ERASING SID MURPHY

by

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Erasing Sid Murphy

Colleen Clayton-Dippolito

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Erasing Sid Murphy is a young adult novel. It is the story of a tenacious 16-year-old girl named Cassidy Murphy who experiences a traumatic incident on a school ski trip. Suffering from post-traumatic stress, she develops an eating disorder. She eventually gets the help she needs and is able to face her various issues.
Chapter One

It's four in the morning and I'm sitting on my porch steps waiting for my friends. The streetlight casts a pale glow over my yard and I'm so exhausted that the snow is starting to shape-shift into an enormous feather bed and soft cotton sheets. I should go back inside where it's warm and wait by the window but I'm more tired than I am cold so I guess I'll just stay where I am, hunkered down like a frozen gargoyle.

I didn't fall asleep until almost two, just laid there imagining Kirsten, Paige and me on the slopes, ski bunnies on the rampage; no parents, hot guys everywhere. When the alarm went off, I didn't even hear it. My mom came in and shook me awake—Get up already, jeez, it's all you've talked about for weeks—then stalked back to her room like a zombie.

Finally they pull in. I grab my stuff and head toward the clown-mobile that sits all candy-apple-red at the end of my driveway. It's a car designed specifically for amusement or torture. Clowns, contortion artists and Kirsten Lee Vanderhoff, these are the people who buy mini-coopers.

Paige has shotgun so I stuff all five-foot-nine of me into the cramped but thankfully empty backseat.

"Is there time for a nap?" I groan.

Paige tries to hand me back a cup of hot coffee and a paper bag. I wrestle with my duffel, stuffing it into the tiny space next to me, and then take the coffee and bag from her.

"Rise and shine," Paige says, sing-songy, "no naps allowed. The party has officially started."

Paige is bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as usual: makeup on, hair done, a whole raring-to-go-I'm-just-happy-to-be-alive look on her face.
"What's in the bag?" I ask, setting it on top of my duffle and taking a sip of the best coffee ever poured.


Kirsten looks at me through the rearview mirror and says, "Compliments of Paige Daniels, Future Soccer Mom of America."

"Shut up, brat or I'll tell your mom you're speeding again," Paige says.

"No I'm not," Kirsten argues.

"Yes, you are," I say, "and there's a cop up ahead in the Malloy's parking lot so slow down."

"Shit," Kirsten says, pressing down on the brake too quickly.

Kirsten already has four points on her license. If she gets two more, her parents are going to dump her from the insurance and bury her keys in the yard 'til she's twenty. We pass the cop, all of us quiet and holding our breath, staring straight ahead like he can read our minds or something. He doesn't pull out when we pass him, so we relax and Kirsten turns on some music. Paige pulls out a wetnap from her purse and wipes down the coffee that slopped down her hand. The hot coffee and music and my friends' stupidity—it all starts to work its magic and wake me up.

She'll deny it, but Paige loves being the Type A, goody-two-shoes of our merry trio. She’s always there to pick up the slack and remember the details. I mean, wetnaps? Kirsten's right, Paige is going to make some six-year-old soccer star very happy someday. Some people find her tireless perk and nerdy tendencies a turn-off. Not me. I dig nerdy little Paige. Especially since I skipped breakfast and have a three hour bus ride ahead of me. I bite into my muffin. Banana nut. Yum.
We get to the school lot, park the car, throw our bags onto the luggage heap and climb aboard our assigned bus, which is freezing cold. I grab us a seat as far back from the PTA chaperones as possible, a few seats up from the Callahan brothers who are sprawled out in the back-seat like two kings. Sean's a junior and Devon's a senior and they're both on the wrestling team. They're pretty good-looking; not drop-dead-gorgeous-hand-me-a-towel-because-I'm-drooling kind of hot, but decent enough.

"Ladies, plenty of room back here," Sean says, patting his legs and winking at Kirsten. Kirsten usually gets the most guy attention of the three of us. She's blonde, has a nice body, and a great smile. Paige is pretty cute, too. She’s super tiny, about five feet tall and ninety pounds, like a little bookworm pixie. She only just got contacts last year after spending the first fourteen sporting thick-rimmed goggles. It took Kirsten and me ambushing her in the mall and dragging her into LensCrafters to finally make her ditch them. Still, even without the goggles, she radiates this I-heart-Harry-Potter type of vibe—like the glasses disappeared from her face but resurfaced in her personality or something.

"Yeah, you'd like that, Sean," Kirsten smiles, "but, sorry. Older brother already beat ya to it."

"Oooh, burn," Devon says, laughing, reaching over to punch his brother.

The Callahan boys are notorious in our town. There's eight of them altogether, if you can believe that in this day and age, and not a female among them, except for the mom. Kirsten hooked up with Patrick Callahan last year at his graduation party. The Callahan graduation parties are legendary keggers, there's one practically every year.

"It's all good," Sean says, "there's always more brotherly love where that came from."
"Yeah, I'll bet," Kirsten says, rolling her eyes at Sean, then squeezes into the seat with me and Paige.

"Brothers comparing notes over the dinner table," I mumble, "that's what you need."

"Exactly," she says.

Paige is squashed between us like a loaf of bread. I could seriously put Paige on my lap and never even know she was there. Still, I move closer to the window to give her more room.

"What the hell man, I can see my breath," Paige says, blowing out a stream of vapor. "There should be a law against this—child endangerment, inhumane traveling conditions—something."

The PTA chaperones start clapping their hands and barking orders, taking roll call, and passing out lift tickets. Then the bus takes off. After about twenty minutes, the heater finally kicks on and before long the bus goes from meat locker-on-wheels to rolling crematorium. It becomes so suffocating and hot that the excitement and chatter ceases altogether. By the time we cross the Ohio-Pennsylvania border, everyone is sitting in roasted agony, staring into the thick, sweaty silence.

"I'm so hot, I think I feel cold," Paige says staring into the void, her voice limp, her hairline soaked.

I look up toward the front of the bus at the back of Mrs. Winthrop's head. She's the lead chaperone and gave everyone strict instructions not to open the windows. She's about two hundred fifty pounds and sporting that Kate-Plus-Eight-But-A-Bit-Too-Late hair style that went out ages ago; swinging that fringe like she invented it.

"That's it," I say, "I don't care what that PTA bitch said, I'm opening a window."
I lean up and slide down the pane and call out, "Opening up a window, Mrs. Winthrop. People are getting queasy back here."

Immediately, every window on the bus is snapped down and an audible wave of relief sweeps through the aisles. "Just till it cools down! And no throwing things out the window, not even gum! Arms and legs inside, people!" Mrs. Winthrop yells out to no one in particular

"Legs inside?" Kirsten groans, "are we five?"

"Thank God we're not stuck in that woman's condo," I say.

"Yep. Dodged a bullet there," Paige says. "Once we get to the lodge, we'll be under the not-so-watchful eye of Cougar Di."

Kirsten adds, "And then the fun can begin."

Cougar Di is Taylor Anderson's mom and the chaperone for our condo group. Her real name is Diane Mason but she also goes by The Former Mrs. Phil Anderson of Anderson's Custom Paint & Tile or The Former Mrs. Rick Sheffield of Sheffield & Zuckerman, Attorneys-at-Law. She's a navel-pierced, botoxed, gold-digging, career divorcee who thinks she's Taylor's hot big sister rather than her mom. The original Real Housewife of Cuyahoga County and she's all ours for the weekend.

"Can you imagine being stuck in a condo with Mrs. Winthrop?" I say, "The Queen Bee Nazi of the PTA? It would ruin the whole trip."

"I heard a rumor she's brewing up some kind of game night at their place," Kirsten says. "She's brought a slew of pre-historic board games—Parcheesi, Backgammon—she's setting up stations around the condo for some kind of weird relay."

"Gak. Poor Ellen," Paige says, "she's been stuck with that woman every day since birth. She must be mortified."
"Uh-huh," Kirsten mumbles, rifling through her coat pockets, holding up a compact mirror and sliding on tinted chapstick. "These are the times when I'm actually grateful to be the by-product of upper-middle class alcoholism."

She snaps her compact shut and smiles matter-of-factly.

"Doesn't count if it's expensive, right?"

I laugh, even though technically it's not funny because it's so completely true. Kirsten's parents spend their nights and weekends smashed on imported wine and Grey Goose martinis, fighting like two drunken pit bulls. I know it really bothers Kirsten about her parents, so I throw a bit of my own dirty laundry into the mix, spread around the misery so she doesn't feel like a leper.

"I know what you mean; times like these I'm glad I have a deadbeat dad. No time to chaperone when there's only one parent and she's busting her hump to feed the kiddies."

Paige sits uncomfortably quiet. I give her a playful shoulder shove.

"What's your excuse, Miss Perfect?"

"Yeah," Kirsten adds, bumping her shoulder against Paige too. "Where are your parents in all this? Judge and Delores are always looking to bust up your good time."

Paige shrugs, half-heartedly trying to defend her paranoid, overbearing parents, "They're not that bad."

Kirsten looks at me with her eyebrows raised. Maybe Judge and Delores have decided to loosen the apron strings?

A moment of silence passes. Then Paige comes clean, "Bible retreat in Columbus or they'd totally be here—Parcheesi and Backgammon in tow."
We all bust out laughing. Then we settle in and relax quietly inside of our friendship, safe in the knowledge that when it comes to the family ideal, all three of us got screwed.

We arrive at the resort around eight a.m. Our condo has direct slope access. Just walk out the back door, slap on your skis, and slide downhill. We hit the powder at eight-thirty sharp, and by eight-thirty one, it is apparent to all who witness the carnage, that I suck entirely.

Usually I am more athletic than either Kirsten or Paige, but apparently skiing is not my forte. Three hundred bucks down the drain. Kirsten's parents, despite being high-functioning alcoholics, make decent bank. Paige's family is also fairly well off so it's not a big deal for them to spend three hundred dollars. I had to beg my broke-ass mother to let me join the ski club this year and all I got for Christmas was a homemade gift certificate wrapped in a neck warmer: SKI CLUB MEMBERSHIP WORTH 300 CLAMS. NO REFUNDS.

Kirsten and Paige push me to the bunny hill and work patiently alongside me for two hours, instructing me on various novice techniques that go by precious names like "making pizza slices" and "cooking French fries." None of their hard work and patience is paying off. For the hundredth time, I unscrew my limbs, dust myself off, and look up at my friend's faces.

"It was better, I swear," Kirsten says, helping me up.

"Right," I say, "face it, I'm a ski bunny reject. A ski-ject."

"But you stayed up a whole six seconds that time!" Paige says, nodding her head up and down, beaming a little too enthusiastically.

They're trying hard to be nice but I know it isn't fair. They'd be doing some world-class skiing right now if it wasn't for me. Zig-zagging down black diamond runs with menacing names like CPR Gully and Body Bag Drop Off.
"Why don't you guys go on ahead?" I offer. "I'll be okay here on the bunny hill."

"What? No, it's fine. You're getting the hang of it! Really!" Kirsten says.

I look at her flatly.

"Uh, Kirsten, I don't know if you've noticed but we've been here for two hours. For two solid hours, every trip down that tiny lump of hill has ended with me tumbling into a crumpled heap at the bottom. You guys paid good money to be here and shouldn't be stuck babysitting the vertically-challenged all day."

Paige's smile disappears, "But, you'll be all alone."

"There are other kids from school here," I say, "I do have other friends besides you two."

I look around for a familiar face. "Look," I say, pointing over toward the lift line at a group of snotty girls from school. "My fellow cheerleaders are right over there, just waiting to welcome me into the fold."

Starsha Lexington, Amber Franks, and the rest of the squad are huddled together like a package of pink marshmallows. They see me pointing at them, scowl, and then turn into themselves to whisper. They are probably sending up prayers to the Barbie Gods in hopes that I break my legs, so Cameron Fitzpatrick can finally be restored to her rightful place on the squad, the place that I callously snatched out from under her last year when I had the unmitigated gall to try out for cheerleading.

"You get onto that ski lift with Starsha," Kirsten says, "you better chain yourself to the seat, sister. Otherwise you're goin' down. All the way down."

We laugh but I still feel like a ski bunny reject holding back her two best friends who've been skiing since they were in diapers.
"Seriously, guys,” I say, “I need a break anyway. I'll go to the lodge and get a hot cocoa or something. I'll find someone to hang with. I'll text you later for lunch or something."

"Are you sure?" they say.

"Yes! Now go! Have fun!"

I shoo them away from me and they slide effortlessly off toward the black diamond runs. As I watch them disappear around a thick of trees, I think about how excruciatingly long this weekend just became.

I don’t go for hot cocoa.

I dig my heels in, determined to get it done.

I've been called a lot of things in my life—fat, obnoxious, snarky—but never a quitter. I work hard at the bunny hill and after about an hour, my body starts cooperating a bit. I do finally start to get the hang of it. I think the pressure of being watched and critiqued was affecting my confidence. I head toward the intermediate runs, skipping the easy trails altogether. Unless I plan to spend the next two days alone, I need to step it up.

Sweaty and nervous, I get into the lift line at Snowshoe Dip. I look around at people and spy a hot specimen in the crowd. Is he staring at me?

Snowboarding tweens to the left.

Geezers to the right.

Yes.

I'm pretty sure he is staring at me.

I take off my gloves and casually run my hand over my face, sure that I have something disgusting smeared across it. The slopes are packed and the grouchy crone running the crowded
lift shouts out for single skiers, pairing people up if they're alone. Staring Hot Guy bustles through the crowd and plants himself next to me.

"Hey there, how’s it going?" He says, smiling directly at me, beaming with that self-confidence that only the truly gorgeous or truly disturbed seem to possess. I force an awkward smile before looking down at my skis.

Our turn is up. We both stumble forward, shuffling like mad to beat the bench that is fast approaching our rear. Staring Hot Guy grabs my arm and nearly sends us both crashing to the ground but then right at the last second, the seat clips the backs of our knees and scoops us up in a tangle of skis and poles. He starts laughing which makes me laugh too. Ho! Ho! Ho! We are both laughing away, hanging on for dear life, up, up, and away we go, just the two of us, suspended in mid-air for the next ten minutes.

When we settle into the seat, he pulls down the safety bar, leans in and flashes his Colgate smile. "Apologies, I don't usually maul unsuspecting females in public. I'm new to this skiing bit."

"Don't worry," I say, "I stink, too."

"Dax Windsor. I'd shake your hand but I'm afraid I'll lose a glove or a pole."

He looks down at the snowy ground that is getting further and further away.

"Cassidy Murphy. Or...um, Sid."

"Nice to meet you, Cassidy Murphy."

I say his name in my head. Dax Windsor. It is beyond a doubt the coolest name I’ve ever heard in real life. He proceeds to talk my ear off the whole way up. Not that I mind this of course, because, well, did I mention that he's hot?
"So, where you from, Sid? No wait, let me guess. I can already tell you’re a Midwesterner, but if you answer three questions then I’ll tell you within one hundred miles where you’re from."

"Oh, like what’s the capital of your state or who’s your congressman?" I say with friendly sarcasm. Not that I would know the answer to that second question if he did ask it.

"No, not ones that are dead giveaways. General questions about what you call things and how you say things. I'm taking a course on shedding accents and perfecting the Non-Regional American Dialect. I'm studying broadcasting at Central U. I can pinpoint accents and vernacular down to under a hundred miles."

"Okay. Shoot."

Then slow and deliberate he asks, "What do you call a carbonated beverage that comes in a can?"

"Pop."

"Okay, you’re from Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, or Michigan."

"But which one? That’s a lot of territory you’re covering there."

"Oh, you don’t think I can do it?"

"No, it’s not that, I’m just saying that you—" The more I talk, the more I am giving him information so I cut myself off, zip my mouth shut, and pretend to throw the key over the side of the bench.

"Oh, a wise ass. Alright. Number two: Is it a drinking fountain, water fountain, or bubbler?"

*Bubbler? What the hell is a bubbler? And my confused expression gives me away.*
"Cross out Wisconsin," he says smugly. "So which is it? Water fountain or drinking fountain?"

"Water fountain."

"Okay, I already know the answer from the way you said water but I’ll go ahead with the last question. Shits and giggles."

"Well, if you already know the answer then tell me where I’m from, smart guy."

"But then the fun is over and I want to hear you say it."

"Say what?"

"The answer to the last question."

I mull this over for a second.

"Okay, I know," I say, "write it down ahead of time and when I answer the question, we’ll see if you’re right."

I hand him my poles and reach into my pocket and pull out a tiny pencil that I accidentally pocketed when I was filling out my ski rental forms. Then I fish around for some paper until I find a piece in my snow pants.

"Okay, here. Write it on the back of this receipt," I instruct, handing him the pencil and paper.

I hold his poles while he writes his guess down.

"So what if I guess correctly after only two questions? Do I win something?" he asks.

"You win the satisfaction of knowing you are Master of The Universal Accent or whatever you called it. Anchor of the Year!"

"Nah, that’s not good enough. I want you to promise to come to a party."

My heart jumps.
"A party?"

"Yeah. At my roommates’ uncle’s condo tomorrow night. We have this dinner thing tonight but Jason’s uncle’s leaving in the morning. My roommates and I are planning the mother of all blow outs. Bring your friends, roomies, sisters whatever. So long as it’s female and at least half as gorgeous as you. Just kidding, you can bring your ugly friends too."

"Ha, ha," I say dryly, but on the inside I’m jumping up and down, screaming Hooray!

"No, for real, if I guess right, you have to come."

He looks at me and he is not joking. It's a real invite. I start to get panicky as my mind races in circles. A party? I just met this guy. He’s in college. He looks like he’s in his twenties. He said ‘roomies’ so he thinks I’m in college too. Holy crap! Somebody pinch me. What do I do? Do I tell him how old I am? That I’m a sixteen-year-old Junior who rode in on a big yellow bus with the rest of the Ski Club from Lakewood High? That I have a curfew and if I’m caught breaking it, it means deep shit trouble and a guaranteed suspension? How do I politely decline without looking like a toddler freak? Did I mention that he is hot?

"Okay, deal,"

And I say it, not having the slightest clue how I will go about honoring said deal if I lose the bet. I guess I'm hoping deep down that he'll guess Pittsburgh or Detroit and I'll be off the hook.

"Cool. Alright, here we go. Ready?"

"Ready."

"And no cheating by throwing in a fake British accent or something."

I nod.

"Okay. What does C-A-N-D-Y spell?"
"Candy," I say, biting down on that first syllable to where it sounds like Kyandy.

I am trying to fool him into guessing Chicago.

He flips over the receipt. It says "CLEVELAND ROCKS!!!’

"You’re good," I say, looking at him wide-eyed.

"Yep, all that from the way you said one little word. Candy?" he says smoothly while pulling out a half roll of lifesavers, offering me one.

My favorite flavor peeks out the unwrapped end. Lime green. He takes the next one, cherry red, and pops it into his mouth.

"212 Snowbird Trail. Be there by nine little girl."

My stomach leaps when he calls me little girl. My heart hammers away inside my chest as I look out at the snowy mountain passing below us. I say nothing for the next few seconds as I ponder my unanticipated situation. This is the best-looking guy I have ever seen up close and he is interested in me—goofy, loud mouth Sid Murphy with my crazy red hair, bubble butt and obnoxious laugh. The busty cheerleader who was put on the squad solely to hold up bony-ass princesses like Starsha Lexington and Amber Franks. Always stuck at the bottom of the pyramid while the real cheerleaders dive gracefully from the top like size zero Christmas stars, right into the arms of good old dependable Sid. I mean, I’m not the girl who reels in the big fish. I’m the funny side-kick who gets the leftovers. I’m Sid Murphy: Designated Driver, Bosom Buddy, and eternal Wing Man.

"Okay. I’ll be there," I say.

Dax leans in, smiles mysteriously and raises one eyebrow, "You’d better come.

Remember, I know where you live."

It's during the lean-in that I smell it—liquor mixed with cherry lifesaver.
"Oh, my God! Have you been drinking?" I laugh.

He scrunches up one eye, makes a pinchy ‘little bit’ motion with his fingers and then puts a forefinger to his lips.

"Shhhhh, don’t tell the snow patrol."

I look behind me at the mountain below. We aren't on the wussy hills anymore. It's a long, long, steep way down.

I turn back to him.

"Are you crazy?"

"Certifiable," he says then pulls out a flask from his coat pocket, twists off the cap and takes a long pull of what I can only assume to be hard liquor.

"You’re gonna kill yourself."

"Liquid courage, baby," he says, wincing as he swallows another mouthful. "Whooo. That’s the stuff."

He holds the flask out to me.

"Wanna ‘lil nip?"

"No! I can’t be skiing drunk! I’ll be maimed!" I say, feigning shock and turning my blushing face away from him.

I look over at the top of the forest passing next to me. Some free spirit removed her bra and tossed it up into the top branches of a giant pine tree. Seventy feet in the air, it clings there, frozen stiff for the world to see.

He continues to work on me.

"Come on it’ll relax you, improve your game. We’ll be doing double diamonds by noon."
I eye him suspiciously then look down at his flask, then back up at his face.

God, that face.

I cave, take the flask and rock back a tiny sip and start coughing as the fiery liquid lights up my pipes.

"What is that? Gasoline?" I sputter, handing the flask back.

He slaps me on the back a few times and then takes another long drink before putting it away.

"Gasoline? I beg your pardon."

Neither of us has realized that the end of the line is fast approaching until the guy running the top of the lift leans out of his control booth and screams, "Lift up your bar already! Jesus!"

As Dax lifts the safety bar and readies his poles, he says, "That’s High Glen single malt scotch you're drinking, aged fifteen years, Little Missy."


And with that, he jumps off the lift and slides down and around the operator’s booth effortlessly. I stumble off and come to a ragged stop at the top of the mountain.

"Otherwise known as liquid courage!" he yells and takes off down the hill at top speed howling, "Yeeeeee Haaaww!"

We spend the whole day together skiing and falling and laughing our asses off. I text the girls and tell them to have lunch without me, that I've met someone. They text back: Where R U!? We want 2 meet him! I turn off my phone and go have lunch with Dax. If they come, they'll ruin things by mentioning high school and asking him his age. I know I should ask him myself but the stupid, selfish part of me doesn't want to know. The stupid, selfish part of me
doesn't care how old Dax Windsor is because, well, I'm having fun with a hot guy for once in my life and screw it, I don't wanna know.

I mean… he's probably not that much older.

He buys me a coke and burger and we split a tray of chili-cheese fries at this ski-in cafeteria place. We talk about his classes and his dickhead roommates and my friends and books we've read, shows we like. I keep my end of it all very vague and non-committal, so he can't pin me down to anything age-related.

Around five, it starts getting darker, and I can no longer avoid the fact that I am, indeed, not here with Dax Windsor, Sexiest-Man-Alive, but on a ski trip with my stupid high school. I need to check in or they'll send the fun-sucking, PTA mom-patrol out hunting for me.

Dax makes me promise again to come to his party the next night. He gives me a sweet little peck on the cheek—quick, like he's almost embarrassed—and then he skis away saying, "Nine o'clock. Remember, I know where you live!"

I text the girls and head back to the condo.

________________

It's Saturday evening and despite my best efforts, I had zero luck talking Kirsten and Paige into sneaking out with me for the party. I tried to enjoy the day skiing with them, suffered black diamond runs, and nearly broke every bone in my body to get on their good sides. I kept looking for Dax on the slopes thinking that maybe if the girls actually met him, he could charm them into coming. But it's a big resort and if you don’t know where to look, it’s impossible to find someone.

