

# one.

## **Mike Tate is currently more than a little**

obliterated. Something to do with the cheap beer and excellent pot. He's lounging poolside in between his girlfriend, Lisa, and his buddy, Jason, with the fire pit at his back. The August air is hazy and thick with heat, and Mike blinks blearily up at the tiki torches framing the sliding glass doors.

Cam Scott's house is bigger than it looks from the front. It's a split level, with a sprawling den and a finished basement that opens up onto a yard that's a good three-fourths of an acre, butting up against miles of Morrison Township woods. Add that to the fact that Cam's dad doesn't care how rowdy they get, so long as the police don't get involved, and it's the perfect place to party.

It's the last party of the summer—arguably the *best* party of the summer. Cam has spared no expense; there are twinkle lights and monster packs of Twizzlers, and Cam's older brother, Zack, is still grilling up burgers, even though it's going on three in the morning.

There's music blaring out of the sound system hooked up

underneath the deck. It's power pop, but Mike's in the mood to take it. His junior year looms on the horizon, just a few days away, and he's betting on it being pretty fucking sweet.

There are three things about his life that Mike wouldn't change—ever, for anything.

One: his little sister, Rosie. She drives him up a wall sometimes, but she's a trip, and she's started dressing like him, working holes into her jeans and scribbling black magic marker all over her tees. Mike totally approves.

Two: his crappy garage band. He loves those dudes. They're kind of the best, especially Cam. He's a dick, but he's as close to a brother as Mike's going to get.

Three: uh, three—something to do with Lisa. Lisa is the *coolest*.

He says all this to Lisa, flashing her a grin. "Everything else can just bite me."

## two.

**August ends abruptly, like someone sucker** punched it in the face and it went down sobbing like a little girl, segueing into a soggy, muggy September. Mike manages to survive his first week of eleventh grade at South Morrison High—barely, and mostly because of the awesomeness of Zack Scott and his homegrown weed. Zack's got a walk-in closet in his attic bedroom that acts as a makeshift greenhouse, also home to his three-foot iguana, Alfie.

After school lets out on Friday, Mike's mom heads off with Rosie—dinner and a trip to Build-a-Bear as a reward for not making any of the other kids cry during her first week of first grade—and he takes full advantage of the empty house with Meckles and Cam and a baggie of Zack's finest.

Mike likes to think he's popular. He's in a sort-of-band with three other popular dudes and Jason, who is barely cool by association, but they let him hang because he's the only one who knows how to even turn on the Casio. With all those switches and buttons, Mike always ends up getting it stuck on Extreme Gothic Organ or something.

Popularity's subjective, of course, but Mike maintains that he's pretty fucking awesome. "I am so fucking awesome," Mike says, lying upside down on his bed, head hanging off the edge. His arms are dangling, hands brushing the carpet. It feels rough—a slight, hot burn when he drags his knuckles along the pile. "Unlike you losers."

Cam's wearing a truly spectacular Hawaiian shirt with a purple-pink sunset and silhouettes of palm trees—it's one of the better ones in his collection, and admittedly works well with his shaggy haircut, which Cam calls his "sweet locks." He shoves Mike's shoulder with his foot. "Fuck you."

Mike says, "You wish," halfheartedly smacking at Cam's toes. Mike and Cam have been stuck with each other since kindergarten. In certain circles they're labeled as best friends, and they're even occasionally mistaken for actual brothers—both of them are on the brownish side of blond and on the short side of tall, but Cam is stocky and broad-shouldered, thicker where all Mike's parts are lean.

Cam shoves harder at Mike's side and Mike slips off the mattress and lands on his neck and elbows, knees against his chest, spine curving, stretched muscles just shy of painful. This is some weird flexibility he's got going on here. Mike's sure it should probably hurt more than it does.

He huffs and twists and falls onto his side, cheek mashed into the carpet. It smells funny. Maybe they should let up smoking weed in his room. Or maybe he should vacuum more than once a year.

He fishes his phone out of his pocket and thumbs on the display. 6:50 p.m. He's somehow lost four hours. His mouth tastes like dead things, his tongue feels like cotton, and he thinks that somewhere in there he had a conversation with Omar about Jason's fingers and Cheez-Its and those giant spiders from Harry Potter. *Shit*. He must have called Omar.

Meckles, a killer drummer and Mike's other best bro, is sprawled lazily in Mike's desk chair, his large body barely fitting between the armrests. Mike groans and tugs on Meckles' outstretched leg, fingers snagging his ankle. "You let me call Omar," he says. They're such *assholes*. Omar probably thinks he's the biggest dumbass; why does he always end up calling him when he's stoned?

Meckles snickers.

Mike rolls to his feet and sniffs his armpits. He's kind of rank, and he contemplates taking a half-assed shower before switching out his T-shirt for something that isn't three days old.

*Fuck it*. He's already late to meet Lisa.

"See you dudes later," he says, and Cam gives him a two-finger salute.

"I'm not actually your girlfriend," Lisa says, leaning across their table at the diner to flick Mike's ear right in the middle of his rant about how Cam and Meckles are such

douche bags for letting him call Omar at *work*. “I don’t have to put up with this.”

Lisa would technically be Mike’s best friend if Mike was the kind of guy who had girls for best friends. That sort of thing had stopped being cool back in sixth grade, and when it circled around into being cool again, Mike had already alienated Lisa with years of ignorance and sticking gum in her hair. Which, of course, all culminated with them making out at Cam’s last New Year’s party. There had been the excited buzz of the countdown and they’d been squished up next to each other on the couch at the time; that’s Mike’s only explanation.

“We’re dating, though,” Mike says as he dips a fry into his chocolate shake.

Lisa rolls her eyes. “I let you buy me dinner and sometimes we make out a little when we’re bored. That’s not dating.”

“Okay.” Mike bobs his head, rolling with it. “Then you can pay for the movie.”

“Deal,” she says, and then takes a huge bite out of her hamburger.

Mike pauses with a fry at his lips. “Wait, seriously?” They’re *really* not dating?

Lisa chews and chews and chews for as long as possible, head tilted, a pensive look on her face. Then she says, “I kind of want to ask Larson out.”

“Larson Kemp?” Mike says, incredulous. “The creepy dude who wears suspenders and hangs out with Casper

Jorgenson behind the gym, making craploads of origami frogs?”

Lisa smiles. “He’s so handsome.”

Mike kicks her shin under the table. “You’re full of shit.”

“I’m serious, Michael,” Lisa says, still grinning. “All you do is smoke up and forget to shower. I’m better off with someone I’m less likely to get a communicable disease from.”

Mike narrows his eyes at her. After the surprise kiss on New Year’s Eve, Lisa had made Mike apologize for shoving a salamander down her dress when they’d been eleven. She’d made him apologize in front of Meckles and *Cam*. It’s been eight months since then, since they reconciled their differences and started fooling around. Mike wishes he’d known that he and Lisa were apparently just friends with benefits—though, since they’ve never actually had anything remotely close to sex, Lisa would probably destroy him for just the implication. But now he feels like he’s wasted all this time. “Well,” Mike says, slumping lower in the booth. “This sucks.”

“It doesn’t. I just need you to stop complaining about Omar’s work schedule and Cam’s porn and Jason’s track practice,” she says. “It’s getting old. Maybe you need new friends.”

“Maybe you need a new face,” Mike says, scowling, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I’m not kidding about Larson,” Lisa says. “I bet he’d take me to cool German restaurants. Did you know his dad owns a boat?”

