

GIRLS
ON
THE
VERGE

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*For my niece and best friend, Ashley,
and for my aunt Pam, who inspired me to join
the fight when I was a little girl—
we are three generations of feminists*

No woman can call herself free who does not own
and control her body. No woman can call herself free
until she can choose consciously whether she will or
will not be a mother.

—Margaret Sanger

JUNE 25, 2013

Texas State Senator Wendy Davis (D) stands in her pink sneakers holding a thirteen-hour filibuster to block Senate Bill 5, which restricts abortion access in the state. The bill bans abortions after twenty weeks, requires clinics to meet the same requirements as surgical centers, requires the clinics' doctors to have hospital admitting privileges, and requires a revisit to the doctor fourteen days after a medical abortion. She succeeds.

JULY 16, 2013

At the end of June, Texas Governor Rick Perry calls a special session to vote on House Bill 2 (HB2), which would set forth provisions that would result in closing the majority of abortion clinics in the state of Texas. The bill is signed into law on July 18.

JUNE 2014

As of this date, only nineteen abortion clinics remain open for the entire 269,000 square miles that make up Texas, populated by more than five million women of reproductive age.

ONE
JUNE 30

I've been ready to leave for the past hour, but that doesn't mean I want to. I didn't sleep. I lay in bed all night, watching the glowing red numbers on my alarm clock blink down the hours.

I straighten the quilt my grandma gave me for what seems like the hundredth time.

My phone buzzes, startling me.

Here. I'm early so take your time.

I pick up my backpack and purse and take a last look around my room to make sure I have everything.

I shut my door and head down the stairs, sliding my hand along the banister worn smooth from seventeen years' worth of touching. I make sure to avoid the squeaky step Dad always promises to fix but never will.

In the kitchen, I get a glass of water and gulp it down. The

refrigerator hums, the hall clock ticks, the AC makes that weird noise that no electrician can figure out. It's strange the things you notice when you're really paying attention. The family pictures on the dining room wall across from me have hung there my whole life. There's a formal portrait of my grandma and mom, both of them in powder blue dresses, standing side by side. Next to it, a collage of my brother and me from kindergarten to junior year, baby-toothed smiles to awkward braces, a blank space reserved for my senior picture. And then there's my parents on their wedding day. Dad in his rented tux, Mom in her glittery gown and poofy veil. She holds a huge bouquet of lilies.

I scribble a note for my parents, draw a heart on it, and pin it to the bulletin board. I throw a couple of bananas, two granola bars, and a bottle of Sprite into a plastic bag, cram my feet into my Chucks, and open the door.

The sun is just starting to come up, but it's already hot. The paperboy appears over the hill; his loaded bag, crossed over his chest, pulls him sideways. I stop and watch as he flings the folded newspapers at the houses. They all fall short, landing on lawns. But the next one thunks onto my neighbor's porch, and the boy pumps his fist in the air.

Annabelle, seeing me, jumps out of the car and opens the passenger door.

Annabelle's car seats are covered with black fleece seat covers embroidered with the words *Black Cherry* over the headrests. A

cobalt-blue evil eye swings from her rearview mirror by a leather strap. The floor is littered with flattened foam coffee cups. I carefully place my feet between a Giddyup cup and a Sonic one.

Annabelle has two orange plastic go-cups of coffee in her cup holders. The smell of the coffee makes me feel nauseous and hungry at the same time. She gets in the driver's side and shuts her door. "Sorry the car is such a mess. I didn't have time to shovel her out." She points to the cups of coffee. "I did bring nectar of the gods, though. And I wore my new favorite T-shirt."

I look at it. I STAND WITH WENDY DAVIS, it reads. And underneath the caption is a pair of pink sneakers.

"I thought we could use some of Wendy's courage. Coffee and courage, what more do we need?" She pauses for a moment, studying me. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head. "No, not really."

"We don't have to do this if you don't want to," Annabelle says. "We can turn around at any point. Just say the word."

"I do," I blurt out, a little harder than I mean to. "I mean . . . I do want to do this."

"It's going to be all right, Camille."

Annabelle grabs one of the coffees from the cup holder, takes a sip, puts her car in gear, and drives off.

"Didn't you have a Bug before? I remember you driving a yellow Volkswagen," I say.

"I sold her before I went to England. I bought Buzzi for when I'm home."

"Buzzi?"

“That’s what I named this car—after Ruth Buzzi. Have you heard of her?”

I shake my head.

“She’s this comedian from the sixties. She lives near Stephenville on this big horse ranch, and she collects all these cool vintage cars with her husband. She used to be on *Sesame Street* a lot. Anyway, I’d love to have vintage cars like hers someday.” Annabelle pats the steering wheel. “Buzzi’s not much of a car, but she tries.”

“I’ve never heard of anyone naming a car before.”

“You gotta name your car! It’s the only way to really get to know it. Otherwise it’s just a hunk of metal and wheels.” She smiles and pushes the gearshift.

Annabelle looks so cool shifting, like she’s a race car driver. After she shifts, she leaves her hand on the gear knob, her fingers cupping the bottom of it. I like how that looks. Kind of tough. Like you really know what you’re doing and don’t really care what anyone thinks about it.

“Is it hard to drive a stick shift?”

“It is at first. But then it’s easy when you get the hang of it. My cousin taught me because my ass-hat of a father couldn’t be bothered to.”

I reach for a granola bar to settle my stomach. I eat it, watching out the window as the familiar landmarks of my town go by: the Holler Up, Jess’s Jewelers, the Giddyup.

“God, I’m so glad to get out of Johnson Creek,” Annabelle says.

“Even if it’s a shitty reason why,” I say. My shoulders are so tense, my muscles ache.

“So, listen. Bea called me last night.”

“What? God, she never gives up.” I should have known that Bea would search for a work-around. “Did she try to talk you out of taking me?”

“No. She wants to come.”

“Well, she can’t.”

I take a sip of coffee, but the taste of it makes me feel pukey. I jam the cup back into the cup holder and grab the plastic bag. I dump the contents on the back seat and put the bag on my lap, just in case. I open the Sprite and take a sip.

“Do you need me to pull over?” Annabelle asks, casting a nervous look my way. “I mean, I won’t hate you if you puke, but I’d rather you not.”

“No. I’m okay.”

