

KELLY QUINDLEN

**LATE**

**TO**

**THE**

**PARTY**



ROARING BROOK PRESS • NEW YORK

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Published by Roaring Brook Press  
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120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271  
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2019941018

ISBN 978-1-250-20913-9

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First edition, 2020  
Printed in the United States of America by LSC Communications, Harrisonburg, Virginia

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For my godmother, Patty Kearney Lister.  
Thank you for seeing us as we really are.*



IT WAS THE FIRST DAY OF SUMMER, AND IT WAS RAINING, but not hard enough to keep people out of the pool. We watched them from inside Maritza's car, parked at the top of the clubhouse parking lot, with the windshield wipers dragging and the engine humming beneath us. JaKory was leaning forward from the back seat, his arm bumping against mine in the passenger's seat, but I hardly noticed. I was transfixed by the people swimming in the rain.

"Let's go in, just for a minute," Maritza said. She was trying to sound bold, but I could hear the strain in her voice.

JaKory inhaled sharply. "No, thanks," he said, shaking his head. "The rain's gonna pick up, and there could be lightning. They really shouldn't be in the water."

It was a group of kids our age, maybe seven or eight of them. They were splashing each other and cannonballing off the diving board and drifting into the corners to make out. We were parked

right by the gate, only a few yards from the pool, close enough to see their grins. I wondered if we knew them, if we went to school with them. I wondered why they scared me so much.

“Do they live in here?” Maritza asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, peering harder at their jubilant faces. “I guess they must.”

It was something I should have known, given that it was my neighborhood pool we were parked in front of, but there were so many houses in my huge, sprawling subdivision that it was hard to keep track of who lived in them.

“They look like they’re having a blast,” Maritza said, her expression hungry.

“What if they get in trouble?” JaKory asked. “What if the lifeguard bans them?”

The lifeguard was blowing his whistle so hard that we could hear it from inside the car, but the kids in the pool ignored him. Beyond them, huddled under the canopy that housed the bathrooms, was the usual pool crowd: moms, little kids, swim coaches. They watched the madness with disbelieving frowns on their faces, their towels wrapped tightly around them.

Maritza looked at me. “What do you wanna do, Codi?”

A crack of thunder sounded above us, but the swimmers were oblivious: They had started a chicken fight, the girls squealing on top of the guys’ shoulders, the rain hitting them at a slant. My stomach felt like it was reaching outward, yearning to be in the water with them, yearning for that raw recklessness. It was a feeling I’d had more and more lately.

“We could wait it out . . .” I said.

“We’ve been waiting for ten minutes already. It’s time to shit or get off the pot.”

Maritza’s biting tone grated on my nerves, but I’d learned over the years that she was chastising herself more than us. She had always been her own harshest critic.

“Why don’t we just go home and watch a movie?” JaKory suggested. “We can swim tomorrow instead.”

Maritza hesitated, her eyes fixed on the pool. Then she turned off the ignition, reached around JaKory, and grabbed a towel from the back seat.

“*Maritza*,” JaKory whined.

“What?” she said, her voice high-pitched. “We’ve been dying to swim for *weeks*. I’m not giving that up just because the weather won’t cooperate. Besides, those kids are swimming, so why can’t we?”

She meant it rhetorically, but it sounded more like a plea. We were silent for a beat, looking at each other. Then Maritza opened the door, covered her frizzy dark hair with her towel, and dashed out into the rain. JaKory and I looked at each other, already knowing how this would play out, before we grabbed our own towels and followed her.

It was pouring. My feet were instantly soaked, and the towel over my head was useless. In a matter of seconds the rain got worse, pounding down on us. We caught up to Maritza as the wind picked up and the trees started dancing. Another crack of thunder shook the sky.

“Maybe this wasn’t my smartest idea!” Maritza shouted.

“You think so?!” JaKory shouted back.

We hovered at the pool gate, gripping the bars. Water was moving

across the pool like sea spray, and the guys and girls were howling with delight. One girl was floating on her back with her eyes closed, water hitting her from every direction.

I looked at my two best friends. Their eyes were fixed on the kids in the pool, and they looked as inexplicably scared as I was.

“I’m going back!” JaKory yelled. “Unlock the car!”

Maritza turned with him, her key already pointed toward the car, but I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the pool.

“Codi!” Maritza called. “Come on!”

I took one last look and ran after my friends.

It hadn’t rained on the first day of summer in years. I knew this because for the last five years in a row, Maritza, JaKory, and I had gone swimming on the first day of summer. It was tradition to meet at my house, pack a cooler full of snacks, and flip-flop our way through the burning late-May sun to the clubhouse at the front of my neighborhood. “Clubhouse” sounds bougie, but all the neighborhoods in the suburbs of Atlanta had clubhouses, and all the clubhouses had pools, and all the pools were filled with toddlers in soggy diapers and kids who’d just finished swim team and brave mothers who’d recently moved down from the Midwest or Northeast and were hoping to make friends in this transient half-southern, half-everything-else place. And then there was us: three teenagers splashing around in the shallow end, totally engrossed in playing a game of Celebrity, or practicing back twists, or guessing what songs JaKory was singing underwater.

We’d started this tradition the day after sixth grade ended. That was the day Maritza and JaKory had shown up at my house with

swimsuits, squirt guns, and their summer reading books, and I had been so nervous and excited that I'd painted their portraits as a way of thanking them for coming. Embarrassing, I know, but you have to understand that before that sixth-grade year with Maritza and JaKory, I'd never really had a best friend, at least not the kind who lasted more than a single school year. And I knew it was the same for them, because when I'd gone to their houses a few days later, Maritza had taped her portrait to her mirror and JaKory had tacked his above his favorite bookshelf.

"You made me look so pretty and cool," Maritza had said, beaming at me.

"My mom said you really captured my essence," JaKory had said, trying not to look too pleased.

