

1 ASB PRESIDENTS AND POP-TARTS

JOLENE

Not even the threat of science class—let alone seeing Justin in science class—can diminish my good mood. I'm still riding high on Anthony asking for my number during the passing period. He did it right in front of Piper, so she probably hates me now. She has a well-established crush on him, and he barely looked her way, and then she barely spoke to me after. But she hates everybody; I'll be in good company. Although, that company won't include Anthony. Maybe he'll join us later.

My best friend, Logan, and I enter the chemistry classroom and take our assigned spots within the section's final two rows, right before the lab tables against the back. I sling my backpack around the seat as Piper enters with her friends Quinn and Courtney. The two cheerleaders wave at me, but Piper doesn't even look my way as they sit at the lab table behind us.

Justin's seat is next to me, but he's not here yet. He's usually a bit late. I don't care, really, not like that. It's just that I ran out of his party Friday night because I overheard him saying horrible things about me. Turns out, they were horrible things about his ex-girlfriend, Tay-Tay, but I still don't want to see him. He's been aggressively assertive, and now that Tay's his ex, there's nothing stopping him from asking me out.

This probably wouldn't be such a big deal if he weren't such a big deal, but he's Associated Student Body president, rich, and one of the hottest guys in

school—not that I’m attracted to him... anymore. His stunning blue eyes are hardly captivating when they’re looking at you like you’re a Pop-Tart.

He swaggers in as if all the girls in class were waiting for his arrival and slides into the seat next to me. He’s wearing off-white corduroy pants and a dark-gray wool jacket over a forest-green sweater.

“You disappeared Friday.” He leans over, not putting his backpack on the chair like I had, because he doesn’t have his backpack. He doesn’t have anything. How does he expect to pass if he comes to class without his book? Should I not carry my books around? How would I do the reading, though? “Where did you go?”

I don’t want to answer him. The truth—that I got confused, my feelings were hurt, and I fled—is embarrassing.

“Matt said there was an emergency.” Justin shakes his head, waiting for more info. But he’s gonna have to give me a minute, because—what?! Matt’s the last guy I expected to come to my rescue, especially after I screamed at him while leaving Justin’s party. I didn’t expect to scream at Matt either. I pined for him for two years, then he was at the party, and we were laughing and it seemed like there was something between us—then he made out with his ex-girlfriend. I should have yelled at him more. But I can’t think about that now—Justin’s still waiting.

“Yeah, turns out it was a false alarm.” That’s as big of a lie as he’s gonna get, so I hope it satiates him.

“What happened?” he asks.

“It was nothing, really.” I’m gonna have to change the subject myself. “Did I miss anything?”

He sits back in his chair, nonchalant. “I broke up with Tay.”

He leaves it at that, and I feel like he wants me to comment, but I have no comment. I don’t care. Is that mean? I don’t mean it to be mean; I’m just not interested in taking Tay-Tay’s place.

He gives up on waiting, sits up, and leans in. “We should go to a movie sometime, with everyone.” He adds that last part with a shrug—the nonchalance returning. He’s very good at not showing any sign of chalance.

I consider this “everyone” he speaks of. He’s close friends with Anthony, so he’d probably come.

“Sure.” I try on the nonchalance myself. “Sounds fun.”

“Great. It’s a date.” He stands and strides to the back of the room; I assume to get an extra textbook, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he left his book in his locker as an excuse to strut past the girls at the lab tables.

I bite the side of my mouth and plop my chin onto my hand. How did it go from “with everyone” to “a date?” Maybe I can get out of it when he tries to schedule it.

The whole thing nearly derails my good mood.

PIPER

I want to hate her forever in peace—difficult when all my friends love her. Justin talks to her in their seats a few feet in front of me, and he’s definitely still

harboring feelings—which is kind of insulting. Where’s his sense of loyalty to his good friend Piper? Jolene’s been a terrible friend to me—he knows this. He was there, at his party, when she flirted with Anthony in front of my face even though she knew I liked him. But whatever—it’s not like Anthony’s asked her to Homecoming. I bet I can get her to go with Justin before he has the chance. It’ll just take a little tweaking, nothing too serious. But it will mean I’ll have to speak to her again. Ugh.

After class, I let her walk to her locker with Logan before I join them. I don’t want to be seen with Logan. He’s a huge nerd. We dated for—like—two weeks in junior high, and too many people haven’t forgotten about it. If I were seen walking around the school with him, people—well, Justin—would make way too big of a deal about it and ask me if we’re dating again. And, like I said, huge nerd. I don’t know how Jolene stands it.

He crouches down and sits on the ground next to his locker, almost completely out of sight, so I join Jolene. I gotta make it super clear that we’re best friends and there was never any question about it.

I pull out my padlock that was on my old locker and look for an empty spot near Jolene’s. “Any of these lockers free?” I ask, opening one, seeing it’s clean, and sliding my lock on the door.

She’s frowning and looking away, possibly questioning why I’m speaking to her again. How dare she question my sincerity?

“Something bugging you?” I ask.

“Justin thinks I said yes to going on a date with him.”

Good. It's not me. Better still, Justin's doing his job—distracting Jolene from Anthony.

"Good!" I push my bag into my new locker.

"Why? Why good?"

"Honestly..." I take a moment to get into character—not that I'm going to not mean everything I'm about to say, but it has to come out right—like I'm truly hurt my favorite person in the world—her—would stab me in the back by flirting with my other favorite person in the world—him. "When Anthony and you were talking, it seemed like you guys were flirting with each other, but now you're with Justin, and I guess I was wrong. Thank goodness."

"I'm not with Justin."

"Right. Course." Whatever makes her happy. "But at least I don't have to worry about you and Anthony."

"Right," she says, the same way I did.

"Right?!"

"Piper," she sighs, "I'm not going to go for him. I know you like him—"

"Right!" Best news I've heard all day. "Thanks, Jolene." I grab her arm to show her how much I mean it. "You're such a good friend."

"Course..." She looks at the ground, her face empty—lost of the spark I've known her for. Oh well.

LOGAN

"I'll see you in class," Jolene says, letting herself be whisked away by a giddy Piper. It's like Jolene's slowly—or kind of quickly—fading away from me. First, she ditched me for Friday's game. She claims she

forgot, but... I don't know. And now she's letting Piper interrupt us, then she goes off with her to class without me. She'll eat lunch with Piper because Anthony eats lunch in that group, and I can't join because of Piper—like—shoot! I've zipped up about half of my backpack when I snagged the Ziplock bag holding my Pokémon cards. Pikachus and Bulbasaur fly everywhere. I scoop them back up and shove them into the big pocket when someone's feet stop walking a little too close to where I've planted my butt.

"It's Logan, right?"

I look up—way up. Anthony peers down at me under his floppy brown hair. He's wearing a navy-blue T-shirt that cuts off right across his muscles, as if they need help standing out; they'd probably stand out under layers of sweatshirts. I thought he was the QB—more of a runner than a tackler. Do runners have to be so bumpy?

"You're Jolene's friend?" He smiles with half his face. It'd put me at ease if it came from someone else, someone fatter, maybe. Guys like him don't usually talk to me. Guys like him usually punch me in the stomach, pull my shirt over my head, and throw my First Edition Shadowless Charizard Holo Card in the toilet.

"Uh-huh." I wait for him to insult me, or attack. There's no other reason he'd be here, talking and stuff. I should have taken my mom up on those karate lessons.

"I'm Anthony."

"I know." I'm still waiting.

“You should come have lunch with us. Any friend of Jolene’s...”

I stand up, push my locker shut with my foot, and strap on my backpack. “Yeah, I don’t know...” I can think of a billion reasons I’d rather give myself a wedgie than eat lunch with his group. But he’s gonna want me to name one, and I can’t do it. “I was thinking of joining the”—I look around at the fliers and ads for different sports and groups—“golf club.”

He tilts his head and stares at me like he’s giving me the opportunity to take it back, and I’d like to—really! I would *like* to sit with Jolene and the popular kids; it’s just, oh—what’s the word—Piper.

He keeps staring at me. It’s getting uncomfortable. It reminds me of the bog Jolene and I fought in game before she went to France for a year. It was big, brooding, unbudging, and didn’t take any of my crap either.

“So, I’ll see you at lunch?” he asks.

“Fine.”

“Jolene will be glad you’re there,” he says.

“Okay,” I say as he walks off.

It’ll be nice having my friend back. And maybe it won’t be awkward sitting with Piper. Their group is so big, she might not even realize I’m there, and if it goes south—I don’t know—maybe the golf club takes late admittances.

Jolene comes up from behind me, scaring me a little—I was so caught up about lunch, and I didn’t expect her to come back.

“It’s too hot.” She takes off her backpack, opens her locker, and takes off her sweatshirt.

“That’s the guy Piper likes?” I gesture to Anthony’s back, walking away from us.

Jolene looks up, then to me—pity on her face. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“He’s nice.” I loop my thumbs through my backpack straps. “I’d like him if Piper didn’t.”

“If it helps,” she pushes her carefully folded hoodie into her locker, biting her lip as if considering whether she should say it, “I don’t think he’s as interested in her as she is in him.”

“It’d help more if it were the other way around.”

She nods, shutting her door.

“What makes you think that?” I ask.

“Just a feeling I get.”

I watch her watch him go, and it clicks into place why he asked me to join them for lunch; it wasn’t for my benefit—not solely anyway. “I get that feeling, too.”

She looks at me with a smile and an eyebrow peaked, as if she’s not quite sure what I mean, and we walk to class.

2 A NEW PLAN

PIPER

Anthony sits by her at lunch. It's close to me but not close enough. We form a sort of pyramid, with me at the top—sitting a row above theirs. He engages her, and when someone—me—asks him a question, he looks at her while answering it.

“Anthony, you got anything to trade for my apple?” I hold up my apple, hiding the brown spot.

He makes a “hmm” face and digs in his brown bag. “I’ve got...” He pulls out an apple and grins at Jolene. She snorts, and I lose my appetite.

“Never mind.” I need something to tear them apart.

“What kind of apple is that? We only ever get Granny Smith or Red Delicious,” Jolene says, as if anybody could possibly care.

“I think it’s a Gala.” He literally checks the sticker—like he literally spends time on answering her stupid question—any excuse to have something to say.

“I woke up so early this morning.” I pull on my miniskirt hem. It’s almost impossible to sit in this

thing, and the benches are wood and splintering. “I got, like, two hours of sleep.”

“I got one,” Quinn says.

Classic Quinn—can’t let anyone else draw attention.

Anthony says something I can’t hear to Jolene, neither of them looking at me, or acknowledging that I’ve spoken, off in their little private world. It makes me want to slap them. If he asks her to Homecoming, it’s over.

Justin chews his pear like it’s the heart of his enemy, glaring at Anthony. He knows what I know. I hope he also knows that this is all his fault. I want to grab him and scream in his face, “What good are you, Justin?!” Useless. He had one job—occupy Jolene so she couldn’t date Anthony. Why is that hard?!

If only there was someone better suited for the job. But Justin’s the richest and most popular guy in school. Anthony and Tyrus are hotter, but not by much. No. If Justin can’t distract her, then—wait. Why does it have to be a guy at school? It would be best if he was at school, because then he’d be around all the time, but it might work if he’s, say, in college.

I sip my Diet Coke, thinking. At the party, a certain friend of mine made Jolene’s face light up. And when we went to Riptide, she even mentioned she had a huge crush on him.

“I can’t believe school just started and I’m already falling behind. You guys wanna do homework at my place after school? We could order a pizza.” And I could invite a certain someone without telling Jolene. It’s gotta be at least somewhat tempting for her to take the bait. Geeks like her are all about the grades.

“Sure,” she says.

And if she’s in, the others will follow. But all I need is her. It’d probably be better if the others didn’t follow. Shoot! Why didn’t I ask her when we were alone?

“Yeah, I’m in,” Anthony says too quickly.

“Me too,” Justin says.

I hope Logan doesn’t want to come. He’s not saying anything or looking at me, so I think we’re safe. But it’s annoying he’s even here.

“We have cheer.” Courtney looks down her nose as if stunned she has to remind me.

Justin turns to Anthony, the center of his lips rising into a sneer. “You don’t have football practice?”

“It’s Coach’s birthday.”

Now, this chance to spend some off-campus time with Jolene, is a chance to watch Anthony spend some off-campus time with her.

Justin looks like he bit into the brown spot of my apple. I know the feeling.

ANTHONY

Jolene pulls something round and brown out of her lunch bag and pops it in her mouth where she holds it while unscrewing the lid of her juice bottle.

“What is that?” I ask.

“Chocolate rice cake,” she says, except she doesn’t take the rice cake out to say it.

I laugh.

“Girl,” Courtney says, “take the rice cake out of your mouth, then talk.”

Jolene turns red, sets down her juice, and takes out her rice cake. "Sorry." She looks at me, enunciating slowly, "It's a chocolate rice cake."

I press my lips together to stop from laughing too hard, and nod. "Is it good?"

She tears off a piece and hands it to me.

I try it. "It's like chocolate cereal."

"Explains why now I want milk," she says.

"I was actually asking what kind of juice that is," I say.

"Oh." She holds up the bottle. "I don't know. My dad bought it. Whenever he does the shopping, we end up with weird stuff. I think it's a mix of tomatoes and cherries. I think they confused it with cherry tomatoes."

I grunt. "That does not sound like good juice."

She takes a swig. "No, it does not." She screws the cap back on.

I offer her the rest of my Coke. She thanks me and takes the tiniest sip, then tries to give it back, but I put my hand out to say no, and she finishes it off.

JUSTIN

The bell that ends lunch rings, and everyone starts shuffling out of the Greek.

Anthony could toss his stuff in the garbage right now, but he's waiting for Jolene as she slides her trash into her lunch bag, zips her backpack shut, hoists it around her shoulders, stands, and brings her braid up from under her straps.

He's gonna walk with her to class. Piper will probably go with them, hallucinating they want her there. Shoot me if I'm ever that desperate.

It's annoying. I don't usually have to put this much effort into a girl. Usually I talk to her, and she starts following me around like a lost, neglected-by-her-dad, puppy.

Anthony throws his trash in the nearby garbage can, then turns back to the group—but I'm in his way.

"Did you hear?" I try to sound more excited than worried that he won't believe me.

"What?" He looks at Jolene, but I'm still blocking him. He's probably worried she'll walk to class without him. I guess he gives up, because he sighs and stares at me, waiting.

"I asked Jolene to Homecoming, and she said yes!" I grab his shoulders and put on a huge smile as if anything I said was true.

"That's great, man." He steps back and scratches under his eye. He's lying too, but I don't care. All signs say he buys it.

I slap his arm and walk to class, letting both stings set in.

3 ROOMMATE

JASON

Sometimes I think about going back to high school. At my friend Justin's party last Friday, and all weekend, I've kinda been thinking about it. UCSB's started up, so Matt's gone all day. The apartment's kind of lonely, and I'm kind of bored. Maybe I'll get a job. But I'm only seventeen, so I have to get a work permit from school, and then I'd have to, again, go to school—and communicate with my parents...

Matt walks down the twisted stairs. His room's up in the loft. There's a real room off the side of the living area, but he said I couldn't take that one, so I'm on the couch. I guess it's fair since I don't pay rent—but that means I'm a guest, and he ought to treat his guests better.

"I thought you were in class." I say, throwing off my blanket. Now's as good a time as any to get out of bed.

"I was." He walks into the kitchen area and opens the fridge. "It's two-thirty. Hey, put some pants on."

"Meh. You bring back your laptop?"

He points to the kitchen table, where he left his backpack.

I use the bathroom, come back, grab his computer, and sit on the couch. He's heating something in the microwave—smells like the pizza from last night.

"Can you put some in for me?" I ask.

He doesn't have to answer; I know he will.

The front door opens, and I jump.

"Hello?" a scraggly surfer-voice calls out. It sounds like he gargles knives. He walks in with a box in his arms.

"Matt," I shout behind me to the kitchen. "The Amazon guy let himself in again."

"I think he's my roommate," Matt says. "You Cameron?"

"Yeah." He's got long blond hair and looks like he's been in the sun for nine years. Hopefully, that means he'll be at the beach a lot, and not here. "I grabbed the mail."

"Thanks. I'm Matt Craddick. This is Jason."

I raise an arm without looking away from Fortnite on Matt's laptop.

"He's been crashing." Matt lowers his voice as if his apartment were bigger and I couldn't hear him. "Hope you don't mind."

"Wait." Cameron double-checks the mail he just put on the table. "You're Matt Craddick?"

"Yeah..."

"Any relation to the Isaac Craddick I just signed first and last month's rent to?"

"He's my grandpa." Matt opens the microwave and takes out his pizza. "I'm actually the superintendent."

Of course he mentions that. “I’m the superintendent.” “I’m the superintendent.” He’s been telling everybody, like he’s the only guy in the world with a job.

“Bruh.” There it is. I knew Cameron would say it! “Then I guess I don’t mind if Jason crashes.”

“Hurray,” I cheer.

Matt looks at his phone as he hands me his pizza.

“You didn’t have to give me yours,” I tell him. He’s not going to take it back, so I might as well protest a little.

“It’s fine.” He’s distracted by his phone. “You wanna go to Piper’s?”

“No,” I say, sniping a guy. “Piper’s a turd-collector, and her mom’s nuts. Last time I was over there, she said I couldn’t use the bathroom. Like...” I shake my head.

“Justin and Anthony are going.” Matt opens the fridge again, probably getting his slice.

“Fine,” I say.

Another crap thing about not going to class is I don’t get to see my friends. I don’t need to see all my friends, like I don’t really care if I ever see Justin again, but Anthony’s chill. He came and got me once when my bike chain broke while I was riding down Cathedral Oaks and everyone was in school. I sent out a distress text—he was the only one who responded.

“You guys going out?” Cameron’s scratchy voice asks from somewhere behind me.

“Our friends are getting together,” Matt says.

There’s a light knock at the door that I’ve grown to recognize over the last few days. Sure enough,

Charlene and Dillon enter; they can't stay away very long—not because of me, though, unfortunately.

"We made too much salsa." Dillon says it like they didn't do it on purpose, to have an excuse to come over. She heaves two large bags of tortilla chips into the apartment while her roommate Charlene carries a huge bowl of salsa behind her. "You guys want some?"

Charlene has long blond hair and long blond legs. Dillon's exactly like her but red-headed, flatter, and freckled. They dress like all the other girls in Isla Vista—short shorts and tank tops—like they could jump into the ocean at the drop of a class.

"This is my new roommate, Cameron," Matt says. "That's Charlene and Dillon."

I look up for a second and see Cameron's face as he takes in our hot neighbors. I shake my head. Poor guy's about to get his heart crushed.

I snipe some more. "We're about to head out," Matt tells our guests.

"Oh," Dillon says, sounding disappointed.

"You can come if you want." Matt dips a chip and pops it in his mouth. "I'm sure Piper won't mind. We can bring the salsa."

"Are you going?" Charlene asks Cameron.

"Yeah." He doesn't look like he needs to think about it, and apparently Charlene thinks this is a reason to smile and clap.

Cameron dips a chip, and I hate him.

4 THOMPSON RESIDENCE

JOLENE

Okay, no one's doing their homework. Anthony takes his science book out but sings to himself instead of working on anything.

“But what does it bring, if it ain't got you, ain't got you?”¹

It's not that I mind hearing him sing; I don't at all! He's got a rough, bass voice that's rocky but on key and toasted around the sides. It's just, I don't want to be the only one working. Piper and Justin don't even open their backpacks and keep talking while I'm trying to write. Even worse, Justin bumps my arm every time he wants my attention. I actually need to finish my homework; I've got tons of it, and I'm starting a driver's ed course online tonight.

“What kind of pizza do you guys like?” Piper asks, swiping an app on her phone.

¹ Lyrics from “To Love Somebody” by the Bee Gees (covered by Smashing Pumpkins)

“Ulster’s.” Anthony sets his book on Piper’s parents’ coffee table. He sits alone on the couch across from Piper, Justin, and me. I’d move to go sit next to him, but I promised Piper I wouldn’t make a move on him, and I don’t want to be rude to Justin by getting up and moving after he sat down next to me, even with the arm nudging.

“I don’t wanna drive to IV.” Piper lowers her phone and glares at Anthony.

He shrugs. “They deliver.”

“Not this far.”

“You live closer to them than I do.”

“I’m just getting Checker’s.” Piper kicks off her slide-on shoes and tucks her feet under her. “What do you guys like on it?”

“Pepperoni and olives.” Justin looks over her shoulder at her phone.

“Eww.” Piper pivots her phone away from his eye-line.

“Why ask if you’re not going to listen to us?!” Justin asks.

“How many should I get?” Piper asks, continuing to ignore everyone.

“Eighty-three.” Anthony grins at me.

I smile back.

“I’m just gonna get six,” Piper says.

That startles me. If Piper’s anything like me, she’ll have two slices, tops. Justin and Anthony could probably handle half a pizza each, if not a whole one, but that’s just one and a third pizzas, three max. No way could the four of us eat six.

"If Jason comes, it should be more like eight," Justin says, making Anthony laugh.

"Or twelve," Anthony says.

"I thought it was just us," I say to the coffee table. I'd have to look around Justin to speak directly to Piper, so I don't even try. And I don't look at Anthony, I don't want him to think I'm accusing him of not giving me the full story—no, this is 100 percent on Piper.

The doorbell rings.

"That's them." Piper looks up from her phone. "Come in!"

"Them who?" But no one answers.

"Don't blame me. It's not my fault." A guy I recognize from Justin's party runs in with his hands up and sits on the recliner. This must be Jason. He tugs his vintage Star Wars shirt to untuck it from under his belly.

"What's not your fault?" Piper asks.

"Matt's bringing friends." Jason unties his sneakers and kicks them off.

Before my heart can restart, in walk four college students—Matt and three others I don't know—two of them girls.

"Hey." Matt waves at us. "This is Cameron, Charlene, and Dillon."

"See?" Jason widens his eyes. "Not my fault."

But I don't get what's so bad about them, or why Jason should warn us.

"We brought chips and salsa," one girl says while she and her blond friend set them on Piper's parents' coffee table in the middle of Piper's parents' living room.

Matt sits next to Anthony, and the red-headed girl next to him. Her friend sits on the arm of the couch, and the guy, Cameron, with long hair sits on the ground at her feet.

Matt looks like he always looks—basketball jersey, jean shorts, sliders, bright grin, strong arms, broad shoulders, caramel eyes—maybe I don't want to yell at him.

I wish Piper would have warned me he'd be here; everyone else seems to have known. I'm not sure what I would have done differently, but it would have been nice to know—to prepare myself for how paralyzed it'd make me. We left things so horrible, after Justin's party—or *I* left things so horrible. Is he holding a grudge for how I screamed at him? Did I ruin every chance I even had with him? I pined over him for two years, then when I got back from France, and he actually paid me attention, like real attention, I screamed at him. Really, I shouldn't be nervous around him at all now; there's no point. I'm sure I've turned him off completely, if he was ever on.

But I can't stop nervously fiddling with the ring I'm wearing. It's an opal ring I bought off a vendor in France.

The girl next to Matt, the redhead, asks him something I can't hear and laughs, and I'm not sure how much I like her. Is she the one Jason warned us about?

"What do you guys like on your pizza?" Piper asks her bonus guests.

Jason stretches out his hand. "Gimme."

Piper relinquishes and snuggles back a little into the couch.

I try not to stare at Matt, and act like I'm just casually looking around Piper's living room.

She wears a lot of purple and yellow, but whoever decorates their house likes red. There are two red walls, red pillows on the off-white couches, red books on the wood and iron coffee table and in the bookcase, and red glass vases on an end table by the window.

"Justin," Matt says. Good. I can look at him if he's talking. "Dillon speaks German."

Justin glances at Matt, at me, then back at Matt.

"Okay."

"Aren't you German?" Matt asks.

"No."

"Nice." Anthony leans over to talk to the redhead that I'm guessing must be Dillon since the other girl isn't paying attention—chatting with Cameron. "Did you study abroad, or..."

"Yeah, for a year as a junior," Dillon says with a kind smile. Yep. I don't like her.

Matt turns to Anthony. "Shhh—that's not..."

Anthony raises an eyebrow, probably as confused as I am why Matt doesn't want him talking to Dillon. Possessive of his new girlfriend?

"Lay off Anthony," Justin says to Matt. "He still has to find a date to Homecoming."

Anthony gives Justin a scowl I don't understand.

"So do you," Piper tells Justin.

"Psh. No, I don't." Justin throws his arm around the back of my seat. It's my fault for sitting forward—still stupidly trying to finish my history homework. I left

him the opening, and he took it—just enough familiarity to make it look like we're close, but not so much that I can push his arm away without being accused of overreacting.

"You going with Jolene?" Piper asks Justin.

My mouth falls open, and I stare at her. She's looking back at me like she's surprised I'm surprised. But she knows I don't want to date him!

Justin's answer is a shrug.

I fold my arms and glare at him.

"Might as well," he says to me. "Right?"

I glance across Piper's parents' coffee table. Anthony looks confused, and Matt's not looking. I turn back on Justin, but I can't force a sound out; I just gape—the bottom of my mouth on Piper's parents' floor. How dare he ask me in front of everybody?! If I say no, like I'd like to, I'd be a creep for rejecting him in front of every single one of his friends. But there's no way I'm saying yes.

"You should." Piper leans back as if my acceptance of his invitation is a sure thing. "He's nominated for Homecoming King."

Everyone congratulates him. I do too, meaning it, and hoping the distraction keeps.

"Pipe," Matt says, "who else is nominated?"

"I shouldn't say," she says, looking very much like she can't wait to. She must know who's nominated because she's a school officer—might have even counted the votes. "Anthony is too."

We all congratulate Anthony, who thanks us. I'm not sure I've ever seen him turn red before.

"Justin," Matt says, "Dillon surfs."

Something in me snaps. We weren't even talking about surfing, or Dillon! It's like he's obsessed with her and showing her off to everyone. Are they dating, and he wants to rub it in Justin's face or something? And why would Justin care? Was Caradine too put out Matt rejected her last Friday that now he's after Dillon? Where did this girl even come from?!

Justin rolls his eyes and asks Piper something about how to buy Homecoming tickets, while Anthony leans in toward Dillon again.

"What spots do you like?" he asks.

"We go up to—" But Dillon is interrupted by Matt telling Anthony to shut up.

It's so weird; Matt's being so weird! And I can't put my finger on why it bothers me, but it does!

"Are these features standard for Dillons, or do all makes come with them?" It comes out louder than I expected, and it's not supposed to sound so irritated; it's supposed to be light and funny—but everyone stares at me like I just slammed Dillon's head in a door. I hold still, but move my eyes around, trying to get the gist of their reactions without eye contact. I take a deep breath, swallow, and jut my thumb toward the hall. "Bathroom this way? Great."

I finish up in the bathroom and step into Piper's hall—right smack into Matt.

"Ouch! Matt! What are you doing here?!" I try to yell quietly. I've shouted in front of everybody enough for one afternoon.

"Why are you being mean to Dillon?" he has the nerve to ask me.

My hand flies to my chest. "I'm being mean?!"

"A little!"

"I didn't mean to be mean to her; I meant to be mean to *you*! Why are you listing all her qualifications like she's applying for a job?"

"Why are you being weird?"

"You're being weird!" I point to the living room. "Unless it's totally normal to tell all your friends your new girlfriend's typing speed. Does she know Excel? We can't hire her if she doesn't know Excel!"

But his face softens, something I didn't expect. I honestly thought he was going to yell back at me.

"I'm not dating her. I—" He sighs. "Piper said she was setting you up with Justin, and I thought if I could get him interested in Dillon..." He waits for me to say something, to understand. I shake my head. "He'd leave you alone..."

I was wrong; he's not after Dillon. And I got all crazy for no good reason. I don't even care! I had a gigantic crush on him for two years and now that other guys notice me, he's suddenly into me?! The injustice burns in my chest—his admission fueling a surge of confidence and anger.

"Wow!" I shout. "That's—you know what, Matt?"

"What?"

"You had your chance!"

He nods bitterly. "I had my chance?"

"You could have asked me out, but did you?!"

"No."

"No!" I slap my hands together. "Couldn't be doing that! And guess what—I'm going to Homecoming with

Justin, and you can just sit at home and hear all about it later.”

“That’s fine!” Matt returns my level of fury. “That’s great! I’m happy for you! Go to Homecoming and tell me all about it later! Yeah! Tell me all about how they call up your date and all the king nominees onto the stage and crown Anthony the winner!”

“Oh, I will! I’ll get your number from Justin so I can text you live from the dance!”

“Fine! I’ll put you in my contacts as CRAZY GIRL!”

“Great! Be sure to stay up late enough to get all the pictures of me in my gorgeous dress, dancing with all your friends!”

“I will! I’ll stay up stupid late! I’ll be too glad to sleep—glad I’m not dating the girl on my phone named CRAZY GIRL!”

“I’ll text you all night long, photo evidence of me not thinking about your stupid face anymore!”

“Fantastic! I’ll like each one—like that I’m not in them! And like that I’m not thinking about you anymore, either!”

“Good! Then neither of us will think about the other! Ever!”

“I’m already not thinking about you!”

“Good!” I fold my arms and walk away. “Fine!”

“Fine!” he yells behind me.

I don’t know what that was. I didn’t know I had that much anger inside of me over him. I mean, I knew I wanted to yell at him, but I didn’t know I actually would!

I'm out of the hallway and into the living room. Everyone either didn't—or acts like they didn't—just hear Matt and me.

I grab my stuff. "It's getting late." I glance out the window—not even close to dark out. "I better go."

Piper rolls her eyes and drops her feet to the floor.

"But the pizza isn't here yet," Jason says as I swing my backpack on.

"I'm sorry, Jason. Have some for me?" I'm far too embarrassed and angry to stick around, no matter how much pizza is offered me.

"I guess I can do that," Jason says, dutifully.

Piper grabs her shoe and slides her foot in. "If I'm gone when the pizza gets here—"

"I'll take her," Justin says.

I try to hide my disappointment as I bite the side of my mouth.

"I got it, Justin." Matt's voice comes from behind me—surprising me.

"But—" I try to object.

He grabs my hand, "I'll be right back," and pulls me out the front door.

5 CRAZY, THY NAME IS MATT

JOLENE

He drags me out of the house and past Piper's parents' front porch.

I try to shake off his hand, but he tightens his grip. It almost hurts. He heaves me through the yard, fast and fierce—it's like being pulled around by a jaguar with a sinus infection.

And what is his deal? Why does he want to aggressively drive me home all of a sudden? Five seconds ago we were screaming at each other.

I almost trip over a planter, but he propels me forward too fast to worry about it.

"What is your problem, Matt?! How long have you been insane?!"

He stops, pulls my hand until I'm right up against him, wraps his arms around me, bringing me in even closer. It happens so fast, and before my brain stops rattling, he kisses me.

I don't know what to do! I've never been kissed before! I always thought I'd have a warning—time to

prepare! Stupefied, I keep my lips shut tight while my eyes close instinctively.

It's warm in his embrace, with his face smashed against mine, but all I can think is, "Matt Craddick is kissing me! This is my first kiss, and Matt Craddick is kissing me!" Then I realize—wait! Matt Craddick is kissing me!

My eyes flash open. I push him back. I gape at him, reading his expression.

He creases his eyebrows, probably trying to read mine as well. "Sorry," he says.

I'm not sure if he means it or will try to kiss me again.

"Sorry," he repeats. "Sorry."

"I'm just gonna—" I go back toward the house. Maybe Piper will give me a ride home if I can bypass Justin.

"Wait, Jolene—" He grabs my arm.

I spin to him, and shake it off. "Seriously, Matt!"

"Sorry." His lips are still and smooth, his head hangs.

"You kissed me," I say, readjusting my backpack.

"Sorry."

"I just—the last time I saw you, you were looking pretty close with Caradine."

"I told you, I thought you were with—sorry."

He thought I was dating Justin, when he saw me with him at his party, so Matt made out with Caradine. Only I wasn't dating Justin—never would be. That was Matt's mistake, but I made one too; Justin and Anthony were saying mean things about someone, and I thought that someone was me. I was convinced

all weekend. Is it fair to give Matt a hard time for his mistake when mine was just as stupid?

“Um...” I look away, then back at him—his face sincere, gorgeous. “There were a lot of misunderstandings that night. Thanks for covering for me to Justin. I felt like an idiot.”

“Covering?”

“You told him I left because I had an emergency.”

“Oh, right.” He fiddles with his keys. “You’re welcome.”

We stand in the yard for a moment. He said he’d take me home. Is he still planning on it? Is he waiting for me to say something? I look at my feet, the grass, then at him.

“Were you gonna drive me home?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah. Come on.”

He opens his beat-up old Mustang’s door and shuts it after I get in. Younger me would be dying—Matt Craddick kissed me! And now he’s driving me home in his car. If this were two years ago—even one year ago—even a *month* ago—I would want nothing more than for him to ask me to Homecoming. But it’s more complicated now. There’s Anthony. But I don’t know if he’s going to ask me, and I can’t ask him—Piper would kill me. There would be the social death, swiftly followed by the actual—oh, no! Justin must have overheard me screaming that I was gonna go with him to the dance!

I throw my head back against the headrest of Matt’s car.

“What’s wrong?” He slides into the driver’s seat and puts the key in the ignition.

“Justin probably heard me say I’d go to the dance with him. Don’t tell him I don’t want to, though. I don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

Matt smiles, but only for a second. “I won’t. Think he’ll hold you to it?”

I take a big sigh. “Yes.”

He laughs, perhaps at how certain I sound, and I have to, too.

We’re at my house before I realize he didn’t ask where to turn.

“Hold on.” He gets out.

I stay put, wondering why, then he yanks the door open.

“Aww, thanks,” I say, grabbing my bag.

“Well...”

The car is low to the ground, but he helps me out, holding my elbow. He’s close, and I wonder if he’s going to kiss me again.

He shuts the car door behind me.

“Thanks for the ride.” I hesitate a minute. Is he going to try and kiss me? I guess not.

I walk to the house. It’s locked, of course.

After maneuvering my backpack in front of me, I take my key out, unlock the door, and wave to Matt, who’s leaning against his car, watching me. Why? And since when did he know where I lived? Maybe Mary had a party, and he came over once—before she abandoned popularity for madness. Nowadays she’s unrecognizable from her former cheerleading self. My year abroad changed me, but it changed her more, and she stayed here! I got back, and she had dyed her hair bright-pink, cut it all off, bought a lot of black

clothes and spikes, and now she hangs with the more gothically-inclined art kids.

Personality-wise she's just as cranky as ever but now oozes sarcasm. You can't touch her without getting it on your finger. At first it was intimidating, now it's just obnoxious. I mean, whatever—you might like her, but she drives me insane.

I toss my backpack into the corner of my room. I'll have to finish my homework after my driver's ed class. Then I hear someone behind me—at my door. Usually, nobody in my family makes the journey up to my third-story attic bedroom, so it's always surprising when someone does.

"Unbelievable!" Mary shouts.

I jump and spin around, realizing what I've done. "Oh, my gosh, Mary!" I sit on my bed. "I'm so sorry!"

"I'm never giving you a ride home from school again." She glares at me, her arms folded across her chest—can't be comfortable with all her spiky bracelets.

"That's fair."

But she's not done. You'd think someone with a bright-pink pixie cut would be happier.

"I waited for you for ten minutes!" she shouts.

"I know! I'm so—you only waited ten minutes?"

"Never again!" She slams the door, then opens it again. "Well?!"

"What?"

"Where were you?"

I stick my tongue between my teeth, scrunch my eyebrows, and raise my jaw. It's not like her to ask follow-up questions.

“I went to Piper’s.”

She huffs.

Maybe I can pacify her if it doesn’t sound like we were having any fun. “She was getting a few friends together to do homework—”

“With Justin?” She raises an eyebrow and lip.

I made it worse. I should just tell her the truth. “He asked me to Homecoming.”

She makes an inhuman grunting noise.

“What happened between you two?” I ask.

“Nothing!”

I remember the sweatshirt she was curled up in the other night. “Why do you have his hoodie?”

“No reason!”

My phone blows up, so I check my messages. They’re from Anthony—we’ve been acting amazed by technology ever since he gave me his number this morning. He’s sent me a big “BEHOLD!” all in caps and a video of him turning a light switch off and on. I laugh and cover my mouth.

“That from Justin?” She grunts again.

“No, it’s—”

But she has decided it is and keeps going. “Super fun. You’re gonna have a great time.” She leaves, slamming the door behind her.

“Stop slamming my door!”

She opens it again.

“Okay, you wanna know what happened between me and Justin? I’ll tell you what happened between me and Justin, so you can shut up about it!”

“I didn’t—”

“Shh! Prepare yourself for intense vulnerability.”
She sits on my bed.

6 WHAT HAPPENED TO MARY

MARY—LAST YEAR

I don't meet up with Justin every day, sometimes not even every other day, and when we do, it's always in secret—in his car or my truck, under the bleachers, behind the theater building. I mean, obviously, we're not about to make out in public, but on the off chance we see each other, we don't hold hands or flirt—we hardly speak to each other. But his eyes are so blue, and such a good kisser. He has a way of smiling that makes other smiles feel bad. When he says my name, it's like I've been wandering around a desert looking for something and come across water. Realizing—yup—this is what I've been making do without. Making do without—what a stupid thing to do.

Today, he comes bearing gifts. I'm waiting for him behind the band room when he turns the corner, holding a bear wearing a black and purple cheer uniform with a big WCHS across the chest.

"I had this specially made." He hands it to me.

“You did?” I ask, taking it. “They don’t come in our exact cheer uniforms?”

“Can you believe it?” He flashes that smile I told you about, pulls me toward him by my elbows, and kisses me throughout all of fifth period.

Months later, I’m sitting with my group of cheerleaders, a selection of athletes, and other popular for-some-reason-or-other students during lunch. Usually, I spend the entire twenty minutes listening to my best friend—Tay-Tay—go off about some guy while wishing I could spend the whole time talking to Justin, or making out with Justin, or something with Justin. But even though Tay-Tay was in class earlier, she hasn’t made an appearance at lunch. Maybe she’s making up a test or something, but being Tay, she would have told me; she tells me everything. I can’t get her to shut up.

I wouldn’t mind the peace and quiet, but Justin’s not here either. So, not only can I not sit there while Tay-Tay talks at me, but I also can’t roll my eyes at Justin while she does it.

Suddenly, on the side of the Greek closest to the science building, I see a long, platinum ponytail out of the corner of my eye. When the rest of my eyes catch up, I swear and drop my Diet Coke. She’s not alone. Tay-Tay, my best friend, the girl I’ve spent hours listening to whine about music, or boys, or me, or boys, walks with her arm around a guy in white corduroy pants, maroon shirt, with blond hair, and the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen.

Tears well up in mine. Someone asks me if I'm okay, but it's only after I've fled that I realize what they said and that they were talking to me.

I throw out the rest of my lunch and dry heave into the sink in the girls' bathroom.

Three girls I don't know come in, so I find a stall and hold up there for the rest of lunch.

When the bell rings, I come out again and look at myself in the mirror. It's all red and splotchy, but who cares? I rinse my face, reapply foundation, blush, lip gloss, mascara, and take out my ponytail. I give my hair a few boosts and run wet fingers through it. It looked too much like Tay-Tay's ponytail before, but now I look despicably like my little sister. Ew. I pull my hair up into a messy bun and head to class.

In the afternoon, I don't know what else to do, so I go, as planned, to cheer practice. I make my way down the hill toward the gym, and who is sitting on the ground, leaning against the building? None other than Tay-Tay, hand-in-hand with Justin. I'd turn and run, but they've seen me.

"Mary!" Tay-Tay calls out.

I walk over to her, not putting on a smile—she doesn't deserve my fakeness. I pretended to listen to her for so long—she's not worth any of it. Let's see how she likes real me.