“I told her I’d ask you, but I wouldn’t guarantee it.”

“I don’t know why she’d want to.”

“She told me she wants to support you.”

We reach the YMCA. A pack of boys are running laps around the track outside. We stop at a traffic light by the chain-link fence that borders the track. As the pack gets closer, I can see their arm muscles flexing as they run. Their eyes are intense, and their shirts are soaked with sweat.

Guys get to run in the fresh air and then probably hang out with their girlfriends or their buddies while I get to travel to nearly Mexico to chase down some pills.

Annabelle takes a drink from her coffee and looks at the runners over her go-cup. "I can't imagine running around a track at the butt-crack of dawn like that."

"Me either."

Annabelle rolls the window down and sticks her head out. "Hey, assholes!" she yells. One of the boys in the back of the pack turns his head.

I can't help it. I burst out laughing.

She looks over at me and grins. "So, what do you want to do?"

If I say no to Bea after she has tried to reach out, I'm pretty much ending our friendship. I can't stand the thought of that. But I also can't stand the thought of listening to her trying to convince me to change my mind. I sigh. "She can come."

I direct Annabelle to Bea's house. She's waiting on the porch step already. A huge duffel bag, a pillow, and a grocery bag rest at her feet. "Overpacked as usual," I mutter.

Bea gets up and walks toward the car. Mrs. Delgado waves at us from the door. It's just after seven o'clock, yet she's already fully dressed in white pants and a striped shirt and pearls. Her hair is gathered into a bun.

Annabelle gets out and goes up the walk to help Bea. I stay in the car, staring straight ahead. The driver's door opens, and Bea climbs into the back.

I don't turn around. I don't look at her. "You say one thing to try to make me change my mind, Beatrice Delgado, and I swear we'll dump you on the side of the road."

"I know," Bea says. She puts her hand on the seat by my shoulder. "I promise I won't."

Annabelle slides in, puts on her seat belt, and drives off.

“Why do you want to come anyway?” I ask.

She takes her hand away. “You’re my best friend, and I should be here with you.”

It’s hard to believe that just ten days ago, my life was exactly what I wanted it to be. I was heading to Willow, a supercompetitive theater camp, and I’d played my dream role of Ophelia at the midsummer production of *Hamlet* at the Globe Southwest Youth Theater. The actor who played Hamlet—a very dreamy boy from France—liked me. And that very same boy, Léo, was going to be at said camp sans parental supervision for a whole week.

I stare out the window and hope no one sees the tears in my eyes.

TWO

JUNE 21

I feel a tap on my shoulder.
“Do you want to dance?”

I turn around and Léo is there, all six feet of gorgeousness, and I swear I swoon in French.

“I am dancing,” I say, even though I’m standing dead still.

He makes a face. “Well, that is very sad because I was hoping you would dance with me.”

“I don’t want to make you sad.”

An old song from the eighties starts to play, “Time After Time.”

If you fall I will catch you—I’ll be waiting. Time after time . . .

He steps toward me and puts his hands on my waist, and I set mine on his shoulders. I don’t know how kids dance in his country. I hope he doesn’t start waltzing or something. But we

do the ubiquitous high school slow dance, shuffling around in a circle, swaying back and forth. Bea, dancing with Mateo, gives me a look that says *I told you so*. The song ends, and I remove my hands from Léo's shoulders, even though I *really* don't want to stop touching him.

"Do you want to go outside?" Léo asks.

I would go anywhere with you, I nearly blurt out, but I catch myself. "Sure," I say as casually as I can. Léo takes my hand and leads me through the crowd. I've held hands onstage with him tons of times, but this is not the same thing. I like the way he holds my hand—palm to palm, instead of threading his fingers through mine.

"I hate closing night," I say. "I hate saying goodbye to my character."

"Me too," he says. He casts a glance at me, shy, or maybe uncertain. "I am very glad you are going to Willow."

"I'm glad you're going to Willow, too." I wonder how long he'll hold my hand or whether I should drop it or let him decide.

We're a little way from the theater when he stops. "I like your hair like this," he says, gently tugging my braid.

"It's Ophelia's hair," I say. "I only borrowed it."

"I'm sure she doesn't mind lending it to you."

"No, I don't think she's rolling over in her grave."

"And this flower thing you're wearing. You smell like a pixie."

"That's some line. You've smelled a pixie before?" I say.

"Of course," he says. "Hasn't everyone?"

"Not that I know of," I say, laughing. "It must be a French thing."

He shrugs. "Perhaps."

We stand there for a moment, and I try to find something else to say. “Um, do you want to see the creek?” I ask.

He taps his finger on his chin, pretending to think. “A ‘creek?’”

“It’s like a stream. Or a brook. A small river.”

“Ah, *oui. Un ruisseau.* I would like to see a creek, yes.”

He follows me down the path. The creek runs behind the theater, bordered by a band of woods. There’s a steep path, and I’ve never seen anyone but me there.

The path opens up down a little hill and to the edge of the creek. The wind is waving the tree branches around, and the creek rushes over a bundle of sticks and logs jammed against the side of the bank, making that babbling noise that everyone loves. Air from the day mixed with air from the night creates weird pockets of warm and cool.

“Camille! *C’est très formidable,*” Léo says, looking around. “It’s like Ophelia’s water, where she drowned herself.”

I like how Léo says my name. His accent makes it sound romantic. Special. His face glows in the moonlight.

We sit on a patch of grass on the bank. A cool breeze cuts through the cotton of my dress, and I nudge a little closer to Léo.

“Where do you live in France?” I ask.

“I live in the Dordogne, way in the southwest of France. There we have troglodyte dwellings and cave paintings and a cathedral where the stone steps are worn in the middle from pilgrims climbing on their knees.”

“That sounds painful,” I say. “Have you climbed the stairs on your knees?”

“No. Only on my feet.”

“What’s a troglodyte dwelling?”

“A place where troglodytes dwell.”

I shove him, and he falls backward onto the bank and rolls into a ball, pretend-moaning in pain.

I pull up some grass and fling a handful at him. “Seriously, what is it?”

He sits up and runs his hands through his hair, making it stand up. He laughs. “I told you already.”

I clap the dirt off my hands and take my phone out of my dress pocket. “It sounds like you don’t know, so I’ll just google it.” I go to nudge Léo with my shoulder, but he’s turning toward me and I end up against his chest. I stay there, like it’s perfectly normal, and start searching online for troglodyte dwellings.