I'd soaked in their compliments without saying anything, but in that moment, I felt like I'd swallowed the sun.

We'd rediscovered those portraits this past Christmas and nearly died laughing. They looked *nothing* like my friends. Maritza's likeness should have been gawkier, her eyebrows thicker, her nose more beak-like. JaKory's should have captured his knobby elbows, ashy legs, and worrywart expression. I'd painted my friends as I saw them instead of how the world saw them, and now I was starting to recognize the difference.

"You made us look like we were *the shit* in sixth grade," Maritza had said, laughing, as we passed the portraits back and forth.

"Blissful ignorance," JaKory had said, shaking his head in amusement. "Remember when we spent a whole month choreographing dances to that Celine Dion song? We had no idea how uncool we were."

“Oh god,” Maritza had muttered, going still. “I think we still don’t.”

I thought about that conversation for weeks afterward, wondering if it was true, if that was really how other people saw us. Maybe they did. Maybe to them Maritza was just the gawky, outspoken, frizzy-haired dancer, and JaKory was the skinny, neurotic, Tumblr-obsessed black nerd, and I was nothing but the shy, reclusive, practically invisible artist who never raised her hand. Maybe that was why nothing *real* ever happened to us.

With our junior year behind us, things were supposed to feel big and important and, as JaKory described it no matter how much Maritza and I begged him not to, “pregnant with potential.” But the thing is, nothing felt big or important or bursting with potential to me. We’d gotten older, and taller, and maybe a *little* less awkward than we’d been the year before, but I’d come to know adolescence as a rolling stretch of hanging out with my friends the same way we always had, without anything new happening.

You know how adults are always talking about teenagers? When I was in fourth grade, my family drove past a house that had been rolled with toilet paper, and my dad shook his head and chuckled *Teenagers* under his breath. My mom griped about Teenagers every June, when dark figures hung over the monkey bars of the clubhouse playground long after closing hours, but she never actually seemed mad; she seemed wistful. And then there’s all those shows and movies, the ones where thirty-year-old actors pretend to be high schoolers, and they go on dates and drive their fast cars and dance at crazy house parties where their fellow Teenagers swing from chandeliers and barf into synthetic tree stands. You grow up with these ideas about Teenagers, about their wild, vibrant,

dramatic lives of breaking rules and making out and Being Alive, and you know that it's your destiny to become one of them someday, but suddenly you're seventeen and you're watching people cannonball into a swimming pool in the pouring rain, and you realize you still haven't become a real Teenager, and maybe you never will.

By two thirty that afternoon, we were dried off and well into our second movie, burrowed down in my basement with a feast of soda, Gushers, and Doritos on the coffee table in front of us. Maritza and I were sharing our Gushers packs because she only liked the red ones and I only liked the blue ones, while JaKory didn't like them at all because he had "texture issues."

"Maybe you'll like them better if you eat them on a Dorito," Maritza said, shoving one toward him. "Come on, 'Kory, try it."

"Get behind me, Satan," JaKory said, flicking her away.

"Aww, come on, JaKory," I said, offering him a chip and Gusher of my own. "They're great together. You'll 'ship' them in no time."

I caught Maritza's eye, grinning. There was nothing we loved more than teasing JaKory about his obsessive fandom habits.

"Pretty soon you'll be writing fanfic about them," Maritza said, her expression mischievous. *Oooh, little Gusher guy, you're so juicy, do that squirty thing for me again.*

"Shut your filthy mouth," JaKory said as I fell back laughing. "You'd be a terrible fic writer."

Maritza looked genuinely offended. "I'd be a *great* fic writer."

"Shouldn't y'all be focusing on this movie, anyway?" JaKory said. "Or can you finally admit that it's boring?"

“It’s not boring,” I said, looking at the women on-screen. “Look how beautiful they are.”

“That was literally a shot of her bending over a mailbox,” JaKory said dryly.

“Women look beautiful from an infinite number of angles, JaKory,” Maritza said in her know-it-all voice. “Not that you’d understand.”

“I’m perfectly fine with not understanding that,” JaKory said. “But lesbians or not, this movie is atrocious. Let’s watch something else. How about a gay romance?”

“Ugh,” Maritza and I said together.

“Y’all love to outnumber me on this, but I *always* watch your stupid girl-meets-girl movies, even the desperate dramas where one of them gets shot or eaten by a sea monster or whatever.”

“This isn’t even a drama,” Maritza said. “It’s a comedy.”

“Yeah, and I’m laughing so hard.”

“Fine,” Maritza said, tossing him the remote. “Pick something else. Give us all the gay.”

I guess that was the other part of the equation: the queer thing.

Four months ago, on a biting cold January night, we’d been watching Netflix in my basement when Maritza started acting all twitchy and nervous, hardly responding to anything we said.

“What’s with you?” I’d finally asked, pausing the movie.

Maritza opened and closed her mouth, seemingly at a loss for words.

“What?” JaKory asked, his brow furrowed. “Did you poop your pants again?”

“Fuck you,” Maritza snapped, smacking him with a pillow. “That happened *one* time.”

“What is it?” I asked again, pulling the pillow out of JaKory’s hand before he could retaliate.

“Well . . . okay,” she said in a shaky voice. “So . . . you know how I have that crush on Branson?”

“Yeah?”

“I really like him. Seriously, I think he’s so hot—”

“How is this news?” JaKory asked.

“Shut up, ass-wad. The thing is . . . well, I’ve started having a crush on someone else, too, and . . . um . . . it’s not a guy.”

I’d never seen Maritza look so vulnerable. JaKory and I stared at her for a long moment, and then we glanced at each other to check we’d understood correctly. Then JaKory clutched his hands together and started saying all these dramatic things like *Thank heavens* and *Praise Jesus* and *I’m saved*, and it wasn’t until Maritza jabbed him in the stomach that he yelled, “I’m gay, too! Like so gay I can’t even handle it!”