It's dinner time and I have severe butterflies. I can barely eat. This is a shame because the buffet in the main lodge looks and smells like some kind of cinematic food mirage; a
sprawling wonderland of animal-shaped breads, chocolate fountain, a team of smiling puffy-hat chef-people carving up juicy slabs of roast beef and smack dab in the middle of everything is a revolving ice sculpture of a giant Yeti on skis. It’s a culinary opus, indeed.

Yet none of it appeals to me. I load up my plate and pick, pick, pick, pretending to be interested in Kirsten and Paige's conversation about some boys we go to school with who are staying in another condo, but all I can think about is Dax and the party. I push the food around on my plate and think about how blue his eyes are. After a while, a bread roll shaped like a headless bear comes waddling onto my plate.

"Hello there, Sid. Have you seen my head? It was just here a minute ago…"

Kirsten is trying to make me laugh. I force a smile.

"Alright, seriously," she says, irritated, tossing the headless bear onto her plate. "You said he goes to college in New York. So let's just forget for a moment that Mr. Perfect lives two states away. I mean, you don't even know the guy. Plus, he's old. He's probably married with like, fifty kids."

"He's not old-old," I say, "He’s in college. And please, like you should talk. Uh…Patrick Callahan?"

"Right. I hooked up with Pat when he'd just graduated and I was a sophomore. He's two years older and I've known him since grade school. Your college man is a total stranger. I mean, you look older than sixteen, I'll give you that, but you’re still just sixteen. What future is there in it? Your mom's cool, but she's not that cool."

Paige comes walking back from one of her numerous trips up to the five-star feeding trough. She has a tapeworm, I swear. Also, she's doesn't like a messy plate so only picks out about two or three items at a time. All her food is sectioned off into symmetrical neat piles on
her plate. As she sits down, she catches the last bit of conversation but instantly knows what we're talking about. She shakes out her napkin and lays it gently on her lap.

"She's right, Sid. Sorry. A college guy? Katherine would freak."

"Uh, yah. And I mean completely out," Kirsten adds, piercing a grape tomato with her fork and sliding it into her mouth.

I hate to admit it, but they're right. My mom might let me date a college freshman but Dax looks older than that. Twenty at least. But I don't care. And…well…maybe he's not in his twenties. Maybe he's like me. Maybe he just looks older than he really is. Kirsten spreads some butter onto her headless bear and keeps on talking.

"There are a ton of guys here from school. Go for Rafe Summers or Joey Thacker. Both are single and conveniently still in high school."

I glare at her.

"Oh yes, that’s it, Rafe Summers and Joey Thacker. I'll just call them right up." I reach dramatically into the coat that is hanging on the back of my chair and pull out my cell. I start banging away at random numbers, concentrating extra hard.

"What's old Rafey's number again? Oh, hello there! Is this Rafe Summers? The guy who pushed me off the slide in fourth grade? Split both my knees open?"

I punch in some more numbers, "Joey! Baby! Cassidy Murphy. You know, Sid. The girl you called the Amazon Leprechaun every day of middle school?"

I shoot Kirsten the dirty eyeball, "…along with every other awful name he and his friends could think up that contained the word tit."

I slam the phone down on the table, "Yes, let me just give them a shout out. I'm sure they'll be thrilled to hear from Tits McGee, or Murphy McTitties, or Siddy-Siddy-Big-Fat-Titty."
Paige starts choking on her applesauce, trying not to laugh.

"Oh, please, that was ages ago," Kirsten argues, also trying not to laugh. "And they gave you shit back then because none of them had ever seen an actual live girl-boob yet. And everyone knows redheads are sitting ducks when they're young. But when guys grow up, they think redheads are hot. Especially ones with big racks."

"Miss Beauty 101," I say, settling back into my chair and folding my arms over my ample chest. Then, I gesture to her with my hand, "Oh, please. Do go on. I'm learning so many new and insightful things about myself."

"Sorry, but she's got a point," Paige says. "You know we love your crazy red hair but red-headed middle schooler with big boobs? Might as well have a target tattooed on your forehead. And since your hair is curly, you were triple-screwed." Then she shrugs, "But guys grow out of that stuff. Eventually, they learn to appreciate the rarer breeds, girls who look different from everyone else."

I'm seriously going to knock their heads together. It's like they've ripped a page from my mother's Puberty Pep Talk Manual and are reading it word for word. Katherine would be so proud. I sigh and look down at my food while they continue to diagnose my sickly excuse of a love life. The puddle of gravy in my volcano of mashed potatoes is starting to form a skin.

"Also," Paige says, "I think it was because you were taller than every boy in the state of Ohio. It made them feel like you could beat them up or something. Emasculating. That means—"

"I know what it means!"

"—anyway, they've caught up with you now." Then she pauses, scrunches her nose a little, "Well, Rafe has anyway."
That's it, I've heard enough. I stab my fork into a piece of prime rib, pick up my knife, and start sawing at it like a fallen tree branch.

Kirsten gives me a teasing shove to the head, "Come on, lighten up already."

I shove the beef into my mouth and carry on talking with my mouth full. I don't care if it's piggish. No boys here like me anyway.

"Height, boobs, hair? Those are the least of my worries," I say, pointing my fork toward my backside. "Presently, it's the ass that's the problem. No teenage boy wants to date a girl with a fatter ass than his."

"Hold on, girlie. You are not fat," Paige says. "You're voluptuous. Stacked. I mean, if you're fat, then Scarlett Johannson's a beast. Yeah, you're built big but in a good way. Hourglassy. Like a 50's pin-up girl or that plus-sized girl who placed third in Next Top Model. Oh! Or that chick with the blue hair on Dark Realms. She's totally hot."

I look at her like she's crazy, "Who?"

She stutters, "You know, on, um, SyFy. Velandra, I think her name is? Or Selandra...something like that. You have her eyes come to think of it. Big, green witchy Medusa eyes. Only her eyes have the power to bewilder. She can stun you into a life of endless stupidity with just one—" she stops, stumbles, and starts walking it back.

"—I mean, I've only seen it once or twice while babysitting the Newman kids. They're really into it." And suddenly, she has become deeply interested in removing the lip gloss smudge on her water glass.

I smile.

"Uh, huh. Just blew your cover, gamer girl," I say.

"For like the millionth time," Kirsten adds, laughing.
"I'm not a gamer!" Paige barks.

"Please, gamer," I say, "Come out of your gamer closet already. Coast is clear. Nobody cares."

"Oh, I can name two people who'd care," Kirsten says, "Judge and Delores might send Paige for an exorcism if they found that stack of fantasy novels stashed in her locker."

It's true; Paige’s parents think fantasy novels and role-playing games are some kind of gateway to devil worship. Like pretending you’re a wizard or fairy will turn you crazy in the head and after too much exposure you'll be drinking your own blood and stabbing cats with jeweled daggers. They think Halloween is the devil's birthday and don't have cable for fear of the fantastical creatures that might come charging out of the TV screen—vampires, witches, clairvoyant teens who commune with the dead, even superheroes and talking Disney animals are suspect.

I pat Paige on the knee and with a wicked grin say, "Don't worry, your secret's safe with us."

"Ooh, burn" Kirsten says, taking a big bite of potatoes.

Paige wipes her mouth in a huff, crumples her napkin and throws it on the table. She leans toward Kirsten, "I'm sorry, but how did we start talking about this, again? Oh, I remember, we were talking about Sid's unique ability to repel even the most retarded of teenage boys."

Kirsten slaps the table, "Oooh, double burn. Good one, P."

"Yeah," I say, tearing a piece of bread off with my teeth. "But then we switched topics to your unique ability to attract half-orc magic users."
Paige's eyes narrow, she's starting to get mad for real. And I'm starting to get vicious for real. But I can't help it, it makes me feel better, pointing out someone else's freakishness.

"Okay, let's not fight," Kirsten says. "We're all friends here, remember?"

We sit and sulk for a minute. Finally, I speak.

"Sorry, runt," I mumble, "You know I love ya. Even if you're a closet gamer."

"Me too," she mumbles back, "Even if you're a Siddy-Siddy-Big-Fat-Titty."

We all start laughing and I eventually have to cover up my big, obnoxious mouth with my hand. It's pretty fancy in here and our classmates at other tables are shooting me dirty looks.

"Okay. Seriously, let's think," Kirsten says. "Who do we know that is a.) available or b.) willing to cheat and then dump their girlfriend for Sid?"

"Uh, nobody. Trust me," I say, picking up my water goblet and taking a swig. "I've scoured the yearbook quite thoroughly."

And that's the suck ass truth of it. The only males that have ever shown interest in me were and are, like Dax Windsor, older. A problem since age eleven. Yes, you heard me, eleven. The summer I turned eleven, I was attacked by mutant hormones. They invaded my body and sent all the baby fat in my belly, limbs, and face screaming directly into my boobs, hips, and ass. I filled out so fast, I actually got stretch marks. The boys my own age either dove for cover or sat around thinking up funny tit names to call me. But I'd get all kinds of lusty looks from older guys—teachers, coaches, neighbors, old farts in grocery stores. As if the height and hair weren't enough? It was humiliating, shopping for a C cup in the sixth grade and then a double D by eighth. Kirsten finally gets it that I'm stuck on Dax and won't be moving an inch toward her line of thinking.

"Alright, if you're so nutty about this Dexter, guy—"
"Dax!"

"Dax…then why didn't you get his cell number? That way you could've met up with him today instead of sneaking out after curfew."

"Because his cell won't pick up a signal here so he didn't bother bringing it." I pick my cell up and wave it around. "We're in the mountains, Kirsten. I'm working off one bar over here, two if I stand on one leg and hold it over my head. Your cell shits out every time you try to call home. So, if I don't show up tonight, Dax Windsor is nothing more than a distant memory. I'll never see him again."

"Well, you can Facebook him when you get home," she says, digging into her mashed potatoes with finality, "Because no way are you going to some frat party after curfew alone. I'll hogtie you and sit on you all night if I have to."

Screw it, I give up. They aren't going and I'm too chicken to go alone, so that's the end of it. I push my plate away, get up, and skulk over to the dessert bar. I start piling it on higher than Snow Ridge Mountain.

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Dinner ends and everyone goes back to the condos. After a while, Cougar Di becomes so engrossed in gossiping with her daughter’s friends and playing the role of Cool Mom that she is completely unaware of the illegal behavior going on around her; oblivious to the cooler of beer hidden in the woods out back and the fact that couples are making out in every corner of the house.

I grab a pop from the fridge and head toward the basement. I open the wrong door, the door to a dark pantry, and interrupt a couple of lovebirds in the early stages of molesting one another.
"God. Creep much?" the girl says, yanking her top down. I'd know that voice anywhere, it's my fellow cheerleader and arch-nemesis, Starsha Lexington. Starsha and I hate each other. We've always hated each other. Openly. Since we were young. Since we were little girls fighting over the kitchen play set in the kindergarten room. Starsha Lexington, Goldilocks, snatching toys off any girl who looked like she might be having a good time. Sid Murphy, tangle-headed shrew, crying foul and hitting Starsha over the head with pink plastic frying pans. It always ended the same: with me being sent to the time-out chair to think about my poor choices and Starsha being sent to the art table to draw about her hurt feelings.

Between the guilt from stuffing my face with ice-cream at dinner and the realization that I will never see Dax Windsor again, I'm feeling extra spiteful and ready to brawl. So, I open the pantry door wider. I lean in and grab the light bulb string, snap it on, and look hard at Tate who's blinking from the bright light, his face smeared with Starsha's lipstick.

"Before you go any further, Tate. I feel it my duty to inform you that your girlfriend has a festering case of crabs. Unfortunately, I have a bird's eye view while holding her up during pyramids. I'm not sure what else is going on down there, but if I were you, I'd wear a condom."

I try to shut the door but Starsha jumps forward and starts pushing from the other side, we're fighting with the door and she's pretty much gnashing her teeth at me. "Jealous, virgin?" she says. "Just because you can't get your fat ass laid doesn't mean you have to hate on skinny girls who can."

I push back harder and the door closes shut. I lean on the handle so she can't get it open. She starts pounding and calling me names through the door.
"Better yet, Tate!" I say, loudly. "Wear *two* condoms. The funk is making your bony ass girlfriend abnormally ill-tempered. And that's saying something since she's the biggest bitch at Lakewood."

"Open this door, you psycho!" she says.

Starsha's Football Romeo finally comes to her defense, "Alright, enough. You're strong, Sid, we get it. But I'm about to kick this door open and send your big ass flying, got it?"

Things go quiet for a second. I let go of the handle and make a dash for the basement, yelling "Wrap it before you tap it!"

She yells her favorite name for me, "Ginger Bitch!"

They don't come after me. The closet hump session has been put on hold long enough. I skip down to the basement, feeling slightly warm and fuzzy inside. Is it wrong to feel this good about hating someone?

My mood takes a sharp downward spiral when I get to the basement and survey the landscape, cogitating about how my night's going to play out from here. Some senior boys are shooting pool and playing foosball in the lower rec room while a gaggle of junior girls, Kirsten and Paige included, buzz around them like bees at a honey pot. I slump into a Papasan chair and sulk.

I think about my mom and about Kirsten, Paige and the Puberty Pep Talks. What they said about older guys appreciating girls who look different, fair-skinned redheads with curly hair. Big, tall, busty girls with meat on their bones.

I look around the basement again. At all the boys who love all the girls with their perfectly straight, flat-ironed blonde and brunette hair and perfectly-proportioned bodies. Whatever maturity switch that is supposed to go off in boy's brains about dating "the rarer
breeds" has definitely not kicked in yet. While most boys are pretty nice to me in general now, none of them look at me in that attracted kind of way. Not the way Dax looked at me yesterday.

As nine o’clock looms nearer, I get more and more anxious and more and more disgusted with the people around me. By ten after nine, an inner-shoulder demon has popped out and is full-throttle dukiing it out with her angel counterpart on the other side. *Go to the party! No you can’t!*  *Go to the party! But you musn’t!*  The evil side of me steps it up. The demon says, *It's nine-fifteen and you're still sittin' here? Go big or go home, already.*

And that's all I needed. When I see that Kirsten and Paige are fully distracted, I slip back upstairs, grab my coat, and sneak out a side door. Off I go, into the night, to find my Prince Charming.

After about ten minutes of walking, my phone starts popping off like the Fourth of July. Kirsten and Paige are texting the hell out of me.

*U get back here!*

*Im going 2 kill u!*

*Sid 4 real*

*pleez? :)*

Then finally: *ur a Br@ dont b 2 L8 xxoo K & Pg*

I text Kirsten back: *Unlock the back door 4 me  <3 u guys xxoo Sid*

When I finally find Snowbird Trail, it's already nine-thirty but I can see from a distance that something is off. No loud music, no cars. Nothing that points a big arrow reading: College Party This Way! It is just a dark quiet condo, nestled among some trees with other dark quiet condos.

Then it hits me.
Oh God. I've screwed up the address.

Or, even worse, I've fallen for the classic fake out. Only instead of a fake phone number, I got an entire fake invite and fake address. I turn around to go back, my dreams dashed, when I hear someone calling to me. It's him.

"Hey, stranger! I thought you were blowing me off!"

I smile widely in darkness. Blow this Adonis dreamboat off? Not a chance.

I make my way down the walkway, up the front steps, and sit down next to him—not too close, not too far—on a wooden porch swing.

"Nah, dinner ran late and I had trouble finding it," I say.

All the moisture in my mouth funnels directly down into my palms. It's twenty-nine degrees outside and my exposed palms are dripping with sweat. I put my hands in my pockets before the sweat starts hardening into sweat-cicles.

"So, what happened to the party? Where is everyone?" I ask.

"Ah, my friend’s uncle’s flight got canceled because of the snow in Denver and he ended up staying an extra night. We had to shit-can it. They went to The Owl’s Nest for a drink. You want to go meet them?"

He wants to go for drink. At a bar. Well, he’s not nineteen or twenty. And I’m not even old enough for an R movie yet, sooo…

"No, I probably should just get back then."

Damn. What a bust.

"Well, come in for a little. We can hang out; watch a movie or something lame like that."

Ugh, It's time to end the charade. It's not fair to lie anymore, pretend to be something I'm not.
"Um, look," I say, sighing. "I should probably tell you something. I probably should have told you yesterday, but, I don’t know, I just didn’t. Anyhow—"

I pause and look at his stunning face one last time before breaking the news. He has the bluest eyes.

"What?" he says.

I opened my mouth and try to speak but can't.

"Hey, you’re scaring me," he says. "Are you an escaped convict? A serial killer or something?"

I laugh weakly.

"No, I’m not a serial killer. That I know of anyway."

"Then it can’t be that bad."

I shift in my seat and then finally blurt it out, "I’m only sixteen. I’m in high school."

I bite my lower lip and looked up timidly through a spiral of hair. He says nothing for what seems like a long time.

"Is that it?"

"Yeah. But I’ll be seventeen in July," I offer.

He looks at me a second longer and then busts out laughing. I sigh. His laughter is a good sign. At least he doesn't hate me for deceiving him. Even if he tells me to get lost, it's a relief to get it over with.

"But it’s just a couple of years, that’s nothing," he laughs.

He’s only eighteen, maybe a young nineteen.

I laugh out loud. Really hard. I cover my mouth and try to stifle the Incomparable Sid Murphy Cackling Guffaw.
Then I stop short.

"But, the bar? I mean if you’re only nineteen—"

"Almost nineteen," he says, raising a finger. "Never heard of a fake I.D.?

Duh, Sid.


Whew. Okay, just two years. This is good, great even. God, what a load off. He gets up and opens the front door, stretching an arm out for me to go in.

"Walk into my parlor, madam. I think Law and Order is about to start."

And then he finally remarks on my hair. He didn't mention it in all the hours that we spent skiing together. He doesn't give me the compliment directly but says it in kind of a way that comes across as thinking out loud. While I am walking past him, he gently takes a coil of my hair between his thumb and finger and when it is stretched to the limit, he releases it, and back it springs.

"Man. Spectacular," he says, "These things, they go on forever."

And in I go.

The love of my young life following behind me.
Chapter Two

I sit bolt upright, startled with that feeling of being displaced. I should be looking at a poster of Paul McCartney in his twenties or a framed picture of me, my mom, and little brother fishing off Kelley's Island. Instead, I am staring at an unfamiliar painting of a winter scene. A giant buck with thorny antlers looks down on me with caramel-yellow eyes.

I look around, disoriented.

I'm in someone's bedroom, in someone's bed, and I don't know how I got here. Then I remember and it all comes crashing down in a thousand jagged pieces. I jerk back the covers, relieved to see that all of my clothes are still on. The clock on the nightstand says seven a.m. The bus leaves in an hour.

I call out, my throat dry, my voice cracking.

"Dax?"

No answer.

When I try to get up, a sharp pain blooms behind my left eye and spreads over my head. I can't feel anything from the neck down because the pain is so severe it leaves the rest of me numb. I stumble out of the bedroom, into an alcove, and make my way down a small winding staircase. At the bottom of the steps, I call out to him again. Still no answer.

My coat hangs over a hook near the front door where my boots are sitting, lined up perfectly, right where I left them last night. I pull them on and open the door. It's still dark out but the sky is brightening in the east.

As I walk, my phone buzzes inside my coat pocket then beeps with a low battery alert. Kirsten has filled my inbox with texts and messages but my phone dies before I can call her
back. I hurry through lanes that all look the same, gingerbread houses, row after row. My head is chilled and my hair is damp. I have gotten wet at some point and I don’t know how.

I finally locate the correct condo; I can tell it’s the right one by the police cruiser sitting out front. I sneak around to try the side door. Locked. As I turn to sneak around to the back entry, the door swings open. Cougar Di stands before me, hands on her hips, face on fire and a burly police officer steps up behind her. He sees me and his eyes move up a tick, taking in the giant nest of red curls that I am sure are sticking out in all directions, lending me the appearance of a frightened albino Bushman.

Diane says through gritted teeth, "Girlfriend, you're in big trouble."

When I walk into the condo, Kirsten and Paige are standing in the living room. Their faces are sunken and swollen at the same time. When Kirsten sees me, she cries out with this whimpering sort of groan, a strangled sigh of relief that's been all knotted up with dread. Paige starts sobbing really hard but manages to get out, “How could you do this,” before running out the front door. Kirsten walks over and sits down on the couch, puts her face in her hands for a moment. My head hurts so much that I can barely think and I don't know what's happened or where I've been, but I do know one thing for sure—I have broken my best friends' hearts.

When Kirsten looks up, her puffy eyes have hardened. She gets up and calmly walks over to stand in front of me. I almost get the words out of my lips but my apology is cut short when she slaps me across the face. I’m stunned as she calmly walks back, picks up her and Paige's bags, and walks out the door.

I sit at the kitchen table, facing PTA Nazi Mom, Cougar Di, and the officer. Tate Andrews and Hunter Brady walk by with a group of guys, all of them carrying skis and luggage.

"Rock on, sister red! D'ja get laid?" Tate calls out.
"Boys!" Mrs. Winthrop barks.

They laugh and funnel out the front door with the rest of the kids.

Someone has already packed my stuff. My bag is sitting on the table and I'm being chewed out like I've killed someone. I nod but I can't absorb what Mrs. Winthrop is saying, the throbbing in my skull is too loud. Am I dreaming this? I think my head is going to blow off my neck.

"We finally got the truth out of Paige and Kirsten about a half hour ago when Diane did a head count for the bus. A party? You know that is completely reckless. Do you have any idea what could have happened? You're lucky you're not dead. We were so worried and your mom is absolutely beside herself. She's actually on her way here."

My poor mom. Oh, Jesus.

They call my mom and let me talk to her for a minute. I do my best to calm her down. She's literally about to implode with fear and relief and anger and whatever else a panic-stricken mother feels when she gets a phone call from her missing child. I do the: Yes, I'm fine. I'm fine.

It's a big misunderstanding, I'll talk to you when I get home, turn around and go home, I'm fine, I'm fine. Then we hang up. The relief of getting off the phone is followed by a stab of dread because I know I've only postponed what is sure to be a very ugly ordeal later on.

As I'm telling the PTA moms and the policeman how I met a guy on the ski lift who invited me to his condo, I start to regain feeling in my body. Right around the part of the story where I am entering Dax's condo, I stop.

"Can I use the restroom?" I ask.

Mrs. Winthrop sighs.

"Fine, but hurry up. We have to get going."
I go into a half bath off the kitchen, remove my coat, and start to realize what has happened to me. My sweater is on inside out and I'm bleeding. My period isn't for another few weeks and it's never hurt like this before.

"You okay in there?" Mrs. Winthrop knocks.

"Uh… yeah," I stammer, "Just a minute."

I don't have the time or sense to think about what I should do. I clean myself up and walk out, trying my best to mask the shaking of my limbs by folding my arms across my chest. A voice inside me screams: Open your mouth! Tell this PTA mom what happened! You need to go to a hospital! But overtop of the voice is the awful banging in my head. A sick regret washes over me in rising waves until I'm drowning in thoughts of: What have you done? I walk back to the table, sit down, and tell them what happened; what I pray happened, what I desperately wish would have happened.

"We watched TV and fell asleep," I say.

