

RAYCHEL

It's entirely possible Matt can see up my shorts.

I don't really care—my best friend has never shown any interest whatsoever in my underwear—but the only ones clean this morning were black and lacy. Not ideal for rock climbing, and not ideal for a photo shoot, especially one for his school assignment. I shift my position on the cliff face, trying to cover up.

"You okay?" Matt asks, lowering the camera.

"Just trying not to flash you."

"Don't worry." The clicking resumes. "I'm surprised you're not more hungover today," he says a minute later.

"I didn't drink that much."

He snorts. I only had two beers last night, but arguing will make him ask why I threw up, and that's not a conversation I want to have right now. Luckily Matt won't ask about the rest of the evening. He never does. "I'm ready to come down," I say instead.

"Hang on . . ." He steps sideways and tilts the camera. "This angle looks badass."

If that's a pun, it's not worth acknowledging. "My arms hurt. I'm going to fall."

"You're only a few feet up." But he moves out of the way so I can jump down. My foot hits a rock when I land and pain shoots up my leg, making me yelp. The rest of me hits the ground with a thud that snaps my jaw closed.

Matt's beside me in half a second. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lie, struggling to my feet.

"Let me—"

I bat his hand away and take a cautious step. It hurts like a mad bastard and I can't keep from wincing.

"Are you crying?" he asks.

"No!" I rub my eye. Black smears the back of my hand. I knew I shouldn't have worn mascara.

"Sit down," he says, gesturing at a moss-covered rock. "Let me check it."

"Having a doctor for a daddy doesn't make you one." He stares pointedly at me until I sit, then pokes and prods, trying to rotate my foot. "Ow! Damn it!"

"Sprained, I bet." He stands to retrieve his backpack. "We'll have to tape it."

"You don't even—"

"They taught us this summer." His explanation is muffled, his head already half-buried in his enormous backpack. I teased him about it this morning and called him a Boy Scout when he mumbled something about "being prepared." Going to Outward Bound was supposed to make him more comfortable in the woods. Instead he came home with a million worst-case scenarios and their solutions loaded on his back.

But I can't make fun now. "Should I take my shoe off?"

He pulls out an ACE bandage. "It'll swell too much. You won't be able to hike out." The thought of four miles back makes me groan. "I could carry you," he says, voice flat, and I smack his arm in answer. "Okay then." He starts to hand me two Ibuprofen, but stops to pour water on my palms first, rinsing away the dirt. "That's what I like about you, Raych. You're not afraid to get dirty, like most girls."

I stick my tongue out before swallowing the pills.

.

The return hike takes three times longer than usual. Whenever I stop to rest in clearings along the trail, Matt paces, his shadow long and looming. The sun's already dipped behind the treetops and we're not even out of earshot of the Twin Falls yet. He keeps glancing at the sky, like I don't know we're burning daylight. "I'm going as fast as I can," I snap as he checks the time.

"I know." He runs a hand through his hair. "I'm not worried."

Liar. Matt's always worried.

MATT

By the time I get Raychel back to my house, my hands are cramped from clutching the steering wheel on the curvy Ozark back roads. The drive to the Twin Falls trailhead is

dangerous enough in daylight; at night, all it takes is one deer to kill your car, and you, for that matter. There was no conversation to distract me, at least, but Raychel's choice of music and the fact that she's probably pissed just made my hands clench even tighter. "I'm sorry," I say, as we reach the front door.

"For what?"

"For making you climb just so I could take pictures. I could have—"

"Matthew," she cuts me off. "I like climbing. And you didn't tell me to jump down or put a rock in my way. But you *did* tape my ankle and get me home. So chill."

I nod.

"And thanks." She gives me a hug, more awkward than normal with her balance messed up. My hand accidentally brushes her boob, but she doesn't notice, or doesn't care.

"Ready to face the Inquisition?" I ask. I help her inside to the living room, where my parents are watching a preseason football game.

"Raychel!" Mom gasps, hitting MUTE. "What happened?"

"Just twisted my ankle," Raychel says, shrugging.

But Dad's already standing up. "Better let me take a look at it."

Raych rolls her eyes at me as she follows him to his office, and I return it, even though this was the whole point of bringing her to my house: seeing Dad will save her the co-pay at the ER.

They emerge a few minutes later, Raychel clomping down the hall on crutches like a three-legged horse.

“You were right—it’s sprained,” Dad says with an approving nod at me, “but not too bad. Just remember to RICE it,” he adds to her.

Raychel sighs. Rest, ice, compression, elevation. I recognize the prescription from years of soccer injuries. “How long do I have to use these things?” she asks, tapping a crutch against her good foot.

“A week or so. And no hiking for a while.” He glances at me again.

She snorts. “Matt’s not my keeper.”

“No, but I know how you two are,” he says.

I am hardly the bad influence here, but I nod dutifully. Raychel just thanks him and turns to Mom. “I meant to return your book,” she says. “It’s in the car.”

Mom smiles. “Did you like it?”

“It was so good! The ending made me cry like—”

Blah blah blah. They can talk books all day long, so I tune them out and watch the game until Raychel whacks me in the calf with a crutch to let me know they’re done. She’s basically the daughter my parents never had, and I’m pretty sure they’d trade me for her in a heartbeat. “You ready?” she asks.

“If you’re done with your BFF.” I make a face at Mom.

“Hit him again for me,” Mom says, and Raychel obliges.

.

In the morning, my brother stumbles into the kitchen, hair sticking out in every direction. “Morning,” Dad says. Andrew grunts and takes a coffee mug from Mom, who’s holding it out like a bone to an unfriendly dog.

“Are you dressed?” I ask. I’m not being a dick, I really can’t tell, but he scowls and doesn’t answer, too busy spilling Fruity Pebbles all over the counter. At least he’s not wearing any of my clothes. “Be in the car at 7:15 or I’m leaving you here.”

He waves off my empty threat. Every time he screws up, my parents take his car away, which means I’m the one who really suffers the consequences. Making me play chauffeur is easier than bothering with chores and grades. For him, anyway.

At 7:25, Andrew finally makes it to the car, slamming the door behind him and immediately glaring at my stereo. “What is this emo pansy bullshit?”

“Raych had it on yesterday,” I lie, and back out of the driveway.

He scrolls through my collection. “Your music sucks.”

“So I hear. Every freaking time you’re in my car.”

Andrew finds something that meets his standards and sits back with his eyes closed while I drive to Raychel’s. I usually give her a ride, since the bus sucks and her mom can barely afford food and rent, much less a second car. When we reach the duplex, she’s trying to balance on the crutches while fighting to open the screen door. I hop out to help, but I don’t offer, again,

to fix it, because I know she'll refuse. Even though we both know no one else is going to do it.

I lock up as she hobbles to the car and points Andrew to the backseat. "I already called shotgun!" he protests, as if he doesn't lose this argument every time he rides with us.

"Ladies first," Raychel says. "Or up front. Whatever."

He grumbles but does what she wants, just like always.

