

The **V** Club

by **KATE BRIAN**

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EVA FARRELL DREADED MEETING WITH HER GUIDANCE counselor more than she dreaded dental appointments and final exams and even those evil mock trials she was forced to participate in for history class. Mrs. Labella was everything Eva was not. She was big, she was pushy, she was loud. She constantly smelled of cigarettes and cinnamon gum—enough to make a girl dry heave. But somewhere along the way she had adopted Eva as her very own charity case. She was constantly telling Eva how smart she was, how intuitive she was, how she could have anything she wanted if she would just come out of her shell already and reach for the stars! (She also had a whole problem with mixing metaphors.)

Reach for the stars. Yeah. Eva couldn't even reach for the salt and pepper.

Going to see Mrs. Labella was right up there on Eva's

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personal torture list with oral reports and peer critique days in creative-writing class. So that morning when she walked into homeroom to find the little blue slip on her desk telling her to go directly to the guidance office, she knew instantly it was going to be a bad day. No good day started out with one of Labella's pep talks.

Eva sat back into the vinyl couch in the waiting room, her knees pressed together and her ankles separated. She hugged her backpack to her chest and watched the clock. She'd already missed ten minutes of first-period chemistry. Maybe by the time she got back to class, they would be done going over the homework. At least she would miss the waiting-to-get-called-on sweats (number four on her personal torture list).

The perky guidance secretary looked over at her and gave her one of those I-haven't-forgotten-you're-here smiles. Eva looked away quickly. Eye contact was not one of her talents.

"Eva!" Mrs. Labella's voice boomed through the office. "There you are, girl! I have fabulous news! Mrs. Treemont kicked the bucket last night!"

Everyone in the outer office looked over at Mrs. Labella, standing there in her cubicle doorway in her purple flowered blouse with the huge bow splayed out over her sizable breasts. Her glasses were suspended from a beaded string around her neck, and they hung right off the edge of her bosom shelf, swaying back and forth. It took a lot for the other members of the guidance office to

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look at Labella in shock or wonder. They were used to her. But she'd just announced that the oldest, most revered, most mysterious resident of Ardsmore, Pennsylvania, had died. And she'd done it with a gleeful grin.

Eva scrambled out of her seat and slid past Labella into her office, figuring that it was the only way to break the uncomfortable silence. Labella closed the door after her and lowered herself into her chair. Eva clutched her backpack and waited.

"It's your lucky day, Eva Farrell," Mrs. Labella said, slapping Eva's knee. "That Treemont lady didn't seem like she had much while she was alive, but it looks like she was just sitting on her wad up in that old house, waiting to surprise us all."

Ooooookay, Eva thought. What'd she do before she died—give birth to twin baby aliens or something? Of course, I don't know how that would make this my lucky day. . . .

Mrs. Labella took a gulp of her coffee and looked at Eva expectantly. Eva got that sinking feeling in her stomach that it was her turn to say something. Her mouth went dry.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me *why* it's your lucky day?"

Oh, how Eva hated this game. Mrs. Labella was always trying to trick her into talking by asking Eva to ask her questions. If only Labella could see Eva with her friends, she'd realize it was only teachers who intimidated her. Well, most adults, actually. And guys. And girls who were older. Or more confident.

“Why is it my lucky day?” Eva asked finally. Mrs. Labella grinned, triumphant.

“*Because* Mrs. Treemont has set up a scholarship, and I *know* that you are going to win it,” Mrs. Labella said. “Her people faxed this over within an hour of her passing. It was waiting in our machine this morning.” She picked up a piece of paper from her desk and cleared her throat before beginning to read. “The Victoria A. Treemont scholarship will be awarded to a student in the senior class at Ardsmore High School who meets the following requirements: He or she must have a grade point average of 3.2 or higher; he or she must have demonstrated commitment to school and community; he or she must submit three recommendations from faculty, community members, and peers; he or she must submit an essay demonstrating his or her qualifications for this scholarship; and he or she must exemplify purity of soul and body.”

Eva blinked. As Labella had ticked off the requirements, Eva had been growing more and more intrigued. But purity of soul and body?

Shouldn't this scholarship have been earmarked for a nunnery?

Mrs. Labella placed the paper down on the desk and turned a beaming smile on Eva.