He puts his hand over my phone. “I’ll tell you. These are houses that are built into the front of caves.” Léo drapes his arm around my shoulders. Everywhere his arm touches feels like a kiss. He holds me close. I can hear his breath, feel his chest rise and fall under my cheek, hear the thump of his heart. I wonder if this is what falling in love feels like—comfort, safety, excitement, and desire for that one person, all bunched up together.

“Tell me a story about your home,” I say.

Léo thinks for a moment. “I’ll tell you about a cave in the Vézère valley called Grotte de Rouffignac.”

“Okay, tell me about the Grotte de, uh, what you said.”

“You go in a little electric train. At the beginning of the cave you see hollows of clay big enough for an elephant, but these are dens of cave bears.”

“Cave bears? That sounds made up.”

“And then there are pictures of mammoths drawn into the clay walls with fingers, and handprints pressed into the wall over thirteen thousand years ago. The train goes, and the dark takes over so you can’t even see your hand in front of your face. And then suddenly the train stops, a light comes on, and you look up.” He snaps his fingers. “And there on the roof of the cave you see them—hundreds of drawings of mammoths, ibex, woolly rhinoceroses, and horses painted in red, tan, and black.”

“Who painted them?”

I feel Léo shake his head. “No one knows.”

“I want to see it.”

Léo plays with a piece of my hair. “I’ll take you.”

I imagine myself doing things in France with Léo like characters in a romantic comedy. We carry balloons, eat croissants at a café, and kiss on bridges while French accordion music plays in the background.

His fingers brush against my cheek. “I would very much like to kiss you, Camille,” he whispers. I can feel his breath on my face, his nose touching mine.

“I would very much like you to kiss me.” I say this in a French accent, and then immediately regret it, hoping he doesn’t think I’m making fun of him. But he smiles. And then he kisses me.

His mouth is soft, his kiss gentle. He doesn’t press me back or shove his mouth on mine with all tongues and smashing lips like some boys do.

Léo stops kissing me, but he doesn't move back. He keeps his forehead against mine, his fingers light against my cheek. My heart melts into a puddle. "Kiss me again," I say. He does, and I never want it to stop. I want to stay on the bank forever, Léo holding me, hearing nothing but his breathing and the rush of the creek and the sound of the wind in the trees.

And then nausea hits me. My stomach starts to feel like a piece of paper being crumpled up into a ball, and I pull away from him.

"Camille?" Léo tries to take my hand, but I shake him loose. I sprint to the tree and throw up in the grass, puking my brains out to the point of tears. Léo is there at my side, patting my back.

"I'm okay," I say. "I'm sorry." I'm beyond embarrassed. I never puke, ever. Even when I'm sick.

"I think we should go to the . . . the clinic . . . what's the word? Hospital?"

"No, no, I'm okay," I say. I literally almost just threw up in this French boy's mouth. "I must have eaten something bad at the party. I have a really sensitive stomach."

Léo doesn't look convinced. "Still, I think I should take you, Camille."

"If it happens again, I promise I'll see a doctor." I'm trying my damndest to sound casual.

He takes hold of my hands and rubs them between his own. "What can I do?"

"Gosh, I don't know? What's a guy to do after a girl pukes right

after he kisses her?” I try to joke, but it falls flat and Léo doesn’t laugh. “Um, you can walk me back?”

I try to act like it’s no big deal. Like hey, this happens all the time, it’s an American thing. But if it’s possible to die of embarrassment, then I don’t have much longer to live.

THREE

When we return to the party, Bea and Mateo are ready to leave. Léo and I sit in the back of Mateo's car, and Léo holds my hand the entire way. When Mateo pulls up to Léo's host parents' house, he gives me a quick hug. "I'll see you at Willow," he says. He gets out of the car and shuts the door, giving a little wave through the window. He stands on the drive with his hands in his pockets as we pull away. I watch until we turn the corner and I can't see him anymore.

Bea twists around in her seat. "Someone's got a boyfriend," she says in a singsong voice.

"Actually, I'm not so sure about that," I say. "I kind of threw up after he kissed me."

"What?" Mateo says. He starts laughing. "Only you, Camille."

“Yeah, thanks, Mateo,” I say. “You’re such a good friend.”

“What happened?” Bea asks, alarmed. “Are you okay? Should I tell my mom? She’ll know what to do.”

“No, don’t,” I say. “I feel fine now. Your mom will make a big deal about it, and I’m embarrassed enough as it is.”

“No kidding,” Mateo says.

Bea punches him in the arm. “Stop it. Camille doesn’t feel well. Have some compassion.”

“So what happened?” Mateo asks. “I mean, after you puked on him.”

“She didn’t puke *on* him!” Bea says.

“I was too mortified to do anything but joke about it. I guess I’ll see him at Willow? Maybe we’ll go out or something. At least I hope that will happen.”

“It will,” Bea says. “Don’t mention it. Pretend it never happened and it will all be okay.”

I hope she’s right, but I’d like to know how a girl could come back from puking in front of a guy she’s crushing on.

It’s late. When we get to Bea’s house, we fall into bed right away, Bea on her twin bed under the window, and me on the matching bed that Bea has called mine since we first started having sleepovers in the fourth grade.

“So I noticed your parents didn’t come,” Bea says.

“Nope,” I say, like I don’t give a flying fuck. “Apparently, Mom had to take Chris to some science thing, and my dad fell asleep.”

“Gosh, Camille, I’m sorry.” Bea knows what my parents are

like, and it upsets her that they don't take me as seriously as they do Chris.

I shrug. "Whatever."

"Well, I'm excited that you get to spend a whole week with Léo at Willow!" Bea says.

"He's so cute, right? I wish you were going, too," I say.

"No way. I'll never be in the elite level," Bea says. "I'm not sure I ever want to be. It's, like, too much work, and I doubt I'll have the time, especially now that I'm a teen youth minister and all."

"Not everybody can do everything," I say.

"True dat," she says.

Silence.

"Um. Did you just say *true dat*?"

"Yeah," she says, and then bursts into laughter.

There's a knock on our door. "Girls, go to sleep," Bea's dad says.

"Good night, Camille," Bea whispers. Her bedsprings squeak as she turns over.