“I’m not gay, JaKory, didn’t you hear what I just said?! I like them both!”

“Bisexual! Whatever!”

The two of them fell forward into a sloppy hug, laughing with relief. Maritza actually kissed JaKory’s forehead in delight, and JaKory couldn’t stop wiping his eyes. I could only sit there, stunned, while the two of them calmed down. JaKory wasn’t exactly a surprise—Maritza and I had speculated for years that he might be gay—but Maritza liking girls was definitely a shock.

I knew it was my turn to say something, but the words got caught in my throat. I sat there with a weird sense of wanting to freeze time,

to remember every little detail of the moment, from the happy tear tracks on JaKory's face to the texture of Maritza's fuzzy orange socks. I could feel my heart banging with the significance of it all.

After a minute, Maritza said, "Well, I guess we can all talk about boys together."

That's when I burst out laughing. Maritza and JaKory stared at me, and I shook my head and the words poured out.

"We can't," I said, "because it turns out I like girls."

The three of us laughed so hard we ended up flat on our backs on my basement floor. Maritza kept squeezing our hands and JaKory kept saying, "What are the odds, though?!" When my mom called us upstairs for dinner, we sat around my family's kitchen table trying to hide our secret smirks until JaKory choked on his water when my dad asked if he wanted a piece of pork sausage.

I guess it was pretty significant that all three of us turned out to be queer. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe it further explained why we'd always felt a little different from other kids, and why we'd never clicked with anyone the way we clicked with each other. In any case, it made me even more certain that I would never find anyone who understood me like Maritza and JaKory did.

We still hadn't told our parents. Maritza's parents were devout Catholics, and JaKory's mom was burdened with too many nursing shifts, and my own parents thought I was alien enough already, given that I'd inherited none of their perfect, all-American charm. But it went beyond that, too. We hadn't told anyone else simply because it wasn't relevant yet. I'd never kissed anyone, and neither had JaKory. Maritza's only kiss had been last summer in Panama with some boy who hung out with her cousins. In short, we had no experience, so why worry about making an identity claim? Our

sexuality—or, as JaKory sometimes called it, our “like-eality”—was something we all knew to be true, but which hadn’t really drawn a breath yet.

The thing is, I wasn’t sure it ever would.

“God, I want a boyfriend,” JaKory said, staring dazedly up at the movie he’d picked. He hugged a pillow to his chest like that would help.

“Me too,” Maritza said. “*Or* a girlfriend. Just someone I can send flirty texts to and make out with whenever I want.”

“Yeah, and eventually do *more* than make out,” JaKory said, wiggling his eyebrows. “But we need to get the first step down before any of that can happen.” He took a long breath and sighed. “Damn, I need to kiss someone so bad. Don’t y’all wanna kiss someone?”

I nestled further into my blanket. The fact that I was seventeen and had never kissed anyone was *not* something I liked to think about. As much as my friends wanted to talk about it, I never had anything to say. I guess because I knew, somewhere deep down, that simply talking about it would never get me anywhere.

“I’ve already kissed someone,” Maritza said smugly. She liked to remind us of this achievement at least once a week. I caught JaKory’s eye and mimed stabbing myself in the face.

“I can see you, asshole,” Maritza said, tossing a Gusher at me.

“I know,” I said, tossing the Gusher right back. “And by the way, you kissed a *boy*.”

“That counts, Codi. I *like* boys.”

“Yeah, but don’t you want to kiss a girl, too?”

Maritza went silent. She’d gotten more sensitive lately about

identifying as bisexual, and for a moment I worried I'd offended her. "Of course I do," she said in a clipped voice. "I actually think it'll be better than kissing a boy."

"How?" I asked.

"I don't know, like . . . more delicate."

"I'd take passionate over delicate," JaKory said, shaking his head. "I want to *feel* something. I want it to be like . . . like the moment you hear a brilliant line of poetry. Like it knocks the breath out of you."

"I think it feels like the top of a roller coaster, just before the drop," Maritza said.

JaKory made a face. "You know I hate roller coasters."

"So? You still know what the top feels like, with butterflies in your stomach and your heart pounding—"

"And like I'm gonna pass out or throw up everywhere—"

"What do you think, Codi?"

I kept my eyes on the TV screen, not looking at them. "I'm not sure," I said, trying to sound uninterested. I didn't want any part of their fantasizing; it embarrassed me almost as much as my lack of experience did.

"You've never thought about it?" Maritza pressed.

I waited a beat. Maritza and JaKory were silent. "I don't know," I said finally. "I guess it's like . . . I don't want to overthink it, because I want it to surprise me when it happens."

They remained silent. Then Maritza said, "Doesn't that take the agency out of it?"

I craned my neck to look at her. "What?"

"I just mean, like . . . you can't just expect to be surprised with your first kiss. Some part of you has to *go* for it. I mean, if I hadn't

dropped those hints to E.J., or made an effort to see him, we never would have kissed.”

I felt my heart rate pick up. It was typical of Maritza to think she had everything figured out already, but I knew she was right, and I didn’t want to admit it. The problem was, I didn’t know how to “go for it.” I didn’t even know where to start.

Maritza’s point seemed to suck the energy out of the room. None of us were looking at each other; we were all lost in our own thoughts. Then JaKory said, with his eyes on the floor, “My mom and Philip broke up.”

Maritza and I looked up. JaKory’s mom had been dating Philip for a full year, and JaKory often gushed that he’d never seen her so happy.

“What?” Maritza gasped. “When?”

“Last week, during finals,” JaKory mumbled. “I didn’t feel like talking about it. It was easier just to focus on studying.”

Maritza and I exchanged looks. JaKory worried about his mom a lot. She’d divorced JaKory’s dad years ago, and JaKory was always fretting about her being lonely.