“Now, you can take that last part any way you want, but I know you'll have no trouble as long as you've kept the rabbit out of the henhouse, if you know what I

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mean.” Eva covered her eyes with her hand. Someone outside the fogged-glass door snickered.

Omigod. She’s the devil, Eva thought. I am sitting in Satan’s cubicle.

Eva sank lower in her chair, turning ten shades of purple. The subject of sex seemed to be coming up a lot lately, even with her friends. It was like there was a sudden dearth of worthy topics in the world and they’d been left to gab endlessly about the one thing Eva knew nothing about.

“I . . . uh . . .”

“I don’t know how they’re going to prove whether or not you are a virgin, mind you, but I believe that’s what old Treemont was getting at with that last line. And besides, you meet all the other requirements and then some,” Labella continued. “Sweetie, this scholarship is for forty thousand dollars a year for four years. You could go to *Wesleyan*. You could go wherever you *want*.”

Suddenly every last disturbed thought in Eva’s head was replaced by a vision of her in a heather gray Wesleyan sweatshirt, walking across campus, chatting with other students—students who understood poetry and writing and didn’t think that recounting their latest baseball victory and making it rhyme qualified as literary magazine material.

“There’s an informational session at the beginning of fifth period tomorrow, and I expect you to be there,” Mrs. Labella told her. “You got it?”

Eva sat up straight and gingerly held out her hand. Mrs. Labella laid the scholarship information on Eva's outstretched palm.

An unfamiliar fluttering of hope danced around inside Eva's chest. She had a 3.6 GPA at least. And she volunteered three times a week at 4-H. And she could probably find three people who would recommend her. And an essay? No problem. Plus she was probably the only senior at Ardsmore who hadn't even been *kissed* yet. You couldn't get much purer than that. She could do this.

She looked up at Mrs. Labella's beaming face, took a deep breath, and asked the ever important question. "There's no interview . . . is there?"

"I can't believe she gave me a C-plus! I've never gotten a C-anything in my entire life!" Debbie Patel said, shaking her history paper in front of Mandy's and Kai's faces. "This is insane! The woman is insane!!"

Mandy Walters and Kai Parker exchanged a smile. "Well, maybe Ms. Russo just didn't agree with your hypothesis that the Allies' more functional uniforms helped them win World War II," Mandy suggested helpfully.

"What? You don't think that function versus form in military uniforms is a factor?" Debbie asked. "You really think our guys would have done as well if they'd had to be sitting in those trenches with those tight German pants riding up their butt cracks? No. Soldiers need to be able to *move*. Whoever designed our uniforms helped us win the war."

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“Oookay, Vera Wang. Whatever you say.” Kai shoved her hands in the pockets of her baggy cargo pants and headed toward her locker.

Debbie didn’t know why she was surprised by Kai’s lack of appreciation for her cutting-edge history paper. The girl dressed more like a guy than most of the guys in this school. Still, somehow she made it work for her. Debbie had to appreciate *that* miracle.

“Hey, guys!” Eva said, pushing away from the wall where she’d been waiting for them. “You’re not going to believe this. There’s this new scholarship and—”

“We know,” Debbie said. “Everyone’s talking about it. Forty g’s a year. Fashion institute, here I come.”

“Uh, *no*. Cornell, here *I* come,” Kai put in. “Or wherever I decide to go.”

“Oh, you guys are applying too?” Eva said, her face falling.

“I’m not,” Mandy said, tucking her blond hair behind her ears.

Debbie glanced at Mandy, who, as always, had a serene, content smile playing about her lips. Debbie so envied her. If there was one thing Mandy Walters did not have to worry about, it was money. In fact, there were a lot of things Mandy Walters didn’t have to worry about. Her college applications, finding a boyfriend, her hair, her skin . . . Debbie shrugged this all off. *If I weren’t such a babe myself, I’d probably have to kill her*, she thought, smirking.

“Thank God for that,” Kai said. “If Miss All-American here applied, we’d all be screwed.”

Eva leaned back against the wall again, looking deflated. “Well, if you guys are going to do it—”

“Don’t even finish that sentence, Eva Farrell,” Mandy said. “You have just as much of a shot as anyone.”

