

S. J. GOSLEE



How  
(Not)  
to  
Ask  
a Boy  
to  
Prom



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*For Sully & Flynn*

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# One

Spring renewal comes with many things—the annual Sheffield Family Lawn Game Tournament, my part-time job at the Talbot plant nursery, an inexplicable increase in dick drawings on the outside of my locker.

What I don't expect it to bring, this year, on the day of the spring equinox, is my name being called in homeroom for the Student Advisor Program.

The Student Advisor Program is for juniors freaking out about college apps and the bored seniors who volunteer to help them. When my sister was one of those juniors last year, she formed a codependent bond in SAP with the co-captain of the golf team that basically weirded everybody out.

But me: I'm completely chill about college apps. I'm going to follow my sister to State, obviously, and if I can't get in there I'll probably just stay home and work for Mr. Talbot for the rest of my life. I've got a green thumb; it'll be fine.

Haimes says, “Nolan Grant Sheffield,” and I straighten up in my seat, watch the other three kids in the class that apparently actually *did* sign up for SAP scramble out the door.

“Well, Nolan?” Haimes says, gesturing toward the door. “Report to the library. They’ll have late passes for your first period.”

“But I—” I cut myself off. Do I really want to argue about getting out of half of my gym class? We’re starting a soccer section. I’m specifically exempt from the no-hands rule—lose a little blood from the face during kickball and apparently everyone panics—which will probably only give those jerkwads Plank, Sid, and Small Tony an even meaner edge to their play. I mean, they’re pretty much the reason I always bleed in the first place.

I hightail it out into the hallway, preparing to explain to the librarian that this was all a mistake.

Maybe I’ll take the long way down to the soccer field after I talk my way out of SAP. I can hang in the second-floor bathroom for a while if I have to, so long as Bern and his crew aren’t monopolizing it for an organized roof climb—I’m 90 percent sure they have a rope ladder and a grappling hook hidden at the bottom of the trash can in the last stall.

At the library, I push open the doors and scan the scattered tables already full of pairs of whispering students and see . . . Daphne. All alone. Grinning, she waves both her hands at me and I palm my face with a groan.

Daphne Sheffield, graduating senior, my sister in all ways but blood: I should have seen this coming.

“You’re joking,” I say, dropping down into the seat across from her.

She’s got out a notebook and a pen with a pompom on the end of it, a book on college essays at her elbow, and her grin is getting progressively sharper around the edges the longer she looks at me. Finally, she says, “I promised Mom I’d prep you for the SATs.”

“You did,” I say slowly. I fold my hands together in front of me on the table and try not to break eye contact.

Daphne has a scoop nose and wild dark ringlets around her head. There are deceptively adorable freckles along the tops of her cheeks. Her eyes are practically angelic, long-fringed, underscored with eyeliner, shiny with faux guilelessness. She clasps her hands under her chin and says, “I did, baby bird. We’ll even get you into some extracurriculars for your transcript, too.” She arches an eyebrow. “You owe me.”

“Oh?” I say faintly. I’ve got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Game night. December,” she says. “You owe me a favor. A boon.”

*Boon* is such a broad word when used by my adoptive family. Because, as I’ve learned many a time since moving in with them three years ago, they’re all competitive nut jobs. If Daphne hadn’t forgotten about the promise she’d forced

out of me—my head smashed into the carpet, caught red-handed stealing money out of the till, but god almighty we'd been well into our third hour of Monopoly, can anyone blame me?—I was at least hoping for maybe a servant for a week type deal, like when Daphne's mom, Marla, had to do all of Tom's laundry after tanking at Mario Kart.

I spread my hands out in front of me. "I wouldn't exactly call all this a favor."

Technically, to any outsider, this might look like Daphne is doing a favor for me. Technically, any outsider would be wrong.

Daphne reaches out and pats my arm. "Don't worry, baby bird. This is going to be fun."

Fun for Daphne is relative. Daphne likes pick-up games of basketball and watching shark documentaries and hanging out with Dave and Missy, who are the worst. Missy, in pale button-downs and sweater vests, wavers between being a hateful jackal and a sophisticated T2000 sent back from the future to murder all happiness. Dave wears flat-brimmed caps and hides his feelings in paperback books.

So I have my doubts about every part of this.

SAT prep, fine, I can probably handle that, but I know it won't stop there: Daphne is a hurricane.

Resigned, I pick up the book on essay writing and start to flip through it.

She slaps it down on the desk and says, "Hang on, baby bird, I have a list."

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In English, Evie says, “What’s wrong with your face?”

“What’s wrong with it?” I palm my jaw and rub my fingers along my cheek.

“You’re pouting.”

I force my lips up into a smile, but I don’t think it works.

“You were fine this morning,” Evie says, suspicious.

I *was* fine this morning, even though there was a fresh penis drawn on my locker (large, and encasing both the top and bottom doors—I was suitably impressed).

And look, I got to skip most of gym! That’s a point in Tuesday’s favor, even if I had to sit through a bulleted list of all the ways Daphne thinks I’m doing my life wrong. I’ve been trying not to take it too personally.

“There,” Evie says, stabbing her finger right in between my eyes. “You’re doing it again.”

“I have a headache.” It’s not a lie.

And then I notice that the seat next to me is filled with an actual body. That it isn’t the empty void it’s been for the better part of the year: a pale, institutional green chair paired up with a scarred desk that, if you look closely enough, was a hapless victim of my narwhal obsession. Weird.

The seat next to me in English belongs to Ira Bernstein, for the few times he actually decides to show up for class.

I'm not sure how he's passing, *if* he's passing. The only class I've ever seen him reliably attend is our art elective.

I've had English with him all year, and usually he's only in class when it's raining.

A glance at the window shows the sun shining, with only a few fluffy white clouds mingling in the blue.

I risk a full look at Bern—he's scowling down at his desk, and he turns to glare at me when he senses my stare. He's got the raccoon eyes of a sleepless night, and I can't tell if the redness of his eyeballs is from a bender or if he's been *crying*.