And I spin the yarn—I am The Sleeping Beauty who slept too long. I pump the pedal on my little spinning wheel and weave us all a Sleeping Beauty fairytale. My heart is pounding and I want to run away so badly but the What have you done? voice calls out to me. Softer this time. It whispers to me from that hollow pit in my stomach, that place where fear lives, and it talks me through it. It helps me believe my own lies.

...You can wrap the fairytale around you like a blanket. You can bring it to life with inflection and embellishment and when it all fits, just click your heels together and poof! it will become real. You'll be home in your bed saying it was all a dream, it was all a dream....

When Mrs. Winthrop and the officer and Cougar Di are satisfied and convinced and thoroughly disgusted with Sid Murphy and her selfish, selfish choices, the officer hands down
my punishment. I can see from his name badge that he is isn't real police. He's resort security
officer, Barry C. Mayfield of the eight-dollar-an-hour-no-benefits set. Barry fills out a form
detailing a curfew violation, rips it off the tablet, and tells me never to come back to Snow Ridge
again.

"Don't worry, she won't be coming back," Mrs. Winthrop says.

We head out of the condo and onto the buses. I sit down in the front seat with Cougar Di.
Across the aisle, Mrs. Winthrop sits surrounded by a sea of disposable bags filled with souvenirs,
snacks, books, and knitting supplies.

"You can take this up with your mother and Principal Watson when we get home," Mrs.
Winthrop says, pulling out an Oprah Magazine and peeling down the wrapper of a Snickers bar.
"I'm done stressing about it. Honest to Pete, I don't know why I volunteer for these things."

Cougar Di pulls out a nail file from her purple croc-skinned purse and starts sanding
away. She looks at me sideways and whispers, "Sorry, kid. But you really had us worried," and
shoots me a half smile. She's trying to be nice. I return the awkward smile and then lean my
head against the seat and close my eyes.

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When we pull in, I can see my mom's car sitting front and center at the school curb. I
seriously don't know what I'm going to say to her. I've spent three hours stuck between Cougar
Di and Mrs. Winthrop, trying to get the words right in my head, because I need to tell my mom
the truth. I'm going to tell my mom the truth.

The bus pulls around back. I step off and the terror ripping through me launches me into
a delusional dream state. I just stand on the sidewalk, a river of brightly colored ski-jackets
flooding past me in a blurry current. I try to pick out Kirsten and Paige's jackets but I can't, the
world has become a hundred melted crayons. But Starsha and Amber? Oh, they slide by in slow motion, Starsha's fuchsia jacket blazes in the sunlight, her mouth stretches into a sneer when she sees me. *You are fuuuucked, ginger bitch.* she says, with a slow sort of dullness, *Totally and completely fuuuucked.* She and Amber laugh then disappear into the technicolor swarm.

I squeeze my eyes shut and snap myself out of it. I force my legs to force the rest of me to go find my mom. I round the building and there she is, without my little brother thank god, leaning against the car, her face like Paige's, sunken and swollen at the same time. Her face is beaten in two from crying.

I walk and psyche myself up and commit to telling the truth. I'm just going to get into that car and say it. Just tell her what happened and go from there. She'll drive me to the police station, or to the hospital, or to the cliffs at Nelson Ledges; to wherever it is that mothers and daughters go when something too horrible for words happens.

I walk up and stand to face her. She looks up at me and her eyes tell me that she doesn't know how to feel, she's waiting for me to tell her something.

Horror or anger, the choice is mine.

And out it comes: "I-met-a-guy-we-went-to-his-condo-and-watched-TV-and-I-was-exhausted-from-skiing-all-day-and-fell-asleep."

So there you have it–my mouth, my mind, and my heart choose anger. They choose anger because anger passes. Anger passes because my mother knows exactly what to do with it. Katherine is the master of anger, she dominates anger. She takes anger in her hands and twists its neck, ripping its head off. She throws anger against the wall and stomps it to death. Her voice rises, it changes, it conjures up ghosts and cusses in a spitting Irish brogue. Then, when she's tapped out empty, she picks anger up between a thumb and a forefinger and carries it
outside and drops it in the trash. On her way back, she scoops up forgiveness like a bouquet, sniffs it deep and arranges it in a vase. She set forgiveness down, shining in the middle of everything.

So anger? I can give her anger.

But, horror? I can't give my mom that, because horror doesn't pass. Horror is forever.

I hold my breath tightly and watch the anger rise up in my mom's eyes as, “What in the goddamn bloody hell were you thinking?” comes screeching out and I'm thankful for it. I breathe out and a calmness seeps in because I'm thankful that I don't have to watch my mom fall to her knees and cry forever.

"Mom. I'm so, so sorry," I say, over and over. And I listen to her anger the whole drive home, looking out my side mirror at all the things in the world getting smaller. My dead grandmother's biting Irish brogue rears up, that voice that's been boiled into my mother's DNA fills every space of the car. Her anger is like music; a familiar, raging, beautiful song that I can cling to. I cling to my mom's anger like a raft. I hang on tight and leave horror behind me.

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It's Sunday evening about five or so. My mom went to the grocery store and I’m babysitting my six-year-old little brother, Liam. Or pretending to anyway. I stuck him in front of Nickelodeon with three juice boxes, a wet rag, and a box of Fiddle Faddle. I told him he could eat the whole thing and I wouldn’t tell so long as he doesn’t wipe his fingers on the drapes or move a single inch from the couch. It’s almost dark out and I just lay on my bed and look out the window, opening and shutting my eyes.
I am trying to gather mental snapshots of the dimming sky, collecting the pictures and laying them out in my mind, so I can remember and make sense of it. So I can figure out how the world went dark right in front of me.

But I can't do it. It isn't working. All I see when I close my eyes is blinding snow followed by everything that came after. The ski trip plays and replays in a circular, endless loop in my mind.

The last thing I remember about last night was standing in the condo kitchen talking to him. Then the sound of breaking glass and the sensation of being carried. I was leaning against the countertop, holding a glass of ginger ale that Dax, or whoever he was, had poured for me. Things went blurry and the glass slipped from my hand, crashed into pieces at my feet. And I was falling, and then floating, being lifted.

Then nothing. Just the white hotness of snow and the jolt of being pierced by those caramel-yellow eyes.

I’ve tried all the mind games I can think of to reason my way out of it. Like, *if a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it, then did it really make a sound?* Some would argue no. If they're right, then if a person who is raped can’t remember it, maybe it didn’t really happen. And trust me when I tell you that I don’t remember it. At all. Not a single solitary moment of it.

Breaking glass. Falling and floating. Caramel-yellow eyes.

These are the things I know.

__________________

It's Monday, I get up from bed at 6:30 just as if I were going to school. No sleeping in my mom said, this isn’t a vacation. I go into the bathroom, pass by the mirror but only see a flash of red on my way to the shower. I don’t look in mirrors now unless I have to and it’s not
necessarily because of some deep-seated Freudian-esque type shame, although that may have something to do with it. It’s because I can’t look in the mirror and not have The Truth staring back at me. Literally. And it’s going to take three years to fix. And when I say three years, that’s what I mean. Because three years is how long it will take for it to grow back. For three years, I am going to look in the mirror, see the damage, and be forced to remember him.

My mother was the first to notice it, in the car when she picked me up yesterday. She'd finished with the screaming and our faces were soaked with tears, our noses were running, and I turned to reach into the backseat for some tissues. "What happened to your hair?" she said and reached out to finger my curls. I flipped down the visor mirror and that's when I saw it.

One little curl snipped.

*Man. Spectacular. These things, they go on forever.*

And now he has a piece of it.

____________________

It’s Wednesday, the third day of my four day suspension. It would have been five days but I haven't been in trouble since middle school. I had a reputation for being a scrapper back then but I’ve not had so much as a detention in high school and keep a respectable grade point average. The guidance counselor went to bat for me and the principal let me off a little by cutting my suspension down by a day and adding a detention.

I’m grounded of course and being indoors is unbearable. Every moment feels like the roof and walls are caving in on me and the only thing that gives me any real relief is stepping outside into the cold air. But then my mom gets upset because I’m supposed to be grounded, which meant "confinement" the last time she checked.
She's forgiven me though; the forgiveness bloomed right away, just like always. In the middle of that first night, I felt her tiptoe into my room and crawl into my bed to lay down beside me. I pretended to be asleep. It was comforting to know she was there. She reached out and put her hand on my back like she used to do when I was little. To make sure I was breathing. To make sure I was warm and safe and real.

But I'm still grounded; Katherine hasn't budged an inch on that especially since the principal calls to check on me every day. Somehow, and maybe it’s just me, but I think the principal is trying to send me some sort of message. He called on Monday and gave me the topics for my punishment essays:

The Importance of Curfews...2,000 word minimum.
Why Society Needs Rules...2,000 word minimum.
Respecting Authority. Peer Pressure. What It Means To Be A Leader.
2,000.
2,000.
2,000.

I only have two days left and I haven't even started them yet. So, I hunker down and get it done. The Essay is my true medium; I am a rock star when it comes to mixing bits of information with twenty-dollar words.

With 10,000 words completed in just under four hours, I go back to the cleaning. I spent Monday and Tuesday cleaning the garage and basement per my mom's instructions. She didn't say anything about cleaning before she left for work today, but I clean anyway without being asked. Anything to keep moving. I clean everything that can possibly be cleaned and wash, fold, and put away every piece of laundry we own. I organized every drawer, closet, and cabinet.
in the house. There's a foot of snow on the ground and no gardening to be done but trust me, if it were spring, I’d be out there in a giant sun hat and gloves, digging and yanking at every weed in sight.

When there is nothing left for me to do, I lie down, exhausted, and pray for the sleep that never comes. I just lay in bed until anxiety overtakes me. Anxiety creeps in on little cat feet, and lurks overtop of me. *Get up and move* it hisses or *I'll suffocate you.*

Night comes and I finally crack around three a.m. I decide I am going outside in the morning; I don’t care if I get caught. I’ll suffer any punishment she can think of if it means I can be outside and moving. The last time I was truly safe, I was outside and moving.

Liam is talking but I can’t hear him. We're at the table and I’m sitting in front of a plate of cold scrambled eggs looking at the half empty water glass that my mother left on the table before she went to work.

"Huh, Sid?"

I look fuzzily at my little brother.

"What’s that Liam?" I say.

Through a mouthful of toast he says, "I *saaaaaid,* why do they give you days off school if you do something bad?"

I look at him, smacking away innocently. He looks nothing like me, not even one little bit. He is about the most beautiful looking creature on two feet with dark, thick hair and eyes so brown they're almost black and olive skin like his dad. Vince lives a few miles away from us and sees Liam every week.

I answer his question.
"Because they’re so mad, they don’t want to see your face until they’ve cooled off."

He looks at me with sadness and offers comfort.

"Don’t worry, I’m gonna do something bad today so I can stay home to keep you company."

"Oh, yeah? What could you do?"

I ask this knowing full well that Liam doesn't know the first thing about true rebellion. He's a company man, inside and out. But under my strict tutelage, I may be able to fix this before he reaches middle school.

"I don’t know," he says. "I haven’t thought of anything good yet. Help me think of something real good. I mean real bad."

He scrunches up his face.

"Hmmm…well, let’s see. Maybe you could pull the fire alarm and send everyone screaming out of the building?"

His eyes widen. He never anticipated a real answer.

"Or maybe you could filch your dad’s Zippo and cigars next time you visit. Set up a card game at recess. Play for lunch money. That’ll get you suspended for sure."

Liam slams his fork down, shudders, and a piece of egg falls out of his open mouth. I look up at the clock. His bus will be along shortly and he is still in his pajamas and a mess. I get up, pluck him out of the chair and swoop him over my shoulder.

"Or maaaaybe you could cut Madison Kelly’s pigtails off. You sit behind her on the bus right?"

"Ooh, yeah!" he says. "I wanna do that one!"
I tickle him and he laughs, kicking and squirming all the way through the house. I dress him and—because he sucks at it—brush his teeth for him. Then I take him outside to wait for his bus. When he gets on, he waves to me from his seat. Madison Kelly is sitting in front of him and turns around to tease him. He looks at me, so I make a scissor snip motion with my fingers, followed by a hard wink and thumbs up. He covers his mouth, grinning as the bus pulls away.

I go back inside and look down at the food that I haven’t eaten. My stomach lurches. I hate to waste it so on my way out, I stop and give it to Mrs. Leary’s dog. We own a duplex and she rents the other side from us. She's older than King Tut's grandma but really sweet. Her dog lives in the garage and has a nice fenced run that he can access from a giant door flap carved into the side.

The dog comes lumbering out of his giant door flap to scarf up the food. He's an Irish wolfhound named Ronan and stands nearly to my chest on all fours. Like I said, I’m 5’9” so that would make him positively the hugest dog ever born. Two gulps and the whole plate is gone. I give Ronan a pat then shut the gate. He lowers his head and lets out a low Broooof of a thank you before moseying back into his freshly cleaned garage.

I walk a few blocks to the business district and stop in front The Diner on Clifton, known for its eclectic and spunky atmosphere. I like the name choice, straight and to the point. I go in and scan a menu at the door. Everything would normally look appetizing but the thought of eating any of it makes my guts roil. I’m incredibly thirsty all of a sudden, so I order two Red Bulls and a glass of ice. I also order a plain bagel because I feel strange sitting down at a diner with no actual food. I have chosen a table near the window. I take my gloves off, set them in the sill, and sit listening to the clang of dishes and Regina Spektor playing overhead.
The waitress, Shelley it says on her nametag, brings me my bagel and Red Bulls and asks why I’m not in school. I tell her I’m twenty but look young. She has a kind face and is wearing a "Keep it Green" tee shirt and silver earrings that jingle when she moves her head. I want someone to talk to, so I make up a whole story about who I am. How my name is Fiona and I go to Case Western. I'm majoring in Ecology. I rent a room from this old widow for practically nothing. I just have to shovel the drive, mow the lawn and walk the old woman's horse of a dog three times a day. Incidentally, I am also a vegan and don’t believe in cars; I only walk, ride my skateboard, or take public transportation. I don’t want to leave my carbon footprint on our precious earth.

What a crock. I tell this story to the waitress. I know the words are coming out of my mouth and on some level, I can hear them, but it feels like they are coming from the girl sitting behind me, like it's someone else’s conversation altogether. But the lies feel good. For a moment, I am someone else entirely. Someone who has never cared about being in love in her whole life. I am someone who cares about real and important things, like carbon footprints. I am someone with lofty purposes who wouldn’t try out for cheerleading even if a gun was held to her head, someone who could care less that no boys at school have ever asked her out, a girl who would never fall for a predator’s bag of tricks because she’s so desperate for attention.

No, I am not Cassidy Murphy EASY MARK right this second. Not in this diner, at this moment. Right now, I am Fiona-What’s-Her-Face-College-Student-Wise-Beyond-Her-Twenty-Years. I am Scholarship Girl, Environmental Warrior, and Caretaker of the Elderly. I am not sitting duck high school idiot who was lured in and—

Ow! I wince hard.
I have been rabidly crunching on ice while chewing the fat with Shelley Keep It Green. My brain was elsewhere. It lost track of my mouth and I have bitten into my tongue. Fack! That hurt!

"You okay?"

"Just bit my tongue."

Shelley smiles and walks away. I am left alone again with only The Truth to keep me company. I suck down my Red Bulls. When I am good and torqued up on caffeine and positively brimming with self-loathing, I decide to burn it all off by running. I need to keep moving. I throw down a ten dollar bill and head back outside. I’m not sure where I want to go and I don’t care where I end up so I just pick a direction and keep straight. I’ve never run more than a couple of blocks in my life unless you count the pathetic lag sort of running that Paige and I do in gym class. I get two blocks and feel like I’m dying. I stop and lean against a building to spit and heave. My chest feels like I’ve swallowed a shattered dish but the immediacy of the pain, the pain that I’ve created for myself, the pain that I have control over, drives me onward. I rally and keep going until the distant shoreline peaks itself out, surprising me through the back yards of some Lake Road mansions. I stop, bend over, gasping for breath, and think, *Huh, when did they put that there?*

I live in Lakewood, Ohio and drive by Lake Erie daily. But in winter? I clean forget it’s there. It’s like a giant invis-shield slams down the day after Labor Day and the whole lake just evaporates off the map until May. I realize that it’s never dawned on me to visit the lake in the dead of winter. I make a turn on Lake Road and cut through the park until I reach the boardwalk where I collapse onto an empty bench swing, dripping in sweat. Then I stare out at the icy, gray water and wonder if on a clear day you can see all the way to Canada. Some gulls spot me and
start milling about, bobbing their heads up and down, squawking for food. I break off pieces of the bagel in my pocket and throw it to them. One fat thug in the bunch gets most of it and I feel bad when it’s gone. Most of the punier birds didn’t get a single crumb.

I sit for a while, enjoying the shaky, wobbly feeling in my legs. After a few minutes, I can no longer feel my feet, fingers, or face. They are so cold from the wind off the lake that it doesn’t even hurt. I could be frostbitten black for all I know. It’s okay though. I sit a while longer. Numb is good.

I check my watch, it’s eleven and my mother may call to check on me at lunch. My legs can literally go no further with the running and my boobs are killing me. Note to self: Buy a sports bra. I’ll need the whole hour to drag myself home. I stop only once on my way back, to look in an art gallery window at a painting of some flowers. Poppies that sit hopeful in a vase, waiting for someone to buy them.

I crawl back into bed, soaked in a cold, frozen sweat and completely fatigued. At the edge of sleep, I think about my life, before.

School.

Friends.

Cheerleading.

Mall.

TV.

Internet.

This is what my life has been for the past three years, and I was happy with it. An ignorant sort of happy, but happy nonetheless. I picture myself watching music videos or
shopping now and it makes me feel awkward and glaringly self-aware. Like a fifty-year-old who picks up a dress in the juniors section, then puts it back quickly, hoping no one saw.

I pull the covers over my head and think some more.

I think of a shared joke with my little brother. I think of a single mother who buys suits second hand, so her kids can wear Gap. I think of a dog, grateful for a plate of eggs and a clean garage. I think of a pleasant waitress with jingly earrings. I think of the salty burn in my lungs and the satisfaction of running further than I ever thought I could run. I think of a forgotten lake and hopeful poppies. I think of how I’ve lived in Lakewood all of my life and have never seen or felt any of these tiny, beautiful things until now.

It took losing something wonderful and amazing to see them.

It took losing something that, once it’s gone, you can never get it back.

Peace.

The irony of this stings me with a sorrow so painful that I have to bite into my fist to keep my heart from ripping in two.
Chapter Three

And suddenly, I am in hot demand. Apparently, staying out all night on a school trip makes one popular in certain circles. I finally charged and checked my phone last night. Went online, checked my networks. My various inboxes are teeming with tweets, pokes, invites, and adoring chit-chat. People think I'm cool now, even some of my fellow cheerleaders. Not Starsha, but still, a couple of them anyway. And those boys that never gave me the time of day? Coming out of the woodwork. I am the poster girl for teenage rebellion, everyone's bad girl superhero. It's like I'm living in a parallel universe of Lakewood High. It looks the same, smells the same, only in this universe, I am mildly popular.

I walk through the halls like a goddess—high fives and fist bumps at every turn. Everyone at school wants a piece of Bad Ass Sid Murphy. Everyone, except the two people I actually give a shit about. Kirsten and Paige want nothing to do with me. Neither have contacted me, called me, or messaged me. Not that I’ve contacted them.

I know I should have. I should've called them and explained myself somehow, apologized for dragging them down with me. Their moms called my mom and they're in trouble too. For covering for me. Not suspended, but still, grounded for weeks and detentions out the yang. Kirsten's lost her driving privileges and Paige, well, they don't have TV and she doesn't have a car, so I'm not sure how they plan to punish her. Probably make her read the bible all day long.

But I didn't reach out. I didn't reach out because it was easier to just not talk this past week. Not talking or seeing people made hiding from the truth easier. I could hide at home and try to forget that horrible thing I can't remember but I can't hide from Kirsten and Paige at
school. We're joined at the hips here and plus, getting them into trouble was a lousy thing to do. I'd probably hate me too right now if I were them. So, I need to fix this, I need to reach out.

During homeroom, I get a printout of my new schedule. A new grading period has begun and some of my classes have changed. I look over the list and my eyes land on last period. Music Appreciation has been swapped out for Web Page Development. Kirsten and I signed up for the class together, couldn’t wait to be able to instant message, free and unfettered, for an entire fifty minutes a day.

The day drags on as seventh period sits there like a big dead end.

My heart pounds as we are let out of sixth period and I head toward the computer lab. I pass by the art wing and the earthy smell of wet clay fills my nose. Pretty girls with long hair and no makeup, smelling of essential oils, are filing inside one of the rooms for pottery class. ‘Throwing pots’ I think they call it. I wish now that I had channeled my energy into something worthwhile and lasting, instead of spending hours in front of the mirror channeling the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders.

I go down the steps and stand around the corner from the computer lab, pasted against the wall like a cat burglar. I take a breath, peel myself off the wall, and go to get it over with. The teacher, Mr. Roudabush, points me in the direction of the last empty cubicle and begins yammering on about templates versus blank slates. I sit down in front of the monitor, fire up the engine, and punch in my school network user name: ItGirlz2.

Lame, I know. Kirsten, Paige and I chose our user names so they would match. Kirsten came up with this theory in ninth grade that if we formed an alliance and called it something cool then it would catch on with the masses and slingshot us over Ordinary and smack dab into Popular. It’s been two years and no one knows who the ItGirlz are but us.
I send a message to *ItGirlz1*, Kirsten, across the room.

*K, Can we talk?*

She writes back and I look at her condensed text words and they are like the peckings of a drunken two-year-old. A week ago, I thought imming was up there with primitive cave paintings and hieroglyphics in historical significance. Now, it's nothing but a garbled up version of what’s really on someone’s mind.

*4 dys go by & now U wanna talk? Ur nt evn Sry. I cant bleev i wuz evr F? W/U.*

Doesn’t quite have the same effect as:

*Five days go by and now you wanna talk? You’re not even sorry. I can’t believe I was ever friends with you.*

Her words are like a roundhouse kick to the chest. I type the only thing I can think to say: *I’m so sorry. I never meant 4 this 2 happen. Pls dont be mad. Pls dont hate me.*

A long time passes before she responds. A really long time.

Then finally: *Do u know how scard Pg and I were? It was awful. And then 2 top it off, we got a wk of detentions. Becuz of ur b-shit! I mean, WTF? I hope it was worth it, Sid. I rly f-ing do. Oh & dont flatter ur-self into thinking we hate U. Pg & I don’t hate u. Pg and I r just done w/u.*

It's like she's thrown a knife at me from across the room. I sit working up the nerve to tell her. I need to tell her the truth, or some kind of version of it, something to make this better. I can't lose my two best friends over this.

*I'm so sorry, K. Can u pls come over aft sch? I need 2 talk 2 u in person. About what happnd w/Dax.*

I hit the send button.
A notice pops up.

*User has blocked this sender.*

The classic freeze out.

Roudabush is making his rounds. I look back over our exchange. We're supposed to be working on a template and following along with the lesson. I try to blink out the message box but the screen won't budge. Blink, blink, blink…nothing. My computer has seized up and will not drop the message box.