“More so if that whole purity thing turns out to *not* be a joke.” Kai popped open her locker and, as always, a mess of tangled clothes, CD cases, and notebooks spilled out onto the floor. Kai used the side of her leg to push it all back in as Debbie flattened the door back against the wall so she could check her hair in Kai’s locker mirror.

“If that turns out not to be a joke, I’m in trouble,” Debbie said.

“You’re not even going to *need* Treemont’s money,” Mandy told her. “You’re gonna win that FIT scholarship.”

Debbie’s stomach turned. At that very moment her mailbox at home might contain an envelope from FIT. *The* envelope. She had sent her scholarship application in weeks ago, along with her audition piece—a red, backless, Asian-inspired prom dress with a tulle lining and a mandarin collar. Some days she was sure it was going to snag her a spot in the freshman class on her way to Parisian runway shows and sipping fruity cocktails with Gwyneth. Other days she could just as easily envision her creation in the admissions office on the bottom of a pile marked *To be burned*.

“It’s always good to have a backup plan,” Debbie said,

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sounding a bit too much like her father for her own comfort. She brushed the thought aside and tugged at one of her springy black curls.

“Yeah, but I thought the Math and Science competition was your backup plan,” Mandy said.

“Luckily that can now be my *backup* backup,” Debbie said. She took a silver Clinique tube out of her makeup bag and applied a new coat of Black Honey lip gloss. “It’ll be the fashion design scholarship,” Debbie said, smiling at her reflection in the mirror. “Then if that doesn’t work out, the Treemont, and if *that* doesn’t work out, *maybe* the Math and Science competition.”

Her father might be counting on Debbie’s winning the statewide Math and Science competition and getting a full ride to Penn State for the science major of her choice, but Debbie had other plans. Like never cracking a science textbook again for the rest of her natural life.

“Um . . . Debbie? Didn’t you hook up with Sam Crispo on Friday night?” Mandy asked, looking off down the hall.

Debbie turned around to follow her gaze. “Yeah, why?”

“I think he’s showing those guys your bra,” Mandy pointed out. Sure enough, a large group of salivating dorks were jostling around Sam’s locker and Debbie saw a flash of black lace. She snapped her lipstick shut and shook her head.

“Never hook up with a junior,” she said with a sigh, and rolled her eyes. She stalked off down the hall to deal with her latest guy’s indiscretion. The lemmings at the

back of the pack noticed her coming and wisely moved out of the way.

“Hi, Sam!” she said. A four-alarm flush rose to his face as he clumsily attempted to hide the bra behind his back. *You are so snagged*, Debbie thought. She held out her hand.

“I’ll take that back if you’re done practicing,” she said.

Sam’s mouth opened and a pained noise came out. He placed the bra in her hand and Debbie started to walk away slowly, knowing one of the Neanderthals would have to ask.

“Practice?” someone said.

Debbie stopped, smiled at her friends, who were watching the proceedings, and turned to face the guys.

“Oh, yeah. I let Sam borrow this after it took him half an hour to get it off me on Friday night. I guess he hasn’t had much experience,” Debbie said. She tilted her head and in a high sweet voice added, “So Sammy, was it any easier when it was wrapped around a pillow?”

The guys all cracked up laughing and Sam sputtered. Debbie returned to her friends.

“Too bad,” she said, shoving the bra into her bag. “He was a hottie.”

“What was that in the scholarship material about purity of soul and body?” Kai joked, bringing a fingertip to her chin, blinking her dark eyes rapidly, and looking up at the ceiling.

“Ha, ha,” Debbie said.

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“Hey, as long as they draw the line at virginity, Debbie will have no problem,” Mandy said.

Kai’s jaw dropped. “Oh, wait a minute. You’re not telling me you’re actually a *virgin*.”

“Why is everyone always so surprised by that?” Debbie asked, widening her eyes innocently.

“It’s the tattoo rule!” Eva and Mandy called out in unison.

“What the hell is the tattoo rule?” Kai shook her head, confused.

“All right. We’ve been hanging out a lot since you moved here, and you seem like a trustworthy girl. But you should be very honored. It’s not just anyone who gets to join Club Tattoo,” Debbie said.

“Sounds pretty intense,” Kai joked.