They don't even have the decency to separate once I approach. And now that I'm closer, I can see she's wearing his jacket—the jacket I've slid my hands into so many times, the one he bought because I have his other.

“Do you remember the routine? I need to go over it,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say. “I remember all of it. Also, you can both”—I suggest a list of things they can do that I won’t repeat here, spin on my heel, and walk back the way I came.

The next morning, I go into my bathroom. I’ve decorated it in black and purple—Winchester Canyon High School colors. It’s such a thing a cheerleader would do.

After I shower, I yank down the purple shower curtain, gather all the purple towels, and the purple trash can, and pile it in the hallway. I go back into the black bathroom and brush my long, wavy, brown hair. I look exactly like the person who, yesterday, simpered and followed Justin Granite around, hoping today would be the day he’d hold my hand in public.

I retch, go down the hall, enter my parents’ bedroom, go into their bathroom, find my mom’s haircut scissors and my dad’s electric razor. I cut off my hair, leaving it everywhere, and then shave it down to stubs. That’s better, but it’s still brown. Too much of that girl is left.

I get dressed, grab a banana, and head to the drugstore.

My mom always tells us that if we want to dye our hair, to just let her know, and she’ll take us to the salon to have it done. Salons are for cheerleaders. I grab a box of “Fuchsia Glow” off the shelf, hand the cashier eight-sixty-five, and by lunchtime I more closely resemble a sprite than my former cheerleading self.

My once long, wavy, glorious brown locks, now violent-pink, are only long enough to barely make out color.

I enter the kitchen to make a sandwich, and my mom's got all the salad stuff out, assembling. At first, she doesn't look up.

"Want me to make you one, sweetie?" she asks.

"Nah, thanks." I open the cupboard.

"Do you have cheer practice today?" she asks.

Technically, the cheerleaders are practicing this lovely Saturday, but that doesn't include me—not anymore.

"Nope. I quit."

She bends and sees me. "Wow. This is a new look."

Obviously.

"What's going on?" she asks.

"Just felt like a change." I shrug as if I did nothing more than buy new socks.

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Nothing really to talk about." But I can tell she wants to dig, so I quickly make up my sandwich and take it to my room.

A text awaits me from Tay-Tay: "Where are you? Are you quitting? If you're quitting, at least have the decency to let us know so we can find you a replacement, and it would help a lot if you gave us your uniforms. You can leave them on my porch, but you should really text us and let us know."

Instead of texting her back, I block her number, then drive to her house, and place my cut-into-pieces uniforms in a box on her porch. I pull out my parents' stove lighter and set the box on fire.

Tay's voice comes through her doorbell camera.
"What are you doing? We have you on video, idiot!"

I give her video two fingers and leave.

Maybe it's dramatic, but maybe a little drama is what this world needs. Maybe we've all become too complacent when our friends stab us in the back, and our boyfriends turn out to be words I won't say in a Young Adult novel.

After a weekend of police visits, scheduling court dates, and writing my "apology—"

Wanna see it? Check it out:

Dearest Breiman Family,

I regret that because your daughter, Taylor Lauren Breiman, so viciously betrayed me, I retaliated by setting my own property on fire, doing zero damage to your precious porch—that from your reception of the incident, must have been made by the zombified body of Michelangelo, brought back just for this purpose, then, regrettably, laid to rest again.

I regret that my actions caused distress to Tay, who is apparently prone to freaking out over the tiniest provocation. I hope that receiving this letter does not send her into a spiral she is unable to recover from. I hope that said spiral does not send her to an institution where she is electroshocked for years until she succumbs to the Earth's endless embrace.

I wish you all a long life together. I can think of nothing more deserving than for you all to live the remainder of your years in the presence of one another: my former best friend and the parents who raised her.

Earth-shatteringly Sorry,
Rose Mary Stansen

So, after a weekend of all that, and ultimately suffering the fate of an informal probation, I have to endure the worst punishment of all—returning to school.

It's only February. I still have the rest of winter and all of spring left, but with nothing to fill my six-period slot—previously filled by cheer. I also have no one to sit with at lunch, as all my old friends sit with Tay-Tay and Justin, and I cannot even stand to look at them—let alone bear witness to their swallowing. But that's later's problem.

I go into history taught by Coach Tinino. One thing I love about coaches is they don't care what seat you take. You can have a different seat daily, and they don't even blink. It's especially helpful on days like today when the last thing I want to do is sit anywhere near my usual spot by Tay-Tay and Justin.

She has the nerve to wave to me as I come in.

I tilt my head as if to ask, "Sit with you? Why didn't I think of that?" Then my glare says, "Maybe it's because I hate you." I think it comes across; I don't look at her long enough to be sure.

I take a seat on the far side of the room next to a puff of red hair and pale skin, wearing all black and drawing in a notebook. After I put my backpack on the back of my new chair, I get a look at what he's drawing—a grotesque, mangy rabbit with red eyes and blood dripping from its mouth eating a dark-haired cheerleader. The resemblance is uncanny.

"Is that me?" I laugh.

He looks up, startled. “No. Just any random cheerleader...”

“Fair,” I say. “If it were me, you’d have to give her a haircut and a dye job.”

He studies me for a good twelve seconds. “It actually really suits you. You’ve got the bone structure for it, and the pink highlights your lips—sorry.” He looks uncomfortable, like he’s not super aware of how to act around people, but knowledgeable enough to know it.

“It’s cool,” I say. “I was surprised, too. Lucky me.”

He laughs at that. “I’m Tate.”

“I know.”

“Oh, we’ve never spoken, so I didn’t know if you—”

“Yeah. Got any rabid rabbits devouring blond cheerleaders?”

Lunch catches up to me. I hold it in a brown bag while staring into the vast depths of the Greek theater. Was it always this big? Have there always been this many students at this school? I’m surprised how few of them I don’t know. It used to not matter. Until this moment, I just did what my grade school friends did, and I was their friend because they said I was. They invited me over; they sat with me; they called, texted, and messaged me—I’m sorry—it’s all very frustrating to have an inner monologue while everyone’s staring at me.

Tate’s sitting with a group of kids who dress like him—as if they walked into their closets this morning and had no idea there would be people at school with eyes who could see them.

I shuffle over. "Can I sit with you?"

"Sure," they say, looking up at me with shocked expressions. A lot of people were looking at me with shocked expressions today, but at least these don't come with a side of scandalized—okay, I'm glad the others were scandalized. But I don't want to eat with the scandalized ones. Don't dissect that.

I sit between Tate and a girl I've seen around a few times, whose name I believe is Veronika but might be Victoria. She ignores everyone and listens to wireless earphones. She wears a black dress and black boots and has a side nose ring.

Tate notices me watching her. "She doesn't talk much."

I nod.

When I used to sit with the popular crowd, a few people sat with us, but not really with us. They were more like parasites hanging off a shark than friends hanging out with friends. But something tells me this group doesn't have sharks and parasites. Who wants to feed off plankton? I mean, besides me.

I tap my ear. "What are you listening to?"

She takes out her earphones. "Nothing." She hands me an earbud so I can see for myself, and sure enough. "I wear them so people don't talk to me."

"And the first thing I do is talk to you."

But she smiles, and it's warm and kind—completely opposite of Tay-Tay's phony smile—which I'm only realizing was false now that I compare it to an actual, human smile.

"Why aren't you listening to something?"

"I want to hear what they're saying," she says.

"What would you be listening to if you did want to listen to something?"

We spend the rest of lunch listening to Veronika's recent favorite female-murder-music picks.

I leave school with a drawing of a rabbit eating the entire cheer team, including my former self, a playlist of music I never would have heard if Tay-Tay and Justin hadn't betrayed me, and a new sixth period—Art with Tate and Veronika.

7 THE STUPID THINGS WE DO BECAUSE WE'RE MAD AT MATT CRADDICK

JOLENE—PRESENT DAY

"And now he's going to Homecoming with my little sister." Mary leans back, hands on my bed.

"Honestly..." I take a deep breath and let it out. In a matter of minutes, she's answered every question I've had about her. It's a lot to take in. But one thing apparently hasn't changed. "He's kind of a jerk."

"Yep!"

"I was just mad at Matt, so I said I'd go with Justin—"

"Why were you mad at Matt?" she asks. "Oh! Because he made out with Caradine?"

"Yeah." I bite the inside of my cheek. "But—okay, like, he said he thought I was dating Justin, so—like, in a mad rage he made out with Caradine. But he's a stupid face. He waited until after I got back from Paris, had an expensive haircut, designer clothes, and a chest—what—I wasn't good enough for him before I left, but now I am?!"

She snorts. "He liked you before. Come on."

“He didn’t do anything about it!”

“And that’s your haircut’s fault?”

“Yes.” But I’m not as convinced as I was.

“Did you tell him you liked him, or was he supposed to dump his girlfriend on the chance you did?” She sounds like Logan and Aunt Eloise.

I bite down on my back teeth.

“Mm-hmm,” she hums smugly.

“I told him Friday night that I used to like him.”

“Which explains why now he’s giving you all this attention.”

Is she right? I sneer while trying to figure it out. He was giving me attention before I admitted I liked him—but not before I left for France.

“What makes you think he liked me before?” I ask.

She shrugs, glides to the door, then turns back to me. “Jason told me.”

Jason?! Matt’s roommate?

“When—” But she’s gone.

8 COUCHLESS

MATT

“How long are we gonna be couchless?” Cameron mumbles. He’s done nothing since he got here but flirt with Charlene and whine about Jason. “I’ve got people coming over.” Probably Charlene and Dillon.

“I’ll talk to him.” I’d like to take Jason’s side, but when I told him he could have the couch, I didn’t mean he could literally hog it all day. It’s ten A.M., and he’s got his Star Wars blanket trapped between his legs and drool on his pillow.

Cameron goes into his room and slams the door—waking Jason up. But it doesn’t take.

“Jase.” I shake his arm. “Jase.”

He turns to me but doesn’t open his eyes. I know this means he’s awake, but it’s annoying that he won’t look at me.

“Can you go crash in my room, or something? Cameron’s got people coming over.”

He opens his eyes just so he can roll them. "I wasn't gonna say anything, but he has people over all the time."

"He pays rent."

"I do the dishes." He sits up. He's wearing my UCSB shirt.

"That's not equivalent to handing in a fifteen-hundred-dollar check once a month."

"Ugh. Fine. I'll vacate the premises until His Grace's guests leave." He stands and collects his pillow and blanket.

"You don't have to leave," I say, feeling bad now. "Just put on pants."

"PANTS?!" He sneers at me. "I'll be upstairs."

9 THE BREAKWATER

JOLENE

Friday night I stand in the kitchen pleading with my dad who's less willing to let me go to the football game than he had been the week before—when I broke curfew. But I can't not go to the game, so I promise to be back by eleven, knowing this time if I'm not, there won't be a third game.

I run upstairs and get ready. I won't be able to attend the victory party tonight. The game usually goes until ten—by the time I'd get home, it'd be almost eleven. This means I won't be seeing Anthony tonight, and he won't be seeing me—or what I'm wearing—unless he can make me out from the field. I will, however, be seeing Justin. He'll probably mention Homecoming.

I push my revolving bookcase and step into my closet. No sense in putting too much effort into how I look. It might be better if I can turn Justin off, but let's not go crazy.

I throw on a pair of jeans, a soft-pink shirt, a light-blue sweatshirt, and flip-flops. I re-braid my side-braid, reapply my makeup, and call it done.

I plop onto my bed, pull out my phone, and wait for Piper.

Logan hasn't texted back yet. I'm trying to convince him to join us, but with Piper driving, I doubt he will.

I trade my phone for my book—get a text—and trade them back.

It's Piper letting me know she's here.

After our team wins the game, we gather in the school parking lot before heading out. I go straight for Piper's Jeep, but she lingers and laughs with Justin.

"We'll meet you there," she says over her shoulder, skipping to me.

I'm relieved she came over alone; Justin brought Weston to the game, and all night I've been worried he'd would push him off onto someone else and offer me his spot in his car. But it doesn't look like that's going to happen.

Last time there was a game, Justin drove me to his party afterwards, speeding the entire way, and not just a little over. He never stayed within twenty miles of the limit.

But only part of me is relieved. The rest of me isn't comforted in the slightest; I knew Piper would try to get me to stay out.

"We'll meet him where?" I ask. "I have to go home—"

"His grandpa's over, so he can't host the victory party tonight. I told you."

"No, you didn't—"

“Instead, we’re meeting at the breakwater.”

“I can’t. I can’t break curfew again.”

“It’s nine-thirty.” She scoffs and wrenches open the door of her Jeep.

I’m going to get grounded.

I yank open the door and slide in next to her.

“Where is it?” I’m hoping it’s at Goleta Beach—nice and close, but I can’t picture it.

“It’s downtown, by the marina.”

I could have guessed that last part, and I should have guessed the first.

“Downtown?! Then we can only stay for—like—ten minutes.” I shake my head fast, giving myself a little headache.

“Anthony will be there.”

“Oh, okay then. I didn’t know Anthony could freeze time.” I bite my tongue between my side teeth.

If Piper thinks Anthony being there will change my mind, she’s correct. It changes everything. Of course, I already knew he’d probably be there, but it’s different when it’s confirmed. You know what I mean? But even though she brought it up, I can’t say it matters—not without getting dragged into the woods and slapped to death.

Twenty minutes later, we arrive at the marina. It’s closed and there’s a bar blocking the parking lot entrance, so we park in the one right next to it, get out, and lean against the side of her Jeep, waiting with a dozen others for Justin and Anthony.

"Sometimes I hate being popular." Piper shoves her key fob into her back pocket. "Too many people show up to stuff. I wish it were just us, Anthony, and Justin."

I don't disagree—not because I hate our friend group, but because I'm shy, and terrified of everyone.

"Like, look at these idiots," she says. "If they all park in this lot, it'll be too obvious we're out there."

I don't point out that we were the last ones in the lot. I just nod.

She brings some strands of hair that were behind her shoulders in front of them. "There's Justin."

His red Porsche parks illegally in a handicap spot.

He's alone in the car.

"Where's Weston?" I ask as Justin gets out.

"I took him home," he says. "Curfew."

I glare at Piper, but she doesn't look at me.

"Tay coming?" he asks.

"I didn't invite her." Piper snorts. I wonder if her derision is in solidarity with Justin, or if she holds a grudge against Tay for her own reasons. "Course I didn't invite any of these guys." She waves an arm at the rest of her friends in the lot.

"Anthony's not here yet?" Justin asks.

"Not yet."

"Probably walking the field after the game."

"Why does he do that?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, here he is."

Anthony's navy-blue Ford Bronco rolls up, and he gets out with a bunch of his teammates, including Jesse.

“I was right where Coach told me to be—” Jesse shouts at a guy who gets out of the back of the car.

Anthony smiles at me and rolls his eyes.

They come toward us while Jesse keeps complaining.

Anthony walks straight to me and says in a voice too low for anyone else to hear, “He’s been like this the whole way.” He widens his eyes and then looks over at the breakwater while I stifle a laugh. “You ready for this?”

“I’m not sure what this is.” That might have come off as stupid. “I mean, I know what the marina is, but why are we here?”

“You’ll see,” Piper says. I didn’t realize she was so close. “Oh! Leave your phone in the car.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Trust me.”

Her smugness is annoying, but I take my phone out of my pocket and put it in a slot in her car door.

She wraps her arms around mine and Anthony’s and walks between us toward the other side of the boats. The sidewalk there extends into the ocean to encase the marina. An eight-foot wall braces against the waves. By the sound of it—they’re massive.

As we walk out onto the breakwater, several yards behind the rest of the group, I start to panic. It’s dark; the only light is from the street, yards behind us. One wave crashes against the wall next to us and sprays overhead. I gasp, and Piper laughs.

Suddenly the group ahead of us all screams and runs as a wave hits the wall, washes over it, and douses them in salt water.

Piper laughs again.

"Oh, good." Justin comes back to join us. "The tide's in."

Anthony detaches from Piper and walks with him a few feet, then falls back, letting us catch up. Piper watches him on the other side of me while he bends down to my ear. "You do not have the right shoes for this." He looks at my flip-flops.

All the other girls are either cheerleaders and have come in their uniforms and tennis shoes or they're Piper, who knew the plan and dressed accordingly.

"Well, I'm not supposed to be here," I say.

"Where are you supposed to be?"

"Home by eleven."

"It's only ten. We'll get you there."

I blush a little. I like that he doesn't push and respects my need to not be grounded.

"Nice game." I play with the end of my braid.

"You see my new touchdown dance?"

"Yeah," I laugh. "Very good. Very celebratory."

"I'll take that as a compliment coming from a Paris-trained ballerina."

"That sounds a lot fancier than it was."

"Yeah?"

"Well, no, it was pretty fancy."

He laughs, and I join him.

"It smells out here," Piper says.

It smells a little, but just like any beach, and like any beach, the farther out from the shore we get, the more peaceful the night is. The stars shine brightly out here over the ocean, and apart from the occasional scream

from the other group, it's a beautiful night—of course, that's until a wave launches over us.

Piper, Justin, Anthony, and I scream and run. But it's no use. The four of us are drenched.

Piper screams again, and Justin makes a weird sound only dogs can hear.

"It's so cold!" I shout at Anthony while he stands and yells, "Ahhhhh!" facing me. His mouth and eyes wide; it makes me laugh, and I guess my expression does the same for him because he cracks then we continue to walk down the path, shivering, and rubbing our arms.

"Come here." He opens his jacket, and I duck inside to keep warm.

"Me too! Me too!" Piper pushes her way into Anthony's jacket, but he doesn't fight it.

I haven't been this close to him since the day we met. He accidentally knocked me over, then helped me to the school nurse's office. But even then, I wasn't inside his jacket.

I wrap one of my arms around his back—for warmth.

We keep going, braving the onslaught and fury of the sea. At least if another wave gets us, the worst that'll happen is we get slightly wetter. But another wave breaks against the wall, and I do not want the chilling water to get me again.

We scream and run, but Justin, maybe upset we didn't include him in our huddle, stops right in the way. We slam into him and take the full slap of the ocean.

Piper whacks his arm, screaming profanities. I stand dripping, with my arms out, shocked that a person can

feel this cold. I look up at Anthony, who's making the same face, and we laugh.

"Wait, hang on," he says, reaching for my forehead. "You've got some water right here." He brushes the smallest drop off my face.

"Oh, thank you," I say. "I feel so much drier."

"I'm here to help."

"Wait." I squeeze the water out from the tiniest section of his shirt that I can.

He sighs in relief.

"Better?" I ask.

"So much better."

You'd think I would've learned to keep a close eye out for the water, but I'm distracted, and the mother of all waves comes hurling toward us.

This time Anthony throws his body around me, about to block the wave and take the force of it himself, but Justin shoves him, we break apart, and the ocean washes over us.

"That one didn't get me," Piper announces, stepping quickly past the offending spot.

"Why are we doing this?" I ask, standing perfectly still since all movement causes my skin to touch my cold, wet clothes. I know why we're doing it, but I've never been colder in my life.

We don't want to be victims of a returning wave to this spot, so we walk on a little—so we can be victims in a different spot.

The wave hits a few feet before us.

"Okay, get ready and run fast. I'll count," Piper says. We stand as if about to race. "Three," we hold our ground, "two," hold it, "go!" I take off running, but

Justin grabs me and holds me as the wave descends upon us.

“Justin!” I yell.

If there was a cell of my skin that wasn’t soaking, it is now.

“Okay,” Anthony says, coming and standing between Justin and me. “Now you’re just trying to get wet.”

“It wasn’t me,” I say.

“You existed in a world with Justin, so you are partially responsible,” he says with a glint in his eyes.

“Mm. I’ll have to remember to not do that next time.”

“Probably a good idea. Probably safer... drier.”

I’m lost in his grin, then catch Piper glaring at me past his elbow.

A shot of guilt hits me like one of the waves. Did I do something wrong? I said I wouldn’t make a move on him but—I mean, we’re just talking! I’m not allowed to talk? I know! I know! She’s liked him since before I met him, but what does she expect me to do when he starts it—dive into the ocean and swim out to sea?!

“I can hear when it’s about to break,” Justin says.

“No, you can’t,” Piper tells him.

“No, listen,” he says.

We stop walking and listen. First there’s nothing, then a rumble, and Justin shoves Anthony ahead of us just as the wave breaks over the wall and all over him.

Justin laughs as Anthony turns to us with an expression of mild violation. It’s not threatening at all,

but Justin runs behind Piper and me, using us as a shield between him and Anthony.

The group ahead of us screams as a wave hits them. We come to that spot, stop just before we get there, and listen, but we haven't judged the position right. The wave careens over the wall directly where we're waiting. Anthony grabs me and pulls me across him and out of the way, as he himself is brutalized by the sea.

He stands tall, facing me, and sighs.

"Oh," I say. "You've got a teeny, little bit..." I take my soaking wet shirt's hem and dab at his arm.

"So much better." He sighs.

I laugh.

"Thank you so much," he says. "You are an angel."

Our friends get to the end of the walkway and start coming back our way.

"How are you guys so wet?" Todd asks us.

"Stick around and find out," I say.

They keep walking back toward the parking lot.

"We can make sure you guys get wet, too," Anthony calls after them. "It's not hard." He sighs. "I don't think they want to join us."

"Let's head back, too," Piper says. Her words short and crispy.

"I kinda want to keep going," I say. The end of the breakwater is quieter and looks more peaceful.

Piper scoffs but walks with us.

We get to the end. The tall wall stopped several feet back, and now we're on a catwalk supported by rocks. We've walked along the entire side of the marina and across the back.

“Parking lot’s just right there.” Anthony points straight ahead of us where yards of water separate us from the beach. “We can’t get any wetter; might as well swim back.”

“Be my guest,” Justin says.

Anthony turns to me. “How about it?”

He can’t be serious, but then, I don’t know him that well.

“Maybe next time,” I say.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.” He picks me up.

I scream as he makes like he’s gonna throw me into the water.

“One...” He tilts me back and then forward, gaining hurling momentum.

“Don’t you dare!” I shout.

“You are freezing!” he says. “Two...” He brings me back again.

“Anthony!”

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s not swim. It’s kind of cold.” He sets me down. I adjust my clothes and gape at him smirking at me. “That was close.”

“But just because I don’t want to go for a swim, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t.” I grab his arm and pull him to the ledge. Concrete and rocks await him at the bottom.

“I don’t want to go alone,” he says.

“I’ll catch up.” I nudge him forward.

“Ladies first.” He maneuvers behind me.

“Chivalry’s dead.” I duck around him.

“It’s only mostly dead.” He pulls me back in front of him.

He's got his legs lunged out, so I can't get any movement. I pull and push anyway, but he wraps me up in his arms, bringing me right against the edge of the walkway. With a slight movement he could send me sailing—

"I think the tide's gone out," Piper says.

Anthony and I look at her and Justin glaring at us. They turn and start walking back toward shore, so we break apart and join them.

Without the waves crashing over our heads, the walk back should be much less harrowing, but the matching scowls on Justin and Piper's faces keep me just as cautious as before.

We reach the parking lot too soon. Piper and Justin still glare at us, but I don't care. It was just talking... and a little bit of trying to drown each other. Really, they're both a lot drier than us, so who's the real winner here?

"This was fun," Todd calls to us as we enter the lot. "We should catch hypothermia again sometime."

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Piper grabs my arm.

I pull myself away from Anthony as hard as I can and let Piper yank me to her Jeep.

ANTHONY

An angry Piper hauls Jolene away from me, saying something about needing to talk to her. That can't be good.

Justin pivots to me, looking like I'm about to get my own version. "What was that?!" he asks.

I was going to back off of Jolene like he asked. He saw her first, or whatever. I was doing a good job with

it. At Piper's house, I sat on the other couch—across from them—I hardly said anything, and it sucked. Tonight, when I saw her—I don't know—I just talked to her. There was a little bit of flirting, but come on—the way she smiles, and laughs, and can't dodge a wave to save her life—it was all I could do to not grab her and kiss her.

“I dumped Tay-Tay,” he says.

I give him a “you should have done that anyway” look. He didn't have to wait for Jolene for that.

“She means a lot to me, especially after finding out that Tay was cheating on me, and you're ruining it by butting in.” He looks at the sky and then back at me with a smirk. “You know, technically, we're going out. She even called me her boyfriend.”

JOLENE

“Okay, so, you know how I like him, right?” Piper talks quietly, as if there's someone around who doesn't know about her crush on Anthony.

“Yeah.”

“Really?! Because it looks like you were a little confused back there!”

I'd like to tell her that, while, yes, we did flirt, it didn't do any good—but if it didn't, she wouldn't be mad...

She takes a step closer to me. “He flirts with everyone. I told you what he said last week.”

I lock my teeth. Piper said a lot of stuff about Anthony: that he's insincere, that he's playing both of us, that he's manipulating and gaslighting us. It all

contradicts reality—as far as I can tell. Am I remembering things wrong? Am I blind to what’s really going on?

She flips her hair. “And Justin says Anthony’s just flirting with you to make me jealous.”

See? This is what I’m talking about! It doesn’t feel like Anthony’s insincere, but Piper keeps insisting he is! It gets boggled up in my mind and impossible to sort out facts from fiction—

“We weren’t...” but the words I’d like to say run and hide, knowing full well we were definitely doing all the words.

“It’s not a big deal.” She scoffs. “It’s not like he’s falling for you.”

JUSTIN

“I don’t know what you want from me.” Anthony stretches his arms to his sides and lets them fall. “You said she’s going out with you—sounds like we don’t have a problem.” He clicks a button on his key, and some guys pile into the back of his SUV.

Jolene and Piper are having it out by her Jeep. I join them before they can get in and take off.

“Anyway, let’s grab lunch tomorrow,” Piper says to her. She pulls out her keys, looking a thousand times bubblier than Jolene.

“So, Homecoming...” I say.

Jolene’s about to turn her head away but cocks it back at me.

“Heard you telling Matt you’d go with me.” I smile. She’s too nice to back out now, and I’m not nice, so I don’t either.

“That’s true.” She looks at her feet. “I did say that.”

“Let’s go in a group,” Piper says.

I raise an eyebrow. “You’d have to get a date for that to work.”

She kicks at my shin, but I dodge it.

JOLENE

“Can I drive you home?” The question I’ve been fearing Justin would ask. I don’t have a reason to say no—or do I? I rack my brain.

“I don’t want my dad to see me getting home with a guy—”

“I’ll stop a few houses down.” There’s that mostly dead chivalry Anthony was talking about.

“There are no houses down.” It’s true. My house is way out at the end of Goleta—a little even past that. There’s at least a football field between us and the closest building—an abandoned gas station and hotel.

“Just go with him.” Piper opens the door to her front seat. “You’ll get home faster.”

That’s probably true unless he wants to stop for a snack again. He drives like a maniac but orders a shake like a turtle.

Anthony comes over, motioning to his packed car.

“AJ and Ashton went home and left Chris behind, and my car’s full. Can you take him, Justin?”

“I only have one seat,” Justin says.

“Right.” Anthony sounds like he doesn’t see the problem.

Justin glances at me, definitely seeing the problem.

“It’s fine. I’ll go with Piper.” I back toward Piper’s passenger door before Justin can object. “I’ll see you guys later.” I wave and hurry in.

Piper scowls at me, rolls her eyes, and nearly hits Justin and Anthony as she backs out.

10 THE CREAMY BATTLE OF WINCHESTER CANYON HIGH SCHOOL

JOLENE

Monday during homeroom, they announce the nominees for Homecoming King and Queen. Tay-Tay, the Alices, Jesse, Justin, and Anthony are among the ten listed. I'd be surprised, but we already knew about Justin and Anthony being on there, and then Friday night in the school parking lot—after the game and before we left for the breakwater—Piper gleefully leaked the rest of them.

The breakwater was a nice change from the victory party at Justin's house the week before. At the marina, nobody tormented Justin's sister Guineth, nobody mocked his brother Noah, nobody had an embarrassingly public breakup, and—true to Anthony's word—I was home by eleven. Then I had *Nutcracker* rehearsals on Saturday, church on Sunday, and now I'm counting down until I see Anthony again at lunch. But I forgot that Homecoming Week isn't

like a regular week. During Homecoming Week, the nominees don't sit with us.

The nominated guys sit on chairs in a line across the stage of the Greek with the girls behind them.

Piper and I come around the art building. "Oh!" She claps her hands as we take our usual seats up at the top of the benches and pull out our lunches.

Logan walks up with Chris, a guy who usually sits near the edges of the group. They've gotten close over the last week. I've caught them talking about Pokémon, Sponge Bob, Star Trek, all the pop culture things Logan likes. It's nice he's making friends and has someone to talk to about all the shows and games that I'm not super into.

I open my lunch as the music blasting from the speakers cuts out, and Quinn's voice comes over the Greek while Danny Vegas, my green-haired fellow math survivor from freshman year—camera in hand—snaps photos of Courtney and Quinn from the grass in front of the stage. He must be on yearbook now—I never took him for the extracurricular type. I guess I'm not the only one who's changed.

"Hello, Winchester Canyon High School," Quinn says. "I'm Quinn Wayne. This is Courtney Usher. We're your Junior Class Presidents, so we're hosting Homecoming Week!"

Everyone cheers.

"What that means is," Courtney says, "each day this week we're doing class comps, but just for the nominees, so you guys can all get to know these ten lovely people here on the stage with us, and then you can have something to base your vote on this Friday."

“Yeah,” Quinn says. “Then come to the Homecoming game at seven, and I hope you all have your dates and tickets for the dance on Saturday. Who are you going with, Courtney?”

Courtney glares at her, then blinks and smiles at Danny’s camera. “I told you. I—” She sighs and forces a smile out at the crowd. “I don’t have a date, Quinn.” She says it like she’s hosting a singing contest full of tone-deaf children—like it’s painful and everyone knows it but pretends it’s fine.

“Are you sure about that?” Quinn asks.

I’m about to die inside. It’s so hard to watch, but then AJ—this guy who plays football and sits a few seats away from me—stands up and starts yelling,

“WILL YOU GO TO HOMECOMING WITH ME, COURTNEY?”

She grins, then speaks into her mic. “Love to, AJ.”

“Aww,” Quinn says. She leads everyone in a round of applause, ever the cheerleader. “That’s one for the yearbook. You see, guys? Homecoming Week is magical. Courtney, tell us about the comp.”

“So, the girls have to pile whip cream on top of the guys’ heads, and whichever team has the highest pile at the end wins gift certificates to Riptide.”

Piper grabs on to my arm. “Let’s sit up close.”

I let Piper drag me a few steps down so we’re right against the side of the stage, as Courtney and Quinn introduce the nominees to the crowd.

“Margot Detcher’s paired with Jesse Morrison.” The audience applauds. “Scarlett Grey’s with Justin Granite.” More cheers. “Then we have—”

The crowd gets a little louder; Anthony's taking off his shirt, revealing a maroon tank top underneath.

"What are you doing?" Justin hisses at him.

"What?" Anthony asks. "I don't want to get my shirt covered in whip cream..."

"I hate you."

"What?"

Quinn and Courtney finish the line-up, start the game and the music, then clear out of the way.

It starts well enough, but after Justin gets a little pile of whip cream on his head, he takes some with his finger and flicks it onto Anthony's face.

"Hey!" Scarlett shouts at Justin, probably mad he ruined her hard work.

"Control your partner!" the Alice on Anthony's team shouts at Scarlett. She squirts her with some cream, and soon enough the entire stage is covered with it. Margot and Tay-Tay wrestle over a can, spraying it upright in each other's faces. Jesse chases the Alices around the chairs, shooting whip cream wherever he goes, like a cartoon cowboy. Justin and Anthony smear and rub it on each other's clothes, and hair, and faces—almost aggressively—at least on Justin's part. His eyebrows cinch, and you can hear his teeth grind from where we're sitting. Anthony gets him in the neck, making Justin gag.

Piper laughs.

Anthony and Justin spin to us. It's like being spotted by raptors. They say something to each other, then make their way toward us.

"Look at you—" Justin stretches out his arms to me. "You want a hug."

“No, no, no, no, no—” But he keeps coming. “Justin! No!” He takes my hands and pulls me up, while I protest. “Justin! No! No! Justin! Justin! No!” I’m wearing my cute, gray, fitted, long-sleeved, hooded shirt and short dark-blue shorts, and I don’t want to get whip cream all over me. I didn’t bring anything to change into, like I would have if I thought I’d get covered in cream at lunch.

He ignores every brilliant point I make—like about the “Justin!” and the “No!”—yanks me into him—“Justin, you”—and kisses me.

MARY

The entire school “oohs” as Justin Granite kisses my little sister.

She pushes him off and yells, “Justin!” then looks out at all of us and turns red.

“Well...” I say to my teensy circle of friends, “I think I’ve had enough school for the week.”

I climb the stairs out of the Greek and exit the campus by the quickest route possible—even though my car’s in the opposite direction and I’ll have to walk around the entire perimeter. It’s fine. It’s not like I’m in a hurry, or have anywhere to be, or anyone expecting me anywhere... except maybe my math teacher.

JOLENE

I wrap my arms around myself and turn to catch Piper’s—okay—*Anthony’s* reaction.

I think they've both missed Justin's performance. It was probably picked up by Danny, though. He hasn't stopped clicking his camera since the battle started. But Anthony and Piper seem unaware. He's sitting next to her, facing away from Justin and me.

"You want a hug?" he asks.

I can guess Piper's thoughts—sure they're the same ones I'd have. If she says yes, she'll get an Anthony hug. If she says no, she'll stay clean. That's not nothing. I am absolutely covered in the stuff.

"You can use cleaning off as an excuse to get out of fifth," he says.

She tackles him.

Neither of us is gonna get any cleaner, so I scrape off a little blob Justin got on me, and flick it at Piper, but it smacks Anthony on the face.

He looks at me, appalled, and gasps. "Jolene!" He stands. "How could you?"

"I meant to hit Piper!"

He creeps toward me like a horror movie killer as I back away.

"I meant to hit Piper!" I scream as he reaches me and stops. I lower my guard a little to check on him. "What'cha doing?"

He lunges forward, grabs me around my thighs and waist, and throws me screaming over his shoulder.

The Greek is a blur. A whirred Piper crosses her arms and throws one leg over the other, then Anthony spins me around, the crowd in the Greek flashing by.

"Has anybody seen Jolene?" Anthony asks. "Super cute, wears her hair in a braid, sucks at throwing whip cream..."

He spins me again.

“Put me down!”

“Justin, have you seen—” He stops himself. I can’t see why, but I doubt Justin’s amused. “Let’s try over here.”

I scream again as he whirls me around and walks to the other side of the stage.

JUSTIN

I shake up the can of whip cream I was saving, tear off the cap, shove the nozzle down the back of Anthony’s pants, and let it rip.

“Hey!” he shouts. “What’s going on? Who’s doing that?”

JOLENE

He sets me down then charges Justin. They do some more whipped damage to each other, then the bell rings.

We clean ourselves off during fifth period and well into sixth, and by the time the rest of the student body’s going home, Piper, Courtney, Quinn, and I are already dress shopping downtown.

The place to go has always been EnChantel Boutique, something I didn’t know until Piper told me just now.

As we step into the pink and black store, I instantly get why everyone likes it. There’s everything: glimmering formal gowns, flirty cocktail dresses, shoes I’m not sure I’m allowed to touch, jewelry so

sparkly it casts lights about the room, they even have an adjacent sales floor with wedding dresses. I kinda wanna go check them out, but don't want everyone to think I'm pathetic, or hopeful. I definitely don't want it getting back to Justin that I was looking at wedding dresses, and it's the kind of thing Piper would tell him.

Quinn and Courtney go right to a rack and start sifting through it, as though they know exactly what they want and only need to come in and pick it up. Piper and I are a little less prepared, and meander around. I'm learning that Piper's not the type to shop independently. If I don't stick right by her—like, if I linger at a dress, she calls me to her to see what she's looking at.

"What do you think of this?" She holds up a royal-blue dress. It's short with long sleeves and covered in sequins.

"It's cute. Try it on."

She takes it back to a fitting room, and I backtrack to one dress she had called me away from. It's a sleeveless dusty-pink gown with a sweetheart neckline and a silk corset top, with a ruffled tulle skirt that's slender and goes all the way down.

A stylish woman in a chic black dress, black boots, and red smile approaches me. "That has a matching stole, and I have the perfect shoes for it. Would you like to try them on?"

I nod, and she gathers everything she thinks would make the outfit, including some marcasite earrings and a matching necklace I didn't know I needed but now can't live without. Then she leads me to a dressing room.

I pull the black velvet curtains closed, and start undressing.

A curtain opens nearby and my friends gasp.

“Piper, that’s gorgeous!” Quinn says.

“Yeah?” Piper asks.

“So cute,” Courtney says.

I fasten the corset around me and stare at myself in the gilded mirror. It’s the most gorgeous dress I’ve ever seen—even after a year in France around my fashion mogul aunt. I look like—well—I look beautiful. For the last few months, I’ve thought I’ve looked cute, nice, acceptable, but never beautiful. My eyes must be misleading me. Maybe the mirrors are enchanted.

I exit the dressing room. Piper’s back in her street clothes, holding her royal-blue dress.

“You look amazing!” she says.

I take a big breath, which is slightly hard to do in this. “I don’t know.” I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Is it too formal? And it’s way too revealing...” I remember the stole and wrap it around my shoulders. “Ah. There we go.”

“Now we just need to convince them to have the dance outside in January,” Piper says.

She’s right. I can’t wear the stole all night. I take it off and set it on a chair in the dressing room.

This is the greatest dress that will ever exist, and I will never look better than I do when I’m wearing it, but I’m going with Justin. Like during the game last Friday, I’d almost rather look bad. But then Anthony will be at the dance where he wasn’t near me at the game, and what if—what am I doing? This is a disaster.

“Maybe I should call it off,” I say.

“The Monday before the dance?” Piper asks. “You’d crush him! And he has to have a date—he’s nominated!”

She’s right again.

“Just don’t leave me alone with him. The thought of that makes me nervous.”

“In a good way...?” she asks in such a giddy way I almost want to say yes, grab her hands between us, jump up and down and squeal, like they do in movies where girls are friends with each other and want the other to like her Homecoming date.

“No,” I say instead. “Stop hearing what you want to hear. He... he kissed me at lunch—”

“He kissed you?!” she asks.

“I saw that,” Courtney says from the checkout line.

“In front of the entire school,” I say, “so I couldn’t punch his face—or maybe I could have—why didn’t I?”

“I totally missed it,” Piper says.

That makes me glad. If she missed it, like I had thought she did, there’s a good chance other people did, too—other Anthony-ish people.

“But get that dress and let’s go,” Piper says. “Should I get something a little plungier?”

“Don’t you dare,” Quinn says, checking out. “That dress looks gorgeous on you.”

“I don’t know.” Piper checks the tag. “It’s expensive, and I’m still waiting for Anthony to ask me.”

Does she not know? I glance at Quinn and Courtney who look at each other then at me. Oh, it’s awkward.

“Um...” Quinn says, pulling out her credit card and handing it to the cashier. “Anthony has a date.”

“WHAT?!” Piper asks.

“He’s going with Damaris,” Quinn says.

“FITCH?!” Piper screams.

“Language!” the cashier says, swiping the card.

“Why didn’t he tell us?” Piper asks me.

I was hoping to let Quinn cover it.

“Um,” I say, “he did... I thought you knew...”

“He didn’t tell me! Why would he tell you and not me?” Piper asks.

I don’t know. I look at Quinn and Courtney, but they don’t offer any reasons.

“You know how you don’t tell the person you like certain stuff, because they intimidate you a little bit...?” I try.

Piper shrugs. “We’d better get going. The guys are probably already at Riptide.”

“What guys?” I ask.

“Quinn and Courtney still have the gift certificates from lunch.” Piper slides her hair behind her ear and gets in line to check out behind Courtney.

Does anyone who competes in the Greek ever get their gift certificates?

