

*The Best Laid
Plans*



ONE



THE FIRST THING I see when I open the door is Chase Brosner's bare ass, flashing at me from the bed like some neon Vegas billboard. Then I see the girl underneath him, hands gripping his back, and when I see the fingernails, I know it's Danielle. I was with her when she painted them, *black*, she said, to match her heart.

They're completely wrapped up in each other on the bed—Andrew's *parents'* bed—and I can't move, my hand frozen on the doorknob. This is not what I expected when I wandered upstairs, trying to get away from all the people who don't even remember it's my birthday, who are only at this stupid party because they know Andrew's parents are away on a ski trip and there's free beer. But now, as I take in the image of Chase's ass, of Danielle's fingernails clutching his skin, her dark hair spread out on the pillow, I realize this is so much worse than the party.

It only takes about three seconds for Danielle to notice me—

though it feels like three thousand—and then she screams. I scream too and drop my beer, which splashes onto my feet. We lock eyes as she scrambles for the sheet, pulling it up to cover her naked body. Chase tumbles onto the floor, wrapping himself up in the comforter like a human burrito.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, bending down to pick up my cup, wiping up what I can with the sleeve of my sweatshirt before it does damage to the floorboards. “I didn’t know there was anyone in here.”

“Get out!” she shrieks, and I do, slamming the door shut behind me.

And I know it sounds crazy, but as I stand blinking on the other side of the door, all I can think about is this: What if this is *it* for me? What if this is officially the first and last ass I’ll ever see for the rest of my life? When I shut my eyes I can still see it, bright and white, like when you stare too long at the sun, and I’m afraid it’s going to be seared there forever. It’s not a *bad*-looking ass, I guess, although I don’t have anything to compare it to. It’s just attached to a guy who I don’t even like—a guy who makes dumb jokes about his farts, who cares way too much about basketball, and who has an unhealthy obsession with the word *dude*. But there are certainly no other naked guys on my horizon, not with the way high school has gone so far.

I’m still there when the door opens again and Chase and Danielle step out of the bedroom. They’re finishing pulling on their clothes, and I wince as Chase zips up his fly.

“Keely,” Danielle says, her voice breathy. Her arms are wrapped around his bicep, and I can smell the candy sweetness of her perfume. She’s got lipstick smudged across her cheeks, her

dark hair messy like an unmade bed. I need to stop thinking of messy beds. *Ugh.*

“Hey, dude.” Chase lifts his arm into the universal bro-gesture to fist-bump, then brings it back down to his side, presumably remembering I’m not, in fact, a dude. Easy mistake.

“I’m so sorry,” I say again, backing away from them.

“Whatever.” Chase shrugs like it’s no big deal.

“Actually, can we talk?” Danielle motions her head toward the hall bathroom to our left. “Alone?”

“Sure,” I say, but my chest feels tight.

To everyone else it probably looks like Danielle and I are friends—which I guess, according to the rules of high school, we are. We’re in the same group and sit at the same lunch table, but we don’t really ever talk one-on-one. Looks like things change when you accidentally see someone naked.

“I’ll meet you downstairs.” Chase kisses Danielle in a way I feel uncomfortable watching, his hand just on the side of her boob, about to squeeze. She giggles and he pulls away, nodding at me. “Later, Keely.” Then he lumbers down the staircase. I can smell the stale beer on him as he passes.

Once he’s gone, Danielle pulls me into the bathroom. She shuts the door and locks it, then turns to the mirror, speaking to me while looking at herself. I don’t blame her—if I looked like Danielle Oliver I’d probably stare at myself all the time too. Her pale skin is luminous, her cheekbones model sharp, and she’s got big brown eyes that turn up at the corner, like a cat’s.

“You have to promise not to tell.”

“I won’t.”

“Good.” Some of the tension drains out of her. “I’m still playing hard to get.”

I bite the side of my cheek so I won't laugh. Danielle and Chase aren't dating yet, but they make sense: they're the beautiful people, the ones you'd read about in the tabloids if high school were like Hollywood. It was only a matter of time before they got together. So I'm not sure why Danielle is so intent on keeping this a secret. It's not like she was discreet earlier when she was laughing and chasing him in a circle around the kitchen, trying to draw on his face with her red lipstick.

"Didn't he just . . . get you?" Hopefully she won't kill me for the question. But here's the thing—it's pretty well known around Prescott that Danielle Oliver is—*was*—a virgin, and it's not because she's openly circulated the fact. That's just how things work around here. Our nowhere Vermont town is so small that even if you're barely friends with someone, you probably still know everything about them. I mean, we've been together—all sixty of us in the senior class—since elementary school, so secrets tend to hop from student to student like a twisted game of telephone. And the fact that Danielle has managed to stay a virgin for so long is probably Prescott's top news story.

I'm a virgin too, but this isn't surprising enough to be news.

I can see the moment right when she decides to tell me. She smiles and it spills over her face like light filling up a dark room, and she's suddenly so stunning I feel it in my chest. Her eyes are sparkling as she turns to me. I can see the secret brimming in her, like bubbles in a glass of champagne.

"Okay, so maybe he got me," she says. "Guess who's finally a woman."

"Wow." I'm suddenly unable to find the right words. "That's . . . congrats. Way to go!" I don't know why I've turned into a cheesy greeting card instead of a real, functioning human.

Wishing you all the best on your journey. Reach for the stars! She must not find it too weird because she continues talking like I haven't said anything.

"It didn't even hurt that much. Ava told me she passed out her first time, so I guess I was expecting it to be a little more extreme." She licks her pointer finger and runs it under her eyes to fix her mascara. "Ava is *so* dramatic." If Ava Adams were in this bathroom right now instead of me, she'd know exactly what to say. Ava is Danielle's favorite. I'm just the one Danielle tolerates.

"Do you like him?" I ask.

She doesn't answer for a few seconds, probably deciding whether it's worth telling me the truth. Then she shrugs. "It was time. I can't believe I was a virgin for this long. So embarrassing."

My cheeks burn at the casual dig. Being a virgin shouldn't be a big deal—I *know that*—but the fact that Danielle shared the label with me always made me feel a little better. If Danielle Oliver does something, it automatically shaves five million points off the embarrassment scale.

Ava was the first girl in our class to lose her virginity. She and Jason Ryder did it middle school grad night on the playground behind the big slide. I was horrified back then when I first heard about it. Sex was still something foreign to me, something people did in movies—and not even in the movies I watched. Then other girls started doing it too—Molly Moye lost it to one of her older brother's best friends, Jessica Rogers to a girl she met over winter break in Vancouver. My friend Hannah lost hers junior year to her boyfriend Charlie. They spent the night at his lake house, lit a bunch of candles, and played her favorite album. Turns out, even Morrissey couldn't save them.

When we first heard these stories, the rest of us were eager

with questions. What did sex feel like? Did it hurt? How did you know what to do? And now Danielle has joined them. Now we're seniors and the questions are drying up.

Now I'm the only one left.

I can hear the low thumping sound of music downstairs, a high female screech and peal of laughter, a crash as something falls to the floor—a water glass maybe, or a table lamp. I wince, hoping Andrew's mom won't kill us, because even though it's his house and his party, she'll know I was here. I'm always here.

Danielle grabs a hand towel and scrubs the smudged lipstick from her cheeks. I want to reach out a hand to stop her—Andrew's mom will flip out about a stained towel, especially after the broken *something* downstairs—but it doesn't seem like the time. She leans closer to the mirror and stares. And I swear, her expression is of someone wise—someone who will never again wonder if a boy likes her back, never again get a huge pimple in the middle of her face. Danielle has always been confident, but now she looks unstoppable.

Next to her I still look like I'm twelve years old, even though as of today I'm officially eighteen. I've always been ridiculously short, but now I look even smaller because Danielle is wearing these black chunky heels and I'm in my socks; I took my snowy boots off at the door like we were supposed to. I touch my hair—darker blonde than usual because I didn't wash it—cursing myself for thinking some dry shampoo and a ponytail were proper party attire. It's like I'm setting myself up for failure.

Danielle purses her lips. "Do you think I look older now?" She moves her head back and forth to check out her reflection from all angles. "Now that I'm a woman I really feel older."

I don't want to admit to her what I've just been thinking, so I cross my eyes, throwing back her question. "Do I look older?" I know birthdays don't magically change you from one day to the next. Still, there's a part of me that wants to feel the way Danielle is feeling—I want to be unstoppable too.

She looks at me blankly. "Why would you look older?" *Of course* she doesn't remember, even though Hannah brought cupcakes to school today to celebrate and Danielle said the recipe was too *eggy*. Even though this party is supposed to be for me.

"It's my birthday."

She wrenches her gaze away from the mirror and turns to me. "Oops, I totally forgot." Her hand catches on a tangle in her hair. "Chase was so sweet tonight. He knew it was my first time, so he didn't rush it." So we're back to Chase. I guess I can't blame her. If I had just lost my virginity, maybe I wouldn't want to stop talking about it either.

"I'm glad it was just how you imagined," I say. "There are a lot of jerks at this school. It's good you found a nice one."

"I know," she says, "Chase Brosner." She grabs my hand and pulls me to the door, unlocking it and yanking it open. "Remember," she says. "This never happened."

We leave the bathroom together and head downstairs. The air is warm, despite the snow falling outside, and it smells like sweat. We're almost at the bottom of the stairs when it starts.

The applause.

It's quiet at first, over the din of the party, over the flow of the Kendrick song playing through the speakers from somebody's phone. But then as more people notice us, it picks up. People stop talking, stop dancing, pause their games of beer pong mid-

throw, and join in, hooting and hollering and cheering. Somebody grabs the phone, and Madonna's "Like a Virgin" blasts through the living room.

Danielle stiffens beside me on the staircase.

Across the room from us, Chase is sprawled out on the couch with Jason Ryder and Simon Terst, a sleepy smile on his face.

Simon leans forward, practically twitching with excitement. "Not bad, Brosner!"