Mike says, slowly, “There are parts of your brain that are very scary.”

“The frogs are for performance art purposes, by the way,” Lisa says, eyebrows arched.

Freaky theater geeks. Mike doesn’t mind them, but he doesn’t think Lisa should date them. She’s hot in this statuesque, down-home, country-spun, meat-and-potatoes way. “Larson would have no idea what to do with your boobs.”

“Like you do?” Lisa shakes her head. “I need you to give up here,” she says. “We’ll be beffies, it’ll be great, we can gossip about boys.”

“I hate you.” He sighs, because he very obviously doesn’t hate Lisa.

“Whatever,” Lisa says. “Grab the check. I don’t want to miss the previews.”

Friday late-nights at the Franklin 23 are insane. It’s not the only movie theater in town, but it’s the biggest, and it’s directly behind the mall, so when all the stores start closing, everyone drifts westward.

It takes them twenty minutes to get through the ticket line, and Omar meets them at the snack bar with a bucket of popcorn and a blue raspberry Icee. He raises a mocking eyebrow at Mike.

“Save it,” Mike says, cheeks heating.

“It’s not that I don’t enjoy talking about the possibility of



Jason being an alien, dude.” Omar laughs. “Sometimes I even put you on speakerphone. The guys at the shop really get a kick out of it.”

Mike groans. Omar is super cool, as far as his friends go. He’s got a van, he plays a mean bass, and he gets along with pretty much everyone in the entire universe. There should be, like, tiny birds and woodland creatures following him around, only Mike is pretty sure Omar’s dad, an avid outdoorsman, would just shoot and eat them. Anyway, Mike should probably take it easy with the weed.

Lisa pokes his back. “I want Skittles,” she says.

“How can you still be hungry?” Mike asks.

“I’m not,” she says. “Skittles don’t count as food, duh.”

Mike opens his mouth to argue that Skittles are part of the four main food groups—candy, cheese, cookies, and hamburgers—but she palms the side of his face and says, “Skittles, Michael. Line number three is moving pretty fast.”

Mike grumbles, but does what she says. He’s pretty whipped, he acknowledges this, and it’s doubly sad now that apparently she’s not even his girlfriend. Cam’s gonna laugh his ass off.

By the time he gets to the counter, Mike’s decided to get himself an Icee, too, and water for Lisa, and a pack of Goo-bers, and he says, “I’ll have—” just as he looks up at the douche at the register. “Aw, hell.”

He’s gonna have to strangle Lisa later. Such a shame; she had a rich and fulfilling life ahead of her.

“Tate,” the cashier says. He’s got this gleam in his blue eyes, like Mike being alive is just hilarious.

Rook Wallace is evil. Too bad no one will believe Mike.

“Wallace,” Mike says tightly. He needs to learn how to kill people with his mind. No messy fingerprints, and Wallace would be out of his life forever. That would be pretty sweet.

Wallace says, “What can I get you?” with this massive, sparkling smile, and it takes Mike a second to remember how to talk.

“Skittles,” Mike says finally.

Wallace cocks his head while ringing him up. “That it?”

Mike nods. “Yeah.”

When he’s walking away, he totally kicks himself for being a pussy and forgetting his Goobers. He’ll just steal Omar’s Icee, and Lisa can suck it up—she didn’t specifically *ask* for water.

Lisa pouts anyway when he hands over her candy.

“You’re sharing,” he says. “I had to talk to *Wallace*.”

“I like Wallace,” Omar says, like he could ever hate anyone anyway. Mike has legitimately never even seen Omar get *angry* with anyone, even that time Meckles sat on his bass.

Mike points at him and says, “That’s because he isn’t after *your* soul.” The bitch of it is that Wallace is a nice guy. Hell, he’s even friendly with Jason, and Jason’s a massive tool. Mike just happens to rightly believe that Wallace is the spawn of the devil, because no one knows how Wallace used

to beat the crap out of him after Little League games when they were twelve. And no one will *ever* know. There's no way Mike is going to bring that up now; how embarrassing would that be?

Lisa ignores him and says, "Are we waiting for Meckles and Cam?"

Mike waves across the packed lobby toward Meckles. If his flaming red hair hadn't made him stand out, everything else about Meckles would have. Over six feet of solid muscle, currently making his way over to them in too much flannel and baggy jeans, like he time-traveled to modern-day Morrison from Seattle circa 1995. Mike would be ashamed to be seen with him, but Mike's an upstanding and giving guy. Plus, it's not like Cam's any better with his floral prints and his cargo shorts that he insists on wearing at least eleven months out of the year. He just pulls his socks up to his knees when he gets cold.

"Dudes," Meckles says. He bumps fists with Omar.

"Where's Cam?" Lisa asks.

"With Deanna." He makes a face. Meckles is thoroughly weirded out about Cam dating Deanna, mainly because she's Meckles' twin sister.

Mike approves, because Deanna is totally hot.

"Movie, guys, let's go," Omar says, jerking his head toward the ushers.

"No Jay?" Meckles asks.

"Damn it," Mike says. "Did anyone even call Jason?"

Omar waggles his cell phone in the air before tucking it into his back pocket. “He’s babysitting, he’ll meet us later. Now let’s go before all the good seats are taken. I’m not sitting by myself again. Or with Meckles.”

“Hey,” Meckles says.

Omar hugs the bucket to his chest and says, “You touch my popcorn, you die.”

When the movie lets out, they hang in the dimly lit side exit until security chases them off.

Lisa leans into Mike’s side and loops their arms together, watching Meckles charge into Omar, flip him over his shoulder, and take off toward Omar’s van. Omar isn’t a little dude. He’s smaller than Meckles—*everyone* is smaller than Meckles—but it’s still pretty impressive.

“Huh,” Mike says.

“What?” Lisa asks.

“Nothing.” It’s kind of chilly, so Mike twists his arm out of her grip and wraps it around her waist instead, pulling her closer, and wonders if it’s okay to still hold her like this. “Just. Larson Kemp? Really?”

Lisa shrugs. “His accent’s sexy. Plus, I’m thinking about joining drama, beef up my transcripts. I need to get more involved with school activities if I want to get into a good college.”

Mike sighs. Really, it’s a little tragic, all those estranged

years between them. He thinks their relationship might've been more fulfilling if they hadn't needed sucking face as a reason to hang out. It's kind of messed up, now that he thinks about it. And mostly proves that one or both of them have some emotional issues. Ugh.

He's not even really *hurt* about Lisa's decision; his ego's bruised more than anything else. That probably says a lot about what was really going on.

At the van, Omar calls back to them, "Yo, we're meeting Jay at the Lot!"

Lisa nudges their hips together. She says, "I've realized a few things in the past couple weeks, you know," steering him across the parking lot toward Omar.

Mike turns his head, giving her a questioning look. "What?"

"Just"—she shakes her head—"some things." Her eyes are somber in the dim light spilling over the parking lot. There's no breeze, and her dark hair falls mostly straight and heavy around her face, bangs cutting just above her eyes. She looks like maybe she isn't as okay with their so-called breakup as she says she is, and Mike wants to know *why*. He kind of feels like he did something wrong, but he can't think of what that could be.

Mike seriously *hates* talking about feelings, though. He swallows back all his words and forces a shrug. "Okay."

