



FAILURE:

somebody or something that
is unsuccessful.

LIFE CAN BE A LITTLE WEIRD WHEN YOUR MOM IS A PSYCHIC IN OHIO. And not the witchy, crystal-ball-reading psychic—a college psychic, helping budding students find their perfect school. Call it hokey, but kids come from all over the Great Plains states to get an hour with my mom. It's pretty ironic, then, that I managed to earn a rejection letter from the school I was destined to attend.

The second letter revoking my admission to Ohio State in the fall sat tucked under my mattress, the prime hiding spot for my every teenage secret. I failed my senior English course, of all things. After a series of unfortunate events, including a complete misunderstanding of my final assignment and an unforgiving teacher, I didn't pass the class—the one class that

Ohio State required for my major in “New Media and Technology,” whatever that meant.

“Ohio State is a perfect fit for you, Danielle,” my mom had said. “I’ve been able to observe you your whole life; my reading for you is going to be spot-on.”

I trusted her. She did know me better than I knew myself sometimes. She could sense when I was upset, when I needed guidance, when I preferred to be left alone. Luckily for me, her senses had been consumed with new clients for the past month, and she hadn’t questioned me about the perpetual and clichéd storm cloud over my head.

My mom’s readings come in two phases. First, she has a one-on-one session with students where she asks them some basic questions about what they’re interested in, where they think they want to go to school, what they think they want to do. Then she gets into the nitty-gritty of what students actually like, seeking out deep and repressed vibes. Like a kid who had been bred her whole life to be a doctor but dreamed of being a museum curator and should actually pursue art history. Those parents are always the worst when they hear that their pride and joy is not who they expected. Nine times out of ten, I see students walk out of our home with relief on their faces. Even if my mom really isn’t a psychic—if she’s just really good at reading people and knows a lot about colleges—it’s comforting to know that someone can validate your future.

Slipping on my fuzzy socks, I headed downstairs to find my mom leading a group out the front door. The family was all smiles, so this must have been a very nonconfrontational

session. I slinked into the kitchen and stayed out of sight. There were pictures of us hanging from every angle of the house, but when Mom had clients over, we were to stay invisible. Staying invisible was easier for me than it was for my dad and brother, who liked to watch early morning cartoons at full volume. You'd think that since Noah was fourteen now they would have shaken that habit, but when I opened the door to the kitchen, the sound of the Road Runner accosted me.

They barely looked up as I walked in. I went over and kissed my dad on the side of his head and reached to refill his coffee mug. This one said "Greetings from Oahu!" with chipped palm trees winding up the handle. My grandparents were huge travelers, and the X marking their current vacation spot was a cheap mug in the mail. I grabbed a mug that said "Someone from Paris Loves Me," remembering the year that my grandparents lived in France. It was the longest they stayed in one place my entire life, and the memories of one summer there when I was fourteen grounded me in my desire to travel.

"Mom's working, you know," I told them both.

"It was an emergency session; she's done now," Dad said.

"Emergency session" was code for a kid who had waited until the last minute to apply anywhere. On top of Mom's knowledge of colleges, she also held a bit of clout when it came to admissions. She could usually work some magic to get admissions to take another look at an application and knew the right things for kids to write in their appeal letters. After she was a student at Ohio State (go figure) she worked in their admissions office

for a few years before hopping around to other colleges. She made so many connections from moving around that she started to realize that she could recommend schools based on all the experience she had. She started out with the neighborhood gang of soon-to-be college students when I was the ripe age of twelve, and the rest is history.

“It’s all hands on deck for dinner tonight,” Dad said. “Aunt Rachel and Claire are coming.”

My aunt and her angelic daughter only came by the house for one of two reasons: they had something they wanted to brag about or something they needed sympathy for. More often than not, Claire came for her bragging rights. We had dinner when Claire was voted homecoming princess, when she got her swanky internship at *Teen Gleam Magazine*, and when she got into Northwestern—the school that my mom had so perfectly helped her find.

“And you’re all staying to eat?” I asked.

“No way,” Noah responded, finally looking up from the TV. “Dad’s taking me to acting class tonight.”

“I can drive you to acting class,” I said. “I’ll get us ice cream and a puppy after.”

“Nice try,” Dad said, turning off the TV. “Your cousin will be happy to see you. She’s only back in Denton for the weekend.”

“I don’t think she’s ever particularly happy to see me,” I said.

“I don’t think she’s ever happy to see anyone,” Noah said. I sent him a mental fist bump of sibling solidarity.

“Who are we talking about?” Mom asked as she made her way into the kitchen.

“Oh you know, the Queen of England,” I said. “I’ve heard she’s kind of a diva.”

“The queen?” Mom raised her eyebrows.

“That’s what the rumor mill is churning these days, Mom; you should really tap into pop culture more often,” I said. She could see through my BS but chose not say anything. “How was the emergency session? They seemed smiley.”