Jason Ryder takes a long swig of his beer and then pats Chase on the back, hard enough it probably hurts. "Guess she's not *unfuckable* after all," Ryder says, his words slurring together.

Danielle is still frozen in place, one heel hovering over the next step.

"Danielle," I whisper, clutching her arm, trying to steady her, trying to steady myself. "Are you okay?"

How has everyone found out so fast? We can't have been in the bathroom for more than ten minutes. Did Chase announce it the second he came down the stairs? Maybe he told Jason Ryder and Ryder opened his big dumb mouth.

"I'm fine," she hisses. But her hand grabs on to mine and she squeezes for just a second before she pulls away. She takes a deep breath and reaches an unsteady hand up to smooth down her hair. And then she bows.

The crowd goes wild.

TWO



DANIELLE STRAIGHTENS back up, smiling like she's Chase at a home game and we're all holding signs with her name on them. It's like the Madonna song is just her entrance music. I follow behind her the rest of the way down the stairs, hoping that nobody has made the connection between the song and *me*, how it's my entrance music too.

At the bottom of the stairs, Ava barrels over to us, grabbing Danielle possessively by the arm. Ava is tiny—more boobs than body—with pale freckly skin she keeps perfectly tanned even in winter, due to a passion for tinted coconut body lotion. Her hair was red once upon a time, but last year she started dyeing it different colors to match the holidays. Right now it's a faded pink from Valentine's Day, and it looks just like the cotton candy they make down by the lake in the summer. She's wearing the same bright red lipstick as Danielle, her ears decked in the same silver studs, and in her hand is the same matching purple phone case. It's a uniform that makes things clear: even if we're technically

friends, I'll never be able to penetrate their two-person club. Sometimes I think she and Danielle are so used to being exactly the same that dyeing her hair is the only way Ava can think of to stand apart: her one tiny rebellion.

"Did you seriously just hook up with Chase?" Ava tugs on Danielle's arm. "Everyone says you slept with him."

"Everyone says," Danielle repeats, her mouth twisted. "So it must be true."

Ava tugs harder. "I've got it from here," she says to me. And then they walk away, whispering to each other in low voices I can't hear. Suddenly I'm overwhelmed again by the need to hide. I take a hesitant sip of what's left of my beer, just for something to do. It tastes like warm pee.

Parties have always been Andrew's thing, not mine, and I don't know how he's so good at convincing me to come to them, not when I'd rather be ten hours deep in a Netflix binge. I scan the room for him, or for Hannah, or *somebody*, but I'm too short to see over the crowd.

I'm going to kill Andrew for throwing me a birthday party and then leaving me to fend for myself.

C'mon, Collins, he whined earlier when I insisted it was a bad idea. *We've spent all your birthdays together. Can't stop now.* It's true—Andrew was there the day I was born. Before, actually. Our moms became friends in Lamaze class, so we've been stuck with each other forever. Andrew's birthday was last week, and his parents took us out for dinner at Giovanni's. Not really the birthday adventure he had in mind. So now that they're out of town, I'm stuck with this.

I walk into the kitchen, narrowly avoiding Jarrod Price, who's puking into the trash can. There are cups and dirty plates scat-

tered all over the Formica counter. Andrew promised to get me pizza if I agreed to the party, and now the boxes litter the kitchen, covered in stray crusts and congealed cheese.

I gather up the dishes and put them in the sink, lathering up the sponge with soap and water.

“Please tell me you’re not cleaning right now.” Andrew slings an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into a hug. He’s always reminded me a little of a golden retriever—a smiling, floppy mess of sandy hair and freckles. Sometimes I swear I can see him wagging his tail.

“I just thought I’d get a head start.” I pick up a red plastic cup and run it under the faucet. Andrew whacks it out of my hand, splashing us both. His flannel shirt is already so rumpled it’s like he’s been rolling around in it. Which he probably has, with some girl or other. *Gross.*

“No cleaning on your birthday,” he says. “House rules. Besides, this is a red Solo cup. It’s disposable.”

“Don’t let it hear you say that. You might hurt its feelings.” I glance across the room to where Danielle is standing, surrounded by a gaggle of junior girls. “Do you think she’ll be okay?”

Andrew follows my gaze. “She’s Danielle Oliver. She thrives off attention. Things couldn’t have worked out better for her if she’d planned it.”

I think about my conversation with her upstairs, how she made me promise not to tell. “I just feel bad. If it were me—”

“She’s not you.” He loops an arm around my back. “Thank God. You think I would have stuck around her for eighteen years?” I let him lead me over to the fridge. “I got you those stupid watermelon drinks you like. Did you see them?” He pulls out a pink frosted glass bottle and I grab it from him with joy.

“And you’re only telling me now? I’ve been trying to drink this stale pee all night.” I motion to the keg, sitting on a pile of dirty beach towels in the corner, thanks to Andrew’s cousin who turned twenty-one a few years ago and has been supplying our booze ever since.

“I’m just trying to toughen you up a little,” he says. “Someday you’re going to find yourself out in the wild, maybe at a party with a host who isn’t so charming or thoughtful, and there won’t be any stupid watermelon drinks and you’ll think to yourself, *Thank God Andrew Reed taught me how to drink beer.*” He motions toward the keg. “But you’re right, this tastes like pee.”

Still, he reaches over and pours himself a cup. That’s when one of the juniors peels away from Danielle and comes up to us, touching Andrew lightly on the shoulder. Cecilia Brooks is always lightly touching people’s shoulders. It’s like she’s mastered some sort of secret code. I know for a fact Tim Schneider always does her trig homework when she asks, which is the kind of powerful I wish I could be.

“Hi, Drew.” She tucks a strand of curly blonde hair behind one ear and smiles, revealing two rows of perfectly white teeth. Cecilia’s parents are dentists.

“Hey, Cecilia,” he says. “I’ve been looking for you!” His usual line. Party Andrew has a different personality than regular Andrew. He always gets way cheesier when he’s around girls, and somehow it works. Andrew upgrades girlfriends like he’s upgrading iPhones.

“No you haven’t!” She laughs and slaps him lightly on the chest. “You’re such a liar.”

“He’s been talking about you all night,” I improvise, trying to help him out. “I can’t get him to shut up about it.”

Andrew steps down on my foot, indicating perhaps I've gone a bit overboard.

Cecilia turns reluctantly to me. "Oh, hi, Keely." Then her eyes go wide. "Oh my gosh, is that a watermelon Breezer?" Her hand comes up to rest once more on Andrew's shoulder. "I love those!"

I want Andrew to be above it. But no straight boy, it seems, is immune to the magical touch of Cecilia Brooks—especially not Party Andrew.

"Yeah, do you want one? I bought plenty."

"Really? You are so sweet!" *Shoulder touch.*

I'm glaring at him, clutching my watermelon Breezer with two hands, as if somehow his pathetic pandering will cause it to slip from my grasp, sprout little wings, and fly into hers. He grabs a frosted pink bottle from the fridge and cracks it open, handing it to her. She takes a sip, glossy lips resting in just the right way on the mouth of the bottle.

"So, Drew, I came here with Susie, right?" Cecilia says. "But she might be too drunk to drive. She's had like way too many shots of raspberry Smirnoff. Do you think . . . are people staying over here tonight? Do you think we could crash here?" *Shoulder touch.*

"You can definitely sleep here," Andrew says, and Cecilia beams at him. I can practically see the hearts in her eyes.

I know he's lost to me for the night, along with the rest of the watermelon Breezers, so I finish my drink and set it down on the counter, ready for the next move. We've been here before and I know my lines. "I'm gonna go find Hannah. I'll see you guys later." I wave and walk into the dining room.

Andrew chases after me, leaving Cecilia behind. "Hey, you can take my bed tonight, okay?"

“Aren’t you two going to need it?”

“It’s your birthday. You’re not couching it.” He grins. “Besides, we can take the guest room. Or the shower.”

“Please don’t put gruesome images in my head,” I say, hitting him on the shoulder in a not-so-delicate way.

“C’mon, there’s nothing gruesome about a shower. This isn’t *Psycho*.”

We discovered Hitchcock when we were twelve, stumbling upon a DVD of *Strangers on a Train* at the local video store. We watched it on the fuzzy TV in his basement, bringing down our sleeping bags to spend the night and pretending we weren’t scared. This led to a slew of basement movie marathons and the infamous time I peed my pants during *The Birds*. Now, whenever we see seagulls at the beach, or flocks of geese in the sky, he always says something infuriating about the air smelling like pee.

Andrew breaks into an impish smile, the corner of his mouth going crooked. He motions back toward Cecilia, his voice low. “Tonight, we’ll be *Strangers on a Drain*.”

“Oh, stop.”

“I can’t wait to check out her *Rear Window*, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ve got some birds for you.” I laugh, flipping both my middle fingers at him.

Andrew waggles his eyebrows. “Tonight I’m gonna show her my *Hitchco*—”

“My favorites!” Hannah crashes into us then, pulling both of us into a tight hug. “Are you guys seriously doing Hitchcock puns? If I didn’t love you both so much I would hate you right now.” Hannah’s grip is surprisingly strong because she’s been playing field hockey since sixth grade and has the muscles to

prove it. A hug that almost hurts is a Hannah Choi specialty.

“Oh no,” Andrew says, pulling out of her grasp. “If *you* don’t think we’re funny, then who will?”

“That’s why you have each other,” she says, laughing and brushing the long bangs out of her eyes. Hannah has shampoo-commercial hair—black and thick and bouncy. She’s gorgeous, which doesn’t do me any favors considering I spend most of my time standing next to her.

“Actually, he’s ditching me.” I lower my voice, nodding my head back toward the kitchen. Cecilia is still there, whispering now with Susie Palmer, her arms folded.

Hannah flashes Andrew a wicked smile. “Oh, are you and Cecilia Brooks going to do each other?”

“Yeah, probably in the shower,” I say with a grimace. “I just heard way too much about it.”

Hannah laughs. “If anyone can handle all the gory details, it’s you.”