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The Lot is the stretch of cracked asphalt framing an abandoned Sears building at the rougher end of town—the Morrison ghetto, or what passes for a ghetto in suburbia. It's half lit by halogen spotlights—three of the five lights have been popped by douches with rocks, and it's not the kind of place where anyone would replace them. On the other end of the strip mall is a Payless and a Manhattan Bagel, but neither is open this late.

Cam and Deanna are sitting on a speed bump. Deanna has one red Converse on her skateboard, rolling it back and forth, but mostly her attention is on Cam and Cam's mouth.

"Ugh, gross," Meckles says.

"Girl Meckles!" Mike shouts, swooping in and wrapping his arms around their necks, leaning into their faces.

"Get *off*," Cam yelps, laughing. He flails and knees Mike in the thigh and sends an elbow into his armpit, while Deanna slaps both her hands at his chest.

"Had to do it," Mike says, stumbling backward and grinning at their expressions—Deanna's eyes are bright, belying her frown. "Meckles was about to seizure."

Cam sticks his tongue out at him, because Cam is approximately five years old.

It's not that crowded at the Lot for a Friday night. A couple scattered groups, some guys on bikes down at one end, a bunch of girls smoking in front of the Sears entrance.

Lisa tugs Deanna to her feet and Mike snags Deanna's skateboard, pushing shakily off toward the center of the Lot.

Lisa yells, “Careful,” after him, and he hears Omar groan and say, “He’s gonna brain himself one of these days.”

Like Mike is *anywhere near* as bad as Cam.

So, okay, it’s true that he’s got absolutely no sense of balance. There’s a very real reason why Mike’s own skateboard, a much-begged-for gift for his thirteenth birthday, is buried in the back of his bedroom closet.

He should probably *never* be on a skateboard, but he can’t help himself. Whenever he sees Girl Meckles’ board he goes for it, thinking maybe he’ll become magically better at it, but it never works. Whatever. It’s a flat surface, and he’s got all four wheels on the ground, and he likes to live a little dangerously. He *did* grow up with Cam, after all. Almost all of Mike’s bad decisions throughout the years can be blamed on Cam, despite him being his very best bro, and Omar’s usually the voice of reason that Mike should always listen to. Of course, more often than not, he doesn’t.

The stupidity of that is suddenly highlighted when one of the wheels catches on a piece of gravel. The snag probably would’ve hardly even shaken a normal person, but it pitches Mike forward into the asphalt right in front of four strangers, who are, Mike gleans from a passing glance midfall, all relatively hot and cool. Great.

Mike is bleeding from an elbow and his chin feels raw. He rolls over onto his back, the pavement damp against his T-shirt. He coughs a little, staring up at the sky, at stars

blurry with fuzzy nimbuses. He can hear Cam hooting in the distance.

“Are you okay?” a guy asks, and Mike blinks up at him, red faced. There’s a light behind the guy’s head that makes his hair glow like an angel.

It’s possible that Mike’s hit his head, too. “Maybe?” He pushes himself up so he’s leaning on stinging palms.

“Oh my god,” one of the girls says. “That was hilarious.” She snaps her gum, grinning.

“Thanks,” Mike says dryly.

The guy says, “Here,” and leans down to help Mike up. Mike starts to go a little dizzy as he gains his feet, and he appreciates the guy’s strong grip. Head wound is definitely looking likely.

“I’m good,” Mike says.

“Sure.” The dude has a nice smile, now that Mike can properly see his face. There’s a lip ring involved. Mike’s impressed.

“Nice, uh.” Mike catches himself just in time, because complimenting a guy on his grin, even with a few screws knocked loose, is pretty weird. He manages to end the comment with “shirt,” because he’s motherfucking smooth.

“For real?” another girl says, incredulous. She’s got ridiculous, tiny pigtails on top of her head, so Mike doesn’t feel like he has to explain himself to the likes of her.

Just when he’s sure he’s going to have to commit seppuku



to get out of this with even a shred of dignity intact, Deanna and Lisa wander over.

Deanna flips her board up, grabs it with one hand and tucks it under her arm. She frowns and says, “Mike, we don’t need a trip to the hospital tonight, okay? Stick to walking.”

Great, now Girl Meckles is berating him—like she has any business lecturing anyone, considering the shenanigans Cam gets into on a daily basis—in front of whoever these people are. It doesn’t really matter, since they’re not anyone he’s ever going to know, but he still kind of wants to melt into the pavement.

Mike shrugs tightly and lets Lisa thread their fingers together. She swings their arms as they walk, and Mike tries to shake off the weird, fuzzy feeling in his head. When he glances at her, Lisa’s staring at him, smiling a little.

“What?”

Lisa waggles her eyebrows. “Nothing.”

“Yeah?” He’s not buying it.

She laughs and ruffles his hair with her other hand. “You’re adorable sometimes,” she says.

“I’m adorable *always*,” he says, even though he’s still confused.

“Whatever. C’mon, Cam’s trying to convince Meckles to build him a bike ramp out of old fencing.”

“That’ll end well,” Mike says. Cam is nuts. Mike might

have, like, inner ear issues or something, but at least he doesn't attempt to jump lines of trash cans on his dirt bike and then act surprised when he ends up taking a header straight into a pile of garbage.

Anymore. Mike doesn't do that *anymore*.

Lisa nods. "It'll end fantastic, and then we can watch Deanna yell at him a lot."

"Hey." Mike lifts their twined hands and points off toward where Omar's van is. There's a pale guy loitering. He's like a ghost, with hair so light it blends into his skin. "Isn't that your boy?"

Lisa jerks her hand out of his and punches him in the middle of the spine and hisses, "Don't point, oh my god, are you *dumb*?"

"Ow," he says, twisting his back. He glares at her. "He's not even looking this way."

Lisa's cheeks are pink.

Mike sighs and tilts their heads close together. "Lisa Linnet Delany," Mike says in a low voice, "stop freaking out. Larson would be lucky just to breathe the same air as you. He'd probably wet himself if you said hi; you're totally in. Just remember that I'll hurt him if he ever does anything to make you cry."

Lisa makes a face. "He's over six and a half feet tall," she says.

"Are you calling me short?"

“No, I’m calling you average. I’m calling *him* freakishly tall and dreamy.”

Mike flicks his gaze to Larson and then back to Lisa. She’s got that weird smile on her face again, and it kind of makes Mike want to vomit. “I will accept this,” he says finally. “I’ll sic Meckles on him instead.”

“Michael,” she says, exasperated.

“Lisa,” Mike says, echoing her tone, “let me have this. I’m imagining Meckles getting some sweet punches in before Larson suggests a danceoff.”

Lisa bites her lower lip. “That would be kind of funny.”

“Hell, yeah.” He pushes her toward the van. “Now go talk to him about paper frogs and interpretive dance.”

She kisses his cheek and says, “I hate you.”

It’s getting even colder. Mike can almost see his breath. In front of the Payless, he sits on the edge of the cracked sidewalk next to Jason, his thin wrists resting on bent knees. There are flyers plastered all over the telephone pole next to him, and Mike reads them absently—three lost and founds, a couple roommates wanted, reminders about South Morrison High intramural baseball and soccer, open mic at the Beanery, an old *Vote for Fitzsimmons and Smith* sticker.

Jason’s humming something lame under his breath.

Mike jostles him with his elbow. “Dude.”

Jason blushes. “You have no appreciation for the classics,” he says.