“Just a run-of-the-mill late application. Very minor work on my end,” she said. “The good news is, now we have more time to get ready for dinner. Danielle . . . I know you and Claire have your problems—”

“Dad already warned me. I’m mentally preparing myself. Though I would be really okay with taking Noah to his class tonight if that makes things easier for everyone.”

She crossed her arms. “Can’t you ever do something nice for me without complaining or trying to get out of it?”

“I’m kidding, I promise,” I said, holding up my hands.

Dad and Noah sat in tense silence trying to find their way out of the room and the awkwardness.

“Why don’t you and Noah go to the store and grab a few things for me?” she asked. The family took a collective breath as the tension lifted.

“Sure,” I said. “Make me a list and check it twice!”

She wasn’t amused. Noah left the room to change out of his pajamas, and I took his exit as my cue to leave as well. I closed my bedroom door behind me and sank against the

door. The lie of my rejection was bubbling inside me, and I felt like the truth would explode out of me. It could quite possibly kill my mom. Sure, she'd probably have an emergency plan in place, but it seemed pretty hopeless. My room was already stacked to the brim with Ohio State-embellished dorm room merchandise, including a rather comfortable toilet seat cover. I flopped onto my bed, my hand reaching to that space in between the bedframe and the mattress where my shame hid. I opened it up one more time, thinking that the words from the dean of admissions would magically change by positive thinking.

Dear Ms. Cavanaugh,

It is with great regret that I inform you that we will not be accepting your application to Ohio State University this fall. After a thorough review of your final transcript by our admissions board, your final grades did not match the stipulated grades for our competitive New Media and Communication Technology program.

If you wish to retake the classes in which the competency levels were not reached, you may apply again for admission in the spring. More than 10 percent of our students join classes in the

spring semester and are still able to complete their degree within the four-year time span.

Thank you for your interest in Ohio State University, and we hope to see your amended application in the spring.

Dr. Caroline Bates

Dr. Caroline Bates
Dean of Admissions
Ohio State University

Over the past month, I'd come up with elaborate schemes to get rid of the letter. I could burn it, feed it to the neighbor's dog, turn it into confetti in the paper shredder—but nothing seemed to resonate. One of my favorite units in elementary school was this "Crafts Around the World" program, where we worked on a project that was inspired by a different country each week. The best week was Japan, when our class made paper crane strings that wound around the ceiling of our classroom for the rest of the year. The colors always stayed in my mind, and even now I sometimes make paper cranes when I feel stressed out or in need of focus. I tore off the bottom of the letter, leaving the paper in the perfect square shape to start creating the crane. Memory wasn't normally my strong suit, but the folding technique of the crane came back to me instantly.

When I finished, it seemed much smaller than I thought it

would be. I couldn't read the words that haunted me anymore. They jumbled together into nonsense that looked sort of beautiful. I held it close to my face and could make out one string of letters on the wing. My name. Danielle.

"Shall we start shopping for the dinner of doom?" Noah asked, popping his head in my room. I quickly placed the paper crane on my bedside table and hopped off my bed.

"Let me throw a sweater on, and then we'll roll," I told him.

He nodded and left, and I took the crane back into my hand. I could have sent it flying out my window and watched it float away, but I placed it on the top of my bookshelf instead. Even though it was probably around eighty degrees outside, there was something comforting about wearing a sweater. Also, I think my blood circulation is shoddy—I'm always freezing. If it were socially acceptable to carry a blanket around in public, I probably would.

The door to Mom's office was closed when I came back downstairs, but her grocery list was on the counter alongside the keys for our family minivan. Driving the minivan was a special treat. It should have gone into retirement years ago, but my dad refused to get rid of it. I call it the Jankmobile for numerous reasons, one of which is the gross kick of exhaust it puffs out each time you turn the car on.

I wasn't super disappointed about having to go to the store because it meant I had an excuse to see my best friend, Zoe. She started working at Freeman's Market when she was probably too young, and she'd been promoted to shift manager for

the past two years. Being shift manager meant she could sneak her best friend and her best friend's little brother reject donuts if they asked nicely for them.

"What's on the list, Noah Man?" I asked.

"Chicken breasts—the nice kind behind the counter—peppers, onions, mushrooms, and spinach noodles," he said.

"Spinach noodles?" I asked.

"Apparently Claire is gluten-free," he said.

"Of course she is."

Freeman's Market wasn't terribly crowded, but I figured we'd see at least ten people we knew just walking in. Denton wasn't a Podunk, everyone-knows-everyone type of town, but it was one of the smaller suburbs of Cleveland. You were bound to see a familiar face wherever you went. I squirted some hand sanitizer on the handle of our cheap basket before picking it up and heading straight for the bakery.