“We’re not going to *do each other*, as you so beautifully put it,” Andrew says, all faux-offended. “Besides, it’s your birthday, Collins, so if you want to hang out instead . . .”

He trails off, and I can tell he’s waiting for me to give him permission to ditch me. I should be annoyed, but it’s not like I didn’t know this would happen before the party even started. “Don’t let me hold you back from love.”

He scratches his nose. “You sure? Hannah and I wrote you this birthday rap and we haven’t gotten a chance to—”

“That sounds excruciating.” I laugh, practically shoving him away from me. “Just go. If you keep ignoring her and talking to us, you’ll miss your chance.” I can feel Cecilia’s glare from here like it’s a physical touch. “I have Hannah. And leftover pizza.”

“Okay, cool,” Andrew says. “And I’m not ignoring her, you know. I’m giving her time to miss me.” He turns back to Cecilia then, flashing his stupid Party Andrew smile, and like always, it works. She comes into the dining room, sliding an arm through the crook of his elbow.

“So, Andrew, I need a partner for beer pong. Want to play?”

She begins to pull him as if he’s already answered her question, and he lets her drag him away. “I’ll see you two later, okay?”

“Have fun, kids!” I wave, and he calls back to me.

“My sheets have birds on them, Collins, so try not to wet the bed!”

I flip him off again and hear his laugh as he leaves the room.

“He’s disgustingly good at that,” Hannah says. “I don’t know why we’re friends with him.”

“We’re enablers,” I agree.

I know Andrew appreciates our help with girls, and if I asked for his help with guys, he would do the same for me; it just hasn’t ever happened. Guys don’t come up to me at parties and magically touch my shoulder. Before I can help it, an image flashes through my mind of Danielle and Chase naked and tangled together on the bed and I feel a little sick. I look around the party and try to imagine who I would approach if I could, who I would let lead me into the master bedroom like Danielle did. It occurs to me suddenly that I could do it, I could try to lose my virginity tonight, right now, on my eighteenth birthday, and then it would be over.

But there’s nobody here I want that way. Not Chase, who knows he’s the best-looking guy in our class and acts like it. Not Jason Ryder, who acts even worse. Not Edwin Chang, who everyone knows is in love with Molly Moye, or Jarrod Price, who is

pretty much always high. Definitely not Andrew, who is basically my brother and is currently wrapped around Cecilia like a winter scarf, whispering into her ear as she wriggles in his arms.

I've known them all for too long—since they used to pick their noses, have farting competitions, eat melted crayons and glue. It's hard to look past that now. I think for the millionth time about how college will be different, once I'm out of nowhere Vermont, once I get to the city and can walk down the street and be surrounded by strangers for the first time in my life—people who don't all look and act exactly the same, who won't know my parents or what I was like when I was ten, won't think of me as Andrew's best friend, as the girl Danielle tolerates—the least cool one allowed at the lunch table.

I shake my head and loop my arm through Hannah's. "Andrew said I've got dibs on his bed. Want to share the room with me?"

"Yes. Thank God. I've been trying to find a spot to sleep for a while, but everyone's claiming them. I tried to take the couch in the office and Sophie practically murdered me."

Here's the thing about parties in the middle of nowhere. There's no such thing as Uber, and you'd be an idiot to drive drunk—especially with the snow—so everyone spends the night. It's like one giant alcohol-infused sleepover.

Hannah and I head up the stairs, passing a wall of framed pictures from Andrew's childhood, pictures I've seen a million times and am mostly in—Andrew and me on Halloween dressed as Ghostbusters, fistfuls of candy in our tiny hands; Andrew and me in middle school, blond and skinny with braces and acne, the height of our awkward phase. Hannah taps her finger on one as we pass—Andrew's tenth birthday, when he and I got in a mud

fight. We're smiling at the camera, completely splattered.

She grins. "Think everyone has already seen these, or is there still time to hide them?"

"It's too late."

"I can't even tell which kid you are." I know she's joking, but she's got a point; I look exactly like a boy here. But there's no use hiding the past. If I can remember everyone picking their noses, chances are everyone remembers me like this too.

I spent all of elementary school with Andrew. I didn't see the need to make any other friends, not when Andrew and I biked at the same pace and could quote all the Star Wars movies by heart—even the prequels. My mom warned me of the dreaded "cootie" phase—of the day Andrew would change and decide he couldn't be my friend. But it didn't happen. Puberty hit and we somehow stayed friends.

There were awkward years, sure. I remember being the only girl at Andrew's thirteenth birthday pool party and being terrified to strip down to my bathing suit, wanting desperately to join in the cannonball contest but worrying my suit would fly off or my period would start. I remember posing for pictures with him at family gatherings, our parents casually telling us to "get close together" and me not being able to breathe from the awkwardness of it. I remember the time Andrew invited me over in seventh grade and I showed up in my pajamas, not expecting a bunch of other boys to be there—*cute* boys from our class—and I was so mad he hadn't warned me that I didn't speak to him for three days.

And then there was Andrew's first kiss, with Sophie Piznarski at the eighth grade dance. He pulled me outside the cafeteria to tell me, his face a confusing mixture of excitement and embar-

rassment. *Was this kind of conversation okay? Could we talk about these things? Was it too weird?*

During those turbulent, traumatic years of frizzy hair and braces, when Andrew and I were still testing the waters, trying to figure out how to relate to each other; when he was always surrounded by other boys, and every time I tried to talk to another boy it felt like I had clay in my mouth, it was a mercy I met Hannah. She was cooler than I was, and friends with Danielle and Ava—girls who, at thirteen years old, already looked like Instagram models. She invited me to sit with her at lunch, rescuing me from tomboy obscurity and the vulgar conversations of middle school boys.

I was worried my new group of friends would make things different with Andrew—that he'd feel weird or left out that I had a new best friend besides him, but I should have known better. The first time I hung out with both Andrew and Hannah, they bonded over a mutual obsession with Harry Potter, and soon the three of us were inseparable. They're both Gryffindors, of course, and even though I'm a Hufflepuff, they say they love me anyway.

At the top of the stairs we see Molly Moyer making out with Edwin Chang, the two of them leaning against the door to the hall closet like they might try to climb inside. Edwin still has a bottle of beer in his hand, and it's seriously close to spilling because he's trying to hold it steady and grope Molly's ass at the same time. Hannah is friends with Molly from field hockey, so we've hung out enough times for me to know that Edwin and Molly getting together like this is a momentous occasion, but for some reason I don't feel like celebrating.

"Is everyone in this house in heat?" I mutter under my breath, walking over to take the bottle out of Edwin's hand and setting

it down on the hall table, on top of a magazine so it won't leave a ring. He barely even notices, just gives me a quick thumbs-up, which I return, because I'm trying to act like I'm cool with everything. We edge by them into Andrew's room, and once the door closes, I relax. The place is a mess, but it's a mess I can clean up. The floor is strewn with laundry, and the bedsheets—green with flying ducks—are unmade and rumpled. Against one wall is the old couch I usually sleep on when I stay over. Hannah plops down on it while I sit on the bed, throwing her an extra blanket.

"So what happened?" she asks. "I was in the basement and I heard everyone cheering."

So I tell her about Danielle and the crowd and the Madonna song, the word *unfuckable* loud over everything else, as sharp as a blade.

"It's just so typical." I take off my woolly socks and flop back on the bed. "This place sucks." I'm going to college in California, which everyone thinks is crazy, but I need to be somewhere completely new. I'm sick of Prescott—the snow, the ice, the wind so cold sometimes it feels like it's actually eating you. All I know is I want to make movies, and Vermont is pretty bleak on that front. All we have are writers, snowboarders, and serial killers.

Hannah is going to NYU to study art, and Andrew is going to Johns Hopkins because even though he hides it well, he's freakishly smart. Johns Hopkins is in Baltimore, which is 2,646 miles from Los Angeles, which is 2,777 miles from New York. I've looked it up. Next year, we'll just be three distant dots on a map. That's the scariest part. I'm ready to get the hell out of Prescott, but I'll never be ready to leave them.

So we need to make the next few months count. All that's left are the *moments*—the big memories we'll look back on, the ones

that will matter when we talk about high school twenty years from now. When school ends in June, the three of us have a plan to blast “Free Bird” from Andrew’s truck speakers and point our middle fingers to the sky as we zoom out of the parking lot—one final *fuck you* to everyone and everything else. I already have it planned out in my head, can picture the rest of the school year like the frames of a movie.

“Next year everything will finally be different,” Hannah says. “I can’t wait to get out of here.” Hannah is Korean—one of only three Asian kids in the entire school—and I know it’s part of the reason she’s excited to move to New York. Her parents actually met at NYU and then moved here from the city when she was five, and she’s been talking about going back ever since, living in some bohemian artist loft. I mean, I get it. New York is vibrant and exciting and diverse. Vermont is one big bowl of crunchy white granola.

“Prescott is the most depressing place on Earth,” I say. “But I’m glad you’re stuck here with me.”

“I’m so happy you were born, birthday girl,” Hannah says. “And I’m happy Andrew exists too. He’s one of the good ones. He gave us this room.”

I laugh. “I’ve just been using him for his bed this whole time.”

“I actually don’t think Andrew would mind you using him for his bed,” Hannah says, waggling her eyebrows.

“You’re disgusting.” I make a fake gagging noise like I’m in kindergarten. Hannah has been joking about Andrew and me getting together since middle school, but it’s never going to happen.

“You know.” Hannah frowns. “I really thought Chase was a good guy too. I bet he didn’t mean to tell everyone about Dani-

elle. You know how Ryder is. He probably punched it out of him or something.”

I’m not sure if she actually believes what she’s saying or if she’s only trying to convince herself. Hannah has always tried to see the best in people, even when they don’t deserve it.

I pull back Andrew’s sheets and climb under them, not bothering to change. Hannah tucks herself in under her blanket. We lie still for a few seconds, looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling, and then I hear Hannah’s voice, soft and muffled.