"Night, Bea," I whisper back.

Another stomachache wakes me up, and I have to run to the bathroom. I kneel in front of the toilet and hang my head over it, but I don't throw up this time. After a minute, the nausea stops and I go back to bed. I lie in a ball and hold my stomach. Bea's breathing and the little mumbles she makes when she sleeps seem louder than usual and I can't fall asleep. I don't know what this could be. Stomach flus don't last this long, and I don't think I ate

anything to make me throw up this much. I reach under the pillow and take out my phone and tap *reasons for vomiting* into the search bar. A bunch of answers come up on Doctors.com: high blood pressure, food poisoning, flu, appendicitis, something called syncope . . . pregnancy.

My heart pounds, and my hands start to sweat. I start counting back on my phone's calendar. I missed my period in May, and I should have started a couple of days ago. I start turning cold. Really, really cold.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

I sit up. This can't be. No one gets pregnant on their first time. Or do they? I google it.

Yes, they do.

It only takes one eager sperm to hit an egg.

There's a movie they make everyone watch in health class that shows a cartoon of a bunch of sperm wiggling their way toward the cervix, through the uterus, and up the fallopian tubes, racing in a fertility marathon to be the first to get to that egg. Over and over in my head, I keep rolling that film. Is that what's going on in my body? If so, I'm at least *two months pregnant*.

I get up and tiptoe to Bea's bathroom. I pull my pajama shorts down and sit on the toilet. I hear Bea's dad cough, which makes me jump. The air conditioner clicks on, and cold air rushes out of the floor register and blows over my bare feet. I cross my arms and hug myself hard. The last time I felt this afraid of my body was when I started my period two years ago.

Maybe my period will start tomorrow, now that the stress of the play is over. I don't think I can stand to wait that long.

Hesitantly, I press my fists against my stomach, and then I push, increasing the pressure. I really don't know why I'm doing it, like I'm somehow going to "activate" my period by kneading my abs? Then, I push my forefinger in my vagina a little bit, to check if anything is coming out. My eye catches a framed photograph of Bea from fourth grade hanging just next to the door. Above it is a piece Bea cross-stitched back in seventh grade—it says HE IS RISEN. I am suddenly keenly aware that I am in my best friend's bathroom with my finger in my vagina. My best friend who never, ever, under any circumstances talks about her period. I take my finger out, but there isn't any blood.

Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. The yelp that escapes my mouth most certainly woke up the whole house.

"Camille, you okay in there?" Bea says through the door.

"Um, yeah! I'll be right out!" I flush the toilet and quickly wash my hands. I make a point of not looking at myself in the mirror.

When I open the door, Bea is standing there with a look of concern on her face. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Oh, yeah. I thought I started my period, and I didn't want to get blood on your sheets." These are not words I ever say to Bea.

Bea's face pulls back in a grimace. "Camille, ew."

We crawl back into bed, and minutes later, I can tell Bea has fallen asleep.

I lie awake for the rest of the night.

FOUR

JUNE 30

An hour outside of our hometown, we see a billboard: WAF-
FLE FACTORY AHEAD! Annabelle shakes her go-cup. “I
need coffee. You mind if we stop at ye old Waffle Factory?”

“I could eat,” I say. I look over my shoulder, and Bea is
nodding.

Annabelle takes the exit to Waffle Factory; we park and go
in. The restaurant echoes with the clatter of plates and conver-
sation and smells like maple syrup and bacon. I find the bathroom,
and when I come out, Annabelle’s standing by the door, clutching
a foam coffee cup. Bea is in the souvenir side of the store.

“It’s like fifteen minutes for a table,” Annabelle says. “I’m
going to wait outside, okay?”

I nod and head into the souvenir store where Bea is looking

at a rack of jewelry charms, all hallmarks of Texas's pride: a tiny western boot, a Texas star, a cactus, a horse, a posy of bluebonnets.

"You would not believe the awesome junk in here, Camille," she says. She picks up a plastic western boot. The handle of a toilet brush pokes out of the top. "The spur even twirls." She spins the spur with the tip of her finger and grins.

Bea and I have always loved looking at kitschy knickknacks. We love going into dollar stores, thrift stores, and souvenir shops to look at the random stuff whose ridiculousness is undeniably adorable.

Today, at least for me, not so much. The fact that Bea can pretend nothing happened, that we'll go on being friends and doing goofy stuff we've always done, makes me angry. I look at that toilet brush. It's not cute. It's ugly and stupid and it's supposed to clean a toilet and that's all. I want to grab it out of her hands and hide it so no one can ever buy it to stick in some hunting cabin or whatever.

She pulls the brush out and waves it like a wand.

"That's the dumbest thing I ever saw," I say.

Her face falls. The spur wobbles to a stop.

"I know it's stupid, obvi," she says. "I was just trying to cheer you up."

"This sudden change of heart doesn't have anything to do with Annabelle helping me?"

She drops her arm, and the brush clatters to the floor.

"So that's a yes, then?"

She shakes her head, but she doesn't look at me.

"You weren't there for me, Bea. Do you know how excruciating it was to ask Annabelle Ponsonby, the person I admire more than anyone in the Globe community, including Mr. Knight, to help me? Do you know how that felt?"

She shrugs and flicks the spur again.

"There's no cheering me up, at least not for now," I say. "Laughing over a western boot with a toilet brush isn't going to make me forget that I'm pregnant and need to drive hours out of the way to get rid of it." I bend down, pick up the toilet brush, and shove it back into the boot.

FIVE
JUNE 24

I get dressed for acting class, put my hair into a ponytail. I pick up the Willow pin, which I'll have to give back to the Knights. I'll tell them that they made a mistake and that they should pick someone else to go to Willow. I'll have to text Léo and tell him I'm not coming and that we probably won't get a chance to see each other again, because he's leaving for France straight after Willow. He'll want to know why, and I won't have an answer. I'll never get a chance to take the little train into that cave with him. I'll never climb the stairs to the cathedral and look at the valley stretching out below, holding his hand, palm to palm in that old-fashioned way of his. Kids at the Globe will look at me like I'm the world's biggest idiot; that I gave up an opportunity they would kill to have. I'll be known as the girl who was too scared to go to Willow.

