

CHAPTER 12

Park

When Park got on the bus, he set the comics and Smiths tape on the seat next to him, so they'd just be waiting for her. So he wouldn't have to say anything.

When she got on the bus a few minutes later, Park could tell that something was wrong. She got on like she was lost and ended up there. She was wearing the same thing she'd worn yesterday – which wasn't *that* weird, she was always wearing a different version of the same thing – but today was different. Her neck and wrists were bare, and her hair was a mess – a pile, an all-over glob, of red curls.

She stopped at their seat and looked down at the pile of stuff he'd left for her. (Where were her schoolbooks? He wondered) Then she picked everything up, careful as ever, and sat down.

Park wanted to look at her face, but he couldn't. He stared at her wrists instead. She picked up the cassette. He'd written 'How Soon is Now and More' on the thin white sticker.

She held it out to him.

'Thank you . . .' she said. Now *that* was something he'd never heard her say before. 'But I can't.'

He didn't take it.

'It's for you, take it,' he whispered. He looked up from her hands to her dropped chin.

'No,' she said, 'I mean, thank you, but . . . I can't.' She tried to give him the tape, but he didn't take it. Why did she have to make every little thing so hard?

'I don't want it,' he said.

She clenched her teeth and glared. She really must hate him.

'No,' she said, practically loud enough for other people to hear. 'I mean, I *can't*. I don't have any way to listen to it. *God*, just take it back.'

He took it. She covered her face. The kid in the seat across from them, a twerpy senior who was actually named Junior, was watching.

Park frowned at Junior until he turned away. Then Park turned back to the girl . . .

He took his Walkman out of the pocket of his trench coat and popped out his Dead Kennedys tape. He slid the new tape in, pressed play, then – carefully – put the headphones over her hair. He was so careful, he didn't even touch her.

He could hear the swampy guitar start and then the first line of the song. 'I am the son . . . and the heir . . .'

She lifted her head a little but didn't look at him. She didn't move her hands away from her face.

When they got to school, she took the headphones off and gave them back to him.

They got off the bus together and stayed together. Which was weird. Usually, they broke away from each other as soon as they hit the sidewalk. That's what seemed weird now, Park thought; they walked the same way every day, her locker was just down the hall from his – how had they managed to go their separate ways every morning?

Park stopped for a minute when they got to her locker. He didn't step close to her, but he stopped. She stopped, too.

'Well,' he said, looking down the hall, 'now you've heard the Smiths.'

And she . . .

Eleanor laughed.