I quickly shut off the computer to get rid of the messages just as he gets to me, not bothering to power down first. Roudabush sees me do this and nearly faints. It takes most of the period for the aide to get my computer working properly again and I get an F for the day. When Roudabush tells me my computer is fixed, I sit down, and immediately get a ding in my inbox and for a second I'm hopeful that it's Kirsten. It's not. It's Tate Andrews, Starsha's on-again-off-again-friends-with-benefits-love-you-hate-you-forever is emailing me from across the way. *Prty @ Hunter B's beach house this w-end. Middle Bass Isl. Wanna go?*

Soooooo Tate Andrews, The LHS Football Romeo wants to take Ski Slut Murphy to a party at a beach house Friday night. Uh-huh, I'll just bet he does.
Chapter Four

My mother is about five minutes late picking me up and I wait in front of the school, the icy wind whipping me from all sides. I open the car door and slide into the automatically warmed seat. I smell spices and see a takeout bag at my feet. My brother waves from the back and screams, "Hi Sid! I missed youuuu!"

He has headphones on and is watching a superhero movie on the portable DVD player that hooks onto the back of my seat. I wave back and settle inside. I am relieved and glad to see them.

Mom leans over and kisses my cheek—no grudges, no worries, just love.

"How was it? Bad?" she asks, looking at my weary face.

"Uh, bad would be a step up from the day I had. More like awful, I’d say."

"Oh, honey," She says, reaching over and patting my leg, "Don’t worry. Hang in there. It’ll blow over, wait and see, a month from now it'll be like the ski trip never happened. People will forget about it altogether."

"Yeah," I say, hoping she’s right but knowing she’s not.

And besides, even if she is right? Even if, given time, other people forget about the ski trip, I won’t be forgetting it anytime soon. That trip has set up permanent base camp in my brain; it’s going to be playing on auto-repeat for quite a while.

"You wanna talk about it?" she asks.

"Not particularly," I sigh.

"Well, I have something to cheer you up. I ordered Indian. I thought we could play Tinker. It’s a Tudor on Lighthouse Road. There’s a glass conservatory that overlooks the lake."
"Cool."

Something that we have done together since my mother became a real estate agent is to go to empty houses together and play a game she named Tinker, the Irish term for a gypsy. When there is an especially swank or interesting unoccupied house that she needs to ready for showing, she will take us with her and we will spread a picnic out in the nicest room and pretend we just moved in. We have to eat on the floor because our truckloads of expensive furniture haven’t arrived yet. Liam runs around and plays hide-and-seek too. He thinks Tinker is the greatest game ever, running around fancy new houses or spooky old houses, hiding in bare cupboards or under stairs. It's fun for me too, knocking around someone else’s house, admiring rooftop views or commenting on God-awful wallpaper choices. We haven’t done it together in a long time and I am up for anything that doesn’t involve a computer, a TV, or being stuck somewhere with my own thoughts for too long.

"Oooh," my mom says, "Man Candy, two o’clock."

I look ahead and see a runner—male, extremely fit, longish hair hidden under a navy ski cap. As we pass him, my mom toots the horn and scares the hell out of him.

I roll my eyes and grin.

"Perv."

She smiles like she’s won something.

While we drive, I lean my head against the seat and look over at my mother who is driving and smiling at nothing in particular. She is so pretty, her chestnut hair pulled back in a pony. Dapples of sun hit her smooth skin and I think about how young she looks and about how young she was when she had me. I think about when I was really little, before her second marriage, when it was just the two of us in a shitty, little apartment, and our heat was turned off
because she couldn't pay the bill. She carried me around all day, me clinging to her like a fat little monkey, her wrapping her thick robe around the both of us and tying it up tight. *Climb inside my robe where it's warm, we'll pretend we live in the zoo...*

And now, I need to roll down the window and catch a good gust of winter air on my face, the past is giving me a flush. I like thinking about my mom, Liam, and me the way we are now. The Three Musketeers. Playing Tinker. Plus, the smell of the Indian food is doing strange things to my stomach. I haven't eaten much all day, so I should be starving but the smell is making me sick.

And here we are, The Tudor on Lighthouse Road.

We take our shoes off and leave them on the front porch by the door. They just had the floors polished and my mom doesn’t want to get the place scuffed up or dirty. I lift Liam up and let him do the keyless lock code that is hidden under an ornate, metal plate with the house number on it. The code is easy, it’s always easy on the nicer houses. 2345 Enter. God, how do these people make their millions?

This house is seriously one of my mother’s finer listings. The kind you get maybe once a year if you're lucky: 5,800 square feet, three floors, a winding staircase, an alcove that overlooks a mahogany den, a cobblestone path that leads down to a boat slip and an amazing panoramic view of the lake from a glass conservatory.

"What’s the asking price?" I say.

"Eight hundred fifty. Down from one mill. I’ve got six months to sell it."

"What’s the commission?"
"Anywhere from two to five percent, depending on if I have to split it with another agent. Hopefully, I can sell to one of my own clients and we can keep most of it. Not likely, but you can always dream, right?"

I do the math inside my head.

"That would be like thirty grand take home right?"

"Yup."

I think about all the things the Murphy's could buy with that kind of cabbage: a European vacation for Katherine, an in ground pool for Liam, and a breast reduction for Sid.

We go into the conservatory and spread our blanket out on the marble tile. She opens the takeout containers and dishes out our food while I plug in the CD player and put on The Beatles. Even though I'm still not hungry, I eat a little bit.

"That's all?" my mom says, looking at my near full plate.

"I didn't know we'd be eating so early," I say, "I had two burritos for lunch."

Lie. I just don't want it. Food and I are not seeing eye-to-eye these days and I don't want her asking me questions about it. I've actually lost a few pounds and, frankly, I don't want to find them again.

"You can heat it up later," she says, "Indian is always better the second time around."

Then we talk and laugh and I feel calmer and happier than I have in a while. Something about being in someone else's house, living an imaginary life for a while. We clean up the take-out then look out the conservatory windows. There is a patio out from one side of it with fancy urns and statuary and a foot path that goes down to another flower garden with a three-tiered fountain. The shrubs and flowerbeds are naked and covered in snow. The climbing vines that cover everything are brown wisps, thorny tendrils that lie in wait. You can see that it's nice if
you look hard and use your imagination. These aren’t flash and trash annual gardens crammed with flats of impatiens and petunias. These are take your time, old fashioned perennial gardens. I bet there are things like Jacob’s ladder and honeysuckle. French lavender and blue bells. And roses galore. In spring, I bet it's nice to walk around out in your robe with a cup of tea in the mornings. You'd spy your old perennial friends popping up through the dirt, saying: Hello there! I'm back! Miss me?

We look out at the lake, vast like an ocean, my mom, Liam, and me. We fantasize about our new home and life. We plan out the summer on our new sailboat christened Sweet Brigid after her own mother, talk about how we will throw a Bon Voyage party with our other rich neighbors in the gazebo that sits in the garden. They’ll all wave to us on the little dock, holding flutes of Dom Perignon, as we sail off in our coordinated striped sailor outfits. We don’t mention the fact that none of us have ever stepped foot on an actual sailboat or know a single, solitary thing about sailing at all. We just talk about how we will sail all five of the Great Lakes in one trip and fish for our dinner. We talk about how we will sleep under the stars and play Monopoly in the cabin should it come rain. My mom scoots closer to me, Liam nestled into the front of her. She leans her head on my shoulder. I can smell Liam’s strawberry-scented kid shampoo mixed with my mom’s soap and water perfume and there is nothing better in the world than them.

When we are talked out and our butts hurt from sitting on the floor, we get up, walk around the house, and pick out our bedrooms, deciding where to put all our new furniture. After a while, my mom says, "Well, back to reality, gotta get to work now," and pulls out her clipboard and camera. She walks around taking pictures and writing notes to herself. I play hide-and-seek with Liam. I tell him to go hide as I stroll in and out of the empty rooms pretending to look for
him, while knowing the whole time exactly where he is. He is hiding in a pantry in the kitchen which, for some reason, is always the first place he heads in every house. I walk around saying *Hmmm? Where could he be? My, my, he’s disappeared altogether...*

While I am walking around pretending to look, I run my fingers along carvings in the woodwork and stop to admire a stained glass window. I stand at the top of the spiral staircase and contemplate sliding down the banister like Mary Poppins. I decide against it because if my big butt ended up breaking it, it would probably cost more than our whole house to fix and my mom could be fired.

What really blows me away though is the turret room with the mural.

A turret room is a room that from the outside, is reminiscent of a castle. It has round walls with a tip that looks like a princess tower. The turret in this house is a sitting room, I bet. From the inside, the rounded, smooth walls are covered in a Trompe L’Oeil mural of a forest reaching toward a blue and yellow sky.

I walk to the middle of the room and lie down, stretch out on the hardwood floor and stare up at the painted sky. There are no big windows. Just a small decorative one, shaped like a hexagon. The window is tiny and provides no light whatsoever but this room doesn’t need window light. It has its own painted light. Usually Trompe L’Oeil murals are made of tacky wallpaper but this one is the real deal, hand-painted with tree branches reaching up from the rounded walls.

If you stare up at it, it gives the illusion of the sun piercing through clouds, beaming gently down on top of you, like on a sympathy card. God Light, I think they call that. And it feels real. It feels like the sympathy light is coming from somewhere sacred. If I owned this house, I would keep this room empty except for a pillow right in the middle of the room. I
would let people use it if they wanted to get away for a while. I would keep a Do Not Disturb sign on the door, and if someone needed to go somewhere to think, or dream, or just feel something deeply, they could shut the door and lie down in the middle of this room.

I look up and I can feel myself being pulled into the light, carried up into the clouds, no worries for the rest of eternity. My throat catches and I close my eyes, squeeze them hard, to try and erase it all. Because it's not real. This sky and this light and this world are an illusion and it hurts to look at it. Before the tears come, I sit up and go to find Liam for real this time.

When I get to the pantry, I hear him shuffling around inside, trying desperately to be quiet, but being six, completely incapable of it. I stomp over extra loud.

"Well, this is the last place I can look! I sure hope he’s in there or he might be lost forever!"

I try to open the door, but it's stuck. Or locked. I rattle it.

"Liam, you in there? Open the door, I found you."

My voice is getting a nervous high pitch to it. Liam says nothing but just laughs.

"No, seriously Liam, open the door."

"Sid?" he says.

"Yeah, Liam, it’s Sid, open the door."

I feel him turning the knob but the door will not budge.

"I can’t open it. It won’t open," he says, with a calmness that I find unsettling. If it were me in this closet, I would be clawing at the door, trying to kick it in, and screaming my head off.

"Don’t worry, I’m right here, sissy’s gonna get it open."

I’m shaking and rattling the door like a maniac. An hysteria has come over me, as if Liam were in some life-threatening situation. Like this thin door, separating us by two inches is
some kind of serious threat to him. A threat tantamount to a car dangling over a cliff with him inside the trunk, a tornado bearing down about to swallow him up. A predator leading him away with a kind word and some candy…

Magically, the door just opens out of nowhere.

I fall to my knees, grab Liam, and smash him into my chest, hugging him tight.

"Oh, Liam, that scared me. I’m so sorry. Were you scared?" I say, pulling back to look at him.

"Don’t cry," he says, "It’s okay, I wasn’t scared, I knew you’d get me out."

"Yeah. I did," I say, wiping my eyes and smiling.

He looks at me, concentrating closely, his eyes zoning in on my left cheek. Like there's something on my face. I pause and start to raise my hand to my cheek, to see what's wrong, when he smacks me hard across the chops and yells "Tag, you’re it!" before running out of the room squealing.

This is a gag I taught him, sort of like ‘There’s something on your shirt,’ the person looks down and you run a forefinger up their face, made ya look! Only I zone in on someone’s face, preferably the forehead, and then thwack them a good one, scream ‘Tag! You’re it!’ and take off running.

He has gotten me good; I have never fallen for my own gag until now.

"Oh, little boy! You better ruuun!" I yell and I can hear him squealing through the house, running to find mom’s legs so he can hide behind them.

I find them stretched out in a huge, empty, marble tub in the master bath. Her notebook and camera are on the window ledge and she’s singing Some Day Our Prince Will Come, schmaltzy and overblown, like poor, pitiful Snow White. Liam is clinging to her chest, smiling
at me sideways with one eye. I lean on the doorframe and look at them. He whispers into her ear and she listens hard, smiling at whatever it is he's saying. It makes my throat ache to look at them.

I look at my mother’s familiar face, smiling and listening to Liam's secret and it makes me wonder how I could have sold her so short. How could I have not told my mom what happened to me when I'd had the chance? My mother could have handled it. The horror, I mean. If I'd told her, she would have felt it, certainly. The horror would have driven her to her knees.

But not forever.

She would have grabbed onto that anger she knows so well and hauled herself up, then grabbed onto me and pulled me up with her.

I think about this. And I almost, almost start to tell.

I mean if you can’t tell your own mother, who on earth can you tell? My jaws are tight and locked and I am concentrating so hard. I open my mouth just a little bit and almost get the words to come out...Mom, I need to talk to you about something later when we're alone. I need to tell you something about the ski trip...

But, they don’t come. The words won’t come.

She glances up and notices me looking at her so hard. Our eyes meet and I am hoping so much that she heard my thoughts and that she'll pull me aside later and ask me what's wrong.

But she can't hear my thoughts, she misreads my expression and bursts out laughing.

"The owners are out of state and no one has the combination but us! Don’t look so tense, silly girl! Climb on in, the water’s fine!"
The moment passes. I force a bent smile and climb in with them. I snuggle up to my mom and brother. I join in when they start singing along to the music that is seeping up through the floorboards. We sing *Can’t Buy Me Love* at the top of our lungs.
Chapter Five

On the way down the steps to Web Page Development, Tate Andrews sidles up next to me, "So, you're coming to Hunter's, right? I'll pick you up around six.

He is so eager and sure of himself. Like rejection by Sid Murphy is not even a possibility.

"Uh, no. I can't," I say, speeding down the steps and rounding the corner.

He speeds up too.

"If it's about Starsha, don't worry. She and I, we have kind of an agreement. Besides, she's going to Toronto with her parents for the weekend, so it's cool."

I glance over at his perfect jawline. At his trademark hair sitting perfectly styled in that messy-on-purpose-I-use-man-product kind of way. I look at this dumb jock who's never given me the time of day. He thinks he's going to take Big Ass Murphy to some island in the middle of Lake Erie in the dead of winter and pour a six pack down her throat. He's gonna screw himself a ginger then tell everyone on Monday how much bigger her boobs are up close. I almost go nuclear on him but decide against it, I don't need more drama. I've had enough drama to last me a hundred years.

"Sorry, I have this family thing."

I screw up my lips, raise my shoulders, and try to appear bummed that I am unable to attend the festivities. His expression tells me that he is unmoved by thoughts of Murphy family bonding.

"Well, get out of it," he says, "You just got invited to a party at Hunter's beach house. By me."

I fantasize briefly about hammering him in the balls.
And that's when Starsha, who clearly heard Tate's last remark, comes waltzing up to join us. And then, because God hates me, Kirsten strolls by too.

Starsha, Tate, and I are standing right outside the computer lab just as she passes. She sees the three of us huddled together and a look of disgust flickers in her eyes right before she heads inside. She thinks I'm chumming it up with Starsha and Tate now.

"Tate, what are you doing?" Starsha says, "Hunter's party is not a Callahan kegger, it’s exclusive. Tres Clique only."

Yes, they call themselves that. Tres Clique—an uber-popular, Starsha/Tate lead faction of LHS clones. This unforeseen bit of theatrics forces me to recount my history with Starsha and the Sid/Starsha film of nostalgia plays fast-forward in my brain. The primary years spent taunting me about my hair and height, the middle years spent taunting me about my premature boobs and ever-expanding rear, and then finally, the fit she threw last year when I made it for cheerleading and Cameron Fitzpatrick, cheerleader since grade six, did not. I remember the campaign of terror designed to make me quit so that Cameron, relegated to first alternate, could be reunited with her beloved pom-poms. How Starsha called me fat at every practice and declared that cheerleading was for girls' size three or smaller, that red hair was ugly, kinky red hair was super ugly, and I wasn't just fat, I was obese. I remember cheer camp last summer when I had to stay in a dorm room by myself because Starsha wouldn't let anyone bunk with me, forced everyone to treat me like piece of breathing shit all day long for a solid week. I remember how my real friends, Kirsten and Paige, sent me a bouquet of sunflowers for moral support with a note attached: *For the best cheerleader ever! Keep on kicking!* I remember the relief when after camp, Starsha finally threw in the towel and accepted the fact that I wasn't
going anywhere, and started rationalizing my usefulness by sticking me at the bottom of all the pyramids.

It's not glamorous, being the brawn at the bottom of the pyramids, but at least she didn't break me. At least I didn't quit. And things have cooled off somewhat. Mostly it's just catty, harmless banter, the two of us being immature and thriving off our lifelong repartee. It's been one of my fondest high school past-times actually, fighting with Starsha. When you've got best friends like Kirsten and Paige, it makes the shitty part of high school almost fun…the fighting with mean girls and not being popular, I mean. Well, it used to make it fun.

Tate looks at Starsha, "What do you care, anyway? It's not like you'll be all busted up about it, sitting in Toronto with your dickhead boyfriend, Bradley."

"Really Tate? You want to do this here? He's my parents’ friend's son. You're being a child."

Then she points for him to go into the lab. He lets out a snort and slumps inside. Starsha turns and finally addresses me directly.

"You'll have to excuse Tate," she says "All that football has damaged his already fragile brain functioning."

"Whatever," I say, turning to walk inside. Barbie and Ken are making my skin itch.

"Wait. I wanted to talk to you, anyway," she says, following behind me, "it's important."

I sit down at my cubicle, turn on my computer, and pray she'll wrap it up quick. My appetite for sparring with Starsha has reached an impasse. It's dried up, really. I haven't slept in days and I'm just too tired to deal with her.

"Well. I just thought it my duty to inform you of a few things," she says.

"Go. Let's have it," I say, rolling my chair back, crossing my arms and looking up at her.
I want to say: Fire the cannons, bitch. Because there's nothing you can say to make me feel any worse about life than I already do.

She sits a little on my desk, blocking me from my keyboard. Her hair and outfit and makeup are so perfect she looks counterfeit, like she's a photo-shopped version of herself.

"You know, your little ski trip escapade made you, for once in your life, kind of interesting," she says, looking up and away, ankles crossed, arms crossed, like she's pondering her own existence and not actually talking to someone.

"Such a blatant disregard for authority was almost impressive. And then dumping Kirsten and that other girl, that little book-mouse, whatever her name is...that was a smart move. Really lightened your load. So much so, that in a matter of days, you were able to bypass a few rungs on the ladder and secure an invite to an exclusive gathering. Of course, I've rescinded that offer but—"

I interrupt her with a loud yawn, "Are we done here?"

She looks down at me and smiles. "Almost."

I muscle in, push her bony ass off my keyboard. I punch in my user name, pretending to be busy and completely bored with her.

"Bottom line Siddy, I don't think it's working out so we've decided to let you go."

This make me laugh. I feel a little fight in me after all. "What? Let go from Tres Clique?" I say, feigning disappointment while typing and clicking, pretending to scan for non-existent files. "But I just got hired. I haven't even started and you're firing me? Where will I go? How will I live?"

"Oh, I'm not talking about Tres Clique, silly," she says, matter-of-factly. "I mean, you might have climbed a few rungs, but Tres Clique has standards. Pedigree. If we let in every dog
who wins a ribbon at the fair, we'll be over-run by mutts. See, no, what I was talking about is
your spot on the Golden Bullets. We're letting you go."

The bell rings, people start settling into their cubicles. I roll my eyes, busy myself pulling up more non-existent files.

"Yeah, okay. You may think you run things around here but you're not the cheerleading coach, you can't fire me from the Bullets. Besides, you've already tried getting rid of me once and you failed, remember? So, I guess, you'll have to put up with this mutt a while longer. Because this bitch—"

"Oh, you didn't hear?" she says, interrupting me. She leans in close, like we're best friends sharing a secret. She's smiling and her eyes are twinkling like stars.

"Hear what?" I groan, tap, tap, tapping away at my keyboard.

"Coach wants your uniform by the end of next week. No delinquents allowed."

My fingers freeze and I look at her.

"You're lying," I say, staring at her.

"Really?" she says, getting a little more fiery, whipping out a yellow booklet from her bag. "See, this is called a code of conduct manual. And it's all right here." She thumbs through the book and points. "Section B, paragraph 3: Any student receiving an at-home suspension will be dismissed immediately from all sporting teams and intramurals for the remainder of the semester." She lowers the booklet and leans into my face, "In laymen's terms, that means So Long Ginger Bitch, Welcome Back Cameron."

She walks away, her hips swaying, smiling and blowing a kiss over her shoulder. I sit in my chair, my mouth open like a fool.

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Kirsten still has me blocked and I'm too gutless to try and talk to her in person. She and Paige avoid me as though I were carrying typhoid. To chase after them, especially spouting on about the woes of cheerleading, seems desperate and wretched. I sit in my cubicle, stunned. I want to talk to somebody about this but I can't. I know cheerleading is stupid. I know this. Why should I care, right? I mean, it's cheerleading for God's sake. You might even wonder why I would do such a stupid thing as try out for cheerleading in the first place. True, I did it because Kirsten dared me but I also did it because…

well…

…I did it because I wanted to be a cheerleader.

Ugh.

So there you have it: I wanted to be a cheerleader.

And I'm good at it. You might think a bigger girl like me wouldn't be capable of a back handspring or a toe touch or a Chinese split, but you'd be wrong. Because this one is very capable of it. Liam's dad taught me how to do a back handspring in fifth grade and I never forgot it. So, sue me. I wanted to wear a cute uniform and shake pompoms and possibly have a boy or two look at me for a change. A fat lot of good it did me. No boy has ever looked at me in my uniform and thought anything but, Wow! That's one big ass cheerleader!

It's so stupid, I know. Especially now, after what's happened.

But still, it chaps me that I've been booted from it. Not because I won't get to cheer anymore, I'll get over that. In fact, I'm already over it. I was over it three games into football season when the sparkle wore off and I realized that the view from the pyramid was exactly the same as the view from the bleachers. I stayed in it because I couldn't give Starsha and her coven
of miscreant harpies the satisfaction of seeing me quit. So, losing the actual cheering isn't what's bothering me, what's bothering me is that he took it from me.

He took my most precious thing, and now he's taken my most stupid, idiotic thing, too. And I get to hear Starsha remind me about it every day for the next eight weeks.

I look over the cubicles, at the tops of people's heads—at Starsha, Kirsten, and Tate.

I cannot sit in this class for the next eight weeks.

I'm throwing up the white flag. I'm embracing something I've always despised: I'm quitting. I am quitting this class. I am dropping Web Page Development.

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"I want to drop Web Page Development for Pottery," I say to the guidance counselor, hoping to God he will say yes.

"Sorry. Pottery's full."

He leans back in his chair and puts his hands behind his head. His carefully groomed soul patch and ornately shaped sideburns cry out to me for acceptance. See kids...I'm just like one of you...

"Okay, then cooking."

"No dice. Canceled, not enough people signed up."

I go moist in the armpits. I cannot sit in that class every day for the next eight weeks. I will go completely cuckoo, rip my hair out, and be hauled out of the computer lab, bald and screaming.