11 A NIGHT WORTHY OF THE MOON

JOLENE

The guys turn out to be exactly who I hope.

The hostess leads us to a group of tables in the back of the restaurant. A small booth full of some friends I don't know very well sits next to a larger, emptier one where Quinn's boyfriend Todd, Todd's friend Weston, Justin, and Anthony wait for us.

"We saved you a spot." Anthony motions for Todd and Weston to scoot out of the booth so he can get out and let us in.

I slide around until I'm sitting next to Justin. Anthony comes around my other side, Courtney, Quinn, Todd, and Weston fill up the bench after him. Piper folds her arms and sits on the other side of Justin. She's been quiet ever since finding out Anthony's going to the dance with Damaris Fitch. There's a chance Damaris won't survive until Friday.

"Hey, I'm Cameron. I'll be your waiter," a guy says, standing at the end of our booth. He has a scratchy, surfer voice and is as tan as a pirate with his sand-

colored hair tied back behind his neck. "Oh, hey, Jolene—"

"Hey," I say, recognizing the guy Matt brought to Piper's the other day—the day he kissed me. What's with him and Justin kissing people out of nowhere?! "You guys remember Cameron?"

"He certainly remembers you." Justin shoots a glare at our waiter.

"Right..." I say. So, he remembers me? So what? That doesn't mean he likes me, and if he does, it doesn't mean he's going to make a move. Justin has to come at him for having a good memory?! It was a pretty memorable event. Maybe saying so will diffuse the situation. "Probably because I was screaming in the hall," I say.

Anthony and Cameron laugh.

"I'll be back for your drink order." Cameron walks off and Courtney raises her eyebrows.

"Did he just introduce himself to not take our drink order?" she asks.

Anthony leans down to me. "If you order a shake with whip cream, I'm gonna move to the other side of the table."

My face warms. "I meant to hit Piper."

He pauses for a moment, as if considering. "Okay, I'll stay." He sits back straight.

"Hey, high school kids." A deep, velvety voice I know instantly comes from the head of our booth. I haven't really spoken to Matt since the day he kissed me at Piper's.

His eyes meet mine, and he tilts his head a little bit, maybe surprised to see me, but why should he be? He knows I'm friends with his friends now.

"Come join us," Anthony says. "He hasn't taken our order yet."

Matt slides in next to Piper who seems annoyed to have to move to allow him and Jason in.

"Why, you got Cameron?" Jason asks. By the sound of it, he's no more a fan of our waiter than Justin is.

"How was your game Friday?" Matt asks Anthony.

And now that Anthony's talking to Matt—leaving Justin my only other neighbor—I don't know where to focus. I can't lean over Justin to talk to Piper without drawing Justin into the conversation, and I can't lean over Anthony to talk to Quinn and Courtney without cutting through his conversation with Matt. So, I look down, pick up my napkin, and unwrap the utensils inside.

"Good," Anthony says. "Played Carp, so—"

"Oh yeah," Matt says. "You guys always beat them." Then he looks at me, wedged in between two of his best friends. "Who do you got for math this year?"

"Schiffer."

"Can't be worse than Diefenbacher." He unrolls his napkin like I did.

"Apparently she's not even at the school anymore," I say.

"Really?"

"She got arrested."

"What?"

I nod.

I heard all kinds of things from Logan about it, none of them appropriate for the dinner table.

“When was this?” Matt asks.

“Hey—” Justin interrupts. He’s stiff and his voice comes out tense. “Feel free to get whatever you want. It’s on me.”

“Oh,” I say. “No, you don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind,” he says, scoffing so much he might choke.

“Justin, you got mine, too?” Jason asks.

“Sure.”

“Sweet.”

Anthony bends down to me. “Just take advantage. Everyone else does.”

“Nice,” I say, laughing a little. “Is that what you do?”

“He never offers to buy mine.”

“How about I buy yours when he buys mine?”

“Then I’ll buy Justin’s.” He leans over me to Justin. “Yours is on me, Justin.”

“What?! Why?!”

“Because you’re very special to me.”

“Shut up.” Justin folds his arms, facing away from us.

We finish our meals and pay. Justin and the gift cards cover everyone who isn’t Matt, Anthony, and Weston, and the four of them make sure everything’s covered and that we’ve left a large enough tip for Cameron—despite the fact he didn’t bring us our drinks until after half of us were through. Then we scooch out of the booth and start separating.

I swing my backpack around my shoulders when Matt asks, “Jolene, you need a ride?”

“You live around the corner,” Justin says, “and we already decided—she’s going with me.”

“Well, a few of us,” I clarify so Matt doesn’t think I’m going alone with Justin. “We’re, um, dropping you off at the school to get your car, right?”

“Yeah,” Justin glances back at Matt. “Anthony’s driving.”

“You know, I live right by the school,” Piper says. “I could take you, Justin.”

Justin stares at Piper like she’s a black hole threatening to engulf him.

“It’s okay,” he says. “I’ll go with Anthony.”

Piper glares at him, and without saying good-bye, stomps out into the parking lot.

“Oh,” Matt calls out, making everyone stop and look at him. “I’m throwing a party Saturday night after the dance. It’d be great if you all came. Come as you are—you don’t even have to bother changing.”

He looks at me.

I tilt my head—what’s that look mean? He almost made it sound like he wanted us to not change, but why would he care?

Before I can think too much about it, everyone tells him we’ll be there, and we leave.

We walk through the parking lot to Anthony’s Bronco. I go to open the passenger-side door—

“Let me get it.” Anthony jumps in front of me and eases it open. “It sticks a little.”

He shuts the door, and gets into the driver’s side, then takes the car out of the lot, around the corner, and down El Colegio Road.

The sun's setting and the car's quiet except for *Guns N' Roses* humming out of his speakers.

"Did you go dress shopping with Piper?" Anthony asks after a while.

I slap my hand against my forehead. "I forgot my dress in her car!" I groan. "I'll have to get it tomorrow."

"So..." Anthony says. "Yes."

I smile and look over at him. "Yes. She's so mad at you."

"Me? Why?"

Shoot. Shoot. Shoot. Shoot. I should not have said anything.

"I guess she learned from Quinn that you're taking Damaris to Homecoming." Hopefully, that's smooth and casual—something that if it got back to her, wouldn't make her hate me forever.

"She's mad about that?" he asks.

"I shouldn't have said anything. Erase your brain."

I've guessed that he knows about her crush on him, and I think I'm right. I hope so at least, or I'm a terrible friend.

"Because she's jealous," Justin says from the back seat.

Anthony scoffs at Justin in the rearview mirror. "Oh, come on."

"But seriously, man, Damaris?" Justin asks. "That'd be like taking—" He goes silent, as if not saying anything will make us forget he ever spoke.

I face him, not about to let him off that easily. I know who he's dated before—the girls he admits to, and the one he doesn't. And I have a feeling he'd admit to a lot more if I wasn't in the car.

"Who were you going to say, Justin? It'd be like taking who?" I ask.

"Uh, nobody..."

I stare at him—no facial changes at all. Answer me or live forever in this car with me staring at you like this.

"She seems cool, and she asked me." Anthony shrugs.

My resolve dissolves. I turn from Justin to gawk at Anthony. I hadn't heard that she asked him. I'll have to make sure Piper knows. It might help her mood—it helps mine.

"Can't all have your luck," Anthony says, glancing in the rearview mirror.

But I don't think Justin takes it in the jovial way it Anthony said it.

"Could you stop hitting on her for like ten seconds?!" Justin screams.

"Justin!" I shout back at him.

"It's all he's been doing all day!" Justin yells at me now. "He throws you over his shoulder at lunch, and now, right in front of me, he tells you he'd rather go to the dance with you!" He faces Anthony. "I thought you were my friend, man." He throws himself back against the seat and crosses his arms.

Mortified and furious, I face front, away from him.

Anthony—calm as a lake—tilts his head as he merges toward the high school. "I think you're making this a bigger deal than you need to. Jolene's obviously going with you—what are you worried about? Sorry, Jolene, didn't mean to talk about you as if you weren't here."

“I wish I wasn’t,” I say under my breath.

Anthony pulls the car into the lot and stops by Justin’s red Porsche.

“See you tomorrow,” Anthony tells Justin who gets out and slams the door behind him. But nothing he does appears to affect his friend, who turns to me. “Where’s your house again?”

Suddenly, Justin’s standing against my window, his light clothes, face, and glowing hair ghost-like against the dark parking lot.

Anthony and I both yell—surprised and terrified.

“Sorry,” Justin says. I roll down my window so we can hear him better. “Sorry, it’s just—I’ve never liked someone this much before, and all my friends keep flirting with you, and it just makes me crazy sometimes. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He leaves.

In three movements, Anthony lifts his finger to the side, rotates it down, and pushes the button to roll up my window.

I take a deep breath, and once Justin starts his car, Anthony pulls out of the lot.

We don’t talk much for a few minutes. I just stare out the window.

On the side roads the night is dark and peaceful. The stars and the eucalyptus loom overhead. I took it all for granted until I went to France and missed it. I missed the fragrance of the beach mixed with the trees, the dry foothills, the morning fog rolling in from the ocean. Somehow even the near constant smell of the skunks comforts me and feels like home.

Even tonight, after Justin's outburst, and Piper's pouting, and Matt's weird signals and offering to drive me home, I feel relaxed in Anthony's car.

You'd think I'd be nervous sitting next to Anthony—and I should be. He looks like someone who should be intimidating—tall, strong, gorgeous—but I can only manage a buzzing excitement that's more exhilarating than terrifying.

I keep my head facing the road but watch him in my peripheral. He drives relaxed, with one arm resting against the side of the car and the other on his leg. He wears a short sleeve midnight-blue T-shirt, and I wonder if he doesn't mind the cold, or if he just didn't bring a jacket.

"You live in Ellwood?" he asks.

"Yeah. Well, near-ish."

He makes a turn onto the overpass, crossing over into my neck of the literal woods, where no one ever goes—where the stars shine brighter than our few streetlights—where the sound of the waves through the trees rocks everything in the forest to sleep—where the worries of my social life are dampened out by the smell of the grass and sea salt, the sounds of the birds and the ocean, the glimpses of the beach through the shadows.

Sharing this place with Anthony for the first time—it's like introducing something that's a part of me—something I love to someone who's quickly becoming one of my favorite people.

"How's *The Nutcracker*?" he asks.

"Good. Good... Although..." I laugh thinking about it. "I'm dancing with this new guy, and—I don't know—

he does this look when I run to him for a lift, and”—I open my eyes and mouth wide and hold my hands out like I’m gonna catch someone, mimicking my dance partner, Peter’s, panicked expression.—“I start laughing! I can’t do it!”

Anthony laughs.

“Is your sister in a *Nutcracker*?” I ask, lifting my head to see his.

“Yeah. She’s with Hollister Ballet School.”

“That’s the one I’m in.”

“What?”

“I probably know her!”

“Little girl, brown hair...”

“You just described everybody.”

“I have a picture.” He leans forward so he can pull his phone out of his back pocket, flips to his photos, and hands it to me. So trusting. He doesn’t worry that I might look through his other photos.

A little girl who looks like Anthony, but smaller and way more girl-like, swings at a park and smiles up at me from inside the screen. I know her instantly. She’s in the party scene with me. She doesn’t play one of my kids, Clara, or Fritz, but she and a few of her friends come hang out with me during down time, show me the new steps they’ve learned and ask me questions about dancing *en pointe* and my costumes.

“Alana!” I say. “Of course she’s your sister! Anthony! She’s the best! I love her!”

Anthony smiles so big it could break me.

“Did she show you how she can jump and land on her toes?” he asks.

“Yes! Terrified me!”

“She does this thing where she takes her feet and bends them—I don’t know how, but like backward—is that a ballet thing?”

I laugh. I can’t even picture it, and it’s the most Alana thing I’ve ever heard.

“No,” I say, handing his phone back to him—without scrolling through all his photos—and facing front. “Aww, you’re so cute. Maybe you should just pull over and let me out here, so you can rush back home to her...”

“One problem at a time.”

“Oh, so I’m your problem now?” I look over and smile at him, but he’s not smiling.

“Most of them.”

12 PEAR EATER

JOLENE

I apologize to Logan the entire drive to school. It isn't until we get to our lockers and start sorting out what we need and what we don't that he convinces me he's let it go.

"Now I'm going to be mad at you because you won't shut up about it," he says, his lips curling into a grin.

"Okay," I say. "I get the point. You forgive me. Jeez."

He kicks my shoe with his, the way someone might pat someone on the back, but I still feel horrible for forgetting we made plans to kill zombies. Those zombies are probably running wild right now, all robust, and unkilld.

I take my sack lunch out of my backpack and put it in my locker when I hear someone springing up next to me.

"I just did something stupid," Piper says.

"Oh no," I say. The lunch I just put in my locker has a gigantic MARY written across it. "I grabbed Mary's

lunch! She probably has a pear. She's such a—pear eater!"

"Doesn't Mary have a zero period?" Logan asks. "Didn't she grab your lunch first? It's her fault."

"She slept in and missed it today. She probably hasn't even left for school yet." My back pocket vibrates. "That's probably her chewing me out for taking hers." I check. Sure enough, it's a text from Mary.

"Hello!" Piper yells. "Best friend having a crisis here! I just asked Chris Kimball to Homecoming!"

"It's still her fault," Logan says. "You usually can just grab your lunch because she's usually gone by then. You're not used to checking."

I text Mary: "Sorry! Switch it with mine when you get here. My locker's S9, my code's 35-15-35."

"I don't know who that is," I tell Piper, sliding my phone back into my pocket and swinging my backpack around. Oh—it must be the same Chris who sits on the edges of our group at lunch—Logan's new friend. Of course she'd ask Logan's friend to the dance! Anything to get at him. Like he needs taking down a peg when he's already pining for her. Add this to the list of reasons he should move on. "Oh, Chris! Sure."

"Ugh," she says. "He's the worst. But I knew he wouldn't have a date, and would say yes."

As crushing a blow as it is to Logan to ask his new friend to the dance, at least she's not standing in front of us, referring to Logan as the worst.

"I spoke too soon," she says, looking at the other side of the locker hall. "He's not the worst; Damaris is. Look what she's wearing!"

I do but can't join in Piper's disapproval. Damaris Fitch—Anthony's Homecoming date—okay, she's a bit of a strange one. She dresses like an anime character, her long hair pulled to the sides in pigtails, fingerless gloves in cherry blossom fabric that matches the crop top that she wears over a light-gray shirt. She pairs all this with a large white belt with a plastic flower on it, and a short, pink netted skirt, and thick white knee-high boots. And yes, it's unique, but she also looks insanely cute. I have to give her props for not caring what girls like Piper stage-whisper about her behind her back. Shoot, if it wins her a Homecoming date like Anthony, maybe we should all take notes.

"I think she looks cute," I say.

"Ugh," Piper moans. "She's such a—pear eater."

"Are we still meeting at my place before the dance?"

"Yeah," Piper says.

"Should we invite her to join us?"

"No!"

"They'll pick her up before they get to my house. Did you want her in the car with the guys before us?"

She looks away like she hates all her options.

"I'll be right back." I hitch up my backpack and cross the hall. "Hey, Damaris. You're going to Homecoming with Anthony, right?"

She looks at me, stunned and terrified. "Did he send you to cancel?" she asks in a quiet and squeaky voice. "Or is this some type of *Carrie* situation?"

"No, no," I say. "I don't know if he told you, but we all wanted to go as a group."

"Oh, yeah."

"Oh, he told you?"

"No."

I wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn't.

"You're that new girl in mine and Lindsey's ballet class," she says. "I was the new girl until you got there. You're from France, right? How are you liking America? Your English is really good by the way."

"No, it's—I'm from here—I—"

She's a little spacy, but nice about it, at least—no reason to ridicule her for it like Justin and Piper seem to think. It makes me appreciate Anthony saying yes when she asked him to the dance, not necessarily because he's kind, or charitable, but he doesn't seem hung up on who does and who doesn't fit in with his group.

"The guys are picking us up in Justin's dad's limo at my house. Piper and I were going to get ready at five-thirty, if you want to join us."

For a moment, she stares at me, and I'm not sure she's heard me. There's a possibility she's checked out and that her brain's connecting to an alien frequency the rest of us humans can't hear. Soon she'll announce that the mothership has arrived, and she has to go make preparations for our inevitable destruction.

"Okay," she says, still looking like I might dump pig's blood on her. "That sounds fun. Okay, bye."

"Bye," I say, as she walks away.

I return to my friends. Piper's gone, but Logan's waiting for me with an odd look on his face.

“Anthony’s going with Damaris?” he asks.

“She’s nice.”

“Sure.”

I round on him. “You too?”

“What?” he asks. “No. It’s just unexpected. It’s unexpected, right?”

I sigh, giving in. I was surprised too, at first. “Yeah, but it shouldn’t be.”

“Again, I say, ‘Sure.’”

She reminds me of me, if I—before I came back from Paris—had all the courage in the world, worn whatever I wanted, and asked out the guy I liked. What would have happened if I had asked Matt out back then? He would have said no; he had a girlfriend.

What if I had met Anthony, and asked him out? He said yes to Damaris, he very well might have said yes to me. I could have saved myself so much hassle over these last few years, pining and pining after Matt.

A guy I’ve seen but have never spoken to, who sits across the room from me in history walks up to us, assumedly to talk to Logan.

“Jolene?”

Oh. I guess not to talk to Logan.

“Hey...” I say.

“It’s John. I’m in your theater class...”

“Right. How’s it going?”

He gapes at me, trembling. He looks stalky but like he might be a sophomore, has brown hair that fades on the sides, army pants, and an anime character on his shirt I don’t recognize.

"I was wondering if you had a date to Homecoming." He says it so fast I almost ask him to repeat it, but it dawns on me before I do.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I already told someone I'd go with him. If it helps, I 100% would rather go with you."

He smiles. "Yeah. Yeah, that does help," he says as he skips off.

"Getting asked out by random guys in your theater class now?" Logan asks.

I shrug, turning away so he can't see my blush. I've never been asked out by a guy I've never spoken to before—I've hardly ever been asked out at all!

"You worried at all that he's gonna make too big of a deal out of you saying you'd rather go with him?"

I crinkle my eyebrows. "Why?"

Logan shrugs, rubbing his neck. "Just that if a quiet kid you've never spoken to asks you out, it's probably something he's been thinking about."

"You think I led him on? I didn't mean to—"

"He's gonna tell all his friends that you'd rather go with him than with Justin Granite."

I bite my lip. Maybe I should have shut my mouth after letting him down.

The first thing they want us to do in myth is vote for Homecoming King and Queen, since it's homeroom.

Class officers pass the ballots down each aisle. I take one and pull out my pen.

The girls are easy. Naturally, I'm not voting for Tay-Tay, so that leaves Margot, Scarlett, and the Alices. I fill in the dot next to Alice Sistine's name because she

signed my yearbook when I was a freshman. Apart from Tay-Tay, she's the only one who's ever spoken to me.

The boys are harder—well, sort of. It's less of a “who do I vote for” and more of an “am I a horrible person for not voting for my date” kind of thing. But I know who I want to win, who deserves to win because he's kind, funny, and puts everybody at ease. There's really no point in putting it off. I fill in the dot next to Anthony's name, fold the paper like everyone else, and pass it back to the front.

13 MORE REASONS TO HATE DAMARIS FITCH

PIPER

She needs help with everything. I come into her room, dressed, makeup ready, hair ready, and she's sitting at her vanity—in her sweats and hair down—still fiddling with her eyeliner.

“You’re not even close to being ready,” I say.

“I didn’t know I was supposed to be.” Jolene sets down her brown eye pencil and grabs a tube of something. It’s all expensive and name brand. My mom makes sure I have the good stuff, too, but I don’t have as much. And I basically just have the essentials, and don’t have nearly as many fun throw-ins—like setting spray, or bronzer. Jolene even has three different kinds of perfume. I have the 0.34-ounce free gift that came with my mom’s order of \$50 or more.

I place my corsage for Chris on her bed and get to work.

“I’ll do your hair.” I grab her brush and one of her elastics off her vanity then pull a third of her hair into

a pony at the top of her scalp. I section out a tendril on each side of her face so they fall over her cheekbones. “My mom’s so mad at me.” I tuck the ponytail into itself. “I wasn’t supposed to spend this much on my dress. How much was yours?”

She shrugs.

Did she not check the tag? Ugh. She probably never checks the price of anything. Probably has no clue how much her laptop cost, or her designer makeup, or shoes—probably thinks a banana costs \$10. But if I look upset, I’ll be admitting I do check tags, so I relax my creased eyebrows away.

“She forgot she even said I could get a dress—forgot about the dance completely until I came out of my room in it,” I say, watching her expression in the mirror.

She looks like she might pity me for a second, but laughs with me now at my mom.

“Hi guys,” a whiny voice says behind me.

Damaris Fitch enters the room in a short dress with long sleeves, covered in red sequins. It’s my dress—exactly my dress, but in red instead of royal-blue. This is what comes out of going to the best store in town to get dresses.

“What?”

“We’re wearing the same dress!” I yell at her.

What does she mean “what?” She has eyes! She can see I’m here, basically her but with strawberry-blond hair and in blue!

“I think the color’s different,” she says.

“Ugh!” I groan. She also has the perfect body for it. What is ballet doing to these girls? “And it looks better on you!”

“Thanks.” She smiles like I don’t hate her.

I can’t with her, so I turn to Jolene. “I’m done with your hair. You can go get your dress on.”

She disappears through her bookcase door to her closet.

“Where’s Jolene?” Mary strolls in wearing a dress covered in sequins—black of course—different from Damaris’s and mine, but close enough to be annoying.

“Mary, you look amazing!” Damaris squeals.

“Damaris!” Mary shouts. “What are you doing here? You look incredible!”

“I’m going with Anthony. I like how black your dress is.”

“But look at you! Anthony’s gonna lose his mind, girl!”

MARY

Piper looks livid that I’ve complimented Damaris, which makes me wanna do it again.

She moves to Jolene’s bed and puts her head between her palms. She’s probably still hung up on Anthony. She has been ever since she was my friend, and he’s still cute, so there’s no reason for her to like some other poor, unsuspecting boy. Honestly, it’s probably for the best she’s picked him as her target. He seems to bear the burden well. No other boy could tolerate it.

“Your hair looks amazing down,” I tell Damaris, keeping an eye on Piper hyperventilating into her hands. “You’re gonna have to beat Anthony away with a stick.” Piper heaves. “A sharp stick.”

Damaris trills, claps, and jumps up and down. I laugh as Piper does too, but in a totally different decimal.

“Just so you know,” Piper says, looking up from her wallowing, glaring at poor Damaris, “we’ll probably have to drop you off before we head to Matt’s party. The limo driver is supposed to be off by a certain time, and we can’t have him drive all the way to your house after the party. It’ll be too late for him.”

I call fallacy, but I don’t care enough to say so. Piper just doesn’t want Damaris around Anthony too long. I can’t really blame her for resorting to lying—she needs all the help she can get, and this is one of those things that’ll likely end up biting her in the butt, and she’ll get what she deserves, which will be far richer than me pointing out her lie before it has a chance to sink its teeth in.

“What party?” Damaris asks.

“I said ‘Matt’s party’.”

If Piper’s scowling grew arms and legs it would jump on Damaris and strangle her.

“It’s way out on Del Playa,” Piper says, “like right by Riptide.”

Ugh. She sounds like such a high school girl—dropping street names in Isla Vista like she knows her way around the college town. As if it’s somehow impressive to know a place you’ve grown up next to.

Most sensible Goletians avoid the entire UCSB area. It'll only bring you traffic signs and bikes that don't obey traffic signs.

"That's fine," Damaris says. "I think college parties are kind of boring."

My laugh isn't missed by Piper, who glares at me and goes back to pouting.

Jolene exits from her closet wearing a dust-pink gown that's far too pretty.

I should tell her it looks bad on her, but the words don't reach my mouth before she's complimenting me.

"Mary!" she says—eyes lighting up like a fairy princess whose face is on fire. "That dress is stunning! Is that the one you made?! It's gorgeous!"

I grimace.

Sometimes she makes it so hard to hate her. She needs to be taken down a peg, though. That's why I came in here. She's going with Justin! But then again—she's going with Justin. If he's still the same Justin I knew, she's not about to have an especially magical evening.

"Look at you!" I say to her.

Really, she does look gorgeous. Her hair is perfectly plump where it should be, she's done her makeup in colors that make the brown of her hair and eyes pop, yet it's soft, like her spine. And dust-rose looks good on her. Really, she should wear it all the time, but I'd never say that to her face.

"You look so gorgeous," Damaris tells Jolene while Piper groans from the bed.

"It's too much," Jolene says. "I'll be overdressed..."

“It’s true,” I say, “but the only people who’ll say so will be jealous and peeing themselves.”

“Just do what I’m doing and wear this instead,” Damaris says. “Piper’s doing it.”

“I think it’s a little late for that,” I say, unsure whether Damaris was joking or stupid.

Piper’s still dry heaving across the room. She snatches one of Jolene’s pink satin throw pillows and screams into it.

Jolene bites the side of her mouth.

“I think she’s upset because her cat died.” Damaris balances on one leg and fixes her shoe strap. “My neighbor screamed like that once, and my mom said it was because her cat died, which was a relief because I thought it was because I had just”—she raises quote fingers—“*accidentally*’ set her rug on fire.”

Piper raises her head to glare at Jolene, as if blaming her for having to be around Damaris.

“Here I was thinking Piper was mad because you didn’t show up looking like Sailor Moon,” I say.

I don’t hate her as much as I hate Tay-Tay and Justin, but I’m not rooting for a girl who turned on me the second I quit cheer. She always felt a little like a fake friend, then confirmed it when my status dipped. Ha! “Dipped.” Like it was some little blip. I meant, “when my status took a nose-dive.”

“Who’s that?” Damaris asks.

“Sailor Moon?”

“No, you said ‘Yu didn’t show up.’ Who’s Yu? Oh! You mean ‘you!’ Like, ‘me!’ Oh!” She laughs like the precious little weirdo she is.

“Yeah,” I say. If I’m not going to be mean to Jolene, there’s really no purpose for me to be in here. “Well, have fun tonight, kids.”

I leave them to their misery, taking a little bit of it with me in case I get bored.

14 IT TOLLS FOR YOUR DAUGHTER

MARY

A year ago, I had such dreams. I'd be all dressed up in a bright-pink gown, my brown hair done up all pretty. I'd anxiously wait until I heard the doorbell, then walk downstairs as Justin smiled up at me. I'd greet him at the bottom step, exchange corsages, pose for photos, then get into his dad's limo and drive off to Homecoming. But it didn't happen then, and it's not happening now. I'm not going to be waiting by the door when my date shows up, but I'm sure not gonna be upstairs, coming down like some sort of deranged debutante.

I wait down the hall, like a normal person, while my dad fusses with a camera.

I didn't even know he had a camera.

The doorbell rings.

"Lori, they're here!" he calls toward the kitchen, prepping himself behind his tripod. "Come in!"

The door opens and my date steps into the foyer.

“Oh.” My dad steps back from his camera. “It’s just Tate.”

I’m surprised he knows his name. I’m also surprised at what Tate’s wearing. He must have gotten his ancient purple tux, with a ghastly rounded collar, a ruffled frill—not unlike a triceratops—and matching loafers from a thrift store. No—he raided the costume shop. He’s neck-deep in theater, not just at school but all around town. Old me would be slightly repulsed—not gonna lie. I agreed to go with him because he’s my friend, but if he’s gonna dress like a fish that just got turned into a human—well, a year ago I would have shoved him out the door and told him to lose my number.

But now—now I appreciate the way he makes my dad squirm. In fact, I like the idea of Tate getting under people’s skin so much, I think I’ll wave him around a bit longer—at least until Justin gets here.

“Come on in,” my mom says, shutting the door behind my date. “Mary’s not ready yet.”

“Yeah, I am.” I come from behind the staircase.

“I got you a flower.” He holds up a plastic box with translucent plastic grass and a corsage inside with gorgeous purple roses that match his hideous tux.

He slides it onto my wrist—the corsage, not the translucent plastic grass.

I pin a boutonniere on him. It’s black, of course, to match my soul—and my dress.

“You ready?” he asks.

The clock on the wall reads 7:30. I should have asked Jolene what time her date was getting here. We could go and run into them at the dance, but those

things are always so dark and crowded—he could miss us entirely. Then this fantasy I have won’t happen: of him getting jealous and beating Tate to a pulp, throwing me over his shoulder, carrying me off, leaving the rest of the party to scramble for a ride home—or to the hospital.

“You waiting for something?” Tate asks.

The doorbell rings. Excellent.

“Ask not for whom the bell tolls!” I shout dramatically.

“Lori!” my dad yells, flying to the camera that was immobile the whole time Tate and I were doing photo-worthy things.

My mom opens the door, and Dad takes a few photos, blinding everyone, which is so unnecessary with modern cameras, but funny because the three guys behind the door all blink and groan.

Mom glares at Dad, then welcomes Justin, Anthony, and... Chris, I think, and invites them in.

“Which one of you is Justin?” my dad asks.

“I am,” he says, glancing at me but acting like he isn’t.

My dad groans, and I know what he’s thinking. If I were him, and my favorite daughter was going to date one of these three, Justin would be my last pick. There’s something about him that just says, “I won’t respect your daughter at all, ever.” And he’s far too cute. Anthony’s cute, too, but he has an honorable air about him that just turns me off, and Chris looks like a five-year-old could throat punch him and he’d go crying to his mommy. Plus, Justin has this whole throwing-his-wealth-around thing. Anthony and

Chris wear black suits, like most guys, but Justin wears a tailored fit with peak lapels, herringbone lining, cufflinks that are probably real rubies, and a smugness that makes me want to forgive, forget, and make out with him until dawn.

“Well, we’re gonna go.” I place my hand on Tate’s chest, bat my eyes, and toss my head back to address the rest of the room. “We have reservations for a private booth.” It’s not true, and I’m not sure any restaurant in town has a private booth, but they say it in movies, and it sounds provocative, so I push Tate out the door before anyone questions it.

STEVE

Out of the three guys in my foyer—the tall, floppy-haired guy, the fop, or the doofus, I like my daughter’s date the least. I don’t even want to let him in, but Lori ushers them inside and offers them seats in the living room. Only the ugly kid takes her up on it.

He plops down, spreads out, and makes himself at home. But I’m not gonna waste my energy on a kid who probably doesn’t know how to wipe his butt. I need to make it clear to this Justin guy just how dead he’ll be if he mistreats my daughter.

“Curfew’s nine-thirty.” I glare at the little snot.

“Steve.” Lori eyes me.

“Fine, ten.”

She huffs at me like I’m joking.

“The dance is over at eleven, so we’d like Jolene home at eleven-thirty.” My wife betrays me. “If it’s a little bit late, that’s okay. I know the driver has more

than just her to drop off, but there's no reason it should be past midnight, okay?"

This is the woman I married. Why?

The tall kid nods while the dandy smirks.

I glare at him, which knocks it off his face. Good.

JOLENE

With Dogberry at our heels, we walk down the stairs while my dad takes a bunch of flash photos—blinding us—making it hard to see where we're going or to tell who's waiting for us at the bottom.

I trust it's our dates, but it'd be nice to see them—to make sure that Anthony Whitaker is in my house, at the bottom of my stairs.

CHRIS

Piper, Damaris, and Jolene walk down the stairs, wincing as the camera flashes in their eyes.

It would be hilarious if they fell.

JUSTIN

Jolene's easily the hottest of the group. Piper has a horse face, and she knows it. Damaris has a nice body, but her crazy cancels out anything else. She's too embarrassing to be seen with; what if she says something?

It's almost not fair that Jolene's in the same room as them.

I bet it's killing Chris and Anthony. Chris hasn't even gotten off the couch, and I know Anthony's trying his best to act like he's not devastated he's going with Damaris and not my date.

Then there's the extra bonus of bothering Mary. It's too bad she left before she could see me with her sister.

ANTHONY

I thought she was beautiful before—the girl next door, but I was wrong. She is infinitely more exceptional than neighborly.

Her long, brown hair bounces over her pale-pink shoulders, her eyes glow and dance in the strobe of the camera. Her grimace against the flashes makes me want to scale the stairs, tear off my jacket, and hold it up—blocking her from the offending brightness. As she gets closer, I almost reach out to her, before remembering she's not my date.

I take one last look at her as she blinks against the light, then force all my attention onto Damaris, smiling at her with a smile that belongs to Jolene, ready to praise her with Jolene's compliments, and give her the night I'd do anything to give Jolene.

JOLENE

Eventually, the flashes die down, and we get to the ground. Sure enough, our dates are waiting for us.

I use all my strength to focus on Justin, not Anthony, who wears a suit so well the makers should hire him

to promote it, who smiles at Damaris, and laughs over something I didn't catch.

Justin's eyes move up and down my body. "You look ravishing," he says.

I thank him as Anthony slides a beautiful red corsage over Damaris's hand.

Justin places the corsage he got me on my wrist, and I raise the white rose I got him, but he already has a boutonniere pinned to his jacket. Or at least I think he does. It's still hard to see with all the flashes.

"What the heck is this?" Piper yells as Chris as he lifts out the light-blue rose he got her.

"You said your dress was blue." He leans away from Piper like he's expecting to get slapped.

"Dark-blue!" Piper says, visibly dying as he slips it on her.

I face Justin. "I got you a boutonniere—"

"I wanted a white one. I told you not to worry about it."

"I got you a white one. I thought you meant I shouldn't, like, get anxiety over it."

He shrugs, so I turn to my mom who offers her hand to take the rejected flower.

The door opens behind me and Chris, Piper, and Justin walk out.

"You know what, honey? Your friend's date forgot to get him one. Let's give it to him." My mom motions toward Anthony, who's crouched next to Dogberry giving him a good rubdown.

"Oh—she did?" I must have been so distracted by Piper's response to Chris's blue flower, and Justin

already having one, that I missed it. “Do you want this one?” I ask Anthony.

He smiles. “Well, if Justin doesn’t.” He stands and leans down so I can reach his lapel and pin the flower to it. His breath smells like mint, and his neck’s smooth, like he just shaved. I swallow and focus on not stabbing him.

“Thank you,” he says. “Or should I thank Justin?”

“Please do.” I remember how Justin behaved in the car after Riptide. “He’ll be so thrilled it went to you.”

“He will?” my mom asks.

“No,” Anthony and I say.

Anthony and Damaris leave and my dad hands me the stole I had left on the railing.

“Here’s your thing, honey,” he says.

“Thanks.” I drape it around myself.

“I gotta tell ya,” Dad says, “I don’t like your date.”

“What he means is,” Mom says, “try to have fun.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean the exact opposite of that. In no way should what I said be construed to mean that—”

“Bye,” I say and step outside, shutting the door behind me.

The chill air smells like brine, tar, and skunk, so I breathe through my mouth. It only helps slightly.

A man in a suit stands by the door of a long white limo at the edge of my driveway. Chris and Piper are, I assume, in the car. But Justin, Anthony and Damaris wait for me on my porch.

“You don’t mind?” Anthony asks Damaris. “Jolene gave me Justin’s boutonniere.”

“Don’t be stupid. I can’t believe I forgot.”

“Could have happened to anyone.”

They walk ahead but Justin lingers to walk with me, offering his arm. I take it because stilettos and steps aren’t friends. Then he leans in. “Did you have to do that?”

“You didn’t want it.” I grip my stole tighter, securing it into place, covering my chest.

He checks his cufflinks. “I paid some of the guys to compliment you tonight to make sure you feel as beautiful as you are.”

It seems like that would work better if he didn’t tell me about it. Wouldn’t it?

He lets me get in first. I slide next to Anthony, then Justin climbs in behind me and the chauffeur shuts the door, locking us in.

Imagine the carnage if we were trapped in here forever. Who would take charge? Who would get eaten first? I’ve heard of people eating roses. We girls each have three; the boys just have one. Advantage: girls.

Do other people think of life-and-death scenarios, or am I weird?

I adjust the mauve roses on my wrist. They’re covered in glitter and little jewels that sparkle like diamonds in the limo’s LEDs pulsating to the loud music. The roses are probably not edible now that they’re covered in glitter, but the muted color of the petals looks beautiful and elegant against the dusty-rose tulle of my dress.

I lift my hand to my nose; they smell sweet and soft—just as beautiful as they look.

“You look hot,” Justin says in my ear.

I can't bring myself to thank him for that, so I give him a tight smile—in the most innocent way I possibly can. It says “those are words,” and definitely cannot be translated as “let's find a quiet place to be alone.” But the way Justin shifts and lays his arm across the back of my seat, I'm not sure an innocent phrase exists in his body-language vocabulary.

15 HOMECOMING

JOLENE

It's not easy to make a school cafeteria inviting, but I have to hand it to the leadership team, they've done a stand-up job. They've hung a silver foil fringe curtain around the walls that shines and glimmers in the light of the mirror ball rotating on the ceiling. Colored lights flash around the room from the DJ booth, coordinating with the electronic dance music blaring from the speakers. A banner over the back wall reads, "All I Want Is You," which I guess is the theme, and another banner hangs on top of the back exit reading "Refreshments Outside," which might have been a better theme, at least for a high school dance.

We're about forty minutes late, but the room is already packed. A large group dances in the middle of the floor, with pockets of outliers scattered around, some sitting, some standing. Among them is Mary, Tate, and a few of their friends—dressed like vampires and dancing some interpretive dance that they occasionally break from to laugh, then start up again.

Piper grabs my arm.

“Come with me to the bathroom.”

I turn to Justin, point at Piper, then let her tug me down the hall.

There’s a line, but Piper slips past into the bathroom and up to the mirror where she checks her hair and teeth, pulling a tube of lipstick out of the top of her dress and reapplying.

I don’t have anything hidden in my dress, so I run my fingers through my hair.

She puts her lipstick back and pivots to me. “Ready?”

“You didn’t want to use the bathroom?”

“I did.” She pushes me out the door.

We go back to the dance floor where Chris and a few others who usually eat lunch near us dance on the edge of the mob.

Piper tugs on my arm, leans in, and shouts over the music. “Chris is so embarrassing! Look how he dances!”

It’s true, he doesn’t have a lot of rhythm, but I give anybody credit for getting out and having fun. I wouldn’t have even noticed his coordination insufficiencies if she hadn’t pointed them out. It’s not like rocking back and forth with your arms over your head requires technique.

The song ends and a slow one starts.

“Finally!” She stretches to see over the crowd.

“Where’s Anthony?”

I search, too. He’s usually easy to see; not a lot of guys at school are as tall as him.

Jesse strides toward us, no doubt to ask Piper to dance.

“Jolene, wanna dance?”

I stare at the ASB vice president's hand that he holds out, not knowing what to say. "Sure," comes out of my mouth. I take his hand, and he leads me to the dance floor.

PIPER

I bite the inside of my lower lip as Jolene abandons me for Jesse. I'm right here—also not dancing—but he asks her? What happened to his date? Isn't he here with Tay-Tay? Did she die?

"When do I get to dance with her?" Justin comes out of nowhere—just as annoyed with Jolene and Jesse as I am, maybe even more so.

Chris spots us and starts walking our way. Ugh. He's probably gonna ask me to dance. Why did I ask him out? He's gonna think I like him now. This was so stupid. I should have done what Logan did—once I realized Anthony wasn't gonna ask me—and pretended to go out of town or something. Jolene said Damaris asked him, but why couldn't Anthony just borrow a backbone and ask someone out—like me? Even if it was just as friends. He must have known I would have said yes. What was he so scared of? Now I'm stuck at the dance with Chris! Ugh. And he's still coming toward me. He's so embarrassing! He—like—gelled his hair or something. It's all slicked back. He looks like the heartthrob villain in an 80s movie—the guy that's supposed to be cute but just looks like a vintage Ken doll, and not in a good way.

"Well, here," I spin to Justin. "Let's you and me dance."