I pretend that it doesn't matter. That Willow isn't that great,

that it's probably a drag having to do those embarrassing acting exercises like pretending to be a potato and making dumb faces. That the scouts and agents and college recruiters won't be interested in me. That the Knights make Willow sound cooler than it actually is. That Léo only wants a vacation girlfriend.

The Willow pin blurs in my vision, and then from nowhere I start crying hard. I put my hands over my mouth, but I can't stop the sobs from finding their way out. My face is wet with tears, my nose is running; the sadness and shame are washing out of me in water and snot.

I want so bad for someone to be here, to put their arms around me, to tell me I'm not alone, that I'm not a horrible person. The only person who has ever been able to do that for me is Bea.

I don't even realize that class has ended until Bea asks, "You need a ride home?"

"Actually, that'd be great. But can you give me a minute?"

"Sure!" she replies. "I'll be out front."

I watch her leave, dreading the conversation I have to have next. I go up to Mr. Knight and his wife, Tracy. "Hey, Tracy. Hi, Mr. Knight. Can I talk to you?"

"Camille! Just the young woman I was hoping to catch up with." Mr. Knight moves a stack of scripts over and sits on the corner of his desk. "Have you chosen your monologue for Leave?" Every actor going to Willow does a special monologue for an event called To Take a Tedious Leave, which is a quote from *The*

Merchant of Venice. I had planned on Helena's monologue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but that's shot now.

"Actually, I've decided not to go to Willow." I take out the pin and set it on his desk.

Tracy looks at Mr. Knight and then at me. "This is a joke, right?" she says. "The camp is next week. Kiddo, you have to go. Willow is a huge honor and you deserve it."

Mr. Knight shakes his head. "Camille—"

"Please don't make me explain why," I say quickly. "I've made my mind up, and I'm not going."

"Nothing I can say will make you change your mind?" Mr. Knight says.

I stare at the ground and shake my head. Tracy takes the pin off the desk and then puts it back down. "I don't understand."

"I don't want to act anymore; I want to do other things. Do I always have to be the same?"

"No, you don't," Mr. Knight says. "But we wouldn't be doing our jobs if we didn't try to convince you to go. Are you coming back to the Globe?"

"I don't think there's any point," I whisper.

Mr. Knight reaches for the pin, turns it over in his fingers.

"I have to disagree," Tracy says. "Students with talent like yours are the reasons why we do this job. You are an excellent actor, Camille."

"I agree with Tracy," Mr. Knight says. "You're the best we have at the Globe right now. I think it bears saying that you have that extra something that other great actors have."

I wish they would take the pin and stop talking. “Thank you for the opportunity.”

“I wish you the best, Camille.” Mr. Knight holds out his hand.

I take his hand and we shake. Tracy doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t even look at me. I pick up my bag and head for the door.

I leave the theater, and I don’t look back. All I want to do is go home, but I don’t know what I’ll do there. I spot Bea, and I really wish I hadn’t accepted a ride.

She clomps over in the sky-high cork wedges she loves so much. Her dark ponytail swings back and forth, and the beaded purse that I bought for her birthday last month hangs over her shoulder. My best friend of more than ten years, and she has no idea what I’m going through.

“You ready?” She sits down and eases her feet out of her wedges. She examines a blister on her foot. “Why do the cutest shoes always cause the ugliest blisters?” Bea eases her shoe back on and then pulls out a bag of Oreos from her purse. Bea has carried a bag of Oreos with her since we were in elementary school. We always share those cookies, but now the chocolate smell wafting from the baggie makes me nauseous. “Want one?”

“No, thanks,” I say. “Trying to lose some weight.”

Bea takes one out and bites into it. “Are you okay? You never say no to an Oreo,” she mumbles around the cookie.

It’s because the idea of eating one makes me want to barf. Because I’m pregnant. I nearly say it. I *want* to say it. Bea is looking at me in that kind and trusting way, like she always does. And something inside me collapses.

“I need to tell you something,” I blurt out before I can stop

myself. “I had sex.” Saying the word *sex* out loud startles me. It sounds so foreign and odd, as if I made the word up on the spot like Shakespeare always did. *Canker blossom, bodikins, flirt-gill.*

“Very funny.” She bites into another cookie and starts crunching away.

“I’m not joking.” I can feel my thighs starting to burn. I should have put sunscreen on. I don’t know why I think this. Why should I care if my thighs get burned? I just told my best friend, who I know for a fact is a virgin and will be one until her wedding night, who is a teen youth minister at her church, who refuses to see an R-rated movie, who wears a silver purity ring, that I had sexual intercourse.

The crunching stops. “You had sex with Léo?” she whispers.

“No, not Léo. You don’t know him.”

“You had sex with someone I don’t know?”

I don’t respond, and she doesn’t say anything. Her hand rests in her lap, an Oreo clutched in her fingers, half-eaten.

“I think the condom must have broken or something,” I say finally.

“Condom,” Bea says, trying out the word.

I made my best friend say *condom* out loud. I just did that.

“And I’m . . .” I swallow. “I’m pregnant, Bea. I don’t know what to do. I—” Tears start to bubble up.

“Oh, Camille!” Bea drops the bag and the half-eaten cookie and throws her arms around me. I lean against her and cry, relieved that I’ve finally told someone, and that someone is my best friend. I clutch at her like she’s a life raft and I’ve been drifting at sea for days.

“Don’t worry, Camille. I won’t let anything awful happen to

you, you know that.” She reaches for her purse, pulls out a tissue. She dabs at the tears on my face. “So you’re pregnant. You aren’t the first girl to get pregnant on accident. You shouldn’t have had sex, but you did. I promise you, I’ll be there for you every step of the way, okay?”

The knot in my chest unties itself for the first time in days. I had nothing to be afraid of after all. I should have known she wouldn’t judge me. I feel awful to have thought that. It will be okay. Bea will drive me to the clinic, hold my hand while I have the abortion, and then take me home after. She’ll be there with Oreos and Cokes, and we’ll watch dumb reality shows together. And then we’ll go back to the way things were.

“I’ll go to every appointment with you,” she says. “I’ll be your birthing coach, like you see on TV. I’ll tell you to breathe and hold your hand and all that stuff. We’ll figure it out together.”

I haven’t heard her right. “Bea . . . wait. I’m not having the baby.”

Bea looks like I slapped her. “What do you mean, you’re not having the baby?”