“What happened?” I asked gently.

“She said she and Philip weren’t on the same page, that they had the whirlwind but not the calm blue sky.”

“Your mom’s a fucking poet,” Maritza said.

“What if loneliness runs in my genes?” JaKory asked in a low voice. “What if I’ll never experience love because I’m just not compatible with anyone else, like my parents?”

“Oh, ’Kory, of course you will,” Maritza said.

“You’ll definitely find someone,” I said, holding his eyes. “You’re too wonderful not to.”

Even as I said it, I felt a flickering of doubt in the pit of my stomach. If I believed so certainly that JaKory was destined to find someone, didn't that mean I could believe it of myself, too? And yet I couldn't fathom how or when that might happen.

Maritza must have been thinking along the same lines, because she gripped her head in her hands and said, "We'll all find someone. I just need to figure out how."

It sounded more like a wish than a certainty. For the second time that day, I found myself yearning for something that seemed far outside my reach.

Just then, we heard the upstairs door creak open, followed by footsteps pounding down the stairs. I sat up as JaKory pressed pause on our gay movie; luckily, the frame was only showing the interior view of the main character's apartment.

My little brother, Grant, zipped around the corner, sweeping his hair out of his eyes. He looked sweaty the way all fourteen-year-old boys look sweaty, even when they're not. His legs had gotten long but were still so skinny that it almost looked like he was running around on stilts.

"Can you take me to the movies tonight?" he asked breathlessly.

I stared at him for a moment, caught off guard by the request. He hadn't asked me for anything in months, not since he'd hit his growth spurt and started "feeling himself," as my dad put it. Grant and I had been pretty close when we were younger—he'd even danced along to some of the Celine Dion choreography that one time—but over the last year, as he'd started to excel in sports and spend more time with his friends, it had become pretty obvious that he saw me as nothing more than his boring older sister.

"Why can't Mom or Dad take you?" I asked.

“They have that gala to go to for Mom’s job,” Grant said, rolling his eyes. “They said to ask you. Mom said they give you gas money for a reason. So can you take me?”

“I don’t know, maybe. Ask me later.”

He dropped his head back like I was impossible. “Come on, Codi, all my friends are gonna be there!”

I hated when Grant mentioned “all” his friends. I always felt like he was doing it on purpose, trying to rub it in that he had a whole crew of people to hang out with while I only had Maritza and JaKory.

“It’s only five minutes away,” Grant went on. “And it’s not like you’re doing anything else.”

“We’re hanging out,” I said testily, gesturing between Maritza and JaKory.

“Doing what? Sitting around in the basement like you always do?”

I felt my face go hot. My little brother had recently developed a cruel streak. It didn’t come out often, but when it did, I never knew what to say back.

“Grant,” Maritza cut in. “If you want us to drop you off, try asking without insulting us.”

Maritza often talked to Grant like he was her own little brother. I guess it went back to all those summers she’d spent over here, with Grant following her around trying to impress her with broken bits of Spanish, or maybe it was because she was an only child who’d always wanted siblings. It used to make me proud that she felt so close to him, but lately it had started to dig under my skin. I hated feeling like a wall had gone up between Grant and me, and Maritza’s way of talking to him as if *she* was the cool, unruffled big sister only made me feel worse.

Grant took a deep breath through his nose. “If you guys could drop me off tonight,” he said evenly, “I’d really appreciate it.”

I stared at him. It would have felt so satisfying to tell him no, but Maritza seemed to read my mind.

“Codi,” she said.

I ignored her and took a deep breath of my own. “Fine,” I told my brother. “Anything else?”

Grant’s eyes flicked up to the TV. “What are you watching?”

“Nothing,” the three of us said together.

He looked suspicious for a moment, but then he shrugged, dashed out of the room, and thundered up the stairs, shutting the door with a loud snap.

# 2

WE TOOK GRANT TO HIS MOVIE AROUND SEVEN FIFTEEN. The rain had stopped and the sun was shining meekly as we wound our way down familiar roads. Maritza drove, mostly because she liked to be in control, but also because her car was newer than mine and smelled like her “Summer Rain” air freshener. Grant was unnaturally quiet on the way there. When he got out of the car, he looked around at the dozens of people heading into the theater before he turned back to us.

“Can you get me at nine thirty?”

“Sure,” Maritza said before I could answer.

Grant seemed distracted. “Thanks,” he said, sweeping his hair to the side. He shut the door and tore off to the ticket window.

Maritza, JaKory, and I went for pizza at our favorite local joint, Mr. Cheesy. Over the last year, since Maritza and I had gotten our driver’s licenses, we’d come here dozens of times. The guy who owned

the place liked us so much that he usually gave us free sodas, and he'd even tacked a picture of us to the Wall of Fame behind the register. We wolfed down our usual large stuffed-crust Hawaiian while we played MASH on the paper tablecloth, and Maritza and JaKory squealed when they both ended up marrying Michael B. Jordan.

"Let's walk over to Walgreens," JaKory said after we'd paid and stepped outside. "I want to get my mom a card. Or maybe some flowers."

"Your cards are the best," I said, stealing a sip from his to-go cup of Sprite. "What's that thing again? About words being your—"

"Love language," JaKory said automatically. He loved answering questions. "Mine is Words of Affirmation. And yours is probably Quality Time. And Maritza's is being bossy."

"Shut up," Maritza said, shoving him playfully. "I'm obviously Physical Touch."

Walgreens was bright and quiet. We followed JaKory to the greeting cards aisle, where I helped him pick through the Sympathy/Thinking of You section. Maritza got bored and wandered off to a different aisle.

"This one's got a strong spiritual theme, which Mom will appreciate," JaKory said, holding up a beige card, "but this one's *Dancing with the Stars*, and that's our favorite show to—"

"Heyooo!" Maritza yelled, popping around the corner with a plastic archery bow in her hand. "Look alive, bitches!"