I don't even look at Chris as Justin and I join the dance floor. He's probably all confused and mad. Come on though, he should have known someone as popular and cute as me is gonna have guys wanting to dance with her. He can't expect to hog me all night.

We start the slow spin, and I find who I was looking for earlier—Anthony, dancing with his date of all people. They're smiling and laughing, and if I stabbed her, nobody would see the blood on her red dress.

Justin stares over my shoulder, probably at Jolene and Jesse. What a pair we are—both wishing we were dancing with someone else.

"You should have brought someone nobody else wanted to dance with," I tell him, "like Anthony did."

He laughs.

The fact he doesn't chastise me is why we're friends. Jolene would be all like, "Aww, she's nice," or some crap. Like, I'm sorry, there's no way she thinks Damaris is normal. She just wants everyone to think she's nicer than she is. Nobody's that nice. She probably goes home and writes in her diary about how hideous and stupid Damaris is, and how she secretly hopes she'll get hit by a bus so she can't ask Anthony to dances anymore.

We rotate around, and there's Chris—dancing with Queen Margot.

Last night, they crowned her Homecoming Queen at the football game. They crown the king during the dance, and the queen comes wearing her sash and tiara. As if everyone wasn't already gonna stare at Margot Detcher all night. They stare at her all day at school, and now she's in a gorgeous red gown that

looks like it probably costs tens of thousands of dollars, clustered diamond earrings that are probably real, and her hair up in a frothy French twist. She looks amazing, and I want to rip that tiara off her head and throw it out the window. It's bad enough she exists, but does she have to dance with my date? And does he have to be so happy about it?

"Ugh," I say.

"What?"

"Chris is dancing with Margot."

Justin's lips curl up, and he gives me the eyes I hate—wide and knowing. "You concerned about that?"

"He wishes." I roll my eyes. Like I'd care about Chris.

The song ends, and our little group finds itself.

I turn my back to Chris, who's saying goodbye to Margot, and secure a dance spot by Jolene.

"I'm gonna say hi to Lindsey," Damaris says.

"Sounds good." Anthony doesn't seem too put out to have her go.

She takes off to join her weirdos, leaving Anthony to us in our little group of five.

After a few songs, Quinn and Courtney find us with their dates and join our circle. Now we've got two varsity cheerleaders, ASB president, the star athlete, some other athletes who aren't totally pathetic, the junior class secretary—me—and the girl nobody can shut up about because she went to France once. We're a properly popular arrangement. This is turning out to be a decent night.

"Come on, Jolene," Justin says, reaching out toward her. "Gotta snatch you up before someone else does."

It's a weird move because usually during fast songs everyone just dances in a group.

She takes his hand, and—oh! It is a slow song. He must have better ears than I do—or he knows the song.

I turn, expecting Chris to be right behind me—and he is—but after we lock eyes, he snaps his head away.

“Scarlett!” he yells. “Do you want to dance?”

He moves toward her, and I've never felt so rejected in my life. I don't even like Chris! But he should like me! He's always following us around, and I've seen him checking me out when he thought I wasn't looking. And now he's rejecting me?! You saw him lock eyes with me, right? Like he saw me, then turned away—like, that just happened. It's bad enough Anthony didn't ask me to the dance, and I had to ask a geek like Chris, but now he's turning his back on me—like he's better than me?!

Something wet trickles out of my eyes. I can't help it. I'm just standing in the middle of the dancing couples—bawling—like a freshman.

I sniff and head for the outskirts with the rest of the partnerless losers, trying to make it look like I'm fixing my makeup—not wiping away tears—but everyone's looking at me. I move farther back against the wall—out of sight. Maybe now's a good time to grab a snack, but that might draw even more attention to my blotchy face. I turn toward the wall and cross my arms around me.

“Piper,” a voice I know so, so well says behind me.

I spin around, surprised into forgetting that I don't want him to see me like this; I don't want him to think the tears racing down my face mean I've been crying.

He frowns, a look of pity that I can't stand from him, so I turn back to the wall.

"Just go away, Anthony."

"Talk to me. What's going on?"

Is there a point in acting like I'm not going to tell him? I probably will never be able to refuse him anything.

"Did you see him?!" I twist to him. "He saw me when the dance started and walked the other way! He's my date, and he's asking other girls to dance first?! I mean, what does he want me to do—dance by myself?!"

Anthony stretches out his hand, palm up.

I don't want to assume he's asking me to dance, but I don't know why else he'd do it.

"You're not dancing by yourself tonight."

My hand—like the rest of me—might melt right here, but I put it in his anyway.

He leads me into the mob, places his arms around my waist, and we dance.

I'll have to thank Chris for the lovely evening.

JOLENE

Justin, like Jesse, doesn't talk a lot while dancing—just pivots around in a circle. But what's wild is how much I prefer being with Justin. It took me a few seconds to feel like Jesse only asked me to dance so he could get a better look down my dress. I spent the entire time arching my back away from him and strategically shifting my hair in front of me. Justin, on the other hand, holds me so close, looking at me isn't even possible.

The song ends, and our vice principal appears on a small temporary stage, addressing everybody as everyone applauds.

“Good evening, Winchester Canyon High School,” Ms. Ross says. “Can we get all the Homecoming King nominees on the stage, please?”

“Wish me luck,” Justin says in my ear.

I smile at him and fold my arms around myself, with a little pang of guilt. Wishing him luck when I didn’t vote for him would feel dishonest. But he doesn’t stick around to hear what I don’t say, and joins Anthony and the others on stage with Margot Detcher and last year’s king.

“A hand for last year’s king, Lin Pak,” Ms. Ross motions toward the guy I don’t know who won while I was away.

“This year’s Homecoming King is...” Ms. Ross opens the envelope, a glow spreading across her face. She leans into the microphone. “Anthony Whitaker.”

The cheers are deafening, but none of them come from his date.

“Who’d she say?” Damaris asks.

“Anthony.” I point to him. “Look, he’s crowning him!”

Lin Pak lays the crown on Anthony’s head. It accidentally tips while he’s placing the sash around him, but Anthony catches it, laughs, and holds the crown to his head while Lin straightens the sash.

Once set, the old king retreats, someone hands Anthony a bunch of flowers, and he steps forward with Margot and looks out at the still-applauding crowd.

When his eyes meet mine, he widens his grin and stops scanning the room—staying on me.

The warmth of the room rises to my face.

“And now a spotlight dance for our Homecoming King and Queen!” the DJ says.

The dance’s theme song plays, and Anthony helps Margot off the stage and onto the dance floor. Everyone forms a circle around them, but I stay farther back with Piper and Damaris.

“Oh, good,” Piper says, throwing her hands up. “Now he’s dancing with Margot.”

We watch the royal couple rotate until suddenly a blond, Justin-shaped-blur brushes against us and out the door.

“You should go after him,” Piper says.

I sigh.

He must be upset he didn’t win. As his date, maybe I should make sure he’s okay, and see if I can’t cheer him up—in a non-physical way, of course.

The cool September air hits me hard when I open the door. I wasn’t expecting it, but it feels a little nice after the sweaty heat of the dance.

Justin hasn’t gone far—standing with his arms crossed, facing the Greek. He’s not alone out here either. There’s a line waiting to get into the store section of the cafeteria where they’re taking photos, and a few people are scattered around the first several benches of the amphitheater.

“Justin.” I approach cautiously, clutching my arms around me. I left my stole in the limo. “Are you okay?”

He moves his head to the side, almost facing me. "It's kind of hard to be okay when your date is ogling your best friend. I saw how you looked at him!"

His anger hits me harder than the cold.

I take a step back out of sheer shock.

A hot confusion takes over. "He was being crowned. Of course I was looking at him."

"Don't deny you're attracted to him—"

"Justin!" I yell. "This is ridiculous! Let's just go back in and try to enjoy the dance—"

"How am I supposed to enjoy the dance when my date would obviously rather be with someone else?!"

I make several decisions at once—I will never go on another date with Justin Granite—I guess that's one decision, but I feel it so strongly it might as well be a million.

"I thought you were upset you weren't crowned. That I could have understood—but this is crazy!"

"You're not denying it!" he turns to me, snarling and eyebrows darkening.

I rub my arm against the cold—against his gaze—and look away. Does agreeing to go to a dance mean I owe him some kind of loyalty or commitment? Does it mean I'm basically his girlfriend for the duration of the night? I'm not supposed to so much as look at another guy—a friend of mine—a friend of both of ours? It seems a lot to be upset about when we're not even dating. And despite never being on a date before, I don't think it means they get to yell at you for nothing.

"I'm going back." I take a step toward the door, but he grabs my arm.

“That’s right.” He steps in closer, anger sparking in his eyes. “You can’t wait to get back and congratulate Anthony.”

I yank my arm free. He doesn’t have to be like this. If he were nice, I might actually like him—I was attracted to him at first. Doesn’t he realize he’s ensuring his own loneliness.

“What is the matter with you?” I ask, searching my mind for anything I can do to restore the peace. “Let’s just go back inside—”

“I will!” He stands tall, cool, and confident, like he wasn’t just overheating. “If.”

I wait for him to continue, but he doesn’t.

“If what?” I ask.

He takes a step forward, and I regret asking.

“Prove to me you’re not interested in Anthony.”

I roll my eyes.

I don’t owe him proof. But the absurdity of it sticks to the roof of my mind, and my question comes out angrier than I intend. “How would I even do that?”

In a heartbeat his arms are around me, clutching me tight. I struggle against them uselessly—his warm breath against my face.

“I’ll show you.” He leans in, pulling my face toward his.

I push against him with more force; he doesn’t seem to get the hint until I’m using all my strength.

“No—Justin!”

But he’s strong, and I can’t make him budge. Panic rises within my chest. I don’t think he’ll do more than kiss me, but that’s enough.

I'm about to lose when the music from the dance gets louder. The door must have opened. Suddenly my pushing gives, and Justin loosens his grip. My eyes follow where his have moved—to Anthony exiting the cafeteria behind me.

"Jolene?" Anthony looks at me, then at Justin, then back at me. "Would you like to dance?"

"Yes." I take advantage of Justin's slackening grip to put more space between us, and more air into my lungs.

Anthony offers me his elbow, and I slide my arm inside. He gets the door, and neither of us look back at Justin.

We don't make it to the bulk of the group dancing in the center before he wraps his hands around me, and rotates, neither peering down my dress, nor holding me too tightly. But still, this is the closest we've been all night, even closer than when I pinned the rejected flower to his collar, or when we squished into the car. I didn't mind those times or now. I really have to hand it to whoever invented slow dancing. It's like a giant hug that lasts a few minutes, involving just enough music to pretend it's not.

But what about after the dance? People I have to travel home with might take my dancing with Anthony poorly.

I push the worry out of my mind; I'll deal with it later. Right now, the world is perfect, even if just for this moment.

My shoulders are stiff. I can probably relax; I don't need to be *en garde* anymore. I take a deep breath

through my nose. He smells good—crisp and subtle. I loosen my shoulders and my arms.

He seems to feel my shift and smiles down at me.

“What’s it like being Homecoming King?” I ask.

He clicks his tongue, thinking for a second. “You wanna find out?” He takes his crown and places it on my head while we continue to sway.

I try to keep my head straight, so it doesn’t fall off. “Oh, I see. I totally get it now.”

“Okay. Give it back.”

I take it off and reach up to put it on him. He has to lean down so I can.

“You look beautiful tonight, by the way,” he says while our eyes are level.

A groan silently irks in my chest. Just when everything was going so well.

“You don’t have to say that.” I turn my face away.

“Why? Why not?”

I sigh. Of course Justin found a way to ruin this, too. Honestly, Anthony going for it makes me almost think less of him—almost.

“Justin told me he paid his friends to compliment me tonight,” I say, “so that I’d feel, you know, pretty. You really don’t have to.”

His jaw hangs open. “Umm. No, he didn’t.” He pivots me so he’s facing away from Justin, who’s come in from the cold and pouting against the window. “I think he’s lying to you, so that every time someone compliments you, he gets credit, and then you’re not thinking, ‘Oh, Jesse complimented me—he must like me,’ which you should, because he does.”

“That is sneaky.”

“Oh, he’s definitely sneaky, especially when it comes to his girlfriends.”

Girlfriends?! Does he think I’m Justin’s girlfriend?

“We’re not going out.” I move a strand of hair out of my eyes. “We just came to Homecoming together.”

He laughs. “Now I’m falling for it. He said you were going out.”

I shake my head while he tilts his.

“Are—I mean,” he says, “are you going to go out with him...?”

“No!” I yell.

He smiles.

“No,” I continue at a lower volume. “And after tonight I don’t feel as bad for not voting for him!”

His eyes narrow. “Who did you vote for?”

Shoot. I shouldn’t have said anything. “Not telling.”

“I’ll tell you who I voted for.”

“Was it you?”

“No fair guessing.”

I sigh. “I voted for you.” There’s no sense in keeping it from him. He knows I didn’t vote for Justin, and if not him, who else would it be? And confessing this isn’t confessing that I love him... necessarily...

“How come you voted for me and not...?” He tilts his head toward the snack exit.

“Justin?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s not over there.”

“You know who I mean.”

Answering him *would be* confessing that I love him. I can’t do that. One, Piper would skin me alive and stomp on my organs so no part of me could go on

living in someone else, because surely that person walking around with my kidney would also fall in love with Anthony and steal him away from her. Two, if I admitted it and he didn't feel the same, I would shrivel up into a heap and die right here on the dance floor. So I look up at him and say nothing.

"So, you're not dating?" he asks.

I shake my head. "But he doesn't seem to get the message."

"You know"—a glint shines in his eyes—"I have an idea that would send him a really clear message."

There's a chance he's not seriously suggesting what I hope he is—but if he is—well, if I ever have a first kiss with Anthony, I don't want it to be because we were sending a message to Justin. Plus, what if I say, "Sure. Let's do it," and it turns out he's thinking of egging his house?

"You know what?" I say, smiling up at him. "I'll figure it out."

"You sure? It's a really good idea."

I laugh, blushing, but I don't care.

"You waste so many of my good ideas, Jolene—like swimming back from the breakwater..."

"Well, maybe one day we'll go with one of yours."

"I'll hold you to that."

I'm still glowing when the song ends.

He slightly, cautiously, loosens his arms from around me, eyeing something behind me.

"Do you want to keep dancing?" he asks.

"Is this part of your plan?"

"Nope." He turns his full attention back to me. "You don't get to hear the plan now, and it was really good."

Justin approaches, and I assume he's what Anthony had been looking at.

Anthony lets his hands fall from around me and takes mine in between us. "Last chance," he says.

"For what?" Justin asks.

"I think I've got it." I'm not nearly as worried about Justin now, in the heat of the dance, surrounded by people, closer to Anthony.

He smiles and walks away as Justin steps closer.

"Jolene, I—" Justin says.

But Anthony cuts him off, calling over his shoulder. "Jolene, I lied! That wasn't the last chance! Never a last chance!"

He walks farther away, and all I want to do is go with him, but Piper's glaring at me, arms folded. The perfect moment has ended.

"I'm—" Justin says.

"I know."

"I'm sorry," he continues anyway. He takes my hand, holding it in both of his. It's a romantic gesture, but something about it seems like it's meant to keep me here—maybe because I want to run away. "I know I've been saying that a lot lately, it's just that I like you so much—"

It sounds like the apology from the parking lot, after his outburst at Anthony in the car.

I've already decided never to date him again, but if I'm going to pass that message on to him, and without Anthony's plan, isn't now just as good a time as any? Or should I wait until after the dance?

They should teach dating protocols in school. Maybe if I had a mom who was around more, or a

sister who could stand being in the same room as me, they would have taught me what to do in this situation. Aunt Eloise gave me advice, but it was on a broad scale. I need step-by-step instructions—with diagrams.

But it's not like Justin's playing by a rulebook. It's not like he's worried about whether he's being rude, so why should I worry about it more when I respond to him?

"I appreciate your apology," I tell him, careful not to accept it. "But I feel like I should tell you, because you've told me twice now that you care about me a lot—" I waver; his eyes are so sad. There has to be a way to let him down gently. "It's too fast. The past few weeks have been this whirlwind, and most of it isn't coming from you, but I need things to calm down."

"I hear you one hundred percent, and I agree," he says in a way that makes me think he doesn't. "We are moving too fast. Time to slow it down."

He takes my arm, and I shake him off.

Then he shows signs of understanding: he sneers at me—like his lip actually curls—says, "Okay," drops my arm and stamps away.

I feel a drop in the room's temperature but also like I can breathe again. But then Piper comes up to me, dragging me back into the midst of the hurricane.

"What's going on?" she asks, her eyebrows cinched together, her voice high-pitched and bitter. It's less of a question than it is an accusation.

"Nothing."

"What did Justin say? Does it have anything to do with Anthony asking you to dance?" she asks. "I thought you were with Justin. You said you liked him!"

My head spins.

When did I say that? There's no way I said that. Why would she even think I said that?! But she wouldn't say I said that unless she thinks I said that—she must have mistaken something I actually said, or how I said something—but what?! When?!

“I'm not—I didn't—”

“You know, it doesn't seem to matter,” she says, crossing her arms and jutting her chin toward me. “Whatever you do, or don't do. I just wish you didn't enjoy it so much.”

She turns on her heels and struts away.

I've now officially accomplished doing all the things I was terrified of. I've proven to be a disloyal friend to Piper, and I've sufficiently ruined any kind of friendship I might have had with Justin. If this doesn't wreck my high school social status, nothing will. The night cannot get worse.

PIPER

This isn't working. Justin's still failing to distract her from Anthony, and if I don't act fast, Jolene and Anthony will be dating by the end of the night. Ugh. I hate everyone.

A guy with brown hair that's faded on the sides walks up to Jolene and says something. She nods and he leaves. Is she now taking reservations for the next slow song?! He can have a point for taking a dance away from Anthony but come on—this dorky kid's not gonna steal her away from him. I need someone who

can actually distract Jolene for longer than one Ed Sheeran song.

I whip my cell out from my sleeve and send a text to Matt. “We’re heading over soon because Jolene won’t shut up about how excited she is for your party. Honestly, I’m a little worried about her. I think she’s gonna throw herself at you. Please be cautious and careful with her, okay? Don’t let her make too big a fool out of herself, for me?” I toss in some weepy emojis and put my phone back.

“This dance is lame,” I call over the music. “Let’s go to Matt’s.”

16 A GUY WHO'S ACTUALLY GOOD AT HIS JOB

JOLENE

"You made it!" Matt comes straight to me even though I come in with several of his friends. "You look exquisite. Can I take your stole? That's what it's called, right?" he asks, with a wild grin, and way fewer reservations than usual.

I nod, shrug it off, and hand it to him.

Matt's apartment is so Matt. It's rustic and utilitarian chic with exposed red brick and bare wood. It's also stuffed with college students—each with a red cup. They shuffle and push as a local garage band grinds in a corner.

We're not the only high schoolers who've come from the dance. A few others, mostly from our lunch group, blend in and mingle and appear to feel way more at home than I do. I've never felt more out of place in my life—even with Matt running up to me and smiling with his bright white teeth—but I'm so awkward and intimidated, I might as well be back in

France, where everyone was fancy and spoke a different language. Above everything else, I wish I had brought a change of clothes. If I felt overdressed at Homecoming in my A-line gown, I'm definitely pushing it here—and my feet are killing me.

He takes my stole and looks at me—not in the way Justin does, salivating, but more like he's blown away. It's still—you know—do we have to? But my face flushes. I can't help it. I mean, it's Matt.

"Oh wow. You don't make it easy, do you?" He's got a hand on his chest and a smirk on his face.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Can you take my jacket?" Chris asks behind me, taking his off and tossing it toward Matt's head.

Justin and Anthony—who left his sash and crown in the limo—do the same. Matt takes them—"Don't go anywhere"—and leaves.

I turn to Anthony, but Piper grabs his arm.

"How was your night with Damaris?" she asks.

Damaris had requested we drop her off at home before the party—something about what Piper said to her earlier that I must have missed.

I wish I had gotten out with her and crashed on her couch or something—it's so loud, and everyone keeps staring at the girl in the floor-length pink formal.

"Look at this thing!" Matt says, returning to us and holding up my arm—gawking at the corsage Justin put there. "This is like an eighty-dollar corsage!"

I laugh.

I wouldn't put it past Justin at all.

ANTHONY

"I wonder how long she had to work on her hair to make it look decent"—Piper says, still on about Damaris.

I glance past her shoulder—Matt's teasing Jolene about Justin's corsage.

Piper snorts—"if you can even call it that."

"Do you need help when you eat with this hand?" Matt asks Jolene. "How do you even walk with this thing weighing you down?"

But Matt's not the problem; the way Justin eyes her reminds me of the time I was playing with my cousins in Lake Chapala, by the edge of the water, and they pointed out a crocodile lurking not too far under the surface, watching us the way Justin watches Jolene.

"Excuse me, Piper." I move around her—in front of Justin. "Man, I'm starving. Let's grab some pizza."

"I was just going to ask Jolene." He tries to push past me, but I stop him with a hand on his chest.

He's never been pushy. Outside the cafeteria was a first, that I've noticed. It might just be that a girl has never said no to him, but I've never had to worry about him in that way before. I've never had to worry that being friends with him, endorses him.

He looks up at me, and I let my hand fall.

"So, you want to wait to eat until after she tells you no?" I ask.

He snorts. "She's not gonna tell me no."

"Yeah, probably not," I say. He's right but not for the reason he thinks.

He thinks she's second Tay—like she's dying to be his girlfriend. But Jolene's not like that. She's the type of girl who spends her break time answering little girls' ballet questions, who lets a joke about amazing modern technology go on for days past what she probably thought was funny, who tries to talk and hold a rice cake in her mouth at the same time, and who can get absolutely soaked by the ocean in the middle of the night and still carry a glow and warmth around her.

Justin doesn't get it.

"But with Tay," I say, "you let her come to you. If you don't give her any room, she won't be able to."

He looks at her, then at me. "That's what you're concerned about, is it?" His expression accuses me of something—probably exactly what I'm hiding.

But he gives up and walks over to Matt's kitchen where there's a bunch of snacks and drinks.

It's a victory, but something tells me coming here was a bad idea.

MATT

Justin went to the kitchen, but Anthony and Piper act like they're glued to Jolene.

"How's math?" I ask her, pretending to still inspect her corsage so I can keep holding her arm.

"Way less work without having to carry you."

Was that a dig?! Is she teasing me?! She's got a huge grin on her face.

"If I remember correctly, Tim was carrying all of us." I let go of her arm because it'll be weird if I hold it any longer.

"Tim! That's his name. I was trying to remember."

"He's not in your class this year?"

"No, he is."

I laugh. "So, I'm worse at math, but you're worse with memory. Aren't we a couple?"

She tilts her head at my choice of words and looks like she didn't miss it at all, but maybe unsure what to make of it.

"I was gone for a year," she says.

"Excuses." I give her a side-eye—not letting her get out of it. If she's gonna give me a hard time, she's gonna have to take one.

"It's probably less the time away and more France messing with your mind," Anthony says.

"What?" Jolene gasps and turns to him, pretending to be offended by his pretend insult. "I didn't know you had something against France..."

"It's so... European," he says, smirking.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Have you seen what passes for football over there? It's almost like they should just call it something else."

She laughs. "You don't want to go to any country that doesn't have a football team?"

"I might be persuaded..." But he doesn't say how. He just lets it linger there, for her guessing, which—by the look of her crooked-up lips—she is.

"You never told me the whole story about what happened to Diefenbacher," I say.

"Oh, my gosh!" She turns back to me.

I hope she doesn't think too much about my grin. It's just so cute when she says "gosh," like nothing bad has ever happened to her, like the world could burn and she'd wake up in the morning, say "good golly," and keep going.

"It's so crazy!" she says. "Logan said—"

"Who's Logan?" I ask.

"My friend—he said the cops came and interviewed, like everybody."

The way she calls him a friend, with a brushed-off vibe, relaxes my shoulders.

"Hang on." She holds on to Anthony's arm with one hand and pulls off her shoes with the other, then drops both hands, her shoes dangling in one by their straps.

It makes my entire body stiffen, but I act like it doesn't.

"I'm not sure I'd do that." Even without grabbing on to Anthony, I wouldn't go barefoot in here; there's all kinds of crap on the floor—maybe even literally. Cameron let a crab he found at the beach walk around in here yesterday.

"I have ballet feet," she says. "They're tough. Nothing scares me—except these." She lifts her shoes. "So, apparently, the vice-principal—the one that was there before—Mrs. Newheart—knew about it."

"No!" I glance at Anthony, then back at Jolene. Why'd she grab his arm and not mine? Why's he hovering and not wandering off? What's with him? Don't answer that. And why is Piper still standing with us and not saying anything? She's never been quiet so long in her life. Worse even than that, she keeps smiling at me. It's unsettling.

PIPER

Matt is a lifesaver. I'll have to pitch in to cover some of the costs of his party, or convince Justin to, since Matt's doing his job for him, one he's infinitely better at, drawing Jolene's attention away from Anthony. I've seriously never appreciated Matt more.

I was so right to come here.

JUSTIN

I knew coming here was stupid. First Matt took her home from Piper's house, then he tried to give her a ride again after Riptide. I should've known he was into her—probably threw this stupid party just to see her all made up in her dress—sicko.

I grab a cup off the counter and shove it toward a guy surrounded by guffawing idiots, laughing, and filling everyone's drinks.

There's always that one guy. Where does he even come from? Maybe he's the same guy each time—like a party Santa Claus. He senses a party and just appears. You wouldn't know it was the same dude—no one ever talks to him for very long, or knows who he is, or remembers him after everyone's gone. And he always acts like it's his beer because he's controlling the tap.

"You twenty-one?" he asks. I give him a death stare that makes him smirk. "Ooooh." He chuckles and the idiots around him laugh. "Okay. Okay. I'm just kidding."

He fills me up. I take a swig and go back out from under the loft, out of the kitchen area, into the larger space of the tiny apartment. It's just one big room. The ceilings are high, there's an enormous window, and it looks like there's a balcony out the back, but the entire apartment could fit in my wine cellar.

Jolene's still standing by the door talking with Matt, Anthony, and Piper, like I don't exist. Maybe I should remind her—maybe after another drink.

I down the one I have and return to Santa, holding up my cup while looking away from him.

"You driving tonight?" he asks.

I face him. "I have people who drive for me."

"Oh, well, here." He sounds sarcastically careful and bows when he hands me my cup.

I'd be annoyed, but he's right; I am better than him.

I down the drink, but Jolene's still talking to Matt.

It was definitely stupid to bring her here.

JOLENE

The more Matt laughs and jokes, the more relaxed I feel, and the less I worry that coming here was a mistake. Piper's not completely done glaring at me, but now she takes breaks, and we haven't even seen Justin in at least forty minutes—something I don't even realize until he climbs up onto the kitchen table.

MATT

"I'd like to make a toast!" Justin scales my furniture. It cost me a few days' work to afford, but whatever.

Anthony swears under his breath so low I don't think he meant for anyone to hear. But I do, and it's obvious he's thinking what I'm thinking, which makes me take what I'm thinking seriously—Justin's out of hand, and I'm probably going to have to step in.

"To my best friends—"Justin burps but keeps going—"Anthony Whitaker, Homecoming King!" He stops for a second, and I think that's it. "And! And to my date, who's so pretty. You guys, seriously, look at her. Where is she?" He looks around, then spots us, and waves his flailing arm at her.

A mix of horror and disgust spread over Jolene's face. "Excuse me." She ducks out of the room and into the hall, where the party overflows.

I watch her go, then watch Anthony watch her go, then watch Anthony watch me watching him.

"Okay. Okay. She doesn't like it. Just kidding, Jolene! Where was I?" Justin taps his chin.

I cross to Justin and reach my hand up. If he's smart, he'll take it. "Alright. Come down, man."

"No. Shush!" Justin shoos my hand away. "Anyway, to pretty!" He raises his cup into the air then chugs.

Only a few others join him. He climbs down, and I block him.

"Get off me!" He shoves me, downing another swig.

"Justin," I say seriously but not unfriendly, not yet. I reach out my hand again, this time for his cup. "I have to cut you off."

"You and what army?" he asks, apparently unoriginal when he's hammered.

I feel someone step behind me and turn to see Anthony with a scowl on his face. I spin back to Justin, whose shoulders aren't as stiff now.

"You're lucky your football team's here." Justin sloshes his drink everywhere as he thrusts it at me. "Whatever! Some party." He stomps away from us.

The guys in the kitchen, leaning against the sink, move aside so I can dump Justin's cup down the drain. They scooch again when I toss it in the trash behind them.

I leave the kitchen, trying to remember why I invited so many people, and there she is. She must have come back while I was dealing with Justin—and already she's deep in conversation with Anthony and Piper.

Anthony says something to her. She beams at him, turns a shade of rose, and spreads her fingers timidly through her hair, oblivious that over half the room watches her, and not just because she's the only girl here dressed head-to-toe in pink—well, maybe not "head-to-toe," maybe "chest-to-toe..." Point is, it's weird people keep gawking at her, and that she's here at all, and at Justin's, and Piper's, at Riptide, with my friends. Of course a girl who looks like this has friends, but I kinda wish we could go back to when she wasn't such a... woman—not that I don't want a woman, I want her as she is right now—right now—but I'd trade her for who she was if it'd get rid of all of them.

When I knew her before, she was this shy little freshman in my math class, turning pink whenever I talked to her. What happened to that girl?

When I get to them, Piper spins to Anthony. "I've been meaning to ask you, what does it mean when the referee throws up the yellow sash?"

"That's a penalty flag," Anthony says.

Perfect timing. I should thank Piper later.

Jolene eyes me for a second. "How did you get Project Mayhem to lend you their headquarters?" She smiles wily.

I'm about to say something witty and sweep her off her little tough feet when she exhales like she just got punched in the gut.

"Oh, my gosh—my sister's here."

A bright fuchsia-haired sprite heads our way, somewhat resembling Jolene's older sister.

MARY

"I thought I beat you here," I say. "Where's the trail of flowers that fall out of your butt?"

"What happened to your date?" Jolene asks.

"The doctors think it's just a rash."

"No. I mean, is that why you came—because he wanted to? How did you even know about it?" she asks, deserving the glare I supply.

"Oh, right." I toss my arms like I'm as nuts as she thinks I am. "I'm not popular anymore, so I must not know about Matt's party."

"That's not what I meant," Jolene says, lying.

Obviously, I don't have popular friends anymore who tell me about their college friends' parties, and I only know about this one because I was in her room

earlier and overheard Piper telling Damaris she couldn't come.

As far as college parties go, though—after the three seconds I've been here—it's not bad. Jolene's hanging out with dudes who aren't Justin, and Justin is... Ah, there he is—alone, leaning against a post holding up the loft over the kitchen.

I grab a drink, and bump into him. It's unknown whether I did so deliberately, and I'm not about to admit it.

"Oops," I say. "Didn't see you there, Sister's Date. You don't have a drink."

"Matt cut me off," he says, obviously a little intoxicated. That's no way to party—only a little intoxicated.

I hand him my cup. "I won't tell if you don't."

He takes a pull as I turn my back to him, watching out for Matt, who keeps finding excuses to touch my sister's arm, or hair, or elbow.

"Probably don't even have to hide it," I say over my shoulder. "I don't think Matt would notice as long as you didn't draw attention to yourself—oh! Quick! He's looking!"

In a fluster, he shoves my drink to me.

"That was a trick to get my cup back." I bring it to my lips.

He smirks and looks at me like I'm about to get my way.

"I'm starting to remember why I liked you so much," he says.

Okay, he's not a little drunk. He's completely sloshed. I almost can't figure out what he's saying.

Making out with him now would be taking advantage, and I haven't drunk enough to handle the guilt of exploitation—yet.

“On that note,” I say, “I’m gonna mingle.”

And, too little, too late. If he wants my forgiveness, he’s gonna have to beg for it, on his hands and knees—renting his shirt, and kissing my feet, then my legs, my knees, then I could bend down and kiss his face. We could fall over and—ugh. No. Stop it.

I leave him—gonna find someone else to hang with, and... I know just about no one here, and the ones I do know, I do not like.

I squeeze in between two girls I’ve never seen before—talking on Matt’s couch.

“Don’t look,” I tell the frizzy-haired girl to my left, “but the person I’m sitting next to is my clone. Actually, we’re both clones. We were created in a lab together—‘labsters,’ they called us. It’s a combination of lab and sisters, and it sounds like hamsters, which is fitting—because of the experiments.”

She stares at me like I have poo on my face and vacates the couch.

I spread out a little and notice Justin laughing nearby—watching. But watching ain’t groveling, so I step into the kitchen and home in on a little clump of living freckles standing by the fridge.

“Did you know that guy’s actually an undercover cop?” I nod toward a guy in an UCSB shirt next to her talking to some other idiots.

“Jason?” she asks.

Holy crap, that is Jason. It’s been so long since he dropped out, I didn’t even recognize him.

“I thought he was seventeen.”

“So he says,” I say. “It’s a cover. I should know because I’m his boss, the chief of police.”

She rolls her eyes and stomps away, leaving me open for the enemy to move in.

“Having fun?” Justin asks.

“I am actually. I’m sure Jolene’s told you our mom works in LA. She’s sleeping off the work week, my dad’s bingeing sad animal shows, so I came here.”

“No, Jolene hasn’t mentioned that, but I remember you saying something about it before—back when...” His eyes move over me. “It’s been a while...”

“Yes. It has.”

He steps closer, takes my wrists, then slides his hands to my elbows, and leans in.

17 GUINETH

JOLENE

“I thought the theme was ‘We Forgot We Needed a Theme.’” Anthony grins.

It’s late. The band stopped playing a while ago, and pre-recorded music blasts from the speakers. We’ve been standing here talking so long that it’s gotta be past curfew—so I don’t ask what time it is. Piper never seems worried about the time. She’s eased up a little more and has only glared or scoffed twice in the last several minutes—a huge step up from even just half an hour ago.

She really has no reason to be upset. It’s not like I’m in a broom closet alone with Anthony—we’re talking in a group, and with Matt, too.

Honestly, apart from Piper’s drama, the night’s not bad at all. I’m not even sure what I was stressed about. It’s a little strange that I’m at this party, talking all night with Anthony and Matt—neither one showing any signs of wanting to talk to anybody else, and even when Matt leaves for a second, he keeps coming back

to us. But it's a good strange—surreal. I don't feel so much like I don't belong anymore, and just feel... I don't know, excited. This would not have happened before I went to Paris.

"It was 'All I Want Is You,'" Piper says, sneering.

As Junior Class secretary she must have had a hand in planning the dance. I probably should have realized that, but usually she talks about everything she does. Is it surprising that the things she doesn't slip through the cracks? "I voted against it, for the record. I wanted 'Frozen Nights' and to decorate like an ice hotel, but people thought it was 'too Titanic.' Like that's a thing." She waves the hand she's holding her shoes with.

"What did you do with the bouquet they gave you?" I ask Anthony. "One second you had it, and the next you didn't."

PIPER

See how I had his attention, but she just had to take it back?

"I literally don't know," Anthony says. "It's like driving hypnosis or something. I don't remember. I think it was fake, like maybe they use the same one every year. They probably let Margot have a real one—I'd hope."

"They should have had you toss it into the crowd to predict who'd get it next year," Jolene says.

He laughs, and Matt, who's been quieter than he was earlier, touches a place over Jolene's ear. Good. He needs to step it up. He's almost as useless as Justin.

"You've got something in your hair," he says.

Jolene's hand flies to where he touched.

"It was just glitter," he says, finally holding her attention for longer than a split second.

But she turns back to Anthony!

"It must have been from your crown—"

"That thing was so glittery! Do I have any in my hair?" He bends down for her to look.

She grazes her hands through his hair.

I groan and roll my eyes. But I can't blame Matt too much. It's not his fault he sucks.

"I thought you've been putting glitter in your hair on purpose," Matt says. "Trying to attract a unicorn or something."

"Matt..." Jolene slaps his arm—which, in high school, means she wants to marry him.

It's enough to keep my hopes up—especially because Anthony's lips turn down and his joking eyes slip.

Then Justin's little sister comes in.

Just what this party needs: a spoiled, blond headache.

JOLENE

I face Piper, expecting her groans to be on my account, but she's watching Guineth walk in with her chin down, eyes darting around, and lips puffy. It makes Anthony and Matt brow-crease, but Piper seems unphased.

"First Damaris wears my dress in a different color," Piper says, "then Justin's sister wears a different dress in the same color!"

She's not wrong. Guineth wears a royal-blue sequin dress but sleeveless and slightly longer than Piper's, down past her knees.

The closer she gets, the more worried I am something horrible has happened. She's jittery, and holds her chest like if she doesn't, she'll fall apart. This isn't the little bubbly freshman cheerleader frolicking down into the Greek for the class comp or flirting with football players at her brother's party.

She spots us and comes over.

"Guineth, are you okay?" I ask.

"Have you guys seen Justin?" She's shaking, scratching her shoulder, and nearly in tears. Even Piper seems to notice now and stops glaring at her.

"I'll help you find him," Anthony says.

She nods, and he's at her side in half a second with one arm around her shoulders. He looks over the crowd, then heads to the other side of the room with her.

I fiddle with my fingers. I'm not sure what happened, but I'm glad he's with her. He'll help her find Justin and make sure she's okay.

"What do you think's going on?" I ask Piper and Matt. Both of them have known the Granites longer.

Matt watches her and Anthony. "It might be her peanut allergy..."

"Is she okay?"

"Yeah," Matt says. "I'm sure she'll be fine. She has an EpiPen."

I don't know enough about allergic reactions to know if he's right. But if he didn't know she'd be okay, wouldn't he admit it?

“Has this happened before?” I ask.

He rubs his cheek. “Justin said when she was little, they took her to the ER for a few hours.”

I press my lips together and squeeze my thumb.

He watches me and scrunches his eyebrows. “I’ll call in a bit and make sure she’s all right.”

I take a deep breath and borrow his calmness.

PIPER

If it’s not Jolene, it’s someone else. Basically, any other girl in Santa Barbara can take Anthony’s attention away from me. I thought it meant something to him when he asked me to dance earlier, and said, “You’re not dancing by yourself tonight.” I thought he meant he’d dance with me again and again, but he didn’t. Margot hogged him for the entire spotlight dance, then the second it was over, he bolted out the door and returned with Jolene. Jolene—that primed little poodle with her Frenchness, and ballet, so demure it makes me want to slam her face into the floor. I wish she had fallen off the Eiffel Tower, or off the boarding bridge of the airplane, or out of the airplane over the Atlantic—her body never recovered. Then I wouldn’t have to compete with her gorgeous corpse and everyone crying over it.

And now Guineth’s stealing Anthony away for who knows what reason. She’s always begging for his attention. At Justin’s party it was, “Oh, help me, Anthony! Mike’s so mean to me!” and now it’s “Help, Anthony! I need help to find Justin!” Like, get a grip and find your brother yourself. It’s not hard. Follow

the drunken laughter—I can hear him from the other side of the room.

“Do you know what time it is?” Jolene asks Matt. “We should probably start heading out...”

“Night’s still early—” he says.

“No, it’s not.” She reaches for his wrist. “Let me see your watch...”

“Uh, no.” He pulls his arm away from her.

She tilts her head at him, probably surprised a guy wouldn’t give her whatever she wanted, but he doesn’t.

“What time is it?” she asks him.

“Early.”

“It can’t be. Why won’t you let me see your watch?”

“Cause it’s mine. Get your own.”

“Go out and get one right now?”

“Or just take my word for it.”

“What is the exact time?”

“Ear-ly.” He says it slow like he’s talking to an idiot.

She sighs. “Is it past midnight?”

“Probably not.”

“Matt! Just let me see your watch!”

He whips his hand behind his back as she lunges.

“You gonna fight me in that dress? It’s not gonna stay where you want it.” he raises his hand over his head as she reaches.

“Don’t look at me while I’m fighting you.”