“I want to study theater like Annabelle. I don’t want to be a mother at seventeen. I would sooner die. I have an appointment next week.”

“To do what?”

“You know. Come on. Don’t make me say it, Bea.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know!”

Bea is shaking her head. “You can’t. You can’t kill your baby.”

“Stop saying *baby*! It’s not a baby, and it never will be. I gave

up Willow for this. I'll never know Léo. So that tells you everything, okay?"

Bea won't stop shaking her head.

Mateo pulls up in the parking lot, rolls the window down, and calls out to us. "Hey, ladies. Your chariot awaits."

Bea whispers, "I don't . . . I . . . Do your parents know?"

"No. And I'm not going to tell them. I don't want anyone to know. Please don't tell." I reach out, but she shrugs me away and stands up.

"I won't. I won't tell." She goes over to Mateo and stops in front of his car. Her arms are crossed and her shoulders are hunched forward. She's crying.

I'm frozen solid, stuck to the bench like it's a theater seat and I'm in the audience waiting for the next scene to unfold.

The door opens, and Mateo steps out of the car. He ducks down to make eye contact with her and brushes her tears away with his thumbs like an actor in a Nicholas Sparks movie. She says something, and he looks my way. I can't see his expression, but he doesn't wave me over. He talks to Bea. He hugs her. She shakes her head. He puts his arm around her, comforting her, and helps her in the car.

I stand up. I start toward the car, and then I stop. No one is looking at me. I wait, like a dog that's been left behind, unable to understand that she's been abandoned. I sit down again and watch the car, hoping Bea will get out and come back. I picture her running toward me with her arms outstretched, wanting to help, wanting to comfort me.

But she doesn't, and the car pulls away.

SIX
JUNE 30

I leave the souvenir shop and go out into the lobby of the restaurant and sit on a bench with other waiting diners.

A few minutes later, Bea comes out of the shop. She leans against the wall by the bench.

Annabelle comes in and tosses her cup into the trash. She gives us each a look. “Uh, what did I miss?”

“Nothing,” Bea and I say at the same time.

Finally, the hostess calls our name. We follow her to a booth, and she drops three menus on the table.

Annabelle picks up a coffee mug. “Oh my god, hurry up, people. I need fuel here, stat.” She waves the cup in the air, looking around the room for a waitress.

“You just had coffee, like, two seconds ago,” Bea says. “You must like it a lot.”

Annabelle sighs and looks lovingly at her coffee cup. "So much."

"Did you drink tea in England?"

"I tried to, but it didn't take. I went straight back to my first love." Annabelle points at a woman all alone, dressed in denim shorteralls and a plaid shirt. She looks like she could out-bench-press most of the guys in the restaurant. "See her over there? What do you think her story is?"

Bea looks. "Oh, that's Marge. She drives a truck."

Annabelle nods. "Like a boss." She gestures with her head. "That dude at the counter with the clip-on tie and short sleeves."

"You mean Fred?"

"Fred's your man if you're looking to buy . . .," I say.

"Baby dolls," Annabelle says, perfectly deadpan.

Bea and I look at each other and burst out laughing. She reaches out to take my hand, but I pull it away.

A waitress comes by and fills Annabelle's coffee cup. She looks at my mug, still upside down on its frilled paper doily.

"Can I have a Sprite, please?" I ask.

"Sure, honey," she says. "Girls, our special today is waffles with bacon and a side of home fries."

"I'll have that," I say.

"Same," Annabelle says.

"Make it three," Bea says.

The waitress picks up our menus, taps them square on the table. She winks at us and goes off.

Bea sighs happily and sits back in her seat. "I love her."

"The only person I let call me honey are Waffle Factory waitresses," Annabelle says. "Especially if they are named Flo."

“Or Alice,” I chime in. “Alice can even call me sweetie.”

“Betty can call me toots, but only if I’m ordering pie,” Annabelle says.

“And only if she has a pencil behind her ear and those really comfortable white shoes,” Bea says.

Annabelle smiles. “Gotta love those sensible white shoes.”

I realize that I have no idea what story Bea told her parents to be able to come on this road trip. “Bea, where do your mom and dad think you are?”

“I told them I was going to look at some colleges with the two of you. So if we could maybe, like, drive by a college, I’ll feel better about lying to them.”

My best friend never lies, especially to her parents. But she did so to be with me. I’m not sure what to do with that.

“What about you?” Bea asks me.

“Oh, uh, they think I’m at Willow.”

A quiet falls over the table.

A van pulls into a parking space by the window, and two adults and six kids get out.

Annabelle nods toward the family. “See that family?”

“The Funkweiler family?” Bea asks.

“Those guys are hard-core Christians.”

“Nah, they are in one of those German accordion bands—” Bea says.

“No, I mean, seriously. They are as Christian as you can get. You can tell from the way they’re dressed—those awful calf-length denim skirts and sneakers. The girls always have French braids and

the boys always have crew cuts.” She dumps two cups of creamers into her coffee and three packs of sugar. “It’s their jam.”

Bea’s smile fades. She falls quiet.

“The lady at the crisis center dressed like that,” I say.

Bea shoots a look at me. “What’s a crisis center? When did you go to a crisis center?”

I don’t answer her.

“Crisis centers are Christian organizations that trick women into thinking the clinic is a real clinic, but in reality they are sham clinics that pressure women out of having abortions and treat them like shit to boot,” Annabelle says. “They lecture them on the Bible and spout all kinds of bullshit about pregnancy and birth control. It’s a trap, it’s meant to be a trap, and Camille fell into it.”

SEVEN

JUNE 23

There are no other patients in the waiting room when I come in. It doesn't look like a medical office at all, which takes away some of my nerves. It's painted a soft pink and carpeted with a green rug, and a group of tall houseplants in yellow ceramic pots sits in one corner. A woman with a pixie haircut is behind the check-in counter. She looks like a lady from Bea's church, Ruth . . . something.

Please don't let it be Ruth.

She looks up from her computer and smiles when she sees me. "You must be Camille," she says. "I'm Jean. We spoke on the phone. How are you doing, darlin'? Feeling any better?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. "I'm okay."

"I was so worried about you," Jean says. "My Bible study group has been praying for you."

What she says doesn't bother me because so many people in Texas are religious. But it seems strange to me that someone like her would want to work in a family planning clinic.