RAYCHEL

Andrew keeps kicking my seat. I should have given him shotgun—he's too big to sit in the back, two or three inches taller than his big brother. They have the same dark hair and eyes, and almost the same birthday, one year apart. But Matt's a little skinnier and nerdier. Andrew does what he can to accentuate their other differences: longer hair, grungier clothes, stupider behavior. Matt wants to save the world; Andrew's pretty sure he's its center. He went to Outward Bound too, but came home convinced he's invincible.

"Quit!" I say, twisting in my seat and slapping at his leg. When I face front, he kicks again, so I turn up the volume instead. "At least you found something halfway decent to listen to this morning."

He laughs. We've always double-teamed Matt on music because he basically has the same taste as his dad. We also share

majority rule on pizza toppings, weekend plans, and movie selections. Andrew and I could probably be closer friends, but he's never serious about anything—not school, not rules, and definitely not girls. Good-natured and fun, but not reliable.

Unless you need weed. Then he's your man.

"Did you finish your history paper?" Matt asks me, not taking his eyes off the road.

"Yes, Mother." I know he means well, but it's early and my ankle hurts. I spent most of last night trying not to worry about the day that awaits me. My injury is just going to draw more attention when I'd rather have none at all.

At the parking lot, Andrew snags my backpack and jogs ahead, ignoring my protests that it's not even heavy. I hobble along with Matt and try to avoid the fake horseshoe prints embedded in the sidewalk. We're the Big Springs Cowboys. So stupid. No cowboys ever herded cattle through the Ozarks; the mountains were just big enough to make them detour west around Arkansas. But I guess our appropriate mascot options were slim. The "BS High School Hillbillies" doesn't really strike fear into the hearts of your rivals.

As we reach the front doors, our hands reflexively stretch out to pat the statue of Cowboy Chester. Touching his bronze boot is supposed to bring you luck, like a redneck version of Saint Peter. Only seniors are "allowed," but Andrew steals some luck anyway.

Inside the lobby, the late August temperature rises fifteen degrees. The space is mostly glassed in, which sounds cool, but in

reality smells like a sauna full of wet dogs. We've almost made our way across the room when I hear Mindy Merrithew calling. "Oh yikes!" she says to me, her friendly tone not quite a match for her expression. "What happened?"

"Pole dancing injury," Andrew says. Her eyes flicker between us as I whack his arm. "It was awful," he adds. "Tassels everywhere—"

"Rock climbing," I interrupt. "I fell."

"Ouch." Her momentary frown flips right side up. "Can I borrow Matt for a sec?" she asks. "For Student Council stuff?"

I shrug. Mindy's the quintessential good girl: student council, cheer squad, Bible study twice a week, and a kind word for everyone, whether she means it or not. Bless her heart. I know she thinks Matt and I are sleeping together on the sly, but we're like a very chaste arranged marriage. We wear each other as habits.

And Matt remains clueless about the massive crush she has on him. "I should probably stay with Raych," he says. "I told my dad—"

"We're headed to the same hall," Andrew says. "I'll call 911 if she starts seizing or anything."

"You should keep your foot up during class," Matt says. "And we can get some ice at lunch."

I restrain myself from saying "Yes, Mother" again and give him a fake salute.

"Hope you feel better!" Mindy calls after us. Her cheerfulness is obscene this early in the morning.

Andrew puts my pack on his chest, walking beside me as I crutch up the wheelchair ramp. “How long you stuck with those sticks?” he asks.

“A few days. Are we dicks for leaving Matt with her?”

“Nah,” Andrew says, snickering. “That kid needs to get laid.”

I snort. “Which one?”

“Both. Maybe he’ll meet someone on campus this year.”

“Doubtful.” In Big Springs, “campus” always means the local university, which is so close to our building that we call it BS High School Thirteenth Grade. They start recruiting us early—both the admissions office and the fraternities and sororities. We can also take classes there for dual credit, so this semester Matt is taking Cal 3. But I’m betting his female classmates are smart enough not to date seventeen-year-olds.

College courses are too expensive for me, but at least we have a big selection of AP classes. The university professors want their kids to have plenty of opportunities to overachieve while they’re here. But they rarely want their kids to *stay* here for college, which is part of why the Richardsons are always on Andrew’s ass—they can afford better schools and want to send him to one. I mean, this one is a decent university, so far as state schools go, but if you’re from here, it’s just same shit, different day, bigger toilet.

And there’s plenty of shit to avoid. Like the cluster of guys blocking our way in the hall.

“Richardson!” a guy shouts. Andrew stops to talk and I wait impatiently. I try not to look at the pack of boys in white baseball caps with matching red brands, bills dirtied and bent to identical perfection. Maybe that’s why we’re the Cowboys. Maybe Chester was famous for rounding up herds of wannabe frat rats.

A booming laugh tells me the one I dread seeing is with them. I can’t decide if I’d rather Carson Tipton ignore or acknowledge me, but when he turns and ticks his square chin up in greeting, I realize the former would be better. “Hey,” I say to Andrew, gesturing at my bag. “We’re going to be late.”

He turns back to me, holding the pack just out of reach. “Wait, is it true?”

“What?” I clomp closer.

Andrew head-tilts toward Carson. “Did you two hook up this weekend?” He pretends to be shocked, putting his hand to his throat. “Did Raychel really break her no-high-school-boys rule?”

Unexpected rage floods me. “Could you be a bigger dick?” I demand, too loudly. I thought I was prepared for this crap, but not from Andrew. His hand lowers in surprise, so I jerk my bag away and make the most dignified retreat that crutches will allow.

“Raych, wait!” he calls after me.

I ignore him. This is why I have that no-high-school-boys rule. And why I shouldn’t have broken it.

MATT

Outdoor Club is cancelled Monday afternoon, so Raychel comes home with me to hang out. Andrew gets a ride with some friends, probably to go smoke out, but at least he won't be hanging around like he did all summer, making fun of me and trying to get Raychel on his side for everything. Going back to school sucks, especially since most of our friends graduated last year, but at least I get Raych to myself.

She won't let me help her in or out of the car, or down the step into the sunken playroom. She doesn't need my help to win at pool, which is embarrassing, but as consolation, I get to watch her shoot. I have great admiration for my best friend's pool skills, as well as her ass, and I am smart enough not to admit to either.

"You break," she says, hanging the triangle on the wall. "Stripes or solids?"

"Solids." I line up my shot and watch the cue ball drop. "Damn."

Raychel plucks the ball from the corner pocket and appraises the table, but her shot goes wild when she tries to stand on her injured foot. The eight ball drops into the pocket beside me.

I poke her with my cue. "You don't have to take it easy on me."

She scoffs and waits for me to rack a new game. "Hey, can you give me a ride to work this evening?"

"Sure. You need one home?"

"Nah." She usually takes the campus transit service home from Pharm-Co, which I hate, though she claims it's perfectly safe.

I break instead of arguing with her, not noticing Andrew's arrival until he stealth-slaps the back of my head. "Hey," he says, dodging the chalk I throw at him and walking around to Raychel. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Her expression makes me laugh. "What'd you do?" I ask.

