

# The Secret Society of the Pink Crystal Ball

(for Young Adults)

**T**hanks to Jesse, I had almost forgotten about the box.

When I arrive home from school today I'm surprised for a second to see it there, sitting on my desk.

I glance at my watch. Lindsay and Samantha are going to be here any minute. Normally, I would wait for them and make them open it with me, but there's just something about the way Roni said those words—*it was very important to Kate that you not open it until you're alone*—that makes me think I should do as she said.

Moving quickly, I slit the packing tape open with my house key. I don't know what I'm expecting, exactly. Pictures? Letters? Some sort of explanation? My stomach flutters nervously and I hold my breath as I pull open the top flaps and look inside. It's...

It's a pink, plastic ball. Well, technically, it's a Pink Crystal Ball; just the type of retro-kitsch toy that never ceased to amuse my Aunt Kiki. You ask it a question and shake it, and then a silly, new age-y answer floats up to the surface. It's supposed to tell the future like a crystal ball, except, you know, it's plastic. And pink.

I reach inside and remove it from the box. The ball itself is actually clear, but it's filled with a pink, glittery liquid that's reflecting the sunlight and scattering tiny dots across one wall of my bedroom. The bottom of it is flat, so that it can rest on a plastic, silver pedestal, which, I notice, is also inside the box. I pull it out and examine it. Someone etched "RC 52" onto the underside of the base, but other-wise, it looks just like every other Pink Crystal Ball that has ever graced the shelves of Toys"R"Us.

So that's it, then? My dead aunt left me a fake crystal ball? That's the big secret that I needed to be alone to see? I'm starting to wonder if maybe my dad is right. Maybe she really was kooky. What am I thinking? Of course she was! That memo-rial service was like

a circus sideshow gone horribly wrong.

**I look inside the box again to see if there's anything else, and I notice an envelope taped to the bottom, as well as a thin, rolled-up scroll, tied with a piece of raffia. I untie the scroll first and unroll it, hoping for some sort of explanation. But it's just a long list of names. Names I never heard of except for the very last one, Kate Hoffman—written in my aunt's handwriting. Seeing her signature there like that creeps me out, and I look at the goose bumps that have suddenly appeared on my arms. I roll the scroll back up and carefully untape the envelope from the bottom of the box. This has to be it. This has to be the letter from her, explaining why she wanted us out of her life so badly.**

But when I open it, I'm disappointed to see that it's a not a letter at all. It's just a list that she wrote that makes absolutely no sense whatsoever.

- \* Absolute knowledge is not unlimited; let the planets be your guide to the number.**
- \* There are 16 ways to die, but four of them you will never see.**
- \* The future belongs to you alone. Other voices will be disappointed.**
- \* One rotation is as far as you can see. Only uncertainty lies beyond.**
- \* You will know all when no more is known; then it is time to choose another.**

That's it. That's all it says.

*Wow, Aunt Kiki, I think bitterly. Thanks so much.*

Lindsay and Samantha burst into my room just as I'm putting the paper back inside the envelope. Lindsay immediately notices the ball and snatches it off of my bed.

"Oh, my God!" she squeals. "A Pink Crystal Ball! I love these!" She shakes it and looks up at the ceiling as she asks her question.

"Is Megan Crowley going to suffer from a long and painful bout of chicken pox that will leave permanent scars on her face?" She looks at the ball for an answer. "Your future is obscured. You must ask again." She shakes it a second time. "Okay, how about...is Megan Crowley going to get stood up at prom and become the laughingstock of the whole school?"

She looks down at the window. “Your future is obscured. You must ask again.”

“Let me see that,” Samantha says, grabbing it out of Lindsay’s hands. “Does Aiden Tranter want to devour me like the men in those cheesy romance novels that my mother hides under her mattress?” She looks at the ball expectantly. “Your future is obscured. You must ask again.’ Ugh, forget it.” She hands the ball to me. “Here, you try. You’re the genius, maybe you can figure out what’s wrong with it.”

I shake my head. “No thanks. You know I don’t believe in that kind of stuff.”

“Oh, please,” Samantha says. “Don’t be ridiculous. You don’t have to believe in anything to play with a Pink Crystal Ball. It’s just for fun. Come on, ask it a question. You know you want to. Ask it if Spencer Ridgely thinks you’re smexy.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Spencer Ridgely is, like, the hottest guy in the whole school. Possibly even the whole world. And he’s a senior. He doesn’t even know who I am.”

