

**JESS.  
CHUNK.  
AND THE  
ROAD TRIP  
TO  
INFINITY**







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CHUNK,**  
*and the*

**ROAD** **TRIP**  
*to*

**INFINITY**

**Kristin Elizabeth Clark**

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*With deep gratitude, this book is dedicated to its doula, Joy Peskin.  
Thank you for helping these two crazy kids breathe their first.  
You are an extraordinary editor and a kickass human being.*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE



*In the past few years, a lot has changed in terms of visibility around matters of gender identity and expression. Certainly there are more trans stories being published and talked about than there used to be.*

This thrills me both as an ally, and as a mother who loves her child deeply.

My daughter was held up at birth and erroneously pronounced male. Many years later, when she was a young adult, she let me know her truth—an act of bravery that changed us both for the good.

When she came out to me as trans, one of the first emotions I felt was fear *for* her, though I tried not to let her see it. As a longtime supporter of the LGBTQIA community, I was well aware of how brutal the world could be to individuals who didn't fall into narrow hetero and cis-normative categories. And even now, these many years later, every time I learn of a hate crime against anyone queer, but especially against someone who is trans, I think of my own child.

Every. Single. Time.

I know I can't lead my beautiful daughter around by the hand shouting, "Hey, world! Don't hurt her!" All I can do is try to make the world a better, less dangerous place, by giving other people a sense of what it might be like to walk in the shoes of someone who's trans.

My daughter and other trans individuals I've met were inspiration for both *Jess, Chunk, and the Road Trip to Infinity*, and my earlier novel, *Freakboy* (also featuring gender queer characters). The books themselves, though, are works of fiction, and any resemblance the characters may have to anyone, living or not, is entirely coincidental.

It's my fervent hope that my books (and books like them) can lead us all to a greater understanding and acceptance of gender's vast and lovely variations.

All best,  
Kristin Elizabeth Clark



# CHAPTER 1



*Something about my mom's New Age music makes me want to stab myself in the eye. Although anatomically speaking, the ear might be a better area to stab if I'm serious about not having to listen to it anymore. The sound is coming from the living room and our house is so small there's no escaping it.*

I'm in my bedroom packing to the backdrop of a thrumming harp and the low hollow shriek of a bamboo flute. Underneath that there's the *shhhht* of the *Vogue* magazine sliding into my laptop case, and the *snick* of a Viva La Juicy perfume bottle hitting my straight-edge razor. It's five days after high school graduation, I'm packing for my first parent-free road trip, and I can almost hear my old life and my new one clinking against each other.

I add a couple of button-down shirts and some girl jeans to the Space Camp duffel bag I've had since seventh grade.

I'm definitely going to need new luggage before I head off to college in August.

Wallet, check.

Sweatshirt, check.

Sketchbook, check.

Mom comes in and hands me a tube of sunscreen.

“I have some.” I open my bag a little wider so she can see.

“That’s only SPF fifty,” she says. “This is seventy.”

I sigh and take the seventy.

“No skin cancer for you!” she says in a weird accent. I know it’s a reference to some comedy skit about soup or something, but I’m damned if I know what’s funny about it.

“Just want you to be safe,” she says in her normal voice. Her urge to protect me can be irritating, but just now I’m heading halfway across the country—San Jose to Chicago without her—and in this case her concern might be warranted.

I look at her and smile.

Her hair used to be straight like mine, but five years ago she had cancer, and after remission her hair grew back soft and wavy. She calls it the chemo curl.

Even with different hair, people say we look a lot alike. Same blue eyes, same noses, and now that I’m taking hormones, I swear our jawlines are becoming similar too.

It’s not that I want us to dress in matching outfits or anything, but when you’re transitioning, there are worse things than realizing you look like your mom. Especially if your mom is as beautiful as mine used to be.

“You’re wearing that?” she asks, indicating the thin white Power Puff Girls T-shirt I slept in last night. Earlier than expected results from hormones are in evidence. (Yay, breasts!)

I point to a thicker T-shirt and the light blue hoodie lying on my bed.

I've been taking hormones for seven months now, since November 22, the day I turned eighteen, and I'm kind of at an in-between-looking place at this point.

People who know me see what they expect to see, what they think they've seen all along. A sort of skinny guy with a shortish body and longish hair. But under a thin shirt it's obvious that breasts are growing.

I'm friendly with a few kids from my art classes and theater, but I'm not tight with any of them, so my mom and my best friend Chunk are the only ones who (privately) use the right pronouns and call me by my new name (Jess). They're also the only ones who know about my (I'm gonna go ahead and say it) new development.

I toss a pair of nondescript jeans on top of the thick T-shirt and hoodie mix on the bed. Mom nods, satisfied that I'm not putting myself in danger by flaunting my sexy lady body at a time when rigorous shaving is still necessary, and turns to leave. "Breakfast in five."

The clock says 8:30.

"I need to finish packing so we can get on the road!"

"You're in a hurry for someone who originally didn't want to go," she says over her shoulder.

I'm an expert at decoding my mom's voice; her tone is singsongy, teasing, and not malicious at all.

"You're right," I agree.

I haven't spoken to my dad in more than a year, since he'd refused to cosign a waiver that would have allowed me to get

hormones before I was eighteen. The fact that it ultimately worked out okay in terms of timing—I was graduating high school identifying as a boy and starting college identifying as a girl—didn't make me any less bitter about having my gender dysphoria dismissed as a phase.

Six weeks ago, when the invitation to his wedding showed up, my mom opened it. (“I wanted to see if it was what I thought it was, so we could talk about it” was her excuse for invading my privacy.)

I said no effing way am I going. In fact, before dropping the RSVP card in the mail, I practically scratched a hole in the paper over the box marked *Regrets* and then wrote the word *no* over it, just to make sure my father and his cow of a fiancée got my point.

*I'm not going to your wedding and I'm not sorry.*

Bizarrely enough, my mom thought I should go.

“Anger is a coal that burns only the person who holds it,” she told me.

She's been a lunatic all my life in one way or another. Currently she's a very peaceful and New-Agey one. A year and a half ago she went to a retreat for cancer survivors and came back saying things like “In Spiritual Forgiveness, there are no victims. Everything is in Divine Order,” and “All is in accordance with our soul contracts.”

Pretty impressive for someone whose EX-HUSBAND IS MARRYING HER FORMER BEST FRIEND.

Except for the (to me) interminable year Jan lived with her boyfriend Roger, my mom's best friend, single and childless,

spent so much time at our house we called the guest room Jan's lair. She and I hung out a ton. She bought me a sketchbook for my eighth birthday and then made Saturday morning art lessons a tradition. She'd drive me up to Big Basin State Park, just so I could sketch the redwoods because they were my favorite things to draw.

That's right. My father the transphobe is marrying a woman I called Aunt Jan for most of my life.

And my mother's "Spiritual Acceptance" is taking some getting used to.

Because really, when you've settled into a groove of hating your father it's nicer to have someone hating him right alongside you, you know?

In any case, it wasn't Mom who convinced me to travel the two thousand miles to the wedding.

It was Chunk.

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"Don't forget you'll need to clean the kitchen before you leave," Mom calls from down the hall.

Some things are non-negotiable. My cleaning the kitchen after meals is one of them. According to her (recent) philosophy, when your kitchen is in the fêng shui health area of your house, tidiness is of the utmost importance.

"Then you're going to have to change the music," I call back, and turn to my closet. Next to a pair of skinny jeans, on the side of the closet I think of as the girl side, hangs the

costume I designed for the character of Muzzy when our school did *Thoroughly Modern Millie* a couple of months ago.

The girl who played Muzzy and I happen to be a similar size. And it also happens that I designed a glorious garment that *somehow* fits me to a T.

Imagine that.

Besides the Muzzy dress and the skinny jeans, there are only a couple of outfits on the girl side of the closet. Two shirts with intricate designs and flowy, floaty hems and sleeves, plus a pair of wide-legged yoga pants that I got at East West, my mom's favorite hippie store.

I've only ever worn the shirts and yoga pants inside my house.

The clothes I wear in public are pretty gender-neutral: sweatshirts, boy jeans, a few button-down shirts, run-of-the-mill hoodies, paint-splattered Vans. So far, mine is a no-style style. It's kind of boring, but designed to fly under the radar. Important at Kennedy High, but not anymore.

I shiver.

