

Noodle Soup for Nincompoops

Ellen Wittlinger

Everybody else in seventh-grade honors English had groaned at the assignment, "I Am a Camera," but I thought it would be fun—three pages about anything your invisible "camera" noticed over the weekend. After spending most of Saturday at David Segal's bar mitzvah and Sunday afternoon at the mall with Liza and Harper, it didn't take me long to write "How to Flirt Without Showing Your Braces." Even Liza thought it was funny, and it was mostly about her. Actually, that's probably why she liked it; Liza is her own favorite subject these days.

I guess I notice things other kids don't. I like watching people. Most kids I know don't shut up long enough to notice anybody else; they're constantly yelling and wiggling around so *they* get noticed. David Segal's bar mitzvah party was so loud, I saw three grown-ups popping ibuprofen before they even served lunch. Liza, who's been my



best friend since birth, or possibly earlier, is always right in the middle of the action. I'm usually standing on the edge of the crowd, hoping *not* to be noticed. It's always been that way, and neither of us has ever minded.

But now, according to Liza, I do way too much watching and not nearly enough flirting. Up until this year, neither of us talked to boys. We agreed they were aliens. But ever since Harper showed up, Liza is suddenly all about the opposite sex. "Who likes who" takes up three quarters of her conversation.

When Mr. Chrisman asked me to stay after class for a few minutes, I figured he wanted to talk to me about my essay. Mr. C is always complimenting me on my writing. Sure enough, he waved it in front of me and smiled. "Maggie, I knew you were a good writer," he said, "but I had no idea until now how funny you could be!" Even if I *did* have braces, I'd smile at Mr. Chrisman, who, in my opinion, is the best teacher at South Hadfield Middle School (and also really cute).

"You're such a natural writer—why is it you've never written anything for the *Newsflash*?" he asked me. Mr. C is the adviser for the school newspaper, the *Weekly Newsflash*, and he's always trying to recruit kids to write stuff for it. I guess it's hard to fill four pages every week with sports scores, lunch menus, and articles about how much toilet paper gets stolen from the girls' bathroom.

I shrugged. "I'm not that interested in writing *facts*. You know. I like to make things up."

He nodded. "Well, your essay gave me an idea. How would you like to write an advice column for the newspaper?"

I had to laugh. "What kind of advice could *I* give anybody? How to be invisible?"

Mr. C's smile disappeared. "Do you really think you're invisible?"

I shrugged. "To most kids. I don't care, though."

"I think of you as quiet but certainly not invisible. Anyway, for this job keeping a low profile is an asset." Mr. C motioned for me to sit down in the chair next to his desk. "Here's my idea. You wouldn't be writing a *real* advice column; it would be funny, something to get more kids interested in reading the paper. To begin with, I'd write a few letters with silly questions, and you could come up with funny answers. We'd tell kids that if they want to ask you questions, they can leave them in my box in the main office, and I can give them to you after class. That way, no one will know who you are."

"You mean, I wouldn't be answering the questions as Maggie Cluny? I'd make up a name? I'd be somebody else?"

"That's right. Make up a name. You can name the whole column whatever you want, just so it's funny. I think if we set it up as humorous from the beginning, kids will get the idea and write you funny questions."

The idea crept around in my mind. I could say whatever I wanted to as long as I wasn't Maggie Cluny. I'd

have an alter ego, like Clark Kent and Superman. "But won't people find out it's me?"

"Well, that's the thing. In order to keep it secret, you couldn't tell *anybody*. Not even your best friends. I think the mystery aspect will add to the fun of it—everybody will be guessing who it is." Mr. Chrisman sat forward, his hands on his knees. "So, what do you think? Interested?"

"Yeah, I am. Can I think about it overnight?"

"Sure, sure. Meanwhile, I'll try my hand at a few letters, in anticipation!"

Why didn't anybody *my* age ever smile at me like Mr. C did? Sometimes I felt like I must already be thirty. I'd skipped right over the so-called "best years of my life" right into elderly boredom.

By the time I got to my locker, Liza was sitting on the floor, her head drooping over her books, her long blond-streaked hair hiding her face. She looked up when she heard me coming.

"Where have you *been*? Everybody left already. Robbie Piersall's mother picked him up, and he asked me if I needed a ride home, but you weren't here!"

"Sorry. I was talking to Mr. . . . Meadows . . . about the geography test."