Debbie looked around to make sure the coast was clear, then tilted her head toward the doorway to the nearest darkened classroom. Obviously intrigued, Kai followed, and Mandy and Eva stood shoulder to shoulder to block them from view. Debbie opened the button on her denim skirt and pulled the waistband down to reveal the small honeybee tattoo on the skin near her hip bone.

“Hey, that’s really cool,” Kai said, leaning down to inspect it.

“Thanks. I designed it myself,” Debbie told her.

“Why a bee?” Kai touched the bee cautiously with her fingertip, as if she expected it to move.

“*Deborah* means ‘honeybee’ in Hebrew,” Debbie said,

zipping up her skirt. “Why the Patels of Mumbai, India, went for a Hebrew name is still cause for speculation. But there ya go!”

“Okay, but I still don’t get it. What’s the tattoo rule?” Kai asked as the four of them moved back into the hall.

“This tattoo got me banned from watching TV for six months last year,” Debbie said, frowning. “If I’m ever gonna reveal this tattoo to a guy, he’ll have to be someone really special.”

Debbie didn’t see why everyone always seemed to be in such a rush to go all the way. She had plenty of fun doing everything else with her many boy toys, so she figured she might as well save the big deflowering for a guy who was really worth it.

If such a guy exists, she thought.

“Well, I’m honored to be admitted into the club,” Kai said reverently as she sifted through her books. “So, then, I guess you’ve never been in love?”

“Have you *seen* the guys in this school?” Debbie smirked. “*Please.*”

“Point taken,” Kai replied.

“Have *you* ever been in love?” Mandy asked. Kai had only moved to Ardsmore, from Lake Tahoe, Nevada, just before the beginning of the school year. There were still some vital details her new friends had yet to uncover.

“Once. At least I thought I was,” Kai said.

“What was it like?” Eva asked.

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“In a word? Disastrous,” Kai said matter-of-factly.

Kai looked really sad for a second and then cleared her throat. Her eyes flicked toward Mandy and she smirked. “Well, we know one of us around here is a lost cause.”

Mandy’s brow knitted in confusion, but a second later she giggled when a pair of arms circled her waist.

“Can I walk a beautiful lady to her next class?” Eric Travers, Mandy’s Mr. Perfect, said, nuzzling her neck.

Debbie looked at Eva and stuck her finger into her mouth. Mandy whacked her arm.

“See you guys later,” she said.

“I’ll come with,” Eva said, scurrying to catch up.

Kai followed Eric and Mandy with her eyes. “Have they always been that gross?”

“It was even worse when they first got together,” Debbie said. “They went through this whole baby-talk phase? I couldn’t be around them and food at the same time. It gave me the heaves.” She returned to her reflection. “So anyway, you’re definitely going to go out for the scholarship, right? Because your parents are boho dogooders who can’t be bothered with money . . .”

“And *you’re* going to go out for the scholarship because there’s no scratch left in the college pot now that all three Patel brothers have cashed in,” Kai added. “Well, that and the whole exerting-your-independence thing.”

“Exactly. I have to get money from *somewhere*,” Debbie said, snapping the lipstick shut. “I mean, how the hell

did Ravi Junior end up at Penn State? We all had him pegged for a life in and out of rehab, jail, and mental hospitals.”

“It’s just proof of the extent to which your father can put the fear of God into a person,” Kai said.

Debbie nodded. There wasn’t a single soul who’d come in contact with stoic, larger-than-life Mr. Patel who wasn’t mortally scared of him. Not even Kai was immune to his icy glare. Debbie shuddered just thinking about it.

“You got that right,” she said.

Eva’s locker was closest to the cafeteria, so she always got there before her friends and saved their usual table. This time alone, watching the rest of the students in fifth-period lunch stream through the doors, was her favorite part of the day. Eva sat back with her creative-writing notebook open on her lap and jotted down various details about her classmates.

Tisha Morales continues her antishaving protest. Day 13. Leg hair is beginning to braid itself. . . .

Ryan Gibraltar has a hard-on again. Must’ve fallen asleep in AP bio. . . .

Does Michelle Horowitz really not notice that her foundation is ten shades darker than the skin on her neck?

And then she saw him—just a glimpse of his shaggy blond hair through the slim window in the wooden door—and she stopped breathing. Riley Marx. He was laughing as he entered the caf, glancing over his shoulders at his

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buddies. Eva would have killed to know what they were laughing about.