She shot a plastic arrow at my hip, followed promptly by an arrow that hit a row of greeting cards. I chucked both arrows back at her while she loaded a third onto the plastic bow. JaKory turned on his heel and stomped away, grumbling about us making a scene.

“Stand still so I can practice!” Maritza yelled, her eyes tracking me in the aisle.

“Are you insane?!” I yelled back, grabbing a stray shopping cart and sending it careening toward her. She screeched and tripped into the endcap of stuffed animals, knocking several bears in Hawaiian T-shirts to the floor.

By the time we finished our arrow war and joined JaKory at the register, he’d already purchased both cards and a pack of Jujubes. It was only with the slightest trace of shame that Maritza pushed the archery set across the counter and retrieved her wallet to pay for it.

“You’ll have to forgive my daughters,” JaKory told the sour-faced cashier, who made a show of glaring at us. “They don’t get out much.”

We got back to the theater about fifteen minutes earlier than Grant had asked. Maritza turned off the ignition and we sat with the windows down, enjoying the warm summer air. People were spilling out of the movie theater, but there was no sign of my brother’s shaggy brown hair or skinny stilt legs.

It was another few minutes before we spotted him. He was meshed in with a huge throng of kids who were trying to look older than they were. Grant was right in the middle of them, laughing and yelling, posing for pictures and fixing his hair between each take.

“Such a diva,” JaKory snorted, shaking his head.

“How many fucking friends does he have?” Maritza said.

“My dad calls them his ‘posse,’” I said sarcastically, and Maritza and JaKory laughed.

It was hard not to feel slighted when my parents fawned over

Grant's social life. My dad had been a total frat boy in college, the kind of guy who threw legendary parties and nicknamed all his friends. He still took a trip every winter to go skiing with "the boys." My mom wasn't extroverted like him—I guess I got that from her—but she was magnetic in her own way, always sure of how to speak to people, even if she was low-key about it. Case in point: She won homecoming queen in high school. Dad still teased her about it whenever they went on dates. Mom would come downstairs all dressed up, and Dad would spin her around and say, "Damn, honey, you could've been homecoming queen." Mom's eyes would sparkle, Grant would snort under his breath, and I'd stand in the corner and wonder how I wasn't adopted.

I looked hard at my brother, taking in his exuberant smile, trying to keep the negative swirling in my stomach at bay. Then I realized something seemed . . . *off*. Grant had wandered away from the group and over toward a pillar, and his mannerisms were stiff and jerky. He looked almost nervous.

A little current seared in my stomach.

"Who's he talking to?" I said, more to myself than my friends.

Maritza tapped an archery arrow on the steering wheel. "Probably Ryan, right? Or Brian? Whatever his doofy friend's name is."

"No," I said, trying to make her understand, "it's someone different. Look how he keeps touching his hair."

Maritza and JaKory went still, watching closely. All three of us were silent. Then Maritza said, "Do you think he's talking to a girl?"

I couldn't answer. My breathing was pinched; my nerves were on edge.

"He's moving again," JaKory said.

Grant stepped into the white lights streaming down from the

building. And then, as I'd known instinctively, a girl moved out from behind the pillar.

She was a skinny girl with braces and long, thick hair, and she was smiling at my little brother in a nervous, timid way. Grant was holding his arm to the side, nodding his head too much, and shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

"Holy shit," Maritza said slowly. "He's on a date."

My whole body felt cold and contracted. It was like the universe was playing a joke on me, and I had unwittingly participated in the setup. While my friends and I were lamenting our lack of romantic experience in the basement, my little brother had conned us into driving him to *a date*. I knew Grant was growing up, that he had started caring about girls, that pictures and popularity were part of his currency now . . . and yet I'd never stopped to consider that he was truly becoming a Teenager, and that he might be doing a better job of it than me.

The girl said something. She looked self-conscious. Grant inched a step closer, brushing his hair out of his eyes.

"He's gonna kiss her," JaKory said breathlessly.

I wanted to look away, to hide my face in my hands and pretend this wasn't happening, but I couldn't.

Grant hovered. The moment went on too long, and then it was lost. Finally, the girl leaned in and hugged him. She kissed him hastily on the cheek, then spun around and hurried off toward a group of giggling girls, a secret grin on her face.

Grant stood frozen. He dropped his head back and took a deep breath.

I took a deep breath, too, and looked around at Maritza and JaKory. They met my eyes immediately, and it was clear all three of us were

feeling the same thing. I had an awful, twisted sense of relief, like I'd just gotten borrowed time on a deadline I hadn't realized was coming.

"Should we text him?" Maritza asked quietly.

Before I could answer, Grant looked our way. He watched us watching him, and his face froze.

"Shit," I said. My own voice sounded strange.

Grant looked away, glaring. Then he steeled himself and walked toward us, his head down, his posture rigid. His friends were calling after him, but he ignored them. He opened the car door and slid into the back seat without a word.

I wanted to say something, to channel my dad and make a joke that would burst the tension, but I'd never known how to do that. Maritza turned up her music to cover the awkward silence, and we drove out of the theater lot without speaking.

When we reached the first stoplight, Maritza broke the silence.

"So . . . how was the movie?"

Grant shifted in his seat. "Stupid."

I looked at my brother in the rearview mirror. He was slumped against the window, his cheek in his hand. The big sister in me wanted to comfort him, to offer my counsel like I had when we were younger, but I didn't have the experience needed for this kind of advice.

"Grant," Maritza said, in a would-be soothing voice, "we didn't mean to see that happen—"

"I don't wanna talk about it," Grant snapped.

My nerves were on edge again. I willed Maritza to drop it, to let us go home and pretend like nothing had happened, but Maritza wasn't the type to let things go.

“That girl obviously liked you,” she said. “I could tell by the way she was looking at you.”

Grant said nothing.