When he growls, "What?" I realize I've been staring for too long—*awkward*—and blink and look away.

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It's all over school by lunch.

Metal Shop Gia and Bern were apparently one of the longest-running couples in our class, so their massive public falling-out and subsequent breakup is big news.

I feel bad about it for all of ten seconds, until Bern shoves me on his way out of the cafeteria. I stumble to the side and say, "Hey!" but all Bern does is grunt at me and stalk off down the hall, his shoulders hunched.

And then I feel bad all over again ten seconds after that. The room is buzzing with rumors about how Gia humiliated Bern in the parking lot before school. I shake off the

odd feeling that I should go after him and—what? Offer a shoulder to cry on? A squishy body to punch? Bern spent all of freshman year low-key harassing me when I first came out, so we're not exactly on the best terms.

When I finally make it across the caf, I'm the last one to arrive.

Each and every person at my lunch table is technically one of Daphne's friends, not mine, since Evie refuses to drop French and switch lunches.

It's like staring at blank-faced, black-eyed demons for forty-five minutes out of every day, but they're the only things saving me from having to eat lunch alone in the bathroom or out back behind the auditorium, where some kids sneak off to smoke up and plot the downfall of mankind.

As I drop into the seat next to Carlos, Daphne greets me with another list. She says, "I'm starting you off slow," and I stare at her like she's a crazy person.

"Four hours ago, you shoved three SAT prep books at me." I resist the urge to add, *and gave me a point-by-point lecture explaining how I'm ruining my social life by sleeping too much*. And now she's giving me a list of . . . what, exactly?

She waves around the piece of paper. "It's just two things," she says. "I mean, how can you call yourself an artist and not be a part of the amazing and fulfilling Art Buddies program?"

*Easily*, I think. Art Buddies pairs teenagers up with kids

ranging in age from six to twelve. They're basically supposed to be mentors, and I have no business mentoring anyone that isn't imaginary or my cat.

Warily, I say, "You said two things?"

"The GSA is having a plant sale this year."

The GSA. The Gay-Straight Alliance club. Evie and I showed up once, at the beginning of our sophomore year, only to find ourselves surrounded by lacrosse jocks, cheerleaders, Mr. Boater, and a massive number of feather boas, tiaras, and condoms. I never really understood what was happening, but Evie had grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the room before GSA President Si O'Mara—a god who was sent down from the Mount to smile blessings upon us—could open his mouth to even say, "Hi."

Carlos leans toward me and grabs my plastic bag of Oreos with a "Yoink." He stuffs one in his mouth and says around it, "Doesn't Evie have a rune tattooed on her hip to ward off the heebie-jeebies of the GSA?"

"That's a lie," I say. It's a patch on her book bag, but only because her mom wouldn't sign the permission slip for a tattoo.

Carlos shoots me a lazy finger gun and silently passes over his . . .

"Is this a block of cheese?"

He shrugs. "My mom was in a rush this morning."

I take it. I'm never really picky about food.

Daphne says, “Just think about it. They do public works! And they’re always looking for art volunteers. I bet Parker Montgomery the Third has totally forgotten about that time you told him to fuck off.”

I had totally not forgotten that time I told P the 3 to fuck off. There had been poster demands and I’d been in the middle of a stressful still life and it’s not my proudest moment, but I probably wouldn’t go back and change my response, especially since I’m 80 percent certain P the 3 still has no idea who I am.

And then Daphne tips her head back and sniffs and says, “Is it *meatball* day?” and I have to listen to her romanticize about watery red sauce for the rest of lunch.

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In the afternoon I have my art elective, which I take because I’m some kind of masochist, obviously. Our art teacher, Ms. Purdy, is a sour old lady who thinks she should have been famous. She wears a constant pinched expression and clucks her tongue over everything I do.

Which is fine. I don’t need her to tell me I’m awesome at drawing—I am, seriously—I just need her to not give me C minuses all the time, and maybe not act like Zamir Abadi is the second coming.

But what am I going to do, *not* take art class?

There's a big poster in the front of the art classroom of a smiling, gap-toothed kid covered in paint, with a sign-up sheet next to it, ART BUDDIES spelled out in puffy lettering. It's a constant all year—"New names are always welcome!"—and I stare at it with narrowed eyes and twitchy fingers. There's only about three months left before summer break. How much would this actually help me?

Evie nudges me toward our shared table in the back and says, "Don't even think about it."

"Daphne wants me to," I say, dropping down into my seat.

Evie rolls her eyes. "You have a problem. Daphne's not the boss of you."

It kind of feels like Daphne's the boss of me. I've never really gotten over that summer I first moved in with the Sheffields, when I was thirteen and impressionable and Daphne was really good at climbing up on things to give me noogies.

And now I have to think about the fact that Daphne's graduating and flouncing off to college. She's arguably my soul-twin, my one great platonic love affair—the keeper of all those dark times, when I was on the cusp of fourteen and terrified that her parents were going to throw me back for being defective. We've since moved on to greater things, like our shared love of narwhals and *Supernatural* and the double-chocolate cheesecake from Modeen's Diner,

but memories like that stick: I was a wreck of hormones and nerves and foster woes, and Daphne showed me the brilliant weirdness that is the Sheffields' impossible yet possible life. We watch movies in the backyard and have family game nights and day trips to the shore that involve too many hotdogs and inadvisable amounts of time in the sun.

And that's all going to change. It's inevitable, like Grandpa Sheffield shuffling off his mortal coil and Waffle Sundays and the living-dead thing under my bed eventually burrowing out through my mattress to eat me. But just because it's inevitable doesn't mean I have to like it.

So. Art Buddies.

Flipping open my sketch pad, I say, "It could be fun?" Which convinces nobody, not even myself, that it could *actually* be fun.

Rob and Arlo drop down into their seats across from us at the long rectangular table. Rob says, "What could be fun?"

Evie says, "Fuck off," without any heat, because she has this knee-jerk hatred of Rob that stems from his codependency on Arlo, and how Arlo is the devil. Arlo *sculpts*; he has no business being that defensive of Impressionism. Everyone knows he just does it to piss Evie off.

