

## Chapter 1

“Did you hear it?”

“Oh my god, it’s the BEST!”

“That one part, though?”

“For real!”

Why were all of these people blocking his locker? He yawned and shoved through the group of girls. They rolled their eyes and moved away from him. Didn’t they hear the bell? The latch pulled open easily; it was pre-set to his combination.

The cover of his yellow Prob and Stats book, *Statistics and Probability with Applications*, Third Edition, ripped even farther away from the binding as he pulled it out of the loose pile. That was going to cost him. Great. He groaned and slammed the book into his backpack with his pencils, ruler and dark green notebook.

The group of girls next to him jumped as he slammed the locker door closed. He grinned. They muttered to each other, behind their hands as if they were *actually* in a teen movie from the ’90s, and glared at him. He slid his Airphones into his ears and pressed play. The synthetic indie-pop sent the dissipated the whispering voices like fog when the sun finally peeks through.

The hard plastic seat was warm, a distinct advantage of having the seat under the window. He slid his phone out of his pocket, switched the song to a folk ballad, more fitting for his mood, and pulled up Instagram.

A few pictures of a party he wasn’t invited to, someone doing a flawless trick on a skateboard that they had undoubtedly tried hundreds of times before that take, a black and white picture of a blonde girl with pouty lips cuddling a dog. It looked like one of his classmates was at the beach last night, even though they lived thousands of miles from the ocean.

He rolled his eyes and tapped the picture of himself, bringing up his own feed. It was so bland compared to the ones he had just seen. There were no sunsets or beaches, no dog ears

over his head. Just a few pictures of album covers and one of the record player his dad dug out of storage. He sighed and tapped the camera.

The phone screen filled with an image of his face and he winced. He turned his chin, trying to show off the Airphones, and snapped a picture. He swiped through the filters and found a classic-style black and white one that dulled the acne around his chin into small dots. He ran a hand through his hair. It looked flat in the picture. He was going for carelessly wavy. Missed that one.

“What are the odds I’ll fall asleep in this Stats class?” he typed. He winced and then shrugged as he pressed the “post it!” button. The blue bar filled up and suddenly a picture of himself popped on top of the feed. He rolled his eyes and closed the app. It wasn’t the worst picture of him at least. Did it matter if it was? His 238 followers couldn’t care less if his hair was wavy or a bowl cut.

Students were still pulling into the parking lot in cars they should not be allowed to drive at 16 years old. Weston watched them through the window as the folk ballad turned into a Beach Boys classic. He skipped it and the steady drum of another folk song started. Good enough. He bounced his pencil off the desk almost in time with the kick drum.

The trees surrounding the parking lot were bursting with green, their leaves rustling in the wind. Boys were jumping out of cars, straightening their ties, their girlfriends sliding jackets over their white-button up shirts. They laughed and smiled like actors in a Gap commercial. The sun was just over the horizon, casting the perfect amount of backlight on their perfect skin and flowing hair. Class started in less than a minute? Why did they care? They had the world at their feet and the future spread before them like a runway.

Weston rolled his eyes. A few more people filed into the room. He shifted in the plastic chair, bumping his knee against the desk. His phone buzzed against the table and a few people glanced over their shoulders. A notification from Instagram; someone liked his picture already. He slid it open and pulled up his feed.

Veronica Walsh liked his picture. Great. She liked all of his pictures. Who really cares about that? “Come on Eileen” started in his Airphones. He thought about switching it, but let it play. It didn’t really fit his mood, but it was a classic. He tapped the circles at the top of the app. His finger danced against the screen and the pictures passed through without him registering what they were. Flashes of color and random shapes flipped through the screen like an animation moving too fast to create a story.

He paused, pressed back, and held his finger on the screen. So it was warm enough yesterday for Bri Pollen to get the bikini out. How interesting. He paused a few seconds longer than he should have and pressed on. He tapped through countless pictures of album covers. Everyone always wanted people to think they were so trendy and unique with the best taste in music, but, at least from his stories this morning, they were all listening to the exact same song. How unique.

His right Airphone was pulled out of his ear, bounced off of his lap, and disappeared under his desk. He winced at the loud voices and chairs scraping against the floor. The sounds clashed with the steady hum of Kevin Rowland yearning after Eileen in his left ear.