“I know it’s scary to make a move,” Maritza plowed on, “but you’ll get another—”

“Maritza,” I said loudly. “Do us all a favor and *shut up*.”

Maritza looked scandalized. The light turned green, and she jerked the car forward.

“Just trying to be helpful,” she spat, “considering his older sister isn’t saying anything—”

“He doesn’t need your help,” I said, my face flushing.

“Yeah, well, he definitely doesn’t need *yours*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“All right, hold on,” JaKory said, spreading his arms between us. “Let’s just take a second. We’re all feeling a little vulnerable—”

“We’re fine,” Maritza barked.

“Maritza, stay in your lane—literally and figuratively. Codi, let it go. Grant’s fine. He doesn’t want anyone’s help, and that’s his prerogative.”

“I wouldn’t need *y’all’s* help anyway,” Grant huffed.

JaKory, offended now, threw up his hands and turned away toward the window.

Grant’s words stung. It took me a beat to catch my breath, but then I twisted around to glare at him, my heart rearing. “You shouldn’t need *anyone’s* help,” I said. “You’re too young to be worrying about this anyway.”

Grant glared back at me, not bothering to lift his head off the window. “I’m fourteen. Everyone my age is dating.”

“Yeah, well, they shouldn’t be.”

“You’re probably just saying that because *you’ve* never dated. I’ll bet you’ve never even *kissed* anyone, none of you have—”

My whole body burned.

“Shut up, Grant! Of course I’ve kissed someone, and even if I hadn’t, you can bet I’d never chicken out on it!”

“Fuck you, Codi!”

“HEY!” JaKory said, his voice booming. “Stop talking, all of you. Just *stop*.”

A loaded, searing silence swept through the car. I faced the windshield without seeing it, my insides burning. I was angry, I was hurt, and I was embarrassed, but more than anything, I hated myself and the limited world I’d been living in.

“You should put your seat belt on, Grant,” JaKory huffed.

Grant didn’t move. I wanted nothing more to do with him, but the big sister in me couldn’t let it go.

“Grant,” I said, my voice hard. “Seat belt.”

Still, Grant didn’t move.

“What is wrong with you?” I said, whipping around to look at him again. “Put your seat belt on! Now!”

The way Grant looked at me then—murderous and resentful—confirmed we were strangers like never before. That my little brother had grown into a popular, self-possessed, too-cool-for-you Teenager who didn’t need his dorky older sister for anything. He buckled his seat belt in one swift, angry motion, then dropped his forehead against the window and didn’t speak again. When Maritza pulled into our driveway a few minutes later, he raced out of the car without bothering to shut the door.

My friends and I sat with the car still running, the music still playing. I didn’t have anything to say, especially not to Maritza.

“I’ll see you later,” I said, getting out of the car. I didn’t bother to invite them in.

My brother’s room was the first off the upstairs landing. I stood in front of his door for a long minute, feeling the vibrations from his loud, blaring music. The hand-painted sign from my grandparents was still affixed to his door: a small wooden rectangle with footballs, trains, and *Grant’s Room* written in swirly, child-friendly lettering.

I did something I’d never done before and held up my middle finger to his door.

Alone in my bedroom, I looked around and took stock of my world. Maritza’s NASA sweatshirt that I’d stolen a month ago and kept forgetting to give back. A battered copy of a Doctor Who novel JaKory kept bugging me to read. Selfies of the three of us in my basement, in the school courtyard, in the Taco Bell drive-through.

No sign of a life any bigger than this. No wilted bouquets from the prom, no blurry photos from late nights I couldn’t remember, no movie ticket stubs from a date with a pretty girl. The burning embarrassment I’d felt in the car was gone, but now there was a furtive pit of shame in my stomach, threatening every idea I had about myself.

My brother was becoming a real Teenager. He’d met up with a girl at the movies tonight, had probably paid for her ticket and bought her candy from the concession stand and held her hand in the dark space of the theater, and after the movie he’d spun her away from his sea of friends and come so, so close to kissing her, and I had watched from my spot in my best friend’s car, fresh off an evening of playing with kids’ toys at the pharmacy.

How had I gotten to be seventeen years old without anything *happening*? Surely my dad had enjoyed his share of wild adventures by the time he was my age. And surely Mom had kissed a few boys by the time she was crowned homecoming queen. They always talked about high school with that wistful tone in their voices, with that mischievous gleam in their eyes. What had their high school summers been like? What had they gotten up to on those late nights, in those fast cars? And what had their friends been like? Were they anything like mine?

Maritza and JaKory. They'd always been the center of my life, but suddenly my life felt so small. How much of that had to do with them, and how much of it had to do with me?

# 3

I WOKE EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. IT WAS RAINING again, and for a while I lay there listening to it, letting the feelings from last night wash over me. My parents had come home late from their gala, speaking in low rumbles, their dress shoes clacking on the kitchen floor. I'd pretended to be asleep when my mom had poked her head into my room.

When I finally came downstairs, the rain had let up and the sun was reaching through the windows, pearly white and timid as it stretched across our family room. Grant was in the kitchen, eating Froot Loops. He made a show of clanging his spoon around the bowl and keeping his eyes on the kitchen TV. I ignored him and poured my own bowl of cereal, but when I opened the fridge, something was missing.

"Are we out of milk?"

Grant said nothing, but when I looked at his bowl, I saw he'd

poured way more milk than he needed. His Froot Loops were practically drowning in it. The empty milk gallon was on the stool next to him. I shoved the refrigerator door closed and grabbed a banana instead.

JaKory called around noon, asking if I wanted to get coffee.

“Is this because you wanna talk about last night?” I asked.

JaKory sighed, long and pained. “Don’t you?”

The small pit of shame still hummed in my stomach. “Maybe,” I admitted.

“The sun’s out,” he said enticingly. “You could do some painting.”