"I'm sorry," he says, ignoring me, and rubs the back of his neck. I lean against the table and wait for her to explode.

To my disappointment, she sighs instead. "I'll be back in a sec," she tells me.

I twirl the end of my cue against the floor as they step into the kitchen. I can hear Andrew apologize again, but not what Raychel mumbles in reply. "I know," he says. "And it's none of my business if you did."

Ah. So that's the issue. Rumors about Raychel were everywhere today, claiming she screwed Carson Tipton in his truck Saturday night. I'm not sure exactly what happened, but *something* did, a fact that makes no sense because Raych quit giving high school guys the time of day when we were sophomores. She had a boyfriend at the time who got mad about how much time she spent at work, so he told everyone she was cheating on him with a much older co-worker. She's had a reputation ever since.

I honestly don't know how much of it she deserves. College guys are still fair game and I know she's hooked up with plenty of them at campus parties. But she appears to have made a high school exception, and I have no idea why it was for Carson, of all people. He's a nice guy and never has a problem getting

chicks, but he's dumber than a box of rocks. She must have been really drunk, because Raychel doesn't suffer fools.

Except for fools like my brother, apparently. He comes back into the room alone, his expression contrite. "Are your balls still intact?" I ask.

He grabs his crotch. "They're a damn sight bigger than yours will ever be."

"Tough talk from the dude who's scared of spiders," I say.

"Says the one who puked at Silver Dollar City."

I flip him off as Raychel snorts from the kitchen. She's heard all about last spring's ill-fated roller coaster ride. "At least I didn't blow chunks all over Spencer's dorm room," I call to her.

I get no answer, and Andrew grins as I put down my cue. My turn to face her.

RAYCHEL

I listen to the boys argue, rolling my eyes and taking a few deep breaths before I have to deal with them again. Andrew's comment this morning was just the first in a day full of "knowing" glances and whispered comments and dirty gestures.

And it's my own fault. I brought this on myself.

I expect a few high school kids to show up at frat parties, but Saturday's party was at our friend Spencer's dorm. It should have just been me and Matt, plus Spencer and his girlfriend,

Asha, who both stayed here to go to college together. There weren't nearly enough folks to drain the keg some optimistic freshman paid for, but Carson turned up with a few of his crew. When we ended up chatting at the end of the hall, he was surprised how much I knew about football. I was surprised he was having a conversation with me at all. Not that he's ever been mean or anything. He just never seemed to notice me much.

So when he needed a smoke and asked if I wanted to come with, I said, "Yeah, sure," and shouted down the hall to Matt so he wouldn't worry.

Everyone saw us go.

Everyone saw me come back an hour later, hair wild and eyes wide.

Everyone saw me grab a beer, chug it, and proceed to throw it up in Spencer's room.

Matt comes into the kitchen and I open the fridge so he can't see my expression. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah." The cool air feels clean on my face. "I'm fine."

.

The rest of the week doesn't improve much. On Tuesday, a group of sophomore girls corner me in the hallway to ask how big Carson's junk is. Wednesday, I'm tagged online in a few pictures from the party, and a shot of Asha holding my hair over Spencer's sink draws a lot of comments about my virtue and lack thereof. Thursday, someone coughs "Slut!" as I walk down a crowded staircase.

But I've dealt with gossip before. What I haven't dealt with is Carson. If he would just ignore me, this would blow over, but instead he insists on smiling, waving, winking—everything short of actually striking up a conversation. And yet a stupid part of me is insulted that he hasn't talked to me.

Maybe if he did, I could laugh it off. Put it behind me.

Stop thinking about it.

The last thing I want to do Friday night is go out, but I promised Asha I'd go with her to a frat party, and I kind of owe her for last weekend. However, she'll ditch me the minute Spencer appears, and I'm not going to brave it alone. "How the hell are you going to wear a toga with crutches?" Matt asks.

"I'll figure something out," I say, shifting the phone. It'll be easier than wearing the usual heels, skirt, and barely-there top combo anyway. "Please come." Matt doesn't answer. "Bring Andrew too."

"He's got plans."

Bummer. Andrew would make things more fun. "We can leave early," I say, changing tacks. "Please?"

"Fine," he says grudgingly. "But we really can't stay late. I have StuCo in the morning."

"Deal," I say, not even gloating. "We'll meet you there."

.

I wait forever at the bus stop and finally manage to take the transit over to Asha's. She lives in the worst dorm, on the

farthest edge of campus. The parking sucks, the food's gross, the bathrooms are disgusting, and I am so freaking jealous I can barely stand it. One more year. Just one more year and I can have my own crappy dorm room on a campus far away.

She's already several drinks ahead when I get there. "You gotta catch up," she says, handing me a watered-down tequila mixture that's supposed to be a margarita. "Have a Drink on Me" blares from the speakers. I sip when AC/DC commands and Asha tries not to jab me with safety pins as she arranges my bedsheet into a toga. She looks pretty, draped in one of her mom's saris.

"Does your mom know you're wearing that?"

"Ha," Asha says. "No, and don't spill anything on it or she'll kill me."

My sheet literally pales in comparison—it used to be floral, many bleachings ago, but now it's mottled and ugly. "Where's your roommate?"

"She's never here," Asha says, taking the pins out of her mouth. "I don't think she likes Spencer."

"What? Why?" Everyone likes Spencer. He is the definition of nice. Polite, kind, quiet, and completely in love with Asha.

"I don't know. I think she's a racist."

I snort. "Maybe she just doesn't like the nonstop sexfest."

Asha pokes me on purpose. Everyone knows she and Spencer screw like rabbits—except her parents, who are pretty traditional. Her mom wants Asha married as soon as possible, and her dad . . . well, her dad is the answer to "who doesn't

like Spencer?" Mr. Chavan got over the fact that Asha dated Spencer in secret for their entire sophomore year, and he claims to be over the fact that Spencer is black instead of Indian. But now that Asha stayed in Big Springs to be with him for college, Spencer is back on Mr. Chavan's shit list.

Asha claims she's here for the well-respected social work department, but that doesn't make her dad any happier. Her older siblings are an oncologist and an engineer, and Asha, as the baby of the family, is supposed to complete the trifecta of success. Preferably as a surgeon. Lawyer, like her dad, is also acceptable. But what she really wants is to start a nonprofit and save the world, like Matt.

I'm just going to save myself and major in business. "Did you drop that statistics class?"

She steps back to examine her handiwork. "Yeah, but I'll have to make it up at some point."

"Ugh." The chorus comes around again and I gulp from my mug.

"You ready?" Asha asks, looking for her keys.

"I think." I tug experimentally at my toga and its hundred thousand safety pins. That sucker is going nowhere. "I hope this party blows less than the last one."

Asha laughs, a little higher and sillier than when she's sober. "You're not looking for another round with Carson Tipton?"

My pulse spikes, sending lukewarm margarita straight to my head.

She fake punches my arm. “The dude has a Confederate flag license plate, Raychel. What were you thinking?”