“It kinda reminds me of Charlie.”

I roll over to face her, propping my chin up on my hand. Cheating-Asshole-Charlie, as he’s more commonly called, broke up with Hannah mere days after they first slept together. Turns out he was also sleeping with Julie Spencer the whole time. I know being in Andrew’s room sometimes makes Hannah think about Charlie because this is where we spent the night after they broke up. Andrew looked up how to play all the best power breakup songs on his guitar, and we scream-sang along to them off-pitch and at the top of our lungs. *You’re a Gryffindor and he’s a Squib*, Andrew told her. *You remember that.*

He’s not a Squib, Hannah said. *He’s a fucking Death Eater.*

“What Chase did is bad, but it’s not the same,” I say now, needing to believe it for Danielle’s sake. “She’ll get over it. She’ll be okay because she doesn’t . . .” I trail off, but Hannah finishes the sentence for me.

“ . . . love him?”

“Yeah.”

“Sex and love are supposed to go together,” she says. “But anyone who falls in love is screwed.” She reaches up to switch

off the light. “Falling in love with a high school boy is the single stupidest thing you can do.”

I wake up a little later when I feel a weight press down on the mattress beside me. Turning toward it, I crack open an eye and see Andrew sitting on the edge of the bed, his hair sticking up in all directions. He’s got my purse in his hand, and when he sees me he drops it, the contents spilling out at his feet.

“Sorry,” he says. “I tripped on it.” He reaches down to stuff everything back in then lies down next to me.

“What time is it?” I whisper, my voice hoarse from sleep. He glances at his phone, the light from the screen bright in the dark room.

“Four thirty.”

“Where’s Cecilia?”

“Basement. We were trying to sleep on the couch down there, but there wasn’t enough space. I kept sliding onto the floor. I bruised my elbow.” He holds it out for me to see.

“So you just left her?”

“It’s your birthday,” he says, like this is an explanation.

“You’re an asshole.”

“No way.” He slings a heavy arm over me. “I’m the best.”

“No, get off.” I roll away from him so that I’m practically falling off the other side of the bed. There’s a noise from the couch and Hannah turns away from us, snuggling deeper into the cushions.

“Shhhhhhhhh,” Andrew says loudly, slinging his arm back over me.

“No. You’ve got Cecilia all over you!”

“We showered, remember? I’m clean as a whistle.” He lets out

a soft whistle, as if this somehow proves his point. I sigh, but let him keep his arm on me, too tired to give any real protest. His phone buzzes and he lifts it back off the pillow, the light of the screen blinding us both when he clicks it on.

“Love poem from Cecilia?” I whisper. “O Dearest Andrew. O Captain my Captain. Why did you leave me all alone on the couch in the basement?” I can’t see his face very well, but can practically feel him rolling his eyes.

“She’ll be fine, Collins.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pair of tortoise-shell glasses with big thick frames, glasses I’ve always thought make him look sort of like someone’s grandpa. He always keeps them tucked away in his pocket, only putting them on when it’s extremely necessary, like he finds them embarrassing. I scoot closer so I can read the text with him. It’s not from Cecilia after all, but from Susie Palmer, Cecilia’s friend—the one who had *like way too many shots* and couldn’t drive.

Are you asleep? I'm alone in the guest room if you want to find me 😊

“She realizes you just did her best friend, right?” I ask.

“I’m not gonna answer her.” He clicks the phone off so the screen goes black. My eyes take a second to adjust to the dark, and for a moment I can’t make out the shape of his face next to me on the bed. Then slowly his glasses come into focus.

“Really?”

“You sound surprised,” he says, voice soft. “I’m not that big of an asshole.”

“Or you just have a massive crush on Cecilia and you don’t want to mess it up,” I say, grinning. “I get it.”

“It’s because her *conversation* is so stimulating.” He smiles, and I shove him, rolling away and closing my eyes. I’m used to this side of Andrew now, Party Andrew, who hooks up with girls like it’s no big deal, joking about taking coed showers like it’s something we all do.

In comic books, superheroes have this big moment—a spider bite or a puddle of radioactive goo—that turns them from someone normal into something extraordinary. But Andrew changed from Peter Parker into Spider-Man slowly—so slowly I didn’t notice while it was happening—the years morphing him from the gangly kid, all hands and feet and freckles, into someone girls find *cute*, someone with power over girls like Cecilia Brooks and Susie Palmer. And with great power comes great responsibility, so I try my best to keep him in check—to keep him from becoming SuperDouche.

Still, I can’t help thinking about how he’s so much farther along than I am. It’s like everyone else in school is competing to beat each other’s high scores and I’m still trying to put the batteries in my controller.

“G’night, Drewchebag,” I say into the dark. But he’s already asleep and he answers me with a loud drunken snore.

THREE



“**NOW THAT I’M** a woman, I’m going to order an espresso,” Danielle says from the driver’s seat on our way to Dunkin’ Donuts the next afternoon. “That’s the little one without any milk and sugar, right?”

“Yeah, and it tastes like gasoline,” Ava answers from shotgun. “Besides, you’ve put five Splendas in your coffee since seventh grade. I don’t think one magical night can change that.”

We’ve just spent all morning cleaning Andrew’s house—scrubbing down counters, loading and unloading the dishwasher, shoveling the driveway so everyone’s footprints and tire tracks are gone. Andrew’s mom is a bit crazy about the house—she refers to her bedroom as “the sanctuary” and spends so much time at Crate and Barrel, she probably gets the employee discount. So we know she’ll notice if something is out of place. The morning after a party is always a several-hour ordeal if you’re nice enough to stick around. Guys like Jason Ryder never do.

I have this idea in my head that things will be different once

I get to California, that the kids there are classy and drink wine with their pinkies out, that the guys don't get drunk on Keystone Light and try to write their names in the snow when they pee. But maybe people are the same everywhere.

We've been sent on a dumpster drive, so the car is piled with bags of trash we're supposed to drop—empty bottles and cans from the night before that we couldn't leave as evidence inside the house. I'm in the back seat with Hannah, who looks a little green, probably from the smell wafting out of the trash bags. Unfortunately for all of us, Ava loves musical theater, so we're currently listening to a song from *Wicked* that's about three octaves too high for the morning after a party.

"For the love of God, can we turn this off?" Danielle reaches for the stereo but Ava slaps her hand away.

"No! 'Defying Gravity' is literally the best song of all time. Are you telling me this doesn't make you feel something?"

"Yeah," Danielle says. "It makes me feel like I want to die."

"Careful," Ava says. "I could put on the one where all the songs are about pee instead."

Ava has been the star of every school musical since freshman year. She'll be at NYU next year with Hannah, and although their majors are different, the image of the two of them exploring New York City together makes my heart hurt if I think about it for too long.

"Is there one where all the songs are just relaxing ocean sounds?" Hannah asks, leaning her head against the window.

We're on a curvy back road lined on either side with pine trees. Prescott is full of roads like these, carving through the middle of nowhere. Downtown is only a four-block strip lined with shops and restaurants. In the summer, the nearby lake draws tons of

tourists: families with inner tubes and giant tubs of sunscreen, or hikers with backpacks and dreadlocks passing through on the Appalachian Trail. Fall brings the leaf-peepers, city people from New York or Boston who drive so slowly on the roads they're a hazard to traffic. But in early March, we're a ghost town.

As we pull onto a busier street, Dunkin' Donuts appears on our left, a glorious pink and orange beacon of all things good in the world. Danielle drives right past it.

"What are you doing?" Ava shrieks. "I need caffeine! I have a headache!" This is hard to believe from the decibel of her voice. Ava always projects like she's trying to reach the back of an auditorium. Sometimes people get on her about being too theater kid, but I kinda like that about her. She always feels everything totally and completely. One time in ninth-grade English she cried while reading this poem out loud to the class and she wasn't even embarrassed about it.

"We're going to the one on Base Hill instead." Danielle rolls her eyes as if this should be obvious. Dunkin' Donuts locations dot our town like confetti. There are three in our county alone, even though we don't even have a movie theater and have to drive almost an hour to get to a mall. "They just put one in right next to that gym where all the EVmU guys work out."

Eastern Vermont University, our local college, is known for its herbology department, if you know what I mean. Lots of kids from Prescott go there on the weekends to crash parties, but I've never wanted to put myself through that; a college party sounds like literal torture.

"What, now that you're a woman you only want college boys?" I ask Danielle, grinning.

"We've given high school boys too many chances," she says.

"I hate that expression by the way," Hannah says. "The concept that you have to get penetrated by a peen in order to become a woman. Like, why are we giving guys so much power?"

"And what about lesbians?" I add.

"Yes!" Ava says. "Chase Brosner does *not* have a magical penis."

"Thank God," Danielle says. "His ego is already big enough."

"No guy has a magical penis," I say, laughing. "They all just think they do."

"Have you talked to Chase?" Hannah asks. "You know . . . since?"

Danielle pulls the car sharply into a turn, ignoring a yield sign. "We both got what we wanted. He's an idiot if he thinks it's ever going to happen again after that show last night."

"He's such an asshole." Ava nods in agreement. "It's like Charlie all over again." She glances back at Hannah. "They act like they care about you, but it's all a big joke, isn't it? They only care about you until they cum."

"There's already a bag of trash sitting next to me," Hannah says. "Do we really have to talk about Charlie?"

"I'm just being honest," Ava says, her voice rising. "Isn't it depressing that none of us is still with the guy we lost our virginity to? When you care too much, it just hurts you." She turns around in her seat, eyeing me pointedly. "Keely, you're lucky you're still a virgin."

"Whatever. I don't regret it." Danielle pulls into the parking lot and stops the car in front of the gym, shifting a little too forcefully into park. We watch as a beefy guy in his mid-twenties pushes open the gym door, holding it for a girl behind him. She walks through into the cold air, wrapping her arms around his waist like she belongs there.

"It's only going to get worse in college," Danielle says. "You're supposed to be done with the awkward part, right? You're supposed to get that out of the way in high school." She looks right at me. "Being a virgin in college is like having a disease."