“I’m not agreeing to that.”

I should leave them alone and let them explore some stirring feelings, and Guineth’s not gonna need Anthony all night. Once they find Justin—and Anthony unlatches himself from her—he’ll be all

alone. With Jolene and Matt growing more and more in love on the other side of the party—it'll just be us.

I follow where Anthony and Guineth went.

ANTHONY

Justin's back faces us with a girl's arms wrapped around him—must be Tay-Tay's. Ugh. He must have taken her back.

They move, and the head locked onto his is far too bright fuchsia to be Tay-Tay's.

I stand behind him, Guineth still tucked under my arm. "Justin."

He breaks apart from Mary and gapes at us—goth makeup smeared over his face. "Gwen, you okay?"

She shakes her head. "Can you take me to the ER?" She points behind us. "The salsa was in its storebought container, but I think it was homemade and cross contaminated."

"Did you use your EpiPen?"

She nods and scratches her arm, violently shaking and covered in hives. "But the epinephrine can kill me. Can you please just take me?!"

"Call an ambulance—"

"The cops will come!"

"What about Dad?"

"He's out of town!"

He looks up at me. "Can you take her? It's just I've only got the limo. If I leave, how're the rest of you getting home? And I can't drive Matt's car; I'm too drunk, and it's a stick. You're the only one sober who can do it."

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ll drive the three of us.”

“Well, you don’t need me if you’re going.”

Everything that’s happened tonight hits me all at once—him moving on Jolene at the dance, embarrassing her in his tabletop toast, and now this.

I consider myself a calm, rational person, but I punch Justin in the face.

He yells and falls back into a group who also yell, but I don’t care.

“Mary, keep an eye on Guineth for a second.” I grab Justin’s shirt, dragging him out Matt’s back door onto a crowded patio overlooking the bluffs and the beach.

“What’s your problem?” he shouts and breaks away from me.

“Your sister needs you right now. Sober up and come with us.”

He says something under his breath—judging by the sneer on his face, I’m glad I didn’t catch it.

“You’re coming with us if I have to drag you—”

“They’ll call the cops...”

I should make him anyway, even if he’ll get arrested for underaged drinking, but the more I fight her brother the longer it is before she gets help. There’s not a lot of point arguing with him when he’s like this anyway. He won’t regret any of it either; he won’t remember.

I go back inside where Mary’s got Guineth sitting on the couch, helping her scratch her hives.

PIPER

He enters from the patio, his face in a slump, and I get to him before he's stolen away by Guineth, or Jolene, or any other pathetic girl drooling all over him.

"Hey." I place a hand on his arm. "It's hot in here. You wanna take a walk on the beach?"

His nostrils widen, eyes narrow, and one side of his mouth curls. "I can't go for a walk." It's the coldest I've ever seen him. "I have to take Guineth to the hospital. Take Justin for a walk. He could use it."

It's like being stabbed in the heart.

He grabs his jacket out of Matt's closet and helps Guineth into it. Her friend Christie comes up to her and after a bunch of nodding it looks like she's going to go with our happy couple to the ER.

Anthony lets Christie's arm be the one around Guineth, then talks to Matt who hands him his car keys.

JOLENE

"Is Justin going with you?" Matt asks.

"No." Anthony puts Matt's keys in his back pocket. "He's out on the patio—bleeding." Then he turns to me. "Did you have a good time, apart from..."

PIPER

Anthony says something to Jolene, who nods. Then he leaves with the freshmen without so much as a glance in my direction—me, who's been his friend longer even than Matt has, who babysat his sister when he went to court with his parents during their divorce, who's gone to every one of his home games, who wore

blue tonight because he likes it, who texts him when he misses school, who drives to his house when he says he's sick, just in case I can catch a glimpse of him through the window—but I'm the one he ignores!

Jolene turns back to Matt, hand on her chest like a princess who's just endured seeing someone sneeze.

This ends now.

I shove people out of my way until she's right in front of me, gawking at those I've left in my wake then facing me with the nerve to look surprised.

I smile. "Can I talk to you for a second?" I grab her arm and squeeze my nails in.

"Ow."

I drag her a few feet from Matt.

MATT

Piper pulls Jolene away and someone taps my shoulder.

"Hey," Cameron says, "the band's out front. Guy says they didn't get their money."

"That would be because I didn't pay them."

I head out.

JOLENE

Justin returns from the patio—snarling and incoherent, like a dragon attacking a small town. He pushes Piper aside—ignoring her word choices—backing me up until I bump against a group of college students.

He's got a minor cut on his cheekbone.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he says.

“Like what?” I ask. I had no idea I was looking at him like anything.

“Like all high and mighty. You’re not as great as you think you are.”

I didn’t think I was great at all. In fact, I’ve spent years feeling wholly deficient.

“You’re just—pretty,” he says. “Lots of girls are pretty.”

“Justin—” I interrupt but he keeps going.

“I know it’s not because of Anthony. You wouldn’t fall for him like all the other girls who think they’re the only ones in his life. Like he doesn’t treat every girl like that, then gets bored and moves on to the next.”

He says nothing I hadn’t considered, stuff Piper’s mentioned, too, but I’ve pushed it all aside. I’ve seen no evidence at all, apart from them saying it.

Then Justin takes my hand, and my elbow, stepping even closer, forcing me to worry about him, and save worrying about Anthony for later.

He clamps his arm around my back forcing me in close, as close as before—outside Homecoming—only now Anthony won’t be striding out the door, asking me to dance with him.

“So I know it’s an act,” Justin says. “You don’t like him. You’re too nice to like him while going to the dance with me.”

I didn’t think it was something dependent on one’s nice level, but I can’t really expect sense out of Justin, who hasn’t said anything that wasn’t insane all night.

“So I’m left with you’re trying to make me jealous.” He slips my hair behind my shoulder and leaves his

hand on my bare arm. “But, like I said, you don’t have to do that.”

He brings his lips toward me, and I shove him back, this time easily against his tumbling, drunken state.

“I’ll tell you what I’m too nice to do,” I say. “Because I am nice, too nice to deliberately go out of my way to make my date jealous, especially when—as you’ve said—I don’t have to.” Several people watch and can’t help but feel a little less than this nice I claim, but I can’t afford to mind right now, or worry about the line between nice and too nice. “Our date is over.”

“Over?” He laughs. “Look at you.” He steps closer and lowers his voice. “You’re only acting superior because you’ve been asked to the dance by me. If I didn’t pay attention to you, you’d be nobody.”

My mind flashes back to when I felt like I was nobody—back to my freshman year math class, before I left for Paris. But since then, something woke up; something that didn’t need outside validation from Justin Granite.

“I’m fine with that.” I brush his hands off me and he grabs both my arms. I shove him away. He stumbles but snatches me up again and leans in to kiss me. I slap him and he falls back into the crowd.

When I retreat, Piper’s there, guffawing, looking almost excited.

PIPER

I wrap my arm around the slap-happy Jolene, and usher her a bit of a distance away from her victim.

She almost makes manipulating her too easy.

"You okay?" I ask, scrunching my eyebrows in concern for my dearest friend.

She's looking around. "I need to go—"

"Sure." I scratch my neck. "But you know what that was about, right?"

"What?"

"He's taking out his frustration at what Anthony did to him, on you."

"Huh?" She looks even more confused and less anxious to leave. I've got her.

"I've been trying to tell you that Anthony's just a player, and now Justin's trying to get it into your head, too. What's it gonna take?"

"But"—she shakes her head—"he doesn't act like that!"

"Because he flirts with you? He didn't ask you to Homecoming, and he left with Guineth..."

"Oh, gosh! Guineth—"

"She's fine. She has an EpiPen."

"If she's fine then why did Anthony take her to the hospital?"

"Point is, why'd it have to be him to go with her? Her brother's here. But Anthony tried to convince Justin to let him take her to the ER. Justin's hammered, obviously, but he was gonna hire a Lug and take her anyway. So he tried to stop Anthony because he doesn't want him dating his little sister, and Anthony slugged him. He flirts with you for the same reason he used to flirt with me and a dozen other girls. He loses interest after a while—"

"What?! He used to flirt with you—"

“And a dozen other girls, usually focusing in on one or two for a few days. Looks like this week it’s you and Guineth. I wonder which one he’ll tire of first.”

JOLENE

All the blood rushes to the top of my skull. It can’t be true. I don’t want to believe any of it or even think about it, but I can’t shrug off what Piper’s saying. There’s a cut on Justin’s cheek—they obviously fought. Anthony even admitted he left him bleeding...

My world turns, mentally and physically. I grab on to the twisted iron staircase, trying to separate what’s true and what’s not. When he’s around me, nothing is wrong in the entire world. But don’t they say manipulative narcissists are charming—they have to be to lure in their prey? Is that what I am—prey?! He never makes me feel that way—but Justin’s cheek!

“I have to go.”

This time Piper lets me.

I grip the side of the door as I pass—not sure where I’m going or how I’m getting home. I should go the other way and find Mary, but I don’t. I need air. I need to be out of this building, even if just for a minute.

I slip on my shoes and dash into the parking lot.

18 THE GIRL I KNEW

MATT

"Is this you?" I ask the band's lead singer, holding my phone up to his face with my money app on the screen.

"Yeah. That's us. Give us a minute until we're sure it went through."

I nod and send him the money as a group of girls come from around the back of the apartments—one of them I recognize.

"I know this guy," Caradine says, leaving her friends behind. "You at this party, too?"

"It's my party."

"Caradine, it's cold!" her friend whines.

"You going back in?" Caradine asks me.

"Yeah," I say. "In a minute."

She makes her way in with her friends as another girl comes out of the building wearing a long pink dress.

"We got it," the singer says.

"Great."

The band wanders off as Jolene rushes past me, not even looking my way.

JOLENE

Maybe the chauffeur will let me into the limo. I can just wait there and take a nap until everyone else is ready. My dad doesn't know I'm at a party in Isla Vista, so I can't call him, and he'd ask questions if I arrived home in a Lug—but they might be easy to answer if I tell him I was tired and didn't like my date. It'd probably make his night.

I walk farther away from the building into the cool night. It's late on a Saturday in IV, so naturally lots of people are up—in and out of parties. I should play it safe and stick to the curb.

I feel him in my bones before I see him. He's several feet behind me.

"Jolene," he says.

"Oh my gosh, Matt."

But the space between us shrinks, not grows, despite the exhaustion in my tone.

"Where are you going?" he asks. "You shouldn't be out here alone..."

"You're welcome to stand there if you shut up."

"What's your problem?"

"Nothing. Sorry. I just..." I say. "Are you making out with Caradine again?"

"No." He says it so quickly and sincerely, without any defensiveness, it has to be true. "What would it matter to you if I did?"

“Nothing,” I say slowly, insincerely and with lots of defensiveness.

“Come back inside.”

“No.”

“Why not? Because Anthony left?”

“What?!”

“Honest question—”

“No, it’s not! What’s it to you?”

“I think you know what it is to me.”

I glare at him. Why couldn’t he have admitted—so freely—how he felt about me before—back when it was much less complicated?

“What?!” he asks.

“Can you go back inside?”

“You know,” he says, “you’re not acting like the girl I knew at all.”

“AND?!” I turn to him.

He laughs and raises his arms as if surrendering. “I liked you before, too,” he says, referencing my blowup at him during Justin’s party, when I actually admitted to my years-long crush on him.

“No, you didn’t!” I scoff. “Not enough! But now that I’m friends with the right people—have the right clothes and the right sized chest—now you like me. You know what, Matt? If you liked me before, you would have done something about it, and if you’re telling the truth, and you just didn’t for some reason—do anything about it—then you know what that makes you? A coward.”

“You didn’t do anything about it either. Does that make you a coward?”

My jaw tightens, and a feeling of strength surges through me. I stand on my toes and get right up in his stupid face. “Oh, but see that’s okay with me. I’m used to being a loser.” I sneer. “How do you like it?”

His mouth gapes awed and bewildered. It unsettles me—not what I expected.

I turn away toward the street again. But he doesn’t leave.

“So, you’re a loser?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“And I’m one for not asking you out sooner?”

“Yes!”

“Okay.”

He grabs me, spins me into him, and kisses me so passionately and tightly I can’t move or breathe, and I’m not sure I want to. Of course, if I don’t, I’ll die, but I’ve never been kissed like this before. They say death is warm and peaceful, and sure, this is warm but kind of chaotic.

He stops but doesn’t stop holding me close—his arms still around me.

“I’m sorry,” he says, but doesn’t look it. “Just thought somebody should kiss you while you’re wearing this dress.”

“I have a date”—not that I want to kiss him either!

“Yeah, but I’m so much better at it.”

He kisses me again. His opening mouth lifts my lips apart, dominating them into unison with his. My body quivers in shock, not even so much at his brazenness but at how he holds me to him with so much effortless force—I’ve always thought of myself as strong—I’m a dancer; I’m athletic and fast, but in his arms, I am

trapped. My efforts to free myself fizzle and die in his hot and hungry arms.

After a long moment he stops, pulls back, and looks at my hands, seemingly surprised they've been pushing against him. He holds them at his chest—both mine in one of his—and with the other he takes a loose strand of my hair between his fingers.

I don't move; any sign of movement might inspire another kiss, which with the way he looks at me—might not take much. He brushes the back of his fingers against my face, looking for all the world like he's going to pounce again.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

I feel mesmerized and dazed. I almost let the word "yes" slip out of my mouth.

"Anthony took my car," he says, "and Jason's is in the shop, but—"

With a firm jerk, I shake out of his hands. "No!" I shove his arms off from around me. "You had your chance! There was nothing wrong with me before! Admit it! Admit that if I didn't go to Paris, and get this haircut, and clothes, you would not have kissed me just now!"

"How can I admit that? How can I know what may or may not have happened in some hypothetical crazy world you're talking about?" He studies me as I glare at him. "Fine! In some multiverse where you never went to France, I might never have kissed you. Who cares?! I'm kissing you now."

He does it again! This time worse—or better. He bends me backward, supporting my entire body in his arms—one around my waist, the other holding my

head. His mouth opens, soft despite his urgency, as if he's sure I won't push him away, as if I've already made up my mind—as if I belong to him.

He lets me go, slowly until I'm standing on my own without any part of him touching me.

I don't smile. I give him absolutely nothing.

He might feel my coldness because he takes a step back.

I surge in my stilettos past him, back inside.

19 A BIT OF A NIGHT

MARY

It's like the day he showed up holding Tay's hand all over again. He knows he just made a very public—and loud—display of affection toward my sister, and here he stands before me, as if none of it could possibly have offended me. As if I'm his puppy, who'll put up with all sorts of mistreatment and abuse, all because I love him and am desperate for his affection.

"Get away from me," I tell him, adding a few vile words in there for fun.

"I know," he says. "I get it. I'm a mess. I'm never going to be lower than I am right now."

"Let's hope not."

"So," he says, taking a step closer and smelling like beer. "You might not get another chance with me."

I think there's something wrong with my brain, or at least one of my five senses, because the more he insults me, the more I want to die in his arms. "They made out too long," the coroner would say. "They thought all they needed was each other, and they were

tragically wrong.” Our ghosts would point and laugh. Who needed things like food, oxygen, and life when we had each other?

My cell buzzes against my butt. I lift up my dress, revealing the shorts I’m wearing underneath, remove my cell from the back pocket, and read a text from my sister—two texts:

“Are you ready to leave? Can you give me a ride?” and, “Can you grab my stole out of the closet? I’m in Charlene and Dillon’s apartment, and I do NOT want to go back to Matt’s.”

A few thoughts occur to me. One, Justin didn’t just hurt me tonight; he also hurt Jolene, and bad—little Jolene who sings in the forest with woodland creatures and wouldn’t hurt a spider who had a knife and was trying to kill her. Two, he also didn’t just hurt Jolene; he also hurt me.

“So, what do you think?” he asks. “We could go down to the beach...”

I lower my phone and look at him—rich, popular, and attractive. “I think you know what I think.” I wrap a hand around the back of his hair and pull his face to mine. “Why don’t you grab a blanket, and I’ll meet you down there?”

He smiles, and leaves, and so do I.

With Jolene’s stole around my shoulders, I enter the apartment next to Matt’s. The door’s open, and some of the party has wafted in, but not much. I find her sitting on a couch with her face in her hands.

“Jole.” I toss her my keys as I walk back out, calling out behind my fluffy, dusty-rose shoulder— “you’re driving.”

She catches up to me as we walk down the hall toward the lobby.

“I don’t have a license.”

“Better you than me,” I say. We get out to the parking lot, and I open the passenger-side door of my truck. “You’ve got a permit?”

“No.”

“You’ve started driving behind the wheel?”

“No!”

“You’ll be fine.”

I slide in and, to my surprise, she gets into the driver’s seat. She starts the car and stares at the steering wheel, looking petrified.

“You know,” she says, swallowing. “I’ve kind of had a bit of a night...”

I nod. “Let’s call a Lug.”

20 OF LUGS, JOURNALS, SISTERS, AND BOYS

JOLENE

On the way home, Mary makes sure I know I'm paying for her to take another Lug back to get her car in the morning. By "morning" she means "noon," so I don't fight it. At least I don't have to drive. I'm glad she's with me—crazy as that may sound. I could have left the party and gone home in a Lug by myself, but I reached out to her for a reason—one I didn't understand or even think about until now. A wall that's been separating us isn't there anymore. I'm not sure when it tumbled, but I search for it in my mind, in my senses—it's not there. I was her sister earlier when she opened up to me about Justin, and now she's mine.

"You're not dating Justin, are you?" she asks as our driver stops at yet another red light on our journey out of IV.

"No. Very no."

She zips up the hoodie she grabbed from her car as I spread my stole over the front of my shoulders.

"Are you hot?" the driver asks.

"No," Mary says. "We're cold."

"I can't turn it down any cooler."

Mary gives him the thumbs up then leans into me.

"He didn't tell you we had a history, did he?"

"You and the driver?" I whisper.

She slaps my arm. "Me and Justin."

"I know," I say. "He never mentioned it."

"It used to bug me he didn't pick me. It wasn't until he kissed you on stage in front of everybody that I realized what it was: he likes idiots."

"Okay," I say, glaring at her.

"No, I mean, once he finds out a girl's smarter than him, or like, better than him in some threatening way, he gets insecure, and goes after something else, something easier."

"So, I'm stupid and easier?" I ask.

"No, he just hasn't realized you're not yet. Because he's cute, rich, popular, and for guys like him, a lot of girls are. Okay, when I came up with the theory, I didn't think it was because you're stupid, because you're not, you're—you."

That makes me feel a little warm. I must show it on my face because she elbows me in the ribs. "Your guy's growing on me." She shrugs a little.

My guy? Obviously, she doesn't mean Justin, but then who? Did she see Matt kissing me?

"Who?"

"Anthony," she says. "I like how he punches Justin."
So he did hit him.

"He's not my guy." As much as I would love that. I shake my head.

“That’s not what it looks like.”

A thought pops into my mind—she saw it happen! “Why did he hit him?” I ask.

She sighs and sits back. “Girl, okay, Anthony was trying to get Justin to take Guineth to the ER, but Justin was like, I can’t drive her, I’m drunk. So, Anthony was like, I’ll drive the both of you, and Justin was like, well, if you’re driving then, you don’t need me, and Anthony slugged him.”

One of my hands flies to my chest, the other braces against the window. My mouth falls open, and breath flows through my lungs like I’ve been suffocating for the last hour.

“You were told something else,” she correctly guesses.

“Yeah.” I pant. “Piper said something very different.”

She sighs and puts a motherly hand on my shoulder as if teaching a toddler why they got burned. “Piper is a cunning little creature, isn’t she? Once she convinced Kaila that she had chicken pox and shouldn’t come to the junior high dance, so she could try to steal Miguel. Joke’s on her; now no one wants Miguel.”

“Sounds like the joke’s on Miguel...”

She snorts. “Yeah.” She looks out the window, then back at me. “How was the rest of your night?”

I can’t tell her about Matt, but—I don’t know. She told me everything that happened to her. Maybe there aren’t any secrets left between us. “Matt kissed me, a lot.”

“Congratulations! When’s the wedding?”

“Shut up.”

“What did you do?”

"I didn't know what to do—and couldn't move even if I did—"

"I know what I would have done."

"How did you know I liked him?" I ask. She looks confused, so I clarify. "You said I did the other night."

"Oh. I read your journals while you were gone."

"Find them interesting?"

"Riveting," she says sarcastically. "Your daily accounts of everything that transpired between you two were absolutely mesmerizing. I couldn't put it down."

"Then why did you read it?" I ask.

"It made me feel better to read about how pathetic you are."

I scoff as she laughs.

"Were," she corrects. "Then you came back looking like this." She shakes her head.

"I told him off," I say.

"Really? For kissing you?"

"If he wanted me, he should have realized that before I—" I motion toward my body.

"Went through puberty?"

"Something like that."

"So, no more Matt?"

"He missed out," I say.

"And no Justin?"

"No. No Justin."

"Who are you going to write about?"

"I haven't kept a journal since I left for Paris."

"Aw. You should. I liked them."

I smirk.

“So, why did you want to leave?” She fingers her corsage. “Because Matt kissed you... a lot?” She plays sultry at the end with her eyebrows going up twice.

“No—I mean, not completely. You didn’t see everyone, like, freaking out at me? Piper told me that lie about Anthony, and Justin was losing his mind. He is not a fun drunk; neither are you, by the way. I’m starting to think that’s not a thing. How did you miss all that? Justin must have yelled loud enough for you to hear him if you were down the block.”

“Oh, I heard him,” she says. “I just wanted you to relive it. I dropped out of cheer because of him, and when I did, everyone dropped me—including Piper.”

“Yeah,” I say. “She’s the type. I think she dropped me tonight for the crime of speaking to Anthony.”

“You didn’t!” She hides her mouth behind her hands like I just told her she had to marry Frankenstein—although Mary probably wouldn’t be opposed to that. “You know that’s illegal; like, they’ll arrest you.”

“I know!” I say. “How was your night?”

“Made out with Justin.”

“MARY!”

“Shhh! I apologize for my sister!” she says, leaning forward to the driver.

“I can’t make it any colder,” he says.

“Oh, Larry.” She laughs and leans back in her chair, then looks at me.

“You made out with Justin?” I ask her. Part of me wonders if I should be upset. He was my date, but I can’t find an angry cell in me, at least not over that—just worry. “What happened?”

“Stop,” she says, waving a hand like it’s no big deal. “It was what we like to call a mistake.”

“Are you over him?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She forces a laugh, acting out of breath, but is a terrible actress. “I think I’m over him. Really, I have you to thank. If you didn’t get so hot in Paris, I might still be in love with him.”

She stares out the window, her body small in the frame of the window. I surpassed her in height before I left for France, but I never realized how fragile she was. She always seemed tough, like a tank, even before wearing so much metal.

“Gonna stick with Tate?” I ask.

She sighs and doesn’t turn around—just looks out the window like she’s somewhere else, with someone else... “Probably not,” she says, “since he’s gay.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” She turns to me. “Keep it under wraps; Justin doesn’t know.”

21 RECOUPERATING

JOLENE

Dogberry greets me as I step into my bedroom. My parents—who didn't stay up to make sure Mary and I kept curfew—must have taken him out, or he'd be jumping and dancing.

I slide my bookcase to the side and slip into my closet, strip off my layers, throw on my jam-jams, and return to my room.

After searching through my secretary desk, I find a journal I had abandoned half-way through. I grab a pen, date the page, and write.

Tonight, I went to Homecoming with ASB president Justin Granite. Halfway through the dance, a T-Rex crashed through the wall and ate him. Oh well. We had a good run.

I leave it on top of my desk, where Mary can easily find it, and brush my teeth, pray—not forgetting Guineth—get in bed, and think about all the stupid things I did tonight.

I relive the worst parts of it—over and over. My sadistic side unsatiated no matter how many times I

replay them. It was such a weird night. Half of it was amazing, and half of it was the worst, and a bonus part was throwing me off completely. Ugh! If he kissed me like that years ago, I would have died! But now?! It's ruining my life! I've moved on—moved on to another guy I can't have—not because I'm not popular, but because I am! My stupid popular friends forbid it! Not that Piper and Justin aren't good friends, but they're both so manipulative—if I crossed them, they'd come after me; they'd turn Anthony and me against each other; they'd turn the whole world against us. It'd be so bad even Logan would never speak to me again. I'd try to pitch my case, but he wouldn't listen because Piper would take him back and give him everything he's ever wanted if he stayed mad at me.

I snort. She'd have a time turning Matt against me. By the way he held and kissed me, I'm not sure anything could, which is hilarious! I used to be so concerned about whether he liked me—really don't have to wonder now.

I bite the corner of my mouth. If I have moved on from Matt, would I keep thinking about that kiss? Would I have put up more resistance? I couldn't move, or push him off, but how hard did I try, really? It's not like I didn't like it—I did and I didn't—but I hadn't made up my mind about him—I mean, I did, but I didn't. You know? I don't want him to grab me and kiss me like that, without my permission! I don't want him to hold me in his big arms, dipping me, running his hand up my spine and into my hair...

I need a distraction to shut my brain off so I can stop thinking about Matt—and Piper, and Justin, and

Guineth—oh, Guineth... Matt said he'd call and make sure she was okay—I'm not sure I'm up to texting him to ask about it, as much as I'd like to know...

I could just text Anthony.

I send him a message, but I'm in my bed and ready to fall asleep before he answers me. He's probably still at the hospital, and not on his phone.

Sunday after church, I invite Logan over. He sits at my desk and games on his laptop while I play on mine.

"Watch out! Watch out!" he yells.

"I see her!" I dodge around Brigita, this horrible Wagnerian zombie Viking who sings and burns your eyes out.

"How was Homecoming?" he asks.

I take a deep sigh.

"See? That's why I don't go to those things." He shoots a zombie in a tree.

"Nice shot."

"Thanks."

"No, it was weird." I check inside a hollowed-out stump and find health kits. "First aid in here. Justin screamed at me and was really aggressive."

"Yikes."

"And Piper told me this huge lie about Anthony."

It's his turn to sigh. I'm sure he wishes he could believe Piper wasn't doing all the terrible things she's doing just as much as I wished Anthony wasn't doing all the terrible things he wasn't doing.

"He actually took Guineth to the hospital," I say.

"Really?!"

“She had an allergic reaction to, like, Matt’s neighbor’s salsa or something.”

“Yikes. Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. I texted Anthony—which way’s the exit?”

“North.”

“Where’s North?”

“Straight back. Honestly, woman, have you never played this before?”

I smile, get killed, and lean back waiting to respawn.

“Sorry,” he says. “Sounds like a lot of drama for a night that should’ve been fun.”

I check my phone to see if Anthony’s gotten back to me. I know what Mary said canceled out Piper’s lie, but hearing back from him would help ease my worry a lot, and not just for Guineth.

“It’s just my social life,” I say. “You’re the best one anyway.”

“I could have told you that, and saved you all the trouble,” he says.

Anthony texts me.

“Oh, it’s Anthony.”

I open the message: “Sorry. I took a nap at the hospital and didn’t get your text until late. I didn’t want to wake you. She’s doing alright now. Justin said you left the party early. You okay?”

“She’s all right,” I tell Logan then text Anthony back: “Yeah. I’m all right. I went home with Mary. Kind of a crazy night, huh?”

“Definitely. I gotta run to work. Glad you’re okay. Talk to you later.” He includes a car and wrench emojis.

“You know I’m over her,” Logan says, sniping zombies from inside a truck.

“What?”

“I’m over Piper,” he says. “I’m not gonna fawn all over her when she’s been such a creep to you.”

“Aw,” I say, really quite touched. “Loge.”

“Besides, I like someone else.”

This makes me a little nervous, to be honest. Aunt Eloise seemed to think Logan liked me, or I liked him. I tried to explain to her that it wasn’t like that, but since then, I’ve been a little worried he might like me. “Who?” I ask cautiously.

“Brigita.” He holds up his laptop, showing me his avatar face-locked with the Wagnerian zombie Viking.

I laugh. “How did you even do that?”

“AI,” he says. “It’s not in-game.”

I laugh again. “That’s probably the best use of AI I’ve ever seen.”

“I have more,” he says.

“Oh, please keep those to yourself.”

We laugh and game until my mom calls me down for dinner. Logan joins us, watches a movie, walks Dogberry with me, helps himself to some cheese, and eventually goes home after I announce I’m going to bed.

22 MONDAY

MARY

Usually I avoid Justin's locker hall, but today—today I don't bother. He can avoid me. Ugh. I honestly was hoping he wouldn't be at it, but he is, turning the lock, watching me as I try to sneak past.

"Hey, Mary!" he calls out.

I sneer at him but walk over.

"Yes?" I ask, overly sugary.

"Sorry about last weekend," he has the nerve to say. "Anthony said I was pretty horrible."

"Mm-mm," I nod, still pretending to be happy, and at all interested.

"I thought I could make it up to you sometime," he says. "Maybe we could go to the game together Friday, and out to eat?"

"Oh," I say, laughing my head off inside my brain. "Shoot, I'd like to, but I can't, because I hate you. You know, you should go with my sister—no, wait, no—she hates you, too. Crap. Oh, well. Have fun at the game alone, though."

I walk on my merry little way, missing the moment when he opens his locker and finds the decapitated teddy bear I put in there, still sporting its black and purple cheer uniform. Luckily, I set up a little camera that videos the magical moment and streams it directly to my phone. But I've got class right now; I'll have to view it later.

JUSTIN

I take the bear remains out, cautiously. No telling what else she left for me in here, then it dawns on me—I grin and toss the bear's lifeless body back inside my locker—she waited until now to destroy this thing, almost a year after we stopped seeing each other. She's not telling me she's through with me; she's trying to get me to think she is because I've rekindled a hope in her she had let go of before.

I watch her walk away, strutting like a little vixen.

"She wants me," I inform the air around me as I shut my door.

JOLENE

I walk—or more like hide—behind Logan as we file into myth and take our usual spots. I didn't need to hide—Piper's not in class yet.

Quinn, Courtney, Quinn's boyfriend Todd, and Todd's friend Weston, enter and take the seats surrounding us, pulling both Logan and me into conversation—Todd and Weston with Logan. It makes me smile that Logan's now part of the group. If

Anthony hadn't reached out to him, I wouldn't have been able to convince him to hang out with us.

"Did you see my short?" Quinn asks me.

I shake my head. She hands me her phone playing a short video of me chewing out Justin at Matt's.

My face flushes with embarrassment. It was bad enough everyone at the party saw our fight, now everyone in the world can!

"Who took this?" I ask.

"Who do you think?" Quinn asks, implying herself.

"Why?"

"Seriously?" she asks.

"Look at Justin's face," Courtney says. "Like he just got slapped."

"I thought you guys liked Justin," I say.

Courtney shrugs, and Quinn tosses her hair over her shoulder.

"We do," Courtney says, then grins. "But not as much as he likes you."

They laugh.

"Show her that one." Courtney points at a video on Quinn's phone.

"These are blowing up, by the way." Quinn selects away from the videos, despite Courtney's request. "You're great for content." Holding her phone and hitting record, she raises it, so she and I are both in the frame. "She's survived!" She sticks out her tongue, turns off the video, then focuses on editing.

Kaila glides in, takes the closest seat to me, sets her bag over her chair, and leans in, holding a hand up as if to stop other people from hearing. "Don't tell Tay I said this, but you looked really pretty at the dance."

“Why don’t you want me to tell Tay?” I ask, not that I would.

“Because she’d kill me if I were nice to you.” She rolls her eyes like it’s obvious, and she’s probably right. “Piper too, for that matter.”

“What?”

“She’s just jealous.” Kaila shakes her head like it’s nothing, but it knocks the wind out of me.

“Why?!”

Courtney and Quinn laugh.

“Shoot,” Quinn says. “I’m gonna have to re-do my entire voice-over.”

“Because of Anthony,” Kaila and Courtney say together.

Everything’s moving, people, the earth, but it all feels still.

“What about Anthony?” I ask.

“Because he likes you,” Courtney says.

“What makes you say that?” I ask. Please have receipts! I know what Piper said about him wasn’t true, Mary disproved her there—at least in part, but the part disproves the whole—or something like that, but it would make me feel a lot better if I heard some actual good news about his character—something I can trust—especially since I’ve hardly heard from him since Matt decided to engulf me.

But they laugh at my question again.

“Did you get Anthony punching Justin?” Courtney asks Quinn.

“Do you think I’m oblivious? I saw the fire alive in Anthony’s eyes and had my phone ready.” Quinn taps on a video, and without thinking I snatch it away from

her, holding it up close to my face as the events of the punch unfold in front of me—just as Mary said. Piper hadn't counted on other witnesses—hang on, there are more lies to clear up!

“What do you guys know about Anthony? Piper says he's a player, but it doesn't seem like it,” I say.

Quinn snorts while taking her phone back. “Piper wishes he was a player. She'd love to get played.”

Courtney laughs and lightly slaps Quinn's arm, then turns to me. “I've never heard anything, and every time I see him, he's by himself, with guys, in a big group, or with you. And I really wouldn't put it past Piper to lie about him.”

“Probably you should forget absolutely everything she's ever said about anyone,” Quinn says, checking her teeth in her phone camera.

I nod. It might be the best advice I've ever gotten.

PIPER

I walk into myth and, to my utmost horror, all my friends, even Kaila, who I hate, are circled around Jolene and Logan, laughing like old friends. Just what I don't need right now. I was all ready to never have to deal with her again—now that she's written off Anthony—and all my friends are hers! What am I gonna have to do to get rid of her—write off all my friends?! Whatever. I'll sit across the room, and all my friends will come over except her because she won't want to abandon Logan—wait—would Quinn and Courtney join me? Or would they stay there with her?

I walk up to Courtney's desk and tap it. "Hey, let's go sit over there."

"No." She doesn't even look up at me. "Shh. Jolene was saying something."

I try Quinn. "Quinn, you wanna—"

"Now I have to re-do my audio again!" she yells.

I take a deep breath. I guess this is my life now. I'm like Frankenstein's maker and she's Frankenstein. Best be nice to this monster until I can figure out how to contain her.

I sit down and turn to Jolene. She doesn't acknowledge me at first. "Jolene." That does it. "What'd you do all weekend?" I ask.

JOLENE

"Mostly I killed zombies with Logan," I tell Piper, who's smiling and acting like she didn't just lie to me and try to ruin my life.

"They're not gonna kill themselves," Logan says.

Piper sneers as her friends laugh at her ex-boyfriend's joke.

"I also talked to my sister—you know, Mary? And she seemed to think Anthony hit Justin for an entirely different reason than what you said, and Quinn got the whole thing on video, which confirmed it. Isn't that weird? It's like, nothing you said was true at all." I shake my head like it's too strange to grasp. I turn my back on her gaping face.

PIPER

Class ends. I grab my bag off the back of my chair, but when I turn around to talk to Jolene, she's already out the door. She ignored me the rest of the period, and if I lose her as a friend, I might lose all the others as well.

I chase her into the hall.

"Jolene!"

She and Logan stop, but whatever. He can hear it, too.

"I may have misunderstood what happened between Anthony and Justin—"

"You mean you lied?" she asks.

I stick my tongue between my molars and sigh. I wouldn't have to do this if my friends weren't all obsessed with her. Was it my own fault? Did trying to pair her up with Justin and then Matt just make her more enticing to Anthony, and more interesting to my friends? 'Cause it didn't help.

JOLENE

"He hit him because of Guineth!" Piper says. "I was just confused about how he felt about her, I mean, you saw him with his arm around her!"

My mind jumbles up. Wouldn't Piper have heard exactly what they said? What did she tell me? Is there a possibility she got it wrong? I thought she specifically said what she heard them say, or am I confusing things? Didn't she say he flirted with girls when Quinn and Courtney said he doesn't? How would she be confused about that? Unless she thinks flirting is just

making sure a girl doesn't die of anaphylactic asphyxiation.

But I have no proof that she was lying and wasn't confused, and it probably wouldn't hurt anything to let it go...

"I guess that makes sense," I say.

"Right," she says, switching from morose to peppy. "I'll see you in class."

She walks off down the hall, and Logan turns to me.

"I'm sorry about a lie I told, too," he says.

"Really?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm not over her."

"Logan!"

"What? She's nice now. She apologized..."

"That wasn't an apology—"

"She said 'sorry.'"

"I don't think so..." I remind him that this is the cycle: fight, kind of apologize, makeup, repeat, all the way to our locker hall.

But despite Logan's eagerness to get hurt again, I'm starting to feel like things might just be okay. I'll probably always have to tiptoe around Piper, and I have to face Justin next, in science, but maybe that'll be okay, too—or maybe he'll be sick today. Or maybe it'll be like myth, where it's not only okay, but actually kind of great.

Todd said Justin probably won't remember any of it, so it sounds like the worst seeing him again will be is awkward, and even if he hates me, I didn't like him anyway, not like that.

But I don't have to wait for science to find out. He waltzes around the corner—his hands on the shoulder

straps of his backpack—and stops when he gets to me. “Anthony said I owe you an apology.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Do you know about what?”

I nod and exchange my myth book for my chemistry book. I almost tell him that hundreds of people know what it’s about, thanks to Quinn, but maybe it’s best not to mention that...

“Sorry.” He takes a deep breath.

“Do *you* know why?” I ask out of curiosity.

“Unfortunately. I must have ruined your night.”

“Well...” I tilt my head to the side. He didn’t really, and now that we’re back at school and nothing’s exploded, it all feels like the tide’s going out and everything’s calming back down. It’s not all cookie-cutter perfect, but it’s doable—I like this calm.

“You didn’t talk to your sister, did you?” he asks.

“About what?”

“Nothing.”

But I think definitely something, but his asking about my sister reminds me of his.

“How’s Guineth?”

“She’s fine.” He shrugs.

The way he says it in such a matter-of-fact way makes me feel like he has no idea how she’s doing—not really.

“She at school today?” I ask.

“No, she’ll be back tomorrow.” He rests an arm over my shoulder against the top of my locker, obstructing my view. “So, you wanna go see that movie?”

I shut my locker and turn away from him to zip up my bag.

A Homecoming poster on the wall grabs my attention.

“They should take that down,” I say. “Homecoming is over.”

“Jolene...”

I’m gonna have to answer him.

23 MATT'S MONDAY

JASON

It's bad enough I've been woken up at the unholy hour of nine am, but the reason Cameron did it is so stupid!

"You put the wet plunger on the bathmat!" he shrieks at me.

"Yeah?! So?!" I move my blanket aside so I can sit up and scooch around his face he's got hanging over me.

"Now the bathmat has poo water on it!" he shouts. He's not super mellow for a surfer.

"How about, 'Thank you for unclogging the toilet, Jason?!'"

"You clogged it!"

"Um," Charlene says, sitting with Dillon at the table. "You know what, Cameron? We're just gonna go."

"I'll call you later," Cameron says as they bolt out the door. He turns on me the second it shuts. "Now you've made Charlene and Dillon leave!"

"I gotta be straight with you, man—Charlene is not interested."

“Ugh!” He puts his hands on his head.

Matt comes down from his perch, and Cameron turns to him.

“I can’t handle it!” He’s got his hands in front of him now, pleading. “I want him to stop crashing on our couch!”

“It’s my couch!” I say. It’s Matt’s couch, but it’s more mine than Cameron’s. But Matt’s giving me a look and crossing his arms. “All I did was tell him he couldn’t get Charlene.”

“They’re going out,” Matt says.

Huh, I didn’t know that.

“I gotta go to work,” Cameron says.

“Try and actually get people their drinks today!” I shout after him just before he can slam the front door. “Ugh.” I sit on the couch and put my feet up. “Finally, he’s gone.” I pull Matt’s laptop onto my lap and open it.

There’s a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Matt calls. “Hey, Grandpa.”

“Hey, Son.” Matt’s grandpa lives upstairs next to his office. At first, when he gave Matt the job, it was just superintendent, but since we moved in, he’s been given a lot more to do, like a lot.