"Well, is anything else available?"

He looks over the catalog on his computer.

"Nope, sorry."
"Is there anything at all that I can do for the period? Office assistant? Writing tutor?"

Long pause.

"Well…"

"What? What is it? I’ll take anything."

"Well, all I have available is an open position in the Audio Visual Department."

"You mean like an aide?" I say and instantly conjure images of those creepy burnout guys in wife-beaters, the guys who push dusty TV’s around the halls, reeking of cigarettes.

"Yes, but you have a pretty good GPA and I don’t think that with the college prep track you’re on, that AVA would be appropr—"

I interrupt him.

"I’ll take it."

"Yes. Well, while we have three thousand kids here at Lakewood and while the Audio Visual Aides provide a valuable service to the student body—"

He stops abruptly, then continues on.

"Please, who are we kidding here? We both know they sign up for AV to get out of taking real classes and the school calls it a service because it keeps troublemakers out of their hair for an hour. Computer Science courses are much more suited for you."

I lean forward and look into eyes.

"I said. I’ll take it."

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I head to where the audiovisual department is located. Basement level. A land I’ve not yet ventured to in my two-and-a-half years at Lakewood High. I pass several storage closets, a service elevator, and then, peering in through a little window, what appears to be a sad little
"Faculty Only" exercise room containing mismatched free weights and an antiquated treadmill. Finally, at the end of the corridor, I find another door that reads: AUDI ISU L DEPT and underneath the sign, someone has carved: "Knock or die."

I rap lightly which causes a flurry of activity on the other side. The door creaks open and standing before me is Corey Livingston, the biggest stoner at Lakewood High, all six-foot-three, two hundred-plus pounds of him. He's bleary-eyed and his tousled, longish hair is sticking up on one side. He's wearing about fifty t-shirts and the top one, "SDMF" it says, while technically clean, looks like it was pulled from a dumpster. He's not fat, not yet anyway. He's just big and tall and you know that those love handles he doesn’t have yet, they're in there somewhere, waiting patiently for a six pack of beer or pizza slice too many.

He mumbles while rubbing at his eyes and yawning.

"All the video recorders are signed out until tomorrow."

"I don’t need a video recorder. I’m supposed to come down here and help."

"Help what?"

"I have no idea. I don’t know what it is you people—I mean—what an audio visual aide does exactly."

He finally takes a good look at me. His face perks up a bit like he recognizes me or something. He looks me up and down. Not in a creepy way, more like he can’t believe it’s me. I get self-conscious of the way I'm dressed; jeans, Abercombie & Fitch hoodie, Chuck Taylors.

I cross my arms over my chest to conceal the big A&F logo emblazoned across the front of me. The "A" and "F" stretched bigger than "&." He probably thinks I'm some bourgeois poser. And why shouldn't he? I'm wearing the uniform, right?

"I know who you are. You’re that cheerleader who—"
He stops. His mouth hangs open. I can see the unspoken words ballooning out of his mouth: *got into all that trouble on the ski trip.*

God, and he smells like cigarettes, too. Gross.

I grunt with disgust then turn and walk back down the hall. Forget this crap. No way am I spending the next eight weeks with this loser, what with him towering over me in judgment, reeking of Marlboros.

"Wait!"

I stop and turn. He ducks back inside the room, like he needs to get something, and comes back out holding a DVD and broom.

"You need to take this movie on global warming or some bullshit up to room 208."

He pulls a dollar out of his wallet and tucks it inside the cover of the video. Then he sets the case on the floor and swats the whole thing down the hall with the broom. It almost slides past me before I stop it with my foot.

"And hit the cafeteria on your way back. I need a Dr. Pepper."

He walks back into the AV room, shutting the door behind him.

My disgust morphs into rage. I stomp up the steps to room 208 with a thin trickle of steam pouring from my ears. Over my dead body is a hulking loser of The Living Stoner’s magnitude going to strip me of my last shreds of self-respect. I bang on room 208 and practically toss the DVD through the door like a Frisbee.

My pent-up aggression has reached a violent boiling point so I grab the The Living Stoner's pop from the vending machine then head back down to the basement—shaking the bitch up like a can of spray paint.
I open the AV door and The Living Stoner is leaned back in a chair, practically sliding down out of the seat with his head thrown back, mouth open. The SDMF shirt is now off, rolled up and covering his eyes. It has been replaced with vintage Billy Idol. I slam the door and The Living Stoner jumps in his seat. His phone comes unplugged, jerking from his ears and his shirt mask falls into his lap. Thrash Metal is playing so loudly, I can hear it from across the room.

"Let’s just get it all out now," I say, "Make your comments, your jokes. Get it all out of your system. Let’s talk all about how Sid Murphy slept around on the ski trip and is such a big, fat whore, how she was so hell-bent on getting laid and is such a raving slut….whoo-hoooo!"

I throw my arms over my head and wave them around like a lunatic.

"I don’t mind, because I like to talk. In fact, I have lots to say. Like how you, for instance, took a little vacation last year to juvie and spent ninety days at Club Cuyahoga for dealing drugs."

He looks at me and starts smiling. He’s getting a charge out of my tirade, which makes me even more nuts.

"Oh, you think it’s funny? Who are you to judge me anyway? A half-baked, pot-head, ex-juvie thug?"

I rear back to launch the Dr. Pepper at him and he throws his arms up over his face.

"Whoa! Killer! Calm down!"

I stop mid-throw and wonder why it is that I'm unloading on this stoner I don’t even know. Why him? Why not hunt down the person I really hate, the one who caused all this, and unload on him?

"No. I don’t think it's funny. I think you're funny,” he says. "You wanna try and fight me or something, Murphy? Jesus, settle down."
He clears his throat and his chuckling tapers off.

"Relax, Irish. I mean we’re all guilty of something, right?"

I walk over and set the can of pop in front of him on the table.

"Your Dr. Pepper," I say with bitter contempt, "and don't call me killer, or Irish, or anything that isn't my name. My name? Is Sid."

"Fine, jeez, whatever, Sid. Why so much hate? Personally, I think it rocks that one of you cheerleaders finally put down the kool-aid and joined the rest of us plebs in our lowly quest for fun."

He pulls back the tab on the can.

I step back as a geyser of Dr. Pepper sprays all over him, all over the table, all over the chair and floor. Billy Idol looks out at me and snarls through the brown syrup that has completely coated him and his trusty guitar. Stoner Boy jumps up, arms out to his sides, hair and face dripping, looking down at himself, stunned.

"Holy shit," he says, letting out a cough of a laugh.

Then he looks at me like he can't believe I just did that. And truthfully, I can't believe I just did that either. Wow. He’s really sopping wet with Dr. Pepper. Maybe I'd better run?

I start to backpedal, "Uh, I…I didn't know—"

"Stop," he says, holding up his hands. "Don't apologize. Take your victory, throw it in the air, and roll around in it. Because that…was brilliant."

He takes off the Billy Idol shirt and wipes his face with it. Billy is replaced with a long-sleeved plain white t-shirt.

"Well played," he says, smiling and pointing a finger at me. "But when you least expect it? Expect it. Because I've got eight weeks to plot my revenge."
Then he slides his fingers through his hair and sits back down. He leans over and starts slurping up puddles of pop like he's four. I get a good look at his eyes for a few seconds before his bangs falls back down over them. They're brown—big with long lashes.

I turn away so he won't see my face and how hard I’m trying not to smile.
Chapter Six

I google him sometimes. I don't know why.

I know his name isn't what he said it was. Dax Windsor is not a real person but he does exist. It's the name of a doctor on a soap opera that was canceled back in the eighties. Can you believe that? When I read that, I wanted to take a sledgehammer to my laptop and then go turn on the oven, crawl inside, and shut the door. God, I am so dumb. His real name could be Rumpelstiltskin for all I know.

But still, I always go back for more. When I'm unable to sleep, most nights actually, I'll fire up the laptop, hop on the internet, and promise myself that I'm just going to do normal stuff. I promise myself that I'm just going online to check email. Sometimes I'll IM with the girls I sit with at lunch, Bethany and Emma, second string replacement friends I've forced myself to make since I'm no longer welcome in the Kirsten Vanderhoff off-campus dining car. Usually though, I just hide out offline on Facebook and stalk Kirsten and Paige's profiles. They've got new pictures—ones from the ski trip that are all cropped and free of Sid Murphy. There's this one though, a close-up of her and Paige, it's cropped but I can see a little curl of my hair on Kirsten's shoulder. When I see the curl, things go quickly downhill from there. My fingers become possessed and I start googling horrible things; Date Rape, Drug Rape, Travel Rape, Vacation Rape, Dax Windsor, Windser, Winzor.

I don't know how it happens, it just does. I search and search for clues to tell me what happened, where he is, who else he has done this to. I find nothing but inner sickness. I get so torn up and panic-stricken that I have to slam my laptop shut and raise my window, stick my head out into the cold night and try not to scream. I don't know what to do with it, this lack of peace, this need to know. I want it to go away but it won't.
Every night it comes back.
Every night I am searching.

Last period is over so I head out of the gym rolling an AV cart back down to the basement. I had the pleasure of running the movie projector during that oh-so-lovely freshman assembly on STD's. It was pretty awful having to sit through that movie for a second time, especially since…well…you know. I mean, I think I'm fine, everything feels normal enough—down south, if you catch my drift—but still I couldn't wait for that movie to end.

I grab my stuff from my locker and head toward Mr. Davis's room to serve that detention I've been putting off. Three freshman girls walk in front of me and they're all squeezed together, shoulder-to-shoulder, holding their books, and gushing about some boys they met at the movie theater. It reminds me of how things used to be with Kirsten, Paige, and me when we were that age. Everything was so exciting back then. I cut down a different hallway so I won't have to listen to girls being best friends anymore.

I walk into the detention room and scan the crowd for an agreeable face. And when I say crowd, I mean it. I know this school has its share of idiots and delinquents but detention is packed and it's a huge room, twice the size of a normal classroom. Every dope-head-pierced-up-bully-slacker at Lakewood High is present and accounted for, The Living Stoner included.

He doesn't notice me because he and his stoner buddies are too busy hanging off desks, comparing tattoos, and throwing stuff at each other to care about who's coming through the door. They're passing a piece of paper down Stoner Row, each one looking at it, laughing, then passing it off to the next idiot. Finally, it gets to Corey. His eyebrows furrow and he shoves the guy who gave it to him, crumples up the paper and sticks it into his pocket.
It's probably a copy of his report card or something. He's not the brightest bulb in the chandelier from what I've heard. Those second-string friends I’ve been hanging out with at lunch told me all about him. I'm fairly sure Bethany is a reliable source even if she's a little annoying. I used to be friends with her in middle school but then in eighth grade she went all meat-is-murder-enviro-nutball on me, started hassling me for eating chicken fingers and drinking bottled water. She's nice enough for the most part so I've been sitting with her and her vegan buddies during lunch. It actually works out food-wise. I'll chew on some carrot sticks or crunch on an apple and yay, everybody's happy. Anyhow, I told her how I was doing AV instead of computers and she offered to rub her head against mine, in case I needed to borrow some I.Q. points after losing them to Corey. She said he used to get made fun of in elementary school when he had to read out loud. According to her, between the inborn stupidity and the permanent marijuana cloud hovering over his house, Corey Livingston is operating with a dangerously low amount of brain cells. Three to be exact: one for growing pot, one for smoking pot, and one for dealing pot. Then she added a fourth: eating, so he can munch after smoking all that pot. I have to admit it, I laughed. Bethany can be funny sometimes. Not as funny as Kirsten and Paige, but pretty funny.

Part of me thinks it’s crap though. I mean, every time I've talked to Corey he seems all there and everything and he doesn't talk or act like he's brain-damaged or stupid. Besides, you can't always believe what you hear around this place because in addition to having quite a few idiots, LHS also has its fair share of liars.

I spy a few girls who look like they're on their way to a vampire slaying or mass suicide. They're brooding and gloomy and skulk through hallways layered in black. In class, they sit drawing cryptic symbols on their arms and knuckles. I look at the three girls and wonder how
they got that way. They had to be "normal" at one point, right? Maybe they were exposed to too much online gaming, read one too many fantasy novels, or maybe...they're just three really unfortunate trick-or-treaters. I conjure Paige's mom's grating Puritan voice: *See, girls. This is what happens when you dress like a monster and go traipsing around the neighborhood after dark. The devil eats your soul and turns you into a Goth Emo Hybrid.*

Whatever. All I care about right now is, Goth Emo Hybrids rarely converse or make direct eye contact with outsiders and are fairly harmless for the most part, so I plant myself in a seat in front of them, pull out some homework, and do my best to evaporate.

Mr. Davis enters the room, hollers at everyone to settle down, and then takes out his thick stack of pink papers and starts calling off names. The list goes on for what seems like hours. I finally hear, "Cassidy Murphy" and no sooner do I get my hand up than someone yells, "Go Red!"

Stoner Alley erupts into hysterics. Every single one of them is laughing; everyone, except Corey. He just sits there, with his head in his hand, like he's pissed or bored or something. Mr. Davis yells, "Shuddap! That'll be fifteen more minutes. Keep it up, folks, 'cause I got aaaall night!" People quiet down and then everyone just sits and glowers with a collective scorn that could curdle every pint of milk in the cafeteria.

After about half an hour, when the teacher nods off at his desk, I get a tap on my shoulder. I turn around and jump. It's Corey. Somehow, he has traversed the entire room undetected and is now sitting where a Goth Emo Hybrid was napping only moments before. I look around, I don't even see the girl. Wherever she went, she got there fast.

"Hey," Corey whispers.

"Hey," I whisper.
"Um, I need to talk to you about something. Tell you something when this is over."

"What?"

Then the teacher yells from the front of the class, "You! Kid in the black t-shirt, needs a haircut! Something you'd like to share with the rest of us?"

"No, sir. Absolutely not, sir," Corey says.

Stoner Alley cracks up.

"Then zip it!"

Then Davis looks at me. A little nicer, but not too nice, he says, "And you with the red curls. Keep those green eyes front and center. You don't want stuck in here another day, I'm sure."

When detention is over, the crowd funnels out the door like rats down a sewer drain. Corey and I stay back. Someone in a blue flannel yells, "Hey, Corey! Save some of those red curls and green eyes for the rest of us! Along with those you-know-whats!" before disappearing into the swarm.

"What's up?" I say, looking at Corey.

"Um…" he pauses, looks at his feet, sighs, "Man, this is weird."

"What? Spill it, already."

He pulls out that piece of crumpled paper from his pocket.

"I didn't make this, okay. I want you to know that. But it's being passed around and I thought you should know about it. I think it's from that cheerleader bitch's Facebook or something."

I reach out and grab it from him. I start to open it.

"Wait!" he says.
"Uh, I mean, maybe you should wait until you get home? You might not want me standing here. We don't know each other that well and—"

"What the hell is it?" I say, "Me naked or on the toilet or something?"

"No!" he says, "Well, I mean, not *totally* naked or anything…it's just kind of…"

I wrestle it open.

My stomach drops.

The picture is a close-up of me in my bra, pulling on my cheerleading vest. It's a little blurry but the hair is unmistakable. It's me alright. And holy shit, my boobs are huge. I can't believe how massive my boobs look on camera.

I look up at Corey, his eyes look sorry. I open my mouth to say something but then I turn and run out the door.

"It's not that bad!" he yells. "You can't even see anything. Really!"

He doesn't follow me, thank god. I run to the girl's bathroom and hide out until I'm sure the school is empty. Then I run all the way home. My brother and mom are in the kitchen, I pass by them, tell my mom I have homework then dash to my room, slam the door shut, and lock it. I fire up my laptop and go to Starsha's Facebook page.

On her status, she has directed everyone to her new blog called Gingerbitch.com where she has penned a poem called ‘Better Dead Than In Bed With A Red’ and the header is that picture of me in my bra with a little black edit box covering my eyes. As if that is supposed to disguise me somehow. I must have been getting changed in a locker room at an away football game. She and her minions must have taken it with a phone then laughed all winter about
Ginger Bitch Murphy's double-D rack. There is also a picture of my bent-over butt during a cheerleading pyramid. Swell.

But what really hurts, what really cuts deep, are the other pictures. There are pictures of me in elementary school when I still had all the baby fat. Me doing embarrassing kid stuff. In one, I'm wearing an ugly polka-dot, grass-stained bikini that was a few sizes too small. I'm rocketing head first down a slip-n-slide during a field day on the last day of school. Then there's another one of me making an obnoxious face and wearing a Spongebob shirt. It's been cropped to cut out everyone else in the picture but I know who is standing next to me—Kirsten. It was at her tenth birthday party, the year I decided to have a go at straightening my own hair because I hated how curly it was. I ironed it with my mom’s flat iron and burned it so badly that she had to practically shave it off. I looked like a fat, kinky headed boy.

I slam my laptop shut and race back down the stairs, grab my coat, and head out the door. My mom chases after me, holding a spaghetti strainer.

"Where you going? Dinner's almost ready!"

"Library! Big paper!"

"Eat first and then I'll drive you."

"It's only four blocks! McFatties is right there, I'll grab a Big Mac!"

Then I run nine blocks to Kirsten’s house and bang on her door.

I'm seriously going to strangle her.

Kirsten opens the door. She gives me this look like: Whatinthehelldoyouwant?

"You bitch! How could you do that to me?" I say. "Those were pictures we took in grade school! I thought you were my friend!"

Her brows wrinkle up in confusion, "Wha—"
"Don’t play dumb, at least have the spine to admit it! The picture of me in my bathing suit during Field Day? And of your birthday party after I scorched myself bald!"

"What are you talking about?" and her voice is getting louder now. Oh, she's good. She looks and sounds genuinely perplexed.

"The website dumbass, Gingerbitch.com! Like you don't know."

Did she really think I would take this lying down?

Her faces blanches. "What website?"

I mock her, "What website? Please, the one Starsha put up to make fun of me!"

She takes a deep breath and steps closer to me.

"Look, I may be pissed at you," she says, "but that I would never do. I'm not the only person in Lakewood with a camera you know. That was a field day at school, as in the whole damn school was there. And my mom made me invite every girl in the class to that party. Like thirty girls or something. I don't know where the pictures came from, but they didn't come from me. And frankly, I resent the implication. Although, I do understand it. See, you're in deep with me right now so you're turning things around in your psycho head to make me look like the criminal. You were the one who tied this friendship to the tracks and walked off with some frat boy you just met. You! So, when I said I was done with you, I meant it. Totally and completely done!"

She steps back inside and slams the door.

My throat catches and the tears start trying to push their way out. Because this is yet another thing that he has taken from me. If the ski trip hadn't happened, I'd be hanging with my besties, hating on my enemies, and pretty much loving life. My peace, my virginity, my friends,
cheerleading, and now my pride; he’s taken it all. And with everything he takes, the Fairytale Lie unravels a little more. And I need it, I need the Fairytale Lie.

I fight back the tears by taking off running. I run the streets of Lakewood and let the biting wind and gritty slush harden me from the outside in. As I run, my face and ears ignite with a cold burn. My muscles ache, like my legs are still figuring out how to run. But after a while, the strangest, most astonishing thing starts happening—the worries, the heartache, they just start falling away, just dropping out of my mind and onto the pavement. The ski trip, Dax, Kirsten, the website...plop, plop, plop. It's like magic. I run and wonder about it. I wonder about how speed and fatigue, wet and cold can act like a spell, how they can affect the body and the mind, how pain can feel good sometimes. And running in January is painful, trust me. But I focus in on it, to keep everything else from getting back in. The cold burn that started in my face and hands spreads to my feet and legs. It stays in my extremities a long time but I keep up with it by running my engine at full speed.

I run until I'm colder and more solid and unyielding than I've ever felt in my life. And I don't care that it hurts. I don't care that I want to scream from the pain because I think it might be worth it, this terrible, shredding pain. Because at some point, the numbness will come, it must come. And maybe if I do this long enough, and do this often enough, the numbness will stay and I will no longer be Sid Murphy, helpless ragdoll, sleeping toy. I will be Sid Murphy, human glacier, suit of armor forged from ice.

It's Monday morning and I am in luck. It snowed twelve inches overnight and shows no signs of stopping. So, lucky me, Snow Day. Even luckier, I’m home alone. Liam spent the
weekend with his dad and stayed an extra night. My mom went to work at her job because the concept of "adult snow day" only exists in warm, tropical locales like Cincinnati and Dayton.

I spend the whole day shoveling. First the driveway, then the sidewalk, then the neighbor’s porch. Every two hours, the snow is back. The menial nature of the job is a relief from having to think too much and I enjoy the back breaking pain of it. I look over at Mr. Snow Blower three doors down and stifle the urge to yell "Hey, Pussaaay! That all ya got?"

I start to get woozy around noon and realize that I haven’t eaten. The hunger strike has to end. I go inside and stuff my face with anything I can get my hands on. Dried cereal, pop tarts, a whole stack of bologna. It’s like I haven’t eaten in weeks. Wait, that’s right, I haven’t really eaten in weeks. And suddenly I’m so freakin’ hungry, I can’t cram it in fast enough. Who knew cold Spaghettio’s right out of the can could taste so heavenly? When my belly is stretched to capacity, I stumble to my room and lie down to enjoy it. I close my eyes, and at first it's kind of awesome, like I'm floating in a warm, quiet ocean. But about five minutes into the groggy haze, the room starts spinning. My stomach cramps up and my mouth goes all watery and metallic-tasting. I run to the bathroom and…

blagggh…out it all comes.

After a few minutes, when the heaving stops, I get up and rinse my mouth with mouthwash. I splash my face with cold water and look in the mirror. My eyes are bloodshot but I feel so much better that it kind of weirds me out a little. I shake it off and go back outside to give Mother Nature another ass-kicking. I shovel fast and hard and try to push the images of food vomit out of my brain. I shovel and shovel, and pretend like the whole thing never even happened.
It's eleven p.m. and I've been laying here for over an hour. I went to bed right after dinner, exhausted from shoveling all day. Now I've woken up and there is no hope of getting back to sleep anytime soon.

Also, I'm starving.

It's like my body is catching up with itself after weeks of not-eating since the ski trip. It's like someone stuck cardio-paddles to a really lazy tape worm that's been living in the folds of my stomach: Clear! Zzzzzz! Now eat!

I go into the kitchen and eat the leftover pizza from dinner, three slices of pepperoni with anchovies, along with a shit ton of other stuff. I start getting that crampy, drunk feeling again. I sit at the table and feel disgusted with myself.

I glance over at the sink.

God, it would be so easy. Just lean over the sink, take your finger and—

But I don’t want to go there. I'm not turning into some walking, talking, bingeing, puking, made-for-TV train wreck. I get up and head back to my room.

I try to read. No luck. I go online and force my fingers, eyes, and brain to just check my email. I force my fingers NOT to perform Google acts of horror and not to go on torture expeditions at Gingerbitch.com.

I have a message that Corey C. Livingston has requested my friendship. I go to Facebook, accept him, but before I can begin a proper stalking of his profile, he pops up into my chat screen.

Hey, Sid. Good news.

Hey, Corey. Oh?

That blog was taken down.
I shrink Facebook and immediately race to Gingerbitch.com. Instead of me in my bra, there's only a blank screen that says: *The site you are looking for was not found.* I'm relieved of course. I mean, Jesus, who wouldn't be. But then I start wondering how it is that Corey knows the website is down unless he went trolling the internet in search of cheap Sid Murphy thrills. I write him back.