“I have plenty,” Mike says. The Lemonheads, that’s a classic band. Peter Cetera, not so much. He shakes his head and says, “Chicago,” in this sad, disappointed way that always gets Jason scrambling to make him proud. Mike has no idea how or why this reaction started, but it’s almost as good a reason to keep Jason around as Casio management.

Jason pulls out his iPod and gives Mike one of the earbuds. “Fall Out Boy, Nada Surf, or Bleachers?” he asks.

“Nada Surf, man,” Mike says, then flops back on the cement to stare up at the stars.

## three.

### **Weekends for Mike are usually a whole lot**

of bumming around in his pajama pants. He has a part-time job at his uncle's cheese shop, but he tries to keep his schedule mostly during the week, after school, so working won't conflict with the long stretches of nothing—with a side of possible band practice—on Saturday and Sunday.

Mostly, he spends as much time as he can with his little sister, because she pretty much worships him, and that's always gratifying. Plus, it keeps his mom off his back for when he wants to actually do shit. Rosie drives him crazy sometimes, but she's a cool little dude. Occasionally Mike'll end up playing with Barbies, but for the most part they just make forts or race tracks for her Matchbox cars and hermit crabs, and Mike can deal with that.

“Mikey.”

“Rosalinda,” Mike says, snapping together another LEGO. They're building a castle, have been building a castle for over an hour; castle building is serious business. They have recommended directions, but really they're just making it as tall as possible.

“Sandwich is hungry,” Rosie says.

Mike looks up at her, eyebrow arched. She’s got her hands balled on her hips, short blond hair still spiked from all the mousse Mike had put in it earlier, only it’s kind of flat on one side now. “He is?”

“Yep.” Rosie nods. Sandwich is her latest imaginary friend. Before him there was Box Head, and before that, Poppy Carlos. Rosie routinely gets notes from her first grade teacher that tiptoe around the fact that she’s certifiably *weird*.

“Should we find Mom?” Mike gets to his feet, swiping his palms on his thighs. He groans and twists his back, because he’s been sitting in one position too long. He’s extra sore from the night before, and he’s gonna have some sick scabs on his arm.

Rosie purses her lips, like she’s really thinking about it. “Only if you think she’ll give us pizza.”

Mom’ll give them tuna salad sandwiches and applesauce. Mike weighs the pros and cons of leaving Mom out of the lunch equation. She’ll probably be pissed that they didn’t drag her out of her office to eat, and there’s a chance she’ll smell the Ellio’s before it’s even out of the oven, but Mike decides he’s willing to risk it if Rosie is.

They’re successfully stealthy—Mom must be in a writing groove. He hasn’t heard a peep from her since midmornning, when she’d stumbled out, zombie-like, for a coffee refill.

He pops in a movie while they eat. It's *Return of the Jedi*, because there's no arguing Rosie out of the Ewoks, but at least she's off her *Wizard of Oz* kick. They're just finishing up, empty plates on the coffee table, when the doorbell rings.

Mike stares in the direction of the front door from the couch for a minute. He doesn't feel like getting up. Maybe they'll go away.

"Door, Mikey," Rosie says, eyes glued on the TV.

It rings again.

Mom yells, "Door, Michael," from the back of the house, so Mike heaves himself to his feet with a sigh.

On the other side of the door is a tiny black-haired girl with a huge smile and bangle bracelets all the way up to her elbows. There's glitter all over her cheeks. She says, "Hi!" and, "Can Rosie come out and play?"

Mike doesn't know how the Wallace family can produce such a strange spectrum of offspring. There's Rook, the jockified douche, then Serge, the pale-faced, basement-dweller *artiste*, Lilith, who Mike's never actually heard talk, at least not in English, and finally Teeny, who is probably not actually named Teeny, but Mike's never heard her called anything else.

Teeny Wallace is deep in the throes of puppy love with Rosie. It's funny, because it's kind of obvious Rosie doesn't actually know what to do with her. They don't have a lot in common, so of course, they're basically inseparable.

“Rosie’s watching a movie,” Mike says, then waits to see whether Teeny will invite herself in or not. It could go either way.

She fidgets on the stoop, shiny, mary-janed feet pressing on top of each other, right hand playing with the hem of her pink skirt.

Mike surreptitiously scouts the front yard for signs of Rook Wallace. They live four houses down, and it’s theoretically possible that he’s using his baby sister to lure Mike out of the house for a good old-fashioned beat-down. Not that that seems to be his style, nowadays. Wallace is apparently far too freaking *nice* to beat the ever-loving crap out of him anymore. Mike doesn’t trust the peace. He doubts Wallace has had such a change of heart—more likely he’s just biding his time. Probably. It’s been a few years, but that doesn’t mean Mike should just let his guard down. Wallace has been smiling at him a lot more lately, which probably means he’s just waiting for the perfect time to eat all the flesh from his bones.

Teeny finally lets out a breathy sigh and says, “Okay,” and then just stands there, staring up at him with her huge, baby deer eyes. She’s *adorable*. He doesn’t get how she can be related to Wallace.

Mike steps aside and says, “C’mon in,” waving a hand toward the den.

Rosie doesn’t acknowledge her beyond shifting over when Teeny drops to sit on the rug next to her.



Mike sighs. They're quiet now, but he knows sooner or later Teeny's going to make noise about playing house or bakery or Candy Land, and Rosie's going to say no. And then they're going to get into a screaming fight, complete with tears. Rosie will stomp upstairs and slam her bedroom door, and Teeny will make her way huffily home and come back an hour later with an entire sketchbook filled with these I'm-sorry drawings that Mike's pretty sure are supposed to be cats and teddy bears and ducks but basically all just look like dragons and weird cheese. This happens at least once a week.

Before anything like that can even start, though, Cam texts Mike: *practice @ meckles*

He pokes his head into his mom's office to let her know he's taking off, then heads out to meet the guys.

Mike drives his mom's car over to Meckles'. Since she basically works from home, it's easier to just use hers—on the rare occasions that he can't get Omar or Cam to swing by and pick him up—than it is to save up for a car of his own.

Band practice is always in Meckles' basement. It used to be in Meckles' garage, but then his dad started getting pissed off that he could never park his car inside, so they migrated, because they're easygoing dudes. Mike's not sure Meckles' dad is thrilled with them being under their kitchen

either, but the most he does is complain about them leaving drinks on the felt of his pool table.

Mike says hi to Meckles' mom as he lets himself in the back door, and then he slinks down into the basement, guitar case hefted over his shoulder.

"Hey," he says when he hits the bottom of the stairs. It's muggy, and smells like feet and ass.

Jason is folded up on the floor, playing with something on the back of his keyboard. Meckles is absently tapping out a rhythm on his snare drum. Cam, a white, soft-brimmed cap mashing down his blond curls, is sprawled on the beaten, sagging couch, singing Bon Jovi.

"Are we really practicing today, or did you just call me over to fuck off?" Mike says. He drops his guitar case on Cam's stomach and Cam gives him a dirty look. "Where's Omar?"

"Here."

Mike bends down to peek under the pool table. Omar waves at him from the floor, where he's lying on his back, bass resting on his belly.

"So," Mike says, straightening back up, "fucking off, I can dig it."

Cam rolls his eyes. "Just get your shit set up."

Omar shimmies out and gets to his feet. He tugs the strap of his bass over his head and glances meaningfully at Mike, like he hasn't been wasting just as much time staring at the underside of the pool table.

Mike has never been able to successfully one-up Omar, though, so he just sighs and starts lugging the amps off of the far wall, unrolling all their wires.