I laughed. He knew how to hook me. “I’ll pick you up in fifteen minutes.”

The Chattahoochee River was the most underrated thing about Atlanta. It wound through the northwest side of the city’s perimeter, long and sprawling and glistening. No one really talked about it, but we drove past it all the time, even when crossing the interstate. It was like an open secret, something we forgot was there.

Our favorite coffee shop was right on the banks of the Chattahoochee, in a quiet little haven nestled behind the highway. The shop itself was in a huge, multistory cabin, and the grounds stretched out along the river, carefully landscaped with close-cropped grass that extended to the nettle-strewn tree line. You could walk along the river rocks or sit in one of the Adirondack chairs overlooking the water, listening to the steady rush of the river sweeping past. Usually, when my friends and I came here, we’d take our backpacks and stay for hours. Maritza would spread a blanket and practice yoga, JaKory would sit at a picnic table and

lose himself in a book, and I'd sit across from him, painting the brightest colors I could find.

Our usual table was still damp from the rain. I brushed off my side without caring too much while JaKory methodically dabbed every part of his bench with a napkin. By the time he was finished, I had already dug my sketchbook and watercolors out of my bag. There was a patch of vibrant marigolds by the water that I was excited to paint.

We were quiet at first, but it wasn't strained—more like a gentle blanket. I could sense we were about to have a heart-to-heart. JaKory and I were good at those. We may have tried to save face with Maritza sometimes, but with each other, we always said exactly what we were feeling.

"Did you feel horrible yesterday, too?" JaKory asked.

I looked up from the colors I was mixing. "The worst I've felt in a long time."

JaKory was silent. Then he screwed up his mouth and said, "I went home and wrote a poem about it."

I smiled wryly. "Course you did."

"There was one line I really liked. '*My youth is infinite but my fears are intimate.*'"

I mixed my orange and yellow paints. Such bursts of color, such vibrant promises, like the infinite youth JaKory spoke of. And yet those intimate fears loomed larger.

"I'm scared, too," I admitted. "Scared of . . . I don't even know what."

"I'm so pissed at myself," JaKory whispered. "I always knew I was different . . . black, nerdy, queer . . . but that's not why I'm missing out. It's because I'm standing in my own way. I know it."

I wilted. JaKory was speaking the same truth I felt in my bones. Did Maritza feel that way, too? Were all three of us stuck in a co-dependent friendship because it was easier than facing our individual inertia?

“What are we supposed to do?” I asked quietly.

JaKory held my eyes. “Maritza has a plan. She’s on her way to meet us so we can talk about it.”

I stared at him. “What do you mean, ‘a plan’? I thought this was just you and me hanging out. You know I don’t feel like talking to her after how she acted last night. Didn’t you hear what she said to me? *He definitely doesn’t need your help.*”

“She didn’t mean it.”

“You know she did.”

“We’re family, Codi. Families fight and make up.”

“So you invited her without telling me?”

He looked past me. “Here she comes. Just listen and keep an open mind, okay?”

I spun around, caught off guard by this whole setup. Why was JaKory prepping me for a hangout with Maritza? Why did I feel like I was being ambushed?

Maritza approached cautiously, watching the ground like she might trip any second, even though she was the most graceful of the three of us. She sat next to JaKory and placed a large croissant on the table like a peace offering.

“How’s it going?” she asked, looking directly at me.

“Fine,” I said, not meeting her eyes. JaKory eyed the croissant, but I ignored it and went back to my painting.

“How was the dance camp meeting?” JaKory asked, clearly trying to break the tension.

Maritza was on our school's varsity dance team, and this summer she would be working as an assistant teacher at the middle school dance camp. It was a highly selective position that only a handful of dancers had been chosen for, and Maritza was elated, especially because it would help with her application to Georgia Tech in the fall. The only downside was that it was a full-summer commitment, which meant she'd be missing her family's annual Panama trip for the first time ever.

"Fine." Maritza shrugged. Her eyes darkened. "Except Vivien Chen was being a snotty bitch again."

Vivien Chen was Maritza's sworn enemy. She was in our class at Buchanan High School and was one of the smartest, most accomplished people around. Unfortunately, she had a knack for high performance in the same exact things as Maritza: science and dance. This past year, Maritza and Vivien had been in the same honors physics class *and* had competed for the position of dance team captain. And while Maritza had earned the better grades in physics, Vivien had ultimately won out as dance team captain. Maritza had taken it pretty hard; on the day their coach had announced it, back in April, she'd cried for two hours in my car.

"JaKory said you have a plan," I said pointedly, glaring at her. "I'd rather hear about that than Vivien Chen."

Maritza stared at me for a beat. Then her words tumbled out, loud and fast as ever. "Listen, I'm sorry about last night. I shouldn't have made that dig at you, Codi. I was just—I was caught off guard. I never imagined in a million years that your little brother would go on a date before I would. Before any of us would."

The only sound was the rushing of the river. I stared at my watercolors, trying to make sense of my emotions.

“Codi-kid,” Maritza said, using the old nickname. She nudged the croissant toward me. “I’m sorry, okay? It was a dick thing to say. I was just feeling shitty about myself, and . . . well, I think we were all feeling shitty.”

She tore the croissant and held out a piece to me. I was still annoyed, but my urge to hear her plan outweighed it. I met her eyes and took the piece she offered.

“Ha,” she said, grinning. “Softening y’all with food always works.”

“Shut up,” I said, rolling my eyes and dipping my piece into her fresh coffee. “Are you gonna tell me what’s going on, or what?”

She tapped her fingertips together, giddy. “Okay, so . . . you know that girl Rona, on my team?”

“The one who used to sit in Ben Reed’s lap while Mr. Clanton ‘rested his eyelids’ during health class?” I asked. “Yeah.”