“Good question,” I say, and drain my mug.

M A T T

I told Raychel that Andrew had plans, but he cancels them when he hears about the toga party. He takes forever to find a sheet, finally wrapping himself in an old one with Sesame Street characters, and by the time we find a parking spot, then walk all the way from the parking deck to the frat house, I’m sure we’ll be late.

But we still beat the girls to the party and have to stand on the lawn waiting for them, watching a crowd of costumed kids walk, or stagger, inside. Finally Spencer the Friendly Drunk shows up and we go inside to escape the heat. He offers his flask to everyone in sight, but I turn him down. When the girls finally show up, they’re already stumbling, and the smell of tequila washes over me as Asha rests her forehead against mine. “Hiiii, Maaaattt.”

Well, this should be fun.

Raychel hugs Andrew. “Nice toga,” she says, looking him up and down, then turns to me. “Where’s yours?”

“He’s a modern Greek,” Andrew says. “Banker type.”

"I said I'd show," I say, "not that I'd dress up. Where're your crutches?"

She points toward the door, where they're leaning against the wall. Andrew passes her Spencer's flask and before I can argue, she takes a swig, shuddering. "Oh, that's disgusting."

Great, we're mixing liquors tonight too. "You're not drinking on painkillers, are you?"

She rolls her eyes and takes another swig before handing it back. "Thanks, Spence."

"No problem." He puts it in his pocket, just in time for Asha to make an attempt at swallowing his entire face, glasses and all.

Wonderful. "Don't you have to work tomorrow?" I ask Raychel.

"Not until noo-oon," she says, poking my arm. I bite back an angry reply. All week, she's been furious that her hookup with Carson is the topic of conversation, but it's not stopping her from another weekend of public debauchery.

A girl in a toga made of plastic wrap comes over to Andrew. "You want to dance?"

He looks at us, grinning, and Raychel waves him away. When he's lost in the crowd, she leans over to talk into my ear, and gestures at Spencer and Asha. "Let's give them some privacy," she says, vowels long and slow.

The idiot hormonal part of my brain wishes she'd bite my earlobe.

Instead I half carry her to a corner, where she slumps on a sticky couch. Her laurel wreath crown, which looks suspiciously like it's made from the holly bushes outside Asha's dorm, slips

and catches in a tangle of brown waves that change color with the DJ booth's flashing lights. Red, yellow, green, back to red, flashing like a strobe. She stares at it without blinking.

"Tequila, huh?"

Her head lolls toward me. "How'd you guess?"

"Asha had margarita breath."

That strikes her as funny and I have to wrap an arm around her waist to keep her from laughing herself off the couch. Raychel has this problem when she drinks: she starts to slide off whatever seat she's in. We call it the puddle effect, and it's funny when she's not nursing an injury. My fingers line up with her ribs, skin warm through the sheet.

"That tickles!" She squirms away from my hand, closer to my lap, her head resting on my shoulder. I could kiss the top of it if I wanted to.

The idiot hormonal part of my brain wants to kiss her mouth instead.

The urge to kiss a pretty girl shouldn't be surprising, even if it's Raychel. It's not that I don't want to, because god knows I do, but this *is* Raychel, so I shouldn't.

She doesn't smell like tequila. She smells like limes. Tart.

But we're friends. And not the kind with benefits.

I make myself turn away.

.

We watch people migrate to the makeshift dance floor until Asha and Spencer find us again. They have drinks for us as

apologies, but I decline, since everyone else is obviously past the point of no return, and someone has to get Raychel home.

That lucky someone is me, but what else is new.

“Hey,” I say, shouting over the bass. “Are you guys staying? I think we’re heading out.”

Asha looks at Raychel the Puddle and giggles. “I was going to see if she wanted to dance, but uh, guess not.”

“Yeah, pretty sure she’s done.” I wade into the crowd to get my brother, but he’s found some other friends and wants to stay. For once, I’m irritated that he’s ditching us, because I could use some help getting Raychel out of here. Back at the couch, I pull her to her feet and she groans in protest. “Ready for the hike to the car?”

“Can’t you bring the car here?” she asks.

“It’s all the way over by the stadium.”

She pouts. “Then can we get ice cream on the way home?”

“We’ll see,” I say, trying to move her toward the door. “Ice cream and alcohol don’t sound like a great combination.”

“But you dumped me!”

I snort and leave Spencer to hold her up while I go get her crutches. I’ll never live it down: We dated for four days in the seventh grade, until Mindy Merrithew smiled at me in the hallway. Then I dumped Raychel, Mindy immediately started acting like I had leprosy, and Raych has used it as her trump card ever since. I want the last cookie? “But you dumped me!” I want to hike at Eagle Point and she wants to go to Roger’s

Hollow? “But you dumped me!” I want to sleep and Raychel wants to have a two-hour conversation? “But you broke my heart!”

Maybe next time I’ll say, “Let me make it up to you. Let’s go out again.”

Right after I magically grow a pair.

Instead I hand her the crutches and we make our way through the crowd. “Ugh,” Raychel says as we step outside. It’s muggy and still, the kind of night where leaving the AC is like walking into a wet spider web. But her gaze is on an approaching pack of guys from school, with Carson jogging ahead of them.

“Sanders!” he says to Raychel, and nods at me. It feels more like a dismissal than a greeting. “Y’all leaving already?”

Raychel mumbles something. She suddenly seems a lot drunker than before, and she’s holding on to the crutches like she needs them again. I glance to make sure her toga’s still up. “Somebody pre-gamed a little too hard,” I say.

Carson laughs. He’s a redneck, but he’s all right. His mom was our Cub Scout leader, but my brother knows him better than me since they played baseball together until Andrew quit this year to “focus on basketball.” As if Andrew can focus on anything. “Where’s Hana?” he asks.

“Hana Mori?” I ask, confused, and he nods. “We broke up a long time ago.” She stayed here for college, but I haven’t seen her since graduation.

“Oh. Right.” He nods at Raychel. “You dating this one now?”

Ah. Now I get it. “We’re best friends,” I say, and Raychel squeezes my arm.

“Well, in that case . . .” he says, and grins at her. “You sure you don’t want to stick around?”

I wait for Raychel to respond. I don’t want her to say yes, obviously, but she clearly has something going with this guy, and I know from past experience that if I answer for her, I’ll hear about it later. The way she’s holding herself rigid makes me think she might be about to barf, though. “Raych?” I prompt. “You want to stay?”

She leans against me. “Tired.”

Carson’s friends are starting to crowd us. “Aw, come on,” he says, lifting and resettling his baseball cap, but she shakes her head.

“She started drinking tequila at six,” I say, trying to help him save face so we can leave. “She’s going to pass out any second.”

“That’s what he’s hoping,” one of the other guys says.

I pretend not to hear, since I’m way outnumbered. Carson adjusts his hat again. “Well,” he says. “See y’all later then.”

Raychel sighs and pulls my arm against her like a teddy bear as he walks away. “I’m your best friend now?”