He's wearing his Mr. Bubbles T-shirt today, she wrote, her hand suddenly shaky. *You've gotta love a guy in a Mr. Bubbles T-shirt.*

Actually, Eva had to love this particular guy no matter which of his myriad pop culture tees he was sporting. He didn't care what the other guys thought of him, even though his social position had yet to be defined at Ardsmore High. Unlike the rest of the male population of this school, Riley Marx was undoubtedly human.

And Eva had been fantasizing about him regularly ever since he'd arrived. There was the fantasy where he first spoke to her—when he came up to her in the hallway after classes and told her that he'd read her latest poem in the lit magazine and it had touched a chord deep within him. There was the one about their first kiss, sitting at the edge of the water at Huff Lake with champagne and candlelight. . . .

Even her friends knew about that one—the fantasy first kiss—but she never told them who the guy was. That part of the daydream was all hers. Besides, she knew it was never going to happen. Eva could hardly ever get up the guts to talk to *any* guy, let alone a man of perfection like Riley Marx. But the fact that it was impossible didn't make the crush any less intense.

“Hey.”

Eva blinked. Riley and his friends had just walked by

her table and Riley had lifted his chin and said “hey.” Had he been talking to her? Was that even possible?

Oh God. What if he was talking to me and I didn't say anything and I was just sitting here staring into space like a complete wastoid? Eva blinked. *Did I just use the word wastoid?*

Eva flipped to a new page in her notebook and started to write frantically. Riley Marx had potentially just spoken his first word to her. At least ten pages of rambling were definitely in order.

“So, any special requests for your birthday, sweetness?” Eric asked as he pulled to a stop in front of Mandy’s sprawling house that night. They’d met up after their respective team practices—football for him, volleyball for her—so Eric could drive her home. Mandy’s VW Bug had been in the shop that morning getting the oil changed and the tires rotated, but it was back now, parked in the driveway, gleaming in the waning sun.

“You don’t have to get me anything,” Mandy said.

“Yeah, like that’s gonna happen,” Eric replied.

“Well . . . whatever,” Mandy said happily. “If it’s coming from you, it’ll be perfect.”

Eric put the car in park and turned to look at her, his blue eyes mischievous.

“Speaking of . . .”

Eric pulled his backpack out of the backseat and Mandy smiled. It was October 15.

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“You know what today is,” Eric said, fishing a small gray box out of his bag.

“Eric, you really don’t have to keep doing this,” Mandy said, even though she loved it. Eric grinned as she opened the box to find a tiny crystal penguin with black eyes and a tiny nose looking up at her.

“Oh! It’s so sweet!” she said.

Ever since their first-month “anniversary” Eric had been giving her one Swarovski crystal animal on the fifteenth of every month like clockwork. Mandy had started collecting them when she was nine, but thanks to Eric that collection was now beyond impressive.

Mandy still remembered how touched and surprised she’d been when he’d given her the first one—a tiny sparkling turtle. He’d only been in her room once at that point and had asked her about the collection casually. But that was Eric. He was pretty much the most thoughtful guy she’d ever known.

She closed the box and kissed him on the cheek. “You are the best boyfriend ever,” she added.

“What can I say?” Eric joked.

“Now you *really* don’t need to get me anything for my birthday,” Mandy said.

“Well, I was thinking, my parents are going to be away, and since we’ve been talking about it a lot lately . . .”

Mandy’s heart thumped and she felt a stirring in that place she was still surprised could be stirred by mere words.

“Nothing’s been *decided* decided,” she said. Little did Eric know, Mandy *had* decided. She’d decided that this was it. Eric was going to be her first. She loved him; that was the most important thing. But furthermore, if they kept doing all the things they’d been doing and *not* having actual sex, she was fairly certain she was going to spontaneously combust.

She bit her bottom lip as Eric leaned toward her. His brown bangs fell over his eyes and her breath caught in her throat as his lips touched hers. For a few blissful minutes Mandy forgot that they were sitting right in front of her house, where anyone could see them. When Eric finally pulled away, his breath was warm and quick on her face.

“Just say you’ll think about it,” he said.

“Oh, I will,” Mandy said. “A *lot*.”

She gave him a special sort of smile and felt naughty. Deliciously naughty. It was a nice change.



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