"Ugh, geography." She got to her feet and dusted off the butt of her low-rise jeans, then readjusted her shirt so her belly button peeked out. You aren't allowed to have your stomach bare in school, but Liza always wears that stretchy material you can pull down or push up, depending on the occasion.

"Why did you want a ride?" I asked her, carefully changing the subject from my recent whereabouts. "It only takes us fifteen minutes to walk, and the weather's nice."

Liza sighed. "Maggie, God. I don't care about the *ride*. Robbie wanted me in his car! Don't you get it?"

"Oh." I hated it when Liza acted like I was the dumbest geek on earth. "Well, how was I supposed to know you liked Robbie Piersall? I thought you were crazy about David Segal—you were yesterday!" The turnover in Liza's boyfriends was hard to keep up with; she fell in love more often than most people brushed their teeth.

"I *am*. I don't think I even like Robbie, but maybe he likes *me*. Now I'll never know."

"I don't see how one car ride would have proved anything," I grumbled.

"That's because you just don't *get* stuff, Maggie. Honestly, sometimes you don't even seem like you're really thirteen!"

I guess she hadn't heard the news that I was actually thirty in disguise. "Well, sometimes you don't either," I said. "Sometimes you seem like you're about eighteen!"

Liza's pout turned up at the corners. "You really think so? Because of my hair?" She hooked her arm through mine and turned into my best friend again. "Wait till you hear what David said to me after math today. . . ."

"How's this?" I said, handing Mr. Chrisman a sheet of paper. I'd been working on the idea since I left school the day before, and I was proud of the final product.

“Noodle Soup for Nincompoops; by Faustina Intelligentsia. No question too stupid to answer.” He gave me his big, full-of-teeth smile. “You’re going to do the column!”

“Do you like the name?” I asked.

“I love Faustina Intelligentsia—it’s silly and pompous—perfect for a humor column. But I’m not sure I get ‘Noodle Soup—’”

“I was trying to think of a name that would get people’s attention, so I checked the paper to see what books were on the best-seller lists. There were all these books for ‘dummies’ and ‘idiots,’ and then there were a couple of Chicken Soup books, so I thought if I combined both of them . . .”

He threw his head back and laughed, his brown hair falling in his face. If only there were *boys* as cool as Mr. C. “Noodle Soup for Nincompoops! It’s great. You’re going to be good at this, Maggie. I can tell already.” He handed me some papers. “Take a look at these and see if you can come up with funny answers. You don’t have to do them all, just two or three. And remember, don’t let anyone see what you’re doing!”

If popularity at school had anything to do with how much teachers liked you, I’d have a posse. Unfortunately, it seemed to work the opposite way. Liza and Harper were both standing in the hallway when I came around the corner. As I said, Liza has been my friend forever, but Harper was a new addition. She was really Liza’s friend more than mine, although I didn’t hate her or anything.

She hung around with more of the popular kids than Liza and I did; it was because of her we got invited to David Segal's bar mitzvah. But sometimes I felt like Liza and Harper were the best friends and I was just a dark, silent shadow following them around.

At least Liza looked happy to see me today. "There you are. Harper's mom is going to drive us to the mall."

"How come? Wasn't Robbie Piersall's mother available?"

"Ha-ha. Let's go—she's waiting."

I hung back. "You're really going to the mall again? We were just there on Sunday."

Liza narrowed her eyes and stared at me as if she was trying to send me a coded message. "So? It's *fun*."

"Oh, yeah, if your idea of fun is watching boys pick out jeans at Abercrombie."

Harper was studying the white crescents of her cuticles, staying out of the debate.

Liza sighed. "Come on, Maggie. We'll go to the food court and get sweet-potato fries."

"Can we go to the bookstore?" I asked.

Harper looked up. "No! When you go into the bookstore, you want to stay forever, and we have to wait for you!"

"Oh, like I didn't wait half an hour for you two to try on fifty shades of nail polish!"

Liza gave me a tight smile. "Maybe we could meet you someplace if you want to go to the bookstore."

I shook my head. "That's okay. You guys go. I don't feel

like being inside this afternoon anyway. I might go home and rake leaves."

Harper rolled her eyes. "You're kidding. *Rake leaves?*"

"I like doing it. It's relaxing."

"So is going to the mall!" Liza said.

"Don't beg her," Harper said, heading for the stairs.

Liza looked disappointed. "Okay, go do your chores. Maybe you can come over tomorrow or something."

"Yeah, maybe," I said. Liza ran to catch up with Harper, which I hated to see. When had Harper become so very important?