“I’ve got an opportunity for you.” Another job, he means. “I bought a bed-and-breakfast up in Mammoth, and I need to get it ready for listing. You mind going up and checking it out? Make a list of everything that needs attention, and you and I can head back up at a later date and make them. Sound good?” I sense his eyes on me. “You—of course—can bring your friend—if you must. It’s already snowing

up there, early for this time of year, but you could go, have fun, make a weekend of it. Try it out and see what its selling points are.”

“Sure. I can do that,” Matt says. He never says no to his grandpa.

“I’ll have Sarah email you the details.” He leaves.

“Cameron’s getting his wish!” I tell Matt.

“Your butt off the couch?” Matt asks. “Sure—for a weekend.”

I nod with a big smile. I’m so easy to have as a roommate.

24 JUSTIN'S QUESTION

JOLENE

"What?" I ask, like I've forgotten Justin asked me something. I've spent too long at my locker. I'm usually safe in class by now.

"You wanna go to the movies?" he asks.

I don't know why I'm having problems telling him no, after I vehemently told him off at Matt's party. Although he doesn't remember that—and I'm not as angry now that he's not looking at me like a Lik-a-Stix. But I'm gonna have to let him down. But it's not like I'm even going back on my word; when he asked me to the movies the first time, he included others, then tried to make it a date. Nuh-uh.

"I'm sorry, Justin." I pull away from him. He's still got his hand on the locker and is leaning in—he's not crazy tall, or especially broad, but he's bigger than me and his bright-blue puffer jacket makes him look huge. I also don't know what to say. I'm brand-spanking new at this. Seriously, I should petition for there to be a

course: How to Deal with the Male Ego. "I'm into someone else—"

That, my friends, is the wrong thing to say. He cocks his jaw out and leans back with disgust and envy on his furious face. "I knew it." He slams his hand against the locker. "It's Anthony, isn't it?!"

"It's irrelevant." I pull back from him and cover my vital organs.

"No. I deserve to know which one of my 'friends' stole you away from me." This also is the wrong thing to say.

"I was never yours!" I shout. "We just went to Homecoming."

He tilts his head and sighs. If I didn't know him better, I'd think he was having emotions over offending me.

MARY

I turn the corner. Jolene's at her locker, with Logan and Justin. He's got his arm resting against the door, and that look that makes me want to punch him in the face—alright, that's not really saying anything, but if you saw him, you'd want to punch him, too. It would be a good way to earn money—screw kissing booths—we need some "punch an Associated Student Body Officer" booths.

"Jolene—" he says.

"I have class." She turns to leave.

"Wait—" He reaches for her arm, then thinks better of it.

That was a smart move. I'm a little surprised. I didn't know he stored knowledge.

"I'm sorry, I just—I get it, but I mean, you can't just expect me to give up," he says.

"Please give up a little bit." Her voice rises at the end like a question.

He shakes his head, and the urge to punch him resurfaces.

"Um." Logan stands up and shuts his locker with a foot while tossing his backpack around him. "You never told me how Homecoming was." I think he's trying to be a hero. He and Jolene were together all Sunday. No way they didn't talk about Homecoming.

"Good," Jolene says. "You went to your grandma's Friday and Saturday, right?"

"My aunt's."

"Oh right. How was that?"

"Meh," he says. "She's dieting, so she's crabby and has no decent food in the house."

Jolene laughs.

"Jolene!" It's Piper. She's got her hands in her hair and is hyperventilating. "Ohmygosh, ohmygosh, ohmygosh, ohmygosh—" She digs her head into my sister's shoulder.

"What's going on?" Jolene wraps an arm around her. "I thought you went to class."

"No." Piper sniffs and tosses her hair out of her eyes. "I went to the bathroom, then I came out and Chris was there, and he was, like, 'We should go out, like, you should be my girlfriend,' and I was, like, 'Okay, yeah', and now I'm like—what?!"

"I thought you hated Chris," Jolene says.

“We texted all Sunday.” Piper shakes her head. “And he was all like, ‘Margot who? I just asked her to dance because you blew me off for Justin,’ and I was like, ‘I don’t even like Justin!’”

“Thanks,” Justin says.

“So, he came over and we made out through a *Star Trek* movie, and all, but, like—now we’re, like, *dating*, like how did that happen?!”

“You could have said no,” Jolene says, patting her on the back.

“I know!” Piper blubbers into Jolene’s shoulder. “But Anthony was right there, and I wanted to make him jealous—”

“Aww, Pipe.” Justin lets go of the locker he was leaning against and stands straight. “He’s gotta like you in order to be jealous.”

Piper slugs his arm. Best thing she’s ever done.

“You know what?!” she says. “If I dated Anthony that would help you, too!”

“Why would I care who he dates?” Justin scoffs.

“Think about it for three seconds.”

Then the man himself walks over with his cell out. He has an array of friends before him to talk to, but of course he walks right up to my little sister.

“You get this message from Matt?” Anthony asks. “‘Hey, my grandpa’s got a cabin in the snow he wants me to check out this weekend—said I could bring some friends. Cabin sleeps nine. Who’s in?’ Looks like it’s him and Jason, then the five of us makes seven—”

“We could bring my boyfriend,” Piper throws her hair over her shoulder, “Chris.”

But from how he watches Jolene, Piper might as well be the overlooked Homecoming poster on the wall—not even drawing enough attention to get taken down and tossed in the trash.

PIPER

“We could take my SUV...” Anthony leans in close to Jolene.

“Logan has a van,” she says.

“We could take Logan’s van. I’ll text Matt we’re all in.”

The dance failed. Justin is a lost cause. He’s fired. The after-party didn’t work either. But that doesn’t necessarily mean Matt’s failed—not yet—not if in a few days we spend an entire weekend locked in a cabin in the snow with him—shoot! Of course NOW I have a boyfriend! Is it working, though? Does Anthony look a little off when I mention Chris? Should I test it again?

MARY

“Don’t forget to include my boyfriend, Chris.” Piper’s hand is in her hair again. Then both of her hands are and she hyperventilates away.

My cue.

“Excuse me, pariah coming through.” I walk over and address Anthony, who’s taking up the most Jolene airspace. “Need to talk to my sister. CLEAR OUT!”

He doesn’t go far, just pivots away from me, and draws Justin into conversation. Good enough.

“Something exciting is happening.” I touch Jolene’s arm just for a second. “Ask me what.”

She frowns, looking wary. “What?”

“I get to see Dad’s reaction when he hears you’re going away for a weekend with a bunch of boys!”

“Mary,” she rolls her eyes and leans against her locker, “what did I do to you?”

“No, no, no.” I tap her arm again. “Ask me what I want—the price for my silence.”

She glares and sighs. “What do you want?”

“I want to go with you.”

“Really?” She crinkles her eyebrows. “You know Justin will be there.”

“Shoot.” I say it like it’s really devastating and totally not the selling point. “Well, it beats staying home all weekend with Dad asking me how many flamingo pool floats it takes to make my hair dye.”

“Okay.” She shrugs. “I’ll tell Anthony to tell Matt.” She turns toward him.

“Seems like you could cut out the middleman there,” I say.

She shifts back to me with a smirk. “I don’t have his number.”

I give her her smirk back. “If I was you and Matt had kissed me, I’d have his number. Just saying.” I leave.

25 THE LIE AND THE ROAD

JOLENE

It's complicated. It's so complicated. But if Piper's dating Chris, then she can't claim Anthony, and spending a weekend locked in a wintery cabin with him is just too much to let pass just because I have parents. But sneaking around them requires organization and a plan. Piper said we could each tell our parents that we're spending the weekend camping with the other's family, but I pointed out that my parents would definitely want to meet hers first. It just would not work. Then Mary pointed out that I could tell my mom, who's in LA, that Dad talked to Piper's parents and said it was fine, and I could tell Dad that Mom talked to Piper's parents and also said it was fine. It worked on Mom and Dad. Piper's parents figured it out but said she could go anyway.

So, Friday, when everyone else in our school is getting into their first class, we meet at Piper's and load up Logan's van.

“Do you need all that?” Justin asks as Matt loads yet another bag into Logan’s trunk.

“I don’t know what I need.” Matt hauls another bag in.

“Um,” Mary says as Jason tosses his bag in on top of Matt’s hands. “I hate to break this to you guys, but we can’t all fit in Logan’s microbus. We’re a soul too many.”

“I could not go.” Logan looks at the asphalt as I turn to him.

“No.” I raise my eyebrows so he knows I’m serious.

“Mary, you could drive your truck,” Piper says.

Masterfully, Mary turns her back on Piper, climbs through the trunk into the backseat, and puts her earphones in. I bite my lip and look at Piper apologetically, with a touch of “what now?”

“My Porsche doesn’t like country roads.” Justin looks up at Anthony. “What about your mom’s SUV?”

“She needs it this weekend,” he says.

I hadn’t realized that Anthony’s car isn’t his. His shoulders stiffen slightly—bristling, like it bothers him.

No one asks Matt to drive his dilapidated Mustang, or Jason to drive his car that I think I heard was in the shop.

“Fine!” Piper groans loudly and throws her hands up. “I’ll drive. Chris, you’re coming with me.”

Chris, who was waiting behind Matt to load his duffle bag, shrugs and tosses it into the backseat of Piper’s Jeep.

“I’ll have to stop for gas,” Piper says.

“We will, too,” Logan rubs his eye with his shirt.

“Matt, text me the address.” Piper pulls out her phone like he’s gonna put down all the luggage he’s holding to do it right now.

“Let’s get our stuff,” I yell at Mary, but she’s got noise-canceling headphones. “Mary!”

“We’ll help you.” Anthony nods at Logan and tilts his head to me.

“Oh, thanks,” I say.

They walk with me a few cars away to Mary’s truck.

Anthony looks into the bed. “All this?”

I nod.

He grabs my largest suitcase—my rose-gold 26-inch roller with white bands around it, looking like they buckle but are really magnetic—with one hand, and my second largest matching one with the other. Logan grabs Mary’s bat-themed roller she found at a thrift store and customized, and her gothic anime backpack.

“Thanks, guys.” I carry my matching train case and matching handbag over where Anthony lifts them all into the trunk—except my handbag.

Justin opens the sliding door and starts climbing in next to Mary.

“Know what? I’m gonna sit with Loge.” She leans over, grabs her backpack out of the trunk, and shoves past Justin to the front seat. Justin makes a click sound with his tongue and takes the back corner anyway. Jason starts to join him.

“No,” Justin says. “Let Jolene in.”

“Mean,” Jason says, ignoring his request.

I don’t really know Jason all that well, but right now I could kiss him.

Matt raises an eyebrow at Anthony, who's standing with me on the side of the van with the open door. He opens the other door and slides into the edge of the middle row of seats. Anthony motions for me to get in first, so I take the spot next to Matt with Anthony on my other side. They both slide their doors closed at once.

Piper taps on Matt's window, not Logan's. Matt winds it down.

"Let's stop together for dinner," she says.

"We might not be able to if we get separated." Matt says, risking Piper's fury. He scratches his cheek, unconcerned. "Might not make sense."

She snarls at him.

He rolls up the window and taps Logan's shoulder. "Let me know if you want me to take a shift."

"Yeah." Logan turns his head slightly toward him. "Probably around the time we get to the mountain. Those steep climbs freak me out."

Mary laughs, not antagonistically.

Logan backs out of Piper's driveway and jangles down the street.

The road to Mammoth is long, you guys. It's six hours without stopping, and we're stopping a lot. I don't really mind—squished between Anthony and Matt. We can't really hear Mary and Logan as they chat away about—again, we can't hear them, and Jason and Justin are tuning everyone else out—Justin with a beanie over his eyes and headphones in, and Jason playing Logan's hand-held video game. At a gas station, Justin tries to switch places with Matt, but Matt

just drags him out of the van and reloads him into the backseat. The rest of the time it's just me, Anthony, and Matt.

"Have you ever been to Mammoth before?" Matt asks, getting back in the car after manhandling Justin.

I shake my head.

"What's the farthest you've traveled?" he asks.

"France."

"Right."

"Well, I guess Italy," I say. "My aunt and I flew out to Milan once. I think that's the farthest east I've been."

"Why'd you go to Milan?"

"I honestly don't know." That cracks Matt up, and I feel Anthony's laugh on my other side. "It was some fashion thing. We were there for a few days. She was busy almost the whole time, so I mostly stayed around the hotel, swimming, and stuff." I suddenly remember the best part of that trip. "Then we met up with—" Oh, no, I don't want to tell them we met up with Oscar Ivanov—a very attractive movie star and friend of my aunt and uncle.

"Hm?" Anthony asks, encouraging me to keep going.

I shake my head. "Nothing."

"Come on, tell us," Matt says.

"Now you have to tell us," Anthony agrees.

"It was just Oscar Ivanov," I say, trying to make his name inaudible as Logan merges onto the freeway.

"I don't know who that is," Matt says.

"Yeah," Anthony says. "I don't either." He pulls out his cell. "I don't have service, so I can't look him up."

"Who is this guy?" Matt asks me.

“No, just this, like, really hideous movie—guy.” I clear my throat. “Friend of my aunt.”

“Oh, okay.” Matt leans back a little, as though Oscar being my aunt’s friend clears him. Maybe he thinks my aunt is older than twenty-six. Probably most aunts are.

“What was your favorite thing about France?” Anthony asks me.

“Sailing.”

“Yeah?”

“Well,” I say, “I wasn’t allowed to touch anything.” They laugh. “They just like, strapped me to the front of the boat.” They laugh again. “It was like, this leash that I wasn’t supposed to let go of.” More laughs. “And I just—it was amazing.”

“Who’s ‘they’?” Matt asks.

“My uncle and his friends.”

“Oh, okay.”

Again, I imagine he must think of them as old. There might have been one that was thirty.

“Their friend pilots his own aircraft, so we’d fly down to the coast once in a blue moon,” I say, remembering traveling with Uncle Cass and his freakishly wealthy friends, and how they treated me like a little sister. I turn back to Anthony. “You said you could be persuaded to go?” After Homecoming he was giving France a hard time for their lack of football.

“I’d go—I’d go for the cheese,” Anthony says. I laugh as he rubs his nose. “I’d go for the, uh, long plane ride. Those are fun?”

I shake my head.

“Oh, yeah.” He smiles. “I’d go for the Forbidden City.”

“That’s in China,” I say with a grin.

“Shoot,” he says, pretending not to have known.

“Oh, I know—The Great Wall.”

“Also China.”

“Gosh, darn it.”

I laugh as he smiles down at me.

“Come on, Anthony,” Matt says. “Thought you were a little smarter than that.”

Anthony brings his head back a little with a bewildered smirk. “Do you not understand sarcasm?”

“Do you?” Matt asks. “Don’t you have a football game tonight?”

“It was canceled—a wildfire over in Lompoc.”

“Ah, too bad.” He could mean the burning homes and farmland is too bad, but he means Anthony being with us is too bad.

Anthony seems to know this; his chuckle doesn’t form into noise.

I’m not sure if this is normal male bravado or for my benefit, or if there’s a difference, but we could use a change in topic.

“I think you’re the only high school student I know who routinely wears a watch,” I say to Anthony.

He looks at it. “Sometimes Alana’s school calls me when they can’t reach my mom. I don’t want to be unreachable, too.”

I look at his face. He smiles at me with half his lips in a smirk, but his eyes carry a weight behind them—a weight full of patience, taken on maybe not by choice, but joyfully.

“That’s really sweet,” I say. “She kind of reminds me of you.”

His cheeks raise. “Yeah? In what way?”

“She makes that face you do when you think you’re really funny,” I say.

His eyes widen in mock offense. “When I *think* I’m really funny?! Oh, Miss Stansen.” He shakes his head while I laugh. “So mean.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I say.

“Anyone have any gum?” Matt asks, turning our attention to him. “I’ve got a weird taste in my mouth.”

“I don’t,” Anthony says. “But please go on about how bad your breath stinks.”

And just like that, I need to change the subject again. “What’s this place like? It’s snowing already?”

Jason hands me some gum, which I pass to Matt.

“Yeah.” Matt puts his arm on the back of my seat. “Apparently, it’s an enormous property, next to a forest and a lake.”

“What does your grandpa want you to do?” I ask.

“Not much.” He tilts his head. “Well, you guys don’t have to do much. He wants me to see what’s working, test it out, what needs to be overhauled or fixed, and to enjoy it, and write up a listing with its best, uh, best features. So, let me know if a shower sucks, or if, like, the view is amazing, or something.”

“I think Piper will give you a lot of feedback,” I say.

“Think so?” Matt asks.

“Just a feeling I get,” I say.

“I will, too,” Anthony says. “Happy to report all the stuff wrong with the place. Grievance one—it’s too far.”

I laugh. “Oh, and I’m tired.”

“Yes.” Anthony nods. “That!”

“Okay,” Matt says. “I’ll get right on that.”

Anthony leans down to me. “I don’t think he means it.”

I laugh. “No. I don’t either.”

“Grievance two, inspection staff is insincere.”

“So,” Matt says, “it’s far, you’re tired, and I’m sarcastic?”

“But,” Anthony says, holding up his hands, “there are also things I like.”

“Okay,” Matt says, perhaps not as amused with Anthony’s game as I am.

“The company’s nice,” Anthony says.

“Well—” Matt says.

“Some of it,” Anthony clarifies.

I feel Matt sigh, and I imagine he’s rolling his eyes, but I don’t turn my head to check.

We reach a steep incline. Abruptly, Logan pulls over on the side of the road.

“Switch!” he says.

“I’ll do it.” Matt opens his door and gets into the front as Logan scoots in next to me.

Matt starts the van again and pulls back onto the road.

“Nobody talk to me until we’re through the steep part.” Logan holds his hands over his face and takes deep steadying breaths.

Mary turns to him. “Grounding techniques, Logan. Think of five things you can see.”

“Shhh. Shut up! Sorry, but shut up!” Logan throws his head back, his eyes shut tight, taking more deep breaths.

"Whoa," Jason says from the backseat. "Look at how far down it goes!"

Logan whimpers next to me.

"Not helping, Jase," Anthony says.

MARY

A few minutes after Matt starts driving, he starts making small talk with me, probably out of a sense of obligation. I'd rather talk to Logan. Logan's geeky and brotherly. He'd come over while Jolene was gone. He said he missed Horatio, Jolene's cat, and would sometimes feed him and play cat games with him. It's too bad he didn't also miss Jolene's fish, because that little guy didn't last a month.

"What are you up to these days, Mary?" Matt asks.

"Ritual sacrifice," I say.

He nods like it's nothing. "Any specific type?"

"Mostly animal," I say.

"Mostly?"

I nod.

"Birds?" he asks.

"And newts."

"Where do you find newts?"

"I special-order them in bulk."

"Yeah? You got a newt guy?"

"Ted," I say. He's not buying any of my improvised nonsense, but it beats general small talk.

"Where do newts even come from?" he asks.

"If I knew, I wouldn't need a newt guy."

We drive for twelve years and eventually pull up to an enormous cabin next to a wood, a small lake, and a

severe drop-off into a canyon. A little bit of snow dusts the tips of the trees, and there's a crisp, pine, freezing smell to the air. I know temperatures don't smell, but it smells like cold—it just does.

The driveway leads uphill to a garage, and it looks like the main floor of the house is on the second story with a large wrap-around veranda. There's another floor above the main, and either vaulted ceilings or an attic, or both.

Piper and Chris have beaten us. She leans against her Jeep, glaring like it's our fault she disregards speed laws.

We get out of the van and stretch. Logan—recovered from his panic attack—takes the keys from Matt and opens the trunk. It's such an old car, he can't even pop the trunk from the dashboard. I'm surprised it made it all the way up the mountain. We probably have Jolene's pureness of heart to thank for that. Her animal friends were probably helping push, and her good nature just propelled us along. I watch as Anthony opens his side door and helps her down the step. Matt meets her, holding all her luggage, as well as some of his. If her woodland friends failed her, her knights would have stepped up.

Jolene leans into me as we walk up the driveway, looking at the ground carefully as we walk.

"What are the sleeping arrangements...?" she says in almost a whisper.

"Don't worry." I pat her on the back with my free hand—my other hauling my luggage. I didn't bring an entourage of men to carry things for me, like

Cleopatra here. "I'll make sure you get a room with Justin."

"No!" she shouts.

I laugh so she realizes I'm joking, but she only relaxes a little.

"I want to room with you," she says.

I snort. "So does everybody. You're gonna have to fight some people for it."

"Like who?"

"Like everybody." I climb up the stairs leading to the main entrance while my sister mumbles something behind me about obnoxious family relations.

We're not inside three seconds before all pandemonium breaks loose. Jason and Chris run around the house claiming bedrooms. Logan calls the first one he sees, sets his luggage on the bed, and starts taking his shoes off. By the time they're all done, Jolene, Piper and I have got one room with two twins in it.

"How are the three of us going to fit into two twin beds?!" Piper yells, throwing her duffle on a couch in the living room.

Twenty-foot windows proudly show off the view. There's a piano, ancient TV with dials, some couches and chairs, and a bookcase filled with—you guessed it—books and board games.

"Jolene and Mary are skinny," Jason says. "They can share a bed."

"Oh, thanks a lot!" Piper shouts, offended.

“What are you saying, Jason?” I ask, taking the fun of offense away from Piper, who can’t be trusted with it. “Are you saying I’m basically a stick figure?!”

“Alright,” Matt says. “The girls can have the two rooms with the queen beds. Chris and Logan take the one with the twin beds; the rest of us will share the one with the bunk beds.”

Justin huffs. “We get bunk beds while Chris gets a twin?”

Matt rolls his eyes. “Did you want to room with Chris?”

“No.”

“You wanna take the bed in the attic?”

“No.”

“Then do you want bottom or top?”

“Top,” Justin hauls his stuff down the hall toward the bedrooms.

“I think it sleeps more than nine, Matt.” Jolene sets her train case down, the one tiny piece of luggage she was forced to carry herself. Not sure how she handled it—it must weigh almost a full pound. “I think your grandpa must have meant it has nine beds. It sleeps eleven if you put two on each queen.”

“I will make a note of that,” he says.

“Oh, thank you, Jolene’,” I say in my best Matt impression, which sucks. “That helps me so much. I could just give you a kiss.” Everyone glares at me—oops, I’m not with my goth friends. They would have thought that was hilarious. “I call the room down the hall.”

I move my stuff into the only queen room with a bathroom. Piper and Jolene can share and pee down the hall.

JOLENE

Mary runs down the hall, like Piper and I are gonna race her for the room. I go into the bedroom right off the living room and start putting my stuff on the side of the bed farthest from the door. Piper follows me in and shuts it.

"I don't want everyone looking at me while I take off my shoes." She sits on the bed and does just that. "That picture looks just like you."

I turn around from looking out the window at the lake to see what she's talking about. A picture over the dresser, next to the door, has a young woman in it in a nineteenth-century dress, sitting on a chair, making a quilt.

"That's creepy," Piper says. "It's like you with a dorky hairstyle."

"She doesn't look like me—"

"Yeah-huh." Piper glances around the room, and points at a chair in the corner. "I think that's the same chair." She points at the bed. "Oh, gross! That's the same quilt!"

"It's freezing in here." I pull my arms through my long pink coat. "I'm gonna ask Matt if he knows where the thermostat is. I hope it works."

But there's a knock on the door, a "Come in" from Piper, and Matt enters.

"This is a nice room," he says.

I'm not sure I can agree. The mattress is lumpy, like it's old or made of frogs. The peacock-painted chest-of-drawers clashes against the yellow flowery wallpaper, and the rug sticking out from under the bed has a few stains I worry are blood, but I'll have to find a helpful way to put it, if I voice it at all. But there are good things, too, like no parents. That's a plus.

He sits on the wooden chair by the closet.

"MATT!" Piper screeches, "GET OUT OF THAT CHAIR!"

He jumps up. "WHAT?!"

"IT'S THE CHAIR IN THE PICTURE!" she cries.

Matt looks at me for confirmation. I roll my eyes and shake my head. But he walks over to where Piper's pointing.

"It looks like you, Jolene," he says.

"I just have one of those faces." I maneuver around him to get to the door.

"You really don't." He scooches to the side to let me pass.

"Did you find the thermostat?" I ask.

"I wasn't looking for it. My grandpa sent me some schematics. It should be on them." He reaches toward the picture. "I'm gonna put this in my room." He turns and sees the glare on my face. "I'm kidding." He leaves it and walks around me, out the door.

"Did he say if a cleaning service came in?" Piper asks. "Do we trust this bedding? It's the same quilt, right?"

"There's no way it's the same," I say. "It's probably designed to look like it, like an homage quilt."

Logan enters and plops down on our clumpy bed. "I turned on the thermostat. It is cold in here."

"Thanks," I say. "Where was it?"

"Down the hall. This room isn't as creepy as mine. Maybe I should sleep on the couch."

"Cause that won't be creepy?" I feel the heat coming from the vent and stand under it.

"Well, it won't have Chris."

"What's wrong with Chris?!" Piper asks.

"Uh, nothing." Logan gets off the bed, makes an "oops" face at me, and leans against the window, farther away from Piper. "He just keeps asking if this place is haunted. He's like, 'Did you see that?!' every five seconds."

"Is it more creepy or annoying?" I ask.

"Fifty/fifty," he says.

The heater is doing its job, so I take off my coat, and then Anthony enters.

"You guys, look." He points to the window. "It's snowing outside."

I go to the window with him beside me. We peek out like little kids who've never seen snow before. It's twinkling down like slow, fuzzy rain.

Anthony elbows my arm. "Put something warm on, and I can pay you back for the whip cream in the face."

"You know..." I pull back from the window and face him. "It's okay. You don't have to pay me back for that."

"I don't want to be in your debt," he says.

"No, you know if anything, I owe you. You did throw me over your shoulder in front of the whole school."

"Yeah, but that's not enough," he says. "Maybe I should do it again."

He reaches for me, and I jump back and throw my hands up.

He wrinkles his eyebrows. "That's it?"

I part my lips—confused by what he means.

"That was your defense?!" he asks.

"Okay," I put a hand on my waist. He's tall and probably weighs at least two of me, and expects me to fend him off? "You show me what would have worked against you."

He raises his hand to his chin and looks at me as if considering. "Oh, good point. Come on, let's go." He taps my elbow with his arm.

"Okay, but you guys have to leave. I want to change into my snow clothes."

"You have forty seconds," he says.

"Five minutes."

"You have forty seconds, and then I'm waiting longer."

He and Logan shut the door on their way out.

I bend down to my luggage, heave it onto the bed, and dig.

By how much I packed you'd think I was staying indefinitely. But I just got new ski clothes and haven't even had the chance to wear them yet.

"Watch out. Sparks flying." Piper pulls her hoodie over her head.

"Sparks? What?" I strip off my jeans and pull my snow pants on.

"Between you and Matt."

"Oh." It seems like forever ago that Matt was in here, acting like he was going to take the picture that looks

like me. It's not even me. "Really? I thought that was kind of awkward."

"Are you kidding?" She brings her hair out from under her sweatshirt. "He's totally into you."

I bite my cheek. "Well, I mean..." I consider ending it here, but my mouth keeps going. "I kind of got that impression when he kissed me. I just—"

"What?! When was this?" She pulls a beanie onto her head.

I sigh. "The first time was at your house—that day he was there, and we ordered pizza—"

"WHAT?!"

"I pushed him away—" I slide on my shirt.

"WHY?! I thought you said you liked him."

"Well, it's complicated—"

"How's the hat?" she asks.

"Good."

She stands up and grabs her scarf. It's red and green, maybe the only one she has; otherwise, she'd save it for Christmas...

"It just seems like since you promised me you wouldn't go after Anthony, going out with Matt would be what you'd want." She faces away, wrapping the scarf around her neck.

There's a light knock on the door.

"Ready?" Anthony's voice calls. It's been five minutes, almost exactly, according to the clock on the wall.

"Come in," I say.

He opens the door as I slip into my snow jacket.

"Hey," he says. "You look great."

“Thanks.” I pick up my light-pink and white scarf that matches my snow boots. “You too. Are you gonna be warm enough? You got a scarf or something?”

“Yeah, come on,” he says.

“We’re right behind you.” Piper shuts the door on him. “I’ve been friends with him for years, and around you he doesn’t even acknowledge me, so forgive me for being anxious for you and Matt to start dating.”

“You have a boyfriend—”

“Yeah, but you know I don’t like him.”

She joins Anthony out the door, and I suddenly feel like maybe there’s no hurry.

I zip up my jacket. I only brought my new ski clothes because they’re white with pink details and they’re cute, but who cares? Who cares about any of this if I have to wait until Piper’s dead to pick my boyfriend?

Anthony pops his head out from around the open door.

“You coming?” he asks.

I nod and follow.

26 SPECIAL OPS

MARY

The game is Capture the Flag. The teams are boys vs girls and Logan. Personally, I think we should have gotten one of the beefier guys, like Matt, Anthony, or Justin, ahem, since we're a team of ladies—equal out the muscle mass—but I was outnumbered—by boys. And Piper voted with the boys because she's weak and thinks men find that attractive. In reality, guys want someone who constantly disagrees with them, at least that's my new theory. Being a doormat didn't work for me before, so we're gonna try this.

Logan and I are the special ops team. We're doing reconnaissance—searching for the enemy's flag while Jolene and Piper guard ours.

The snow has really started coming down, but we have to persist if we want to reach the enemy base before nightfall.

Through the trees we tread—no sign of friend or foe—until hanging on a branch, thirty yards in the distance, I spot it.

“There’s Piper’s scarf,” I tell my comrade-in-arms. “You’d think they’d station a guard—”

“I smell a trap,” my wise companion says.

“Watch my back.” I rub my nose and inch toward the flag, first slowly, then quickly until I’m full-out running.

“WAIT, MARY!” Logan yells, yards behind me.

I’m almost there when a large, incredibly handsome, blond, and sultry enemy soldier jumps out of the bushes just next to the flag!

I scream and turn to run, but it’s too late. “RUN, LOGAN!” I shout as I’m grabbed from behind. My life flashes before my eyes and other dying cliches as I’m lifted off the ground and carried away captive.

Logan’s yelling, “I’m being taken! Like in the movie! Jolene! Piper! I’ll describe my attackers! One is Jason! He’s wearing a yellow and grey hoodie! The other is Chris! He’s wearing a white hat and black sweatshirt!”

We’re dropped into a tiny grove of trees behind enemy lines. Chris and Jason leave, but Justin stays.

“This is jail,” my captor says. “You can’t leave unless someone from your team tags you.”

“We know how to play,” Logan says. Then his eyes grow wide. “Mary, tag me.”

I touch his arm.

“Ha ha!” he shouts. “You didn’t say it had to be a free member of my team!” He runs out before Justin can grab him.

Justin turns to me, sucking on his teeth, like it’s my fault.

"If you plan to torture me for information, I won't talk!" I say with an old-Hollywood flair and a tilt that begs him to try.

"STAY ALIVE, MARY!" Logan's voice calls from the distance. "I WILL FIND YOU!"

"Well shoot," Justin says, feigning forlorn over his escaped hostage.

"So, what do you wanna do now?" I ask totally innocently, only slightly biting my lip.

He closes in on me. "I think someone should have to pay for helping that prisoner escape."

I raise my hand to my chest, stepping back against a tree. "What are you going to do?!"

He grins—my menacing angel of death!

I didn't even have to test my new disagreeing theory!

PIPER

Jolene and I are on Matt's hat duty. His hat is the enemy flag, and I'm bored. Jolene's in one of her moods where she doesn't talk much, and even if she weren't, I wouldn't want to hear it. It'd probably just be about France and how much Anthony likes her. Whatever. It's cold, and this game's for nerds.

We hear Logan screaming something but can't see him through the trees.

"Great." Jolene speaks, finally. "If they're captured, we're gonna have to separate and free them."

Ugh! She's talking game strategy! I just want to go back to the cabin and take a bath, if there's any hot water in that hole. It's not that I'm not adventurous or

athletic, but I drove the entire way here. I told Chris I needed him to take a shift, and he said he couldn't because he had a sore throat. I told him he should stay home, so he doesn't get everyone sick, but he said it was psychosomatic and just something that happens to him on road trips. We broke up in the Mojave Desert, but then he bought me a Coke when we started up the mountain, so I took him back.

"But he didn't mention Anthony, Justin, or Matt," she says.

"Do we think they're coming for the hat?" I ask.

"Well, what else would they be doing?" she asks.

"Crap," we say together, scanning the trees.

Suddenly, Anthony and Matt pounce—throwing snowballs!

I snatch Matt's hat off the limb, shove it down my shirt, and huddle into a ball. "Go, Jolene!" I scream. "Get my scarf!"

Anthony reaches around me, not realizing where the hat went. Okay, the game's kind of fun. He tickles me.

"No! Stop!" I scream through laughs.

"Hand it over!" he yells.

JOLENE

Matt tries to catch me, but I'm keeping a cluster of trees between us.

"These trees won't save you." His smile makes me kind of not want them to, it's warm and gleaming.

He reaches through the branches to grab me and barely misses.

“Ah-ha!” Logan shouts out of nowhere, jumping on top of Matt’s back. “I’ve got him! Go, Jolene! Run! Save yourself!”

I make for the scarf.

There’s a scuffle behind me, and footsteps closing in. I probably only made myself easier to catch—abandoning the safety of my trees. Yep. I only make it a few steps before I’m in his arms, screaming.

“That’s not fair!” I shout. “You’re on our turf! We’re the capturers here, not you—”

“Then capture us,” Matt says, his breath hot against my ear. It warms my tingling spine.

I spin around in his arms, wrapping mine around him. “You’re captured.”

“Nice try.”

“It’s supposed to work!”

“I don’t know what to tell ya.”

His arms around me remind me of the night he kissed me. I’m not anxious for a repeater, especially in front of everybody.

“Then let me go.” I struggle against his hold.

“No.”

Turning around to face him was stupid; it gave him better access to my face. Did he egg me on so I would turn this way?

“Let me go; you’re cheating.” I try to wriggle free then stop with an idea. “What’s the matter? Can’t win against a bunch of girls without cheating?”

“I’m not taking you back to my base.”

“No, but you’re not going to mine either.”

“Alright, I’ll go to your base... if...”

Oh, my gosh. He’s like a Disney villain.

“Matt...”

“What? I didn’t even say anything!”

If he thinks I’m going to kiss him to win the game, he’s got a lot of nerve—course I kind of like guys with a lot of nerve...

“Just let go of me,” I say.

“Ask me ‘if what?’”

“No.” I manage to spin away from him again—still in his arms though. “I don’t want to know ‘if what?’”

“Oh, come on...”

“It’s still cheating!”

PIPER

Anthony kneels next to me. “Piper.” He breathes heavy in my ear. “Take it out from under your shirt.”

I roll my eyes, take it, and throw it. “GET IT, JOLENE!”

JOLENE

Matt releases me and searches for his hat that Piper threw. “Where is it?!”

I pull on him, trying to slow him down or get in front of him, but he just drags me along, holding on to my wrist as much as I’m holding on to his arm.

I spot it in the bushes.

It’s easy to free myself once I’m no longer clawing at him, then I sprint for the hat.

Matt and Anthony chase me, maybe trying to stop me more than going after the hat themselves; I’m not sure they’ve seen it, but it doesn’t matter.

My fingers wrap around it, and I lift it from the ground as Anthony lifts me, throwing me over his shoulder.

He spins me so I'm facing Matt, who scowls at him before realizing I've got his hat literally dangling in front of his eyes.

He snatches it from me, and everyone freezes.

"HE STILL HAS TO GET BACK TO HIS SIDE!" Piper yells.

"NO! PUT ME DOWN!" I shout, but Anthony jogs after Matt, with me on his shoulder.

I have no idea what's going on until I hear cheers up ahead. Matt must have passed the boundary line.

"Aww," Anthony pats my back while slowing down. "Tough break, Jojo."

He sets me on the ground when we reach the others celebrating at the boundary.

I pretend not to notice Matt glaring at Anthony as we're joined by Chris and Jason, also celebrating.

PIPER

I arrive at the boundary line, dust off the snow, and catch my breath, hating this game again.

"What do I get for winning?" Matt asks as he gets to Jolene.

"You get your hat back." She takes it from him and puts it on his head.

I don't know why she's fighting it so much. She obviously likes him at least a little—enough to flirt with him. That's more than she ever did to Justin. I should never have bothered with him. I just thought

he was so popular with girls at school that she'd fall for him. I even liked him once. There's probably something wrong with her—she was probably dropped on her head as a kid or got a toe shoe stuck in her butt in France.

"Let's go in," Jason says, turning toward the house.

"See, I was thinking I'd get something else..." Matt walks with Jolene.

"Like cake?" she asks.

"No, not cake..."

They're almost too cute. If I wasn't so freaking excited that they're flirting, I might hurl.

I retrieve my scarf from their tree and catch up to Anthony, a few feet behind the happy couple.

This is it—they've provided a perfect opportunity to launch my new plan. I couldn't get Jolene to believe that Anthony was all the things I said he was. His flawless reputation is established; all she had to do was cross-reference what I said with what everyone else said. But her reputation is free for the inventing. I'll start light—nothing too harsh or ruining.

"Aww," I say. "Jolene and Matt are so cute together." In my peripherals, I see Anthony stiffen, so I continue. "I didn't realize how serious they were—guess I should have after she told me they kissed..."

"When was this?"

"When he drove her home that day everyone was at my house..."

He stops walking, but I continue on. Ahead of us, Jolene turns her head, and jogs back to Anthony. I hear them behind me, walking together.

"Rematch tomorrow?" she asks.

“Uh, sure,” he says. “Wait up, Jase.” He catches up to Jason, leaving Jolene to wonder what she did to offend him.

It’s my duty as best friend to console her, so I backtrack to her.

“What was that about?” she asks.

“What was—what?”

“Where’s Mary—or Justin?” she asks loud enough for everyone to hear.

“They probably already went back,” Jason says.

“Yeah. They must have known you’d never be able to come rescue her.” Chris laughs like a weasel. I should break up with him again.

Matt comes back to Jolene—seriously, if we keep running back to each other, no one will ever reach the cabin.

“Same teams tomorrow?” he asks.

“Kay.” She sounds like speaking is difficult. “We almost had you guys.”

MARY

I pull away from Justin’s lips on my neck. “Sounds like everyone’s going back.”

He holds me closer. “So?” He bites my ear.

“Good point.” I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him.

27 GHOST IN THE ATTIC

PIPER

Matt tosses logs into the fireplace, Logan and Chris sit on the sofa, while I curl up on the large, cozy chair with my feet tucked underneath me. It's not quite dark yet, but we're all kind of settling in for the night.

"We could play a game," Logan says, motioning toward the bookcase with a deck of cards and some boardgames crammed into it.

"Did the old owners just leave everything here?" I ask, combing my fingers through my hair.

"Yeah," Matt says. "Widow was renting it out and she died and didn't have any family."

"I knew it was haunted," Chris says.

"Shut up," Logan says, "it's not haunted!"

"I heard a noise earlier," Chris says.

Jolene comes out of our room, changed back into her jeans and white tank, and looks around—probably for Anthony.

"Jolene, this place is haunted, right?" Chris asks.

Matt looks at her, up and down, then goes back to what he was doing.

"Sure..." she tells Chris, peering down the hall and like she didn't hear him.

"Come join me." I scooch over for her. If Anthony ever comes out of his room, I can't have them sitting together.

She does what I said, and fidgets. "Where is everyone?"

Jason wanders in, tapping his phone. "I can't get a signal."

"I told you, you wouldn't be able to," Matt says.

"Then we have to walk or drive down the hill to the pizza place," Jason says.

"Drive." Logan sniffs. "You don't want to walk carrying that much pizza."

Jason points at Logan and nods with wide eyes. He's found someone who speaks his language.

"I'll get my keys." Logan stands.