"Art Buddies," I say, and Rob makes a face.

Arlo scoffs and says, "Good luck with that."

And then Evie has a silent stare-down with him that ends with her turning to me and saying, “You know what? Let’s do it.”

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Maybe it isn’t just today that sucks balls.

Maybe it’s every day, given that they’re inevitably all bookended by gym and chemistry. My lab partner in chem is Linz Garber. Linz Garber is a pyro, she probably needs actual help, but odds are nobody’ll do anything about it until she burns the whole school to the ground. Dr. Carlisle gave me my own personal fire extinguisher for under our table two weeks into the school year.

The only awesome thing about chem is that I have it with Si O’Mara, the school’s one and only openly gay football star. It’s possible that I’m still not over my freshman crush.

It’s possible that I’ve had it bad for him ever since he innocently helped me pick up my books and papers when my bag split open in the middle of the hallway between classes our first week in. It could’ve been a meet-cute. I had embarrassingly vanilla fantasies about sitting together in class, at lunch, hanging out at each other’s houses after school—*Evie must never know about them*. But meet-cutes don’t happen outside Hallmark movies that I definitely, absolutely don’t watch. The only class we’ve always shared has

been science, and we always end up on opposite sides of the room.

Today, Si has a flush to his cheeks, like he's been laughing. I slump down with my chin in my hand and catch myself in the middle of an audible sigh.

"Oops, crap," Linz says, and the distinct smell of lit paper makes my nose twitch. It's like—we weren't even *using* our burners, what the fuck?

I automatically flap my notebook down on her crumbling paper so fast Dr. Carlisle doesn't even notice.

Linz grins at me, sheepish. *Sorry*, she mouths.

I shrug—crazily enough, I'm used to it by now—and then shake ashes off my notebook and flip it open to a new page.

When the bell rings, I only stare a *little* creepily as Si packs up his books, scuffs a hand over the back of Mykos's head, and waves to P the 3.

Linz absolutely can't judge me for it.

And then Si's gaze sweeps the room and he catches me looking and I feel my face freeze up. This . . . has never happened before. His ice blue eyes have never locked with mine, like he's trying to figure out exactly where he knows me from, despite us both being right here, in the same classroom, at the same time, every day. Oh god.

His slow-dawning grin is blinding, and I'm pretty sure he means it for Linz; or for Steph Crane, who sits behind us; or for the happy, fluffy clouds floating past the far

windows; but my mouth automatically twitches up to smile back.

And, okay, there's a burn on my cheeks that can probably be seen from space when Tasha Carmichael elbows past me to saunter up to Si's still-smiling face and hook arms with him.

Linz snorts and I mutter, "Shut up," under my breath.



Instead of immediately delving into the world of after-school activities, Evie and I silently agree to go home and sleep on it. At least that's what I think we're agreeing to. She doesn't stop me when I go for my bike, and I make my way home to watch *Ellen* and think about my life choices with my cat, Fuzzbutt McGundersnoot.

Fuzzbutt is completely unimpressed with me, in general, but he sleeps in my bed every night and is willing to rub his face on my face, so I'm sort of attached. He's a longhaired floofy thing, brown-and-white tabby, and both of my hands are buried in his fur as he tolerates an enthusiastic petting when Marla knocks on my bedroom door.

She leans into the doorframe and says, "I hope you don't think I'm meddling."

Lifting my head up from where I was definitely not making kissy faces at Fuzzbutt, I say, "Meddling how?"

Marla doesn't usually *meddle*. Tom meddles, because he still thinks he can teach me how to catch a baseball. He counsels grade schoolers and likes to analyze why I'm partial to plants (spoiler alert: they don't care if I sing to myself after hours at the nursery), and I'm pretty sure he looks at me sometimes and still sees the beanpole in worn Converse shoes they picked up in front of the group home almost three years ago.

Marla, on the other hand, has always respected my right to hate sports and own four different pairs of the same sweatpants and name every single jade plant I get Attila.

Moving into my room, she perches on the edge of my bed and pats my ankle. "I just want you to be as prepared for next year as possible."

Oh, yeah. SAP. I shrug. "Okay."

"To be fair," she says, grinning, "all I did was ask Daphne to lend you her prep books. So whatever else happens is completely out of my hands."

I muffle a laugh in Fuzzbutt's fur, because what can you do? Fuzzy flicks his tail over my forehead and then shifts over onto his other side, away from my face, but still within arm's reach.

"It's fine," I say. I don't know how fine it'll be when Daphne gets some real momentum behind her, but for now it's not so bad. Some studying, some after school Art Buddies shenanigans with Evie—I can handle it. Maybe.

Marla squeezes my ankle and then lets me go. She says, “Your dad’s grilling steaks for dinner, and Daphne’s out with Adrian.”

I make a face, because *Adrian*, ugh. Adrian Fells is the worst boyfriend in the history of boyfriends, but Daphne is blinded by his lacrosse skills and shapely ass and probably his tongue, too. They’ve been dating since January. The only thing more terrible than Daphne dating Adrian—who has given me more than one bloody nose by “accidentally” tripping me down the school stairs—is that her best friend Missy agrees with me about it.

We shared a commiserating look of horror when Daphne announced their first date, and it was one of the strangest things that’s ever happened to me. I hope to god it never happens again.

“Dad could use some help with the garlic toast,” Marla says, and I sigh and roll up off the side of the bed and onto my feet.

Fuzzbutt jumps down, too, only he immediately disappears under the bed.

Marla says, “You might want to consider finding out what died under there, before it spreads to the rest of the house.”

It’s a heavy hint that I choose to ignore. Whatever is under there is starting to smell even stronger, and I really don’t want to know what Fuzzbutt is doing with it.

## Two

Because the high school lets out an hour before the middle and elementary schools, Evie and I have time to kill in between school and our first Art Buddies meeting. Which we are doing. For sure. It was touch and go for a while there today, but Evie's resolve solidified during art, after an offhand huff from Arlo. I'm almost entirely certain the aforementioned huff had nothing to do with our afternoon plans, and was most likely meant for Rob instead, and all the ways he was sticking markers up his nose. I'm not actually going to tell Evie that, though.