Ava was right about the espresso, of course. Penetration did nothing to change Danielle's taste buds, and after one sip, she orders something that's mostly whipped cream. While she and Ava wait at the counter for her second drink, Hannah and I walk our coffees back to a table in the corner.

"Danielle's just putting on a show, you know," Hannah says, taking a hesitant sip of her latte. "She's pretending she doesn't care, because Chase literally screwed her over. That thing she just said about having a disease is such an unhealthy mind-set." She fiddles with the lid of her cup. "Honestly, virginity shouldn't even be that big of a deal. We only make it a big thing because we put all this pressure on it. You shouldn't worry about being a virgin. Everybody thinks it's fine."

"That's the problem though." I set down my drink. "Everybody knows. Everybody shouldn't think it's fine, because everybody shouldn't know."

I went with Hannah to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* last Halloween, dressed up in wigs and corsets. When we first arrived, the show's emcee took a tube of bright red lipstick and drew a big V on each of our foreheads to let the rest of the audience know we were "Rocky Virgins" and this was our first time seeing the show. This is how I feel every day in the halls of Prescott—like everyone in school can still see that big red V on my forehead, like I never washed it off.

My parents have always been really open with me about sex. They very willingly gave me the “birds and the bees” talk in fourth grade, going into way more detail than was absolutely necessary at the time. The phrase “clitoral stimulation” will probably be seared into my brain for the rest of eternity.

We aren’t a town of churchgoers for the most part, at least not in the way you’d think. It’s not uncommon here to identify as “spiritual” instead of “religious”—to believe in an energy in the trees or to look for guidance from the stars. My family celebrates Christmas, but it’s always been more about presents than anything else. Danielle has always described herself as *Jew-ish*; she never bothered with a bat mitzvah and usually cheats during Passover, saying she could never last more than a day without a bagel.

I know in some other parts of the world, in cultures different from ours, religion plays a much bigger role in shaping ideas of sex and purity. For some people, sex comes with marriage. It’s not embarrassing to wait, it’s expected. Sex is a demonstration of love, something sacred.

But then, Hannah thought her first time was sacred. She loved Charlie, and he claimed to love her back. She waited for the moment it felt right. When he suggested they spend the night at his lake house, she knew what was implied. It was romantic, special—perfect. Until the next week, when he dumped her for Julie Spencer.

I’m not waiting for marriage. I’m not even really waiting for *love*. What I want is respect and trust. I want to know that whoever I have sex with will make me feel safe, that they won’t leave me for a junior in their French class, or never talk to me again,

or tell everyone at the party in a matter of minutes. I don't think I could handle a public humiliation as well as Danielle did. For that matter, I don't think I should have to.

Wait until you're ready, people always say. But how are you supposed to know when you're ready? Do you wake up one day and suddenly feel more grown-up, more like an adult? I don't feel like an adult at all. If having sex means opening yourself up to heartbreak, or ridicule, or pain, I don't know if I'll ever be ready.

"If it's this bad now, how's it going to be next year?" I ask miserably. "We're going to college in the two biggest cities in the country. There probably haven't been any virgins in LA since the eighties."

"We have six months until college," Hannah offers. "You still have time. And next year is our fresh start, remember?"

The little bell above the door jingles and a cold gust of air swoops into the store, blowing a guy inside with it. He looks college-aged, probably an EVMU student coming from the gym next door. I watch as he puffs into a pair of fingerless gloves, rubbing his hands together. He's all dark hair and clean lines, with warm chocolate eyes and hard cheekbones tinged pink from the cold. And I swear—he's the best-looking guy I've ever seen in real life. Hannah and I gape at him, pausing mid-conversation.

"He looks like James Dean," she whispers, slack-jawed. Hannah knows this because I've had a *Rebel Without a Cause* poster tacked to my wall since fifth grade. It's one of my favorites.

Our eyes trail him as he approaches the counter, coming up behind Danielle and Ava. He's wearing a leather jacket that covers his butt, and I inwardly curse the cold weather. I can tell the moment Danielle notices him. She nudges Ava, who stands

up straighter, hands reaching up to smooth her pink hair. They both turn to face him at the same time.

“You’re up,” Danielle says. Then she licks a dollop of whipped cream from the top of her drink, staring at him like she’s licking something else. Danielle’s stare is a powerful thing; she uses eye contact like a weapon.

“Uh, thanks,” he says. His voice is like warm, hot fudge.

The girls rush back to the table.

“Did you see that guy?” Ava hisses, probably not as quietly as she should.

Danielle takes a long frozen sip of her drink. When she pulls her mouth away, there’s a red lipstick mark on the straw. Before Danielle, I always associated lipstick with old ladies, the smell of powder perfumes and hairspray that always hovered around my grandma. But lipstick is Danielle’s signature.

“I should go back and talk to him.” She glances over her shoulder.

“Yeah you definitely should!” Ava nods vigorously.

Danielle looks back at him and shrugs, then walks to the door instead. “Whatever, he’s not worth it.”

It’s not like Danielle at all to shy away from a guy, especially one as good-looking as James Dean, and I wonder if Chase has messed her up more than she’s letting on.

I glance back once more as we leave, just to get another look at James Dean, and feel myself flush with excited embarrassment when he looks right at me. Then he lifts a tiny cup of espresso to his mouth and takes a long sip.

FOUR



WE'RE DRIVING AGAIN when my phone beeps. I pull it out of my pocket to find a cryptic text from Andrew.

Help!

I suck in a sharp breath, then text back.

Don't scare me. This better be something serious. Are you dying?

I wait a moment and my phone beeps again.

We're in so much trouble

I feel my chest clench, like something heavy has been dropped there. My phone begins ringing, playing a tinny, canned version of "Eleanor Rigby." I pick up even before the violins can start.

"What's going on?"

“Is that Andrew?” Hannah mouths from the seat next to me.

“My parents found the condom,” Andrew says.

“What condom?” I’m caught off guard by his words. The car swerves, and Danielle reaches up to turn off the music.

“Chase and Danielle’s condom,” he says. “They found the wrapper on the nightstand next to the bed.”

I can’t help it. I laugh. “Seriously? They didn’t throw out the wrapper?”

Danielle swears softly from the front seat, and I can tell she’s caught on, even if she can’t hear Andrew’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Your mom’s gonna kill you,” I say.

“Yeah, and she’s gonna kill you too.”

“What did I do?”

“Your parents are here.”

I sigh, the weight on my chest increasing. “I didn’t have a party!”

“Yeah, but it was your birthday. Obviously you were here.”

“Fine,” I answer. “I’ll get dropped off.”

I hang up the phone and turn to Danielle. “You left the condom wrapper on the nightstand?” I can’t tell whether I’m angry or whether I want to laugh.

She purses her lips. “At least we used protection.”

Andrew’s house looks spotless. When we pull up to the front, it’s easy to forget that last night even happened at all, that we spent the morning lugging trash bags across the slushy ground.

“Tell Andrew I’m sorry,” Danielle says as I jump out of the car. “His parents won’t kill him?” She actually looks worried. I want to tell her Andrew will be fine. He’s used to getting into trouble.

I'm the one she should be apologizing to. But she's craning her head out the window and looking toward the house, and she doesn't focus her worried gaze in my direction at all.

"Don't worry about it," I say instead. I shut the door and walk toward the house, my boots crunching in the snow. The car peels out of the driveway, the smoke from the exhaust leaving little puffs in the cold air. I can hear *Wicked* come back on from all the way down the street.

My mom must have spotted me coming up the driveway, because she bursts through the front door and onto the porch. Like usual, her white-blond hair is wild around her head, curling out like wisps of smoke. When I was little, I used to think my mom was a beautiful witch in a fairy story, with her long colorful skirts and the gemstone rings stacked on her fingers. But then I realized she's just from Vermont.

Right now she's wrapped in a purple pashmina to keep out the cold, and it whips behind her in the wind like a flag. I shrink back slightly when I see her, preparing for a lecture, angry words to match the angry whip of the pashmina.

"Honey, it's freezing! Where is your coat?"

The soft tone of her voice catches me off guard.

"I'm fine."

She grabs ahold of me as I get up the steps and ushers me inside. The house smells like garlic now instead of the stale beer stink from last night, and there's classical music playing—I recognize Debussy from when I used to take piano lessons.

There are bags of ski gear dumped in the front hallway, boots dripping melted snow onto the tile floor. Andrew's parents always close out the ski season in Canada for their anniversary weekend, and usually Andrew stays with my family while they're

away, but this year they said they trusted him on his own. I'm struck suddenly with the fear that if they're talking to us before they've fully unpacked, this must be serious.

When we get into the living room, Andrew's parents are sitting on the couch by the window, my dad on the love seat next to them. Andrew is perched on the coffee table, half off it like he's prepared to flee. They're all holding steaming mugs in their hands.

"Keely, sweetie, would you like some yerba maté?" Andrew's mom asks, getting up from the couch and heading into the kitchen, long skirts billowing behind her. There's a reason our moms bonded so quickly when they met—they're the same kind of hippie artist weirdos. "Robert picked some up from the health food store on our way home." She rummages through the cabinets and pulls out another mug. I smile when I see it's one Hannah made—she sometimes sells mugs at our local craft fair.

"Your mom brought us over some homemade bruschetta," she continues. Our parents are all vegans, so they're always cooking up new recipes. Andrew's mom scoops some tomato and onion mixture onto a little plate for me. "You have to try some."

I'm trying to get a grasp on the situation, but I can't. Andrew made it seem like we were in trouble when he texted, but my mom's concern, the smell of the garlic, and the tinkling piano music makes this feel like some friendly lunch instead. But maybe this is the punishment—being forced to drink yerba maté and hang out when we'd rather be literally anywhere else.

I look to Andrew for help, but he seems just as confused.

"So we talked about what we wanted to say to you," my mom starts, "how we wanted to . . . well, how we wanted to bring this up—if we even wanted to bring it up at all." My dad puts his

hand on her shoulder to show they're a Parental Unit and he agrees with her no matter what.