“Good morning to you, too.” Paul’s mouth was open in disgust under his upturned nose. His thick eyebrows raised high on his broad forehead. He was waving sarcastically in Weston’s face.

“What was that for?” Weston dipped his head under his desk. He lifted his backpack and shook it a little. No Airphone. Just great. “Now I lost my airphone.”

“Who cares? You look like a dick with those anyway.”

Weston poked his head over the desk and glared at Paul. “What does that mean?”

Paul shrugged and leaned back in his seat. “Just sayin’. It looks like you’re trying too hard.”

“I like the way they sound, okay?” He shook the leg of his chair and heard the plastic Airphone drop onto the ground and bounce. Where did that sound come from?

“Whatever you say.” He could practically hear Paul rolling his eyes.

The Airphone did its best to skip out of his palm again. He caught it and slid it in his pocket with the other one. The seats were filling up with talking students and phone vibrations. The students barely glanced up as they carried on full conversations. It was almost like a dance and everyone knew the steps. Weston rubbed his hands on his pants to get rid of the fake plastic smell. He could really use some gum right about now.

Meredith ignored him completely and sat her bulky, fake Louis purse in the basket under her seat. Weston forced his eyes away from the way her plaid skirt slid up the back of her long legs when she bent over. She had enough boys watching her every movement, he did not need to be added to that list. Too much trouble for him.

“Take your seats, take your seats.” Mr. Rodgers waltzed into the room, sliding his briefcase onto the desk at the front. Without looking at the class, he grabbed a marker and began writing some sort of problem on the board. It had to be something about probabilities, maybe even statistics, but the whole board looked fuzzy. The constant hum of distracting conversations drowned out everything Mr. Rodgers tried to say.

Weston attempted to pay attention for a few seconds until a bright bluebird landed on the windowsill next to him. Its head swiveled on its neck like a bobblehead. Its wings fluttered and its belly swelled and then retracted. It was so alive and so real. Weston grabbed his phone and swiped up to access the camera, but the sudden movement startled the bird and it flew away before Weston could take the picture.

“I said phones away please.” Mr. Rodgers stared at him and leaned against his desk. The rest of the class turned to watch him too. Blood rushed to Weston’s cheeks. He fumbled the phone in his fingers as he hastily stuffed into the pocket of his skinny jeans. He slid down in the seat until he was blocked behind Tyler’s broad back. Everyone else had their phones out, too. Why was he always the one to be called out?

The potatoes, if that is what they actually were, squished onto his plate and he stepped to his left. The line moved mechanically, another dance that everyone knew the moves to. A man in a tight hairnet glared down at a container of steaming green beans, most of them mashed beyond recognition.

“Oh, actually, I don’t want-”

The silver spoon swung and a heaping pile of mashed beans mixed with the potatoes on his plate. Great. He grabbed a carton of milk and dropped his five dollars on the counter.

Someone perched in his usual seat in the back left corner. He rolled his eyes and found another empty four-seater near the column in the middle of the room. People kept brushing against his back as they fought their way to their tables. He mumbled into his potatoes with every nudge and almost spilled his milk.

A couple sat at the table behind him and made no attempt to keep their conversation private. He rolled his eyes and reached towards the black pouch of his backpack for his Airphones when he paused. Did they just mention The Winnebago Wanders? They were a funky jam-band that had popped up on his Tunely discover a year ago. How did this couple know them? The last time Weston checked, the Wanders had maybe 10,000 total listens on Tunely. Not exactly the pinnacle of high-school popularity.

He turned and looked at the short blonde girl. “You know the Winnebago Wanders?”

Her boyfriend had Airphones in and tapped his fingers against the table in some semblance of rhythm. “Umm, of course?” The blonde girl squinted at him and glanced at her boyfriend for help, but he was lost in the music.

“Oh, cool. I love them.” He shrugged. “Didn’t expect to meet other people who knew them.” The girl chuckled without smiling. She stared at the ground, her boyfriend’s tapping fingers, the tray of food. Anything to not meet Weston’s eyes. “How did you hear about them?”

She started to smile and then stopped when Weston looked confused. “Are you serious? They’re on The List?”