There's no way the Muzzy dress will fly under any radar. It weighs a ton because the entire thing is covered in black sequins, except for the bodice, which is slashed across the front with silver bugle beads. The cut is long and narrow, with a slit up the side.

I've never shown my true self to the outside world, and yet this is what I plan to wear to my father's wedding.

Because, really, nothing says "F U, Dad" like showing up

in a dress, when he used to make you wear a Cub Scout uniform.

I take the sublime, sequined concoction off the hanger and gently roll it around a pair of black satin ballet flats. My hand fumbles with the zipper when I close the duffel bag.

I am really going to do this?

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During breakfast we have the wear-your-seat-belt-and-sunscreen-and-be-careful-of-strangers-and-check-in-once-a-day-unless-you-want-me-to-put-out-an-APB-on-you-and-I'm-very-proud-of-you-for-going conversation. Then Mom goes off to get dressed for work while I do the dishes.

Really, I don't know how she's going to survive the next week without having me around to be all concerned about.

I've just put soap in the dishwasher and closed the door when she comes back in wearing the nurse's scrubs that have little yellow ducks sporting handlebar mustaches. She says the kids on the pediatric ward love them.

We made several sets of scrubs for her during our sewing-together phase. We've also had a gardening-together phase (which I hated), and a knitting-together phase. I drew the line when she wanted us to have a taking-dance-classes-together phase.

"What time is Chuck picking you up?" she asks.

"I told him I'd walk to his house and we'd leave from there."

If I waited for Chunk to come get me, we might never get this show on the road. I love the guy, but he takes his own sweet time in doing just about everything.

“Grab your things. I’ll give you a ride,” she says, keys in hand.

I think about it for a second and shake my head.

“I have a little more stuff I need to do here.”

The truth is, I want to take the first few steps of this trip on my own, but I know if I try explaining that, it’ll sound like I’m making the whole thing overly momentous or something.

Once we leave San Jose, I feel like I’ll be free to be me, full time. Instead of he/his/him Jeremy Saunders, I’ll finally be she/hers/her Jessica Saunders. Jess for short.

“I’ll wait. I can be a bit late,” she says.

“No. Thank you, though.” I step in for a hug.

She holds on for a second longer than necessary and murmurs, “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

“I wish you’d let him know you’re coming.”

I step out of her hug. “My terms,” I remind her.

When I changed my mind about going, I didn’t get in touch with Dad and Jan to let them know. With the exception of the RSVP card, I haven’t broken my no-Jess-initiated-contact record in nearly two years.

Not that silence on my part ever stopped my dad from trying to get in touch with me, but I delete all his e-mails without reading them, and on the top shelf of my closet there’re a bunch of letters and cards from him I’ve never read.



“They don’t get to think they can just summon me.”

“Jess, that’s not what . . . ,” my mom starts to say.

“It’s the only way I’m going.”

And if I end up chickening out, no one but Chunk will be any the wiser.

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When she finally leaves for work, I go into my room and grab the unopened mail from my dad, plus the card with the location and time of the ceremony on it. I shove it all into my laptop case next to my computer and *Vogue*.

Even now, almost six weeks after deciding to do this, I don’t have an actual plan for what I’m going to say, or even at what point during the wedding or reception I’m going to show up.

There’s one thing I do know, though. If my dad says one asshole thing to me, my nonplan plan involves throwing every single envelope in his face and walking out.

I glance around my room to make sure I have everything. It’s kind of hard to tell in the cramped chaos of my futon, my desk, my drafting table, and the easel sitting on a rumpled cloth tarp that’s stiff with paint. Every surface is littered with X-Acto knives, sable brushes of varying thicknesses, vine charcoal, chalk, pigments, and various objets trouvés—the odds and ends I’ve collected to use in collages: scraps of newspaper, old postcards, and even dryer lint that has an interesting indigo color shot through with a gold thread. When my mom complains I point to the hand-lettered

sign on the huge bulletin board running the length of one wall: A CREATIVE MESS IS ALWAYS BETTER THAN A TIDY IDLENESS.

My gaze rests on the album of photos from my art school application—my portfolio. Between its padded gray covers are the scanned pictures of thirteen mixed-media self-portraits. (The fact that my work mainly consists of paintings of *me* really says something, huh?)

I'm still experimenting, finding my way as an artist, but the one thing my pieces all have in common is that each one was inspired by a specific memory. And every painting in my portfolio strongly features a particular color, so when viewed all together there's a whole rainbow thing going on.

My private joke with me.

The letter of acceptance from Stern used adjectives like *remarkable*, *gifted*, *raw*, and *evocative* to describe my art.

Six months later those words still give me warm goose bumps.

I can't imagine a scenario in which I'll be sitting around showing my portfolio to Dad and Jan, but I grab the album anyway. On the drafting table underneath it there's a photo of a piece inspired by a day I spent with Chunk not too long ago. The work is too recent to have been in my art school application, but it's one of my favorites. I tuck the picture loosely inside the front cover and slide the whole thing into my backpack.

It just fits.

-----

## **Blue**

**10x14 inches**

**Image: Ocean painted over roller coaster line drawing.**

**Portrait of the artist in the front car. The artist's expression—mouth open, eyes wide—is one of simultaneous terror and delight. Tiny dresses, red foil alternating with blue, line the border.**

**Acrylic, black ink on paper, foil**

On Senior Beach Day, Kennedy High traditionally packs the graduating class into busses and sends them to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk for a day of fun in the sun, hoping to stave off a true senior ditch day. The school reserves volleyball courts and provides wristbands for the rides. The ocean provides all the water you can swim in.

Not that there was even the most remote possibility of me or Chunk taking a dip.

He's a big guy. He wears huge tent-like shirts, and sometimes I notice him tugging the material away from his body.

It's a gesture familiar to me. Even wearing a sports bra underneath a heavy T-shirt and hoodie, when I was around people from school I hunched my shoulders to keep the material loose and off my frame.

Neither of us was willing to show the outline of our bodies to the world.

Chunk and I were convinced that ride maintenance was taken care of by toothless crack addicts, so we ditched the boardwalk with its smell of corn dogs and funnel cakes

for the ocean scent of salt and tar. We walked along the shoreline, occasionally stopping to let the frigid waters of the Pacific break over our feet.

I do not love amusement parks, I do not love volleyball, I do not love the great outdoors, and I definitely do not love being surrounded by girls who were born with girl parts lolling around the beach in their bikinis.

I do, however, love hanging with Chunk.

Gulls shrieked in the distance, and we stopped to watch some boogie boarders. It had been two days since I'd received the wedding invitation, and I was ranting (again) about my dickhead dad, and his cow of a fiancée, Jan.

"I'm sure he doesn't even really want me there . . . He probably just invited me because it would look bad if he didn't invite his only offspring. I can't believe my mom thought I should go."

Chunk had been listening patiently like a friend is supposed to do, but then he disagreed with me, which a friend is not supposed to do.

"I think you should go," he said, foamy surf swirling around our ankles. "My mom says . . ."

"I know what your mom says," I snapped.

Dr. Georgia Kefala was all about me "repairing the relationship" with my dad.

Another wave crashed, and Chunk kept talking like he didn't hear me. "Besides, don't you want to show him who you are?"

"Black Hole," I practically shouted, which is code for *leave it alone*.

I turned away and stalked up the beach, leaving Chunk just standing in the water.

When Black Hole is invoked, we agree to drop whatever we've been talking about. If the other person brings up the dreaded subject that Black Hole has been called on, the person who called it gets to punch the offender in the arm.

Still, calling Black Hole didn't stop the words *Don't you want to show him who you are?* from echoing in my ear.

I pictured myself standing at the back of the church in a long red dress and kitten heels, and when the minister asked if anyone had any objections, I'd part my perfectly made-up lips to say "I do." There'd be shock on my dad's face, and murmurs of "Who's that girl?" I imagined him starting down the aisle to tell this young woman off for disrupting the wedding, but then he'd get closer and recognize me. That'd show him who I am, all right.

I'd just reached the softer, harder-to-stalk-through sand when Chunk came up behind me, throwing a strong arm around my shoulder. I almost fell but he steadied me, turning me around so we were again facing the expansive hue of sky and water.

"Dude, lighten up." He gave my shoulders a little shake.

You'd think Chunk calling me dude would bother me, but he called everyone dude. Even his fellow mathletes, which always struck me as a kind of funny juxtaposition.

He always talked to guys and girls in the same gender-blind way.