Robbie Piersall set two boxes of the *Weekly Newsflash* on a table in the hallway outside the Little Theater, where kids usually picked up their copies. I tried to be nonchalant as I sauntered over and reached into a box. Several other kids were right behind me.

"This is a really good issue," Robbie announced. I had the feeling he was looking at me, so I didn't look up. Actually, I almost never look at Robbie; he's the kind of person who looks you right in the eyeballs, even if you hardly know him. It makes me so nervous, I can't think straight.

"You're the editor; you have to think it's good," some eighth grader said as he walked past without grabbing a copy.

"No, really. There's a new column on page three—it's really funny."

I took my skinny newspaper and stood back against the

wall, where I could see people's reactions without them noticing. Not that they ever noticed me anyway. This morning, though, my heart was beating so loud, I was afraid they'd look around to see where all the noise was coming from.

I opened the paper to page three, like everybody else. There it was:

Noodle Soup for Nincompoops

by Faustina Intelligentsia

"No question too stupid to answer!"

"Ha! Did you read this?" Jillie Randolph said. "Listen!" And she began to read my column out loud to the assembled group:

"Dear Faustina,

I am madly in love with my boyfriend, but my mother keeps calling it 'puppy love.' I hate that! How can I get her to stop?

—Teenager in Love

Dear Teenager in Love,

Poor you. Have you considered chewing up her bedroom slippers?

—Faustina Intelligentsia"

As Jillie was reading the column some kids had come up to look over her shoulder while others stood nearby,

listening. They all laughed at my answer. Or rather, *Faustina's* answer.

"Who wrote that?" Adam Levine asked as he grabbed a paper out of the box.

"It doesn't say." Patrick Deveraux, an eighth grader, was sharing a paper with his girlfriend, Ellie Something-or-Other. "There's more." He read the second letter aloud:

"Dear Faustina,
I'm crazy about a girl who's two years older than me. I lied to her about my age, but now I'm afraid she'll find out and hate me for lying to her. What should I do?

—Tangled Web

Dear Tangled Web,
Well, dearie, you have two choices: Keep lying until she tells everybody what a big phony you are, or find a girl two years younger and let her do the lying.

—Faustina Intelligentsia"

The first bell rang, but nobody moved. Jillie started in again, reading the last letter:

"Dear Faustina,
I have a crush on my sister's boyfriend, and I think he likes me, too. Is it okay for me to go for it?

—Better-Looking Sister

Dear Better-Looking Sister,
Sure, sweetheart, go right ahead. Of course, it's
also okay for your sister to kick your butt from
here to Tuscaloosa. Duh.

—Faustina Intelligentsia"

"These are funny!" Ellie said. "Somebody must know who wrote them."

"Here's a clue," Patrick said. "It says, 'If you have questions for Faustina Intelligentsia, please leave them in Mr. Chrisman's mailbox in the main office.' So it must be somebody who's on the staff."

"Who wrote this, Robbie?" Melanie Cross said. "You must know."

Robbie shrugged. "It's a secret."

"Oh, come on," Ben Anders said. "You're the editor."

"I don't know. Really. Mr. Chrisman is the only one who knows."

Everybody was talking about my column and trying to guess who'd written it. They were guessing all the obviously funny kids—the guys who can break up the teachers, the girls whose sarcasm can drop an enemy at fifty feet. When the second bell rang, I folded up my newspaper and walked off down the hall, invisible as ever. It was wonderful, but it was frightening, too. All these kids wanted to know who I was! Now I *really* didn't want them to find out because I knew they'd be disappointed that it was just me, Maggie Cluny.

It was almost impossible for Mr. Chrisman to get our class to settle down.

"Come on, Mr. C. Who is it?"

"Why does it have to be a secret, anyway?"

"We won't tell anybody!"

He smiled and shook his head. "Give it up," he said. "I am an excellent keeper of secrets."

I turned into a piece of petrified wood, afraid to move so much as a finger lest I call attention to myself. I didn't dare even glance at Mr. Chrisman.

"I would think whoever is writing the column would *want* people to know who he is. He's good!"

"It's not necessarily a *he*, Robbie," Liza said. "It could be any of us."

"Yes, it could. Isn't a little mystery fun?" Mr. C said. "And now on to the mystery of your vocabulary tests."

After school I saw little knots of kids huddled over the *Newsflash*, laughing. Amazingly, I was a hit.

"Who do you think it is?" Liza asked me while we were walking home.

Mr. C had told me not to tell even my best friends, but I wouldn't have told Liza anyway. Her record for secret keeping is about twelve seconds.