Zoe hated wearing her uniform while she was working in the bakery. They had a mandatory hairnet rule (for good reason), and the all-white uniform clashed with every overly colorful outfit Zoe picked out for the day. I spotted her working meticulously on frosting cupcakes, a job that only she had the patience for. Zoe was happiest when she was being creative. Her hands had permanent damage from many a hot-glue-gun burn. Crafting was her favorite destressing activity.

"I would like to place a complaint with the shift manager," I told one of the young workers at the front of the bakery. The look of horror on her face confirmed that she did not recognize me or appreciate my sense of humor. The poor girl flitted

back to Zoe, who wiped her hands on her apron and smiled my way when she saw me.

“I’m taking a break, Claudia. Don’t let anything burn down,” she told the girl. Zoe flung her apron off and ducked under the bakery counter to join us. She turned around and grabbed two donuts with smudged frosting that were misshapen and handed them to Noah and me.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” she asked.

“We’re on food duty for a Claire dinner tonight,” I said.

She cringed appropriately. “I made an awesome pear cake this morning if you would like to offer it as a sign of peace?”

“Not even your baking can offer the peace we need to have a civil dinner,” I said. “The little brother over here has managed to get out of it, twerp.”

“Hey, I just got lucky that my acting class was at the same time,” he said.

“But who will make faces with me when Claire makes a backhanded comment?” I asked.

“I’m sure you can manage for one night,” he said.

“So, pear cake, yay or nay?” Zoe asked.

“I mean, what can it hurt at this point,” I said. She ducked back under the counter and emerged with a simple cake that hadn’t been frosted yet. Quickly she spread some sort of white icing all over the cake, spinning it on one of those cake wheels that you see in reality TV bake offs. She placed the cake in a box and put a big discount mark on the top for us to use when we checked out.

“You’re an angel,” I told her. I put Noah on cake-carrying

duty as a tiny punishment for leaving me alone for the impending dinner of doom.

Something clanged loudly from the back of the bakery, and Claudia yelped.

“That’s my cue,” Zoe said, ducking back under the counter. “My shift ends at six. Call me if you want to vent about it afterward over a basket of Moe’s fries.”

I saluted her. “You can probably count on it. Thanks again for the cake.”

She waved at us before rushing back to help Claudia, who seemed to be trapped under a fallen drying rack.

Noah and I cruised through the store, only having to ask for some help when it came to the spinach noodles. Apparently Freeman’s Market has an entire organic and health food section that I didn’t even know existed. I prefer my food chock-full of gluten and inorganic materials.

When we made it home, the fancy tablecloth covered our beaten wooden table and Mom was in the process of pulling out the nice dishes from the cabinet above the fridge that no one can ever reach. Was Claire winning Miss America? Noah made a quick exit with my father to head off to acting class, and he gave me one final thumbs-up before he left.

“Can you grab the plates and set them on the table?” Mom asked, blowing off a layer of dust bunnies from the top plate.

“Sure; how many?” I asked. It was usually a toss-up if Uncle Brad would join us. I think Uncle Brad has enough Aunt Rachel time at home without involving her obnoxious extended family.

“Five, please,” she said, a little smile creeping on her face.

“So Uncle Brad is braving it today, huh?”

“Not quite,” she said, her smile getting bigger. “Your cousin is bringing someone to dinner! Isn’t that exciting?”

Or horrible. “Who is it?”

“I think it’s that boyfriend of hers from Northwestern. They’re getting pretty serious, according to Rachel.”

“Oh!” I said, with more inflection than I think Mom expected. Actually, this development wasn’t horrible. It was really to my benefit—if the focus was on Claire and her serious boyfriend, then my failure might go unannounced. Perhaps the “Danielle Is Going to Ohio State” dinner was being renamed the “Claire Tricked a Boy into Liking Her” dinner, and for once I was completely okay with that.

“He’s studying to be a doctor,” she said.

Of course he was. Only Claire would be able to find herself madly in love with a doctor-to-be. After I set the table, I helped Mom with the spinach noodles and threw all the salad fixings into a bowl. We were a pretty good team as long as I didn’t have to do any major cooking. I have a bit of a bad track record with the stove. Somehow my hands or forearms always end up burned one way or another. Mom only trusted me with salad prongs.

In the middle of my superb tossing, the doorbell rang. Part of me wanted to open the door and be the first to see Dr. Charming, but Mom was too excited for me to take that away from her. She skipped to the door in a way she only does when Noah gets a new acting job. Noah’s first shining, skip-worthy mo-

ment was being an extra in a toothpaste commercial. He was labeled as Cavity Kid #2 and had to smile with a mouthful of gauze in the back of the dentist's office. We were pretty proud.

"Oh hello! Come in, come in!" Mom said from the door, her voice reaching new octaves in her excitement.

"Thank you," said a deep voice I assumed to be the boyfriend's, unless Aunt Rachel had started anabolic steroids. I joined Mom by the front door.