A plastic tray slammed on to the table behind him. The blonde girl slid her arm through her boyfriend's and turned him to face the opposite way. The List? What did that mean? What kind of list would the Wanders make? Definitely not any sort of "Best of" or "Charts" type of lists. But what other kinds of lists were there? Some sort of playlist Tunely made?

"And then, just when *that* whole mess was over, guess who walks through the door?" Paul did not wait for Weston to acknowledge him, he launched directly into his rant. "David! And he does that whole eye thing he always does. You know, when he likes shakes his head and squints and panties just drop? That whole thing? Yeah, he does that and then she's just watching him, right? And I can't say anything..."

Weston let Paul ramble. It was white noise at this point. There was a good chance he was not saying anything he had not already said before. So The Winnebago Wanders were starting to get popular. Good for them. They were a talented band that deserved the popularity, at least as much as most of the other popular bands.

But knowing obscure, good music was his thing. That was what he did. Now other people were encroaching on his territory. He was the music guy. If everyone started to listen to his music, what would he even have? Who could he be? He could always join Paul and be the awkward kid constantly hitting on girls out of his league. Maybe he could start playing a sport. Soccer always seemed sort of fun. Maybe he would even be good at it. Bri would pay attention.

He could see himself now gliding through defenders, spinning with the ball at his feet, sliding it past the outstretched arms of the goalkeeper. The crowd would roar. He would run off the field into the waiting arms of Bri. They would kiss and the crowd would cheer louder. Because they looked good together, obviously. They deserved each other.

Weston's eyes shot open and the smile faded from his face. Paul was snapping his fingers an inch away from his eyes. He smacked Paul's hand away and sat up straight. The potatoes were grey and mixed with mashed beans, but they smelled like butter. How bad could they really be?

“What was that?” Paul asked with a little too much emphasis on the last word.

“What? Nothing.”

“Dude, you were like a million miles away. Did you even hear my story?”

“I almost never do.”

Paul nodded. “Mean. Cold. Ruthless. Whatever, it’s your loss. That was a good one.”

The potatoes didn’t taste like butter. They were kind of bitter with a sour aftertaste. The beans stood defiantly on the edge of his plate, almost daring him to give them a try. There was no way those would ever go in his body. He could feel his stomach flip at the thought.

“What were you even thinking about?”

Bri. That was the real answer. That was almost always the real answer. But he couldn’t just say that. He tilted his head towards the couple behind him. “They were talking about The Winnebago Wanders. Just wondering how they knew them.”

Paul squinted at him. “Of course they were talking about them. Everyone is.”

“But why? How are they so popular all of a sudden.” Were there any of the Wanders songs in his playlist he could delete? They were all so good.

“Because they are on the List.”

“Okay, what the hell is this list thing?” His plastic fork clicked against the table as he dropped it. “Everyone keeps talking about it.”

“Wait...” Paul shook his head and placed his palms on the table. Weston rolled his eyes. Why could Paul never simply tell the information? Why was everything such a production to him? “How do *you* not know about The List? You would love it.”

Weston waited for him to continue speaking, but Paul kept staring at him as if accusing him of a terrible crime. “Are you going to tell me what it is?”

“I will, but I’m so surprised I have to. It’s just like...everyone knows the list. I’m so in shock right now.” Paul shook his head back and forth with his eyes wide.

Weston took a deep breath in and closed his eyes. Just wait. Wait him out. Paul would tell him eventually, he could have this moment. Paul ran a thin-fingered hand through his thick black curls, which rebounded back into shape almost instantly.

“Would you just tell me already?”

“The List is a Tunely playlist. You know what that means right?”

Weston rolled his eyes and leaned back from the table. “Yes, I know what a Tunely playlist is.”

“I gotta check. I can never be sure now. If you don’t even know about the List, what else do you not know? What fundamental gaps in your-”

“What is so special about this Tunely playlist?”

“Oh, nothing really. Other than the fact that it has 10 million followers.” Paul shrugged and dug his fork into the mountain of potatoes. “No biggie.”

“10...10 million followers? How is that possible?” Weston’s own playlist, that he had been cultivating since sophomore year, carefully trimming songs away when they were outdated or played out, adding breaking new artists almost every week, had about five followers. Two of them were his brothers. One was Paul.