"Too bad this place doesn't have Wi-Fi," I say loud enough for Matt to hear, but he keeps lighting his fire and I keep being bored.

"Anyone wanna come with?" Logan asks.

"No," I say.

"I was about to go check out the attic, and I could use some help up there, too." Matt shuts the glass door on the fireplace, now that there's a spark, and turns to the room.

"Jolene and I will help Matt—huh, Jolene?" Jason asks.

"Um, sure," she says. "Has anyone seen Justin or Mary?"

Anthony and Justin come down the hall. Justin goes into the kitchen and starts banging around, but Anthony spots Jolene, turns, and heads back. I smirk to myself, then rub my cheek to hide it.

“Anthony—” Jolene stands and takes a few steps after him as he turns back to her. He looks crushed, poor guy. Jolene really should be more careful with all the hearts she’s got lying around. “You wanna explore the attic with us?”

His eyes move to Matt, then back to her.

“I was just gonna—”

“You could go with Logan. He’s making a pizza run,” I say.

“I’ll get my shoes.”

I watch Jolene watch him go, looking sad and confused, like a puppy who’s told it can’t eat its favorite loafer anymore.

Chris sits next to me where she had been and puts an arm around me. Ugh.

“What’s up with him?” he asks.

“Why does something have to be up with him? Why are you sitting so close to me?!”

“Jolene’s going up to the attic.” He shrugs.

“So?! Go sit back—no,” I say. “I’m sorry. You know what? I can’t do this. We’re splitting up again.” Plus, I need to be single now that it’s looking like Anthony’s not gonna be dating anyone else anytime soon.

“I’ll go to the attic, Matt,” Chris says, standing up, as if I care.

“Great.” Matt rolls his eyes, looking like he doesn’t care either.

Matt didn't know Chris too well during school, being a few years ahead of us, so he must have decided within the last hours of arriving at the cabin that he hates him. It's actually taken longer than most. There's just something about Chris that makes people want to slam his head into a doorway, then slam the door, repeatedly. I'll tell you if I can put my finger on what it is.

"You ready for this?" Matt asks Jolene. "Might be creepy."

"No, it's fine," she says. "I'm in the room with the creepy picture."

"It's not creepy. She's beautiful," Matt says.

"Nice." Justin stands behind Jolene with a mug in his hand and a scowl on his face.

JOLENE

"Did you not see me?" Justin asks Matt. To be fair, he's really quiet; I didn't realize he was standing behind me until he spoke.

"What?" Matt asks. He glances around at us, as though we can help explain Justin.

"You know I asked her to Homecoming!" Justin yells. "You think that means I might like her?! Where's your sense of loyalty, man?"

I inwardly groan. This is getting as old as my lumpy bed.

Matt looks at me, eyes raised, then back at Justin. "What's going on?"

Feeling more confident in my ability to deflect a male conflict—ever since the van ride—I turn to Justin,

and gesture toward his mug. It smells like hot chocolate. "Can you make me one of those?"

"I did. This is for you." He hands it to me.

I take it with both hands and lift my shoulders gleefully. "Thank you. That's very sweet of you." I hold it up to my nose and breathe in. "Mm. Smells so good." I walk over to a nearby potted tree and pour it into the soil.

I catch Chris and Jason snickering, and Matt raises his eyebrows as I bring the mug back to Justin and place it in his hands. "Can you make me another?"

Justin glares at me and goes back into the kitchen.

I face Matt, Chris, and Jason. "So, the attic! Sounds great. Let's do it."

In the kitchen a mug crashes into the sink.

PIPER

Jolene, Chris, Jason, and Matt go upstairs, and Mary, who must have just entered, goes back down the hall, while Justin breaks things in the kitchen.

"I know you're in a bad mood," I say, "but you need to clean that up."

He plops down on the couch across from me. "I'll pay the cleaning fee."

"Your dad will pay it."

He glares at me.

"I don't think they've hired a cleaning service," I say. "I think it's us."

"Then I'll pay you to do it."

"I don't work for you!"

"I'll give you a hundred bucks."

I snarl at him. Obviously I'm gonna take him up on that—when he's not being so insulting. I bet I can get Jolene to do most of the work without having to tell her there's money involved.

He pulls out his cell.

"There's no service," I say.

He scoffs.

"You realize every time you rage at a guy who talks to her, you're pushing her further away from you," I say.

"And every time you breathe, you push Anthony further from you."

"How did you ever get to be popular? You're so much nicer than the rest of us."

"I don't think nice has anything to do with it."

"I don't either, but people have to stand you—"

"No, they don't." He slides his cell back in his pocket and stretches his arms across the back of the couch. "You just have to have something they want that they're willing to put up with you for."

"And what's that with you? Money? You're borderline cute?"

He sits there with a smug look on his face, like he knows the secrets of the universe but isn't telling. Whatever. If he was so clever, he'd take my advice instead of losing his mind whenever Jolene talks to anyone. It doesn't matter to me either way. Matt's doing an excellent job. He might need a promotion.

JOLENE

The attic is probably the creepiest room in the cabin, and that's saying something. It has flowing white curtains that always have ghosts behind them, the hardwood floors creek whenever anyone so much as shifts their weight, and all the crap stored here casts shadows in the perfect way to resemble in-human forms in the darkness.

"There's no light switch," Matt says, shining his phone's flashlight around the room.

I try not to think about the spiders that made all the webs. I don't really want to touch anything either. It's all covered in dust. But I said I'd help explore, so I find an interesting-looking chest against a wall behind piles of books. I turn on my phone's flashlight, kneel, and inspect them while sorting.

"Dare me to see what's behind this door?" Chris asks.

"Do you want to keep any of these books, Matt?" I ask.

"If they're in decent condition," Matt says. "We could put them on the bookcase downstairs."

"Oh, it's just a closet," Chris says, after opening the door.

"They're decent, just dusty." There are a few books I've never heard of, then I pick up a copy of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. "I might borrow one." I have the eBook, but I don't think it's downloaded onto my phone, plus there's something about reading a hardback, especially a dusty one, that seems like it's the way the book was meant to be read.

"Sure," Matt says.

"This is a nice table." Jason pats it from the far corner, closer to one of the ghostly curtains than I

would go. “Maybe ask your grandpa if we can move it to our apartment. SPIDER!” Jason climbs upon top of his new table. “GET IT! GET IT!”

Instinctively, I dash past the book piles, slip on top of the chest, and pull my legs up. I’m not usually skittish, but the way he was yelling still has my heart thumping.

I turn to Matt, trying to sound calm. “Come on, Matt. ‘Get it.’”

“Scared of spiders?” he asks.

I shrug. “Not when they behave themselves. But it’s rude to crawl on people without their permission.”

“So, it’s a manners thing—spiders are rude?”

“A good spider follows the lead of the hostess. Just saying.”

Matt smirks and strides to where Jason’s still whimpering on the table. “Alright, I—Jason, that’s not a spider. It’s just a knot in the wood.”

I hop off my trunk. “Is it a rude knot?”

“It did scare Jason,” Matt says, as Jason climbs off the table. “SPIDER!” Matt points above me.

I scream and jump away, looking up—but I don’t see anything. Maybe it’s on me! I scrape my hands on my shoulders, and back, pivoting until I’m facing Matt again—who’s snickering. I fold my arms.

“You should have seen your face,” he says.

I wince a smile and nod. “Laugh it up. I’m gonna get back to work.”

When I panicked, I had sent the rest of the books flying, so now I have a clear path to the trunk. I open it and find black fabric. It takes me a minute before I realize what it is. The prank Matt just pulled has me in

a pranking mood, and I know exactly who to use this on...

28 UNBEARABLE BOYS

MARY

Logan and Anthony went for a pizza run, Piper's in her room, and I don't give a flying fart where Justin is—I'm just by myself, reading some Edgar Allen Poe and chilling by the fireplace. I brought the perfect book with me for this cabin. It really brings out the creepy vibes. Maybe I'll stay in Matt's cabin once he lists it. Six hours away from my parents, definitely haunted, I am in.

But all too soon Justin wanders in, ruining my life, acting like I didn't see the drama with the hot chocolate—like he thinks he can make out with me all afternoon and hit on my sister right in front of me, and I'm gonna be chill—like he's not interrupting me while I'm reading my favorite book by a fabulously creepy fire.

"Where is everyone?" he asks. Ugh. Yes. I get it; I'm not everyone. But I'm not about to let him know how deep under my skin he is.

“I like to think the dead are among us.” I turn the page as if he’s not even there.

JUSTIN

I sit on a big chair across from the couch she’s on, not sure how to start this; I can probably just say it out loud. It’s not like we’ve ever been formal. “You wanna make out?”

She lowers her book and glares at me. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.” She stands up. “I’m gonna go find Piper.”

She’s hot and cold. Typical Mary.

“Your loss.” I put my feet up on the coffee table. “Your sister’s a better kisser anyway.”

She turns to me but strangely doesn’t seem that hurt. I shouldn’t have said it, but she started it with her whole “You’ve gotta be kidding me” thing. Low blow, especially when Jolene was such a heinous witch earlier. Guess neither of the Stansen girls is much for compassion.

“She’s welcome to ya.” She spins away from me. “Except, apparently she doesn’t want you either”—and goes inside Piper and Jolene’s room.

A million years after we’ve all given up on Logan and Anthony, they return with pizzas. We eat them on our laps in the living room, against Matt’s complaints.

“You’re gonna have to replace these couches anyway,” Piper says.

Afterwards we sit around while Anthony plays his guitar accompanied by Logan playing horribly on the

piano. He says it needs to be tuned, but I can't be the only one not buying it.

But it doesn't last long, and Anthony goes down the hall. Logan plunks out one more song, then calls it. Chris says something about the bathroom and leaves, nobody's seen Mary since she grabbed her pizza and went to her room, and Matt's off inspecting the laundry units in the downstairs garage. It's just a few of us chilling.

"Is that Chris's hoodie?" Jolene asks Piper who's sitting next to her. "Thought you broke up."

"We did," Piper says, flipping her hair. "But then Anthony got out of the shower, and his hair was all wet, and he needed to know what he was missing."

I snort. "Give it up, Piper. You're wasting your time."

But it's not Piper who glares at me; it's Jolene.

"Justin," she says with a sigh. She gets up. "I'm going to bed."

JOLENE

I stand up right when Anthony comes from down the hall. He gapes and staggers.

"Hey," I say, hoping he'll actually talk to me, and maybe I can find out what's wrong.

"You're all bundled up," he says, motioning toward my long coat. "Are you cold?" He looks concerned, and much like the Anthony I know.

"No." I cuddle into my coat anyway. "I'm actually really warm. I'm just—it's a thing. It'll make sense later."

He nods, and his cold shell returns as he goes and gets a glass out of a cabinet in the kitchen.

PIPER

Jolene goes into her room while Anthony pours milk into a glass.

“Let’s try out the hot tub,” I say. “You up for it?”

He twists the milk cap on. “Not tonight.”

He’s been in a foul mood ever since Capture the Flag—when I told him Matt and Jolene kissed. I knew he’d probably be a little upset about it, but does he have to drag on and on?

“Everyone’s going to bed so early,” I say.

“There’s nothing to do,” Jason says.

Justin scoffs.

“You’re literally doing nothing,” Jason says.

“There’s stuff to do,” Justin rolls his upper lip. “Just no one to do it with.”

“Ignore him, Jase,” I glance at Anthony. “He’s just mad he lost Jolene to Matt.”

Anthony stands taller, unmoving, looking out the window at the dark.

“I’m sure you’d like to think that—” Justin says.

We can’t have Justin disagreeing with me, or suggesting he lost her to Anthony, at least not in Anthony’s earshot, so I change the subject. “Did Matt go to bed? Who’s supposed to lock up?”

Jason shrugs. Justin fiddles with his phone. Anthony rinses his glass and probably can’t hear me over the water.

He shuts it off and joins Justin and Jason on the couch. "I was hoping we'd be able to catch the game tonight."

"No Wi-Fi, no TV," Justin says.

"It's like living in medieval times," Jason says. "Next we'll be using outhouses."

"Did they have a TV at the pizza place?" Justin asks.

Anthony rubs his nose. "I didn't think to look."

They talk sports and complain about the lack of internet and cable for another ten minutes before my brain starts shutting down.

"Alright." I give up. "I'm going to bed."

It's dark in my and Jolene's room, but there's some light coming from the window, enough to see she's already in bed. She's got her giant coat sticking out from under the haunted quilt. She must be cold again if she's sleeping with her hood up.

"Are you asleep?" I ask.

"Mmm."

"I don't know how anyone could sleep in this house." I crawl into bed. "Matt should tell his grandpa ain't no way anyone's gonna pay money to sleep in this nightmare hole." I lie down. The lumps aren't as bad as I thought they'd be—probably I'm too tired to care. Running around the woods all afternoon wore me out, and—

A scratching noise comes from the closet. It's probably nothing, or a bug or something—gross, but no big deal. It stops. Then comes again, louder.

I open my eyes and sit up. "Did you hear that?" Oh, please don't be a mouse. I listen for squeaks, or

anything to tell me what it is. Maybe I'll get Matt to check it out—or Anthony.

I throw back the covers and that's when I hear it—a faint whisper. "Help me..."

I freeze. I imagined it; I must have... but I don't think so...

Then it comes again, louder. "Please, help..."

I tap Jolene's shoulder. "Wake up. Wake up! Are you hearing this?!"

"Mmm," Jolene protests.

"I see you..." the whisper hisses even louder. "Let me out..."

A shiver tingles behind my neck. I snatch up the stupid haunted quilt and bring my knees up to my chin. I knew I was going to die here! Nothing happens when I try to call out—I can't—

The scratching returns, and a soft, muffled wailing.

All I can manage is a whimper. The scratching quickens and the wailing grows until it's shrieking!

The closet door flies open— "GET OFF MY QUILT!" The woman from the painting, dressed in her exact same black dress and everything, stands against the light of the closet—arms outstretched toward me. The scream I've been searching for shrieks out of my throat.

The bedroom door flies open—someone turns on the lights— "You guys okay?" It's Matt. "We heard a scream..."

Chris and Anthony are with him, and Chris is laughing. Mary sits up next to me in Jolene's coat with a huge grin. Jolene—in the woman in the painting's dress—laughs and claps her hands in front of me.

It'd be one thing if they had pranked me when we were alone—but making me look like an idiot in front of Anthony? It's worse than when she flirts with him.

I cross my arms and glare at Jolene, grinding my teeth into stumps. "We're fine," I spit at Matt, getting out of the bed and facing Jolene. "I hope you know I could have had a heart attack!"

Mary laughs so hard she wheezes and falls off the bed, curling into a ball, not making any noise as her red face heaves.

I turn to Chris. "Oh, you think it's funny? We're through!"

"What?" he asks, no longer laughing. "But I didn't do anything!"

I push him aside to get to the door.

"Aww, Piper—" Jolene says.

"Ghosts are real," I inform her. "You're messing with some very serious stuff!"

"It's just a dress..." she says, but I don't stop to hear her.

I slam the door. I'm taking Mary's room. The oh-so-hilarious Stansen sisters can share.

MARY

I climb off the floor and back into bed. It's cozy in Jolene's coat, and I don't offer it back to her.

"That's the second time I've lost my girlfriend in less than six hours," Chris says.

"She'll recover." Anthony pats him on the back. "I bet you'll be back together by lunch tomorrow."

“And apart again by dinner.” Chris leaves, but Matt and Anthony linger.

“I didn’t think she’d take it that hard,” Jolene says. Poor girl’s actually bothered.

“She’ll be fine,” Anthony says.

“You should keep that dress,” I tell her.

“Because it’s creepy?” she asks.

I nod with a smile. She gets it.

“It’s beautiful,” Jolene says, smoothing out the skirt with her fingertips. “I don’t think that photo is as old as it looks. There’s no way this dress is from the 1800s. I think it’s a costume.” She inspects the neck of the dress. “It has a pretty modern tag.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Matt says. “You can have it.”

“What? Really?!”

“It looks good on you,” he says.

Jolene blushes a little and spins back and forth, watching the gown sway as Anthony watches Matt with an eyebrow up—I do, too.

Anthony leaves the room in one quick motion. Jolene looks back up, and he’s gone. The blush withers and dies.

I wake up to the sound of a blender in the kitchen, right on the other side of this room’s door. Not being down the hall sucks. I would have been away from the racket if Jolene and I hadn’t pranked Piper. Stupid Piper—kind of worth it though.

“What is that noise?” Jolene says next to me, her voice chalky. “Who is up this early?”

“It’s probably Matt,” a masculine voice says from the foot of our bed. “He’s a morning person.”

Jolene and I shoot up—Jason’s lying against our feet.

“Jason!” Jolene yells. “What are you doing in here?!”

“My room was creepy.” Jason sits up. “And Matt talks in his sleep—”

“This is not okay!” Jolene says.

Logan’s head pops up from the floor in front of the bed. “So, you guys probably don’t want me in here either?”

I laugh as Jolene scoffs at them.

29 HOW LIKE A WINTER

JOLENE

Overnight, the dusting of snow turned into a dumping of snow. Nothing is not covered in it. It's beautiful, but you can't stare at it too long because the sun shines off of it and it hurts. It's deep, too—going up to my ankles. Adding a new element to Capture the Flag: footprints.

We keep the same teams as last time, with the qualifier that if we catch them, they have to go with us, even if we can't compel them with force.

We're uneven, and the arrangement grossly favors the guys, but only Mary seems to mind. We wouldn't be able to flirt with them if we were on the same team.

Although right now I'm flirting with nobody. I'm alone, sneaking around the forest. Mary thought we should try a different approach from last time: live bait.

"The game isn't Capture the Flag," Mary said. "It's flirt, and who do all the guys on their team want to flirt with? Jolene—"

"I don't think that's true," Piper said—she's talking to us again—by the way. She was still holding a grudge from the night before until we split into teams and she had to communicate.

Mary glanced at Piper, then went back to her plan. "So, we send Jolene out on—like—the most obvious path, while the rest of us sneak around all the sad boys, and get the flag."

"Do we leave anyone to protect ours?" Piper asked.

"Do you think they'd be able to?" Mary asked. "Not a single one of us could fend off any of them—sorry, Logan."

"I could take Chris—"

"Sure you could, Logey," Mary said, gripping his shoulder. "But they're probably not going to send Chris. He's kind of useless."

I knew the answer before I asked, but it came out of my mouth anyway: "Does anybody care what I think?"

No. Nobody cared, and now I'm wandering alone in the woods—a sacrifice. But I refuse to go down without a fight. Last time, the guys were way better at using the trees to hide. I'm trying to do that but taking it slow. Although, they're likely doing that, too.

Branches and shapes move just up ahead of me to the left. I dash behind a tree. Maybe they didn't see me.

Suddenly, Jason pounces out from my right—like a raptor! I turn to run—tripping on a root hidden by the snow, and landing on a similarly hidden rock. It scrapes my thigh and tears my jeans.

"Ouch!" I shout as Jason slows and stops.

"Shoot! You okay?"

"I think so." I peel back the tear, looking at the gash on my leg.

A sucking of air comes from Jason. When I look back at him, Matt's with him, crouching down by my side.

"Here." Matt scoops his arms underneath me. "I gotcha."

"No," I say as he lifts me into the air, faster and with less effort than I thought possible. "It's okay. I can walk."

He carries me, and a branch threatens to scrape my head as we pass. I duck into Matt's shoulder.

"Put me down. I'm all right," I say.

"Sorry, Jolene," Jason calls, farther and farther behind me as Matt closes the distance between us and the house.

"Matt..." But my protests are feeble. Truth is, I'm glad not to be dripping and limping all the way to the cabin, but being carried is a little overkill.

"It's fine. I've got you."

PIPER

Jason's not even trying to hide. He's standing in the middle of the trees, just staring off toward the cabin. Mary told us to sprint for the flag, but I can't not capture this guy. I tiptoe up to him, then spring—wrapping my arms around him.

"You're captured. Go to our jail," I say.

"You have to take me to it."

"That'll incapacitate me almost as much as it incapacitates you!"

"Thems be the rules," he says.

"What are you, a pirate?"

"I GOT IT!" Mary yells somewhere a few yards away.

"RUN!" I shout back.

They all come out of the bushes at once—Anthony and Justin from the left, Mary, Chris, and Logan from the right. Chris is, as Mary says, useless, but Anthony and Justin very aren't. Without thinking, I shove Jason into Justin and throw myself into Anthony. The snow catches our fall as we fly to the ground wrapped around each other. He tries to get up, but I pull him down close to me with all my strength, locking my legs around him.

"GO!" I yell, but I don't need to. They're going. Logan grabs Chris's shirt, and Mary—scarf in hand—runs over onto our side of the woods.

"YES!" She shouts, waving my scarf over her head.

I let go of Anthony. He stands and offers me a hand up as Mary continues to cheer.

"USA! USA! IN YOUR FACE!" she points at Anthony. "IN YOUR FACE"—then at Matt—"IN YOUR FACE"—Chris—"IN YOUR FACE"—Justin—"IN YOUR—where's Matt?"

"Oh," Jason says, dusting snow off his knees where he landed after colliding with Justin. "He carried Jolene back. She scraped her leg."

"He carried her?" Anthony asks.

Jason nods, not nearly as mortified as his friend.

"So, this wasn't because my plan worked?" Mary asks.

“Um,” I say. “I think it worked better than you intended.” Worked good for my plan, too.

“What was your plan?” Justin asks.

“To use Jolene as bait.” I stretch my arms and crack my back.

Anthony looks toward the cabin. There’s not a perfect view, but you can make out parts of it through the brush. “Yeah,” he says. The rush from the game leaves his body. You can’t even tell if he’s breathing except, he’s standing and talking. “Looks like it worked.”

JOLENE

Alarmingly effortlessly he carries me into the garage floor bathroom and sets me on the counter by the sink.

“You really didn’t have to carry me all this way,” I say, for the thirtieth time. My voice echoes throughout the garage, reminding me how alone we are. I don’t like it. I don’t like being alone with him. He’s taken advantage of us being alone together before, and now he knows the others will probably play for hours.

I’ve never been at more of a disadvantage; I’m completely outgunned, he knows the area better than I do, and I’m wounded! He could easily take me in his rock-hard arms, pull me into his warm chest, and kiss me as long as he wanted... holding me, running his hands through my hair...

“It’s not a big deal,” He says. He carried me all this way, but I feel like I’m more out of breath than he is.

He stands over me, slides off his large, dark-brown coat, and throws it to the side, unwinds his scarf from around his neck, and tosses it to join his coat. He does this while keeping his eyes on my torn jeans.

His gaze sends a current through me, and I can only imagine what him touching my thigh might do.

His arms move toward me. "Let me see your leg."

"I'm sure it's fine." I shake my head, and lean away, but he takes my injured thigh—hands on each side, positioning me so that the rest of my leg rests against his.

"Don't touch it!"

"Stop being such a baby." He holds my jeans and makes like he's going to tear them at the rip.

My heart pounds.

He stops and looks at me. "These ruined?"

I nod.

He splits the leg of my jeans in one quick pull, jostling my leg, making me gasp.

It only tears halfway, so he lifts my leg, reaching under.

"Matt!"

He yanks off the other half, returns my leg back down to the counter, and looks at me calmly, like, "Why are you freaking out?"

He slides the torn portion of my pants down my leg, removes my shoe, and slips the ripped part off of me and soaks it in water, then uses it to wipe away some of the blood smeared on my thigh.

It would've been great if the cut was considerate enough to be farther down my leg, or on my arm, or something, but it's too high up—almost my entire leg's

bare now. So much so, that my butt's cold against the counter, but his hands are warm against my skin.

I swallow as I watch him study my injury. I seriously doubt he needs to hold my thigh this much.

He moves and I wince.

"That hurt?"

"No," I say. "It tickles."

He wads the torn piece into a ball and presses it against the cut.

I take a sharp inhale.

"Hold that there," he says. "Apply pressure while I run upstairs and grab my first aid kit."

I nod and do what he says.

He's back two seconds later with a red metal box with a white cross on front.

"You're such a Boy Scout," I say.

He smirks, opens the box, and finds what he's looking for. Then he wets a washcloth, rubs a bar of soap on it, and brings it to my thigh.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" I scream.

"I didn't even do it yet! Geez! I'm just cleaning it."

"Let me do it!"

He thrusts the washcloth at me with a scowl.

"Thank you!" I take it from him and dab at my wound as he returns to his box on the counter, pouting.

He's so hot and cold and controlling—like he wants me at his mercy.

He holds up another clean washcloth. "May I dab it dry?" he asks, overtly polite.

"I can do that, too."

He hands me the washcloth. I dab and hand it back. Then he gives me antibiotic ointment and a bandage.

I use them and give him back the ointment, look around for the trash, then add the bandage packaging to his still-outstretched hand.

"Thank you," I say again. He's still bristling, so I try to smooth it over. "You didn't need to carry me."

"I'm sorry," he says, not smoothed over at all. "I thought I was helping!"

Unbelievable! It's like he wants me trembling at his manliness, like I didn't play the damsel just right. I didn't collapse enough or need him enough!

I roll my eyes and lean back. "Oh yes! I couldn't possibly do anything without you, Matt—LIKE WALK!"

"Fine!" he shouts. "Next time I'll leave you bleeding in the snow!"

"Fine!" I shout back. I literally would have been fine if he did.

"Fine! You know what your problem is, Jolene?"

"I'm dying to know!"

"You're an ungrateful little brat. You want to handle it yourself? Fine."

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!" I repeat. "I didn't want your help anyway."

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

He grabs his coat and scarf. "I'll go where I'm appreciated!"

"Good!" I stand up, a little careful with my leg.

"Excuse me," he says, "you're in my way."

"We can't have that!" I back up, but it's a small bathroom. He has to slide by if he wants out.

He starts to but stops when he's right in front of me—wedged between the door and me.

“What are we fighting about?” he asks.

“I don't know—”

He drops everything he's holding, pulls me against him and kisses me—hot and maddening, with his hands holding my face.

I could sink into it—give in—wrap my arms around his shoulders and slide my hands through his buzzed hair. I could melt into the fire and let it lap and consume me. I could give that fourteen-year-old girl inside of me everything she's ever wanted. I could be his. It would be so easy...

But I'm not ready. I push him off. I haven't given up on Anthony yet. That door is still gaping open, and until it's shut, I'm not sure how I can make a thorough, well-thought-out decision. And Matt's gotta knock it off with the grabbing! He's just like Justin! “Would everyone stop doing that?!” I squeeze past him toward the door.

“Who's everyone?” he asks.

“I mean, come on!” I say, making my way to the staircase.

“Who else kissed you?”

But I keep going.

“Who else kissed you?!”

I slide out of my jeans since one of the legs is now missing. My options are now the jeans I wore yesterday, my ski pants that I also wore yesterday, my pajamas, my backup jeans, my just-in-case jeans, my fancy pants in case we go somewhere nice, or the

sweats I was saving for a comfy ride home. But I liked these pants. Maybe I can cut the other leg off or have Big Man Matt rip it off for me.

I groan and roll my eyes. Why does he have to be so much—so much like him all the time?!

Everyone's still down in the woods, so I sneak out of my bedroom, in my underwear and T-shirt, and search the drawers in the kitchen for scissors. I find some tossed in with the cutlery.

A toilet flushes down the hall.

I sprint back to my room and shut the door. It doesn't have a lock, so I cut my jeans as fast as I can and yank them on.

I'll put the scissors back later, when more people have come back. No more grabbing and kissing today! Unlike Justin, he doesn't do it when we're around other people, which is both better and worse. No, being alone with him in the house—he's just—he's got a lot of audacity to go around kissing anybody he wants. A girl would never do this. A girl would never just grab a guy and kiss him. Well, Piper might. I could see her doing that—but if she did, she would, and she doesn't, so she's not the kind of person who would do that! It's just Matt—and Justin! But Matt more recently!

I cross to the window to see if the rest of them are heading back yet. They're not. I don't even see them. I sit on the bed and cross my arms. I'm about to cross my legs, but it'll hurt, so I don't. Have they noticed us missing? Does Anthony wonder where I am at all? I need to find a way to talk to him before we leave tomorrow. That's going to be hard in a house full of

people. Although being alone with Matt apparently is no problem at all!

Now what?

I can't go back out there, not while it's just me and Mr. Man. I'll just read.

I scoot back into the bed and flip open *Wuthering Heights*. I don't have time this weekend to read the entire thing, so I scan the book for parts I remember liking when I read it before.

I stand on the foggy moors in a tightly cinched gown. Matt—shirt billowing—has me in his arms, bending me backward, towering over me. “Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!” A direct line from Heathcliff—only dream-me doesn't realize that.

He grasps the back of my head and kisses me. I don't push him away or fight. I grab his long hair—that's buzzed in real life, but shh, this is fantasy—and pull him closer to me.

I wake up a little annoyed about it.

People chatter in the living room next door, and Mary sits on the edge of the bed, reapplying her black eyeliner along her lips.

“Jason said Matt carried you away,” she says.

“I fell on a rock,” I sit up, still fuzzy from my nap. I haven't dreamed about Matt like that in a long time.

“Is it bad?”

“No, Matt just... overreacts.”

“He carried you up here?”

I nod.

“How do you feel about that?”

I throw my head back against the pillow. It’s a good question—one I don’t want to think about. I played this game before—where I pined over Matt for years. It sucked. I thought I was done with it. I should be done with it!

“I told him not to!” I shout into the pillow. “He doesn’t listen to me! He carried me—what is that—seventy yards?” I measure everything by football fields now. “Then he, like”—I mimic Matt’s movements—“rips my jeans apart. Like, thank you, we get it, you’re crazy strong. THEN”—I glance around the room I already know is empty and bring my voice down—“he kissed me again!”

“AGAIN?!”

“SHHH! I know!”

“How many times is that?”

I shake my head with my mouth wide open. “I don’t know what to do!”

“What do you want to do?”

I chew my tongue.

Good question.

I mean, not really a good question, it’s not like I don’t know exactly what I’d like to do about Matt—to Matt... But there’s Anthony—who’s ignoring me, so that’s awesome. I slump down onto the floor. “If I dated him, Piper would literally kill me.”

“Matt?”

“No.” I don’t even want to say his name.

“Piper can’t claim anyone. She’s got a boyfriend,” Mary says.

"I don't think she does right now."

"No, they got back together down there."

"Oh. Well, they'll split again by the time I see her." I bite my cheek. I shouldn't have come. I lied to my parents for this! "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty. Everyone's reheating last night's pizza, or making more sandwiches, or having cereal. Matt said something about trying out the hot tub."

Course he did.

I return to the bed. "Who won the game?"

"I did," Mary says. "Apparently, you were good bait."

I plop down, burying my face in the quilt.

"You want me to have Justin find out what's bothering Anthony?" she asks.

I lift my head. "Yes! Would he?"

"He probably wouldn't if he thought Anthony was mad over you, but I can see it working." She changes into her black bikini. "Stand by."

And like that, she leaves, before I can really be sure I want her to ask him, and I regret every choice that's led me here.

30 ANSWERS

JUSTIN

“I’m ready! Geez!” I say to the knock on my door. But it’s not Jason rushing me to get my swimsuit on. It’s Mary.

She pops her head in. I’m glad I had my trunks on. Half a second ago she would have gotten a different view.

“Hi,” she says in her sultry voice, bending one knee in front of the other in a black string bikini. I’d never tell her this, but she’s absolutely gorgeous. Out of all the girls I know, she’s got the best body—at least the way I like it; curvy where she should be curvy, thick where she should be thick, and slim where she should be slim. And she looks like fire when she wears black.

I glare at her. “Can I help you?”

She shuts the door and leans against it. “Would you?”

MARY

He gives me an annoyed look, but I'm not letting that fool me or dissuade me. I know who he is.

I've moved past the disagreeing with him strategy and on to a broader version: treating him like crap, the way he treats absolutely everybody.

"It would mean a lot to me," I say, playing with my bikini ties behind my neck like they're hair—since mine is too short.

He sighs. "What?"

"I was just hoping you'd talk to Anthony for me. He seems down, and I wondered why," I say. But maybe I'm not the right person to send on this mission. I should have gotten Piper, or Logan, or someone. Because Justin's big mad.

"Why do you care?!" he asks, eyes glowing red and steam coming out his ears.

"I don't," I say, scoffing like the idea is ludicrous. "Logan was worried."

"And you want to help Logan?" A train horn blasts the roof of his head off.

"He's like my brother," I say.

He comes at me, throws his hands on the door behind me, leaning in. "He'd better be."

"He'd better be what?" I ask.

"Like a brother."

"Logan?! Oh, come on—"

"Don't 'come on' me! You come in here looking like this"—he lifts my top strap and lets it snap back to my skin—"asking about *Anthony*—"

"I didn't think you'd get so jealous!"

That does it.

“Jealous?! I’ll make them jealous.” He snatches me up in his arms and shoves his tongue down my throat.

I forget what Jolene wanted me to ask—or that she’s a person.

31 KILLER WHALES

JOLENE

Mary never returns.

I tie on my bikini and step into the living room. Piper's putting away some dishes in the kitchen.

"Everyone's out in the hot tub," she says.

"I'm just gonna grab a bite first."

"You missed dinner."

"Ergo..." I rummage through the fridge and find a pack of single-serving cheese—pull out two, and a Diet Coke.

"That's your dinner?"

I nod, not understanding why she sounds mad.

"I had three slices of pizza and two cupcakes," she says, possibly more to herself than me.

I shrug. "Sounds good. Plus, you were running around a lot more than me, and even if you weren't..." I shrug again.

She stomps into the living room, letting me know she's still annoyed, then turns back to me. "Oh, and

we're all going out barefoot. It's like a challenge kind of thing. If you don't do it, you lose."

She runs off down the hall.

Challenges are stupid, but whatever.

I eat my cheese, take a few sips of my Diet Coke, and follow her out the door.

ANTHONY

I slide my shoes off and step into the hot tub, making for the back spot in between Jason and Chris. I realize my mistake when Piper comes out and sits on the ledge next to her boyfriend—and next to me. Now I can't look that way. If I do, it's all leg. But that's fine, Logan's on the other side of Jason, and I can just talk to them all night.

Justin comes in and sits next to Logan, while Mary—who climbs in right after—sits on the other side, next to Chris.

"Come sit by me," Justin says.

"Bite me," Mary shoots back. You know they're mad when they use dated slang at you.

Matt turns on the bubbles then slides in next to Mary. "What's going on?"

"Oh," Mary says, "nothing. I just found my sister's big pink jacket on Justin's bed."

"What?" I ask.

"I was gonna give it back," Justin says.

"How did it get there?" Matt asks.

"Oh," Mary scoffs, "we can safely assume he stole it. She wouldn't be caught dead in there."

Justin glares at her, and she shoots him with a fiery little smile.

“What is going on with you guys?” Chris asks with a slack-jawed grin on his face. The answer is obvious, but Chris is a guffawing idiot.

“Nothing!” Mary and Justin shout.

The door opens. Jolene stands, silhouetted from behind by the light in the hallway, the curves of her muscles and form—her ballerina body perfectly outlined stealing my breath and keeping it. She walks toward us, then runs until she’s stepping down the steps of the hot tub. “It’s freezing!”

There’s no railing, so Matt extends his hand to help her. “Why did you come out with no shoes on?”

“Piper said we all were.” She takes Matt’s hand and glances at me.

I find the bubbles fascinating.

“Haha!” Piper says.

Jolene sits in between Matt and Justin, the only vacant spot. “This was a prank? It’s not even funny.”

“It’s very funny,” Piper insists.

“Okay...” Jolene’s wearing a simple white bikini, but at the same time it wipes all simpleness from off the planet. She reaches up and adjusts the hair she’s tied up in a clip. I try not to look at her, but everything else in the world sucks in comparison.

Twenty minutes later we’re half-way through a round of I’ve Never—where you go around a circle saying what you’ve never done, and everyone puts one of their fingers down for everything they’ve done. Every time it gets back to Matt, he says he never kissed

someone we all know, usually a guy. Last time it was me, this time it's—

“I've never kissed Justin.”

“What is with you and the kissing questions?” Jason asks, sharing my thought. “Are you trying to figure out who's kissed who?”

“No,” Matt says. But Jason might be on to something, and I think I know exactly whose kissing history he's trying to figure out.

“Wait,” Chris says. “Mary, you put a finger down?”

“What's it to you?” she asks.

Chris makes an immature “Ooooooooooh” sound.

“I think all of us girls had to put one down on that one,” Piper says, scratching under her eye.

This is news to me. Is she including Jolene in this? When did that happen?

“You too?” Jason asks.

Piper waves her hand. “It was, like, a year ago during Truth or Dare.”

“Oh yeah,” Justin says.

“When did you kiss Jolene?” Matt asks for me. I don't love that he also cares, but I'm glad he asked.

“In the Greek before Homecoming.” Justin wraps an arm around Jolene's shoulder.

“When?” I ask.

“During whip-cream-mageddon,” he says.

“It was not well received,” Jolene says, taking Justin's arm and giving it back to him.

“My turn. Let me think,” Mary says.

Matt leans his head back. “Look, it's snowing, but you can still see the stars.” He sighs. “It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen...”

“Aww,” Chris says, trying to make Matt sound like a doofus, but sounding like one instead. “Is it *bwootifle*, *Mwatt*?”

“We should play Truth or Dare,” Justin says.

“No.” Mary glares at him. “People only suggest that game because they want to kiss somebody.”

Jason snorts. “Yeah! Justin wants to kiss all the girls again! Look! Look at that face! He can’t deny it!”

Jason’s probably right, so nobody seconds Justin’s idea. Even though there’s someone I want to grab and kiss and never let go of, I don’t want Justin kissing anybody. It’s not fair to women.

“So, no Truth or Dare,” Chris says. “Anyone have a different game?”

“What happened to the one we were playing?” I ask, holding my remaining four fingers up. I was going to take a play from Matt’s book and say I’ve never kissed Matt. See if what Piper said about him and Jolene is actually true.

“No,” Piper says. “Okay, shut up. Where would you go if you could go anywhere?”

“Forks,” Mary says without hesitation. “Every September, they have this *Twilight* festival—”

“Stop.” Justin rolls not just his eyes but his entire head. “Stop. Out of all the places in the world—Fiji, the Bahamas—you’d pick Forks, Washington?”

She glares at him. He should run, but he’s stupid.

“Where would you pick, Justin? Let me guess, my sister’s closet? Then you could smell all her sweaters—oh!” She claps her hands in front of her. “And try her gloves on, dreaming that maybe one day—one day—she might let you hold her hand.”

“Better her closet than yours,” Justin says.

“Can we stop this?” Jolene asks.

Matt shifts in his seat. “Jason wants to go to Alaska.”

Justin scoffs. “Alaska!”

“I want to kayak with the orcas,” Jase says.

“That’s a good way to DIE!” Justin turns his glare away from Mary and onto Jason. “No, no. People call them KILLER WHALES for a reason, Jason! And forgive me, but I feel like we’ve had this conversation before! How many teeth does an orca have? Jason? Anyone? And are they sharp or dull? That’s right, they’re SHARP! Because why? Say it with me, they’re CARNIVORES! And if they grab a hold of you, forget about it—”

After a few minutes of Justin not shutting up about orcas, Piper fiddles with her bikini top ties behind her neck. “Shoot.” She slides off the ledge to stand in the hot tub. “I’ve come undone.” She glances at me. “Can you tie me?”

I stand and tie her straps together.

“I’m right here,” Chris says as Piper goes back to her spot, and I go back to mine.

“I couldn’t remember if we were broken up or not,” she says.

“We weren’t.”

“Let’s just say we were—are.” She takes her hair out of her hair tie and shakes it out. “Anyway, “I’m gonna go back inside.” She moves through the water, slips past Matt and Jolene, who sits on the stairs, and slides her feet in sandals and heads in.

“We never found out who else Matt hasn’t kissed...”
I stand up.

“Maybe there is no one else.” Jason laughs, standing. “Him and Justin have kissed everyone.”