"Hi, Dani, you look cute," Claire said, giving me a hug. How could she make "cute" sound bad? She had a gift.

"Thanks," I said.

She smiled and straightened out her pink sundress before wrapping her arm around Dr. Charming's waist. He towered over her by almost an extra foot, and he looked like he probably shared Claire's spray tan package at Tan-a-Palooza. They even shared the same dark-brown hair and eyes. He was obviously older than she was, probably by four or five years, and extremely good-looking. Almost too good-looking. Zoe and I have always agreed that it's never a good idea to have a boyfriend who's prettier than you are.

"This is Marcus," she said.

He held out his massive hand, and I took it with the firmest shake I could manage.

"Danielle, I've heard so much about you," he said. Just glorious things, I presume. I nodded and smiled politely as he shook Mom's hand. She and Aunt Rachel sent each other girly batting-of-lashes looks, and I pretended not to notice.

"Whatever my sister has cooked up for us tonight smells

delicious,” Aunt Rachel said, motioning toward the kitchen. “Shall we?”

We all filed into our small pea-green kitchen. Mom instructed each of us to get our plates from the table, and she dished out the chicken and gross spinach noodles. Marcus kept up a casual conversation with Mom, reiterating how lovely her home was and how much he missed home-cooked meals from his mom. He actually seemed genuine, and I once again wondered what sort of hypnotizing power Claire held over everyone but me.

Claire could get away with anything with a flip of her hair and a quick smile. Her mom was locked under her thumb, always believing Claire’s side of every story. Our feud started the moment I was brought into this world and Claire suddenly had someone to compete with for attention. The pinnacle of the Claire–Danielle feud came in my third-grade year, her fourth. We were both auditioning for the part of featured angel in our church Christmas pageant, and Claire knew how badly I wanted it. Before we auditioned for the part, Claire challenged me to a fizzy soda drinking contest. Being the girl who is always up for a good dare, I decided to take her up on it. Little did I know that every time I looked away from Claire, she was spitting out the soda. Long story short, I made a public, pee-filled spectacle of myself in front of all the kids auditioning. That year we watched Claire perform as the featured angel during Christmas Eve mass.

Once we were all seated around our white tablecloth with a still-visible cranberry sauce stain from Thanksgiving and

with our good napkins tucked neatly on our laps, the conversation began with innocent pleasantries.

“Claire, I’m so glad you’ve brought Marcus here tonight,” Mom said. Claire took Marcus’s hand and smiled at him.

“I’m glad he could finally meet you, Aunt Karen,” she said. “It’s just so hard to find a time when we aren’t caught up in all our work and can make it back to Ohio, but I’m so glad we made it tonight. His family lives here too—isn’t that a wonderful coincidence?”

“How lovely! Makes traveling easier for both of you,” my mom said. “How is *Teen Gleam* going?”

“So well! My boss is trying to get a new slew of mobile journalists in the Chicago area, so she’s promoting me from an intern to reporter,” she said. Marcus squeezed her hand.

“She hardly takes a break,” he said.

“How exciting!” Mom said. She looked at me as if to say “tell her how amazing that is,” but once again, I could only nod and smile. The crippling and suffocating feeling of my own failure took too much out of me in that moment. The little anxious voice in my head was starting to warn me that I should go to the bathroom or something to get away, but of course I did not listen.

“Marcus and Claire have had a lot of excitement lately,” Aunt Rachel said with a devilish grin. I looked up from my plate then and saw Claire turn a little red.

“Mom,” Claire said. “You know I’m keeping that a secret for a while!”

“Sorry!” Aunt Rachel grinned.

“Anyway,” Claire started, “is there anything new with you, Dani?”

I shrugged and mumbled a quick “nothing” while trying not to give into Claire’s fishing for questions about her big secret. I’d played this game a few too many times—I saw right through her.

“You can’t leave us hanging like that, Claire,” Mom said. Claire made a big show of sighing and being bashful.

“I wanted to wait until Uncle Peter and Noah were here, but I guess we could tell you all now,” she said.

I stopped chewing. Was she pregnant? No, Aunt Rachel wouldn’t condone that and be jumping to tell Mom and me. If she wasn’t pregnant, there could only be one thing going on. Claire fiddled with her purse hanging off the side of the chair, grabbed something inside it, and came back up.

“Marcus and I are engaged,” she squealed, holding her left hand out for all to inspect. Mom hopped up from the table to hug Aunt Rachel, and they did a little happy dance together. I sat there awkwardly, to the side of all the action, not sure how I should respond. I didn’t know what I felt in that moment. The feeling wasn’t jealousy, but it was nowhere near happiness. I mean, Claire was only nineteen. We’d grown up together our whole lives, and while I felt like I was just starting mine, she was ready to settle down with one guy forever and already had the job of her dreams. I couldn’t even pass my contemporary literature class.