*How did u know it was down if u werent on the site? Going 2 gawk r something?*

*NO!*

Long pause.

Then he writes: *I know b/c I'm the one who contacted the server and made them take it down. Thx a lot, Sid.* And he's pasted a copy of the letter.

*Attention Blogpal, I am writing because I am the father of the girl in the pictures on gingerbitch.com (see link). She's a minor and if you don't shut that blog down immediately, I'm going to call the authorities and then sue you for every last penny you've got. Signed, Ivan A. Kegman, Attorney-at-Law.*

And I feel like a total jerk now.

*Sorrrry. I didnt mean 2 say that. U were upset. Its ok.*

*Thx. I really appreciate that u did that.*

*No prob. Then he writes, But dont think I've forgotten the dr pepper incendent. Ur still totally screwd on that one.*

*Gotcha. Bring it.*

Then we both just sit and stare at our screens. I mean, that's what I do. He could be sewing curtains over there for all I know.
Finally, he writes: *Well. Its late and u prob tired. Ill let u go.*

I pause and try to think of something funny to say. But everything I come up with sounds stupid so I just write: *Thx again. Really.*

*No prob. Cya at AV Irish*

I write, *Cya Corey* then I pause, backspace, and leave it at *Cya*.

Then I click myself offline so he won't know I'm still on Facebook. His user name drops offline too and I wonder if he really left or just fake-left like me. I look back over our exchange, reading it a few times through. I resist the urge to cut and paste the lines into my BEST IMS OF ALL TIME file, something I often do when I have a really memorable or funny exchange with someone. If we'd chatted about something other than Starsha's horrid website with pictures of my enormous half-naked breasts on it, I would have saved it. But I don't want to remember why Corey and I were chatting, just that we were. So I click out, shut it down, and head to the living room to watch boring TV shows in hopes they'll make me sleepy. And on my way through the house, I try not to think about how Corey Livingston is not stupid at all. I try not to think about how he was smart enough to write that fake letter, something I was too stupid to think up when I carry a 3.7. I try not to think about how Corey Livingston only misspelled one word during the whole chat, incident, and how that's better than most guys even with spellcheck.

__________________

I go to the living room where my mom is sacked out on the couch. I look at her all relaxed and dreamy. She's probably dancing through a meadow with pink butterflies or floating in a gondola with a hot guy feeding her grapes. Doing whatever it is she does when that second layer of Ambien kicks in.
The TV is running so I sit down on the loveseat and pick up where my mom left off. Iron Chef America is just starting on Food Network. I decide to put that sleep off for another hour so I can watch our local Cleveland boy Michael Symon take a Parisian-trained charlatan to the Kitchen Stadium woodshed. I usually get kind of pumped up watching this show, especially when Iron Mike is swinging the spatula but my enthusiasm takes a nosedive when, sadly, the mystery ingredient is revealed.

Okra. Bleck.

I flip up one channel—QVC—Southwest Treasures. Joy.

I watch Mary Beth do her chipper best to sell me the most God-awful turquoise nugget necklace ever crafted. Yep, this is it. This should bore me right through The Sandman’s front door.

And an hour later, it's two o'clock in the morning and I am still bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. All that pizza-anchovy-swill is still slopping around inside me. I turn off the TV and pull the blanket up around my mom. Then I grab my tennis shoes and coat and sneak out the back door.

I'll run it out of me, this sick, gross feeling. I won't puke it out. I'll run it out.

I mean, running is good for you, right?

The snow has finally ceased and it's a bit warmer than it was a few days ago but I bring a hat and gloves anyway. The running-until-frozen-solid thing worked great on Friday after Kirsten and I had it out on her porch but when I actually got home? Not so much. I was raw and wind-burned. I looked like I'd stuck my head and hands in the microwave. My mom was pissed when I came rolling in after dark, heaving and sweating, my face lit up like a jack-o-lantern. She made me soak my hands in warm water and took the blow dryer to my face then bitched me out
for leaving my phone behind and not calling her for a ride. Thank God she didn't notice that I had no actual books or paper on me. I'll have to be more careful about running in bad weather; bundle up, buy some running pants or running tights, or whatever the hell it is runners wear.

Ronan peeks out of his door in the garage and stares at me as I leave the drive. I run around the neighborhood for about an hour, using the street because the sidewalks are knee deep in snow. I cut down some side streets until I reach the diner. Shelley Keep It Green is not there but another girl is working. She is sitting at the counter like a customer and is watching a Seinfeld rerun on a TV mounted in the corner. I keep going and pass Johnny Malloy’s Irish Pub where a drunk comes waddling out, yelling profanities to no one in particular. He nearly knocks me over and then yells "Watch where yer goin!!!" I cross the street quickly and he yells again. "Ah, I was just joshin! Don't be a-scared. Hey! Wanna go fer a drink?"

I run the whole way home. Ronan is still waiting for me in his pen. He rarely gets walked anymore because Mrs. O’Leary’s knees are shot. Her nephew has to come over twice a week to clean his run and cusses like a truck driver the whole time.

I pet Ronan through the fence and tell him that next time, I will take him with me.

It's Tuesday afternoon and I feel like a jackass. I'm on my way to AV and even though Corey put Gingerbitch.com out of her misery, the stench of her rotting corpse lingers on. A couple guys made shitty comments to me at lunch and it's pretty much sucked up my whole afternoon. I'm usually fairly adept at shutting haters down, particularly if it's in defense of someone else, but when someone cracks off about my boobs or ass, especially right to my face, my sharp tongue tends to curl in on itself. The worst part? Bethany, my new BFF vegan lunch buddy, pretended she didn't hear the comments when I damn well know she did. She was
standing right next to me when two sophomores looked at my chest and said: *I wonder if there's any melon back there?* *For some reason, I'm craving melon.* I grabbed a juice, threw fifty cents on Bethany's tray and stepped out of line, headed to the table.

Back in the day, Kirsten would have dressed them down until they ran crying from the cafeteria holding onto their shrunken weeners. Shit, even tiny little Paige wouldn't have stood by and done nothing. She would have thrown a spork or called them assholes or *something*.

Not Bethany. *Newp,* Bethany just busied herself with intently studying salad toppings and just left me flapping in the breeze. Then, when she finally made her way to the table, she immediately launched into an overblown tale, something about her sister's pregnant guinea pig getting lost in the couch for two days. It was obvious fiction but everyone laughed and so I pretended to buy it, too. *Ha, ha, ha, that's so funny, Bethany, ha, ha, ha.* So on and so forth.

Whatever, point is, Gingerbitch.com and her big, brassiered breasts are still out there, lingering.

And despite the chivalry, I am not looking forward to spending the next hour with Corey. In fact, it is *because* of the chivalry, that I am not looking forward to spending the next hour with Corey. The Awkward, I can feel it, it's crawling up my insides like a fungus.

I walk to the AV room and stand outside the door. I take a deep breath and turn the knob. When I step inside, I stop in my tracks. The room is different. Where there used to be a table, now sits a big flat screen TV and two beat up, mismatched recliners. The TV is propped up and anchored to a dolly using several strings of bungee cables. Corey's behind it, plugging it in or something.

"Hey, Sid. Welcome to our new home theater." he says from behind the screen.

I walk in and set my stuff on one of the beat up chairs. I think he's hooking up a DVD player or something
"How'd you get a TV that big down here? And furniture?"

"Simple," he says. "Mrs. Nicholson? Teaches freshman history or some shit? She went on maternity leave. The sub couldn't get the TV to work so instead of telling him he's an idiot who can't work a simple remote, I told him the TV was busted and I needed to take it down for repairs. Then I snagged my friend TJ from one of his many study halls and had him help me roll it down here. The chairs are from one of those storage rooms down the hall. I jimmed the lock, drama club props or something. Wanna know the best part?"

"What?"

"Nicholson's out for the rest of the grading period. TV's all ours."

"Clever, clever." I laugh and then sit down. For a Goodwill chair, it's not bad.

"So, what are we watching?" I ask, "Soaps? Judge Judy?"

"Got it. Finally," he whispers to himself, and then pops up from behind the screen waving a DVD. "I thought we could broaden our horizons with a little community theater."

He says it in a snotty, professorial accent.

"Uh. Okay," I say.

So, I guess, we're watching some PBS crap. Well, at least we're not talking about Gingerbitch.com and Siddy, Siddy's Big Fat Titties....

He walks around to the DVD player and turns it on.

"You see, Ms. Murphy," he says, continuing on with the accent, "I'm a big supporter of the arts so I thought a local production of Peter Pan would be just the thing. It was filmed in 1982 and stars a young but dashing Albert C. Davis as that lovable rascal Peter."

Okay, now I'm thinking he might be high or something. Yes, he's definitely high. He and this TJ guy got high in the bathroom and stole a big screen TV off the freshman sub and then
they broke into a storage closet and stole Goodwill furniture off the drama club. Maybe Bethany was right about him.

He turns to me, sees me looking at him like he's nuts.

"Albert C. Davis?" he says.

Like I should know who or what he's talking about. I look at him blankly.

"Lakewood High's version of a Third World dictator? ‘You! With the red curls! Keep those green eyes front and center!’"

"Oh!" I laugh. "From detention. Mr. Davis. Got it."

And so that's what we do most of the period. In between running videos and equipment around, we laugh our asses off at Mr. Davis, age twenty, swinging from a ceiling in green tights to the tune of "I Can Fly! I Can Fly! I Can Fly!"

And because our recliners are right next to each other, I am able to zone in on something I haven't noticed before. The way Corey smells. I mean, I've picked up the aroma of cigarettes before, it's kind of hard scent to miss but I'm picking up something else now, something better. Donuts, maybe? I detect a definite Irish Spring, soapy thing going on, too. The blend of it all is rather intoxicating.

I try to ignore it and focus in on the TV. I laugh as Mr. Davis flits back and forth on the stage, jumping around on a poorly constructed pirate ship that is about to fall out from under him. I laugh and focus and try to ignore Corey's presence next to me and the smell of cigarettes, Irish Spring and donuts.
Chapter Seven

I am pure exhausted. I spend most nights with my eyes popped open like dinner plates, jogging the streets with a monster looking dog loping alongside me. I keep pepper spray at the ready because I think Ronan would sooner lick his balls than bite someone but he is good company and enjoys the late night adventures. It feels good to run. Not that suicidal, ugly, no hat or gloves, type of running I did that one time, but just regular, head up, well-clothed, bouncy type running that says, "Look at me! I'm a jogger! I heart jogging!"

It feels good, healthy. It's like this white out comes over me and strips everything away until all I can feel and see and hear is the running, my feet rhythmic on the pavement, the burn in my legs and lungs, the road ahead. Plus, the new running shoes I picked up at Geiger’s are kind of cute. I don’t mind occasionally looking down at them. They match my hat and gloves—navy with pink stripes.

My mother has no idea I run at night, sometimes two and three hours at a time. If she knew, she'd freaking kill me because a.) What sane female jogs at night, Sid? b.) You have to get up for school, so get your ass in bed, already and c.) You already ran after dinner for two hours so just what in the hell is going on here, young lady?

Katherine, she's a sly one. Not a whole lot gets by her. Thankfully, she pops that Ambien at ten-forty five every night, so I just sit and wait for the sleep fairies to whisk her away and out the door I go.

The downside to all this late night exercise is that it doesn't bode well for daytime learning. I'm beat at school. I play catch-up with naps on the weekends when my mom is at open-houses and Liam's at his dad's. And sometimes after school before my mom gets home, I'll lay in Liam's bed with him and doze while he plays video games or watches cartoons. Mostly,
that's all I do anymore—Doze. Deep, uninterrupted, dreamy sleep used to be a must for me, but I don't like staying still and quiet for that long anymore. One, maybe two hours at a pop, several times, spread out over a 24 hour period works better now; because when I stay asleep for more than an hour or so, my mind gives in. My mind sinks deep down and starts dreaming. It turns into a very vulnerable place, a blank canvas where horror comes to finger-paint and play. So, no thanks, you can keep the dreaming.

But, it's starting to catch up to me. My grades are in the crapper. It’s Monday morning, five weeks into the grading period and time for mid-terms. I’m at school and the minutes are creeping forward like paralyzed snails. I take my tests and use my arm to prop myself up but my head keeps rolling forward jerking me awake. I’m on a narcoleptic-insomniatic roller coaster with no brakes. The up-and-moving moments between classes are only slightly more bearable. I walk like the living dead from class to class wearing sweatpants and sweatshirts.

I've stopped eating lunch with Bethany & Company. They're okay, not bad people or anything, but sitting at their table pretending to be all feministy, nature-girl, pissed-off-at-humanity is like going to a really boring job every day. I make my excuses. Well, not excuses, exactly, more like outright lies. I tell Bethany that I have college essays to work on in the library, or that I have to run home and walk the neighbor's dog because they went on a religious pilgrimage to the Middle East. I usually hit the AV room for a nap. Which is exactly where I'm headed now. I'm going to sprawl out in that stolen Goodwill recliner for the next thirty minutes and doze. Sandman, here I come.

Fack! It's locked. Some nosy-ass janitor is onto me.

I grab a diet Coke from the vending machines and head out the door. I walk through the parking lot and toss around the idea of finding an unlocked car to sprawl out in, an SUV with a
big back seat sounds tempting. I decide against it for fear that I might not wake up and some
teacher will find me snoring in his car after school. I’d be sent off to the loony bin for sure. So,
I go to the track and walk. I don't run at school, unless it's for gym. Maybe when track starts, I'll
run then but running at school when it's unnecessary might perk suspicions that I'm a total
nutcase. Plus, I'll get all sweaty and gross. Like Corey needs to smell Sid Murphy stench in the
AV room after she went and pitted herself up at lunch.

It's kind of nice out, cold but still sunny. I walk and think and wonder where Kirsten and
Paige are right now, probably Taco Bell or Chipotle. Paige worships Mexican food. If Kirsten
picked, they probably went to Whole Foods and grabbed sushi to go.

I picture them pulled over in the big empty parking lot where Circuit City used to be,
sitting on the hood of the clown-mobile, a cup of soy sauce between them, top down, radio
blasting. It makes my throat catch, seeing them in my mind's eye, seeing them having fun and
carrying on without me.

I pull out my I-Pod and turn on a current events pod-cast so I can hear people talking
about bigger, more important things than Sid Murphy and her stupid life. I listen to people talk
of terrorism and unemployment and the flooding in Tennessee. I try to remember the suffering
people of the world. So, I won't think about how hungry I am and about how much I miss my
friends right now.
Chapter Eight

I am dreaming of him. I'm dreaming that we're on the ski lift and he has his arm around me and is pulling me close and talking into my ear. I can’t hear what he’s saying, it's just whispered mumbling. Then I look ahead at the other side of the lift, the side with the empty returning chairs and see Liam coming toward us. He's wearing his pajamas that look like a baseball outfit. He sees me and pushes his safety bar up and then slowly stands in the seat holding his arms out from his sides for balance.

"Look Sid! No hands!" he yells.

I start to scream for him to sit down, to put his bar down and hang on, but something cold and slippery slides over my mouth and I'm unable to move it away, my limbs, my whole body is paralyzed. Frozen stiff, I sit with this snake of a man next to me and watch helplessly as Liam starts to fall, starts to plummet to the ground.

My eyes roll back in my head and my eyes fly open. My heart is pounding and I'm soaked in a frightened sweat. I slip out of my bed and across the hall to Liam's room to sit on the edge of his racecar bed and carefully, quietly, lay my head to his back. I want to wake him up. I want to fold him up in my lap and hug him tightly into me. But I just sit and listen to his heartbeat and breathing until my own heartbeat and breathing settle down again. When I'm calm and the nightmare seems far enough away, I get up and tiptoe out of his room and head downstairs. Out the back window, I can see Ronan staring at the back of the house. He is outside in his run, sitting attentively at the gate waiting for me. He is used to our routine by now.

Tonight, we have to run all the way to the 24 hour pharmacy on Hilliard. It is kind of far but it's the only place where I can get what I need at this hour. I get Ronan out of his pen and he makes no noise, no barking or jumping. He knows to be quiet and slips into the leash that I
bought for him. We sneak around the house and down the driveway. He waits until we're down the street to start huffing and puffing and butting my legs with his head, the way dogs do when they're excited to see you and want petting or a treat. I stop walking and give him his due. I scratch behind his ears and give him the hamburger I didn’t eat at dinner. Then we are off and running. We cut down a side street and on to Detroit. Everything is dark—all the bakeries, gift shops, and galleries are closed. The only places open are the diner and Malloy’s. I stop in front of the window at the diner and jog in place so I can look inside. It's empty except for one man who hangs over a cup of coffee in a booth and the night waitress is manning her post in front of the TV, watching that show where paparazzi stalkers hunt celebrities around-the-clock. They lurk in bushes or outside nightclubs and then report to base command with their photographic kill shots. Ugh, I could never see Shelley Keep It Green watching something like this. She's Discovery Channel or Nat Geo all the way.

Ronan snorts, letting me know he's had enough of this waitress and her TV viewing too. We take off, finding a steady even pace for about half an hour. At this time of night, it's green lights the whole way down Detroit where the pharmacy sits at the Hilliard intersection.

I don’t want to leave Ronan outside so I poke my head in the door to ask the cashier if I can bring him inside. My night vision has kicked in and the brightness of the store assaults my eyes.

"Can I bring my dog in? I’m afraid someone will steal him or he’ll get spooked and run off."

She looks at him and says, "I dunno."

"If he takes a crap, I’ll clean it up, I swear. Besides, there’s nobody here and I’ll only be a sec."
She looks at us uneasily but says, "Just tie him up by the door and make it quick."

"Thanks."

I walk over to the racks and candy machines by the door to look for a way to hitch him up. Easy Listening is playing overhead, Christopher Cross, waxing prophetic about the inner serenity he has found through the pastime of *Sailing*. I tell Ronan to stay and loop his leash around the leg of the free circulars rack. I freeze when I see my mother’s face staring back at me from the *Homes Magazine*. That unsold Tudor on Lighthouse Road made the cover this issue and her picture is in the corner of it. I get a stab of shame; it’s like she is watching me, and going "tsk, tsk, tsk" for what I’m about to do. I turn the magazine around so the cover isn’t showing.

I walk quickly toward the pharmacy counter where all the scandalous items are kept in plain view. The pharmacy window is shut and has a "Pharmacist on Break, Ring Bell for Assistance" sign with a big arrow pointing toward a makeshift doorbell.

I look over the shelves: packages of condoms, tubes of lubricants, cans of feminine spray. And pregnancy tests.

Yes, I am late. Very, very late.

I scan the choices. So many different kinds—ones with little urine cups, ones with sticks to pee on, ones with blue lines, ones with pink dots. And then there are the simpleton ones that scream out PREGNANT or NOT PREGNANT in the little results window. I guess these tests are for the truly rattled, for the petrified basket cases who can't bear to even decode directions. I look at the prices, shocked at how expensive they are. A piece of plastic that you take a whiz on, stare at for three minutes, then toss out, costs twenty dollars? I only have fifteen. There’s a
cheaper test, a generic store brand that costs twelve, but its spot on the shelf is empty and has an out of stock sign in place of it.

I need one of these tests.

I stand deliberating a minute and contemplate shoplifting. It’s a small store. I look up at the round mirror at the end of the aisle that reflects back toward the cashier. She's at her counter. I can see Ronan too. He’s standing at attention, poker straight and looking in the direction that he had last seen me.

Shoplifting?

I am unsure how to go about it.

Do I shove it in my pocket? Slide it up my sleeve? Do I divert attention, take the heat off by buying something else? Do I go whole hog and steal the Mac Daddy twenty five dollar two-fer pack or stick to the least expensive? Will this move be factored into my sentence should I be apprehended by the fuzz?

I am suddenly terrified. People may call me selfish, or a slut, or even a quitter now, but one thing I can never be accused of is being a thief. I have never deliberately stolen a single thing in my life. When it comes to anything even remotely resembling thievery, I start to sweat and wear the guilt like a thrift store wedding gown. I even feel guilty when I get free drink refills at Taco Bell. In fact, one time when I was about eleven, I accidentally walked out of a store holding a pack of gum in my hand. Kirsten, Paige and I were at Everything’s-A-Dollar buying candy and junk food for a sleepover. I'd meant to put the gum in our little shopping basket but was so engrossed in conversation while shopping that I just clean walked out with the gum in hand. About twenty minutes later, when we'd walked almost the whole way back to Paige’s house, I realized I was holding a sweaty, melted pack of Bubbalicious in my fist and
made them walk all the way back in a roasting July heat so I could pay for it. Kirsten and Paige tried the whole way to talk me out of returning it.

_You didn’t mean to steal it, so it doesn’t count, especially if you don’t actually open and chew it._

_Just throw it away at my house._

_We can stop by the playground and pass it out to some little kids or something, that way it’s like charity._

I felt like God was watching and some giant cosmic hammer would swing down and flatten me if I didn’t pay for it. When we got into the parking lot, I had it all planned. Paige would stand outside with our bags and Kirsten and I would do a loop-de-loo around the store, walk up to the counter, and casually pay for the gum. No big deal. But when we got to the door, I was so afraid that I leaned halfway inside and chucked my ill-gotten gain toward the candy rack and yelled “Run!” We took off like our very lives depended on it, convinced that the candy police were hot on our tails. One of our bags split open and we lost half our legitimate purchases somewhere between Everything’s-A-Dollar and Paige’s front porch.

"Can I help you find something?" A voice says behind me. I jerk around and the clerk is staring at me.

"Uh, uh…” I stammer. She looks down at what’s in my hand.

"Ohhhh,” she says. She’s a college-aged girl who looks like she doesn’t actually go to college. She has stringy blonde hair, long artificial nails, and reeks of sickly sweet dessert type perfume.

"Uh, I have to go. My dog is waiting."
I try to put the box back on the shelf but my hands are shaking so badly that I knock off about ten other boxes. I squat down and start to pick them up. The reality of my situation sets in. No, floods in. A voice says: No one will blame you, your mom will understand, she will take you and pay for it. And another voice argues: But, you couldn’t live with having done that… ever…because he or she would still have been part of you…half from you…

The store is getting very small and I am trying to grab boxes, wobbling around, toppling over, and grabbing the shelf to balance myself.

"Hey, calm down. It’s okay," The cashier says, kneeling down to help me. "I’ve had several scares myself. Chances are good that you’re not."

"I only have fifteen dollars," I say, looking at her and trying to choke back a nervous breakdown. "You’re out of the store brand. I don’t have enough…”

She looks up at the empty space on the shelf. She reaches up and grabs the box next to it. The one that tells you in plain English if you’re pregnant or not pregnant. The one that costs twenty dollars. She hands it to me.

"We have a replacement policy. If we’re out of the store brand, you get the lowest priced brand name instead."

A wave of relief washes over me.

"Really?"

"No," She shrugs, "not really." Then adds with an awkward laugh, "But we should!"

I smile a nervous smile and we both stand up. I pull my money out of my pocket and hand it to her all wadded up. My hands are still shaking. I look at her as she is smoothing out the bills. I memorize her face. Underneath her smudged black eyeliner there is a kindness and I wonder if she knows Shelly Keep It Green. She will be The Drugstore Madonna to me now.
We walk to the counter and she rings me up. She hands me my change and I drop it in the little plastic box that is sitting on the counter with a little girl’s picture pasted on it. I give the dollar and nine cents to Delaney Michaels, age four, of Dogwood Lane, who needs help paying for a kidney transplant.