“Oh, hey, check this out,” Cam says, sitting up, “I came up with a sweet name for us.”

“I’m vetoing anything that has the words *assclown* or *pussylicker* in it,” Omar says absently. He’s fiddling with his bass, humming occasionally under his breath.

Cam’s face falls. Cam is nothing if not extremely predictable.

Mike turns to Meckles and says, “Seriously?” because Cam has an actual, real-life, totally cool girlfriend, and Mike has no idea how that happened. “You let your sister *date* that?”

“I don’t *let* Deanna do anything,” Meckles says, offended. “Have you seen her?”

Deanna has Meckles’ height, half a foot taller than Cam, and she’s gorgeous and boy-hipped. She also shaves the sides of her head in the summer and designs most of her own clothes, held together by safety pins instead of thread.

“She’s scary,” Cam says with a dreamy smile.

Jason plays the opening notes to “Axel F” on his keyboard. Mike’ll never admit it out loud, but Jason is occasionally his favorite.

• • •

“What’s up with you and Lisa?” Omar asks. He’s caught Mike outside, sitting on the edge of the Meckleses’ concrete patio, smoking a cigarette. It’s spitting out, a fine, soaking mist, but there’s an awning, so only Mike’s sneakers are getting wet.

“Nothing,” Mike says.

Omar pretty much has zero bad habits, because Omar is awesome. Mike’s mom calls him a good influence. He’s squeaky clean, almost to the point of nerd. Like Jason, if Jason had a shaved head and looked as super fly in sunglasses. Mike kind of wants to be Omar when he grows up.

“That’s what I meant,” Omar says.

Mike shrugs. “We’re fine.”

“Right,” Omar says, like he doesn’t believe him. “Cam says you broke up.”

“Yeah, well.” Mike deflates; the *Cam’s a bitch* is silent but there. “Maybe.”

Omar makes a sympathetic sound and swings an arm over Mike’s shoulders.

Mike’s starting to feel like a girl here, but he leans into Omar anyway.

“Apparently we weren’t really dating, though,” Mike feels compelled to say. The weight of the words could go either way—he’s kind of upset that Lisa hadn’t been taking him seriously, but also relieved that nothing got messy, that apparently there wasn’t anything there to get messy *about*.

Omar doesn’t agree or disagree, which Mike appreciates.

He just says, “Okay,” and then shoves Mike off the edge of the patio. “Come on, Mom Meckles is making sandwiches.”

Later that night, holed up in his room, Mike makes a list. A list to make himself feel better and to organize his thoughts, which he does sometimes. No one knows about his lists, because Cam would laugh his ass off and Jason would want to start talking about *feelings*, like the gigantic dork he is. Mike’s lists are private.

So he makes a pro and con list about the breakup, and sees that the pros far outweigh the cons: 1. He can hook up with other people. 2. He still gets to hang out with Lisa. 3. He’ll save money. 4. He doesn’t have to do whatever she says (although, who is he kidding, he’ll probably do whatever she says *anyway*).

The con side mainly consists of really, really, really hating asking girls out. He doesn’t actually *want* to date. He’s been through that already. It’s mostly psychologically painful, and the mutual groping is—okay, it’s damn well worth it, he’s a guy, but it’s still awkward as fuck sometimes. That’s why the thing with Lisa had been so convenient, but even Mike thinks that’s a lousy reason to stay together. Or, like, beg Lisa to take him back.

Lisa would just make sad faces and then kick him in the balls.

Mike flops back on his bed and stares at his ceiling. This

all would've made more sense, he thinks, if Lisa'd had any actual contact with Larson before this. As far as Mike knows, they don't even have any classes together.

He sighs, closes his eyes, and then pops them open again when he feels a weight dip the edge of his bed. Rosie is staring at him, wearing her favorite pair of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pajamas. The kid's got the *stealth* of a ninja. She also has Godzilla's shell in her fist, and the poor little guy has all his legs out, searching for land.

She says, "I can't find Professor Cheese," and her eyes are red and watery. It's the fifth time Professor Cheese has gotten out of the aquarium and they *always* find him, but Rosie has a strange and strong attachment to her hermit crabs, since Mom won't let them get a dog. Mom's written three books: *Professor Cheese's Great Escape*, *Professor Cheese and the Unhelpful House Mouse*, and *Professor Cheese Is Scared of the Dark!* Sometimes Mike thinks the only reason she had kids was for inspiration.

"He'll turn up," Mike says, but Rosie looks like she's either going to start wailing or hitting him in the arm with her fist—she's got some power when she's all wound up.

"Michael." He glances over at his doorway where his mom is leaning tiredly against the frame. She has her ratty bathrobe pulled on over her nightgown, and a thick headband is holding her hair off her face, so Rosie must've gotten her out of bed, too. She's frowning at him, like maybe she doesn't

already know he's going to help. Like he actually *wouldn't*, with both of them looking at him like that.

He sighs and says, "Put 'Zilla away and we'll go look around the kitchen." Twice, they've found him on his way out to the back porch.

As Mike crawls around the hard tile floor, calling for the Professor, he thinks about how all the women in his life seriously suck, and how he can't seem to say no to any of them.

## four.

### **Lisa joins drama on Monday.**

Also on Monday, Mike gets tricked into joining SMH intramural baseball. Although, not exactly tricked, but Theo Higgins asked him, and nobody ever says no to Theo Higgins. Well, Lisa does—he's been asking her out at least once a week since freshman year—but Mike has never been able to. He's got these huge eyes and he's basically perfect and adorable and pocket-sized. He's *wee*. He also kicks really hard and used to steal Mike's lunch money all through elementary school, but that's beside the point.

Anyway, he said yes, and he expects it to all be very *High School Musical 2*, considering the crowd of dancers Higgins normally hangs with. Naturally, Mike expects his friends to play, too.

And, okay, Mike does have some athletic experience. His and Cam's Little League baseball team, the Lowell's Hardware Cougars, went to state two years in a row, and he knows he's still got a strong swing. He'd actually thought about trying out for the high school junior varsity team freshman year, and even made it all the way onto the practice



fields, but then Wallace, former star pitcher for the Scalzetti Assorted Meats Rams—and the Cougars’ biggest rivals—had shown up, and Mike didn’t want to deal with that. He’d slipped out of tryouts without looking back.

At least Wallace won’t be anywhere near him this time, since varsity players aren’t allowed to participate.

There’s a farm park across the street from the high school, with a four-mile path that winds through woods and cornfields and rented vegetable gardens. The track and field team uses it every day for practice. In the afternoon, while waiting for Cam to get out of detention, Mike and Meckles lounge in the grass by the park’s tiny gravel parking lot, giving Jason crap for whatever he’s doing that day—sprinting, long jumps, baton twirling—which he apparently has to wear these amazingly tiny shorts for.

Jason isn’t really all that tall—he’s shorter than Mike—but he’s mostly skin and bones, with long, lean legs, so he manages to look like a freaky praying mantis, anyway.

“Bones with sleeves!” Meckles yells as Jason runs past, and Mike stifles a laugh with the side of his wrist, because Meckles is *lame*, what the hell, but that’s still funny as shit.

Jason flips them off. He’s learning. Before joining their unnamed band of awesomeness he’d been an emo loser who wrote bad poetry and listened to M83 in the dark. Probably. Mike may be assuming a little here, but he’s sure there was a terrifying amount of loneliness that Mike has since saved him from. Mike’s cool like that.

