

1 AN UNEXPECTED RIDE

JOLENE

The next day.

My dad cooks eggs on the stove while I eat a bowl of cereal at our kitchen table. He hums to himself an annoying song they play on short-form videos all the time.

“Ugh!” he groans. “Sing a song so I can get this one out of my head.”

I hum a more obnoxious one while taking a bite of Floaty Oaties.

“No, that’s worse! What are you doing to me?” My dad brings his eggs to the table. “How’s Driver’s Ed going?”

“Good.”

“What is it—an hour a day?”

“Yeah.”

“Why does it always seem longer than that?”

I shrug.

I’m grounded. I’m allowed to have my laptop for homework and my online Driver’s Ed course, but I have to turn it in to him when I’m done. There’s a chance I take it slow.

“I mean, they encourage you to do one hour,” I say. “But they let you do more—”

The doorbell rings. I drop my spoon in my bowl and scooch back from the table.

“There’s Logan,” he says through a yawn.

“Weird.” I carry my bowl to the sink. “Usually he just texts.”

“Maybe it’s a package.”

“He probably wants to come in and use the bathroom.” It’s happened before.

I rinse my bowl, leave it for later, grab my backpack, and head for our front door.

But when I open it, it’s not my years-long friend Logan. It’s a guy I’ve only recently gotten to know since school picked up again—a guy who’s funny, has floppy brown hair, light-brown skin, and gives me hope for all guys at Winchester Canyon High School—Anthony Whitaker.

“Hi!” I tilt my head to the side, smiling, clutching my dog’s collar so he doesn’t run out. “What’s going on?”

“Logan said he usually gives you a ride, but I thought since I lived closer . . . And I wanted to—if that’s okay.”

He leans down and pets Dogberry.

For the last few days, I’ve been worried I lost him as a friend—I mean, he talked to me yesterday at school, but only a little, and he wasn’t at lunch. It was his coach’s birthday, and he took Anthony and the team out.

“Yeah.” I blink and grin stupidly, petting Dogberry goodbye and pulling the door closed behind me.

If my dad sees it’s not Logan, but in fact a towering an upsettingly hot quarterback, he might not let me go with him—since I’ve only just started my grounding sentence.

So far, hanging out with Logan hasn’t counted as hanging out with friends. My dad must view him the

way my sister Mary and I do—like family—like our brother.

Anthony, on the other hand, is very not my brother, and it's adorable that he feels the need to ask if it's okay if he gives me a ride to school.

"Course," I say. But he stares at me, maybe a little unsure about something. "What?"

"Logan said you'd be bummed he didn't pick you up . . ."

"Oh, he did?"

"Yeah."

"Will he be disappointed if I'm not—okay, yeah, um, how dare you?"

"That's more like it."

"Okay—but really, it's nice of you. Thanks."

He opens his passenger side door, and shuts it after I get in, then hops into the driver's seat.

I've only been in his car once before. It was after a group of us went to Riptide Grill. It was when we found out his six-year-old sister and I are in the same *Nutcracker*, and not only that but we know each other—we're friends, as much as two girls ten years apart can be.

That was a good night—one of the greatest—and that's counting all the nights covering the former year that I spent in France. It's certainly better than the year before—when I pined over my current boyfriend, Matt Craddick.

I stick my seatbelt into the buckle as Anthony drives down the street.

"Your house looks different in the daylight," he says. "I didn't realize it was pink."

I laugh through my nose. “You should have guessed.”

“I’m not sure I should have.” He glances at me in my light-pink shirt, jeans, and soft-blue hoodie. “No, you’re right. I definitely should have.”

We laugh together. It’s easy with him again, even though we’ve been weird, and he’s so ridiculously stunning.

Yes! Fine! Alright?! I have a boyfriend—kind of. It’s new. I’m dating Matt Craddick, and he’s wonderful! He’s dark, with broad shoulders, enormous arms, and he’s warm, and hot. I had a crush on him for two years, then when I came back from Paris I met Anthony, and thought I’d never see Matt again because he graduated, but then he was at Justin’s party, and Piper—who I thought was my friend—lied and said Anthony was into Justin’s sister, and I didn’t believe it, but then at the cabin Piper lied to Anthony, and said I kissed Matt back when that’s not what happened—he just kissed me! Then she said Anthony was, like, “It’s about time,” when I finally *did* kiss Matt back, which sucks that he said that—not that I can complain—and he probably said it because of Piper’s lie, but by the time I figured out Piper was lying to everyone to get Anthony to herself, I was already kind of committed to Matt—and grounded—so . . . but it’s fine. Anthony and I are chill now, and—I don’t know—it’ll work out, and now I know not to trust Piper, ever—which is nice to know.

She’s gonna poop her pants when she sees me getting out of Anthony’s car. I might have to mention it if she misses it.

We walk down from the student lot with about five minutes until school starts.

“I’m this way.” He juts his thumb toward the science and math buildings.

“I’ve got Laramie.”

Everyone knows Laramie and where his room is, even those who’ve never taken him. But I’m pretty sure Anthony has him for second, and if he’s going toward the science and math building, he probably starts with math, since he has biology after lunch—not that I’m keeping track.