"Who do you think?" I asked her back, hoping not to have to tell another out-and-out lie.

"At first I thought Robbie had probably written it himself—he was making such a big deal out of it—but now I don't think so." She gave me a sideways glance.

"No?" I picked a yellowing leaf from a tree and studied it carefully.

"No. Who do you think it is?"

"How should I know?" I said.

"Is it *you*?" Liza said, suddenly turning in front of me so I had to stop walking.

I was so surprised, I jumped. "*Me*? You really think I could write something like that?" I could feel my pupils jumping around in my eyes.

"You can be funny sometimes. Around me. Besides, you're all buddy-buddy with Mr. Chrisman."

I didn't say anything. I just stared at Liza like she was a skunk in my path while I tried to decide how on earth to convince her I was not Faustina Intelligentsia. It turned out silence was the right move.

"Oh, don't look so shocked!" she said. "I guess it couldn't really be you, could it? I mean, you wouldn't do anything as outrageous as that, would you?"

My silence began to heat up as we continued walking.

"I mean, I wish you *were* Faustina Intelligentsia. That would be so cool."

"And I'm not cool enough as I am? Is that what you mean?"

"Don't get mad about it. You're just not the kind of person who's funny in public." She gave my arm a little punch. "It's okay. *I* know you're funny."

I wished I could tell her the truth, that everybody at school was laughing at *my* writing. But I couldn't, and it

didn't seem fair that she was ragging on me again, so I said, "At least we know it isn't Harper who's writing it. I've never heard her say anything the least *bit* funny."

We stopped to pet Mrs. Grayson's collie so we wouldn't have to talk anymore.

Mr. Chrisman was ecstatic about the reaction kids were having to my column. During the next few weeks, we got two dozen letters in the box. Most kids understood that the column was supposed to be a spoof, and they wrote silly questions about things like whether or not to cut their hair and whether you should kiss on the first date. Questions Faustina could have fun with.

While I was playing with Faustina, Liza began to spend more time with Harper. Sometimes they invited me along, and sometimes they didn't, which was fine. Shopping is boring. Besides, I never really felt comfortable with Harper, anyway. I missed Liza, though—I missed her a lot.

Meanwhile, the kids were still trying to figure out who Faustina was. For a while they were evenly divided between those who thought Robbie Piersall was writing the column and those who thought it might be Pam Ackerman, a girl with a big attitude who'd transferred to our school this year from a school in New York City. The idea was that anybody who'd lived in New York was automatically funny, although I'd personally never seen her crack a smile. Except for Liza, nobody suspected me, not for a moment. I pretended to Mr. C that this was great,

but secretly, I was getting a little depressed about it. Nobody had a clue that Faustina Intelligentsia could live inside somebody like me.

Now I was always the last person to leave English class. Mr. C would put the letters on a corner of his desk so I could whisk them up without attracting too much attention, even if he was talking with somebody. One afternoon there was a single letter lying there. I scooped it up and dumped it in my backpack to read when I got home. Liza and Harper had plans after school with another girl, Annie, whom I didn't know very well, so I walked home alone. It was starting to get cold out now, which made me remember walking home with Liza on wintry days, how we'd put our hoods up over our ears and run until we got warmed up, then dawdle the rest of the way, as usual.

By the time I got home, I'd forgotten about the letter. I did my Spanish and geography homework, then went downstairs to help Mom make potato latkes for dinner. It wasn't until nine o'clock that I remembered Faustina's letter. I dug it out of my backpack, opened the envelope, and got ready to laugh.

The question was neatly typed with no errors and run out on a sheet of canary yellow paper. I shivered the minute I saw it.

Dear Faustina,

I'm having a problem with my best friend. I've made some new friends lately, and I don't think

she likes them. I feel like I'm stuck in the middle between my old friend, who's sort of quiet, and the new ones, who like to party. What should I do?
—Stuck

There was no doubt in my mind—it was from Liza. For one thing, she was a very good typist, and I happened to know that her mother kept a big stack of yellow computer paper in her desk drawer. Liza certainly had new friends, who liked to party. And one old dull one. Suddenly, I felt sick to my stomach and lay down on my bed. Liza was having a “problem” with me. She wanted to hang out with her new friends and I was holding her back. God, it never occurred to me that Liza wanted to dump me, but I could see she was asking Faustina Intelligentsia for permission to do just that.