Mike knocks his elbow into Meckles and says, “We’re playing intramural baseball. Starts next week.”

“What?” Meckles goes pale—he has a pathological fear of organized sports.

Mike grins at him. “I signed you up. I’m not doing that shit alone.” He’d also signed up Cam and Omar, but they won’t care.

Meckles looks like he’s going to have a heart attack. “*What?*” he says again, only with his hand clutching his chest.

Mike thinks it’s hysterical. “Don’t worry, we can get drunk first.”

“No we can’t,” Meckles says. “I’ll throw up. We’ll all throw up, it’ll be anarchy.”

“I don’t know, I think it’ll be pretty cool,” Mike says.

“What’ll be cool?” Lisa says, dropping down on the grass next to Mike. Her book bag hits Mike in the shoulder, and Mike stares at her.

“What the hell are you *wearing?*” he asks, ignoring her question. Lisa has some sort of butt-ugly vest on over her T-shirt. There are hideous buttons of varying shapes and sizes all down the front.

She straightens up and smiles at him, tugging on the ends of the vest. “Larson made it for me. It’s macramé.”

“It’s—I don’t even know, it’s like you let Meckles throw up all over you,” Mike says. He tilts his head. With the sun shining on it, it looks like it’s made out of every possible shade of puke brown imaginable.

Lisa ignores him and narrows her eyes at Meckles. “You *do* look like you’re going to hurl. What’s up?”

“Intramural baseball,” Meckles says weakly.

Lisa continues to look confused.

Mike says, “You realize that Meckles hasn’t participated in gym for over two years, right?”

“How is that even possible?”

“I had a panic attack once. Mr. Farragut thought I was dying. He lets me run laps instead of playing—” Meckles cuts off, like he can’t say the actual words out loud, and ends up miming with wiggly fingers.

Mike says, “Is that supposed to mean organized sports? Because it looks like a puppet show about explosions and gay sex. Or jazz hands, which is basically the same thing.”

Lisa makes a choking sound, hand over her mouth, eyes dancing.

Mike claps Meckles on the back. “Man up, dude.”

Meckles says, “If I keel over and die it’ll be all your fault.”

“No one’s ever died from a little friendly competition,” Lisa says, smiling.

Meckles doesn’t look convinced. Mike can’t wait until he gets him out on the diamond. He knows there’s no way Meckles will actually *play*, but it’ll totally be funny trying to make him.

• • •

Mike wakes up with his face mashed into Cam's rug. His eyes are gummy and there's a crusty film trailing away from his mouth from dried drool. He groans as he rolls over to blink up at the ceiling. Something not good is happening inside his body.

Then the door bangs open and Cam's brother, Zack, says, "Rise and shine, chuckleheads," and Mike winces and tries not to throw up all over himself.

What the hell *happened* last night?

"Come on, princess." Zack nudges Mike with the toe of his sneaker. "You'll be late for school."

There's a crash, and then Mike hears Cam say something about his liver and death and eating Zack's face off.

Zack just laughs and flicks on the overhead light.

"You're dead to me," Mike says, tossing an arm over his eyes. When his brain stops trying to ooze out of his skull, he thinks back to the night before. He remembers following Cam home after his detention and finding a note Cam's dad left saying he was working late along with a twenty for pizza. He remembers—he makes a face—he remembers Natty Light and Vladimir vodka. He always forgets how truly shitty he feels after cheap alcohol. Zack is such an asshole for corrupting minors, and on a school night, too. At least he's pretty sure he called his mom to tell her he was sleeping at Cam's before Zack cracked open the liquor. He doesn't have a curfew, but he can really only get away with this during the week if he's staying with the Scotts.

Mike practically crawls down the stairs and into the kitchen, where Cam and Zack's dad is making bacon, because Cam and Zack's dad is awesome.

Mike's dad is not a real person. Or, well, obviously he's a real person; it's probably more accurate to say Mike's biological dad is not a real dad. He's a sperm donor. And not in the derogatory, absentee father way, but in the actual anonymous sperm donor way, as in how Mike's mom is a single, professional woman who happened to want babies. Mike is pretty okay with this.

It helps that Cam and Zack's dad had some sort of cosmic-sibling-slash-best-friend insta-bond with Mike's mom after they first met, back when Cam and Mike were in preschool. Now he's Mike's honorary uncle "Jem," a mangled form of James that only Mike's allowed to use—only fair, since Cam's called Mike's mom Al since they were six and he had trouble with just about every syllable of Allison.

Zack sits down at the breakfast bar with a mug of coffee, smirking at him. He looks coolly put together for someone who did at least four shots of vodka with them last night. There are no shadows under his eyes, and his back and shoulders are straight under his work polo. He looks clean-cut and handsome and not at all like someone who had dared Mike to, if he remembers correctly, down all those expired wine coolers. Yuck.

Mike would glare at him, but he doesn't think his head

could take it. Instead, he just reaches over and swipes Zack's coffee.

Zack doesn't put up much of a fight, though, because despite being a cheery, asshole morning person, he's inherited most of the other awesome Scott genes that seem to have skipped Cam completely. He's usually one of Mike's very favorite people.

Uncle Jem raises an eyebrow at Mike, but thankfully doesn't comment on his obvious hangover. He just slides a plate of crispy, greasy, delicious bacon his way. If only he knew how much alcohol Zack had bought for them.

Cam shuffles in, groaning like a zombie, and Uncle Jem wordlessly pours him a large glass of orange juice.

"You're a god among men, Pop," Cam says. After downing the whole thing, his eyes are almost fully open.

One corner of Uncle Jem's mouth curves up. He says, "First bell is in fifteen minutes, and I'm not writing you a note."

"Shit," Cam says.

They're both wearing the same clothes they wore the day before. Mike runs a hand through his scruffy, dirty-blond hair and says, "Fuck it, let's go."

Mike is almost 99 percent certain Meckles carried him to his second period class. He wakes up with a start when Mrs. Saunders slaps her copy of *Hamlet* on the edge of his

desk, and he could have sworn Dougherty had been shoving theorems down his throat only minutes before.

Mike presses his palms into his dry eye sockets.

Someone chuckles, and Mike glares blearily over at Wallace. Because Meckles apparently dropped him off right in the front row next to *Wallace*. Awesome.

Meckles is dead to him. He mouths *You're dead to me* across the room to where Meckles is grinning smugly by the windows. Meckles, Zack, that lunch lady who refuses to save him the fresh soft pretzels from A lunch: all dead.

“You look like shit,” Wallace says, grinning like this is making his entire day.

Mike grunts, trying not to think about the fact that Meckles probably hefted him down the hall in a fireman's carry. That's only slightly less embarrassing than being cradled bridal style.

This day just keeps getting better.

Normally, Mike sits in the back of English with Mo Howard. Meckles never sits with him, because Meckles is in love with Mrs. Saunders, and he likes to be up front where he can raise his hand as much as possible and gaze at her with these giant moon eyes—even though he says it's because he likes *English*. This could be true, given that Meckles has trouble speaking to anyone of the opposite gender besides his sister and Lisa, and even Lisa's iffy.

Mike twists around in his chair to search out Mo. They've done many an English project together—solid C work, and

Mike doesn't complain. Mo gives him a questioning look, gesturing toward Wallace, and Mike gives her a half shrug. He has no idea why Wallace isn't complaining about him sitting there, either.

He's kind of waiting for Chris Leoni to kick his ass for being in his seat, too, but all that happens is Wallace thunks a bottle of water down in front of him and says, "Drink this."