“Is it creepy if I already knew that?” he asks.

I bite my lip maybe a little too hard. “Might be. Depends on how you knew it.”

His eyes grow big and his mouth makes a sucking sound. “In that case, I’m not gonna tell you.”

My mouth falls open into a wide grin. “Now you have to tell me!”

He chuckles, shakes his head, and walks away.

Unbelievable!

I whip out my cell and text him: “How did you know I had Laramie?!?” I include a few thinking faces then slip my phone into my back pocket.

Piper trades her lunch bag for her myth book at her locker next to mine. “You’re here later than usual. Logan already went to class.”

“You talked to Logan?”

“No.”

Of course not. They dated for two weeks in junior high, and ever since then she’s been trying to make him suffer for it, and everyone else forget.

"I didn't ride with him this morning." I take my lunch out of my backpack, checking the name to make sure I don't have Mary's.

"You guys fighting?"

"No." I raise a shoulder, and don't look at her, like it's not a big deal. "Anthony picked me up."

"WHAT?!"

"He lives closer to me than Logan—probably figured he'd do him a favor—"

"I live closer to him than you do!"

"You have a car. Why are you mad?"

She drops back down to zero. "I'm not mad."

"Okay." I zip up my bag. "I'll see you in class."

ANTHONY

Justin is the friend I've had the longest—like, since kindergarten. We ate paste together, he stole my Transformer when we were six, we played little league together, liked the same girls—we still do that.

This morning he's leaning against his locker, looking like the whole world is dying and he has to speak at the funeral.

I don't even have to ask him what's wrong before he tells me.

"Everyone hates me."

"Yeah." The trick to remaining friends with him is never taking him seriously. "That's about right."

I feel a buzz in my pocket and take my phone out. It's Jolene asking me how I knew she had Laramie.

I text her back: "I'm not telling," as Justin continues.

"Jolene hates me, Matt hates me—"

“I hate you.”

“You hate me.”

“I’m kidding. What’s with you?” I slide my phone in my pocket, open my locker, and unzip my backpack. “Nobody hates you.” Even though Jolene might actually hate him, I doubt Matt or anyone else does. And if he backed off and gave Jolene some space when she asked, she’d at least be friends with him. But he’s been acting all jealous, and freaking out, and they only went to Homecoming together, but he acts like he has this claim on her. And if Matt hates him, it’s probably because he likes his girlfriend—and who cares if Matt hates you?

“I can’t even get Mary Stansen. Watch this. Looking hot, Mary!”

“Go crash your Porsche,” Jolene’s older sister shoots back, walking past us, a bit too quick with the comeback, like she had it ready.

He spins to me. “See?!”

Something weird has been going on between them. One second they’re into each other—sharing headphones and watching *Twilight* on his phone on the way home from Mammoth, and the next they’re tearing into each other.

“She thought you were mocking her.” I tug my backpack around my shoulders. “Talk to her like a normal human. Try being nice even.”

Justin scoffs. “Nice. ‘Cause that’s what girls want. If girls wanted nice you wouldn’t be single.”

I clench my back teeth. It’s not his fault—he doesn’t know how badly that stings.

“Maybe Matt’s nicer than me.”

Justin guffaws.

“Try something else.” I nudge his arm. “That’s all I’m saying.”

“Wouldn’t do any good. I’m a sad, pathetic loser.”

“That’s the spirit.”

He sneers as random people walk by.

He’s wearing a cream, cashmere sweater under his brown, leather jacket that probably used to be famous cows.

His dad’s an arms dealer and one of the richest guys in Santa Barbara. He could buy friends—good ones, better than me. He could buy robots that look like us and do everything his real friends won’t, like baby him.

“She’s right there.” I lift an elbow at Mary, who’s stopped at the locker of one of her goth friends. This one doesn’t wear as much fuchsia as Mary. She wears more green. They wear the same amount of black. “Talk to her again. Be nice even.”

To my surprise, he does it. He struts over to Mary and taps her shoulder as her green friend walks away. She shakes him off in one big jerk but still turns to him to see what he wants. That’s something.

“Hey,” he says. “Nice shirt.”

“Thanks. I stole it from my sister.”

I thought it looked familiar. Jolene even took it to Mammoth—yeah. She wore it on the way home under her big, pink coat.

“Oh, well, that explains it,” Justin says.

I groan.

“Nice.” She turns away from him.

“Wait—” He reaches out and touches her arm. Surprisingly, she faces him, and not to eat his face. “Sorry. I just meant because a lot of your clothes—”

She throws her hip to the side and rests her hand on the other, smirking and tilting her head.

She’s giving him time to dig out of this hole, but he’s not going to. He’s too used to saying everything he thinks, and he never thinks.

“They—uh, and your sister—” He tries to recover, but every new thought he says out loud he cuts short—probably realizing too late it’s all offensive. Bringing up Jolene was especially stupid. Mary can’t have loved that Justin took her to Homecoming and—until recently—yelled at every guy who spoke to her.

“Don’t ever talk to me again.” Mary leaves.

Justin returns to me. “See?”

I shake my head. So close.