And then I wondered if Liza had figured out who Faustina Intelligentsia really was. If so, she'd know that I'd know she sent the letter. We'd used that yellow paper ourselves lots of times. Maybe she was warning me: Either go along with my new friends, or get out of the way.

My best friend since forever was getting ready to throw me overboard, and I was supposed to write something funny about it and *publish it in the school newspaper!* It was impossible—I couldn't do it. I couldn't even think about it! Except I couldn't *stop* thinking about it either.

After an hour of dithering, I decided I wasn't going to get anything else done anyway, so I crawled into bed and turned out the light, even though I knew it was going to

be impossible to go to sleep. In the dark I started wondering what Faustina Intelligentsia would say to Liza.

It was funny. I had a picture in my mind of who Faustina was, and she was nothing like me. She had wild red hair piled up on her head like a messy bird's nest, with pencils and feathers and beads all wound around in it. She was about twenty-five years old and wore granny boots and thrift-store clothes and black lipstick. And her laugh was loud enough to make everybody look at her, even in the middle of someplace as noisy as David Segal's bar mitzvah party. She was very cool and definitely *not* invisible.

Every time I sat down to think of an answer to a question, I imagined her putting her boots up on the table and cackling over the smart-aleck answer. It wasn't that I wanted to *be* like her, but I really liked having her inside my head, letting me see things the way she saw them. I wondered what Mr. C would think of her. He'd probably like Faustina more than me, since she was funny *and* a grown-up. He probably liked red hair.

When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed I lived in the custodian's closet at school. Mr. Chrisman was the only person who knew I was there, and he brought me bowls of noodle soup for every meal. I didn't mind it at all. When I woke up in the morning, I knew what Faustina Intelligentsia would say to Liza.

Dear Stuck,

What you should do, dearie, is *get out of the middle!* Two roads diverged, and all that. You

can't go both ways, unless you're a real split personality. Here's the question: Do you want to end up eating noodle soup with the nincompoop, or do you want to have a good time? Do you really have to ask?

—Faustina Intelligentsia

It was the right answer. Faustina[♂] was always right.

The rest of that week Liza acted the same as she always did, nice to me one minute, then running off with Harper the next. Until Friday, the day the *Weekly Newsflash* came out.

Once again everybody was giggling about the column. They couldn't believe they still didn't know who wrote it. I caught up with Liza as she headed into Mr. C's room for English.

"Got your *Newsflash*, I see." I wondered if she'd read her answer yet, if she'd take Faustina's advice.

Liza turned and glared at me. "Yes, I do."

Her look scalded my cheeks. "So, after school do you want to—"

"I'm busy after school," she said, flinging her half-and-half hair in my face as she turned away from me. "I'm going to Harper's. She's having a party tonight."

"Oh, okay." But she wasn't hanging around to hear my response. She'd already *had* a response, from Faustina Intelligentsia, and she was obviously following the advice to the letter.

I couldn't concentrate very well in English; I kept

sneaking looks at Liza, who had taken the seat farthest away from mine, even though it meant sitting in the front row. Could this really be happening? Would Liza really stop being my friend after all these years because of some silly newspaper column? But no, I reminded myself, she'd wanted to get rid of me before that. The column just gave her permission.

I let Liza fly out of class before I gathered up my books and trudged to the door. Mr. C gave me a big smile, and I gave him a halfhearted one in return. Then, just as I got to the door, Robbie Piersall came up behind me and bent his head close to my ear.

"It's you, isn't it?" he whispered. "I know it is."

"What?" I was shocked to see his grinning mouth and blue eyes so close to mine.

He pulled me off to the side of the hall, so we were out of the traffic flow. "You're Faustina, aren't you? I know it." When I still struggled to speak, he added, "Don't worry. I'm not going to tell anybody. The column is great—it's the best thing in the *Newsflash!*"

I dared to glance into his eyes as they bored into mine. Finally, I found my voice. "Thanks. How did you—"

"Two reasons. First of all, most of the bigmouths around here would have already told people if they were writing it. You aren't like that. And secondly, I saw your 'I Am a Camera' essay. Mr. C left a stack of papers lying around the newspaper office, and yours was on top, so I read it. I didn't put two and two together right away, but suddenly, it hit me. If there was anybody else who

could write that well, I'd know about them."

My mouth fell open. "I didn't think anybody would figure it out. I mean, I'm sort of invisible around here."

"You just think you are. I've noticed you before."

Then we both turned red and looked at the floor.