“That is so wonderful, Claire!” Mom said. She gave me that same look, demanding me to join in.

“Congratulations,” I said.

After the jumping and screaming ended, we sat back down to finish the bits of spinach noodles we’d all pushed to the side of our plates to make it look as if we were eating them. Marcus and Claire kept smiling at each other, and Claire’s eyes would slide to mine every once in a while, to make sure I was watching them.

“Aunt Karen, this chicken is delicious,” Claire said. “But I do know that you only make it for special occasions. Did Mom spill the beans before we came?”

“Of course she didn’t! The dinner was meant for our guest. Well, for him and for Danielle. She’ll be leaving for her freshman year at Ohio State at the end of the summer, and I wanted to celebrate her graduation and success. Cheers, Danielle!” Mom said, holding up her glass. “And cheers to Claire and Marcus on their engagement.”

I kept shoving more into my mouth, hoping that the excess food would soak up my guilt. Claire looked at me again, and I knew she could see it. She can taste fear, smell weakness, and hear my heart pounding with every lie. Her let’s-get-Danielle mentality was still intact, even if she brought her shiny new fiancé to dinner as a buffer. She hadn’t seen the rejection letter, but she didn’t have to. She knew something was up.

“Actually, my younger brother is going to be a freshman at Ohio State next year too,” Marcus said. “Do you know where you’re living? Maybe you’re in the same dorm.”

“Um,” I said, “I haven’t gotten my letter yet.”

“Oh, I thought Bryan got his a couple weeks ago,” he said,

shaking his head. Claire stared me down again, spotting the weakness.

“I heard there’s actually a dorm shortage up there now,” Claire said. “Aunt Karen, I hope she didn’t get waitlisted for a dorm room!”

“I hadn’t heard about that yet,” Mom said. “Danielle, did you get an e-mail about this? I want to call and ask them what the holdup is.”

My armpit sweat was seriously soaking through my shirt, and my hands started to shake. The lie that I had bottled up so perfectly was bubbling and bursting inside me, and I felt like I could throw up. I’m a terrible liar, and now the one lie that had eaten me up for the past month was going to explode in front of my perfect cousin and her sexy new fiancé.

“Mom, I think I accidentally threw the letter away,” I said, the lie somehow still able to come out even though my stomach crawled as the words left my mouth.

“You should have a university account with all the info on it,” Claire said, handing me her smart phone. “Just log on and check.”

The phone shook in my hands. “I don’t remember my log-in info now; I’ll just do it after—”

“Just put in your e-mail and reset your password,” Claire said with more force.

“Claire,” Aunt Rachel warned.

I messed with the phone for a few seconds and then tried to hand it back to Claire. “Really, we’ll just do it later when—”

“I won’t be able to sleep if I don’t know you have a room next year, Dani. Please, find it,” she said in her voice that was the subtlest mix of sweet and evil. Her eyes were hard, staring at me in the way that showed her premature victory. It wasn’t enough for her to come engaged and with a new job, she had to humiliate me too.

“I-I don’t have a log-in,” I said.

“But every student does,” she said.

“I haven’t gotten mine yet,” I said.

“That’s interesting, Dani, everyone else has theirs,” she said, her voice finally reaching its normal tone. Maybe it would do some good to have Dr. Charming see her at her finest moment of devilry.

“Sometimes these things take time and—”

“No, not really.” She smiled.

“Claire!” Aunt Rachel hissed again. Marcus had started to put his arm around her to get her to stop, but she kept plowing ahead.

“You never got accepted, did you, Dani?” she asked, that same horrible smirk on her face.

“Claire, honey, sit down,” Marcus said.

“What kind of accusation are you making, Claire? Of course she got accepted. I saw the letter last fall, and we’ve had it hanging on the fridge ever since,” Mom said. “I wanted to make a great dinner for you and your fiancé, and you come here and accuse your own cousin of something horrible—”

“Mom,” I said.

“She doesn’t lie,” Mom continued. “You know better than to think twice about Danielle’s character—”

“Mom,” I tried again.

“I would appreciate it if you would apologize to your cousin right—”

“Stop!” I yelled. Everyone turned to me at once. Claire still had her arms crossed, and her face was bright red. Mom’s mouth stayed open as she looked at me, and Marcus looked like a bewildered puppy.

“She’s right,” I whispered.

“What?” Mom asked. No one moved, and the silence that hung in the air stung my ears.

“I didn’t pass English, and Ohio State revoked my acceptance,” I said.

Nothing can describe the feeling of your mother’s disappointment and your cousin’s vehement hatred rolling over you all at once. The tears were already falling down my face, and I knew that if I didn’t leave soon my sadness and embarrassment would explode all over the dining room, leaving no survivors in its wake. I took another look around the table before I ran upstairs.