"Why, is it poisoned?"

Wallace looks at him funny. "No."

Mike isn't convinced. "Did you spit in it?"

"A little spit won't kill you," Wallace says. At Mike's frown, he rolls his eyes. "It's not even opened, Tate. Just drink the damn water."

Mike sullenly twists the cap off, breaking the seal, and takes a sip. When he tries to give the bottle back, Wallace shakes dark hair out of his eyes and says, "Keep it."

Mike kind of wants to peg the bottle at Wallace's head, but the sad fact is that water is delicious, and when Wallace brandishes a tiny Advil container, Mike starts seriously considering making declarations of love and marriage. It's pathetic, Mike's ashamed of himself, even as he says, "Gimme," and wrestles the Advil out of Wallace's hands.

"You're welcome," Wallace says, amused.

Mike says, "If I die later, everyone will know it was you."

• • •



“This just in,” Cam says at lunch, sitting down next to Deanna and dropping an arm across her shoulders, “I’m the coolest.”

Mike flips him the finger. “Why does this week suck so hard?”

“Because you think listening to Cam is a valid life choice,” Lisa says.

Cam points at himself and says, “Coolest.”

“Wallace keeps smirking at me,” Mike says. He’s totally not whining; he’s just frustrated. Wallace has this complete asshole-ish look that he gives Mike when nobody else is watching. Like Mike owes him all his unborn children for three measly tabs of Advil. Like Wallace is really going to *enjoy* collecting all his unborn children.

“Mo Howard said you were all over Wallace in English,” Cam says. He mimes giving a blow job and Mike really wants to punch him.

Instead, Mike goes completely red and says, “Shut up.”

Lisa pats his arm. “It’s okay, Michael,” she says soothingly, and Mike doesn’t bother asking her *what’s* okay, because he’s not sure he actually wants to know.

## five.

### **On the second Saturday in September,**

Mike wakes up to Lisa leaning over him, long dark hair sweeping forward, shading her face like some sort of death wraith, only with pretty eyes. His mom must have let her in. It's happened before, but it's doubly annoying now that they're not dating anymore.

"Two words for you, Tate," she says, poking him in the ribs. "Student council."

Mike rubs both his hands over his face and yawns noisily. "What?"

"Student council. I want to be our class president."

Mike knows Lisa is saying actual words, but they're not making any coherent sense. "What? Since when do you care about our class?"

Lisa moves to the edge of the bed as Mike struggles into a sitting position, propping his back up against the wall. "Since I looked over all my college applications," she says. She ticks off her fingers. "St. Mary's, NYU, Duke, Georgetown, they're looking for well-rounded straight-A students. All I've got right now is Honor Society and drama."

Mike stares at her. She looks pretty serious. “Okay,” he says. He’s still not sure why she had to wake him up with this information at—he glances at the clock—nine thirty in the morning. He’d been up until three with Cam. This is *way* too early.

Lisa says, “You need to be my running mate.”

Mike laughs. “You’re on crack, no way am I running for *vice president*,” he says.

“You have to!” she says. “We can sell you as gay, it’ll be edgy.”

Seriously, they’re *real words*, he’s pretty sure of that, but it’s all gobbledygook to Mike. He pinches the bridge of his nose. “But I’m not gay. And even if I *were* gay, I wouldn’t be campaigning with it.”

Lisa arches an eyebrow. “C’mon, Mike.”

Mike drops his hand onto his lap. “What?”

She leans in close again, their foreheads almost touching. “Michael,” she says meaningfully. Her eyebrows are pretty much all the way up under her bangs.

“*What?*” He’s not *gay*. You can totally admire another dude’s shoulders or legs or *shirt* and not be gay. So he thinks Zack’s a good-looking guy. So what?

“It’s cool to be gay,” Lisa says.

“It’s not cool to be gay. It’s kind of cool to *act* gay.” He knows this. Every time Cam gets up in Mike’s space during shows with the band—which, let’s face it, have only happened during house parties in Cam’s massive backyard—all the

girls scream. It'd be embarrassing if it wasn't sort of amazing instead. "Or it's cool to be gay in theory. Or it's cool to be bi, in the sense that you date girls, but girls can imagine you making out with other guys if they want."

Lisa makes a face.

"Yeah, see," Mike says. "Not actually cool."

She gives him a skeptical look. "So you're freaking out."

"No! There's no freaking out here. Nothing to be freaked out *about*." He thumbs his chest. "Not gay."

She gets a shrewd, mean gleam in her eyes, like maybe she's about to take down a baby antelope. Mike's seen this look before, but usually it's aimed at Cam or Theo Higgins. "Says the dude who made out with Junior Meat King."

Mike freezes. Like every molecule in his body just went terrified. He makes a *What?* sound, but his throat is kind of stuck closed.

"You and the little sausage man, remember?" She crosses her arms over her chest, smug. "Last month at Cam's end of the summer blowout. Full-on making out, with tongues, and hands in private places." Her eyes go hazy and she licks her lips. *Gross*.

"No way," Mike manages. Josh Jacob Scalzetti, son of the Butcher of Morrison? "No fucking way." Granted, he doesn't really remember much of that night, but he sure as hell would've remembered *that*, right?

Lisa eyes him askance, a small smile curling the corners

of her mouth. “Are you more upset that you made out with J. J., or that you made out with a boy?”

Mike ignores her, palming his face in utter shame. J. J. goes to Catholic school across town, thank God, but—“Who else saw this?”

“Uh, everybody?”

Which is a lie, because if Meckles or Cam saw that shit, it wouldn’t have taken this long to get back to him. Mike slides his hand down to cover his mouth and stares at her.

Lisa throws up her arms. “Fine. A bunch of girls from Our Lady, Rook, me, Jason—”

“*Jason?*” Mike says. Then, “Wait, *Wallace?*” Fuck. He pulls the covers up over his head and groans, burrowing back down into his bed. “Kill me.”

“It’s not a big deal,” she says. “Just saying, you shouldn’t be so quick to dismiss the bi thing, you know, you looked like you were having fun.”

Mike rips the covers back, bolts upright again, and says, “J. J.’s an *asshole!*” J. J.’s a slick, pansy-ass *preppy*. He wears sweater vests and ties and khakis even when he’s *not* in school. There are fraternization rules, and Mike broke about fifty of them. Oh god, his *tongue* had been in J. J.’s *mouth*.

“I like what you’re focusing on here,” Lisa says, nodding.

“Why was he even at Cam’s?”

Lisa sighs. “It was a party, Michael, I’m pretty sure *everyone* was there.”

“And also—also, why are you just telling me this now? That was over three weeks ago.”

“That’s really not important,” Lisa says, visibly exasperated now. She’s probably annoyed that they’re off topic, but seriously. *Seriously*.

“Are you kidding me? Up until last week you were my *girlfriend*. Oh shit, Lisa, everyone thinks I’m gay, don’t they?” This explains why Wallace has been extra-specially evil since school started. Usually he’s just an asshole to Mike behind everyone’s back—they think he’s so nice and sweet and thoughtful, when really he’s just a giant, back-stabbing poser—but lately he’s been a *smirky* asshole. No wonder.

“I told you, it’s not a big deal,” Lisa says.

Mike pushes back the blankets and swings his legs over the side of the mattress. “I don’t know.” It looks like the end of the world from where Mike’s sitting. If he squints a little.