Justin stands and pats Jason’s back. “Upset about that, buddy? You’ll kiss a girl someday.”

“I’ve kissed a girl,” Jason says.

“I’ve never kissed Matt,” Mary says. “Just saying.”

“What was her name?” Justin asks Jason.

“I don’t remember,” Jason says.

“I’m going in, too.” Mary gets up.

Jolene and Matt lean apart to let us up the step out of the hot tub.

Jolene glances at me, then looks the other way.

Piper said they kissed. Jason thinks Matt kissed everybody. But Jason’s kidding and Piper lies a lot, like, a lot. But something about how she turns away from me—if anyone knows if they actually kissed, it’s Jason.

Everyone mumbles something about turning in, going to sleep, or goodnight. We get our towels around us, slip our shoes on, and go inside.

I hold the door for Jason who needs both hands to hold up his towel.

“Thanks,” he says as I let the door shut behind him.

“Do you know, has Matt said anything—has he kissed Jolene, do you know?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Jason says. “They kissed at his party after Homecoming.”

“After Homecoming?” I ask. Piper said it was when we got together at her house. But it looks like it did happen, and more than once...

“Yeah. Sorry man.” Jason goes down the hall.

MARY

Now that I'm sharing Jolene's room, I have to fight the others for a spot in the hall bathroom.

I lean against the wall, waiting, when Justin shows up with his towel wrapped around his waist, eyeing me as though he'd like to use me as a toothpick.

I cross my arms. "Stop looking at me like I'm my sister's sweater."

He tilts his head and sighs. "I took it because you were wearing it. It smelled like you."

I snort. "Sure. You know, I also touched her hand once. You should cut it off and put it under your pillow."

He scratches his chin. "Don't tempt me..."

I roll my eyes, despite the warmth spreading through my chest.

Jason opens the door, and I push him out of the way and storm into the bathroom.

JASON

I can't do it. I walk into the room with my glass of water I got from the kitchen. Justin stretches out on a top bunk, Anthony does pushups in the middle of the floor, his stuff under my bunk, and I can't do it.

"I don't want to sleep on the top bunk," I say.

"Where did you sleep last night?" Anthony switches to one-arm.

"On the foot of Jolene's and Mary's bed."

Anthony glances at me.

"They weren't happy about it."

He lets air out his nose and keeps pushing up.

“Go sleep on the couch,” Justin says. “You sleep on Matt’s at home.”

“I don’t want to. It’s creepy out there. Anthony, you go sleep on the couch.”

“Can’t hear you, Jase,” he says.

“Take Matt’s bed while he’s in the shower,” Justin says.

“I don’t want him to kill me.”

“Oh,” Justin says. He knows Matt would kill me as much as I do.

“Is Matt in the shower?” I ask.

“I think he’s in the shower,” Justin says.

But when I came out of the bathroom, Mary went in, then I went to the kitchen and by the time I got back to the room, Justin had already been in the bathroom—after Mary—and got up to his top bunk, so... I guess he could be in the shower. I don’t know where else he’d be...

32 THE PRICE OF FRIENDS

JOLENE

I didn't think everyone was gonna go inside. I don't want to just yet, and Justin left, so we don't have to hear about killer whales anymore.

But now it's just me and Matt, and—well, I was avoiding being alone with him earlier, but now—I don't know. I don't want to go in yet...

"Bet you didn't know bringing up Alaska would make Justin explode." I laugh and scoot a little away from him. We don't have to sit so close now that everyone's abandoned us.

He gives me a look I can't place.

"What?" I ask.

"You wanted Justin to stop fighting with Mary," he says. "He's always going off about killer whales..."

My mouth falls open and lands on the bubbles underneath. "Wow." I laugh, impressed at his cleverness, and touched that he bothered with it for me. "Why are you friends with him? He's such a—guy my sister would be into."

Matt laughs.

“Does he have incriminating photos of you, or something?” I ask.

“He’s all right,” Matt says. “Sometimes he’s funny.”

“I’ll keep my eyes out for that.”

“I’m sorry Piper unleashed him on you.”

I make a face like I’d like to deny it.

For a while, Piper was pushing me to date Justin, but yesterday she said she was anxious for me to date Matt—it probably wouldn’t matter who I dated, as long as it wasn’t Anthony.

“How’d you know about that?” I ask.

“She admitted it.”

I sigh. “I guess I can’t talk about your choice in friends when mine sicced yours on me.”

We both laugh.

“Can I ask you a question?”

That gets my pulse rate up, but I nod—slightly.

“Should I tell my grandpa the cabin’s creepy?” he asks.

My heart sinks a little for him. We’ve been harping on it pretty hard.

“It’s not so bad,” I say. “It’s beautiful outside.” I look around. It’s dark, but quiet, vast, with a sliver of a moon shining on the lake. “Could get used to this.”

“Yeah. It’s not the worst.”

I dip lower into the tub, holding myself up by my extended arms on the sides. I lean back and look up. All of space meets me, like time unfolding before my eyes in an instant. I make out constellations I learned as a kid—Cassiopeia, the Big and Little Dipper—and

I've never seen the Milky Way so bright—all visible even though there are enough clouds to snow.

The beauty, the sense of freedom, how much fun I'm having, is all tarnished by the guilt that keeps periodically popping into my mind; if my parents knew where I was, who I was with, they'd be furious. Even though, I'm not doing anything wrong—besides lying to them—I'm not drinking, or doing drugs, or engaging in promiscuous activity! Why can't parents just be cool if you want to go with a bunch of guys to a cabin in the woods? Okay. I hear it. But it's not like I'm alone. Mary's here. She probably wouldn't let me get into too much trouble—if she was paying attention. And I wouldn't let her either—except I'm not sure where she is right now, or where she's been all day... And Logan's here, and he's like our brother, and Matt's an adult, so there's adult supervision. He even knows first aid.

On paper, it sounds like I've done something horrible—lied to my parents and spent the weekend with boys, and maybe I'm just lucky that nothing too terrible has happened, yet. But even with Anthony being off, Justin being Justin, and Matt being Matt, it really is nice up here.

I feel his eyes on me. It makes me a little self-conscious, so I lift my head off the ledge, and watch the snow falling into the hot tub.

I thought if he knew I could see him staring, he might look away, but he doesn't.

"I think you're right about the snow." I catch snowflakes with my hands, but they melt before I can

notice them landing. "It is the most beautiful thing in the world—"

He scoffs. "I was way off..."

I look at him, waiting for him to tell me what he thinks the real most beautiful thing is.

His eyes stare into mine for a long moment. I clutch my arms around me. Each silent breath that passes makes what he means clearer and clearer.

I blink and look down.

"Matt..."

"Let me ask you another question." He scoots closer. "You used to like me before; do you still like me?"

I take a breath. "I can't answer that—"

"Sure, you can." He takes my hand and brings it to his bare chest. "I'll answer first, just so there's no question." His arms and chest are warm and how he keeps moving closer makes my shoulders tremble. "I love you. I was stupid for not making a move before—I'm not stupid now."

I make some sort of noise, but it's not words.

I don't need to tell me he's making a move now—I can tell he's making moves; I've been there when he's kissed me! And now he's acting like he's going to do it again, but this time he's not forcing it. He's breaking all his old habits. He used to try and make me admit my feelings first; now he's making it clear, with no encouragement, and no defense if I shove him away, which I've been doing because he should have made a move before! But at least he's admitting he was stupid.

I try to pull my hand away, but he keeps it.

"You should have liked me then!" I shout.

"I did!" he yells, then calms down. "I just told you—"

“You didn’t make a move until I was pretty!”

“You’re always pretty, Jole.”

There it is, the nickname that melts me—takes me back to when the two of us had lunch in the rain—the day I thought he really liked me—was sure of it—years ago.

“You didn’t either,” he says.

I gape and stop trying to pull my hand away, too shocked at his audacity.

“You didn’t tell me you liked me until I had an apartment, a car, a good paying job, and was in college,” he says.

“But I didn’t do it for those reasons—”

“And I didn’t do it because you came back from Paris *slightly* hotter!”

My head hurts. He can’t make sense; I’m not ready to let go of my grudge against him.

But why not?!

I know why. I just don’t want to admit it—still don’t. But I can’t not face it anymore.

I sigh and bring my free palm up to my head.

The only thing stopping me from grabbing Matt right now and kissing his head off, is Anthony Whitaker.

But—I dab my wet eyes with my palm—Anthony’s no longer interested in me. I don’t know what happened. Did he give up? Acquiesced Justin’s demand to back off from me? If he has, then that’s that. If that’s that, then what am I waiting for?

And if he did want me, and I went out with him, Piper would kill me. Justin would kill him, and we’d all

be dead, and my parents would freak out, know I lied, and never let me leave their sight again.

“Jolene, I’m sorry,” Matt says, mistaking my tears over Anthony as tears over—I don’t know what. “How can I convince you how big of an idiot I’ve been?”

I scoff. “I’m fairly convinced.” But my resistance wavers.

I look at my hand in his, on his chest. I’m terrified by how much I like that he’s holding it, how much I like how he looks at me, like he knows I like that he’s holding it.

“I should have kissed you years ago.” He slides closer to me through the water, reaches a hand up through my hair to the back of my head, glides his other hand around my face and slowly, gently, kisses me.

What am I supposed to do—wait for Anthony to make up his mind about me? I waited two years for Matt to figure it out. Am I supposed to just wait for Anthony to do the same?!

When I kiss him back, he moves one arm to my waist, keeping the other in my hair, pulling me tighter to him. I wrap my arms around his neck. I’ve never kissed anyone back before. I rely on instinct and movies. He tilts his head the other way, but I don’t think to switch mine too, and we brush noses and laugh, but only for a second before we kiss again.

His mouth moves to my jawline, my neck, my shoulder—I’m suddenly very aware that we’re both wearing hardly any clothes. Everywhere he touches me is bare, which is good, because otherwise we’d have problems, but it’s still sending volts through me.

Every touch is a pulse, and my hands on his bare back and in his hair must be tantalizing him, too.

“Wait. Wait.” I stand up. “We should go in.”

“No. No. We should—we should stay out.”

I smile at his saying it like it’s this bright idea he just thought of.

“Matt... it’s late.”

“Okay. You’re right.”

He stands up to walk past me to the hot tub steps, then stops, turns back to me, grabs me, and kisses me.

Again, I kiss him back. It’s fierier this time. Like it needs quenching. His mouth smashes hard against mine. His hands are in my hair, on my neck, my shoulders, my hips, my back.

I can barely move, and don’t want to—but also really want to—encourage him. I keep my arms around his waist—on his back. After a moment he slows, then stops.

“It’s late?” he asks.

“Well—”

He kisses me again. Long and hard but not as frenzied. This is slowing down—saying goodnight.

He pulls back slightly, his breath still mixing with mine. “Let me grab your towel.” After a short kiss, he gets out of the hot tub.

I take a breath as I move toward the steps, kneeling on one, feeling—I don’t know, different, vulnerable, nervous about the emotions and intimacy I just reciprocated and what he thinks about them.

It's hot now, but maybe not so much that I won't be freezing out of the water, so I stay in the tub as he gets his towel, dries off a little, wraps it around his waist, picks up mine, and returns to me, holding it ready for me to run into. I do, and he wraps it around me. Then he lifts me into his arms, and I scream a little.

"You said you came out barefoot."

"Oh, yeah."

I kind of hope no one's watching him carry me back to the house. I hope no one's been watching us this last half hour—but maybe it's not fair of me to hope that.

He opens the sliding door while holding me, brings me through, sets me down, and shuts the door.

JASON

I'm almost asleep—challenging on this couch. But it's worth it; I don't want to sleep on the top bunk over Anthony. I don't want to climb up there, and he and Justin kept yelling at me yesterday for wanting to sleep with the door open.

But I can't sleep. There's a bunch of random creaking, and faint voices that sound like they're outside, but you know they're ghosts.

Then the door opens and a girl laughs, and I feel stupid for actually thinking they were ghosts. But I thought everyone was inside!

"Sorry," Matt's voice says.

I thought he was in the shower—we all thought that. But his silhouette, and a girl's I'm fairly certain is Jolene, fumble around in the dark.

“I’m gonna take a shower and go to bed,” the girl that’s definitely Jolene whispers.

“Hang on.” Matt pulls her close and plants one on her. She doesn’t push him away. “Good night.” He kisses her again.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she says.

Well, if Anthony wanted to know who else Matt’s kissed, he should have taken the couch when I offered it.

JOLENE

I sneak into my room, quietly shutting the door behind me. It’s pitch-black, and I’m sure Mary’s asleep. I feel around for a change of clothes and toiletry bag, find them, quietly maneuver through the door again, get into the bathroom and turn on the light.

Something purple catches my attention on the curve of my neck. I groan. I didn’t even realize it happening, and now there’s this evidence that we made out—like a branding.

When I get out of the shower, I change into pajama jams and do my face routine while my straightener heats up. I’m gonna have to wear my hair down for a few days.

33 THE AFTER MATT

ANTHONY

I wake up early, so ready to be home. I grab some breakfast, go for a light run, shower, wait for Logan to finish breakfast, then pull out my guitar while he tries the piano again. Turns out, it didn't magically tune itself overnight, so he calls it. The girls are still asleep anyway, so I quietly plunk out some songs on my guitar while everyone rumbles around in different stages of the morning.

Everyone's up now but Jolene and Mary. Their door hasn't so much as budged. Piper, however, brushes her hair in the living room while Jason brings his cereal onto the couch.

"You should have taken the couch last night, Anthony. Guess who I saw kissing," Jason says.

I have a feeling I don't want to know, so I pluck away at my guitar, and try not to listen.

"Mary and Justin?" Piper asks.

“Ha!” Justin says, sitting by the empty fireplace. “If Mary and I made out, you guys wouldn’t know about it.”

“So, you did?” Jason asks.

Justin glares at him, and Jason snickers.

People don’t give Jason enough credit. They think because he dropped out of school, and acts dumb sometimes, that he isn’t clever.

Something seems to occur to Piper, and she gets far too giddy about it. She tilts her head low to the side. “Jolene?”

“And?” Jason asks.

So, it was Jolene. It doesn’t matter who else he says now; I know it wasn’t me.

“Matt?!” Piper asks again, too excited.

Jason nods, and maybe it does matter.

“They got in late out of the hot tub and were all kissy-kissy until she went that way and he went that way.” Jason points to Jolene’s room’s door, and down the hall.

“Wait—” Justin says. “WHAT?!”

Matt walks in from outside, just in time to get his head ripped off.

“YOU KISSED JOLENE?!” Justin shouts as Matt takes off his coat.

It’s not enough I have to hear this all second hand from Jason, in front of everyone, but listening to Justin freak out about it, as if it matters to him, as if she was his for the losing—it was mildly annoying before, but now it’s just about unbearable.

“Why are you yelling at me?” Matt asks.

“YOU KISSED MY HOMECOMING DATE! SOME FRIEND!”

“If she wanted you, Justin, she’d be with you,” Matt says.

I’m not sure it’s as easy as that. Well, it probably is for Justin. He doesn’t have anyone telling him he shouldn’t date her out of loyalty.

“Now shut up,” Matt says, “she’ll hear you.”

“GOOD!” Justin raves. “I’M MAD AT HER, TOO!”

“She doesn’t owe you anything,” I spit out.

“I liked her a whole year before you met her!” Matt yells at Justin.

“I MADE A MOVE FIRST!” Justin screams. “The least you could do is appreciate that I made a move before you. There has to be some kind of respect given to the guy who was brave enough to take the first step—before anyone else! You knew her for two years! You had plenty of time. I didn’t know you liked her! I asked her out first, and she said yes! Then you waltz in and—”

I’ve had it. I stand up, clutching my guitar so hard it cramps my hand. “JUSTIN, WILL YOU SHUT UP?! You’re just mad your pride’s hurt. You’re not even in love with her!”

Everyone stares at me. Piper gapes, hands on her throat, like she’s just witnessed someone fall off a cliff.

“Course not. I barely know her.” Justin makes it sound like she’s diseased. “Why?” He dips his head down. “Are you in love with her?”

Everyone’s still staring at me—Justin, Jason, Logan, Chris, Piper, Matt. I never tried to hide it—from them—from anyone. But they look at me like it’s the

most surprising news. Did they really not know? Has how often I think about her not seeped out of my head and shown somehow? They don't notice that when she's near they all vanish—when she's around I don't even talk to anyone else, not really? Have they really not seen that I would tear all their heads off with my bare hands if she asked me to—I'd burn down all their houses, go to prison for forty-five years, come back, drive over them in my car, go back to prison for another ten years, come back, invite them over to apologize, and set dogs on them the moment they arrived if she so much as merely suggested she wanted me to?

And here I was—giving her up for some loyalty I owe Justin—and because Piper said Jolene kissed Matt. I turn and leave.

JOLENE

“Who is screaming?!” I hold my pillow over my face.

“Who do you think?”

I'm surprised to hear Piper's voice. I sit up. She's packing the stuff she left in here while Mary puts her socks on.

“What time did you come in last night?” Piper asks me.

“I don't know...” Does she know where I was? “Why?”

She tilts her head and lifts her eyebrow. “It's why they're yelling.”

“What?” I hurry to the door and lean against it, listening.

“Well, they're not doing it now,” Piper says.

“What was it about?” I ask, keeping the most vital questions reeling in my head—was one of the yellers Anthony? Did he find out? Does he know?

I step away from the door and bite my fingernail.

“What’s going on?” Mary asks.

“I made out with Matt.”

“Mazel tov! When’s the wedding?”

“Shut up.”

I sit down, lean forward, and open my suitcase.

“What are they fighting about?” Mary asks.

“It’s Justin,” Piper says.

“Oh. Course.” Mary clicks her tongue.

And I have to ask—I can’t help myself. “Is Anthony in there?”

“Oh yeah. All the guys are,” Piper says. “Jason saw you kissing last night and told everyone. Drew a big crowd.”

I sigh and tug my long-sleeved black shirt on. I’m about to tie my hair up when I remember my bruise. It’s like hiding a vampire bite.

“When are we going home?” I ask, brushing my hair.

“Soon as everyone’s ready.” Piper zips up her duffle. That and her backpack were the only luggage she brought; meanwhile, I brought the luggage Mamie bought me—designer and chic. I try not to draw attention to the way Piper eyes it.

“What about breakfast?” Mary asks.

“We’re doing that here,” Piper says. “At least my car is. Chris had better eat, cause I’m not stopping for at least three hours.”

"I thought you'd be in a better mood now that Jolene's kissing Matt," Mary says. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Wanted?!" Piper asks, sounding insulted. "What I wanted was for her to be happy..."

Mary laughs like someone got hit in the crotch.

Piper is not going to like my asking, but I can't not ask. "What did Anthony say?"

She scoffs. "What the rest of us were thinking, that it was about time."

Does it show that my heart stops beating? I have to get away from Piper. I can't fall apart in front of her.

"I need to go to the bathroom." I pull my jeans on, deciding against dressing cozy—and stand by the door, doorknob in hand.

I peek out and can't see anything but the hall.

The yelling has stopped, like Piper said.

Someone's playing the off-tune piano: Logan. I recognize the Zelda song. Everyone else could be anywhere.

I take a breath, slide out the door, and smack right into Anthony.

"Oh, gosh!" I say. "Sorry."

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

He smiles down at me—not huffy, not pouting. He's not letting it be awkward at all. It's a relief really, refreshing. Right? I shouldn't want him to be mad! I should be glad he's glad I kissed Matt. I mean, it might be okay if he threw one thing—no. I know it's not fair of me to want that now, especially when he's being beyond fair.

Unless he's never liked me at all. Then it's not really him being fair; it's just him being—apathetic. But I can't believe that—I really don't want to—maybe he's just really good at keeping a stiff upper lip, and he's saying it's about time we kissed, to be the bigger man?

My heart lurches—his being a stand-up guy like this makes me question everything. What if these relationships last longer than high school—longer than my very-rocky friendship with Piper, or his with Justin? Is this really the right move—letting friends who don't seem to care for, either of us very much at all, dictate our futures?

But then he walks on down the hall.

The choice was made. I made it. So now, whatever happens, we'll never go back.

I pack the rest of my stuff, stroll through the living room, past Chris reading a magazine and Logan at the piano—like everyone wasn't just shouting about me—and make a bowl of cereal.

I sit at the counter and eat when Matt walks in.

“Morning.” He says, pouring a glass of milk.

“Hi.”

“How'd you sleep?”

“Good. You?”

He nods and lets out a quiet laugh. “Yeah.”

I blush a little bit, then worry a bigger bit who might be listening. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable...

He leans his arms against the other side of the counter, facing me. “What are you doing later this evening?”

"I don't know." I bite my lip and grin a little—I can't help it. Is it wrong that while I'm torn up over Anthony, I enjoy the part of my life that's not screwed up? "Kinda cleared my schedule."

"Cameron's friend's band's playing at my neighbor's place."

"On a Sunday?"

"It's college." He shrugs. "Wanna come?"

"I might..." I spin my spoon. "It depends."

"On what?"

"If I'm grounded." I stand and carry my dishes to the sink and begin washing them and some other stuff in there.

"And if you're not?"

"Then I might be persuaded..."

It was a line I heard Anthony say, and the realization brings me up short. I clear my throat and scrub off dried freeze-dried fruit. "I mean, sure." I lay the bowl I was washing back in the sink and dry my hands on a paper towel. "I'm gonna finish packing."

He's loading up all his stuff into Logan's van when I come out with my luggage.

"I would have helped you with that," Matt says.

"It's not gonna kill me," I say. "It rolls."

He laughs and lifts it all into the trunk.

PIPER

After hinting, rather obviously to Chris that I'd like him to carry my duffle bag to the car, I bring it out and put it in my trunk. I grind my teeth and glance over at

Logan and Anthony by the van. Maybe now's a good time to dump Chris again.

"Wanna ride with me on the way back?" I ask, walking over to Anthony. "I'm so sick of Chris."

"I would," he says, "but I told Logan I'd take the first shift."

"Going down the mountain is just as bad as coming up," Logan says, turning a little green just talking about it.

"Ugh," I say. "I wish someone would take a shift from me. I drove all the way here Friday."

Anthony's smirk reeks of helpless sympathy.

I bite down on my back teeth. I just need to ride this out. He's not gonna be dating Jolene now; he just needs a little bit of time to get over it. Maybe seeing them making out in Logan's rearview mirror all the way home will help.

Chris comes out of the house and kisses my cheek. I rub my jaw with my hands. "Eww. Knock it off." It'd be nice if Anthony would get over her now.

JOLENE

I walk around to the open door and find Justin sitting in the middle seat of the middle row.

"Saved you a seat," he says.

"She's not sitting by you, Justin." Matt hauls another piece of luggage into the back.

Heat rises to my cheeks over how he claims me, and how he hurls in our suitcases and duffle bags like they weigh nothing.

“Mary?” Justin asks as Mary rolls her roller toward Matt.

“Ha!” she laughs as Matt takes her luggage.

“Anthony, how about it?” Justin asks, moving on to the guys.

“I’m driving.” Anthony gets in the driver’s seat while Logan takes the passenger.

Matt shuts the trunk, comes around to my side, and gets into the back. I get in next to him. Mary slides the middle seat back and sits on it, next to Justin, and Jason comes in on her other side.

“Wanna watch a movie with me?” Justin asks Mary.

“No.” She looks away then leans in. “Which one?”

“Any one you want.”

“*Twilight*?”

“Why not?”

“Have you seen it?” She takes his offered headphones.

He glares at her. “Have I seen it?”

“Wait, you have internet?”

“You guys don’t?” Justin asks.

Jason pulls out Logan’s handheld gaming device.

“Do you have internet?” Mary asks Jason.

“No. I can only play the downloaded games.”

Mary turns back to Justin. “How do you have internet?”

He scoffs. “Cause I’m not poor.”

Mary shrugs and inserts Justin’s headphones into her ears.

Matt rests his arm around me. I worry about what Anthony can see in the rearview mirror. But again, I don’t think it’s fair to hang on to him while choosing

somebody else, and if I can't see his eyes, maybe he can't see me.

I lay my head on Matt's shoulder.

34 THE TRUTH

JOLENE

Apparently, I'm a good liar. Since her daughters weren't home, my mom stayed in LA until Saturday night, catching up on some work. She and my dad must not have talked much, because when Mary and I get home Sunday afternoon, both of them still believe we've been camping with Piper's family, and it was all approved by the other.

I feel terrible.

"How was it?!" my mom asks, bringing my little roller into the house while I give Dogberry a rub down.

"It was fun," I say. "It was snowing."

"Really?" My mom looks up the stairs, then tilts her head at me. "You might have to drag those up yourself."

"I got it." My dad takes my two rollers and charges up the stairs.

"I guess I'll take my own," Mary says, dramatically heaving her luggage up the stairs behind her, grunting and straining unnecessarily while my mom smiles and rolls her eyes.

I feel so guilty about the lies my parents are buying. I honestly didn't think I'd get away with it; I thought I'd get home to them screaming and raging and grounding me—that would have been better. But they're happy to see me, and helpful, and I feel horrible!

"Mom," I say before she can go up the stairs. "I have to tell you something."

"Sure, honey."

Ugh, she doesn't even suspect!

"We didn't go camping with Piper's family. Piper was there, but not her family."

She takes a minute before she asks, "What?"

I bite my lip. She's never going to trust me again, and Mary will kill me.

"It was a group of friends?" I don't know why I ask it like a question, but that's how it comes out.

My mom slides her head to the side, understanding dawning on her formerly-teenaged-face.

"Your father spoke to Piper's family..." she says.

I shake my head.

She shakes hers back. "Who all was there? Were there any adults at all?"

"One," I say.

"Eighteen?" she asks.

I nod. "Maybe nineteen." Like that's gonna help. It's probably worse.

Her lips become very thin. "Who all was there? Name them." She's not happy anymore.

"Me, Mary, Piper"—I worry this'll get back to Logan's mom; I don't know what he told her. I don't want to get anyone else in trouble, just me—"Logan."

My mom juts her head out, then lets it tilt to the side again. "Go on."

I sigh. "Chris, Jason, Justin, Matt, and Anthony," I say as fast as humanly possible, so it sounds like fewer people and like maybe she won't remember them all.

"Were those the guys you and Piper went with to Homecoming?"

"They're our friends—"

"Uh-huh, and your dates?"

"Well, I didn't like my date." I fiddle with my fingers.

"That makes all of us. You're grounded for at least a month."

I nod. It's fair, but it's gonna suck having a boyfriend for the first time and not being able to see him.

"And give me your phone. You can have it for school and ballet, and no laptop except for schoolwork."

Something occurs to me.

"Can I just make a call real quick? I have to tell someone I'm gonna be phoneless and grounded—"

My mom glares at me, not answering. I'm not sure if she even heard me, or if she's just taking a moment to respond—punishing me. I take it. I deserve it.

"You have three minutes. Then I want you upstairs, handing me your phone."

I nod. She goes up toward her room. I climb the stairs and whip out my phone—dialing the number Matt gave me on the ride home.

He answers on the first ring.

"Hey," he says. "How's it going?"

“Bad.” I step onto the second-floor landing and sit on the stairs leading up to my attic. “I told my mom I lied about camping with Piper’s parents.”

“You didn’t...”

“I felt so bad. They believed me! So, I’m grounded, and I have to give her my phone when I’m not at school or ballet. I’m sorry, I can’t come tonight.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

“I actually have to go. She just barely gave me enough time to tell you.” I stand up.

“Oh, okay. I guess I’ll call you during school—”

I bite the side of my cheek. “Well, my mom works in LA, and my dad’s usually not home till six. You could call me after school. What’s your schedule like?”

“I have classes Mondays and Wednesdays from ten to four, and Tuesdays and Thursdays from nine to two, but then I work, and I work until six on Fridays.”

That sucks. “So, yeah, I guess we’ll only be able to call when I’m at school...”

“If I get time, I’ll come over before your dad gets home.”

“Yeah. That’ll work—when you can—”

“JOLENE!”

“I gotta go. Call me tomorrow. Bye.”

I hang up and look up at Mary staring at me.

“You told?” she asks, snarling.

“You’re always saying they don’t care what you do—”

“But if they punish you, they’re gonna punish me! Probably harder!”

“JOLENE!” my dad stomps so hard down the hall the floor’s gonna break. “You’re grounded!”

"I know," I say, handing him my phone. "Mom told me."

"You too, Mary!" He holds his hand out for her phone.

"I lost mine." She looks at me while she says this, her chin so stiff it could chip.

My dad swears, calling her bluff.

"No, really," she says. "Try calling it, and no one will answer."

"You'd better hope you find it, cause I'm not buying you another one." He rages down the stairs.

"I've got a feeling it'll pop up right when our punishment ends." She slides her phone out of her pocket, sends a text—probably to Justin—and slams her bedroom door behind her.

I mope up the stairs and into my room. Dogberry takes his seat against my bed while I sit and take off my shoes.

Maybe I should have just not gone. But it was so much fun, even though my new cut-off shorts are uneven—but if I cut either leg any shorter, trying to match, they'll be way too short—and I'm probably just gonna have to throw them away.

I get up and open my sliding balcony door. The breeze from the ocean feels nice in my stagnant room. I plop on my bed and pet Horatio—purring in his sleep.

Grounded. I've never been grounded in my life. Of course, Mamie wasn't going to ground me in Paris. But I also never did anything wrong in Paris—unless you count the time I broke a picture frame in my room

while doing my stretches, and told Mamie's butler, Pierre, I didn't know what happened to it. But even then, I confessed the truth to Pierre an hour later.

Leave it to me to get my first grounding at the same time I get my first boyfriend. If Matt were still in high school, I could hang out with him all day. I'll probably end up seeing Anthony more often than I do Matt—on the drive home he seemed to ease up a little. He even spoke to me a few times—asked if I wanted him to grab me something when he was running into the mini-mart and I wasn't, and he pointed out a deer on the side of the road—okay, both of those times he was talking to everybody, but still.

When we got to Piper's house, he took my big roller and put it in the back of Mary's truck for me, then looked like he wanted to say something, shook his head, smiled with half his mouth for a split second, then left. But if he talks to me at all tomorrow, it could very well be more than I talk to Matt. You could almost say, it might be like Matt and I aren't even dating...

35 THE TENT

JASON

We get home Sunday evening while Cameron's at work. Matt and I dine on what's left of the cereal we brought to the cabin, when Cameron gets home and helps himself to a bowl—like they don't let him eat at Riptide.

"How was it?" he asks, taking a bite of Floaty Oaties.

"It was great." Matt pours some milk. "Jolene and I are going out."

"That's awesome," Cameron says. "I see you've brought back Jason."

"I remember what you said—it's fine," Matt says. "I talked to him about sleeping on the couch."

"What? What's fine?" I ask, mouth full.

"We talked about it," Matt says.

I vaguely remember a discussion about my couch sleepage, but I can tell it's awkward, so I shrug and shut up.

When it's time for Cameron's friend's band's concert next door, Matt moans about how Jolene wanted to go with us but got grounded. He mopes the entire time, then afterwards we go back to our place and fall asleep.

A few hours later, I wake up in the living room to the sound of screeching.

"WHAT THE HECK?!" someone shrieks.

I unzip my tent and peek out. "Shh! Trying to sleep if you don't mind."

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Cameron yells. "WHY IS THERE A TENT IN THE LIVING ROOM?!"

"Matt said you wanted me off the couch, so we picked this thing up when we were getting supplies for the cabin," I tell him. "Win/win."

"WIN/WIN?!"

"Yeah!"

"MATT! MATT!" Cameron yells up the loft at Matt, but I don't know what he thinks he'll do about it. It was his idea.

36 GROUNDED DAY ONE: MONDAY

JOLENE

The second I wake up, I collect my phone from my parents' room, and head back up to my attic bathroom while checking my messages. There's one from Matt:

"Good morning, beautiful!" with some sun emojis.

My face warms, which is nice because I'm freezing.

I turn on the red heating light in my bathroom while I brush my teeth.

After myth, I text him at my locker, as Logan sits on the floor at his, and Piper complains about Chris next to us.

"What did you tell your mom to let you go last weekend?" I ask Logan when Piper takes a breath long enough to do so.

Logan shrugs. "She was cool. I told her you and Mary would be there, and she said it was a shame I'd miss church, but that was it."

“That’s not fair.” But I’m kind of touched that his mom’s so trusting of Mary and me. If only that worked on my parents.

Matt texts me about his first class—math—and how there’s not as much group work as what we dealt with.

I’m about to respond when someone approaches—standing close—right behind me. I turn and see Anthony.

“Hi!” I say, startled, leaving my text unsent, tucking my phone in my back pocket.

He’s got his hands on his hips, and his eyebrows raised. “You lied to me, Jolene, to all of us.” He seems like he’s only pretending to be mad, but I’m not sure about what. “Do you know what I found once I got service?” He lifts his phone to my face—Oscar Ivanov, the actor I met in Paris, in a swimsuit in a shot from a movie—smiling at me from Anthony’s screen. “I believe your words were, ‘Super, ridiculously hideous,’” I laugh, “‘terribly ugly,’” I laugh again, “‘his face sliding off...’”

“Okay, I lied.”

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head as he slips his phone back into his pocket. “Miss Stansen,” he says like nothing’s ever been wrong between us. “What am I gonna do with you?”

A corner of his lips smiles at me. All my lips smile back.

“Hi, Anthony,” Piper says.

He faces her and juts his thumb behind him. “Damaris just said you told her she couldn’t come to Matt’s party after Homecoming. What is wrong with you?” He walks down the locker hall.

Piper glares at me. I raise my eyebrows and shut my locker—staying out of it, since I wasn't there when Piper spoke to Damaris.

PIPER

I crack the thumb of my right hand as I trail after her and Logan on our way to class.

Yes. She might be on good terms with Anthony again, and yes, it might come out that she hadn't kissed Matt back when I told Anthony she had, but none of that matters now. He bought it long enough for her to get nice and cozy with Matt. He may flirt with her now, but it won't do any good—it won't get any further than that, and there's only so much rejection someone can take—I should know. I almost gave up for a second there, when Justin kept landing fail after fail—but now? She's with Matt, and it's gonna take more than a little to split them apart. Eventually, Anthony will get tired of waiting, need a date for a dance, and I won't wait for him to ask me, or for the Damarises of the world to beat me to it. I'll ask him, he'll say yes, and Jolene will cry at our wedding.

JOLENE

We take our seats in chemistry and pull out our books to read chapter five, section three, the way the whiteboard tells us. I start to do it when Piper, talking to some of our lunch group at the lab table behind me, says, "What did you do this weekend? I went up to Mammoth with Anthony and a few friends."

Quinn, Courtney, Todd, Jesse—whoever else is back there, ask her follow-up questions: “Who else was there?” “Where’s Mammoth?” “Are you guys dating now?”

But Piper only answers one. “No. We’re not dating, not yet. Jolene and Matt are though.”

“Craddick?!” I hear Courtney ask.

I turn and look at Piper, who smiles at me as she tells Courtney, “Yes.”

A thought occurs to me as I face back front—when Anthony was cold to me, up in the mountains, he didn’t seem mad. He seemed hurt, and it didn’t start until after the first Capture the Flag game. I had been talking to Matt after he won, then I turned back to Anthony—walking by Piper—and all of the sudden it was like I had spit on his mom.

“There should be no talking,” Ms. Magpali says. “Even teenagers don’t need to talk to read.”

I haven’t read at all, but everyone was always saying how Piper lies all the time—was it possible that she gave up lying to me about Anthony and started lying to him about me?

“Oh!” I gasp out loud, and Logan stares at me. I shake my head, so he goes back to reading, and I drag my fingers through my hair.

Just before we had gone out to play the game, I told Piper about Matt kissing me! She must have told Anthony! I listened to her when she told me not to flirt with him! I believed her when she said I owed her loyalty!

I face her again.

She shrugs and mouths the word “what?” and a sense of freedom washes over me.

I laugh, breathing like it’s been a while since I haven’t had a whale beached on my chest. I turn back to the front, trying to figure out what this feeling is. Something’s released now that she’s betrayed me, something that I thought I owed her, something that’s been held back ever since I got back from France and met her: me.

THE END

Series Character Chart

In Order of Appearance

Introduced in Book One:

Jolene Stansen

Teenaged ballerina

Matt Craddick

Jolene's crush/Caradine's boyfriend

Mrs. Diefenbacher

Jolene & Matt's math teacher

Danny Vegas

Jolene & Matt's math tablemate

Tim

Jolene, Danny, & Matt's smart tablemate

Caradine Krueger

Matt's girlfriend

Logan Monnel

Jolene's friend

Mary Stansen

Jolene's half-sister

Piper Thompson

Mary's popular friend

Dogberry & Horatio

Jolene's Border Collie & ever-sleeping kitty

Lori Stansen

Jolene's mom/works at a movie studio in LA

Steve Stansen

Lori's husband/Mary's stepdad/Jolene's dad/
architect

Eloise Duchene Grant

Jolene's aunt/Steve's half-sister/Iris's daughter/

Caspian's wife/lives in France
Iris "Mamie" Duchene
Jolene's grandma living in France
Caspian "Cass" Grant
Eloise's husband/living in France
Iphigeneia "Geneia" Mischka
Eloise's famous friend living in France
Oscar Ivanov
Eloise and Caspian's famous friend living in France
Madame Patenaude
Ballet teacher in France
Beau
Jolene's first dance partner in France
Helene
Jolene's dance friend in France
Jean
Jolene's second dance partner in France
Mrs. Reed
Jolene's ballet teacher in Goleta
Lindsey Calisher
Dances ballet with Jolene in Goleta
Veronika
Mary's friend
Jess Monnel
Logan's younger sister
Mr. Laramie
WCHS mythology teacher
Quinn Wayne
Cheerleader/Courtney's best friend/Piper's
friend/dating Todd Elsinore
Courtney Usher
Cheerleader/Quinn's best friend/Piper's friend

Kaila Jones
Cheerleader
Tyrus Krueger
Football player/Caradine's younger brother
Todd Elsinore
Quinn's boyfriend/Weston's friend/
football player
Weston Prior
Todd's friend
Ms. Magpali
Chemistry teacher
Justin Granite
ASB president/in Jolene's chemistry class/
Anthony's best friend
Jesse Morrison
ASB vice president/football player/in Jolene's
chemistry class
Jason Canvis
Matt's friend/roommate/high school dropout
Isaac Craddick
Matt's grandpa/owns his apartment building
Charlene Benedict
Matt and Jason's neighbor/Dillon's roommate
Dillon Mahony
Matt and Jason's neighbor/Charlene's roommate
Tay-Tay "Tay" Breiman
Justin's girlfriend
Guineth Granite (pronounced "GWIN-eth")
Justin's younger sister/frosh cheerleader
Christie Samuels
Guineth's best friend/frosh cheerleader
Noah Granite

Guineth's twin/Justin's younger brother
Anthony Whitaker
Football quarterback/Piper's crush/Justin's best friend
Isaiah
Football player
Alice Windsor
Cheerleader/Alice's best friend/likes Anthony
Alice Sistine
Cheerleader/Alice's best friend/likes Anthony
Nurse Kate Magparagalan
WCHS nurse
Coach Tinino
WCHS history teacher/football coach
Mike
Football player at Justin's party

Introduced in Book Two:

Cameron Johnson
Matt's roommate
Tate Paige
Mary's friend and Homecoming date
Chris Kimball
Sits near the group/Logan's new friend/
Piper's Homecoming date
AJ Knightley
Football player/Courtney's Homecoming date
Margot Detcher
Homecoming Queen nominee
Scarlett Grey

Homecoming Queen nominee
Damaris Fitch
Lindsey's friend
Ms. Ross
WCHS Vice Principal
Larry
Lug driver
Sarah
(Mentioned only) Isaac Craddick's assistant

OTHER BOOKS BY REBECCA JONES

NOT EVEN PARIS

A Jolene Novel Book One