"That there is some fine H<sub>2</sub>O. The sun is shining, narwhals

are out there somewhere, breeding, making little sea unicorns, and we'll be free of Kennedy soon. What more do you want?" he asked, but gave me no time to speak. "Don't answer that. This day is perfection."

I shrugged.

"The word was *perfection*," he said, indicating a game of synonyms. Clearly he'd hoped to distract me.

"Flawless," I said.

"Peerless," he said.

I thought for a second. "Unequaled."

He came back with "Matchless."

"You win," I told him, and presented my upper arm. He punched it, which is what the winner gets to do.

Chunk almost always wins when we play this game. He made it up, and I think he secretly designed it to try to make me smarter or something. Not that I'm complaining, since I credit my excellent verbal SAT score to it.

Chunk himself was one of only a few hundred people in the US to get a perfect score of 2400. He's the smartest guy I know, valedictorian, headed off to Stanford in the fall.

"Of course I won," he said, stepping away from me. He'd never been shy about how smart he was, either. Neither of us is a terribly popular person. "Just one more thing."

The ocean breeze cooled my shoulder where his arm had been.

"About the wedding," he said. "Think road trip."

And he leaned way back so I couldn't slug him.

He broke the code of Black Hole, but I was so surprised by the words *road trip*, I didn't even try.

“As in you and me? Driving to Chicago together?”

“Sure.” He grinned. “Imagine the adventure! Ratty motels, junk food, awesome playlists, bizarro roadside attractions!”

“Who are you and what have you done with my friend?” I demanded.

He looked away. “I have an inexplicable hankering to see these great United States.”

I saw long days of driving, the open road stretching out in front of us, like some final frontier. We’d play trivia games, and Truth, and Spot the Out-of-State License Plates.

And then there was the opportunity to demonstrate to my dad the effect seven months of hormone therapy had had so far.

A wave crashed over the head of a guy with a silvery blue boogie board, and I flashed on another image of me showing up to my dad’s wedding, only this time in a dress the color of that board. I pictured the shock of recognition on Dad’s face . . . I’d show *him* a phase.

But then I faltered. Would the other guests know anything about me? What would I say to Jan? Would I pass as a girl? And if not, would it be unsafe to drive across the country?

The boogie boarder popped up behind the wave, and I looked over at Chunk. He was staring intently out at the horizon. I thought about milk shakes in diners and nights in kitschy motels. Hanging out and watching bad TV, just the two of us.

“We’d take Betty the Car?” I asked.

“Unless you have a car of your own you’ve been keeping a secret all this time.” His lips curved in a half smile, and his cheek dimple deepened.

I tried to sound cool. “It would be kind of a last hurrah before I go to New York and you go off to Stanford . . .”

“Right?” Chunk pulled out his phone and checked the calendar. “And we have exactly five and a half weeks to teach you to drive stick.”

“Who am I to deny my friend the opportunity to see these great United States?” I asked the ocean.

As if that was the only reason I was agreeing to go.



## CHAPTER 2



*When I get to Chunk's, he's still in his room. His parents have already left for work, and I wonder if they subjected him to the same wear-your-seat-belt-and-sunscreen-and-be-safe lecture I had from my mom.*

He's the youngest of four, so probably not. His older siblings have already broken his parents in when it comes to stuff like this.

His sister, Pandora, home on summer break from Princeton (Chunk's whole family is smart), lets me in.

I look down to make sure the hoodie covers everything.

It's not so much that I'd mind Pandora knowing about my transition, it's that I don't want anyone telling Chunk's mom until after I leave for school.

I'm sure Dr. Kefala's a good psychiatrist, but I'm not one of her patients.

My freshman year when I came out as gay (this was before *trans* was even a word in my vocabulary) she *tortured* me with understanding, compassion, and many, many attempted

conversations about what I was feeling and how I was doing. She even started a diversity task force at our school.

*Wayyyy* too much focus coming from the mom of your best friend, you know?

When Pandora gives me a hug, I make my chest concave and step out of her embrace as quickly as possible, under the pretext of giving her the once-over.

She's wearing a gigantically baggy men's oxford shirt open to reveal a tight camisole printed with the Princeton logo. Skinny capri-length pants show off the bottom part of her toned calves, and scuffed penny loafers complete the ensemble. Her thick black hair is full and tousled; her style is at once preppy and disheveled.

"You look great," I tell her, and she smiles hugely.

When girls see me as a gay guy, my compliments on style and appearance seem to take on a special significance. Kind of an "Oh, Jeremy's gay; he must have great taste" thing.

I know it'll change when they know the compliment is coming from another girl, and one with no discernable style of her own at that.

In any case, preppy-disheveled is a great look on Pandora, but I couldn't pull it off. My ankles are too thin and my shoulders too broad. I'd look like a cross between a scarecrow and prep school reject in that outfit.

She steps back and points to two huge five-gallon buckets that say PEARSON'S CUSTOM STAIN-AND-SEAL on their sides.

"I'm supposed to remind you both to drop those off in Tahoe. That way maybe at least one of you will remember."

Chunk's parents are having some work done on their

cabin, and since Tahoe is on our way to Chicago, they want us to drop by and check on things. Like either of us knows a thing about deck building.

“Don’t they have deck stain in Tahoe?”

“Custom color,” she says.

“’Keydoke,” I say, dropping my duffel bag and laptop case on top of the buckets and heading upstairs to Chunk’s immaculate bedroom.

I mean pristine. The books on his bookshelf are arranged alphabetically by author, and I know his dirty clothes are in the hamper instead of being strewn around on the floor, as they should be in a normal teenager’s room.

Chunk is sitting at his desk in front of the computer he built himself, and there are a million chat windows open. He belongs to more online forums than I can shake a joystick at.

Most of the people he chats with are people he has never met in person. People with screen names like Twizzler and Ghouliath and Lizard. People with no lives, who just happen to share his interests in gaming, old-time cartoons, liberal politics, and science.

“We’re already late,” I say, from the doorway.

He’s the one who broke down the timing of the trip. According to the interwebs we can get on Interstate 80 and just stay there until we reach Chicago. Under normal traffic conditions it should only take thirty-three hours or so.

Who knew?

His idea is to do it in three eleven-hour days of driving, taking turns at the wheel. I’ve only ever driven my mom’s

automatic, so he gave me a few lessons on driving stick, and I think I did pretty well.

Except for a teeny-tiny tendency to stall out at stop signs. I'm sure I'll improve.

Coming back, we'll take things at a more leisurely pace along Interstate 40 because, hey! There's a place called Dinosaur, Colorado, and who could pass up *that*?

"We need to leave now if we're going to make it to Salt Lake City in time for a night of bad TV."

"Just finishing up," he says, not taking his eyes off the screen, but holding a bunch of papers out to me. I come into the room and take them. They're printouts of American roadside attractions. I flip through.

"Ghost towns and animatronic presidents? Padlock your love in Lovelock, Nevada?" I ask. "Can we see all of these just off I-80? I want to leave plenty of time for kitschy motel relaxation."

"Don't get your undies in a twist." He's typing something lightning fast. "We'll pick the best ones, drop in for fifteen minutes, and be on our way. For the most part, they're all really close to the highway." He stops typing and glances over at me (finally) before turning back to his computer.

I flop onto his bed. Have I mentioned that the more you try to hurry him the slower he goes?

"I'm not sure we need to see the shoes made from the skin of Big Nose George," I say, reading from the printout.

Chunk doesn't look away from his screen.

"It'll be fun," he says.

“You’re saying it’ll be fun to see a pair of shoes made from human skin.”

“Maybe not,” he says, distracted.

I busy myself reading about the roadside attractions until he turns away from the computer, a video camera in his hand.

Aiming the lens at himself, he says, “Captain’s Log, Stardate 11706.14.”

What?? “We really need to get going.” It’s almost ten o’clock. “What is that?”

Chunk clears his throat. “My dad’s old camera. Recording our epic adventure.”

I whip out my phone and start filming him with it. “And the reason you don’t just use your phone?”

“I’m all about the retro.” He turns the camera around so he’s filming me filming him.

“Besides, this way I thought you could film some and I could film some. It’ll all be in one place so when my phone dies and *yours* gets lost, we’ll still have this valuable record of our epic adventure. When we’re old and gray, we can show it to our grandkids.”

“You can show it to yours. No grandkids for me, remember? Hormones, sterility,” I remind him.

Chunk turns his camera back on himself. “First mate getting testy.”

I smile at the stupid pun, but my mom wouldn’t.