All the air seemed to seep out of my room, so to breathe again, I climbed out my window and onto the roof. I curled my arms around my legs, allowing myself to cry. Everything had finally fallen apart. Mom knew, Claire knew, and now I finally had to admit it to myself. I couldn’t pretend that it would work out or put off the discussion for another day. My

failure was here, in my face, and ready to punch me in the gut repeatedly. I pulled out my phone and called the one person who can solve any crisis.

“Zoe? Come pick me up? It’s an emergency.”

She was on her way before I finished my sentence.

of her thumb, probably nursing a new blister from her hot glue gun or another hole from a stapling incident. She has a bit of an addiction to crafting when she's stressed out or fighting with her mom, and I knew it couldn't be good when I saw her backseat. It looked like she stole the contents of Martha Stewart's house and threw it in the car in time to make a quick getaway. Thankfully, for both our sakes, we didn't press much out of each other until we pulled into the parking lot of our favorite diner: Moe's.

Moe's wasn't your average diner in the grimy, greasy way that is usually associated with diners. Moe's tried its hand at sophistication with black leather booths and beige walls, making for a very minimalist-with-a-touch-of-quirky restaurant. Denton, Ohio, didn't really scream cuisine capital, but the few places that we did have were nice. Denton's marketability expanded with new restaurants and stores after the community college was built.

We ordered a pot of coffee and an endless basket of fries to split from one of our favorite waitresses. When Moe's was really slow, Laurie would join us, but people crowded the diner on this Friday night. Even though school wasn't in session, the Denton Community College kids that either lived with their parents or worked in Denton over the summer partied hard together every Friday night. Moe's was just a pit stop.

"So what did the wicked witch do this time?" Zoe asked, popping a fry into her mouth.

I sighed. "She found out that I'd been lying about something. No, nothing you know about."

“A secret withheld from your best friend? This better be pretty damn good,” she said.

“It’s not that I didn’t want to tell you, it’s just . . . I didn’t really want to admit it to myself yet,” I said, looking down.

“Are you pregnant?” she asked.

I laughed. “Oh yeah, with all my sexual partners, I could feasibly be pregnant.”

“Just saying, you’re being really shady about it,” she said. “What the heck happened?”

I paused again, pouring myself some more coffee. “My acceptance to Ohio State was revoked after my final transcripts were sent in.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “What? How?”

“I failed Franco’s AP lit class,” I said.

Zoe’s face was still contorted. “Everyone and their dog was in that class. How did you fail?”

“I didn’t turn in my most stellar work, okay? I couldn’t think of anything to write about for the final paper; everything came out like jumbled mess, and it barely even made it in on time. You know how I’m terrible at working under pressure. I didn’t think Franco would *fail* me for one paper, but he said that I showed a ‘distinct lack of progress’ throughout the class ‘without asking for help,’” I said, air quotes included.

“How did you graduate high school without that credit?” she asked.

“It was AP—an extra class to get me directly into the program at Ohio State. My mom thought it would be this great way to get me ahead of the game, but it just screwed me over.

The grade made my GPA plummet, so they couldn't accept me on merit either," I said.

"And you didn't think to ask me for any help? Or your mom? She gets paid to help kids write letters, Dan," she said.

The same suffocating, air-compressing-in-my-lungs feeling started again, and I tried to focus on the salt and pepper shakers across the table from me. Breathe in four seconds, breathe out five. Hands flat on the table. Breathe in four, out five.

"Hey," she said, reaching over to take my hand. "I didn't mean to stress you out. I'm just a little shocked that your mom wouldn't have pulled some strings for you to get back in already."

I just shook my head, my voice falling down my throat and lodging itself in my chest. If I tried to talk now, everything would come out in a sloppy and incoherent sob.

Zoe tapped my foot under the table, urging me to look up from the salt and pepper and at her. "You could have told me about this, you know."

I nodded, keeping up with my breathing regimen throughout.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

I hadn't given much thought to what I'd do. I could always take the semester off, get a job in town, maybe at Moe's, and apply for the spring semester later. Or I could curl up in my bedroom and watch Netflix for the rest of my life while Noah made me PB&Js until I died. Either option sounded okay with me.

"I don't know," I said.

A loud group of Denton Community College partiers flowed in through the door behind us, a few of the girls singing a horrible radio pop song in about three different keys. Zoe poured more coffee while I people-watched. At the back of the group was a tall guy walking by himself. He looked familiar, but I hadn't had a chance to see his face yet. He played with his phone idly and looked at the group lazily, responding to his friends every once in a while.

"Danielle, you're hard-core staring," she said, snapping my focus back to our conversation.

"Sorry, I thought I recognized him," I said. Zoe turned around with the subtlety of a five-year-old, and the boy decided to take that moment to turn his head our way. His eyes were the first thing I noticed. They were a color of blue that you couldn't possibly forget. His face had changed, lost some baby fat, but Luke Upton was the same eleven-year-old boy who hid toads in my backyard playhouse and devastated me when he moved away.