Then I thank the cashier and go to retrieve Ronan. As I open the door to leave, I stop halfway and look at my Drugstore Madonna who is leafing through a magazine and a need wells up inside me. Before I can stop it from coming out, the need spills quietly out of my mouth.

"I didn’t want to."

She looks up from her magazine.

"He took it," I say. "He stole it from me."

I can feel my face getting hot, my eyes burning.

Her eyes are hurting and I am regretful now. I am sorry that I have handed her, uninvited, a piece of what I carry.

"I’m so sorry," she says.

"Me too," I say with a trembling chin.

I confess these things to The Drugstore Madonna because I don’t know her and she doesn’t know me and I will never come into this store again. Ever. But I don’t feel better having done it. The burden is actually heavier now.

"Thanks," I say, then turn out the door.

I look down at Ronan. My mind says one thing: Run. Like he has heard me out loud, Ronan takes off and we run, as fast as we can into the cold, starless night, the February air drying my face a little more with each step.
Chapter Nine

There is a God: *Not Pregnant*. I can only assume that stress, heavy exercise and rapid weight loss have thrown my period off. I've lost sixteen pounds in five weeks, mostly off of my ample chest and plentiful thighs. But the badonka-donk junk? Still in the trunk. My ass is as big as it ever was.

So, basically, none of my clothes hang right anymore. My mother has noticed my slimmer face and figure and keeps asking me if I’m sick. No, I’m not sick, I tell her. I am going out for track and watching my weight. Jeez, shut up about it already.

My mom has not sold a house in over a month. It is February, and while ‘lookers’ are numerous, ‘buyers’ are not. While we are not necessarily hurting to pay bills, I don’t want to ask for money for new clothes. So, I need a job if I want to buy them. I have filled out job applications at a pet supply store, Starbucks, and The Diner. I can walk and jog to all of these places. I figure it’s not just for the clothes money, but it will be a good way to keep busy after school and on weekends. *Down Time* is no longer in my vocabulary.

So far, none of the places have called. Probably because my applications are so pitifully void of anything other than my name and address. There is always McDonalds, they're *always* hiring. Especially work virgins, they love to break in doe-eyed work virgins. If you’re sixteen and have a pulse, you’ve got a job but I’m not that desperate yet. I'll dip into my baby-sitting/birthday money before I go that depressing route. Besides, there’s no point in buying clothes yet. I’ve still got nine pounds to lose. I figure by the time I fill out applications, then interview, then start working and finally get a paycheck, I will be at my desired goal weight and I can go shopping for new jeans and bras. I'm shooting for a C cup; a size I haven't seen since sixth grade.
I choose a pair of sweatpants, a black tee and hoodie, before heading out the door. I run to school now. I load up on the deodorant, wash my face, and fix my hair in the locker room before anyone gets there. Only the janitors are there and they don’t seem to mind as long as I clean up after myself.

On my way out the door, I notice that the newspaper is sitting at Mrs. O’Leary’s door, still wrapped in orange plastic. It doesn’t seem right, Mrs. O’Leary never forgets her paper. She rises at four-thirty sharp and has the paper completely read, cover to cover, coupons clipped, crossword done, and it's neatly folded, sitting at our door by seven for my mother to peruse over morning coffee. She always sets the funnies on top with little notes written to Liam and me in the margins. All Mrs. O’Leary asks is that we take all the papers to the recycling headquarters once a month along with her glass and plastic.

I knock on her door but she doesn’t answer. I peek in her front window and see her television is on, set to mute with captions running because she has trouble hearing it anymore. Her door is locked so I go around the house, pull back some overgrown shrubs and peek into a side window. My heart drops into my stomach. She's in the hallway outside her bedroom, lying face down on the floor.

I run back toward the front of the house, I trip coming up the porch steps and bang my shin really hard. I scrabble inside, and run through the house to find my mother. She's in the shower.

"Mrs. O’Leary! Mom! Help! It’s locked! She’s on the floor!"

My mom jerks back the shower curtain, sopping wet, the shower still running, grabs her robe and runs to the junk drawer where she keeps a spare key to Mrs. O’Leary’s half of our house.
Massive heart attack. The funeral was small—just her nephew, his family, a few scattered people from her bridge club, the priest, and us. I wanted to bring Ronan but the priest wouldn’t allow him in the church and the grandson didn't care enough to protest. Poor Ronan has howled non-stop for days. His howls of grief can be heard around the clock, far and wide, throughout the greater Cleveland area. My mom finally broke down and has been letting him inside at night.

We are watching American Idol; I’m rooting for the fat, bluegrass gospel guy from West Virginia. I love an underdog. A commercial comes on so I get up to bring Ronan in for the night. When I get to the door, I see that a van is pulling up. Mrs. O'Leary's nephew is backing a van up to the garage like a moving truck. He gets out and heads over to the run gate holding a leash.

My mom and I run out and ask him what he's doing.

"Getting rid of your problem. Thanks for keeping an eye on him, feeding him and what-not."

"Where you taking him?" I ask.

"The pound. My wife is allergic and I don't have time for a Wolfhound rescue, the nearest one is in Canada and I can't take two days off work to drive him all the way to Toronto."

I freak. And I mean completely out. A beautiful specimen of a dog like Ronan? Unclipped? Sitting in the pound? He'll be snapped up by the first piece of breeder trash to come along. He'll be half-starved and sitting in his own crap in a week while the bloodsucking puppy mill owner sits back making a fortune off puppies. Ronan—my guardian angel—an unloved, shit-covered, flea-bitten, puppy maker? Hell no.
"Yeah, you’re not taking him to the pound," I say. "Unbelievable. I mean, your aunt loved this dog. So, he’s staying right here. This is my dog now."

I snatch the leash off him before he tries to wrangle Ronan up into the van.

My mother, who has been fairly adamant about the fish-only rule, just looks at me like I have become possessed. I throw her a daggered look that says: *Mother or not, I will scratch your eyeballs out if you mess with me on this.* The nephew looks at my mom.

"Fine," she says, “But I'm paying the vet bills with your college money."

The nephew shrugs, climbs into his van and slips quietly out the drive, happy to have his problem solved. My fears abated, I kneel down and hug Ronan close and think, *this is my dog now.*
Chapter Ten

It is the middle of March, the grading period is almost over and my grades are a disgrace. Three C’s. My mother, thankfully, is not a grade Nazi so she will probably just tell me to do better next time, which I will do.

I have a hat on, but my hair spills down the back of me in frozen little coils. I took a shower before bed so it was still damp when we woke to go running. The weather is starting to break but the snow is still piled up in places in dirty half-melted clumps. Streetlamps light us up, every hundred feet or so, as we pad quietly down a deserted Lake Road, the park entrance is just ahead.

I am deep in thought, tuned into the feel of my body, thumping along and enjoying the ease of my slimmer frame. I am thinking about how many calories I am burning, trying to do the calculations in my head when an old white pickup truck passes us, slams on its brakes, and then pulls into the park entrance, blocking us from going forward. Ronan lets out a growl, bares his teeth and leans forward, stretching his leash. This is the first time I have seen him act like anything other than a complete teddy bear. I turn to run us the other way and can hear the driver side window being lowered behind me. I fumble for the mace that I keep in my pocket.

"Murphy?" a voice says.

I turn around and recognize the face. It is The Living Stoner, a cigarette dangling from his lips. My spidey senses which were at five alarm panic, quell, sending a warmish chill of relief up my spine, down my arm, through the leash, and into Ronan, who relaxes immediately. I breathe out and walk closer to the truck. I am sure I look a fright, completely sweaty, breathing heavy and sporting a red nose.

But it’s not like I care or anything.
"Hey, Corey," I say, facing him at eye level because he is so high up. He doesn’t look at me. He can’t take his eyes off Ronan. He takes the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger and blows a stream of smoke away from us, out the side of his mouth and into his car.

"Is that a dog?" He asks.

"No," I say, "It’s a parakeet."

"What the hell kinda dog is it?" he says, still looking at Ronan.

Ronan, sensing my comfort with this person, looks longingly over at a cluster of trees. I release his leash to the full extent and let him sniff his way over.

"It’s the banana snow-cone making kind."

And on cue, Ronan raises his leg and prepares to let loose on a mound of remnant snow that has piled up against the trunk of an enormous tree.

"Oh, look," I say. "He’s about to make a fresh batch. Want one?"

"Ha, ha. You’re a riot," The Living Stoner says and stamps out his cigarette in the ashtray.

Then we both watch as Ronan does his business. The streetlamp casts light on the steam that is now pluming up from underneath Ronan who is looking down the road, concentrating on something in the distance, not aware that he is the focus of such scrutiny. Then he stretches his long back legs out, one by one, before shaking all over with pleasure. Then he walks over, rears up, plants both paws in the window and drags a huge meaty tongue across The Living Stoner’s face.

"Agh!" He says, pulling back and wiping the saliva with his sleeve.
Ronan settles back down beside me and looks up the street, completely bored and done with the both of us.

"Good boy," I say.

"No, really, what kind of dog is it? So I know never to adopt one." Corey wipes at his face some more.

"An Irish Wolfhound."

"Damn, you really are hardcore Irish aren’t you?"

"That’s right. Even got the dog to prove it."

He grins and then asks, "So what are you and your horse doing? Jogging at like…” He looks over at his interior clock "…four-thirty in the morning?"

"Couldn’t sleep," I say.

"Well, I’d tell you it wasn’t really safe for a chick to be night jogging but I think you’ll be okay with your wolfhound next to you. Jesus, his nads are obscene."

"Yeah, I just got him. I’m gonna get him fixed when I get the money together."

This is not a lie, his balls are downright embarrassing.

"Yeah, I don’t sleep well either. I work at the bakery on Fifth. DiRusso’s."

"A baker, huh?" I say. So, that’s why he always smells like donuts.

"You tell anyone and I’ll kick your ass," he says, "And your little dog too." He points a finger at Ronan who looks backwards and snorts defiantly before yawning. The word ‘bakery’ has stuck in my head now. My stomach responds with a growl.

"You make donuts and stuff?"
"Yeah. Donuts, strudels, cakes, pies. I make a wicked almond macaroon tart; I’ll bring some for AV tomorrow. A parting celebration, if you will. You can taste my wares," He adds a slight flourish on that last word.

I ready Ronan’s leash, "Sounds good. And don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. Your secret's safe with me, dough boy. We’re all guilty of something right?"

"Ain’t it true," he says as he puts his truck in reverse. "Be careful. Wear white next time. That dark coat's gonna get ya steamrolled." He rolls up his window.

He gives me a quick wave and his taillights head down the road. I watch as he turns down a side street and out of sight.

Corey Livingston, a baker. That’s why he smells like cinnamon and donuts.

Ronan and I turn toward home. I’m looking at AV time in a way I haven’t before and am sad that it's our last day tomorrow. I’ve barely spoken two sentences to Corey all grading period, if you can believe that. After that day when we watched Mr. Davis make a fool of himself as Peter Pan, Corey brought in a DVD box set of Deadwood, an HBO western that got canceled a few years back. I groaned internally when he first presented the idea of watching it because, as a rule, I don't do westerns, but after one episode I was hooked. We only got through the first season but he said I could borrow the rest. It was nice of him to do that—to bring that TV in and the recliners and the DVD's. Half of me wonders if he went through all that hassle so he wouldn't have to sit there feeling awkward about the Gingerbitch.com fiasco, thinking up small talk day after day. The other half wonders if he did it so I wouldn't have to feel awkward and sit there thinking up small talk day after day.
All I know is, I've learned more about Corey Livingston in the last five minutes than I have in nine whole weeks. I think he's okay. As a friend, I mean. Any guy who knows how to make an almond macaroon tart can't be all bad.

Liam is losing both front teeth at the same time. They're at the pulling out point but he thinks it's downright hysterical to chase me around the house, gaping and wiggling two bloody teeth that hang by mere threads of gum skin. I am an accomplished scrape washer and splinter picker but loose teeth, they flat creep me out. Loose teeth and the dentist chair are the stuff of nightmares. Among other, much worse things, I suppose.

"The tooth fairy is not gonna bring you a lousy thing Liam, if you keep it up. It's bad form. Not in the tooth fairy handbook of Loose Tooth Protocol."

"Pro to Call! Pro to Call!" he goons from behind the bathroom door. He's shut me in here for the time being but it's okay for now, since I'm getting ready for school.

My eyes look hollow so I rub some concealer under them. It's my mother’s and has yellow undertones which make me look even worse, like a jaundiced raccoon. I wipe it off. I've never had to use concealer before so I'll need to get some of my own. Does it come in chalk color?

It's been over two months now. The nightmares are less frequent, only two or three a week now. The Truth takes many forms, moving in and out of my sleeping subconscious like a ghoul or a snake. One minute I am in history, taking a test that I didn’t know was coming and there is this presence behind me, ominous, breathing down my neck. It whispers in my ear and asks me where my clothes are. I look down, horrified to find I'm completely naked and everyone is laughing at me. I run from the room, trying to cover myself with my hands.
In another dream, I'm home alone in the kitchen, hauling a heavy bucket of hot soapy water. I look around and everything—the stove, the floor, the counters, the table—is completely covered in greasy crud and dirty crumbs. I scrub and scrub until my knuckles and fingers are swollen and bleeding. So I reach into the freezer to get some ice and then somehow I'm inside the meatlocker-on-wheels bus that took us to Snow Ridge. I start to run down the aisle toward the exit but am grabbed around the neck by The Snake. The ceiling on the bus opens up to a snowy sky and there is no noise at all, just silence as I look up at the white sky and struggle to free myself. The Snake's jaws open and sink two giant fangs into my neck. Then I'm truly paralyzed, unable to move or speak or scream. He lays me back on the dirty floor then leans over my face, his eyes electric blue, he hisses: *These thngss, they go on forever*....

I look in the mirror; my hair has grown about an inch and a half. If I wet and spray it, I am able to tuck the uneven lock behind my ear now. So, there’s that. I brush my teeth and look at them in the mirror. I never had the big glorious, two tooth gap that Liam will have by the end of the day. Mine grew in one at a time. Straight thankfully. If I’d had to add braces to my repertoire, I may not be here at all. I may have just run away, joined the circus and became a carnie freak.

I gargle, spit, and rinse out the sink with my hand. I open the door and find Liam still standing there. Only now he is holding two bloody teeth in his palm. He growls and mugs at me, smiling widely through a mouthful of blood. I wince—little brothers, gross.

"Get in here ya little tick." I say, pulling him by the pajama collar toward the sink.

As I head to the AV room, my heartbeat is doing the quick step. He returned the TV yesterday and the other smaller TV's are all loaned out or busted. We'll have no buffer in the
room, no reason to sit, stare and not talk to each other. I decide that I'll eat one pastry or donut or whatever he brings and then make like I'm going to retrieve borrowed videos. Or maybe I'll clean it up in there—organize shelves, dust, or something. Busy, busy, no time for chit-chat, last day, need to look like we're working in case an authority figure drops in.

I open the door and there he is. Pastries are sitting on the table, a professional display on a tray, with two napkins on either side. He has already cut me a piece of something that looks like a nut roll.

"Hey, Corey."

"Hey, Sid."

"Looks good. You make all this yourself?"

I'm trying so hard to be casual that I think I may have come off phony. Aloof. Cold, even. My brain seizes up then starts pumping out random insanity. Relax. Think casual. Comfortable. Pre-washed. Old blue jeans. Relaxed fit Murphy, that's me.

"Yep, bright and early," he says, "The nut kolachi is the best but..."

I watch his lips moving and he doesn't seem to notice that I'm about to reach up, unzip myself from the skull down, jump out of my skin, and yell: Surprise! There's a crazy person in here!

"...I kind of screwed up the crust on the tart though, I was in a hurry. Usually, I don't eat this stuff but I skipped lunch so..." his voice trails off.

I sit down and pick up my nut roll. The silence thickens. The awk-werd is palpable. It's as if, by talking outside school for five minutes, by revealing tiny details about our outer lives, him being a pickup truck driving baker and me being a Wolfhound owning night jogger, both of us being insomniacs, we have crossed a threshold, walked through a portal that has made us real
people to each other. We are no longer Former Cheerleader Turned Gingerbitch Slut and Drug Dealer Turned AV Shop Rat. Now, we are Sid and Corey, official human beings, guests at a farewell pastry party, breaking bread, and In This Together Now. We are two people who actually have some things in common and could possibly even be (gak!) friends.

If I stuff my face, I can’t talk. So, that’s what I do—I stuff my face. Not literally I mean, but I do eat a cannoli, an almond tart, two pizzelles and a cheese danish without much stopping. It’s surprisingly tasty. Like, for real. My nerves will not, however, allow me to relish his wares the way they so richly deserve to be relished and all I can muster is a smiling nod of approval and a pathetic thumbs up.

When there is nothing left to eat, when we have demolished the whole damn tray, I slap the table and say, "Well, I’m gonna go collect videos from all the classes that haven’t returned them. Thanks for the pastries. They were really good. Nice almond filling," and then I break my neck getting out the door.

I plug in my I-pod, select Fiona Apple's *Extraordinary Machine* and get down to business. I move from classroom to classroom, collecting videos and accompanying hand guides on flower reproduction, the migratory patterns of Canadian geese, AIDS in Africa, the inner workings of the circulatory system, you name it. I burn through every song on the album and when I have an entire stack of videos and pamphlets that reach to my chin, I head back down to the AV room with a mere five minutes to spare. I turn the corner at the end of the hall just as the music starts up from the beginning. I'm trying to toddle everything without spilling and have only a little further to go. Maybe I can organize them extra slowly and burn another ten minutes. Then make an excuse to run to the head and burn, oh say, another—

I get a shove in my back and the entire load explodes down the hall like a deck of cards.
I whip around, jerk out my ear buds to find Starsha and Amber standing in front of me, laughing their asses off. Starsha spotted me at my last stop, when I was collecting a long overdue video on the invention of the microchip. The teacher was standing right there so all we could do was cast malignant stares at one another, but it seems they have followed me all the way down here. I’m not sure how she managed to pluck Amber from her class so quickly, but she’s like royalty around here, so I’m not surprised. No teachers or hall monitors question Her Highness when she decides to go traveling during the day.

I look down the hall at the mess.

"I'd have thought you more coordinated," Starsha says. "All those times I went diving off that pyramid and you never once dropped me."

She's right. I used to imagine taking a big step backwards at just the right moment so I could watch her splat like a wet frog right in front of me but I never had the nerve or true desire to actually go through with it. I may be vicious, but I'm not evil. Nope, I caught that bitch's bony ass every single time. And all it bought me was Gingerbitch.com and a clusterfuck of videos to clean up. Well, cheerleading is history and times have changed. And I'm feeling a little nostalgic for the Sid/Starsha kindergarten days. Starsha's eyes widen as I lunge at her. Her face twists up as I go straight for her hair.

Hairpulling.

Cliché? Probably.

Amateurish? Totally.

I never said I was a kung-fu, Kill Bill, cage fighter. But I’m not afraid of a good old fashioned cat fight especially with Starsha, who, while it's been quite a while, nearly a decade really, I've scuffled with plenty. And it’s always been my experience in the girl-fight department
to always go for the hair, especially if yours is pulled back already. Luckily, I ran an exorbitant amount of laps in gym earlier and it was sticking out so far that I had no choice but to hitch it back tight in ye ‘ole trademark Wendy braids. Perfect ‘do for a catfight.

It takes me a second to gain my footing but with two handfuls tightly in my grip, Starsha goes down to her knees just like old times. The sights and sounds are so familiar—her yelping, my snarling—it’s like we're back in the play kitchen fighting over who gets to crack the plastic Easter egg into the pink frying pan. Amber jumps on my back and starts yelping, too. During the yanking and slinging, I let loose a string of four-letter words that could reach all the way to Dikshit, India. Still, the whole thing is over in about five seconds when someone comes rushing up to pull us apart. It’s Corey; he peels Amber off my back like she's a flea and yells at me to let go of Starsha’s hair.

"Not before, I claw her eyeballs out!"

He puts two big hands over my wrists and squeezes my fists open. Starsha jumps up and runs over to huddle with Amber, who is hunkered against the wall. He holds me back from jumping at them.

"Let go!" I seethe at him.

Starsha, realizing the fight is now over, begins to examine her injuries. She starts pulling the loose hairs from her head, where they drift in little tufts to her open toed, perfectly pedicured feet.

"Get the hell out of here before a teacher or somebody comes,” he says to them, “You want to get suspended?"

He turns to me and says through gritted teeth, "Calm the fuck down."
I struggle to loosen myself from his grasp; I need to get some more of that hair. This shit is long overdue. When someone else comes hustling around the corner, Corey releases me and we all four stand at attention like, *What? Whad-we-do? What?*

"What’s going on here? I heard screaming!" Coach Letty says, looking to Starsha and Amber for an explanation, obviously not caring what might come out of either mine or Corey’s mouths. Starsha throws me a look of death and I can see her mind working. I can see her queen-bee cheerleading legacy flashing before her eyes. *What to do. What to do. There weren’t enough witnesses to claim an all-out attack, no blood or visible bruising...*

Corey pipes up, "The two of us banged into the two of them coming around the corner and all the DVD’s went flying. Sid slipped and fell. It just surprised us is all. I was helping her up. Right, Sid?" and he stares me into agreement. I nod my head to the coach.

Coach turns to Starsha who is also looking at me but her eyes are squeezed into vengeful slits. She says nothing for a few moments, just stands and weighs her options, like whether or not she should risk her chances at future prom queen by getting into a cat-fight with Ginger Bitch Murphy.

"Yeah, that’s right," she says, putting a hand on her hip and looking around at nothing in particular. "We were all just walking so fast and talking so much that we hit each other head on." Then she bends over dramatically and picks up the DVD nearest her on the floor. She smiles fakely and holds it up. It's a documentary on cannibalism.

"Oh look," she says, "this is exactly what we were sent down here to get. What a co-inky-dink. Well, gotta run."

She looks at me, cocks her head and says sickly sweet, "TTFN Sid," before turning and walking back down the hall, her hips swaying from side to side. She looks back at Corey and
smiles as Amber skitters two steps behind her like a good little handmaiden. Coach turns to face Corey and me.

I clench my fists as Starsha turns around to mock me behind Letty’s back. Walking backwards down the hall now, she mouths "Fuck you, Ginger Bitch," before rounding the corner and stepping out of sight.

The gym teacher eyes Corey and me suspiciously before throwing up her hands.

"Well, clean this mess up and get back to class," she says and walks into the sad, little faculty-only exercise room. My brain is on fire as we pick up the spilled DVD’s. When both of our hands are full and they are all picked up, my feet stomp down the hall. I am fuming.

I could have taken them both easily, if only I’d had more time. It would be worth another suspension just to black one thickly mascara’d eye or bust one overly glossed lip. When I get into the AV room, I sling my DVD’s on the table and kick a chair over before planting my rear end on the table, arms crossed. Corey closes the door with his foot and starts filing his portion of the DVD’s on the shelves.

I am still hopping mad. I have been minding my own goddamn business all grading period, why can’t she just leave me alone!?  

After a minute or so, Corey finally speaks.