I wanted to run away, but the only excuse I could think of, that I had to meet Liza to walk home, was a lie. Finally, I just said. "I should get going."

Robbie nodded. "If you ever need a ride home or anything . . . I mean, my mom drives me and . . . you don't live that far away."

He knew where I *lived*?

"I told Liza a few weeks ago we'd give you guys a ride, but I guess she didn't tell you."

She *told* me, she just made it sound more like *her* invitation than mine.

"Actually, if your mom doesn't mind . . . I would kind of like a ride."

"Great!" Robbie smiled as we walked to the seventh-grade lockers. We walked together, like it was a normal thing to do.

I didn't hear from Liza on Friday night, but who cared? Let her go to some dumb party with Harper. Robbie called and we talked on the phone for a while. Actually, we ran out of stuff to say to each other after about five minutes, so then we just sort of *breathed* together and laughed for another five.

On Saturday, Mom offered to take me to the mall for

new shoes, but I was afraid I'd run into the new best friends there, so I said I didn't feel like it. I sat at my desk doing homework and writing next week's "Noodle Soup for Nincompoops."

Robbie called Saturday night and wanted to know if I could go out with him, like to the movies. I couldn't believe this was happening to me! I got so nervous—what would we talk about for a whole evening?—that I told him my mother wouldn't let me go out alone with boys yet. I don't even know if that's true; I never had to ask her about it before. He said that was okay, that maybe next weekend we could get a group of kids to go!

As soon as I hung up the phone, I missed Liza terribly. It looked like I might just have my first boyfriend ever, and I didn't even have a best friend to talk to about it! Liza would know what to say if somebody asked her to the movies. I needed her! Twice I dialed her phone number, all but the last digit, then hung up. If she didn't want to be my friend, I wasn't going to beg her.

I slept late Sunday—Robbie had to work on a project for his science class, so I knew he wouldn't call until the evening. There wasn't much to do until then except read the Sunday papers and avoid my mother's questions about who that boy was who "keeps calling."

Just after noon the doorbell rang. Mom and Dad were in the backyard mulching the roses for winter, so I hauled myself off the couch and opened the door. There stood Liza, her lips pursed, her eyes blazing.

"I can't believe you, Maggie!" She started right in

yelling. "Doesn't our friendship mean *anything* to you? After all these years? You just tell me to 'get out of the middle' and go to parties with my new friends. You just wipe me out of your life like . . . like you're erasing a chalkboard!" The anger melted off her face, and before I knew it, she was standing there with her hands over her eyes, crying.

I pulled her inside the house, and she sniffed and rubbed her face on her sleeve, trying to get the mad back.

"Did you know it was me all along?"

"Of course I knew. Well, not immediately, but I kept thinking about it. Who else can write that funny? And I know you and Mr. Chrisman are crazy about each other, so of course he got you to do it. You thought your best friend wouldn't figure it out?"

"If you're my best friend, why did you write that letter to me?"

"I don't know. You've been so weird since we started hanging around with Harper. . . ."

"You're the one who started hanging around with Harper."

She shrugged. "Whatever. I wrote the letter to tell you . . . it's hard for me that you don't like my new friends that much. And I thought it would be a funny way to do it in a letter to your column. I knew you'd know it was me because of the yellow paper and all, but I didn't think you'd say, 'Fine, just go off with your new friends!'"

"But I thought you were saying I had to go along with

all your new friends or . . . get out of your way. I thought you were dumping me."

"You dumped me! You said, 'two roads diverge' and all that stuff." Her tears had finally dried up.

"I thought that was what Faustina Intelligentsia would tell you. You should get rid of your boring friend and hang out with the ones who want to party. It's not what I wanted you to do."

Liza stared at me, her mouth hanging slightly open. Then she took her fist and punched me on the arm. "You're nuts, Maggie. You're a crazy person. You told me to go hang out with other people even though you still want to be my best friend?"

"Of course I do. Who else would I hang out with?"

She hit me again, and then we hugged each other, briefly. Liza isn't really the huggy type. "If you ever do anything this dumb again, Maggie Cluny, you can be best friends with Faustina Intelligentsia or the nincompoop or whoever you are at the moment."

"I won't," I promised as we sank down onto the sofa. "So I guess this means you're stuck in the middle again."

She sighed. "The middle isn't so bad. At least I won't have to spend another entire weekend with Harper. Here I was all upset, and all she wanted to talk about was whether or not she should get her hair cut. I guess your weekend wasn't so hot either, huh?"

I smiled. "Liza, you won't even believe it."