“You’ve always been my best friend,” I say. Pressing inside my chest is a wish that I was more like Carson: not afraid to make a move, though with a few more morals about when to do it. Although maybe my morals aren’t so much better, considering that I was thinking about kissing her when she wasn’t any soberer. I try to pull away. “And you’re also really drunk.”

"I *am*?" She laughs, squeezing me harder before she lets go.
"I love you."

"I love you too," I say, and I mean it. Lately I mean it more than I want to.

RAYCHEL

Stripes of sunlight stab through the blinds, past my eyeballs, and into my brain.

So does a god-awful thumping noise. And my mother's voice.
"Raychel!"

Every blow on the door reverberates in my head like bass through a crappy subwoofer. I lurch out of bed and stumble across the room to open the door. "What?"

She frowns. "It's eleven."

"It's Saturday." I blink. "Isn't it?"

"Doesn't mean you should sleep the whole day away."

I try to shift my weight. My ankle doesn't hurt, but it's a little stiff. "I don't feel very well."

She raises her eyebrows, forehead wrinkles disappearing behind her uneven bangs. She's had the same haircut since I was ten. "Weren't you sick last weekend too?"

"I just had a few drinks," I admit, not bothering to lie since I smell like a bar sink. "And Matt drove me home."

"Is he driving you to work today too?"

I glance at the clock, reality waking me all at once. “Oh—crap . . . Mom!” She’s already walking down the hall. “Can you give me a ride?”

“I’ll be late to work if I do.” She taps her wrist over her head. “You do the crime, you do the time.”

.

Unfortunately, the time is “five.” As in, I have been late to work five times since my current boss, Roland, started at Pharm-Co a few months ago. It’s only ten minutes, but he scowls at my frantic apologies, his patchy mustache twitching when I try to blame the crutches. “The transit stop is right outside,” he points out. “See me at the end of your shift.”

I take my place behind the cash register, making sure to exaggerate my limp. The real problem is my stomach. Leftover tequila, aspirin, coffee, and a cold Pop-Tart make a horrible mix, churning as I try to sort through last night’s fuzzy memories.

I remember that Matt was perfectly willing to let me stay there with Carson. I used to think Matt had never noticed that I’m a girl, but the truth is, I’m just not the kind of girl he wants for himself. That’s embarrassing in its own way, but not as bad as him thinking I would actually want to stay with Carson Tipton.

Or as bad as Carson thinking the same thing.

.

The afternoon drags. Working at a pharmacy sucks, but it could be worse—I could have Mom’s job. She’s on the university

custodial staff, cleaning up after brats like Asha and Spencer at the dorms during the week and special events on the weekend. It was a step down from her old position as an assistant manager, but the restaurant chain went bankrupt and she lost her job. By the time the janitor gig came along, it was a welcome opportunity.

The pay's not great, but the benefits are good. The employee scholarship program will pay my tuition if I want to stay here for college. I don't, but it's a nice security net. I have the test scores and the GPA to go to some fancier schools, but those require a lot of cash, and even here I'd still have to pay for room and board.

So for now, I put in my hours and save my money, pretending not to notice who's buying hemorrhoid cream and who needs yeast infection medicine and who has to pay in loose change. I am reassuringly blasé to the embarrassed pre-teen buying tampons and the guy buying extra-small condoms.

I wish I could ignore customers completely when two of Andrew's ex-baseball teammates come in—Shane Martin, who's a complete dick, and Benjamin Cruz, who's nicer and goes by his last name for some reason. My stomach roils at the sight of the potato chips and Red Bull they're buying. Or maybe it's because they were with Carson last night. "Hey Sanders," Cruz says. "You make it home all right?"

I nod, reaching for the rolling papers he indicates.

Shane leans on the counter. "You busy tonight?"

"That'll be five twelve," I tell Cruz.

Shane's not deterred. "My folks are out of town, so . . ." When I don't answer, he straightens up. "Gimme a pack of Marlboros."

"You're not eighteen." I push Cruz's change across the counter.

"How do you know?"

"Your birthday's in January, like mine." Our names were always together on the birthday cake poster in elementary school, but he obviously thinks I remember out of interest. So I smile back with fake sweetness. "You're not getting anything else, either."

Cruz cracks up, but Shane's jaw works. "Too bad," he says. "I was hoping . . ." He pretends to suck on something.

My stomach gives another lurch.

"Come on, you asshole." Cruz tips a pretend hat at me. "See you later, Sanders."

I manage to wait until they're out the door before rushing to the bathroom. Puking makes me feel a little better, but the urge returns when I find Roland standing at my register. Next to my crutches. *Damnit*. "Go ahead and cash out," he says.

I finish up and shuffle to his office, dreading the speech I'm about to get. I wish I could get a better job, but what's available after school is essentially all the same—cashier gigs with college-dropout bosses on power trips. Better to deal with the dick-head you know than the one that could be worse.

Roland stays at his desk when I enter, and he doesn't ask me

to sit. “Raychel . . .” he starts, then leans back, putting his hands behind his head. “You know I have to let you go.”

My stomach threatens a second round. “No,” I say weakly, “I did not know that.”

MATT

Saturday morning student council meetings should be illegal, much less at 9 a.m., but since StuCo isn’t a class period and all the members have a billion other commitments, we have to schedule meetings at weird times. It’s a lot of work just to get some extra points on college admissions. I should at least get to add “wrangled drunks until the wee hours of the night and still arrived on time for early-morning commitments” to my applications. That seems like a more accurate representation of what surviving college will require anyway.

“Matt!” Mindy waves me up to the front of the room. She stopped acting like I had leprosy early in high school, about the time I grew a foot taller and started dating. This morning she’s the one who looks different, and it takes me a minute to realize it’s because she’s not wearing makeup. It’s disconcerting to realize I haven’t seen her actual face in years. “Hey, Rosa’s home sick today,” she says. “Can you be secretary?”

“Sure,” I say, shrugging, and take Rosa’s spot at the head table. “What’s she got?”

“Stomach bug,” Mindy says, with air quotes and a glance at Mrs. Nguyen, the math teacher who serves as our sponsor. “Are you going to the Grove tonight?”

“Maybe.” A clearing in the National Forest outside of town is an unofficial gathering spot, and two out of every three parties there get busted, but we keep going back because no one has to face angry parents and a wrecked house afterward.

Mindy frowns. “You should go!”

“I might. But we’re going to Music on the Mulberry tomorrow, so—”

“Oh,” she says. “You and Raychel.”

“And my brother.” I don’t know why I need to add that. Last year I would have invited Mindy to come along, but the big crew of friends that used to go with us is gone to college now, and it would be weird with just the four of us.

Luckily we’re interrupted as Trenton Alexander Montgomery the Third takes his seat beside her. In elementary school, Trenton Alexander Montgomery the Third insisted that everyone, especially teachers, call him by his full name, and it stuck, much to his junior high chagrin. On the plus side, he had the longest campaign posters in the hallway, which probably helped him get elected vice president this year. “Richardson,” he says, pulling his chair out. “What are you doing up here?”