"We know these things happen," he says, running a hand through his beard. My dad has had the same beard my whole life, and sometimes I think it's his proudest accomplishment.

"A part of me has been preparing for it," Andrew's mom says. "I mean, really, we've always known this might happen, even hoped for it a little bit. We've certainly joked about it a lot."

"You guys are all grown up now," my mom says. "It's hard for us. You were our babies. But this is normal, of course. And you were being safe."

"We're certainly glad you used protection," my dad agrees. "We raised you right."

I choke on my tea, spitting it back into my mug as everything clicks together. They aren't mad about a party. They don't even know about the party.

"But did you really have to do it in our bed when there are so many other places available?" Andrew's mom adds. "You know our room is off-limits." She pauses. "Is that why you went in there? Was it some sort of *kink*?"

"God, Mom, stop!" Andrew jumps up, banging his knee on the edge of the couch. "That wasn't our condom, okay?"

The room suddenly feels hot and cramped. Hearing Andrew use the words *our condom* makes my stomach flop uncomfortably. It's just messed up.

"Well, who else's could it be?" his mom asks, and I swear she sounds a little disappointed.

"Are you saying you two aren't using protection?" my mom jumps in. "Because if that's the case, we have a lot more to worry about than—"

"We're not having sex!" I shout, jerking suddenly and spilling my plate of bruschetta. The tomatoes scatter all over the carpet. I bend down and scoop them up with my fingers, trying to clean, trying to hide my face, to keep busy, to focus on anything other than the conversation around me. I can't look at my parents, can't make eye contact with anyone—especially Andrew.

He bends down to help me, grabbing some bruschetta into his napkin, and I stare intently at the floor. His shoulder is an inch from mine, and I can feel the energy radiating off him, can feel the heat of our parents' gazes as they read too much into the situation.

"I've got it," I say.

"It's okay, I can help."

"No, seriously. Stop." I pull the napkin from his hands. He stands up, arms raised in surrender. Everyone is staring at me. I place the trashed plate back onto the coffee table while everybody watches. I've never felt so uncomfortable in my life.

"So if it's not yours, how did a condom wrapper end up on our bedside table?" his dad asks. "Did it fly in through the window?"

"We had some people over for Keely's birthday, okay?" Andrew says, sitting back down on the coffee table.

"Some people? Like a party?" his mom asks.

"No, like a casual get-together with some friends. What did you guys expect, leaving us alone on her birthday weekend?"

"A casual get-together with some sexually active friends, it seems," his dad adds.

"This isn't a big deal," Andrew says. "You're blowing this all out of proportion."

"Oh, am I?" his mom asks. "I haven't even gotten started."

• • •

“We probably should have just let them believe it,” Andrew says later. We’re slumped in the hammock in his backyard, cocooned in a pile of coats to keep warm. It’s still a little too cold to be outside, but the thought of being in the same house with our parents after everything that’s just happened is too unpleasant. “They didn’t even seem mad when they thought it was ours.” He pushes his leg against the ground so that the hammock begins to swing. “If I knew they were gonna flip about the party, I would have just gone with it, you know?”

So our parents are making us get part-time jobs through the rest of the year. They’re disappointed we’re not being, in their words, trustworthy or dependable, and they think getting jobs will help teach us discipline. Which is messed up. It’s not like I’ve never worked. I spent my last two miserable summers bagging groceries at the local market, making awkward chitchat with all my parents’ friends when they came by the register. Andrew is the one who’s reckless, who acts impulsively, who jumps off cliffs with his eyes closed. I’m the one who’s always waiting at the bottom with the safety net.

This is the last semester of senior year. Last year when I was stressed about homework and the SATs, freaking out about getting into college, I was always so envious of the seniors who got to goof off, joking with teachers and skipping class like it didn’t matter. But I was just waiting for my turn. I knew one day I’d be able to float through the hallways too like I’d already finished. Now our parents are taking that away.

Not to mention these are my last few months with Andrew and Hannah.

“I can’t believe I’m in trouble too when it wasn’t even my

party." I pull a coat tighter around me to stay warm.

"Your birthday, your party," he answers. "Besides, you're an accessory to the crime. When you see a crime being committed and say nothing, that makes you responsible."

"I'm not responsible, remember? I'm untrustworthy and undisciplined."

"Yeah, you're pretty terrible," he agrees.

The sky is a bright gray, giving the illusion that we're in a cloud. The bare branches of the trees above us stretch out like fingers. Inside the house, the windows are lit up by warm light. I can see Andrew's mom emptying the dishwasher in the kitchen.

"That was weird earlier," I say. "I can't believe they thought we were . . . we . . ." I can't say it, can't get my mouth to wrap around the words. Instead, I laugh, shoving him slightly with my shoulder under the pile of coats. "Your mom clearly hasn't met Party Andrew."

"Let's hope my mom never meets Party Andrew," he says, shoving me back.

"Party Andrew eats bacon," I say. "She'd be horrified."

"Yeah. *That's* the part that would make her the maddest." He laughs, snuggling into my shoulder like a cat. "C'mon, Collins, you wouldn't date me?"

"Oh, are you done with Cecilia?" I ask, pursing my lips. "And Susie Palmer? And Sophie Piznarski? And—"

"All right," he says. "Point made."

"It's a moot point really." I push us again with my foot so the hammock keeps swinging. "We all know you're gonna make little blonde babies with Cecilia. Little Sally and Bobby."

"You named them?"

"*You* named them, Andrew. In the future. I'm just reporting

back. Sally loves manicures, lip gloss, and binge drinking, by the way. Just like her mother.”

“You’re so weird.”

“She’s an adorable kid.”

He laughs and soon I’m laughing too, our shoulders shaking so hard the hammock shakes too. I take a deep, gulping breath, trying to regain control, and suddenly I snort. Andrew hears and loses it.

“No, really,” he says between choked laughter. “You’re the adorable one. The sounds that come from your body are just so cute.”

“You know what’s cute?” I snort again before I can stop myself. “Hearing you say the word *condom* in front of our parents. I think that’ll be seared into my brain forever.”

“Really?” he asks. “I could have called it a ‘rubber’ and that would have been worse.”

“A little raincoat,” I say.

“Hey—a *big* raincoat,” he says back, and we both burst out laughing again. It strikes me somewhere in the back of my mind that this is the first time it’s ever occurred to me that Andrew has a penis—that it’s there, not even a foot away from me—only hidden by a few pieces of fabric. It’s a weird, uncomfortable thought, one that sticks out at an awkward angle. I shove it quickly away, and then I’m laughing again and it’s gone like it never even happened at all.

FIVE



WE'RE SITTING IN Greek mythology Monday morning when Danielle gets the note.

It's an easy class, one of the ones basically designed for spring seniors, where you're always breaking into little discussion groups and everyone just talks about the weekend. Danielle and Ava usually sit next to Chase and some of the other basketball guys so they get maximum flirt time, but today they're with me. Danielle has been weirdly nice since the party—she brought me an iced coffee and a Ziploc bag of homemade cheddar scones before class and then sat down next to me like it was totally normal.

Making food for people is kinda Danielle's *thing*, and she's surprisingly great at it. She'll probably have her own TV show someday. One time sophomore year we were all watching *Kitchen Nightmares* at Hannah's house and Gordon Ramsay made some poor guy burst into tears, and Danielle said, *I think I'd be good at that.*

Cooking? Hannah asked.

Well, yeah, Danielle said. And making people cry.

I'm sure some part of her is using the scones as an excuse to ignore Chase, but maybe some other part of her feels bad.

Now, when she taps my desk, it makes me jump.

"Did you see who sent this?" She has a little scrap of white paper clenched in her hands. I take the paper from her and unfold it. It has five words scrawled across it, written in blue ink:

DANIELLE OLIVER IS A SLUT

I crumple the paper and let go like it's burned me. "I wasn't looking. Sorry."

I glance around the room for a guilty face, for someone who might be paying us a little too much attention. Chase is slumped in his desk on the opposite side of the room. I note the pencil he's chewing on and then look back at the blue ink on the paper. There's a chance he used a different writing implement and then slipped it back in his bag, but I really doubt Chase could be that sneaky.

"Where did you get it?" I whisper.

Ava leans past Danielle to whisper back. "We just found it. It's like it came out of nowhere."

We all turn toward Chase, and he must feel the heat of our stares, because he looks up and locks eyes with Danielle. He stops chewing on his pencil and cocks his head, the expression on his face unreadable.

"I don't see how anyone thinks they can get away with this," Danielle says at lunch, popping a grape tomato from her salad into her mouth. "It's like treason."

We're in the senior section, by the windows where the tables get the most sunlight. Prescott is small enough that everyone has lunch at the same time, but it means we're always fighting over the best tables, like we're vying for spots in a lifeboat. People used to care a lot about who they sat with, but now that we're seniors, we've all gotten over ourselves, and stuff that used to matter doesn't anymore.

Right now though, it's just Danielle, Ava, Hannah, and me because Danielle is keeping the note a secret. Before this weekend, I don't think she would have even let me see it. I know it's probably because I was there with her at the party. I'm fully in this now.

She lays the note down on the table, smoothing out the edges with a black-polished fingernail.

"Whoever did it probably doesn't think they'll get caught," Ava says, flipping her hair—bright green now for Saint Patrick's Day—behind one shoulder.

"Does the handwriting look familiar?" Hannah leans over the note and studies it. The letters are a mix of upper- and lowercase, some big and some small. Like someone was trying to make sure they wouldn't be recognized. Ava is always watching these true crime documentaries on Netflix, and sometimes she texts us articles. This note kinda reminds me of that—like someone is asking for a ransom.

"Don't worry," Danielle says. "I'll find out who did it." She smiles, then eats another tomato. I can hear it burst between her teeth.

"Hey." Andrew sits down in the chair next to mine, and Danielle snatches the note off the table, putting it away before he can see. Then she leans toward him, tucking a strand of dark hair behind one ear, revealing a row of silver studs.

