would Mom and I be driving off already? Or would we be stuck in the thick of it, talking about Jim Donovan's antics or the latest gossip at school or how wild it is that awkward seven-year-olds can grow up to be Instagram-model pretty. I'm sure that in that universe, things would be okay between me and Matt and my friends, that the person whose advice I need now more than ever would know some way to fix this.

But the image fades just like the school in the rearview. There's always this empty void, a gap in space and time where my mom should be but isn't.

Shifting in my seat, I rest my head against the glass of the car window and close my eyes, reaching in my pocket to wrap my fingers around the lucky quarter.

I usually push these thoughts away because I can never picture it, but for the first time in a long time, one arm cradling the familiar shape of a bingo prize basket, the taste of our favorite ice-cream flavor still on my tongue, I can feel her.

I can actually *feel* her.

My thumbnail finds that familiar nick just above George Washington's head, and I can't help but think that maybe this bingo night wasn't so bad after all.