“Not the point,” Lindsay says, jumping on Samantha’s bandwagon. “Come on, just do it. It’s not that hard. Repeat after me. ‘Does Spencer Ridgely think I’m smexy?’”

“What is ‘smexy?’” I ask, immediately wishing I hadn’t.

Samantha rolls her eyes at me this time. “It means smart and sexy, stupid. God, you need to hang out in some classes that aren’t AP. Maybe you’ll actually learn some-thing useful. Now would you stop stalling and just ask the question already?”

“Fine,” I say, succumbing to their peer pressure. I pick up the ball and shake it. “Does Spencer Ridgely think I’m smexy?” I ask, not even trying to hide my annoyance. I peer into the plastic on the flat side of the ball. It takes a second for the message to come up.

*Consider your fate to be sealed.*

“Well?” Lindsay asks.

I frown. “It says, ‘Consider your fate to be sealed.’”

She claps her hands excitedly and Samantha laughs.

“Give me that thing,” Lindsay demands. “I want to try it again.” I hand it to her, and this time she shakes it extra hard. “Is Megan Crowley’s boyfriend going to cheat on her with a slutty girl from St. Joseph’s and give her a raging case of syphilis?” Her lips twist in a frown.

“*Your future is obscured, you must ask again.*’ This thing sucks,” she says, tossing it back onto the bed. “Where did you get it, anyway?”

“My aunt left it to me. Her friend gave it to me at the memorial service yesterday. It came with these.” I show her the paper and the scroll.

“I thought crazy aunts were supposed to leave people gobs of money that nobody knew they had,” Lindsay says, half to herself.

“Hey, that would be a great T-shirt,” Samantha interjects. “My crazy aunt died and all I got was a fake crystal ball.”

Even I have to laugh at that one. To be honest, it feels good. It hurts less to think of Kiki as just some “crazy aunt” who didn’t have a grip on reality. Before the laughter fades, Lindsay says that she can’t stay. She just stopped by to see how I was doing. She promised her mom that she would help her move some stuff out of the garage.

*Poor Lindsay*, I think. Ever since her parents got divorced, she’s become the man of the house. She takes out the trash, hangs pictures, helps with moving heavy stuff. I always tell her that, one day, she’s going to make some guy a fantastic husband.

“Have fun,” I say.

“Oh, don’t worry, I will. This is Mr. Lindsay Altman, signing off.” She gives us a salute and then bounces out of my room and down the stairs.

“I should go too,” Samantha says. “My mom is having a dinner party tonight for some really important clients of my dad’s, and I need to be home so that I can totally ruin it.”

“Ha! Nice attitude.”

She shrugs. “Hey, it’s quid pro quo in my house. She makes me miserable, I return the favor. Not all of us are lucky enough to live in a sitcom family like you.” She pauses suddenly, as if she might have said too much, then quickly smiles. “Cue laugh track here.”

She grabs her black Prada backpack and disappears out the door.

Alone again, I take the paper out of the envelope again and stare at it, trying to make some sense of the words. What does that mean, “There are sixteen ways to die”? And what’s “the number”? Why did she leave all of this for me? Why was it so important to her that I have it?

There’s got to be something I’m missing.

My stomach lets out a deep rumble, and I realize that I haven’t eaten anything since lunch today. Dinner isn’t for another couple of hours, so I walk out of my room and start to head downstairs to get a snack. But before I make it to the bottom, I overhear my mom

talking on the phone. From her tone, I can tell that she's upset. It must be about Kiki. I walk back up a few steps so that she won't see me, and I listen.

"Why would she do that?" Mom yells, her voice breaking.

*Who is she talking to? Dad?* "I don't know why," she goes on. "I have no idea. Ask those lunatic friends of hers." She's quiet. And then she starts to yell again. "No. No way. She was a lot of things, but she was never suicidal. No, it's not a possibility!"

Okay. It's definitely not my dad.

"You know what? Thank you. I think I'll find someone else." I hear the beep as she presses the end button, and then she slams the phone down onto the counter.

I stand there for a few seconds, trying to process what I just heard. So, the person on the other end of that line thinks that Kiki was out in that field on purpose. Which would make sense, if you didn't know Kiki. But I'm with my mom. Kiki was so in love with the world; her crazy lifestyle was testimony to that fact. Mom is right. It's not a possibility. But then, why? It suddenly occurs to me that maybe Kiki was attacked. Maybe some random attacker threw her in the field, unconscious. And maybe that's when she got struck...*Oh my God—*

There are so many questions.

But like the T-shirt will say, all I've got is this a fake crystal ball.