"Drew, I'm sorry about this weekend. The, you know . . . wrapper." Her face turns pink. "I should have said something sooner. I can't believe he didn't throw it out." She reaches across the table and pats his arm.

"It's no big deal," he says, taking a casual bite of his sandwich. But the tips of his ears turn pink to match her cheeks.

"If you could just . . ." She clears her throat. "Could you not tell anyone about it?"

"Everybody already knows about it," Ava says, biting into a baby carrot with a loud crunch. "Clearly."

"Yeah, but they don't know every little detail." Danielle reaches over and grabs another baby carrot, flicking it with two fingers so it spins back across the table, landing in Ava's lap.

"Ouch!" Ava says, even though the flying carrot definitely didn't hurt.

"Hey, Danielle," a voice calls out from behind me. Chase is making his way over to our table, a backpack slung low over his shoulder. "Hey, guys." He nods to us. "Dani, can I talk to you?" He rests a hand on her shoulder but withdraws it quickly when she turns to look at him, her gaze icy.

"She doesn't want to talk to you," Ava says in a clipped tone.

"Ava," Danielle hisses. "Seriously. We're not in seventh grade anymore. I can speak for myself."

"Fine," Ava says, standing up. "I was just trying to help." She grabs her food and walks to the busing counter, slamming down the tray just a little too hard.

Whenever Danielle and Ava fight like this, Ava usually storms off and spends the next few hours with her theater friends, who she ironically likes to say are "less drama." But I know she'll probably be back with Danielle by the end of the day.

"I'll talk to her," Hannah says. She gets up and follows Ava out of the cafeteria.

"Sorry about that." Danielle turns to Chase. "What's up? Do you want to sit down?"

Chase rearranges the dirty Red Sox cap on his head, putting it back slightly askew. "Well, actually, do you want to go for a walk or something? I kind of wanted to talk."

"We can talk here." Danielle motions toward Andrew and me. "They're harmless."

"We can go." Andrew starts to get up from his chair. "You guys can ha—"

"Don't be silly." Danielle reaches a hand out to touch his shoulder. Her voice is sweet, but her back is straight, her movements stiff. It strikes me that she knows what's coming. Her armor is on, laced up tight. Does she want us here for moral support? It feels wrong—Danielle needing anyone's help for anything.

Chase slumps into the chair next to her.

"Okay." He seems caught off guard at having an audience. "So this weekend was really fun." He looks at Andrew for a second. "Nice party, dude." Andrew nods that special guy-nod back. "It's just—" he begins again, but Danielle interrupts.

"Here's the thing. I don't think you really understand what this weekend was for me. I just don't *like you* like that, Chase. No hard feelings."

"That's not what I—" he tries to butt in, but she keeps talking.

"I just kind of want to explore other options, and I really don't want to be locked down with one guy. It's not a good time. We can be friends though, right?" She pats his hand and looks at him, her eyes big.

Chase darts a quick glance at Andrew, as if he's trying to figure out what to say, as if he needs help. "What the hell, Danielle?" This is probably the first time a girl has ever spoken to him like this—Chase Brosner, star of the basketball team, the hockey team, *and* the lacrosse team. He's been everyone's crush since sixth grade.

"What?" Danielle asks, bringing a hand up to examine her cuticles.

"You're being crazy."

"I'm not being crazy," she says. "I'm just saying something you don't like."

"Fine," he says, his tone sharp. "We can be friends. I'm looking forward to it."

"Good, I'm so glad you understand."

"Cool." He shakes his head and pulls his backpack up over his shoulder, and then lumbers out of the cafeteria. When he's out of sight, her gaze hardens. Andrew turns to Danielle, looking at her like she's a puzzle he's trying to solve.

"But I thought you liked him."

"He was clearly about to screw me over, and I'm not going to let him get away with that twice. So I did it first."

"You couldn't have done that in private?" I ask.

"I needed witnesses," she says. "Now he can't make up a story. I dropped *him* and you both saw it." She takes another bite of salad and sighs. "I win."

SIX



HANNAH AND I meet in the senior parking lot after school. She's agreed to take me job hunting, per my parents' notion that teaching me responsibility will make me stop attending any of Andrew's parties; as if he would ever let me.

"Ready to face your punishment?" she asks. "Firing squad or electric chair?"

"Definitely poison," I say.

"That's how the cowards do it."

We walk together across the parking lot to Hannah's Jeep. She got it used for her sixteenth birthday, and at this point, I've ridden in it almost as many times as she has. It's stopped snowing now, but there's still a light dusting on the ground. The sun is out and the parking lot is white and glittering. For the first time in months, it almost feels like I don't need a coat.

I take off my woolly mittens—a gift from Hannah—and stuff them into my pocket. She knitted us each a pair for the holidays

this year, and mine are scratchy and lumpy and I love them.

“So, where am I taking you?” she asks. “Do you know any places hiring? Would they hire you back at Green Mountain Grocery?”

“I’m not working at Green Mountain again,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “Those were dark days in my life.”

“Where’s Andrew gonna work? He’s in this too, right?”

She pulls open the driver’s side door and I climb in on the other side, knocking the snow off my boots. As usual, the floor by my feet is littered with trash—dirty plastic coffee cups stuffed with napkins, old school folders and binders, papers spilling from the sides. Knowing Hannah, there are probably some essays from sophomore year down there, forgotten and disintegrating. I’ve learned to ignore the trash problem, which is saying a lot, for me.

“Yeah,” I answer, shrugging. “You know how his uncle works at the fire department? He’s gonna help there.”

She starts the engine and turns on the fan. “Wait, as a fireman? Are we okay with him doing that?”

“Just in the office,” I say. “Are you kidding? I would kill him if he got anywhere near a fire.”

“Does he get to wear a uniform?” She side-eyes me, grinning.

“Hannah, no. We’re not in a porno.” This is a new low, even for her.

“Fiiiine,” she says, stretching out the word with a sigh. “Can’t you help? His uncle is basically your uncle too, right?”

“Apparently it only takes one person to make coffee and sort mail.”

Andrew and I loved Uncle Leroy when we were kids because he’d sometimes let us climb up into his fire truck. But one time,

I ate too much fried dough and threw up on the front seat. I'm not sure I've ever been forgiven for that.

"That sucks," Hannah says. "Andrew throws a party and gets a glamorous job out of it, and you get stuck with the electric chair."

"Poison," I correct.

She pulls the Jeep out of the parking lot, tires spraying slush onto the sidewalk, and heads in the direction of the university. As we drive closer to campus, cresting the hill on Woodhaven, the same bright Dunkin' Donuts sign from yesterday comes into view.

"Here are some stores that have employees," Hannah says, her voice deadpan. "If you're lucky, they might need some more."

She turns into the lot and slides the Jeep into a parking spot. I look at the stores spread out in front of us, feeling depressed at the thought of working at any of them. At the end of the lot is an old sad Chinese restaurant, aptly named "Chinese Food Restaurant," the once bright letters of the sign faded to a sickly yellow. It's the mecca for Prescott stoners because the all-you-can-eat buffet is only \$5.99. I went there once with Andrew and Hannah in tenth grade, and we all got food poisoning and spent the rest of the night sprawled out on the floor of Andrew's room in pain, taking turns running to the bathroom.

Another reason I can't wait to get out of Prescott: better food. Last year, I went with Hannah and her parents to New York City to check out NYU. We all already knew she was going to apply—her parents pretty much never stop talking about it—but we wanted to see the campus for ourselves. We ate at so many cool places—breakfast burritos at a corner bodega, lunch at her mom's favorite secret ramen spot, and dinner at this amazing

Indian restaurant with food so spicy it made me sweat. That's what I want more of. Green Mountain Grocery doesn't even sell hot sauce.

Next to Chinese Food Restaurant is an old video store Andrew and I used to love when we were kids. I'm actually kinda surprised to see it's still in business. A while back, it started stocking textbooks to sell to students and then opened a cafe in the front of the store. I guess coffee and cookie sales have kept it afloat, but the new Dunkin' Donuts will probably put an end to that.

"I'm leaning toward prostitution," I say.

"Look! The video place is hiring." Hannah grins. I think at first that she's kidding, but sure enough, when I squint my eyes I can just make out the red hiring sign tacked to the front of the store.

"No."

"Let's at least go check it out." She pulls open her door. "This could be the start of your glorious film career."

"I'm not getting out of the car."

And then we see him—the guy from yesterday, with the eyes like melted chocolate and the windblown brown hair. *James Dean*. He emerges from inside the video store holding a big square chalkboard and then props it up on the sidewalk. Crouching down in front of it, he pulls a piece of chalk out of his pocket and begins to write. I squint, but can't make out what it says.

"Okay, maybe I'll get out of the car."

Hannah turns to me with sparkling eyes. "Do you think he works there?"

"Unless he's vandalizing the storefront."

James Dean turns in our direction, and we both instinctively back away from the window. He rubs his hands together and blows into his fingerless gloves, little puffs of steam rising in the

air. I can just barely see his shirt from here, black, SCORSESE written across the front in block letters. It's amazing.

I pull down the passenger-side visor and study myself in the little mirror. My hair is falling out of its braid, and it looks a bit like I've just gone for a run. But maybe James Dean will think I'm athletic. Probably not.

"Do I look okay?"

"You are a beautiful unicorn princess," Hannah says. "Now let's go." And before I have a chance to object, she jumps out of the car, yellow boots crunching into the snow. By the time I climb out after her, she's already halfway across the parking lot, easily maneuvering over the slick patches of ice.

"Hannah, wait!" I call out, trying to catch up. The ground is slippery beneath my feet, and I'm trying to go as fast as I can while remaining upright. She's almost at the sidewalk now, and turns once she's hopped up onto the curb. James Dean turns too, and from this distance, I can see that his cheeks and the tip of his nose are flushed pink from the cold. It's adorable.