“I asked him to be secretary,” Mindy answers. “Rosa’s sick.”

He grins at me. “Ah, why don’t you fetch me some coffee then, Madam Secretary?”

“I’ll get right on that,” I say dryly.

“You know what you ought to get on?” he asks, and Mindy clears her throat to start the meeting.

.

Two hours later, we’ve planned the basics of two fund-raisers, an anti-drunk driving campaign, a staff appreciation week, and a blood drive. My proposal to protest the use of pesticides in the building is rejected, but somehow, I have gotten roped into a committee for half the other projects, and somehow, Mindy is on the same ones. A few years ago, StuCo discovered that offering really good food at the blood drive increased participation, so our first task is to solicit donations from local restaurants. As we walk to the parking lot, she gives me a megawatt smile, pulling her dark blond hair up into a twist. “Are you busy today?”

“Um, I have some homework.” She gives me a disbelieving look. “Because of the festival,” I explain. “I have to do it today.”

“Oh, right.” Her smile slides back into place. “Can you spare like, an hour or two? I thought we could get a head start on talking to restaurants?”

I check my phone. “It’s only eleven,” I say out loud, so she won’t think I was looking for texts. “Yeah, I could probably do that.”

She lets me drive, and I let her do the talking, both in and out of the car. She asks how a hybrid works (I don’t know) and if I’m going to play soccer again this year (yes) and if I’m still in choir (no). “I’ve never been to Music on the Mulberry,” she

says, after she's sweet-talked a Mexican place into donating chips and dip. "Is it all day?"

I start the ignition, almost whacking her with my hand when I turn to reverse. Mindy always looks like she swallowed a broom handle, with her chest well out in front of her, and my gaze flits for a millisecond to her V-neck shirt before I snap my eyes away. I'm not complaining, but I am aware that we're alone in my car, and I don't want to creep her out or anything. "Yeah, it starts at eleven," I tell her. "Bands play until two in the morning sometimes."

"It sounds really fun." She lets me pull on to the main road undistracted, then clears her throat. "Who's playing?"

"I don't even know," I admit. "It's just a tradition, so we go."

"Have you ever seen Suddenly, Spiders? They play all-ages shows downtown a lot."

I try not to make a face. "Yeah, but once was enough." Realizing how jerky that sounded, I add, "They're not as bad as those sophomores that played at the talent show last year, though."

"Nothing could be that bad," she says. "Except . . ." She laughs and puts her hand over her mouth.

"You can't not tell me," I say, stopping at a red light. "Come on."

"Trent." She lets a giggle escape. "He has a band."

"Trenton Alexander Montgomery the Third?" I can't imagine Trent in a band. He's even taller and skinnier than me, with a long neck and a chin that juts forward. Combined with his

slicked-back hair, he looks like he's constantly walking into a stiff wind. "What does he play?"

"The drums."

"He must look like a Muppet on stage."

She giggles again. "He does look a lot like Animal."

I grin. "Please tell me they're the Electric Mayhem."

"No," she says, play-slapping my arm. "They're TAM3."

"That's even worse than 'Suddenly, Spiders.'"

"Still not as bad as his music though." It's the meanest thing I've ever heard her say. She reaches into her giant purse and pulls out her phone. "He sent me one of their 'tracks' last year to like, audition for prom." Her eyes roll up, as if God will share her disbelief. "You want to hear it?"

"I'm not sure."

She scrolls through. "Oh, this thing's nearly dead anyway."

"My charger's in the glove box." She opens it and Raychel's emergency supplies tumble out onto the floor. "Crap, sorry, I should have warned you."

Mindy picks a brochure off the top of the pile. "Thinking about Duke?"

"My dad is." He's bound and determined that I'll attend his alma mater. I try to intercept any promotional mail he might use as an excuse to lecture me.

"What's all this?" she asks, trying to put the other junk away.

Toilet paper, sunglasses, tampons, sunscreen, hair ties . . . a condom, which was funny at the time. "It's for hiking and stuff.

We always get way out in the boonies and then Raychel realizes she forgot something.”

“Oh,” Mindy says, and closes the glove box without retrieving the charger. “Of course.”

I decide not to point out the tampon still lying beside her foot.

RAYCHEL

For once, Matt doesn't say "I told you so." "Fired?" he repeats incredulously when I call Sunday morning to tell him I can't go to Music on the Mulberry. "Because you were late?"

"Yeah."

"You should still come," he tells me. "It's only fifteen bucks. I'll spot you."

"I have the cash," I argue. "But I should save it. And I need to apply for new jobs ASAP."

"Come on," Matt says. "It's Sunday. Andrew's going to meet us there with his friends." When I don't answer, he sighs. "I went to the toga party for you."

"Fine," I say grudgingly. "I'll go."

.

Mom gives me a ride to the Richardsons'. "Thanks," I say, hopping out of our rust bucket of a car.

“Call me when you head home—I have plans this evening.”

I duck back through the window. “With the boyfriend?”

Mom smiles, but doesn’t offer more information. I don’t press. I’m sure I’ll meet him soon. I met the few others that lasted this long.

Inside, Dr. R. examines my ankle and gives me permission to leave the crutches behind. Matt and I spend the long drive to the Mulberry brainstorming jobs I might apply for. It’s nice that Matt wants to help, but he doesn’t know anything about working. He can afford to spend his time volunteering instead. I try to tell myself that working and volunteering count the same on college applications, but I doubt that “ran a cash register” and “helped the homeless” carry the same weight.

At the festival, Matt pays for parking and insists on getting our tickets while I unload our stuff, so I sneak the cash for my share into his glove box when I lock up. “Sucks,” he says when he rejoins me, pointing at the overcast sky.

“Yeah, bummer.” I’m actually glad. Last year I got so sunburned I couldn’t lift my arms for two days. It was worth it, though.

Matt and I take our traditional spot along the river, but without our usual crew, our spread of blankets and lawn chairs is pathetically small. He must be thinking the same thing. “I don’t know how to do concerts without The Nuge for inspiration,” he says. We call our friend Randy “The Nuge” because he looks just like a young Ted Nugent—’70s rock star Nugent, not scary

racist libertarian Nugent. He's skinny but cut, with bushy auburn hair, and he plays a mean air guitar.

"I know," I say. "And no flailing." Daniel Fischer is an enthusiastic, if less than skilled, dancer. But Bree and Stanton and Asha are awesome, and even Matt and Andrew are pretty good ("for a couple of white boys," Spencer says). And Nathan is great when his girlfriend Eliza will let him have fun, but that's rare. I hope she's lightened up since they went to college together in Texas.

Asha and Spencer are the only ones at a school close enough to make the trip, and they both bailed because they have papers due tomorrow. I haven't talked to anyone besides them since school started, unless you count a few mass emails Matt added me to. I mean, I know everyone is busy. I didn't expect fountain pen letters on stationery or anything. It's just that I've always felt like they're more Matt's friends than mine, and having that as proof gives me a slow sinking feeling.