Evie's girlfriend, Tamara, is a junior at Holy Redeemer and works afternoons at the coffee and sandwich shop, Ground Zero.

Ground Zero has a hipster vibe, partly because of the Mumford & Sons playing quietly overhead and the stack of farm quilts for sale, but mostly because of the overabundance

of actual hipsters, clad in scarves and ugly sweaters even though the temperature is pushing sixty.

The best thing about Ground Zero, though, is that two out of the four walls are chalkboards, and Tam's manager always lets us draw whatever we want. For me, that means octopods and narwhals and flowers. For Evie, that means her teacup yorkie, Peekaboo, sporting various fashionable neckerchiefs.

Almost all the hours out of every day, Evie projects an air of having it totally together. She's low-key disdainful of our peers, vicious at card games, and has extremely specific opinions on art, the CW, and Harry Potter. And then you get her within three feet of Tam and she completely loses her cool.

Tamara squeezes Evie's hand over the counter and Evie's face goes up in flames, her mouth spreading into a wide, goofy smile.

Tamara says, "We have fresh eclairs and those peanut butter fudge brownies you like." And then she shoves a container of chalk at me and says, "You need to brighten up your face. Why are you frowning?"

I didn't even realize I was frowning, but now that she's said something I can feel the strain at the corners of my mouth. Ugh.

"Extracurriculars," Evie says with a roll of her eyes. "Art Buddies."

"Kids hate me," I say.

“How can they hate you?” Tamara looks me up and down. “You’re like . . . a pipe-cleaner man, or a stick figure.”

“Gee, thanks.” I stick my tongue out at Tamara, hug my bucket of chalk to my chest, and retreat, leaving Evie to pick up our snacks.

We have a regular table in the back corner with optimal chalkboard access, saved from hordes of Kerouac-reading twenty-somethings by the meager natural light and lack of quirky-colored armchairs. It’s a tall table with round stools that double as stepladders, so I can get nearly all the way up to the ceiling if I stretch. I busy myself organizing chalk colors on the tabletop, watching Evie and Tamara out of the corner of my eye. Tamara flirts like they haven’t been exclusive for a full month, and Evie’s shoulders loosen the longer she stands there, until she’s resting an elbow on the counter and scuffing the toe of her shoe along the tile floor. She sends me a quick glance before taking the plate of pastries from the counter. Tamara grins after her as she walks away.

She’s lost some of the giddy pink in her cheeks by the time she reaches me and drops the plate down in the middle of the table.

Evie says, “I’m going to need you to draw me an orca the size of this entire wall so Peekaboo can ride on its back.”

“We have less than an hour,” I say. I’m not opposed to drawing a killer whale, they’re pretty neat. On the scale of sea creatures I like to attempt to recreate, killer whales are

about a six. Not as many limbs as an octopus, no magical horn, but they've got big teeth and nice contrasting colors.

"Well, I'm certainly not suggesting we skip the meeting," she says, picking through the bucket to get to the brown and orange chalk.

"Sure you're not." I'm tempted to do it. Just tell Daphne I lost track of time. It's not even that big a deal, honestly, but I'd still feel guilty as hell about it. I sigh and say, "We're just going to try it. Once. And if we hate it, we never have to go back."

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The Art Buddies program coincides daily with the elementary and middle-school aftercare and is hosted at the local community center: a giant, sleekly renovated building on the edge of town.

Following brightly colored poster board signs pointing the way through the building, Evie and I slink into the back of the large assigned art room at quarter to four. There's a sea of organized easels and art stations, kids grouped in clusters, and a vaguely familiar-looking stocky dude with a clipboard who waves us up to the front with a friendly smile.

We wade through a wide spectrum of kids and a surprising number of fellow high schoolers. I lock eyes accidentally with Bern, and then Zamir gives me a tiny nod of acknowledgment. I totally did not expect to see either

of them here. It's possible I'm wrong, but I could have sworn they spent every day after detention hanging out in front of the Wawa with the rest of their friends.

Stocky dude's name tag reads ALLAIN with little hearts around it. He clicks his pen and says, "Cho and Sheffield, right?"

"Nolan," I say, and Allain nods.

"Sure." He makes a couple check marks on his paper, hands us some blank name tag stickers, then says, louder, "Newbies get the twins."

Half the room cheers.

Two dark-haired girls glare over at us in suspicion, like newbie is code for mass murderer.

Evie pushes up her sleeves like she's going to war.

I swallow hard and wave *hi*.

Mim and Bex are not actually twins. They're sisters, a little over a year apart, but they look uncannily alike anyway, with matching bobs and disapproving looks and only the very slightest of height differences.

Mim says, "Name," and then glares even harder at me when I say it. She's eleven, and I'm terrified of her.

"You have three names," she says, poking at my chest. "You told me three names, like you're a politician or an esquire or a *third*."

"Uh." I panic and back up a step. "Grant Sheffield is more like a hyphenation?" Only without the hyphen, but I don't tell her that.

Her expression only softens minutely. I'm not even sure it can be considered a softening; it's more like she's placing some of her intense hatred in reserve, for when I inevitably fuck up later in the day.

I flash a quick, panicked glance over at Evie, but she seems to be in a fierce stare-down with Bex, so no help is coming from that quarter.

Mim says, "I'm working with glitter today," and, "I hope you like dinosaurs," and it's like—who doesn't, right?

I nod meekly.

There are big tubs of pink, purple, and blue glitter glue, metallic markers, and a huge roll of construction paper at our station. Mim watches me like a hawk as I pick out a marker and arrange my easel, but it only takes a minute for her to dive into the supplies herself. She makes a triumphant *ta dah* sound as she clutches a box full of elbow macaroni.

I like sketching and painting. I've got acrylics at home, even though I prefer oils when I can get them. When I sketch, I use charcoals or soft pencils.