And then my boot catches on a thin patch of ice and I slip, falling backward into a wet pile of slush. My elbow is throbbing when it hits, and I can already sense the bruise forming on my tailbone. I can feel the cold seeping through my pants—snow finding its way into places snow has no business being—but the heat spreading across my face is worse. This is not the kind of grand entrance I wanted to make. I lie back for a second, letting the embarrassment wash over me, avoiding the moment I'll have to face James Dean. Maybe he didn't see me fall. Maybe he turned back to the chalkboard at just the right moment, and I can still get up and scramble away and come back tomorrow shiny and new.

"Keely!" Hannah's voice calls, high and sharp. I sit up, dizzy, turning in her direction, and then I see it—a bright red car is sliding right at me over the ice. The driver blasts on the horn and I scramble to my feet. As the car turns sharply, slush sprays in all directions, and I careen myself toward the sidewalk. I land hard on my hip, bruised but out of the way.

The car skids around me, finally coming to a stop. The driver rolls down his window, his face blotchy and purple.

"This is a parking lot, you crazy bitch! What are you doing? Making snow angels?"

"Hey!" says a deep male voice behind me. James Dean is waving a piece of chalk at the driver. "She fell. Give her a break!"

"I almost ran her over!"

"Exactly! Maybe you should slow down."

"Whatever," the driver huffs. "You're lucky I'm not calling the cops."

"Yeah? Let's call them." James Dean's voice is firm and steady. "You almost killed this girl."

"Go to hell!" The driver clucks his tongue and backs away, slush spraying out from under his tires. And then he's gone. The calm of the parking lot falls over us, and we stand for a moment too long in silence. My heart is thudding like crazy and my mouth feels dry, adrenaline coursing through me.

"Are you okay?" James Dean puts a hand on my shoulder and I jump at the contact, still dazed.

"Keely, you almost died!" Hannah grabs on to my other arm. Her eyes are watery.

"I'm fine," I try to say, but the words get caught. I clear my throat and try again. "I'm fine."

"That started out pretty funny, but now I feel bad for laugh-

ing,” James Dean says with a slight grin, showing off a set of perfect dimples. “You should come inside. You want some tea? Coffee? Whiskey? We have it all.”

I let him steer me into the store. My thoughts are still fuzzy, whether from the shock or from the heat of his hand on my shoulder, I can’t tell. A little bell jingles over the door as he pushes it open. Walking by, I glance down at the chalkboard and see that it reads:

I SPEAK SIGN LANGUAGE

The store looks just like I remember, but maybe a little more bleak—the floor is made of peeling linoleum and illuminated by dim fluorescent lights. In front of us is a curved glass counter filled with pastries and bagels, and behind that the wall is lined with textbooks. The rest of the space is filled with DVD cases, covering the walls and piled onto rolling racks. Andrew and I used to love exploring those racks when we were kids. We’d pool our allowance together and ride our bikes here in the summer. Even though we could probably find whatever we wanted online if we tried, this place felt like more of an adventure. But then we grew up and stopped coming. Seems like we’re not the only ones. There are no customers or other employees around; we’re the only people inside.

“Is it usually this empty?” Hannah asks.

“We do better in the morning when people want coffee,” James Dean says. “Now is kind of a slow time. Hardly anyone’s bought a DVD for like twenty years. Mostly collectors. Vintage types. Actually, there’s a regular who looks like a vampire. *Blade*. Not *Twilight*.” He steps up to a set of barstools by the counter

and opens a little gate, taking his place behind the register. "I'm Dean." He runs a hand absently through his mussed hair.

No way. I look over at Hannah and see her eyebrows rise and her mouth open. She begins to laugh and brings her arm up to fake a coughing fit. *What are the chances?*

"Your name is Dean?" I ask stupidly.

"Um, yeah," he answers. "Why?"

"It's nothing."

Dean motions to the barstools for me to sit. I look down at my wet clothes. My coat is actually dripping onto the floor, a puddle forming on the tiles beneath me.

"I'm kind of soggy," I say. "I don't think I should—"

"Please, these stools are a hundred years old, they've seen worse."

"Actually, I should go," Hannah says, turning to me. "Now that I know you're okay. You're okay?"

I nod.

"Great."

"You just got here," he protests. "Stay for a drink."

She laughs. "This is supposed to be a job interview, actually. So I'm basically intruding. It's not very professional." She backs away, toward the door.

"Job interview?" he asks. "You want to work here?"

I shrug. "I saw your sign."

"But you two have fun!" Hannah calls. "I'll be in the car! Bye, Dean!" The little bell jingles as she pushes open the door, and then she's gone. I clear my throat awkwardly and sit down on one of the barstools. My wet pants feel cold on my legs. He begins rummaging through the cabinets under the sink and pulls

out two glasses, setting them down on the counter. Then he pulls out a bottle of whiskey.

“So, what was your name again? Kelly?”

“Um, it’s Keely.” I pull at a loose thread on my coat eager to have something to focus on besides my embarrassment and cold butt. Will I leave a wet mark on the stool when I stand up?

He unscrews the top of the bottle. “Would you like some whiskey, Keely?”

I glance behind me instinctively, like someone might be watching.

“I’m not allowed to have whiskey.”

“Not allowed?” He pours two glasses of amber liquid and then screws the cap back on. “Says who? If you’re not in control of your own body, who is?”

I feel a blush spread up my cheeks. “No, I mean, I’ve had whiskey before.”

I don’t know why I’m lying. I’ve definitely never tried whiskey. The only time I’ve even been tipsy is from drinking watermelon Breezers, which taste like Popsicles. Whiskey makes me think of Irish fishermen or old-timey cowboys—someone weathered and grizzled and clouded by pipe smoke, not someone like Dean with twinkling eyes and adorable dimples. The smell of the cup in front of me makes me slightly nauseated, but I lean toward him hesitantly.

“It’s just . . . I’m not allowed. I’m not twenty-one.” I bite my lip. “I’m still in high school.” My voice instinctively lowers, like I’m admitting something shameful.

“Cool. I’m twenty.” He shrugs. “But that’s just arbitrary, isn’t it? It’s your body. So why does someone else get to say what goes

into it?" He picks up the glass nearest him and holds it up. "If you want to drink whiskey, drink whiskey. If you don't, don't. It's as simple as that. So would you like some whiskey?"

He holds his gaze on mine, a smile in his eyes. I pick up the glass in front of me and clink it with his, then take a sip. He grins and takes a sip of his own.

It's horrible—sharp and sweet at the same time, like old medicine. My throat is burning and my eyes begin to water, but I force myself to swallow. As I do, a warm feeling spreads across my chest.

"Better?" His face is cool and easy, like the whiskey hasn't affected him in any way.

I cough a little. "I guess."

"It should warm you up. I think I have a dry sweatshirt, actually, if you want to put that on. You look a little . . . damp." He grabs a backpack, pulls a black EVmU sweatshirt out of it, and tosses it to me. Somehow, I catch it without spilling whiskey all over the counter.

"You go to EVmU?" I peel off my wet coat and pull the sweatshirt over my head. It's soft and warm and smells like boy, in a good way. I have a flickering hope that maybe he'll let me keep it, and I push the thought away before it can fully take root. I'm being crazy.

"I do," he says. "Junior. Film theory." He motions to the rows of movies behind him. "That's why I work in this fine temple of the arts."

I laugh, taking another hesitant sip of my whiskey. It still burns my throat, but a fluttery feeling is forming in my stomach.

"Seriously," he says, grabbing a DVD off the nearest shelf. "This right here is a relic of the past." He lays it down on the

counter in front of me and taps its case with his index finger. “We’re in a museum of the obsolete. We’re about to fall away to time. Just by being here, you’re a part of history.”

“Aren’t I always a part of history?” I ask. “I mean, everything we do becomes part of the past the second we’ve done it.”

He grins. “Touché.” Then he clinks his glass against mine and swallows the rest of his drink. When he sets the empty glass down on the counter, he rests his chin in his hands and leans toward me conspiratorially, like he wants to share a secret.

“Did you know that in the first movie theater, the first time anyone saw a film on-screen—it was this clip of a train pulling into a station, and the audience had never seen anything like it. They freaked out—ran screaming, panicking, out of the theater, because they thought the train was real; thought they were about to get run over, flattened, by this train. That was only a little over a hundred years ago. And now here we are: IMAX, 3-D, virtual reality, and these little guys are another part of film history. Like that train.” A lock of brown hair falls across his forehead, and I resist the urge to reach out and smooth it away.

“You really love this place,” I say.

“Sarah quit last week because she got hired at the Bagelry on campus. Said there’d be better tips there, which is probably true. We get a coffee rush in the morning, but it’s not great.” He shrugs. “You have to really love this place to work here. You have to really love movies. Sarah didn’t have the passion.” He lowers his voice to a theatrical whisper. “She was a *bio major*.”

I tell him about how I’m going to Los Angeles next year to study film. “I love Hitchcock,” I say, brightening. “My best friend and I, we’ve seen them all. We can quote every line from *Vertigo* start to finish.”

“The girl staring at us from inside that car out there?” He nods his head toward the window. Hannah’s Jeep is still parked where we left it, and I can just make out the outline of her hair.

“No. Well, Hannah’s my best friend, but she’s not who I . . .” I trail off, not wanting to tell him about Andrew in case he gets the wrong idea, like everyone else. “It doesn’t matter.” I begin fiddling with the end of my braid. “I don’t know why she didn’t just stay here.”

“Because this is a job interview,” he says. “Which you’re acing, by the way. Have you ever worked anywhere before? I guess I should ask that.”

“At Green Mountain Grocery, the past two summers. It was horrible.”

“Great! I’ll have to run you by Mr. Roth. He’s the owner. But you should be golden.”

“Don’t you . . . I mean, I don’t want to hurt my chances or anything, but don’t you need my résumé or, like, references or something?” I take another hesitant sip of my whiskey.

“Nah, I can already tell you’re perfect.”

I swallow and the whiskey spreads like fire through my chest.