“She was talking to me at the meeting just now, and she mentioned this party she’s going to tonight. This guy Ricky Flint, he just graduated, is having it at his house. Rona said anyone could come. And guess where he lives?”

A sense of apprehension trickled over me. “Where?”

“In your neighborhood, Codi.” She said it like a punch line, her eyes bright and fiery. Next to her, JaKory nodded triumphantly. It was obvious she’d already told him this part.

I knew where they were going with this, but it wasn’t something I wanted to hear. We were falling into a conversation I wasn’t ready for.

“And . . . you think we should avoid driving that way in case they accidentally set the house on fire?” I said.

“Ha, ha,” Maritza said, rolling her eyes. “But for real, wanna go?”

They looked at me expectantly. JaKory nodded very slightly, like he was trying to encourage me.

“Not really,” I said quietly.

“But think about it!” Maritza insisted. She moved to straddle the bench so she was facing me directly. “It’s so close, we could *walk* there. That way we could drink!”

“Drink?” I repeated, feeling dazed. “Since when do we drink?”

“Since today, because I want to try something new. We’ll drink, and we’ll meet new people, and maybe—*maybe*—there will be a cute girl or guy that we can talk to, and flirt with, and *kiss*—I mean, isn’t that what you want?”

I looked to JaKory for help, but he avoided my gaze.

“We can’t just go to some random guy’s party,” I said.

“Why can’t we?”

I struggled to articulate what I was feeling. “We—we don’t—I mean, what are we gonna do, just waltz in there and act like we were invited? We won’t know anyone. We’ve never even been to a party before.”

Maritza leaned forward, an urgent energy about her. “Listen to me,” she said. “Last night we picked up your little brother from a *date*, something none of us have ever experienced, and we watched him almost kiss a girl for the first time, something I’ve been wanting to do for *ages*. Didn’t that feel as shitty for you as it did for me? I’m tired of feeling like I’m missing out. We keep hanging out just the three of us, doing the same shit we always do, watching bad movies we’ve already seen . . .” She clasped her hands in front of her and steeled herself. “We need to try something different, meet people who are different. It’s like Einstein said: The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and hoping for a different result.”

I looked between them. “This isn’t an experiment, you guys,” I

said, trying to slow them down, to make them see reason. “We can’t just throw stuff at the wall and hope it sticks. We need to think this through, figure out how to make ourselves ready—”

“Our entire adolescence is an experiment,” Maritza cut in. “And it’s time to try something new. Now. *Today*.”

I sat in silence, a wave of panic crashing over me.

“She’s right, Codi,” JaKory said quietly. “We’re obviously not happy with how things are going, so we need to make a change.”

I looked at Maritza. “Why did you tell JaKory the plan first? Why didn’t you tell us together?”

They exchanged brief, meaningful looks that made my stomach turn.

“*What?*” I asked.

“Well—it’s just—don’t take this the wrong way, but I knew you’d be the harder one to convince. You’re more . . . you know . . .”

“What?” I asked sharply.

“Complacent,” JaKory said, wincing.

“I’m not complacent!” I yelled. “Not any more than *you*, anyway!”

JaKory’s eyes sizzled. “Yeah, well, I’m done being complacent. I’m done being afraid.”

Maritza’s words had obviously gotten to him. She had drawn a line in the sand, marking herself as brave, daring, and adventurous on one side, and marking me as cowardly, weak, and stagnant on the other. JaKory was aligning himself with the side he wanted to be known for.

“I’m sorry,” Maritza said, without sounding like it. “It just feels like I have to push you more. You’re so content to flap around in your comfort zone.”

“Don’t talk to me like that,” I said, my voice rising.

“Then stop acting like that,” she countered, her voice matching mine.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re *small*. Like you’re afraid of everything.”

“I’m not afraid—”

“I think you are. You’ve always been afraid to put yourself out there, even when you want something badly. Can’t you see you deserve bigger things, Codi?”

My chest was heaving; my cheeks were burning. Never before had Maritza attacked me like this, going straight for my weak points like my brother did. I glowered at her, and she glowered back, and there was something more than anger in her eyes. It took me a beat to recognize it, but when I did, my stomach plummeted.

It was worse than anger, worse than pity: There was something in Maritza that was ashamed to be my friend.

All the breath seemed to go out of me. Just when I’d started to worry that I was outgrowing my best friends, *they* had rushed to the same conclusion about outgrowing me. They were ready to leave me in the dust and set off on their new adventure together. I stared at the two of them like I’d never seen them before. In a way, I felt like I’d never truly seen myself before.

“Well?” Maritza said after a heavy pause. “Are we gonna go tonight?”

There was silence for a long, hanging moment. I watched the rushing river. The moment stretched on.

“No,” I said. “If this is really how you guys think of me, then I don’t want any part of your stupid plan. Y’all have fun.”

As I stood up, I caught them looking away from each other. An

impenetrable wall seemed to solidify in my chest, and suddenly I was desperate to get away from them.

I stayed in my room that night, playing music and sketching for hours. It was comforting and familiar, but several times I found myself staring at my sketchbook without seeing it, lost in visions of Maritza and JaKory at that party. They were somewhere here, in my neighborhood, but not to hang out with me. That had never happened before.

Were they relieved I wasn't with them? Were they meeting new friends who were cool and outgoing? Were they sneaking off into dark corners for those make-out sessions they were so desperate for?

Around midnight I decided to go to bed, but just as I got up to brush my teeth, my phone chimed with a text.

**Maritza Vargas:** *Are you up? I know I'm not your favorite right now but I drank too much and can't drive home, can you come meet us and drive my car back to your house??*

I stared at the message for a while. Competing emotions jostled for attention inside me: hurt, resentment, even a bitter desire to say no. But then I imagined Maritza trying to drive them home after she'd been drinking, and I thought of what could happen to them, and that thought was unbearable to me.

I pulled on my shoes and answered before I lost my nerve.

*Send me the address.*