There's something freeing, though, in making a giant T. rex with a metallic blue marker. It looks lopsided, which Mim is obviously judging me hard for. Her herd of yellow-and-purple stegosaurus amidst a glittering pink sunset and macaroni hills is far superior, honestly, but I'm willing to look stupid in front of an eleven-year-old if it means she'll stop calling me Turd the Third.

At the end of the hour, Mim says, "Later, loser," which

is a definite improvement. She's smiling a little, too, so I'll take it as a very slim win.

Evie bumps my shoulder as she walks up with Bex, and I'm not at all jealous of the half-hug Bex gives her before dashing out the door with her older sister. Ugh.

"How did you manage that?" I ask, trying to decide whether to fold my dinosaur picture in half or proudly display it on our walk to the parking lot.

"She likes dogs and rainbows and making fun of Justin Bieber," Evie says with a shrug.

"There's nothing wrong with Justin Bieber," I say, because we've had this argument many times before—there is absolutely nothing wrong with Justin Bieber. His songs have gotten progressively cooler over the years, okay, and the internet is pretty sure he's hung like a horse.

Of course, Bern takes that exact moment to push past us toward the door, and I silently send thanks to the gods of pop music that I didn't voice that tidbit out loud.

Evie frowns after him. She says, "What's his problem?"

"Uh, everything? The world?" Maybe Metal Shop Gia really liked Bieber, and I've unwittingly reminded him of how she, so the rumor goes, told him to get fucked and die. That seems a little harsh after two years of dating, so I have serious doubts that actually happened.

"Cool dinosaur," Evie says, smirking at my picture.

"Damn right," I say. My dinosaur rocks, even if it has macaroni for teeth. "Wanna come over for dinner?" I feel

the need to have some backup with Daphne. She's probably going to grill me on how not entirely terrible Art Buddies was and be totally smug about it.

Evie purses her lips and looks like she's waffling, but she'd be a fool to pass up an epic dinner at the Sheffield household. Tom's the best cook—I've witnessed Missy weep, *weep*, over his heaven-sent meatloaf, risking corroding her evil-robot insides—and there's a high chance of bread forts and/or little people made out of fruit. There could be an edible puppet show.

Finally, she pulls her phone out of her pocket and says, "I'll call my mom."

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Sadly, there is no puppet show at dinner, but only because most of the kitchen table is taken up by a pirate ship made out of a giant watermelon. There's a dashing grape captain with a toothpick for a sword on top of a heap of cut fruit.

Tom doles out spaghetti onto our plates and says, "We had a first mate, but Fuzzbutt ate him."

Daphne kicks my feet under the table and says, "So?" She waggles her eyebrows. "How was it?"

"I made art," I say with a sweep of my fork. "And it's proudly displayed on the fridge."

"It's beautiful, sweetheart," Marla says, passing me a bowl of salad.

I straighten up at the compliment and beam at her.

Evie says, “The kids weren’t that bad.”

I don’t exactly agree, but I don’t disagree, either. I’m reserving judgment on Mim. Fifth graders are iffy: They’re top dog now, and yet well on their way to the bottom rung of middle school. Her snideness may be all bravado, but she could also really just be a dick. Who knows?

Daphne nods like she’s satisfied.

She tells Evie, “You should stick around after dinner. I found my SAT flashcards!”

“While that in no way sounds absolutely horrific,” Evie says unconvincingly, “my mom wants me home before eight.”

“Your loss,” Daphne says.

Tom grins like a shark and says, “I want in on that action,” because he’s a giant competitive weirdo, and that’s how, after Evie neatly escapes when dinner’s over, we end up playing hard-core SAT-prep Jeopardy in the den, breaking not one, but *two* lamps and spilling an entire bowl of popcorn all over the couch.

# Three

The end of March slips easily into April and spring break, and I celebrate a week of freedom from school and Art Buddies and the looming threat of other extracurricular activities by watching TV Land and painting.

I also ease into my shifts at the Talbot plant nursery on Monday, because we're still in the slow season. There are Easter plants to wrap in foil and the gardening store to manage, and I spend a couple afternoon hours rearranging the house plants. Which is fine, because I enjoy talking to all the new baby succulents.

It only takes me a few days to get attached, and on Wednesday, I smuggle home three of the newly potted ones. Mr. Talbot spots me, but he only rolls his eyes. I've been working there for two years, he knows me well enough by now. I've amassed my own little mini-succulent forest in the windowsill greenhouse Marla and Tom got for one of the windows in my room.

At home, I write names on their little terra-cotta pots in sharpie—Pete, Caroline, and Stanley—and Daphne walks in on me arranging them carefully in the sun.

She snorts, then falls backward onto my bed and says, “I’m bored.”

“Where’s Adrian?” I try not to sound snide, but it’s not like she doesn’t already know how I feel about him.

“Busy.” She makes a face. “He can’t even make it to any of the tournament.”

*Thank god*, I think, because playing lawn games with Missy is terrible enough. The Thursday before Easter is the opening ceremony of the Sheffield Family Lawn Game Tournament, which this year will manifest itself as a screening of *Teen Beach Movie* and its sequel on the side of our house in the backyard.

I move Stanley and Attila the Second over a little, making sure to keep a path open for Fuzzbutt, who likes to drape himself over the top shelf. I lost many a plant to him until I learned to just leave room.

She says, “Missy’s bringing a boy, though.”

“A human boy?”

Daphne throws a paintbrush at my head, and I duck away with a laugh.

“Be nice,” she says, but her eyes are smiling. “He’s got a nose ring and he shaves his head, Nolan. They fought over pretzel bites at the movies yesterday. It was the most precious thing I’ve ever seen.”

I'm skeptical. Not much about Missy Delgado can be called precious. The closest thing to a good side Missy has is an entirely separate person—her cousin, Carlos.

There has to be something wrong with this guy, but at least he'll make our teams even.

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By 8 P.M. Thursday, Tom has the makeshift movie screen set up, and Marla has reorganized all the loungers and chairs on the patio. They're all pushed together and covered with blankets and pillows and the occasional TV tray. I've made a butt-load of popcorn with the air popper, and Daphne's filled a cooler with soda and juice. Tom's just about done setting up the projector when Missy and her date arrive.