"How come there aren't any protestors here?" I say. "I was worried about that."

"Oh, they don't bother us," Jean says. She hands over a clipboard and asks me to fill in the information. I sit in one of the chairs. It asks the usual medical information, but I hesitate over the personal stuff like my address and emergency contact number.

"Excuse me, Jean? How confidential is this form?"

"No one will know but us, hon."

At the end of the form is a question: *What do you expect from this visit?* I write in: *I would like to schedule an abortion.*

I hand it to Jean and sit down. I take my cell phone out to check my messages and Jean pipes up: "Darlin', it's clinic policy to turn your cell phone off. It interferes with our equipment."

"Oh, I'm sorry." I switch off my phone. A little TV across from me comes on and a video starts. A fetus floating in a uterus flashes on the screen. "Life is a miracle," a man narrates.

I stand up and pretend to be interested in the plants. They're fake.

A woman comes from the back dressed in pink scrubs. She's holding my folder. "Hi, Camille," she says. "I'm Lisa. You want to come with me?"

I follow Lisa in her pink scrubs down the hallway.

"How's the weather out there?"

"Um, it's hot," I say.

She pauses by a scale and I set my purse down, take off my shoes, and stand on it. I'm ten pounds heavier than the last time I weighed myself. I flush with embarrassment, but Lisa doesn't say anything. She makes a note in my file and leads me down a short hallway and into a darkened room. "Undress from the waist down and then sit on the table." She hands me a sheet. "Cover up with this. I'll be right back."

I take off my shorts and underwear. I hesitate over my socks. I don't think it would matter if I left them on, but she said everything from the waist down, so I take my socks off, too.

The tile floor is freezing, and my feet are cold by the time I sit down. The paper on the table rustles underneath me. I spread the sheet over my knees and tuck it around my waist.

Lisa comes back into the room and sits on a rolling stool. She takes out a long plastic rod and rolls what looks like a condom on it. "You can lie down now. This won't take but a minute."

"I . . . What is that?" I say.

"It's an ultrasound probe, hon. It's the best way to confirm the age of your baby," she says. "It has to go in your vagina, okay?"

My heart starts to pound. "Do we have to do this?"

She doesn't hear me. "Put your feet in the stirrups there and lie back."

I do as she says. I lie back and set my feet carefully in the little metal hooks at the bottom of the table. They've covered them with baby socks—one pink, one blue.

Stirrups used to mean horses and trail rides and friends. Now stirrups mean ultrasounds and god-awful-looking probes.

“I’m gonna hand it to you, and you put it in. Just like putting in a tampon, okay?”

I take it, embarrassed beyond words. I slide it in. It’s cold and gooey.

She takes the handle from me and moves the probe back and forth; I can feel it swiping around. I stare up at the ceiling. There’s a sign up there that says JESUS LOVES YOU. The ultrasound machine is making this loud humming noise, and when Lisa moves, her stool squeaks. There’s a pineapple-shaped wax melter on the table next to me, and the fake tropical fumes wafting out of it are the kind that give me an instant headache. I turn my head away from it and try to hold my breath.

Lisa swipes the probe around some more. She’s taking forever, and I hope this means she doesn’t see anything. I hope the pregnancy test is wrong. Maybe it will be okay. I cross my fingers and then uncross them. *Stupid.*

“I love this job,” Lisa says. “It’s like opening a present at Christmas, seeing the baby for the first time. It’s such a miracle.”

I wish she wouldn’t call it a baby.

She taps something onto the keyboard on the machine. “There!” she says. “There’s your baby.”

My heart sinks. It’s true, and there’s no running away from it now.

She turns the screen toward me. “Here she is. Or he. We can’t tell the sex just yet. You’ll know that in a few weeks. Unless you want it to be a surprise when you deliver. Are you hoping for a girl or a boy?”

I stare up at the ceiling. I won't look. I don't want to see it.

"Look at that teeny little miniature baby."

I shrug.

"You don't want to see your baby?" she says in disbelief.

I shake my head.

"You have to look," Lisa says with warning. "It's Texas law. If you don't look, then you have to pay for the exam, and it's four hundred dollars."

I look. The picture on the screen is black and white. In the middle is a round blank space with a white shape, which Lisa points to. She smiles.

"This is your baby here. You can see she has little arms and legs, and her heart fluttering, that means it's beating. Isn't that exciting?"

I stare at the ceiling again. "Not really," I say.

"A heartbeat, it's a love beat, we say in the clinic. Just like that cheesy old seventies song."

"When can I schedule it?"

"Schedule what, hon?" she replies.

"The procedure." My voice doesn't sound like mine at all. I don't know whose it is.

Lisa says nothing.

"And I've never heard of that song," I whisper.

Lisa prints out a copy of the ultrasound and puts it in my folder, but her friendliness is gone. I pull out the probe and hand it to her. She does whatever she has to do with it to make it ready for the next person, hands me a washcloth, and leaves.

I sit up and wipe myself off.

I get dressed. There's a butt-shaped wrinkle in the paper on the table where I was sitting. I tear it off, bunch it into a ball, and cram it into the trash can.

No one comes back in, so I pick up my purse and go out in the hall. I stand there. After a few minutes, Lisa appears and gestures for me to follow her into an office. She leaves the folder on the desk, steps back into the hall, and closes the door behind her without saying a word to me.

I hear whispers in the hallway. I make out Lisa saying something about me being determined to have an abortion. There's a rustling of paper and then footsteps walking away.

I didn't do a good enough job cleaning the ultrasound goo off, and I can feel my underwear sticking to it. I cross my arms over my chest. It's cold in the office. What's taking so long? I'm the only one in the clinic. I'm going to be late for work, and Iggy will yell at me.

A silver digital picture frame sits on the corner of the desk. I watch as a photo of a couple and two elementary-school-age boys dissolves into a photo of the family standing in front of Sleeping Beauty's Disneyland castle.

I reach for my phone for something to do, but I remember I'm not supposed to turn it on. There is a stack of pink and blue pamphlets on a table next to me, so I pick one up. The information inside is about all the side effects of an abortion, things like breast cancer, suicide, and hysterectomy from a punctured uterus. I put the pamphlet down.

