

Goodbye Stranger

By Rebecca Stead

Emily was leaning against her locker and smiling at her phone.

“What’s funny?” Bridge asked.

“More texts,” Emily said, holding out her phone.

Tab snatched it. “Ew. What is that?”

Emily grabbed the phone back and studied the screen. “It’s not ew,” she said. “It’s a knee.”

“Whose knee?”

“Somebody’s.”

“That eighth grader?”

“His name is Patrick. And it turns out half of JV soccer is in love with him.

“Even the boys?” Tab said.

“Probably,” Em said.

“Are you wearing eye makeup?” Bridge said.

“A little,” Em admitted. “What do you think?”

Bridge tilted her head. “I don’t know yet. I have to get used to it.”

“Wait, look.” Em waved her phone at them. “*This one’s* cute. I promise.”

“What is that?” Tab asked. “Your elbow?”

“No, doofus!” Em’s voice dropped. “It’s his ankle. Cute, right?”

Bridge rotated the phone, trying to make out an ankle. "Why did he send you a picture of his ankle? And his knee?"

"Because! Remember? My foot?"

"So you sent him a picture of your foot and he sent one of his ankle?"

"Yeah." Em smiled.

"The set of all people who send pictures of their leg parts," Bridge said.

"Yeah."

"I'm guessing it's a small set. Maybe just the two of you."

"A set of two," Em said.

"Get that dreamy look off your face," Tab said. "You're being. . . manipulated!"

"I am not!"

"Let me guess. Now he wants a picture of *your* knee, right?"

"So?"

"The Berperson says that women are treated like objects and we don't even know it."

"The Berperson! Give me a break. She's a wacko."

"She is not!"

The Berperson was Tab's English teacher. Her name was Ms. Berman, but on the first day of school she had instructed the class that this year they were going to be detectives looking for the "hidden messages" in language. Then she had written her own name on the board, crossed

out the *man*, and written *person* over it. “Call me Ms. Berperson!” she said. But everyone called her the Berperson instead.

Em used her thumb to flip back and forth between her Patrick photos: ankle, knee, ankle, knee. “Seriously, you guys, what should I send back? Should I do, like, my shin?” She hesitated. “That might be really ugly.”

“Why don’t you and Patrick actually *talk* to each other?” Tab said.

Em looked up. “Are you demented? And say what?”