Gator—*Gator?*—is bald, freshly shaved, and wearing tight pants and thick black glasses. The tattoo on his neck, in the dying light, looks like an electric blue tarantula. He holds Missy's hand like she's something fragile and not a sophisticated AI with secret plans to wipe out the human race.

I can't help staring. She's wearing a *peasant blouse*. There are tassels on her flats, and she smells like magnolias. It's fucking with my head.

I accidentally step too close and Missy twists a vicious pinch into the back of my arm, hissing, "Not one word, asshole."

Tom ignores us with a polite, “How did you two meet?”

Daphne jumps in, “He’s in a band.” Both of her palms are pressed to her chest, like she can’t believe how adorable Missy and Gator are, sitting on a rattan settee in the middle of our makeshift backyard theater. “They met at the skater park. It was a *dream*.”

Missy glares at her and mouths *I will kill you*, but Daphne just grins brighter.

I watch as Gator squeezes Missy’s hand and says, “There was a sixty percent chance I was gonna get punched when I asked for her number, but I decided to go for it anyway.”

“Oh, that’s sweet,” Marla says, bemused.

Missy says, “It wasn’t that bad,” and Gator says, “I think you called me a dickhead in Spanish,” but he’s grinning at her.

It looks like Missy is blushing. “You nearly ran me over!”

“Can we start the movie now?” I’m not sure I can handle Missy acting like a fully functioning human being. I’ve tried to make nice with her before. I know it’s a sore spot with Daphne that we don’t get along, but it honestly isn’t my fault.

It’s just that Missy can be a soulless, rabid hellhound.

Standing in front of the white sheet clipped up against the house, Tom claps his hands together and says, “Welcome to the second annual showing of *Teen Beach Movie*, now with bonus *Teen Beach 2*. Feel free to join in on the dance sequences!”

Marla and Daphne clap and shout, I sink down lower in my seat, and Gator says, “This is gonna be awesome.”

I’m not sure if “awesome” is an accurate description—I like to reserve that for Captain America nights, or our Halloween horror extravaganza—but I appreciate the beach theme for an early kickoff to summer, and the way Tom gives us sheets of lyrics.

Tom and Marla barely make it all the way through the second movie. They’re up in bed by midnight, probably already sound asleep.

Missy and Gator are sitting side by side at the patio table arguing about, I’m pretty sure, the probabilities of time travel. The Blu-ray projector is on a constant loop of dancing teens, but we turned the sound off a while ago, once the songs went from campy to just plain grating.

“I’m going to miss this,” Daphne says, curled into my side, our loungers pushed together.

She sniffs a little and tugs a blanket up further onto our laps. The night has gone past cool, I’ve got my hood up, and there’s a light breeze rustling the leaves of the two big oaks in the yard. The crickets are just starting to get a little noisy for the season. The sky is cloudless, stars bright, moon big and pale.

I don’t say anything. I’m going to miss this, too.

And then she ruins everything by sitting up and saying, “You need a high school musical, Nolan! You need to sing and dance your way through senior year with a guy who will

drop you like a hotcake for college and then you can fuck your way through your dorm—”

“I don’t think that’s how *High School Musical* actually goes, Daph,” I say dryly.

Gator is looking at me in fascinated horror, like he can’t believe this conversation is happening, but he kind of wants to hear more.

Missy bares her teeth and says, “Good luck finding someone willing to touch you, Grant,” and Daphne slaps a hand over my mouth before I can reply with something equally shitty.

She keeps her arms around me and expounds on all the ways I can milk a broken heart with older men. I’m just really happy Tom and Marla aren’t still there to hear it.

Later, when Missy and Gator have finally left, as we’re cleaning up the yard, stacking popcorn bowls and tossing all the paper cups and napkins in a trash bag, Daphne says, “Tonight was good, right?”

There was an embarrassing sing-along earlier. I don’t know if I’ve ever laughed so hard in my life when Tom and Gator got Missy to dance.

“Yeah,” I say. “Tonight was okay.”



The Sheffields are a competitive bunch to begin with. Tom and Daphne have a notebook full of tallied wins and losses

that goes back at least ten years. Marla is usually the reigning Scrabble queen. She likes to pretend she doesn't lock herself in the bathroom with a glass of wine when she happens to lose—she calls it “taking a bath” but we all know better. Risk is a road to hell that *nobody* wants to travel down anymore.

But add in some horseshoes and Baggo and it gets downright ugly.

Midmorning on Friday, Missy shows up at our house with Gator again and two jugs of lemonade. I get Tom in the partner pickings, and Daphne ends up with Missy since Marla wants a crack at the newbie.

We start easy, with bocce ball. No one gets hit in the head—Tom, last year—or starts crying—embarrassingly, me, almost every year—and Marla and Gator manage to eke out a too-close win.

Next up is croquet on the front lawn, which segues into horseshoes in a neighbor's pit, Baggo under the old tree house, and a finale featuring Missy and Daphne beating the pants off everyone in archery—mainly because the sun is shining so blindingly above us, it's making it hard to properly see the target, but also because everyone else sucks.

“Who decided to add archery this year?” Tom says, pouring lemonade while the waffle iron heats up.

“You did,” Marla says. She kisses his temple and pats his back in mock sympathy.

We dig out the ice cream and everyone gets a bowl while

Tom fashions a tower of waffles for Daphne and Missy, their well-earned trophy. He slides it over to them on the table with a flourish. It's topped with syrup and even more ice cream, and I know from experience—Tom had been tackled viciously for stealing the waffles last year—that no one gets to share.

“Man, you guys are awesome,” Gator says over his bowl of chocolate and strawberry ice cream. “Missy’s dad hates me.”

Missy cuts off a giant piece of waffle and says, “He doesn’t hate you, he just thinks you should have a name other than Gator,” before stuffing the entire thing in her mouth.

“Your parents actually named you Gator?” I ask.

“My parents named me an abomination,” Gator says, “and I really liked reptiles when I was a kid.”