“Okay, look. *Look*,” Lisa says. She slides onto her feet, stands in between his knees and places her hands on his shoulders. “It’s done. Now, Mike—now, you’ve got to own it.”

Mike says, slowly, “Own it.”

“Yeah. Own your gayness,” she says. “And then run for student council with me.”

Mike doesn’t know if he can own something he isn’t sure how he got, or if it’s even his. What if J. J. took advantage of a hot-sexy babe hallucination? But at this point he’ll look like a douche trying to deny it. “Can we just . . . not talk about it ever again?”

Lisa shrugs. “We could try.”

Mike falls back and stares up at his bare ceiling. “Fine.”

It isn't until later that Mike realizes the greater implication. Not that he's made out with a guy, with *J. J.*, of all douche bags, but that he'd been dating *Lisa* at the time. He gropes for his cell on his bedside table and calls Lisa and says, “Did you break up with me because I cheated on you?” as soon as she picks up.

There's some ominous silence. And then, “Mike?”

“Shit,” Mike says, because that's Karin answering Lisa's phone, and Lisa's older sister is frightening. She used to be really good at making Mike eat mud. He yelps, “I'm gay!” and hangs up, and Lisa calls him back five minutes later, laughing her ass off.

She can't even make coherent conversation. Mike stays on the line for all of it, even when he hears Karin cackling in the background, because this whole mess is his own damn fault. At least neither one of them appears to be gearing up to kick him in the balls. This is a good thing.

Finally, she says, “I didn't break up with you because you cheated on me, Mike, geez. We weren't even dating.”

Mike doesn't really see it that way, but whatever. He sighs. “I can't believe you waited so long to bring this up. You knew I didn't remember anything.”

Lisa says, “Mostly.”

She *totally* knew he didn't remember the whole J. J. thing. There is no way she would have respected his boundaries about that.

"I was waiting to use it on something really good," Lisa admits.

"Like blackmail."

"Or not," Lisa says. "I just wanted to savor the look on your face."

"Lisa—"

"Do you not remember flirting with that guy at the Lot? Or the way you stare at Zack's ass, like, all the time?"

"You lie, I do not," Mike says. Zack has a good ass, that's a totally objective observation. How did this conversation get so out of control?

Lisa sighs. She says, "Look, Mike," then pauses, and Mike can picture her rubbing her forehead, her eyes closed. "Look. I'd rather just be your friend, okay? And I really *do* like Larson. And you have some issues to work out." She sounds resigned, but not unhappy.

"Okay," Mike says, drawn out, still not entirely clear on everything Lisa is and is not saying.

"You are, however," Lisa says cheerfully, "running for VP in order to make up for breaking my fragile female heart."

Mike says, "Bullshit," but he's got little to no conviction in his voice.

"You're the best friend a gal can have," she says.

Mike's life is fucked up. He rolls his eyes up to his ceiling



and makes a big decision. A huge, important decision, because he figures otherwise he might go crazy.

“I’m going clean for a while,” Mike says. “I need a clear head to figure this all out.”

Lisa makes a weird sound.

“What?” Mike says, defensive. He can be sober. He doesn’t *have* to get high. Or listen to Cam.

Lisa says, “I’m pretty sure that’s the most intelligent thing you’ve ever said.”

“I’m hanging up now,” Mike says.

Lisa makes kissy noises and hangs up first.

“I am completely whipped,” Mike says, heaving his messenger bag onto the lab table.

“By everyone, it’s pathetic,” Omar says absently, pulling out his chemistry book.

He’d argue that, but it’s so true. Adults, kids, guys, girls, hermit crabs . . . Mike is a ginormous pushover. He sees this now with crystal clarity. He slumps into his seat next to Omar and sighs.

Omar looks over at him curiously. “That’s not necessarily a bad thing, you know,” he says.

Mike blinks at him. “You just called me pathetic.”

“All right,” Omar smiles, “more like endearing.”

“Dumb,” Mike says. He stares morosely down at the chipped black tabletop. “So fucking dumb.”

“I’ll say.”

Mike jumps a little when Wallace’s hip hits the side of their table. *Jesus.*

“Good picture of you, though,” Wallace says, holding one of the class election flyers Lisa’s been spreading around. He smiles with half his mouth. It’s Wallace’s charming, self-deprecating smile that always makes Lisa—*Lisa*, who makes distasteful noises around *kittens*, because she clearly has the soul of a hardened Viking—sort of all-around melty.

Mike is immune. He opens his mouth for a snappy, if not exactly witty comeback when it suddenly hits him that Wallace—his archnemesis, Rook motherfucking Wallace—has seen him *suck face with J. J. Scalzetti.*

Wallace’s brow furrows. “You okay? You just went—white.”

Omar jostles his arm. “Mike?”

Mike weighs the odds of getting sick all over the Bunsen burner if he tries to answer him. Finally, he manages a raspy “Fine.”

He is so fucked.

“I hope you’re happy,” Mike says to Lisa. They’re in the magazine room of the school library. It’s empty except for them, a stack of flyers, and half a dozen pieces of poster board.

“Ecstatic,” she says. She’s putting the finishing touches on her election speech, so she isn’t really paying much

attention to Mike, who is steadily but surely going insane. “Why am I happy again?”

“This! This whole—” Mike spreads his arms, flaps them a little, like maybe he can express the exact magnitude of shit his life has dive-bombed into with his meager wingspan.

“You better not be implying I made you gay,” she says, eyes narrowed.

“No, apparently the *Junior Meat King* made me gay,” Mike says.

Lisa heaves a sigh and closes her laptop in a deliberate, put-upon motion. “Mike. You’re freaking out.”

Mike reaches up, digs his hands into his hair. “Is there any reason why I *shouldn’t* be freaking out?” He hooked up with a dude. *Wallace* saw him hooking up with a dude, and *Wallace* may be a *nice guy*, but Mike isn’t really counting on that lasting—there is absolutely no reason for *Wallace* to keep this to himself, right? Just because he hasn’t said anything *yet*, doesn’t mean he’s going to stay quiet about it for forever. Right?

“I need to get this done,” Lisa says, flicking her pen at him. “Seriously, it’ll be fine. Stop worrying about it.”

Mike doesn’t see how he *can* stop worrying about it, because so far all that Mike has realized in his quest for sober findings is that dicks freak him out—not his own, obviously—and that all the gay porn he found is *scary*. Add to that a smug, smirking *Wallace* and Mike wants to bury

himself in a hole for the rest of the school year. He doesn't want people staring at him, wondering. He doesn't want anyone talking about him behind his back.

"I don't think I can own this," Mike says, slumping down in the seat across from Lisa. He's pretty sure he can't even borrow it.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'm not going to push you into something you don't want," Lisa says.

Mike glances pointedly at his mug plastered on VP flyers.

Lisa rolls her eyes. "Not with anything important," she says. "I think it'd be good for you, to try this, but you don't *have* to, nobody's making you. You can go for Mo Howard instead. She's got a crush on you the size of a small planet."

Mike makes a face at the lacquered wood of the table. *Cameron Scott is a giant man-whore* is carved into it, blue pen scratched into the grooves, and Mike traces it with his thumbnail. Mo's cute. She's small and adorable and has at least five piercings in her face, but Mike isn't honestly attracted to her outside her ability to rock iambic pentameter and the way she's always up for using silly voices whenever they have to act out a scene in a play.

"Whatever," Mike says. He face-plants onto the table, forehead pillowed by his arms. "I hate my life."