Sterility was a huge thing she worried about when I talked to her about transitioning. She told Dr. E she was afraid that if she okayed hormones that’d make me unable to have kids,

I might change my mind when I'm older, want them, and blame her for letting me transition.

"Better a sterile adult who's mad at you than a dead kid," he'd said, and handed her a card printed with information for TNet, a group for parents and families of trans people. "And there's always adoption."

"Our mission: to go where no man has gone before," Chunk intones.

I make a harrumphing noise.

"Sorry. To boldly go where no *human* has gone before."

"How 'bout a little less *Trek*, a little more gender-neutrality, and a lot more get this show on the road?"

"The time has come," he agrees, powering down his desktop. Finally.

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The containers of stain-and-seal have to go into Betty's back hatch on their sides. Pandora comes out to the driveway and helps us arrange our luggage in a way that will keep them from rolling around. There's my stuff plus Chunk's backpack, his laptop case, and a bag of DVDs in case cable at the kitschy motels disappoints. The last things to go in are our matching Space Camp duffel bags. The hatch just barely closes.

"Sleeping in the car at night has just been ruled out as an option." Pandora smiles.

"It never was," I assure her.

“Gotcha.” She gives Chunk a hug. “Stay away from the Bates Motel.”

She’s referring to a movie she showed me and Chunk the Halloween we were eleven. It’s about a creepy hotel where the psycho owner keeps his dead mom’s body and dresses up in her clothes and kills a girl in a shower. The girl getting stabbed in the shower freaked Chunk out, but what gave me nightmares was the guy dressing up in his skeleton-mom’s clothes.

Go figure.

“Our reservations are at the Bucket of Blood,” Chunk tells her. She chuckles.

“Except for the one night we have planned at the Clown-of-Death Honeymoon Inn and Suites,” I say, and then feel stupid when she doesn’t laugh right away.

“Or someplace even scarier.” I try separating the romance from the creep.

She turns to hug me, and I go through the shoulder-hunch-concave-chest routine.

“You guys be careful.”

“We will,” I promise even as a bolt of nervous energy shoots through me. Not every place we’re driving through is exactly LGBTQ friendly. I will be very, very careful.

Pandora heads back into the house, and Chunk and I get into Betty. I arrange the sack of essential food I brought (snack-size bag of Doritos, powdered donettes, sunflower seeds, and a six-pack of Dr Pepper) by my feet while he attaches a clip to the dash for the camcorder. When he’s done

with that he reaches behind his seat, pulls out a little plastic bag, and hooks the handles to the glove compartment.

“For trash.”

I manage not to roll my eyes. Chunk loves Betty the Car; keeping her clean is super important. We weren't allowed to even eat in her the first six months he had her.

His mom wanted to buy him a Prius, and his dad thought he should get a used Mercedes sedan. Chunk looked at *Consumer Reports* and talked to people online. He said that a Prius just shouted “Look at me, I care about the environment!” and that the Mercedes shouted “Look at me, I care about money!” He decided on the Honda Insight.

The day he got the car, he drove over to my house, crowing. He was excited about his new ride but not in the way most normal people are thrilled about their first vehicles.

Below is an excerpt of the actual conversation we had when I got into his car for the first time:

Chunk: “The Insight is perfect. Not too image-y, gets fifty-six miles to the gallon, and the insurance is cheaper because it's an older model!”

Me: “I will call her Betty the Car.”

Chunk spent the last few weeks giving me lessons in driving stick. And I love Betty the Car despite her many flaws, like having to turn off the air-conditioning when going uphill, or the fact that the metal doohickey for holding her hood up is missing, so there's a long, fat stick dedicated to that purpose always rattling around in the back hatch.

Now she's going to cocoon me and Chunk all the way to Chicago, so I love her even more.



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Before he starts Betty, Chunk plugs in his phone, turns on the camcorder, and says, “Captain’s Log, Stardate 11706.14. To infinity and beyond.”

“Do you think real Trekkies would be stoked about a *Toy Story* mash-up?” I wonder aloud.

When we pull out of the driveway the skin on the back of my neck prickles in a good way. This street I’ve walked down thousands of times looks different somehow. I imagine the houses looking at me and even though I’m still wearing my fly-under-the-radar clothes, I imagine I’ll look different to them when I come back.

We’re off.

I stick my face in front of the camera. I try on my new voice, which is higher, more breathy.

“To infinity and beyond.”

## CHAPTER 3



*It turns out there's a hellish amount of traffic on the way to infinity.*

The sun is hot and bright through the driver's-side window, and there's a sweaty sheen on Chunk's upper lip. We've been on the road for almost three hours, which feels crazy considering the short distance we've traveled. It seems like the entire Bay Area must be headed for points East today. And now there's the torturous, air conditioner-less climb up I-680 toward the Benicia Bridge.

"When the road flattens out, we can switch," I offer.

"We'll see," he says.

An old song, "Glitter in the Air," comes up on the playlist, and I sing along.

I was around ten when P!nk performed it at the Grammys, twirling and twisting on a silk trapeze. I begged for gymnastics lessons after that, but my dad would have none of it, and in this rare instance my mom didn't argue with him.

“You already have Scouts and Little League,” he had said.

The fact that I hated both didn’t bother him a bit. I retaliated by cutting my bedsheets in half so I could at least wrap myself up like P!nk when she had been suspended in the air above the audience members’ heads, singing about feeding lovers with just her hand.

Aunt Jan was over when the ruined sheets were discovered. I said I’d done it for art, having learned early on that the one way to get my mom and Jan on my side against my dad was for me to call any mess I made art. It never failed me.

Jan was:

- 1) Assistant curator of modern and contemporary art at the Silicon Valley Art Museum
- 2) An art teacher at the Academy of Design
- 3) The person who stole my dad
- 4) All of the above

-----

P!nk ends and Mumford and Sons comes on. Before P!nk we had forty minutes of Koji Kondo, video game music composer. “You put together one eclectic playlist,” I compliment Chunk.

He nods, focused on spurring Betty the Car up the Sunol Grade. The air conditioner is off in the hopes of getting her to go faster. Right now he’s flooring it, and we’re going about thirty-nine miles an hour.

I do not have high hopes for the Rockies.

I know better than to mention that.

“The word was *eclectic*,” I say.

Chunk downshifts. “Diverse.”

“Varied.”

He frowns at that; it must have been the word he was planning to use. “All-embracing” is what he comes back with.

“I don’t think that counts,” I tell him. “Two words.”

“I disagree. Just put a *p* by my name for protest,” he says, and then throws out “Multifarious.”

Even when he’s focused on something else, like getting us to the top of a hill without Betty the Car quitting on us, he wins.

I dig into the junk food bag as an eighteen-wheeler pulls around us. It’s the open kind, heaped in the back with tons and tons of shiny, ripe tomatoes. My stomach grumbles a little.

“Jesus, it’s bad when even the trucks are passing our fat ass,” I say. “Here, have a donette,” and I pull out the last one and try to give it to Chunk, who doesn’t take his hands off the wheel.

Eyes glued to the road, he says, “No, thanks.”

“Sure you don’t want it?”

“I said no!”

I was warned that the hormones would make me “sensitive” and that what my body is telling my brain is that it’s PUBERTY TIME!!! Which means I’m like a thirteen-year-old girl when it comes to highs and lows.

“Fine.” I stare out the passenger window, trying not to cry.

We listen to music in silence, and a little later Chunk grabs a bag of sunflower seeds from the center console and struggles to open it with one hand, using his teeth.

I don't offer to help him.

Fifteen minutes later we finally pull up to the toll plaza. I unbuckle my seat belt, reach into the Space Camp bag for my wallet, and grab the hundred-dollar bill Luanne, my boss at Fabrics Galore, gave me for graduation. I worked there for almost two years, until just a week ago in fact, and I really liked it. Once in a while a customer could be kind of a pain, but I felt like Luanne always had my back.

Chunk takes the money to hand over to the toll taker. She's wearing blue surgical gloves like the ones I once shoved into Betty's glove compartment because hey, a glove compartment should have gloves.

"Yagottanythingsmallerthanthis?" she asks.

"I'm sorry, what?" Chunk asks.

"Ya gotanythingsmaller than *this*?" She gives the hundred-dollar bill a shake.

Chunk looks pointedly over his stomach and down at his crotch like he's checking out the size of his . . . anatomy.

"Nope," he says.

I can't help it. Even though I'm still pissed at Chunk, I laugh.