“Because it’s incredible.” Paul shoveled some of the grey lumps into his mouth. “The List is like the ultimate music discovery guide. Everyone follows it. Whatever band is added instantly hits number one in the charts. It’s crazy. Seriously, how do you not know about this?”

Weston shook his head. A tinge of annoyance passed through him. Great, now The Wanders were going to be played out. Who else had The List catapulted into superstardom? A few months ago a small, indie-folk band he was really loving exploded out of nowhere and were now selling out Madison Square Garden. Was The List the reason for that too?

“Want to know the craziest part about The List?” Paul had his fork loaded with more potatoes and raised halfway to his mouth. His chin was lowered as he gazed at Weston over his

fork. His brown eyes were bright. “No one knows who made it. It’s a complete mystery. All we know is the username: StarsinHerEyes02.”

Weston leaned back from the table and breathed out. It sounded like a whistle through his slightly gapped front teeth. “Wow...” If he had created a playlist with 10 million followers, everyone in the world would know it. That would be his opening line in every conversation. “Hey, I’m Weston Mack, nice to meet you. 10 million people follow my Tunely playlist.”

Paul took another bite and talked through the chewing. “I mean, people guess it’s a girl, cuz of the whole ‘in *her* eyes’ thing. People also think she’s 17 because of the ‘02’ thing. But that’s all just guessing. No one knows anything about her.”

“That’s so crazy.”

“I know, right? Why would they stay anonymous? They could probably make so much money from record labels or MTV or whatever. They could land any job they wanted.”

Weston picked his phone off of the table and quickly pressed the bright red Tunely icon. He typed in “The List.” Thousands of results came up. A song by Moonchild, an album by Chad Daniels, not to mention the countless playlists trying to cash in on the grandeur of that name. He scrolled through a few, but a playlist with 10 million followers would have to be near the top. There was nowhere to hide when 10 million people knew about it.

“Is it just called the List? Or is that like a nickname or something?”

“Oh, I don’t know what it’s named now.” Weston stopped typing and pursed his lips. He glared at Paul. “What? No one really knows what it’s called. She changes the name all the time. Just look up StarsinHerEyes and you’ll find it.”

The profile picture was a black heart with red splotches on it. Weston leaned his face closer to the screen. Was that the old AbsolutePunk.net logo? Who else, besides him, actually remembered that ancient site?

The List was now called “Songs for Today.” Super generic title. It sounded like it had been generated by some washed-up middle-aged exec at Tunely. Not something that would have 10 million followers.

But the music in the playlist was actually good. Weston recognized a good portion of the songs as stuff he had enjoyed in the past. He could also tell that this playlist was a breeding ground for the new music popping up on the pop radio stations every now and then. He scrolled all the way to the bottom. Sure enough, added 9 hours ago, The Winnebago Wanders. It wasn’t their best song of all time, but it also wasn’t off of their new album. Stars knew what she was doing, it seems.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t know about The List.” Paul really needed to work on chewing with his mouth closed. “I mean, you’re like the music guy. This is your thing. How embarrassing for you.” A smile curled the corners of his lips.

Weston rolled his eyes and grabbed his backpack, slinging it over one shoulder. The books inside bounced hard against his spine. “I prefer to make my own playlists, okay?”

“Yeah, sure, whatever you say.” Paul shrugged.

“Besides, I don’t think I want to listen to whatever 10 million other people are listening to.”

“There’s good stuff in there, man. I think you’ll like it.” Paul waved his fork at Weston’s phone. “Don’t knock it til it’s over, or don’t count the chicken book covers, or whatever that saying is.”

“I think I’m good.” Weston slid the other strap over his shoulder and grabbed his tray. He had barely touched his food, but he was not hungry. He wanted to look over that playlist again, to see what everyone else was listening to. Was it actually good?

“All I’m saying is 10 million people can’t be wrong,” Paul called to him as he walked towards the doors.

Many people have been very wrong about good music in the past, Weston thought. This could be that. Another example of herd mentality. At worst, it's some major record label using this to manipulate customers. If that was true, it was a genius plan. He'd have to give them credit for pulling it off.

But this did not feel like a marketing ploy. This felt like someone who genuinely understood and cherished music. Who knew what it could do. Who knew what music could mean to people.

Weston hit the green follow button on top of his screen. Now it's 10 million and one.