Finally, a woman comes in—it's the lady from the pictures. The rims of her flesh-colored pedis are visible inside her black

patent leather flats. Her chin-length soccer mom bob is hair-sprayed perfectly in place.

“Hello, Camille.” She sits down at the desk. “I’m Susan Clark, your pregnancy counselor.”

“Hi.”

“So we know you’re pregnant, that’s definitely positive from the ultrasound.” She speaks carefully, trying to meet my eyes, but I won’t look at her.

“Do you want to tell me how this happened? Sometimes it’s very comforting to tell someone.”

“I . . .” I glance at Susan. “Do I have to?”

“It’s important,” she says. “It gives us a picture of who you are and how we can help you. What you tell me stays here in my office. This is a safe place.”

I clear my throat. “Um . . . well, I was dating this guy, and we hooked up. We used a condom, but I don’t know what happened to it.”

“Unfortunately, condoms don’t work very well. Condoms fail at least fifty percent of the time, so I’m not surprised it broke.” She pulls my folder toward her. “Most birth control does fail, including birth control pills. The only one hundred percent way of being sure you’ll never get pregnant is to wait to have sex until you’re ready to have a baby, right?” She nods, her eyebrows raised, as though I’ve done something really wrong. “You know the mistake you made, right?” Again, the raised eyebrows and the nod.

“I don’t think that’s right about condoms,” I say quietly. I try to think back to tenth grade when we had sex ed, but no one talked about contraception.

She stares at me.

I feel stupid, but more than that, I feel shamed.

“Now you know. And now you can do better going forward from here, right?” Susan finishes all her questions with the word *right*. Like I agree with her completely.

Susan opens my folder and goes through the information. She’s taking forever. I shift in my chair.

“I have to get to work,” I say. But it’s like she doesn’t hear me.

She flips the pages to the ultrasound picture. She smiles and turns it so I can see. “Look at that little miracle—” she says.

“I think there’s a mistake,” I say, interrupting her.

She looks at the name on my folder. “You’re Camille Winchester, right?”

“That’s my name, yes.”

“Looks like your due date will be—”

“I don’t need to know the due date because I’m not having it.”

“It?” Susan says. “What is *it*?”

I swallow. “The . . .”

“Baby?” Susan says. “Because it is a baby, you know that, Camille, right?”

“I guess I should have said on the phone. I think Jean misunderstood.” I bunch my hands in my lap. This is bad. I should have spoken up and told them right away instead of assuming they knew I wanted an abortion. Now I’ll probably have to pay for that ultrasound, and I only have a few dollars in my purse.

“Well, let’s chat about that,” she says. Her voice is calm and she forms each word perfectly. “God sent you here to us, and we

want to look after you. Now, you have other options for your little one, and I'd like you to know what they are before you jump to a decision you may regret later in your life, right?" She comes around to my side of the desk and sits on the chair opposite me. She leans forward and puts her hands over mine. "We can help you find a wonderful deserving Christian family to adopt your baby, or you can keep her and raise her yourself. Both of these decisions will give her the same chance at life that your mother gave you. Can I tell you a little bit more about how we can help?"

Four hundred dollars, I think. I'll owe that if I don't listen. So I nod.

"It looks like you're three months pregnant." She reaches into a wicker basket on the table and takes out a little doll. "This is what your baby looks like now." The tiny figure has a face and little arms and legs.

"I'm not that far along," I say.

She sets the figure on my lap. "It's very hard to tell the exact age."

"But that can't be—"

"Now, the first step is to keep you safe, happy, and healthy. Our school for expectant mothers will protect you from people who might try to make you feel bad for your decision. We also have a dormitory if you feel unsafe or unwelcome in your home. In addition, we'll teach you important mommy skills like baby care and budgeting. We also offer vocational skills at the school like retail sales, waitressing, housekeeping, to help you earn money."

Over on the picture frame, a photo of a lady's birthday party slides into view. Her grayish blond hair is tightly curled, and she looks like an older version of Susan Clark.

"I'm not dropping out of my school," I say. "Why would I do that?"

Susan stands and reaches up to take a pamphlet off the shelf. "We find it's for the best. Our girls made the terrible decision to give themselves to boys before marriage, and they have to deal with that. Bullying only adds fuel to the fire. Our school is the best option."

"I don't want to drop out of my high school," I say again, this time more firmly. "I want to finish my senior year and go to college. I don't want to have a baby."

"I know you feel that way now," she says. "But once you hold your baby in your arms and see her little face for the first time, you'll realize you've done the right thing. Don't you want to do the right thing, Camille?"

"I . . . of course, but—"

"What if your mother had aborted you? Have you ever thought of that?"

"My mother resents me," I blurt out. "She had to give up her dream of being a pastry chef when she had me. If my mom had aborted me, she'd be living her dream. So . . ."

Susan's face hardens.

"Why is my life more important than hers?" I whisper.

She slides the pamphlet across the desk. "To take a life, a little innocent baby's life, is tantamount to murder. I think you need

to think a little harder about this decision. It's proven that abortion can cause terrible mental health issues for you like depression and suicide, and physical problems down the road like uterine perforations and infertility. It can also cause painful periods for the rest of your life."

I shouldn't have yelled at her like that. Now she'll kick me out and force me to pay. "Can I just schedule the . . . procedure? Please?"

"You can't say the word out loud?" She looks me right in the eye, her face expressionless. "Abortion."

I meet her gaze, but I don't reply.

"We are here for mothers, not murderers. I think the next step for us is to contact your parents." She reaches for the phone. She opens my folder. I see my mom's cell phone number under emergency contact.

I stand up and snatch my folder from under Susan's hand; the doll tumbles to the floor. I race out of the room.

"That folder is clinic property," Susan shouts.

I cram the folder into my backpack on top of my Iggy's uniform and push the door open.

I'm halfway down the street when I hear footsteps behind me. I'm scared it's Susan or Lisa running after me to make me pay for the ultrasound and to get my folder back. But it's Jean. She's holding a bag with tissue poking out of the top.

"I want you to have this," Jean says. "It's a little something I made for you the night you called." She hands the bag to me. "You get in touch if you need anything, Camille. I mean that."

When I get to work, I look inside the bag. Under the tissue paper is a pair of pink-and-blue knitted baby booties with little tassels. I find a trash can and shove the booties underneath a pile of wrappers smeared with ketchup and chili cheese.