She rolls her eyes and counts the change back into Chunk's hand. He stuffs ninety-four bucks into the ashtray, shifts, and then turns on the camcorder.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 11706.14. Low-level minions of the Benicia sector lack developed senses of humor," he says.

And just like that, all is good again.

After the Benicia Bridge Chunk pulls off the road so I can drive. We climb out of Betty and stand for a minute looking out at a group of old ships, anchored side by side in Suisun Bay. They're called the mothball fleet.

I've passed by these ships from the time I was a kid but I don't know anything about them other than their name.

"How long have they been here?" I ask, secure in the knowledge that he'll be able to tell me.

Chunk spits out a sunflower seed shell. "Since just after World War II. The Navy decommissioned and packed 'em away here."

"They look so sad."

Chunk cracks another seed between his teeth and says around it, "I read that people who anthropomorphize things suffer from a lack of deep social connection with others."

I ignore him. We've had this conversation before. Both his parents are psychiatrists, and I swear, trying to analyze everyone and everything is a Kefala family trait, passed down in the DNA.

I'm about to point out that his social connections are mostly on the Internet and don't count, when he says, "In a couple years all of those ships'll be gone. Torn apart for scrap."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

He punches me lightly on the shoulder. "Cheer up! They'll be recycled so they'll still exist. Matter doesn't just disappear. They'll be around in one way or another forever."

He hands me the keys and I get to drive.

Finally.

The road isn't as steep, and traffic is much better than it was on 680. We should make it to the cabin in Tahoe in under three hours. We're just going to drop off the stain-and-seal, check on things, and take off again. I want to hit Salt Lake City tonight and leave early in the morning before it gets too light. In a place like Utah, I feel like the dark is a friend to someone who might be at an ambiguous-looking point gender-wise.

When it comes to passing, of all the things I curse about my body, I curse the follicles on my face the most. I'll have to be stupid careful about shaving.

I learned to use an old-fashioned straight-edge razor because I read it gives a much closer shave than a disposable one. I just recently managed to get over the accidentally-slicing-up-my-skin-and-walking-around-with-toilet-paper-stuck-to-my-chin phase.

I swear my individual facial hairs are like tiny toothpicks that have a secret plan to unite and form a billboard that says THIS GIRL WAS BORN WITH A PENIS!!! BEAT THE CRAP OUT OF HER!

"How about a game of trivia?" I ask, to keep from thinking about it anymore.

## CHAPTER 4



*Three hours later the sun's faded to that delicious late-afternoon shade it brews up during the summer. Just after Sacramento, we gorged ourselves from the drive-thru at In-N-Out Burger and I'm*

- 1) Driving
- 2) Almost in a food coma
- 3) Very glad we're not too far away from the cabin

We just finished up a game of Truth, which is basically just asking each other questions from an app on Chunk's phone called Tell Me About It. There is no dare. Categories are things like Romance, Friendship, Family, and Death and Taxes. I guess it's not really even a game, although if you think the other person is lying, you get to slug them in the arm.

Did I mention that most of the games we play have some sort of punching in them?

We pass a sign that says SAFE AND SANE FIREWORKS.



“No one ever advertises the other kind,” Chunk complains. “I like the Dangerous and Insane fireworks myself.”

I downshift, thinking back to the first piece in my portfolio.

## **White**

**7x10 inches**

**Image: Red lips devour white fireworks on deep blue background, portrait of the artist adrift in the margin.  
Acrylic on paper**

Late-afternoon sun slanted through the trees and lit up the grass, making patches of warm green laced with shadier kelly green. The smell of the brownies for the neighborhood block party floated out through the back windows of our house. All day long my mom'd worn her good-mom face. The one that made me want to snuggle up with her, kiss her, be like her.

My dad was in a good mood too. He'd come home from somewhere or other with a bag of fireworks, and he and I were hanging out in the backyard. All was perfect in my four-year-old world.

Dad put a sparkler in my hand and kneeled behind me, helping me hold it away from myself before he actually lit it. The sudden crackly buzz and sulfury smell scared and excited me at the same time. Sparks, white with heat, danced off of the slender stick in my hand.

Frightening, beautiful.

I stared, mesmerized, for I don't know how long, but

the thing had burned down pretty far by the time my mom came barreling out of the house and I looked up.

The dress she wore must have been retro even then, tight sleeveless bodice, blue, full, knee-length swishy skirt. You know, the kind of dress you see in '50s vintage-looking memes that say supposedly outrageous things like "Is it vodka o'clock yet?"

"What the hell are you doing? Don't give him that!" Even yelling, my mom's mouth was beautiful. Bright red lipstick made her teeth even whiter.

My dad held me closer with one arm. "We're fine out here."

"Put it out! Damn it! Who gives a four-year-old fireworks?" she screamed.

"What? I'm right here! Quit overreacting!"

The sparkler burned out and my dad stood up, letting go of my hand.

"Jesus! Edward! You're the worst goddamn father ever!"

"Shut up! Jeremy handled it just fine; he's a big boy." My dad patted my head and I dropped the still-smoldering sparkler onto my bare foot.

Now it was my turn to scream, and my mom rushed down from the porch to take a look. The mark from the burn was small, but I remember the shock of it and the pain. She scooped me up, rushed me into the house, and stuck my foot under the kitchen faucet.

"You're okay, you're okay," she crooned over and over, scooping cold water over my foot with her hand.

After several minutes the pain went from excruciating to just bad.

“Is that better, honey?” I nodded and she turned off the faucet. I still sat on the kitchen counter, foot in the sink. My father stood in the doorway, useless and shamed.

“I want another sparkler,” I said, even though I didn’t.

I just wanted the day to go back to being good.

The look on my mother’s face told me my mistake immediately. She stepped away from me and turned on my dad.

“See what you’ve done, you asshole?” she snarled. “Now he wants to do it again.” She pointed to my foot. “Enjoy the boys’ club, Jeremy!” she said before slamming out of the kitchen.

What I remember next is sitting by my dad on the couch, foot throbbing in a bowl of cold water, and watching my mom through the picture window that looked out on our backyard.

She leaned against the porch railing in her heavenly blue dress, smoking cigarette after skinny cigarette in short angry puffs. There was the sound of a baseball game on TV, and of hot white fireworks in the distance.

The words *boys’ club* cycled through my head, and I felt banished.

## CHAPTER 5



*Chunk closes the Tell Me app and puts down his phone. It's almost five o'clock, we've exited I-80 onto Highway 89, and the cabin's not too far away.*

"So, do you have a plan for the wedding yet?" he asks.

I pretend to think about it for a minute. "Yeah, it involves turning around at the Iowa-Illinois border."

I mostly keep my gaze on the road but kind of look at him out of the corner of my eye to see his reaction. What would he do if I chickened out?

"No, really," he says, not even considering the option. "I think you should come up with a game plan."

"I have one . . . it involves a lot of duct tape, a llama, and a peanut butter sandwich."

Chunk grins. "You don't even know what you mean by that, do you?"

"Not a clue," I agree, smiling. I love making him laugh, even when it means saying stupid things.

“Maybe it’d help if you figured out your objective here,” he says.

“*My* objective? You’re the one who thinks this is necessary for my development as a human being. I’m pretty much along for the roadside attractions and junk food.”

Which is the truth, but not all of it.

There is the whole making-my-dad-see-me-as-female—as the person I really am—thing.

But I don’t want to think about that right now. I want to experience weird sights and kitschy motels and being with Chunk.

He’s stubborn, though.

“Fine, let’s talk about what your objective is *not* and come at it from that angle.”

“Okay, logic boy.” I give in.

“It’s not to break up the wedding, right?” he asks. “I mean it’s not like you want your parents to get back together.”

“God, no!” My parents were truly horrible together. I am not exaggerating when I say that I cannot recall a single family outing that did not end up in a fight of some sort or another.

She was being bitchy.

He was being passive-aggressive.

Could he please stop ogling the waitress?

Could she please stop being crazy?

“You know if I had a time machine, I’d use it to go back and make sure they never met.”

“Then you wouldn’t exist,” Chunk says, a little smug, like he thinks he got me.

I shrug. “Maybe, maybe not. It could be that I’d still exist, just in a different way, kind of like you said the mothball fleet will still exist, just not in the same form.”

Like, I’d still have my mentality, but I’d be in a different body. One that would match up with the way I experience gender.

“Wait, are you talking about physically?” he asks.