But as we head toward the stage, the music lifts me back up. Sometimes dancing is hard for me—everyone else moves to the drums and my hips move to the bass. But the amps whine, and the beat thuds in my chest, and I stop caring who might be watching. Sweat rolls down my back. The music pulses under my skin, like my soul is swelling. I can't *not* dance.

When The Underground Township takes the stage, the crowd doubles in size. I lose track of Matt in the sea of camouflage and crop tops, white hats and white-boy dreadlocks, Tevas and Timberlands. Finally, I spot him with some girl and

a bunch of Andrew's friends—including Cruz and, unfortunately, Shane.

I don't see Andrew, though, so I squeeze through the cracks in the walls of people and find him sitting by our stuff. He turns my water bottle upside down when I reach for it. "Empty. Sorry, kid."

"Damn it Andrew. You should have brought your own stuff."

"I did!" He flicks two fingers in my direction, smoke trailing from the joint between them. "I'll even share."

"You have any beer?" I haven't smoked weed in ages. It makes my head fuzzy and it's not predictable like alcohol—you never know how strong it'll be.

"Cruz's brother was supposed to get us a case, but he forgot." Andrew pinches the roach and takes a hit, the end glowing orange as he inhales. "You up?" he rasps.

The scent pulls me over. I could use some fuzzy-headed time, and we're not going to score any alcohol. Even if we could find someone who's twenty-one, this county is dry on Sundays.

Not that you could afford it anyway. Because you got fired.

I take the joint and promptly burn my fingers. The first hit goes okay, but the second makes me cough so hard I think I'm going to die. "I suck at smoking," I choke.

Andrew laughs. "You know what they say—if you don't cough, you don't get off."

"I'm going to the bathroom." I head for the concessions area. I'm dying of thirst, but there's no free water on-site because they want to charge you three bucks a bottle. My stomach growls at

the smell of corn dogs, Indian tacos, funnel cakes, cotton candy . . . All these people buying all this stuff, and my only cash is locked in Matt's glove box. I'm not going to cut in while he's dancing with another girl and ask for his keys. Or his money, for that matter.

"Hey girl!"

I turn around. An older man gestures to me from a cluster of tents by the tree line. His tie-dyed shirt barely covers the stomach that flops over a sizable belt buckle. "Come here." He's smiling under his full beard. When I get there he asks, "You got anything to smoke?"

"Me?" I glance around, like someone might have materialized beside me.

"Yeah, you. You look pretty fried."

Right. Raychel the lightweight. My eyes probably look like hell. "Oh, no, it's a friend's. I think he's out," I lie.

"Aw, that's a shame. We got this case of beer to trade for something good."

My throat is killing me. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to part with one of those, would you?"

He laughs. "Can't break up the set, darlin'."

"Oh." Dickhead. I start to leave, but his friend calls me back.

"Hey! We might be willing to give you one, for a peek!"

The older man frowns at him. The younger one has a goatee and green tattoos run like mold all the way up his skinny arms into a sleeveless Lynyrd Skynyrd shirt. "A peek?" I repeat.

"Titties!" He pretends to grab his own chest.

"Jack," his friend warns.

I stare at them, wondering if they know I'm underage, or just don't care. "You'd give me a beer to see my boobs?"

Jack snickers. "Honey, I'll give you the whole case for a feel."

"She ain't gonna do that!" the older man protests.

Now it's a dare. Seeing me waver, Jack snorts. "They're just boobs."

They're just boobs. Maybe that's the secret to life. Body parts are just parts—you use them or they use you. Hell, a guy grabbed my ass while I was dancing and he didn't even ask first, much less pay me.

I look around, then yank my shirt up. Tattoo guy squeezes with both hands and yells, "Honk!"

"Jack," the other guy says, disgusted.

It's fast and ridiculous, like a secret handshake, and Jack and I are laughing for very different reasons. So what if he thinks I'm trashy. Sometimes trash is a force to be reckoned with. Landfills rise into mountains and pollute entire waterways.

Okay, maybe I'm a little stoned. But I still feel victorious, hugging a case of beer to my meaningless chest. Andrew's face glows with pride when he sees what I've brought. "Leave it to you to find beer on Sunday," he says, and raises the can I give him. "A toast. To Raychel and her incomparable skills."

"And my boobs," I say.

“And your boobs,” he agrees, tipping his can toward them. “One of your greater assets, I’ll admit.”

We clink cans. Andrew chugs but I take small sips, to make it last.

MATT

It starts to drizzle near the end of the Township’s set. I’ve been dancing with an older girl who laughs as I spin her, long skirt swirling around her legs, but when the rain starts to pick up, she wanders off with her friends. I go to find Raychel, stopping on the way to buy some Cokes and a giant soft pretzel to share.

She’s sitting, half-baked, beside my brother, surrounded by empty cans and a few of Andrew’s friends. She thanks me and takes a bite of the pretzel. “Where’d you get the beer?” I ask.

“Our girl Raych is handy,” Andrew says, slinging his arm around her shoulders.

She laughs and blinks bloodshot eyes. “It’s raining.”

“I noticed.” Andrew smiles placidly, tossing a Hacky Sack up and down with his other hand, while Cruz holds out a small pipe. “I have to drive,” I tell him. It’s true, but it’s also true I’m an uptight nerd who doesn’t smoke, and I’m pissed off to see Raychel partaking. “You want to leave?” I ask her.

“No!” She sits up straight. “We’ve barely danced at all!”

“Then let’s go!” Andrew motions to his friends and jumps to his feet. Raychel grabs both our hands, dragging me along instead of letting me sit and stew, like I’d prefer. We kick off our shoes because the dancing area is quickly turning into a mud pit, and Raychel starts to sway, arms slowly working their way into motion with the beat, rivulets of rain running down her bare shoulders. Andrew’s more interested in starting a mud fight, but I shake my head when he eyes me, so he rushes Cruz, tackling him into the slop. Raychel giggles and keeps dancing.

“Where’d you get the beer?” I ask again, but she doesn’t hear me over the music, so I give up. Occasionally I take her hand or put mine on her waist, more to keep her upright than to touch her. Mostly. When the band goes into a jam, she goes into a trance, her feet barely moving but hips in constant motion. It’s sort of hypnotic. I move closer and she backs up against me.

This never used to be a big deal. I’ve danced with Raychel a thousand times.

But that same weird feeling, the one that made me almost kiss her Friday night, makes me move back. Her eyes open to slits, then close again as she dances farther away. I watch her. I try not to be obvious.

I’m not sure if I want her to come back or stay away.

.

It’s hard to convince Raychel we have to go home, but it’s already ten and we have school in the morning. I’d gladly leave

my brother, but his friends went home, so I have to drag his sorry ass to the parking lot too. I toss him a towel. "Don't get mud all over my car, you tool."

Andrew flips me off. "Why do you only listen to dead white guys?" Raychel asks from the backseat. She gives up on my music and leans forward to turn on the radio. But the joke's on her, because the classic rock station is the only one with decent reception this far out in the sticks, and by the time we get on the road, she's lying down, singing at the top of her lungs. Andrew joins in without missing a note.