She smiled at him foolishly, and I let my frizzy bangs fall in front of my eyes. When she turned around, her smile was even bigger. "Well, now I don't blame you for being a stalker."

"I'm not a stalker," I hissed. Even though it was loud in Moe's I felt the need to whisper, in case Luke could hear us somehow. "That's Luke Upton, my old neighbor. I didn't know he had friends here still."

Zoe turned around to look at him again, and I kicked her shin under the table. She cursed at me and faced me once more.

“He’s wearing a DCC T-shirt. Are you sure he doesn’t go here?”

I scoffed. “That’s impossible—his mom would have called my mom if they were back.”

“Maybe it’s just him,” she said.

“Maybe,” I said, still staring. I reached for the coffee pot but paused as his eyes met mine for an actual length of time. He gave me the look, like he knew who I was but couldn’t quite place me. All I could do was smile back as casually as I could manage.

His last friend got his food, and the group started to pack up. My face probably resembled a tomato. We kept our intense gaze as he left, and he stopped near our table. I almost thought he was going to say something—that he’d realized how he knew me, but he followed his band of party animals outside.

“A little unresolved neighborly business there, Dan?” Zoe asked once he left.

“No more than the average neighbor,” I said. At least I hadn’t thought so. The name Luke Upton hadn’t even crossed my mind in over seven years.

“Whatever,” she said. She smiled her wicked grin again and took a sip of coffee. “But I do have an idea for you that is completely unrelated to your ex-neighbor-boyfriend-hot-guy. Come with me to DCC this semester.”

“What?” I asked.

“Come be my community college buddy. I need moral support, and I don’t feel quite as selfish asking now,” she said.

“Do you think they’ll let me in—”

“Danielle, DCC will let you make up missing AP credits, so you could totally go to Ohio State in the spring if you finish the English class here. And then we can be freshmen together and save each other from the freshmen fifteen or be designated drivers—”

“Because we went to so many parties in high school,” I interjected. Zoe scowled.

“College is going to be different, Danielle, I can feel it. Can you imagine being at the same school again? That would be so much fun!” she said. Zoe and I did have a ridiculous amount of fun together, and though I never thought to consider DCC as an option since I’d been born and bred an OSU fan, I warmed up to the idea more as we discussed it.

“I guess it would be, but my parents were so set on Ohio State. It’s the Reevis-Cavanaugh legacy to go to OSU. I mean, my mom probably has an emergency plan in place. I’m sure she’s making calls right now to try and get me an appeal interview,” I said. “I have no idea how I’m going to tell my dad.”

“Well lucky for you, your bee-otch of a cousin already did the job for you. Now comes the asking for forgiveness and crying,” she said. “Maybe they’ll look at it like my mom does—it’s a character-building school that teaches you about responsibility. I’ve already taught Alyssa that there’s no use slacking off in school. If you want to leave Denton in our family, you have to get a scholarship. God, I wish I figured that out sooner.”

Zoe’s mom took care of Zoe and her little sister, Alyssa, by

herself, and had done so for as long as I knew them. While Sara Cabot rocked the whole single mom gig, money was always tight with them. Zoe had worked at Freeman's Market for her entire high school career to pay for her car and anything else she wanted outside her mom's budget (which included her enormous amounts of crafting supplies). Denton Community College opened doors for Zoe without piling on heaps of debt. Zoe has gotten over the fact that she couldn't feasibly afford even in-state colleges, but the fact that Zoe, who was destined to be a fashion/home décor designer, couldn't go to the school of her dreams wasn't fair.

"Is everything okay? Your car is a bit of a craft tornado," I said, recalling the explosion in her backseat.

"Oh yeah, just the same old stuff with Alyssa," she said. Alyssa had reached the same age as Noah, but where Noah channeled his fourteen-year-old angst into acting, Alyssa channeled hers onto Zoe and Sara. Her latest display of angst involved ruining one of Zoe's newly crafted tables and calling her a loser.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Nothing. I don't want to talk about it," she said. Zoe downed the last of her coffee in a large gulp and slammed the mug onto the table. "Let's do something fun, Danielle! I need a distraction, pronto."

My mind drifted back to Luke Upton and the group of pre-buzzed, hormone-filled college students undoubtedly heading to a party. The thought of going home right now made me want to disappear. Heck, we both wanted to avoid home right

now. A small part of my brain started chanting “party, party!” and the usually rational part of my brain agreed. Luke Upton aside, Zoe and I were going to have fun tonight against the odds.

“Did you see where Luke and his friends were going?” I asked.

“And the rebel is here to stay.” Zoe smiled.