Missy swallows her bite and says, “Carlos likes you.”

“Carlos likes everyone except his ex-girlfriend and Eli Manning,” Daphne says, which is true. Carlos has evil-twin theories despite the Mannings’ age difference, and his ex-girlfriend is the devil.

Tom pats Gator’s back companionably. “It’s okay, you’ll always be welcome here. Unless you hurt Missy,” he says, “and then no one can save you.”

Marla nods. “Remember, I’m a doctor. I can make it seem like an accident.”

Gator looks like he’s not sure whether to believe them

or not, and I duck my head over my bowl of ice cream and grin.

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While none of us are particularly religious, candy and Easter egg hunts are a big deal.

And by “a big deal,” I mean huge spectacles of enforced public embarrassment. It’s usually best to go into a candy coma and wake up Monday morning with a limited memory of the shenanigans.

This particular Easter, we crash the local Presbyterian church’s outdoor sunrise service—it’s cold, and Daphne and I fall asleep on each other halfway through—and then head over to Missy’s house for a hearty breakfast with the Delgados and a cutthroat game of Find the Three-Pound Chocolate Rooster.

I sit in the corner of the kitchen for most of it. It’s not that I don’t want to find a three-pound chocolate rooster, or any of the many eggs that go with it, but it’s 8 A.M. and my body hasn’t figured out how to work properly yet. I blink blearily at my enormous plate of scrambled eggs and try to remember why I thought I could force anything down this close to dawn. I’ve been up since five and I want to die.

Carlos sits down across from me with a plate of something cheesy and salutes me with his fork.

I hear the delighted screams of children, Daphne, and

Tom through the open window and push my plate far enough away so that I can lay my head on my arms on the table.

“Do you think they found the chicken?” I ask through a yawn.

Carlos shrugs and says, “It was my job to hide it this year.”

I wait for him to explain, but he just shoves eggs and bacon in his mouth and stares me down.

I say, “So . . . let me guess, you didn’t actually hide the chicken?”

Carlos just takes another bite and grins.

It takes three hours for everyone to realize the three-pound chocolate rooster is under Missy’s bed. Missy is silent and coldly furious watching all the little kids gleefully tear her room apart. Tom eventually ends up standing in the middle of her mattress with muddy shoes on, chocolate rooster raised in triumph.

Daphne hugs Missy around the neck and says, “Don’t be such a downer, Swiss Miss. I’m gonna share all my jelly beans with you,” as Tom leads all the little kids through a rousing rendition of “Here Comes Peter Cottontail.”

All in all, it’s not the absolute worst way to end spring break.

# Four

Adrian Fells breaks up with Daphne early in April and is a giant douchebag about it to the surprise of almost no one.

On the one hand, I'm relieved, because who honestly liked Adrian? Adrian Fells is a monster. If I thought I could get away with it, I'd run over him repeatedly with my ten-speed. Everyone knows that Adrian Fells is a monster, but he's also captain of the lacrosse team and his family has more money than the Catholic god. Adrian has a slick, greasy side for everyone that isn't considered a loser.

On the other hand, Daph is devastated, because she somehow actually liked the asshole and was one of the few people who didn't think he could ever possibly be a giant dick. Go figure. It's upsetting to see her like this.

On the other *other* hand, this increases her interest in my life by tenfold, and she really had way too much investment in it to begin with. Daphne decides to forego her usual post-breakup ritual—scrapbooking, video splicing, obsessive

fanfic writing, sewing little superhero outfits for Fuzzbutt—and turns me into her main project instead.

Just two days after her breakup with Adrian, Daphne weasels her way into my room with a hopeful expression and what looks suspiciously like a joint Junior-Senior Prom ticket. She sizes up my cut-off, paint-splattered sweatpants with a, “We can work with this.”

“What?”

“You’re almost seventeen, baby bird, time to fly out of this nest.” She makes an expansive gesture, the flap of her hand taking in my unmade bed, piles of clothes—I have them organized by both scent and season—and the precariously balanced manga on my desk.

“I’m not sure what you mean.” I say this both as a stalling tactic and because I’m not actually sure what she means. I edge toward the door, hoping she won’t notice I’m about to make a run for it.

“Nolan,” she says, “have you, or have you not ever been kissed? Have you been on a *date*?”

I scowl at her. She already knows the answers. It’s not exactly like Penn Valley is brimming with prospects, and I spend all my free time with Evie or plants.

“Here’s the deal,” she says, stepping closer to me. She pokes me in the chest with what I can see is *definitely* a Prom ticket now.

I say, “No,” faintly horrified. She can’t mean what I think she means. She *can’t*.

“I’m not letting my forty bucks go to waste because Adrian’s a dick—”

“Is that *your* ticket? Can’t you just go by yourself?”

“That’s exactly something I do not want to do,” she says, still poking me. “Your date choices are Mykos or Si.” I open my mouth to—protest? Gasp my last breath and die?—and she adds, “Those are you *safest* choices. There’s always Hot Todd at the Wendy’s or one of your art class randos, but there’s a higher probability of rejection there.”

“And you think there *isn’t* with Si O’Mara?” I ask, appalled. I don’t even bother mentioning Mykos. Mykos took a sock puppet to Homecoming. He’s an enigma wrapped in a puzzle swallowed by a fuzzy turtleneck with a picture of a Ritz cracker on the front. That is the exact outfit he’s been wearing at least once a week for the past three years.

But Si O’Mara doesn’t even know I’m alive. A shot of terror zips down my spine at the thought of asking to borrow a pen from him, let alone asking him out. I can just imagine his blank look of *who the fuck are you?*, even as he politely lets me down easy. There is no world in which Si O’Mara would say yes to me—a date, a pen, sucking face in the broom closet. Holy fuck, my face heats up in embarrassment just thinking about it. Hands shaking, I say, “No,” again.

Daphne grasps my chin, tilting my head down and looking into my eyes. She says, “Baby bird, what aren’t you telling me?”

“Absolutely nothing.” If she doesn’t already know about my massive, debilitating crush on Si, I’m not going to mention it ever.