“I guess I’m mostly talking about consciousness,” I say.

“So we’re talking about the soul.”

I keep my eyes on the road.

The word *soul* makes me feel shy about nodding yes. I’ve always stayed away from conversations about spirituality with Chunk. I don’t want him to rag on me because it can’t be scientifically proven, but even if I don’t go as far as my crazy mom—and he and I both laugh behind her back when she comes out saying things like “Go with Spirit and you can’t go wrong”—I like to think that an existence outside of the bodies we’re in is possible.

I don’t want him to try talking me out of it either, even if I’m not a hundred percent sure of what I believe myself. If I need to defend my conclusions once I’ve reached them, I’m fine, but I just want the chance to come to them on my own.

Having a genius best friend is a bitch that way.

“I guess,” I mutter.

We’re headed up another hill and he reaches over to turn off the air conditioner before rolling down his window. Leaning back, he says the perfect thing. “Anything’s possible.”

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We follow 89 until we come to West Lake Boulevard. We pass trees and a campground and trees and a shopping center and more trees. To our right there are snatches of blue lake, seen in between the trees. It's a lot of trees.

And it's beautiful.

"Turn up ahead," he says, and I do without stalling. His family's place sits across the street from the beachfront houses in a subdivision of vacation homes.

We pull up under the wooden deck that covers part of the driveway, Chunk grabs the trash bag so he can empty it, and we get out.

When he unlocks the door and we step inside, the cool of the house contrasted with the heat of the car makes me shiver. There are old-fashioned skis hanging over the entryway, but the furniture in the living room betrays the cabin as more of a summery hangout. Kitschy '50s-style signs with bathing beauties diving off docks that say things like "Welcome to the Lake" and "Tahoe! Adventures begin here!" hang on the finished wood walls.

The slipcovers on the couch and chairs match the drapes, with their giant cabbage roses and bluebells. Truthfully, it looks like a bridal bouquet threw up in here. I catch myself wondering what Jan has chosen for her own bouquet. It's too late in the season for lilacs, her favorite flower.

Not that I care.

"Let me just check on a few things, unload the stain-and-seal, and call my mom. Then we can get out," Chunk says, heading straight through the living room and kitchen and out the back door, where he grabs a metal doohickey and uses

it to twist an X-shaped piece sticking out of the ground next to the steps.

He comes back inside and turns on the tap over the kitchen sink.

A deep rumbling issues forth before the water comes pouring out.

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask, not out of a genuine desire to help as much as a genuine desire to get back on the road quickly.

“Go sit on the deck while I turn on the rest of the faucets.” Chunk’s family keeps the water turned off during the winter so the pipes don’t freeze, and between all of the bajillion senior honors banquets he and his parents had to attend in the spring and graduation, I guess no one’s been to the cabin since last fall.

I walk out to the deck, which is bigger than I remember it being. Or maybe I’m just looking at it from the staining and sealing perspective, a job I’d hate to have.

Pulling the cover off a wrought-iron chair, I sit down and put my feet up on the railing. Early-evening sun is warm on my skin, and in front of me the blue jewel that is Lake Tahoe spreads out. There are some boats in the distance, and a lone paddleboarder in the foreground. I take my phone out and snap a picture in case I want to use the scene in a watercolor sometime.

Chunk comes out the sliding glass door, the cabin’s phone pressed to his ear.

“Naw, it all looks good, Ma. Uh-huh.” He listens for a



minute, makes the international signal for yacking with his right hand. “Uh-huh. The flowering quince?”

He peers over the edge of the deck.

“Um—there’s, like, brown sticks down there or something . . . They will? Oh, okay. J,” he says, calling me by the name we agreed he’d use around his mom and bringing me back from a place I’d gone to tune out their domestic chat. “Go down there and turn on the hose and water those plants, okay?”

I cock my head at him like, *really?* He inclines his head and makes the yacking motion with his hand again. “Uh-huh, I’ll check on it,” he’s saying into the phone.

I go down the outside stairs of the deck to a planter box that has brown sticks that are meant to be flowers, I guess. I turn on the spigot next to the box. It takes a minute for a rusty-colored water to run out of the hose.

“Yoo-hoo!” I look up to see a little old lady shuffling toward me from one of the houses across the street. According to Chunk’s parents, those houses cost a fortune—to buy or to rent, and there’s something a little incongruous about the way this little old lady wears a shabby housecoat with giant begonias on it and slippers of the kind you’d expect to see on the feet of people in a senior care facility.

I feel a little caught out myself. The car was hot, so I’m just wearing a T-shirt and jeans. No sports bra to squish things down, no sweatshirt to hide my shape. I run a hand over my jaw and don’t feel stubble. Still, I hunch my shoulders.

“Yoo-hoo!” she calls out again. She has a cane, and it

seems mean to make her come all the way up the driveway.

“Hey!” I call up to Chunk. “There’s someone here!”

He pops his head over the edge of the deck, phone still to his ear, and looks toward the old lady.

“Okay, okay, Ma, I’ll check. Look, I gotta go, Mrs. Harris is here. Mmhmm—I’ll tell her you said hi. Uh-huh. Love you, too.” I hear the beep when he hangs up. He thunders down the outside stairs.

“Hi, Mrs. Harris!” He could not sound more delighted. “How are you?” He crosses the driveway and kisses her on the cheek like he’s this debonair Frank Sinatra type. This makes me melt a little.

Mrs. Harris turns to look at me.

“And who is this?” she asks. I breathe deep, cross the asphalt, and shake her hand. It’s tiny, the size and shape of a bony bird’s wing. My hand feels enormous, like a paw around hers. Does she notice?

“This is Jess,” Chunk says. “I don’t think you’ve met before.”

“I’m the neighborhood watch around here,” Mrs. Harris cackles. “Watching the comings and goings!” She turns to Chunk, kind of brandishing her cane. “I came running over to let you know there’s been a bear around here, so you need to be real careful with the trash.”

“Will do,” Chunk says. And they stand there talking for a few minutes about bear boxes and people I don’t know—who’s here for the summer, who’s renting their house out instead. The conversation moves on to how Mrs. Harris needs

help with something. I'm discreetly checking the time on my phone when I hear Chunk say, "Sure, we'll give you a hand!"

It's after five, and there's still Scheels Sportsman Attraction to check off the roadside attraction list today.

The word *sport* in the title "Scheels Sportsman Attraction" does nothing for either of us, but according to Chunk's printout, Scheels is a gigantic mall outside of Reno that's managed to cram all kinds of crazy into 295,000 square feet of space.

The plan is to skip the indoor rifle range (duh) but there's an indoor mountain with stuffed elk and bears we want to check out, in addition to something called the Walk of Presidents, featuring fourteen animatronic presidents positioned around the railing of the second floor. There's also a sixty-five-foot Ferris wheel *inside* the mall.

Chunk really wants to see which presidents the mall owners decided to immortalize, and I want us to buy fudge at the "world famous" candy store, and ride on the Ferris wheel. (It seems doubtful that the ride maintenance at Scheels is taken care of by toothless crack addicts.)

If we're going to experience the magic and wonder of this mall and still make it to Salt Lake City in time to enjoy bad TV and kitschy motel time, we need to get on the road.

Still, I'm nodding and saying to Mrs. Harris, "Of course we can help."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all," Chunk says with a smile. And then we're shuffling across the street with Mrs. Harris at a glacial pace.

We get to her house and it's enormous. "Too big for one

person,” she says. “But the children come visit me and bring the grandkids, so it’s nice to have space for the young hellions.”

Chunk dutifully asks about her kids and grandkids, and I dutifully refrain from checking the time on my phone yet again.

She opens the door on a huge foyer, and stacked inside it are millions and millions of boxes.

“My girl, Linda, comes day after tomorrow and I could have her move them, but I’m beginning to feel like a hoarder. I just need them to go into the library. They’re books.”

To my credit and to Chunk’s, neither of us groans.

The thing is, since I started taking hormones, I’ve lost some upper body strength. Still, my dainty upper arms do manage to help him move all million (okay, twenty-four) boxes of books from the foyer into the library.

Scheels and Salt Lake City are calling my name the whole time.

When the last box has been stacked, Mrs. Harris follows us to the front of the house.

“I’m afraid I’ve already eaten. Old people’s hours, you know,” she says. “Or I’d give you dinner.”

“No, no, that’s very generous, but we need to get going,” Chunk tells her.