It didn’t take much driving to find the mass of cars in front of an older house tucked into a tree-filled neighborhood. Zoe drove down the block and parked by the curb. We sat in her car for a minute, gathering our wits and deciding if the party was really in our best interest. Both of us were obviously past the point of wanting what was best for us. And, while that seemed like force enough to send us home, we both hopped out of the car and headed to the house party overflowing with kids.

We walked in the door and the crowd engulfed us. No one really danced like in movies; they all just stood around laughing and passing around cups. We’d been slammed into by passing people at least a dozen times, and Zoe screamed as beer splattered her feet. A kid in the room next to us yelled something and cranked up the music, inciting some casual head-bobbing.

“Ladies, no drink in hand? Everyone has a fun time at my party.” A skinny, gawky guy shoved cans into our hands and moved quickly on to his next victims. Zoe threw her head back and took a sip while I held mine more for show. If Zoe planned on going all-out on her first night of rebellion, I

needed to keep my can full. Zoe pulled her headband out of her hair and threw it into her purse, shaking out her curly mess of dark hair. She smiled at me again and grabbed my hand.

“Let’s go dance!” she said. Out on the patio and into the backyard of the house were the dancers. The bass of club-type songs beat loudly, and I wondered how their neighbors kept from calling the cops for noise disturbances. She pulled me onto the grassy area where sweaty bodies pressed up against each other, and I gagged as my arm wiped past a few of them. Zoe’s empty can hit the grass so she could dance, and when I matched her idea, mine splattered over my pants and on the couple behind us. The guy yelled, and I apologized profusely. Zoe just laughed.

“Don’t worry about that! Just dance!” she said. Where Zoe possessed the ability to dance in a semi-cool fashion, I did not. My go-to “robot in a grocery store” dance routine was not as big of a crowd pleaser as anticipated. To make matters more awkward, a guy came up and started to dance with Zoe and I was left to third wheel it up with them.

“I’m going to get another drink!” I yelled at her. She waved her hand to tell me to go, and she turned around to face the guy.

I wove my way back out of the bodies and into the house, where things had cleared out even more. I found the kitchen and looked around for cups but couldn’t find any. Seeing no other solution, I grabbed a beer can and started to dump its contents down the sink. After it was emptied, I swished

water in it before filling it up again with water and taking a drink. When I turned around I almost spit out all the water in my mouth.

“I think the point is to drink what’s already *inside* the can,” Luke Upton said.

I laughed a little. “Haven’t you heard? All the cool kids dig watered-down poison now.”

He actually laughed at that, making his face crinkle around those blue eyes. After his laughter subsided, he gave me the I-should-know-you look again. I weighed my options in this moment. Option 1: I could let him out of his misery and tell him who I was. This could lead to an outcome of either excitement or disappointment. In an effort to avoid his possible disappointment in realizing I was the eleven-year-old neighbor who had had a horribly obvious crush on him throughout our childhood, I went with Option 2: Pretend that I don’t recognize him either.

“Obviously,” he said. “And to think I was drinking mine like this all the time.”

I shifted, leaning up against the sink. “So do you go to DCC?” I asked.

“Starting this semester,” he said. “You?”

“Considering it,” I said. “Though I don’t know if this is quite extreme enough for me.”

“Oh don’t worry, I’ve heard Cody’s been known to throw some extreme sober parties too,” Luke said.

I took a sip of beer-water. “Really?”

“Nah. I’ve only lived here for a month, and I already know

the words ‘Cody’ and ‘sober’ don’t ever belong together,” he said.

It was my turn to laugh as he ran a nervous hand through his wavy white-blond hair. His muscle flashed as the sleeve of his DCC shirt fell down a bit, and I suddenly felt self-conscious about my outfit choice. His confused look persisted for another second before I changed the subject again.

“Since you’re the first person at DCC I’ve met so far, give me five reasons to come next year,” I said.

Luke whistled. “You’re putting me on the spot here!”

“I need a high dedication level if I’m really considering it,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Well . . . the classes are good, I guess,” he said, laughing. “Sorry, sorry, that was weak, I know. The kids are pretty cool. Um . . . the parties are awesome. The food’s decent, and of course, *I* go here.”

“Of course.” I smiled. “But you forgot to mention that Moe’s is a block away.”

He stared at me again. “I saw you there tonight.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, shrugging. “What a coincidence.”

“Yeah,” he repeated. We stared at each other for a long time before I was interrupted by the thought of drunken Zoe by herself outside.

“Thanks for the advice,” I said, walking away.

“Wait,” he said, grabbing my arm. “What’s your name?”

“I think you already know who I am,” I said, winking. “See you later, Luke.”

As I turned my back I let out the largest breath of my life.

Had I actually been flirty and mysterious with a guy? An extremely hot guy? Maybe DCC gave me a new sort of power over my helplessly awkward fumbling. Or perhaps the fates had shown me the good that my failure could bring. I never thought I'd say it, but Denton Community College seemed perfect.