She tries to wait me out, but I keep my mouth zipped shut.

Finally, she says, “We’re gonna make this work. You really should join the GSA.”

I grimace. I’d hoped she’d forgotten about that.

She clucks her tongue. “I have no problem helping you out, okay? You need me to put in a good word with Si or Mykos, I totally will.”

“How is that helping me out?” I ask. How in any world would that be considered *helping me out*, oh my god. And, also, “How do you know they don’t already have dates?”

“Mykos is currently going stag with Wart and Aaron, and I have it on good authority that Si is Tasha Carmichael’s backup date, in case no one else asks her—”

I can’t imagine a world where Tasha Carmichael needs a backup date; she was the freaking Homecoming queen two years in a row and has extremely white teeth, dimples, and a forehead that works with bangs.

“—so I’m giving you a week before I make the choice for you.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I couldn’t have heard that right.

“They’re both nice guys; it’ll be fine.”

I’m pretty sure she’s joking. She’s grinning like she’s on the last thread of her sanity, though. Like Adrian has pushed

her to these extremes. Like it's either set me up with a dude or she'll have no choice but to eat an entire extra-large pizza by herself, sobbing. But . . . "You can't actually do that, you realize that, right?"

She takes both my sweaty, anxious hands in hers, squeezes my fingers. "You're leaning toward Si, I can feel it."

She can feel my panicked heart battering against the inside of my chest. "No," I say.

"First," she says, ignoring me completely, "do you have any jeans that actually fit?"



The next few days fly by in a blur of uncomfortable pants and extracurricular activities. I'm trying this thing where if I believe hard enough, everything I don't want to do will just fade away into nothingness. So far it isn't working.

Daphne quizzes me every morning on words I'll never remember, I get two minor head wounds in gym, and Ms. Purdy gives me a C minus on a still life of squash. *Squash*, arguably the quintessential vegetable for a still life: lumpy, lopsided, round, colorful. I regularly complain about how much I hate still-life drawing, but to get a C minus on one that is considered on the *lively* end of inanimate is a tragedy that can only be explained by how much Ms. Purdy hates me as a person.

Every time I see Si in the halls or class—smile beaming, long fingers tucked into the straps of his backpack, tight jeans showcasing the thighs of a gladiator—I lock up, my entire body burning with adrenaline and fear.

The only bright spot is Art Buddies, which has become no less chaotic, but Mim has apparently decided to put up with me.

By Thursday we've settled into a regular place between Bern and a kid whose nametag reads KIP, who has a thing for seashells and rubber cement. Bern's partner is a chatty preteen with enormous hair and an even bigger smile. It's surreal seeing them high-five, but every time Bern catches me looking at them, his expression dips into intense scowling: a silent warning to keep my nose out of his business, or maybe he'll have to keep it out *for me*. With his fist. He's got dark, tired eyes, though, his face is pale, and there's a smudge of blue paint across his forehead.

Mim clears her throat pointedly and says, "I should set you up with my cousin," like she can sense my impending doom by way of Prom and my sister.

"How are you eleven?" I say, looking down at her.

"Nearly twelve." She gazes at me with a speculative gleam in her eyes. There are specks of glitter all over her hair and what looks like expertly applied eye makeup. She says, "I'm trying to figure out how your heights match, and if your mouths will line up."

“I’m uncomfortable with this,” I say as I feel my face turn hot.

Mim says airily, “I know.”

“Also, I’m, uh,” I spin my marker between my fingers, almost fumbling it, “gay.”

Mim says, “I know, duh,” and finally goes back to her drawing.

I’m left to assume that Mim’s cousin is a guy, and I fight the urge to cover my face with both my hands. This is the most awkward conversation I’ve ever had with an almost-twelve-year-old.

“I don’t need you to set me up with your cousin,” I say. It’d probably be only slightly less of a disaster than being forced to ask out Si O’Mara.

Mim squints up at me. “Well,” she says, drawn out, like she thinks I’m being stupid about this, “if you change your mind.”

“I won’t,” I say. I already have Daphne breathing down my neck. I don’t want a kid I barely know telling me I need to date, too.

Mim flicks her fingers at me and then goes back to her actually pretty excellent field of Galloway cows.

I’ve been mindlessly pasting cut-out circles on a red piece of paper, but when I really look at it, it turned out kind of cool. I sign it in the bottom right with a flourish and then it’s time to go.

Evie gives Bex a giant hug when they reach our station.

Mim slaps my side in what I choose to believe is affection before linking arms with Bex and dragging her out the door.

“I don’t entirely hate this,” Evie tells me.

“That’s because you didn’t get the evil twin,” I say, swinging my backpack over my shoulder. I try for a convincing grin, but she narrows her eyes at me.

“All right, spill,” she says. “You’ve been acting strange all week.”

I sigh, glance at the sky, and briefly pray for the earth to open up and swallow me. Finally, I say, “Daphne may or may not be making me ask someone to Prom.”



“If I ignore it, it’s not happening,” I say.

“That doesn’t even work for ostriches,” Evie says.

We’re at the back of the Wawa, trying to decide between smoothies and milkshakes. I push the button for chocolate.

Evie slams a cup under the raspberry smoothie machine and says, “Daphne always does this to you.”

“She doesn’t,” I say. Daphne’s always looking out for me.

“P the 3’s pool party last year.”

I hunch my shoulders a little. “Pushing me into the deep end isn’t the same thing.”

“You didn’t want to swim,” Evie says. She tops off the smoothie with whipped cream. “She has no boundaries with you. You refuse to give her boundaries!”

I pick up a soft pretzel and eat it while we wait in line at the checkout.

Evie pokes me in the middle of the back and says, “You can tell her no sometimes, you know.”

“I can tell her no, but that doesn’t mean she’ll actually listen.”

“Boundaries,” Evie grumbles.

Outside, the sun is low and blindingly orange, setting the tree line on fire. I’ve probably just ruined my dinner with the pretzel and this milkshake, but I take another long slurp of it anyhow.