We’ve just opened the door to leave when she says to Chunk in a loud whisper, “Now, your parents *do* know she’s here, don’t they?”

Chunk assures her that they do.

“Well, off you go, then,” she says. “You two have a wonderful date.”

I glance at Chunk to see how he takes this. He blinks, but I can't read his face. I step over the threshold, and when we're just out of Mrs. Harris's line of sight, I give him an exaggerated wink. He doesn't respond except to tell her to have a nice night.

We get back on the road and I can't stop smiling.

Sure she was old and infirm and probably had bad eyesight from reading too many books, but I passed!

The fact she thought Chunk and I were together makes me smile even harder. Good old Chunk.

## **Red**

**14x17 inches**

**Image: Portrait of the artist as anime figure Sailor Moon, bursting through a sheet of paper, crushing faceless male figure in her hand.**

**Acrylic, torn vellum, yellowed Scotch tape on canvas**

I've known Chunk since kindergarten. But we didn't really hang out until we were in third grade.

The huge excitement at the beginning of that year was that we were going to finally get to use the computer lab at school. I can't even remember what the lesson was about, and it didn't make much difference. We all had computers at home but there was something cool about getting to use the ones at school, and even cooler about getting to use the color printers in the lab.

A bunch of us were into anime and manga and spent the free time after we finished our work looking up and printing

out pictures. I made the mistake of printing out my favorite, Sailor Moon.

The picture had an interesting perspective from above. You could see she was gesturing with her left hand, her right was on her hip, and her rosy long blond pigtails flared out from the sides of her head and then extended down to the tops of her shiny, knee-high red boots.

This kid named Cole Billings caught sight of the picture and when the bell rang for us to return to our regular classroom, he grabbed it out of my hands. Easy to do—I was super small for my age.

“Look, everyone, Jeremy’s favorite is Sailor Moon!” A couple of the other boys laughed, and I tasted something bitter at the back of my throat. I *did* like Sailor Moon.

I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to.

I had no words, nothing to come back with, because by then I *knew* I was different, even if I didn’t exactly know how or what it meant. All I knew was that I was always accidentally doing the wrong thing around people like Cole Billings. Guys who were the first to the top of the wall when we went rock climbing with the Cub Scouts. The ones who actually liked playing dodgeball and spit great globs of milky saliva onto the ground after they creamed you with the ball.

I knew without needing to look in a mirror that the tips of my ears were redder than Sailor Moon’s boots.

Then Chunk stepped in. This was Chunk when he was still Chuck, before the counselor at Space Camp nicknamed him Super-Chunk the summer after seventh grade. (The Super part was a compliment for leading our team to

victory in the Tuesday Night Galaxy Trivia Bowl. I don't know about the Chunk part. He was big, but not like he is now—well, obviously not. He's six foot two now, and probably close to two hundred pounds heavier than he was back then. In any case, the nickname stuck, and Chunk didn't seem to mind.)

“So what?” he demanded, folding his arms and squinting at Bill as though Bill was so small he could barely be seen.

“It's a girl thing,” Bill said.

“It doesn't have to be,” Chunk argued. “My mom and dad are psychiatrists—*brain doctors*,” he said in an exaggerated way, letting Bill and his friends know he thought they were too stupid to understand what psychiatrists were. “And they say people can like whatever they want and whoever they want. It doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl.”

Bill, still holding my printout, ripped it in half, threw it on the ground, and turned around to leave the computer lab.

“C'mon, we'll fix this,” Chunk said, picking up the pieces of my Sailor Moon printout like he maybe didn't recognize that I had just been exposed, or maybe he didn't care.

I followed him back to our regular class, where he gravely informed Mr. Porter that we needed some tape because, and I'll never forget him using these exact words, “some unfortunate business has occurred.”

The other words that stuck with me through the years are the obvious ones.

*People can like whatever they want and whoever they want.*

Chunk and I were both in Cub Scouts along with Danny Zim, Joey Blanca, Bill Yang, and the hated Cole Billings. We

had a Scout meeting that afternoon, and when it was over, Chunk and I walked to his house to play Dungeons & Dragons and paint Warhammers.

From then on it was always me and Chunk.

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When we cross the border from California to Nevada, there's just enough daylight to see that we have left all green behind. The landscape becomes brown and barren. Seriously, it's like when they went to draw state lines, the people in charge of Nevada lost all the trees in a poker game or something.

iTunes is on shuffle and I'm driving and sort of singing along to some of the songs.

Chunk's been quiet since we left the cabin.

Isn't there some road trip rule that when one person's driving, it's the job of the passenger to keep them entertained so they don't fall asleep and crash?

"Nevada could use some glamming," I tell him, when we leave the Sierras behind.

"That's what Vegas is for," he says, yawning.

"Kind of funny that Mrs. Harris thought we were together," I say, watching him from the corner of my eye.

"Meh," he says.

"We should have told her we had a date in Salt Lake City." I laugh to show I'm joking.

"What, tonight?"

I swallow, and give Betty the Car too much gas without shifting. She whines until I lift my foot.



“There’s no way we’re doing anything in Salt Lake tonight.” His voice has an edge. “It’s after eight now. We’re getting in at, like, four in the morning. Shift.”

I obey and Betty the Car settles down.

Chunk pulls out his phone and starts typing. I think he’s looking something up, but then I hear the *swoosh* of a text coming in.

The thought of a cozy evening, holed up in some retro motel watching bad TV, slips away. And he didn’t, even in a joking way, address the whole Mrs.-Harris-thinks-we’re-together thing.

*Tap tap tap* go his fingers.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to drive until then,” I tell him. “That’s eight straight hours of driving.”

“You’re the one who wanted to slip in and out of Salt Lake under the cover of night,” he reminds me, not looking up.

“That was before I realized the dangers of highway hypnosis,” I say like I’m doing a driver’s ed video voice-over. *Swoosh* goes his phone.

“Besides, what about Scheels? I think we should go there, then stop for the night and make it up tomorrow.”

*Tap tap tap. Swoosh.*

“Scheels will be closed by the time we get there,” Chunk says.

“What time’s it close again?” I ask, thinking of animatronic presidents and stuffed elk and riding a Ferris wheel inside of a mall. But mainly (and I know it’s dorky) something about having just passed in front of Mrs. Harris makes me want to try it again. I picture me and Chunk eating fudge

in a seat at the top of the Ferris wheel, and people assuming we're a couple.

"The website said nine."

"Sometimes website lie."

Chunk shakes his head and goes back to typing. He keeps at it, and every so often I hear the incoming text swoosh.

But I don't ask who he's texting.

For the next half hour he's involved enough with his phone that he doesn't notice the billboards advertising Scheels up ahead. In fact, he doesn't look up until I slow down for the turnoff.

"It's 9:20. They're going to be closed," he says, and then it's back to the phone.

"I just want to see," I tell him.

There aren't very many cars in the parking lot, but I refuse to give up hope. After all, the building is huge and the lot is gigantic. Maybe it just looks like not a lot of cars because they're all spread out.

I drive around the complex until I find what must be the main entrance.

When I park, Chunk looks up.

"Really? It's closed, Jess."

"Maybe the stores are closed but they might keep the Ferris wheel open late." I open the door and get out. Chunk turns on the camcorder.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 11706.14. Captain reluctantly following first mate on a pointless mission to prove that planet Scheels is as deserted as it looks."

The entrance is an open-air corridor, on either side of which are storefronts that are indeed closed. We walk along pebbled concrete and Chunk's lagging behind just enough to make it not an adventure we're having together.

We come to a big courtyard. To the left, huge glass doors lead into the mall. In the center of the courtyard there's a larger-than-life bronze statue of a snowboarder performing a death-defying flip.

The whole thing's inverted, with the board and feet—the bulk of the sculpture—up in the air, appearing to defy gravity. The piece is . . . sublime. I step closer, irritation at Chunk's nonengagement falling away. The thought that Jan would appreciate both the art and the subject pops into my head.

### **Green**

**8x15 inches**

**Image: Redwood tree, shredded bark forms portrait of the artist. A female figure stands, back to the viewer, away from the tree.**

**Mixed media, acrylic, redwood bark on canvas**

We sat on our butts in the snow, laughing. My mom and dad were in the lodge drinking grown-up hot cocoa and Jan and I were having a great time without them. I was eleven, and couldn't remember a time that Jan hadn't gone with us on ski vacations. My parents were skiers, but Jan and I were boarders.