It's annoying, but damn, Raychel can sing. I thought our choir director was going to cry when she didn't try out this year, and I wanted to tell him it was because the new uniforms were too expensive. But Raych would have killed me if she found out. She nearly killed me anyway when I told her I had quit too, though that wasn't out of solidarity. I only joined in the first place so she wouldn't wuss out of her own audition. I didn't expect to get in, and once I did, I was stuck, cummerbunds and bow ties and all.

Now I realize I haven't heard Raych sing in forever. Her alto expands through the car, with Andrew's gravelly bass grounding it here and there. An old song by The Band comes on and Raychel's head appears in my rearview. "Turn it up!"

Andrew obeys, launching into the first verse with her. What the hell. At the chorus, I add tenor to their harmony. "And . . . and . . . and. . . she put the load right on me!"

We keep the classic rock going until we reach the house. I

make Andrew strip down to his boxers in the garage while Raychel stands there, humming to herself, holding her shoes. She's mostly clean, but still damp from the rain. "Do you want some clothes?" I ask. She nods.

"I'll get 'em," Andrew says. He returns, redressed, with the pajama pants Raych keeps here and one of his old Grateful Dead T-shirts.

While she changes, Andrew raids the kitchen and plows through a munchies spread of cold cuts, cheese, and chips. Raychel comes in and makes herself a sandwich that's bigger than her face. She's tied one side of his borrowed shirt in a knot and it rides up, letting a sliver of smooth stomach peek out. I make myself look away and notice she has mayo on her cheek.

That stupid hormonal part of my brain wants to lick it off. I remind it we hate mayonnaise.

RAYCHEL

"Why don't you come home?" Mom asks when I call.

She's not worried because I'm sleeping over with boys—I've been crashing at the Richardsons' since seventh grade, when she had to work nights occasionally. I think she's just jealous. She worries that Mrs. R. will replace her. "It's late and we're really tired."

"You're going to wear out your welcome over there."

“It’s fine. They don’t mind.”

When she finally gives in, I hang up and flop next to Andrew on the leather couch. He kicks my ass at *Mario Kart* while Matt throws our dirty clothes in the washer. “Can I wear this shirt to school tomorrow?” I ask.

“Sure.” Andrew’s smile turns into a grimace as my car careens off the screen. “Look,” he says, trying to take my controller. “If you’ll press this and then—”

I wrestle it away. “I don’t need you to mansplain this, Andrew.”

He puts a hand to his chest in mock offense as the game restarts. “Raychel Sanders, I’m shocked you would use such a sexist term! Lumping all men together like that.” He *tsks*.

“Yeah,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Good thing guys never ‘bitch’ about it or we’d have to change our entire vocabulary.”

Matt laughs from the doorway but Andrew just says “Aha!” and runs me off the Rainbow Road.

.

We get ready for bed together, as usual. Andrew splashes water all over the counter and gets toothpaste on the mirror. Matt scowls at the mess as he sits on the edge of the tub to floss. When it’s my turn at the sink, Andrew shakes his head. “I still can’t believe he lets you use his face wash.”

I’ve never asked, but I always use Matt’s fancy organic stuff—it’s a lot nicer than my Walmart generic. “It’s because I don’t squeeze out half the bottle every time like *some* people.”

Andrew musses my hair, not waiting for me to dry my face. "Night."

"Rematch!" I call after him, leaning out the door. "*Mario Kart!* Tomorrow!"

He walks backward long enough to smirk and blow me a kiss. I pretend to swoon and duck back into the bathroom. If he'd done that at school, I'd be getting the stink eye from twenty different girls right now.

"Tomorrow's going to be rough," Matt says, yawning.

"We'll need extra coffee rations." I lean close to the mirror and pick at a spot on my forehead. Must. Not. Squeeze . . .

"What did you think of The Flying Buttresses?"

"They were okay," I say. Matt's hanging a towel over the shower rod, so I take a chance and lean closer. Can't resist. Must—*eeeew*. Gross. I wipe the goo off the mirror before he can see it. "Two Ton Pickup killed it."

"Yeah, they were good." He follows me out to the guest room and stands in the doorway. "You need anything?"

"Nah. See you in the morning."

He shuts the door. I turn the light off and climb into bed, trying to get settled. Trying to tell myself that I'll find another job easily, and that it's a good sign Shane and Cruz didn't say a single word about Carson today. Maybe some new scandal from this weekend will replace me tomorrow.

Maybe Carson will go back to ignoring me and I can pretend nothing ever happened.

I stare at the ceiling, watching tree shadows dance overhead.

That night in his Blazer wasn't fun, but I have to be overreacting. If it was really as bad as I remember, he would be avoiding me like the plague.

I put a pillow over my head. He made me feel . . . I can admit it. Unworthy. Worthless.

Used.

I've never felt that way before. I like knowing that my occasional college-boy hookups are temporary. That I'm in charge. That I can walk away at any time.

But I can't walk away from Carson. He's everywhere.

I toss and turn for what feels like hours, trying to find a calm spot for my brain to rest. Finally, I fling back the covers, and my bare feet cross the plush rug to the hallway's hardwood floor. I hold my breath passing Andrew's door and tap lightly on Matt's as it cracks open. "Matt?"

Yawning, he sits up and blinks. "Bad dream?"

I nod.

He pulls back the blanket. "Come on."

MATT

My brother got a ride with Cruz this morning, so I don't have to deal with his cranky ass, but Raychel isn't much better after our late night. "Why are you wearing Andrew's shirt?" I ask. It's his best one, a souvenir Dad passed down from the band's

last tour, right before Jerry Garcia died and a few years before we were born. No way would I let anyone else wear mine.

“I like the Dead,” she says.

“Uh-huh.” I turn the radio down as she sips coffee from her travel mug. “Name three songs.”

“Um . . . ‘Truckin’,’ ‘Sugar Magnolia,’ and . . .” Raych glances out the window. I laugh. “Shut up!” she says. “I’m thinking!”

I don’t really care, but I give her a few obvious ones anyway. “‘Casey Jones’? ‘Friend of the Devil’?” Dad’s collection of Dead bootlegs is a wall of cassettes in his office. We weren’t allowed to touch them when we were little, and now no one touches them because we don’t own a tape player. “‘Touch of Gray’?”

“That one doesn’t count,” she says. “It sucks.”

I concede the point. I’m in a great mood, having woken up with her wrapped around me. When we were younger she had nightmares all the time, and sneaking into my room to sleep was the only thing that seemed to help. At first we figured that if my parents caught us, they’d understand; as we got older, we realized they’d probably kill us, but the nightmares got less frequent anyway, so it’s been a long time since she needed me. I’m not happy that her bad dreams are back, but I’m not unhappy to help either.

Because I don’t know what those nights mean to her, but last night made me realize they mean a lot to me . . . and make me hope we manage to pick colleges near one another, when the “no high school boys” rule won’t apply to me anymore.