We were off to the side near the bottom of a run called Pinball, and we'd both gotten a little air from a mogul and then wiped out in exactly the same way. In the deep wintry powder it hadn't hurt, which is why we were laughing.

Jan's goggles blurred up and she took them off and wiped the inside with her gloved finger, trying to get rid of the condensation. Without her goggles on, you could see her green snowboard jacket matched her eyes perfectly.

"How come Roger didn't come skiing?" I asked, glad he hadn't.

She got a funny look on her face and paused, like she was considering what to tell me.

She swiped her finger along the inside of the goggles again, then said, "He's moving his things out this weekend. We broke up."

She was so matter-of-fact that at first I couldn't tell if she was happy or sad.

Then she looked off down the mountain for a long minute, and I regretted interrupting the fun with a stupid question about Roger's whereabouts. I didn't care where he was.

But she did.

I could tell by the way her shoulders sloped. That morning she'd complained, laughing, that the bulk of her boarding jacket made her look even bigger than she was, but just now, in spite of her almost two hundred pounds, she seemed . . . small. Even her curly hair, escaping from under her beanie, looked bedraggled and sad to me. Across the

canyon there were Douglas fir and pine trees. We sat and stared for the longest time.

“Guess what my favorite thing about the redwoods is,” I finally said.

She tilted her head, thought for a minute.

“That you’re getting really good at drawing them?”

“I like that the bark’s the same color as your hair, and the green needles are the color of your eyes.”

She got teary.

“Do you know how special you are, Jeremy?” she asked.

Later that night I sat playing my handheld while the adults finished their dinner. When my dad got up to pay the bill, my mom and Jan talked about Roger. Jan had had a couple of glasses of wine, but instead of it making her sad and depressed, she just seemed philosophical.

“Honestly, I don’t want to be with someone who doesn’t want to be with me,” she said, taking a last sip of her wine. “And in the end, really, if a relationship’s not right, it’s just not meant to be.”

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I turn my back on the snowboarder sculpture and face the big glass entrance doors. Chunk pulls at the handle of one, but of course they’re locked.

By the time I walk over to peer inside, he’s already stepping away. Still I stand there a minute, looking through the glass.

Visions of fudge and Ferris wheels die hard.

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When we get back to Betty the Car, Chunk takes the driver's seat without saying anything. I settle into the passenger side and stare out the window.

He heads Betty back onto the highway, and the barren openness of the desert in the dark makes me uncomfortable.

"Should we maybe look up a good place to stop in a few hours?" I ask.

"Sure thing—it's your road trip."

Next to me I feel, rather than see, a familiar shrug. What is his problem? My chest squeezes, and I want to say it's *our* road trip, but I don't.

Instead I go all dork on his ass.

"That's right!" I turn on the camcorder. "Stardate 11706.14. First mate getting ready to research docking facilities. Preferably facilities that have cable. No pool necessary."

I take out my phone and after I've ascertained that Elko, Nevada, is the perfect distance—four hours away, which makes us get in late, but not so late we'll crash in bed right after checking in—I open the Tell Me app for a game of Truth.

Chunk's phone swooshes, and I'm glad he's such a rule-following guy.

He never, ever, ever texts while driving.

"Category: Family," I read. "'Are you more like your mom or your dad?'

"You answer first," I say.

“My dad, definitely.”

“Really?”

“You don’t think so?” he asks, flipping the little doohickey on the rearview mirror that makes it so the headlights coming from behind don’t blind the driver.

“I don’t know, your dad just seems more into sports and image and fitness and all that,” I say.

Chunk’s dad plays a lot of tennis and wears a thick gold bracelet. He’s a sports fan who never misses a Giants game. And even though he’s a psychiatrist, he seems to know when to give it a rest, unlike Chunk’s mom.

(Oh, the nightmare of walking into their house a week after I’d admitted being gay to Chunk, saying hi to his mom and getting the first of many Very Meaningful “How are you *feeling*, Jeremy?”s.)

“I see.” His face is set, the corners of his mouth turned ever so slightly down. The lopsided dimple that appears when he smiles is nowhere to be seen.

“What?” I ask. There’s no mistaking the seeping chill in the car.

“Nothing,” he says.

I focus on the road ahead.

“I’m definitely more like my mom,” I say.

“No kidding,” he says, checking the rearview mirror and speeding up. “I thought the question was more about personality traits. Not physical ones.”

“I did, too.”

“It sounded like you were just looking at it physically.”

“Why would you think that?”

He takes his eyes off the road and gives me a hard look. “I know my mom and I are both . . . big.”

This is true, but I’m willing to bet I’m waaaayyy more uncomfortable with my body than he is with his. Besides, I like how he’s so solid looking. If you didn’t know what a nice guy he is, you might find his size intimidating, like he could beat someone up.

“That’s not what I was saying,” I protest, and then the implication of what he said a minute ago hits me.

“Wait, you think I resemble my mom *physically*?” I smile because, again, it’s not a bad thing.

Chunk lets out an exasperated huff and jabs the radio button on. Static-y Mexican music fills the air, and he turns up the volume.

I turn it down again and pull up another question.

“Category: Hypothetical.”

When I see the question, I can’t believe my luck.

“A friend of the same sex, one with whom you’ve played sports and have had the occasion to share a locker room, comes out to you as gay. Would that change the relationship? Why or why not?”

“Really?” Chunk asks.

“Really,” I say.

“That’s a stupid question,” he says. “Next.”

“You’re not going to answer it?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think I need to.”

Funny how I’m expected to talk about my feelings, but he isn’t.



“You didn’t call Black Hole,” I say, and punch his arm.  
Hard.

Maybe he thinks I know the answer, but I want to hear it again.

### **Tawny**

**14x17 inches**

**Image: Portrait of the artist gazing through louvered window at the torso of Michelangelo’s David.**

**Ink, watercolor on paper**

I sat on the slatted wooden bench in the garden of the old library, GQ magazine in my lap. The building had been around since the late 1800s, a smallish stone building, and what it lacked in shelf space, it more than made up for in the grounds that surrounded it. Great louvered windows opened onto a back garden that looked like something out of a French impressionist painting.

We spent a lot of time there during the summer before eighth grade. My house was a battle zone of parental fights interspersed with the sad calm of Mom’s chemo weeks, and Chunk’s house had bossy older siblings ruling it. Neither of us were the skateboard-in-the-square types, so the library had become our default hangout. Chunk would troll the reference room, looking up obscure bits of information, and I’d sit out in the garden sketching.

Just inside the front door of the building there was a bin where people would bring magazines they’d read and

wanted to donate. A lot of times I'd go through the bin looking for collage materials or just to get ideas for stuff to draw or paint.

That summer, someone was always bringing in old issues of GQ. Which I loved. I wasn't at all into male fashion, but if anyone asked, I planned to pretend I was.

A tawny-skinned Mediterranean-looking model pouted from the cover of the issue I had in my lap, his tight white jeans so low you could see his hipbones. His lips were full and delicious looking and I was tracing them with my finger when the back the door opened and Chunk stepped out of the library.

He blinked in the sudden bright sunlight, then walked over to sit next to me. I fumbled to shove the GQ under my sketchbook, but Chunk stopped me. He took the magazine and flipped through it for a minute.

"You like these guys, huh," he said. Not accusing or teasing, just stating facts.

"They make good models," I said, heart pounding.

"You know they have the IQs of dust mites," he said. "Minuscule."

I licked my lips.

"The word was *minuscule*," he said.

"Small." My heart rate slowed.

"Infinitesimal."

"Tiny."

"Microscopic."

"Really, really small?"

He smiled at that. "But you like 'em anyway."

When I was in fifth grade, I had a dream about kissing Les Michaels, lead singer of the boy band Picante, and I tried to go back to sleep so we could kiss some more. so we could kiss some more. By the time I was in seventh grade I realized I preferred boys to girls, but I never said anything to Chunk. I worried it might make things strange between us, and romantic feelings just weren't something we'd ever talked about.

Until now.

My best friend and I stared at each other for an excruciating minute, and then both turned our heads away.

Stellar's jays made a crazy racket in the tree above us.

"I like looking at them," I finally said.

"It's all good," he said. I glanced over at him and he gave me a little smile. "The only thing I question is your taste, dude."

That night, I slept over at his house. We played Skyrim and ate pizza, and it was all the same as it had been since third grade.

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A *whoosh* signals yet another incoming text on Chunk's phone, and I stare out the windshield. The road between Tahoe and infinity stretches out into the night.