"Jeez, the ski trip, AV duty…fighting? What’s next, killer? Bomb threats? Arson?" He chortles as if this is funny.

I look at him smiling smugly. He thinks I’m a snotty little fallen cheerleader who's finally gotten one of those things he’s had his whole rotten life: a bona fide reputation. I can’t believe I sat and ate all those pastries with him. All those fat and calories and for what? So, he'll like me? Screw him.
"How about drug dealing?" I snap, "I could do that. Grow a container garden of weed in my basement? You could teach me the ropes—which seeds to plant, proper lighting techniques?"

He smarts, his eyes wounded. He grabs his backpack, slumps past me as the bell rings.

"You think you know everything about me, but you don’t know shit. See ya ‘round Sid."

He slams the door on his way out.

I am stung with guilt; he was just throwing a joke out to lighten me up after saving my ass. I am left alone in the AV room, arms crossed like a brat, the lights buzzing overhead.
Chapter Eleven

The days are getting longer. It's five o’clock on Saturday and I'm at the park, resting with Ronan after a good run, the sun is still fairly high in the sky and the temperature is a tolerable fifty degrees. While it feels warm in comparison to last week, some overzealous, cabin-fevered fools are actually wearing shorts, running along the bike path, pretending not to be freezing their half-nekked asses off. I am sitting on a bench swing, cogitating my evil ways and the unsuspecting world around me. Ronan looks out at the water, the wind blowing his bangs back, his tongue flapping as he pants. I pull his travel bowl out of my backpack and give him some bottled water to drink. We ran six miles today and we'll run another one and a half on our way home.

Ronan laps the water up and then looks back toward the lake. I wonder if deep down inside, somewhere instinctually, he knows about the Irish Sea and where his ancestors came from. Does he know that he is a war dog by nature? That is, before domestication bred the scrap out of him? I remember the way he bared his teeth at Corey when he pulled up his truck a couple nights ago when we were jogging. I am sure, if provoked, he could shred someone. But right now, he is happy to sit beside me, sniffing the watery air and spying far off gulls diving for fish.

I don’t know Ronan’s birthday so I decide to make it St. Patrick’s Day, which is tomorrow. Besides my mom and brother, he is my one true companion. I decide that I will ask my mom if we can go to the parade tomorrow, all four of us. We can eat lunch at Sullivan’s downtown. Irish pubs and restaurants are lax about dogs on parade day, as long as they are Irish bred and well-behaved. Sullivan’s lets you bring them inside all year. Wolfhounds, Kerry Blues, and Irish Terriers mostly. I’ve even seen a few high strung Setters in there, lapping
Guinness out of their owner’s pints. Ronan is well-behaved and a gorgeous specimen, so they’ll let him in for sure. Yes, I will take Ronan out and celebrate his birthday. Instead of cake and candles, he'll get a corned beef sandwich, minus the cabbage, and chase it down with a sip of my mom’s Guinness. I'll even drive so my mom can get her Irish funk on. She could use a break, she hasn’t been out in ages. She’s been hardselling houses for months, cold-calling like a newbie, with ne’ery a nibble to show for it. Yes, I will do something fun and positive with the people I love. It will be a new day. A rebirth. A turning of the proverbial inner leaf.

All this fresh air and goodwill should generate some relief from the guilt I feel for having bawled Corey out, but it doesn’t. I still feel like a total shitheel.

"Let’s go Ro," I say, getting up from the bench.

My dog and I head toward home.

_________________

It’s five a.m. I went to bed at eight and woke up at four. Eight magnificent hours of sleep, uninterrupted by shape-shifting ghouls or restless leg syndrome. I swiped one of my mom’s sleep aids and slept right through the guilt of having done it. The proverbial inner leaf is starting to curl around the edges already.

But now I am on a mission—a guilt-eradicating mission. I left Ronan at home where he is surely pouting at the window. I am walking to The Diner on Clifton. Their special Patty’s Day breakfast menu is already on the board, served midnight until noon.

I scan the choices. There is The Leprechaun’s De-'Light" for the waist conscious: warm soda bread and low fat jam served with unsweetened Irish Breakfast tea. Sounds good, but not what I’m looking for. There’s The Patty’s Day Porridge for the more traditional diner: thick Irish oatmeal served with brown sugar, Irish butter, heavy cream and blueberries on the side.
Better, but not really practical as a “To Go” item. And for the true believers, there is The Irish Rib-Sticker Morning Feast: Two eggs any style, served with warm boxty toast, bangers and hash, backrashers and a simply mouth-watering side of black and white pudding.

Thanks, I'll pass.

I ate a huge bite of this so called ‘pudding’ once when I was about seven. My mother warned me but I wouldn't listen. I expected vanilla and chocolaty goodness to spread across my tongue. However, being that bread and onions mashed up with congealed pigs blood and beef fat does not taste like chocolate or vanilla, I spit it out on the plate, gagging and scraping at my tongue with a napkin. My mother laughed until she was practically falling out of the booth.

Last on the menu is The Cottage Staple and bullseye, just what I need:

Beef and Cabbage.

   All day long.

   On a plate.

   Or in a bun.

Shelly Keep It Green is working. The revelry starts early in this neck of the woods and the place is already full with merry, half-in-the-bag auto workers fresh off the night shift. I order three corned beef and cabbage sandwiches to go and stand in the foyer, salivating at the smells wafting from the kitchen.

"So you’re starting early, eh?" Shelley Keep It Green says, as she hands me my bag.

"Aye." I say with a fake Irish brogue.

She smiles.

"Fiona right? You give up veganism for Patty’s Day?"
Ah jeez, she remembers me. I’m ordering corned beef after claiming to be a skateboarding vegan. I could say it’s for a friend? That I’ve got a Guinness soaked tofu platter waiting back home?

"Um, yeah, about that…my name is actually um…Cassidy. Sid for short. All that stuff about being a vegan and everything, well, I…I made it up. I’m not a vegan. Or a skateboarder. I was cutting school that day and just needed somewhere to hang for a while. I’m sorry I lied. That was a weird thing to do."

Then I laugh nervously and add a hopeful joke, "I don’t even know what a carbon footprint really even means."

She rolls her eyes and rings my order up.

"Yeah, I kind of figured you were full of it, being that you were wearing leather gloves that day. Eighteen dollars."

I hand her a twenty. She pulls out two bucks from the register drawer.

"Keep it. And thanks for going along with my insanity. I needed it that day."

"Sure, no problem. But, don’t cut school again," she says, wagging her finger.

"I won’t," I say, smiling.

"So, where you headed so early in the morning?"

"To see a friend. Well, to try and see a friend. If he’ll see me that is. We had this sort of fight and I’m going to grovel." I hold up the To Go bag and add, "Bribery."

"Ah, yes. Food—gets ‘em every time. But it’s kind of early for corned beef. You sure he wouldn’t like something sweeter, like a pastry or something?"

"Oh, no. No pastries. Anything but pastries. Real food only. He works at DiRusso’s."

"Then the corned beef’ll do it. It’s not Sullivan’s but it’s pretty close."
"Thanks. Have a happy St. Pat’s."

"You too. And good luck with the bribery."

I give her a quick wave and then head out of the diner. The bakery is four blocks away and it’s freezing out. I walk fast so the sandwiches don’t get cold. I did an earlier pass of the bakery to make sure he was working. His truck was parked around back by the trash bin.

I stop to collect myself on the side of the florist shop next door. I don’t want to be breathing heavy when I go in. I smooth down my hair which is extra loaded down with product so I don’t look like the The Bride O’Frankenstein when I start up with the groveling. I calmly walk over to the bakery and step inside.

The jingle bell on the door rings and an old Italian man comes teetering out from the back, he has on a bright green apron with iron-on letters that spell out "Kiss Pasquale! Today, he is Irish!" It’s not a cushy sit down bakery like Panera, but a small "real" type bakery where it’s all made to go; friendly enough atmosphere but with a ‘Get your food and get out. Go home to your families people. Next!’ sort of vibe.

"Eppy St. Patrick’s Day to you Miss. You look-a Irish beauty with your pretty hair. What I get for you today? We got-a nice-a scone and-a fresh-a soda bread. Today we Irish too. Heh, heh."

The old man’s eyes twinkle and I see why Corey works here. It’s so laid back—no dress codes or policies on proper ways to greet a customer. And there’s real music on, I can hear The Strokes playing in the back. He lets him play real music.

"Um, I’m here to see Corey," I say.

The old man’s eyes widen with intrigue and genuine surprise.

"Corey? You here for Corey?"
I nod.
He steps in closer, leaning across the counter while lowering his voice. "He’s a good boy. You date him? He no tell me nothing hardly, ‘less I, how you say, push it out of him."
Then his voice goes higher and he waves his hand around and whines.
"Leave the boy alone Patsy! Stop be so nosy! My wife tells me this. But Corey, he like son. So...you girlfriend?"
His eyebrows wiggle up and down.
"Uh, no. We’re just classmates. Is he here?" I smile nervously, glancing at the swinging door to the kitchen. The old man looks disappointed that I have no juicy scoop for him.
"Ah, well. You too pretty for him. He needs haircut, he look like sissy punk, like Shaggy from the Scooby-Doo with that long hair."
"Coreeey!" he hollers and waddles out from behind the counter, over to the front door, where he grabs his coat from the coat tree and steps outside. He lights a cigar and leans his back against the front window to smoke.
After a minute, Corey comes out, wearing a white apron over several t-shirts, whistling and wiping his hands on a towel. He looks up at me, cuts the whistle and stops dead in his tracks. He continues wiping his hands, slower this time, and then slings the rag over his shoulder. His head cocks back coolly, his arms cross defensively. He has flour on his cheek.
"Hey," he says.
"Hey," I say.
Suddenly, I feel completely stupid and exposed, standing like an idiot with a big greasy bag of corned beef at five in the morning. Who eats corned beef at this hour? What the hell was I thinking?
I open my mouth to speak but nothing lucid comes to mind.

"What? You want pastries or something?" he says, coldly, "or you come to chew me out some more?"

I slump and breathe out. Then I take a breath and just let it rip. I don’t look at him when I speak, I look anywhere, everywhere and say really fast...

"I’m sorry. It…I…it was a really crap thing for me to do, to tear into you like that, especially after you stepped up like you did, I could have been suspended, expelled maybe and I had no right to treat you that way. Totally ungrateful and major tool behavior. God, and after you wrote that letter and got the website shut down? I feel really bad, big jerk, I'm just a…I'm just..."

Then I force myself to look at his face and say it more slowly.

"I am really sorry."

He looks at me, arms still crossed, face still cross, saying nothing.

"I brought you corned beef," I say timidly. My shoulders crunch up, and I hold the bag up, wiggling it like a moron.

His arms uncross as he saunters out from behind the counter, pinning me in place with a dirty eyeball stare, like I’m up to no good and he’s coming over to get to the bottom of my bullshit. I lower the bag and my eyes widen as he comes to a slow stop about a two feet directly in front of me. He towers over me, his hands are now on his hips, and he is giving me a steady, unwavering stink eye.

Damn he’s big.

After a second or two, he calmly reaches out and takes the bag from my grasp. He brings it up and cups one big hand underneath it and rolls the top of it open with the other hand,
and still eyeballin’ me, spreads the top apart with his floury fingers. He peeks down inside, just a quick downcast of the eyes, before resuming his glare. Then his eyes soften a little.

"Fine," he sighs, "Let’s eat. There’s a table in back."

"So I hear this high pitched shrieking sound, like an actual cat fight, and I look out and you’re wrestling around with Barbie and Skipper, cussing like I don’t know what."

"I was cussing? I don’t remember any cussing," I say through a full mouthful of food. God, I’m so freaking hungry. I can only imagine how much fat and calories I'm inhaling right now but man is it good.

"Oh, you were cussing alright. You called her a...what was it again?"

Corey holds his sandwich and looks up contemplatively.

"Oh yeah, I know. A dirty dishrag skank." He enunciates each word with precision.

"Yeah, you were telling her she was going to be...and how did you phrase it? Balder than Elmer fucking Fudd when you were done with her."

He takes a big bite of sandwich.

"Fiction! I did not say that," I say choking a little on my food and slapping the table before pointing a finger at him. "Bullshit-fiction, never happened."

"Did too. Ask her," he says matter-of-factly, mumbling through a mouthful of corned beef.

"But, I don’t remember it."

He laughs. "Then you had a rage-induced black out, because you totally said it."

I take another bite, swallow and then lean in with curiosity. "Can you really black out from rage?"
"Sure," he says, "It happened to me once when I was about eight. Right before we moved to Lakewood. An entire ten minutes erased from my life."

"What happened? Was it a fight?"

"Yeah. Well, not a physical fight, a verbal one."

"Tell me."

"You don’t want to hear this story. Trust me."

"Okay, now you have to tell me."

"Not while you’re eating."

"I have the stomach of a billy goat."

"Alright," he says, shrugging. "You asked for it. You’re gettin’ it."

Popping the last of his sandwich in his mouth, he leans back in his chair, like he's going to need to get comfortable for a while.

"So I had this cat who just had kittens. My mom and I, we were living in this shitty little house on the west side and next door was this crack head with a kid. I think the kid’s name was Andrew or Andre or something. Anyway, he was like four and couldn’t speak because his mom was a junkie cow and didn’t pay attention to him at all. She would just set him outside at dawn and bring him in at sunset. He’d stand in the yard and grunt at cars like he was a dog or something. Weird. Anyhow, my mom and I started to feel sorry for him so we would invite him over, feed him, took him for ice cream once, and let him play with the kittens. He got to where he started just walking in our house without knocking and he’d just be standing there in your bedroom when you came out of the shower. Freaky. Anyhow, we kept trying to explain to him that he couldn’t do that, that he had to knock first. But he wasn’t getting it. One day he came inside while my mom was napping and I was at school. He came in and…"
Corey stops. His face goes solemn and slightly stunned. I can tell from his expression that this story just shifted gears. It is being mentally re-filed in his memory bank, switched from the Oh Man, Check It Out, This One Time shelf to the Ugh, I’d Almost Forgotten That Shitty Story shelf.

“What happened?” I ask.

He looks at his hands and says more delicately, "He took the kittens out on the patio and doused them with a bottle of lighter fluid that was sitting by the grill."

I jerk a little. I was expecting a twist, but not something that bad.

"So, he cooked them alive?” I say, feeling a little queasy.

"No, he didn’t light a match or anything. He... he didn’t know what he was doing. He was just playing. He thought the lighter fluid was like a squirt gun or something."

"So he poisoned them?"

“Yes. I came home from school and smelled gas so I woke my mom up. The cat was running around the house like a manic, panting, and jumping, and freaking out. I picked her up and smelled the lighter fluid on her. My mom ran over to the cat box and the kittens were gone. The mother cat had carried them back in, one by one, and hid them all behind the fridge. She was sick from trying to lick the lighter fluid off them. We washed them all up really well. But one of them died later that day, he’d gotten the worst of it. The other four were okay in the end. We had to take the mom to the vet to get charcoal put in her stomach. She was fine after about a week."

"That’s awful," I say, "What happened to the crack head and the kid? And how did you know it was him if you were at school?"
"Our back door was still open and we knew who’d done it. He was in love with those kittens. My mom called the police and they found the kid in his closet, covered in cat scratches. We thought Crackey would get in some kind of trouble but they didn’t do shit to her. ‘It’s just cats and the kid's fine’ they said. After the police left, I freaked. I went over and started screaming at her and the kid, calling her everything in the book. I told her that my cat was a better mother than she was. That we were lucky he didn’t burn our house down and lucky we didn’t have a baby at our house. That her son would have killed a baby if he’d had the chance. The kid was crying. His doped up mom was crying. My mom had to drag me off their porch kicking and screaming. All the neighbors were on their lawns watching. That’s what the kid two houses down told me anyway. I don’t remember it. I don’t remember anything past watching the police pull down the street."

"That is a terrible story. I’m so sorry that happened to you. And those poor cats."

I look at him hard. I want him to know that I mean it. Then I look down and grimace at my food, I fold up the rest of my sandwich in the wrapper.

"Told ya," he says.

"Yep, you sure the hell did."

He rocks back in his chair a little.

"I still feel bad for yelling at the kid though, even if I don’t remember doing it. He didn’t know any better."

"You were eight. You were a kid, too."

"Yeah, well, I guess the point I was making is that rage can do strange things to the mind. That, and don’t bathe cats in lighter fluid."

He says this kind of joking, taking a halfhearted stab at humor.
"Yeah, I guess so," I say, going along with his feeble attempt to glean some sort of moral from this grim tale. He wraps the sandwich papers into a big ball and tosses them into the trash can that is sitting about ten feet away.

"Two points," he whispers to himself.

Then we sit listening to a car commercial on the radio, trying to digest our corned beef, cabbage, and revulsion. I think about his words: *Rage can do strange things to the mind. Rage can make you forget things.*

"You cold?" Corey asks.

"Huh?"

"You just shivered like you were cold or something. I can get your jacket from the front."

"No, I’m fine. I just…um, was thinking about those kittens."

I look around, not knowing what to say. As if sensing the need for a mood enhancer, Corey jumps up and heads toward the radio over on a shelf.

"Let’s listen to something upbeat," he says, "And I’ll show you how to make pizelles and clothespin cookies."

"What?"

"You know. Um, pizelles. It's an Italian wedding cookie."

I know what they are. When my mom was married to Vince, we made them every holiday with an old fashioned iron brought over from Italy by his grandfather. The cookies would come out looking like a snowflake. But, I let Corey continue to describe them. I am speechless that he knows how to make these things and he looks cute talking about it.
"You know, they look like lacy waffle wafer thingies. And clothespin cookies, they're uh, those little cream filled spirals you see on cookie tables at weddings and stuff."

He realizes how ridiculous he sounds, sighs, and rolls his eyes.

"I have to make three dozen of each before I leave, they're for a baby shower order."

And then this towering hulk of a person, this enigma that I thought I knew to be a complete stone bag loser, is up and moving, talking about lacy waffle wafer thingies and little cream filled spirals. And he is putting on The Beatles.

My personal audio-kryptonite.

Fack!

We have every Beatles CD ever made at home. And all the old vinyl records. And the 8 tracks and cassettes. My mom's mom loved them, passed it down to my mom, who loves them and passed it on to Liam and me, who love them. John, Paul, George, and Ringo are like honorary Murphy family members. I recognize the album cover from across the room.

Rubber Soul. Double fack!

Drive My Car comes on and he says, "Go wash your hands and pull up that hair, Irish. You're helping. Corned Beef or not, you still owe me. Plus, I still haven't gotten you back for the Dr. Pepper. I let you work it off in trade."

We spend the next hour making cookies and goofing around. While the pizzelles are fairly quickly made with a big industrial sized pizzelle iron that cracks off six at a time, the clothespins are more tricky. His clothespins are wound flawlessly and come out looking like perfect ‘little cream filled spirals.’ The ones I make look like lumpy, crooked, falling-apart play-dough. The song Michelle comes on while I am rolling my sorry pat of dough out for another batch of clothespin rejects.
"Ahhh. This is my song," I say, "My mom picked my middle name after this song."

"What about your first name?" he asks.

"Cassidy? It's Irish. For curly-haired. Go figure, right?"

I say this in a tone thick with self-loathing while pointing a doughy finger at the mop of bright red ringlets piled on the top of my head. Surely, they sit in a tangled explosion, glowing like the Fourth of July.

Corey cocks his head and studies my hair with a serious look on his face.

"Curly-haired, hmmm. Nope. Not really seeing it."

He grins sideways.

I roll my eyes, then concentrate keenly on my dough.

"I always wished she would have picked the first name Lucy. From *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. I used to dance to it in my room when I was little. I'd turn off all the lights and spin around in circles until I was dizzy and then lie down and look up at my ceiling. I had all these glow in the dark sticker stars. They'd swirl and spin and I'd think Weeee! I thought I was high."

Corey laughs.

I look at him laughing and it occurs to me that I've never shared this story with anyone until now. I go back to my dough.

"Anyhow, she was afraid that with the hair, people would assume it was because of Lucille Ball. I should be thankful though that she didn’t go with what my dad wanted—Tallulah—Irish for Prosperous Lady."

"Ta-looooh Murphy," Corey crows, trying it out.

He laughs and says, "Ah, no. That’s Irish for playground ass kicking."
"Eh-yah," I agree. "Douchebag tries to name me freakin’ Talullah and then takes off before I’m even born."

"No shit. Me too." Corey says, pausing to look at me for a second before resuming the dough rolling.

"Well, mine stuck around until I was four," he says. "Waited until I got good and attached to him and then flew the coop with a stripper. I saw him once when I was thirteen, for like an hour. He has two kids and lives in Mississippi or Missouri or one of those M states, I dunno."

We both look at each other and I feel a connection being made. A connection through abandonment. It’s something that none of my friends could ever understand because even though they’ve got crazy divorced parents or miserable married parents, they’ve still got two.

"Well, at least your dad didn’t pick your name out of the Auto Trader," he says, cutting his flattened dough into long strips. Mine picked my middle name after a car."

"No. What is it?"

"I’ll never tell."

"Nissan? Corey Nissan Livingston?"

"Ha, ha," he says dryly.

"Corey Corvette!" I blurt, absolutely sure I have the right answer.

"Nope."

"Corey Mercedes Livingston. Corey Porsche Livingston."

"What? No. Jeez, those are girl names. Forget it, Cassidy Sid Lucy Ta-loom-lah Michelle My Bell whatever your name is, ain’t gonna happen."

"Oh, come on. I told you mine," I say flicking flour at him.
He flicks some back and says, "Taloooolah Murphy…"

And now we are in a flour war.

Mr. DiRusso walks back and catches us horse playing.

"Hey, you waste good flour!"

"There’s a sandwich for you on the table," Corey says to him, nailing me in the head with a big blob of dough.

"Okay, truce," I say, teeing up my hands with my face half turned away. Corey gives me his infamous dirty eyeball and we both put down our weapons.

"Okay. I’ll let it go for now," I say, picking the dough out of my hair and tossing it in the trash can. "Besides, I have other ways of getting my information."

"You wish, I’m a man of mystery. You’ll never find out squat what I don’t tell you myself.

"You’ll see," I say, nodding and threatening him, when really I don’t have the slightest clue as to what I’m even saying at this point. Mr. DiRusso walks over to the table and sits down. He picks up the remaining sandwich and starts eating.

"Why you still here?" He says to me with his mouth full. "You no date Shaggy but you stay and do his work? Play tootsie with my flour? Sure. I no pay you though. I only afford one worker."

"She’s my indentured servant for the day, Mr. D." Corey says, as he winds some dough onto a little baking rod. He looks at me smiling and adds, "Payback for being a big bee-yatch."

"Nice! You hear how he talks to me?" I say to Mr. D. "I’d never date a guy who treats me so poorly."

"Good for you. He’s a bum."
Then things go quiet for second. A nervous glance passes between Corey and me. Were we just flirting?

Mr. D smacks his lips.

"Bee-yatch," he says. "What is this bee-yatch?"

I hold back a laugh but Corey starts howling.

Mr. D looks confused and says, "What? What I say funny?"

My laughter has been held prisoner for months. It has been pinched and folded, squeezed and shoved deep down into myself but at this moment, it escapes from me with a thunder. The Incomparable Sid Murphy Cackling Guffaw has returned, in all its obnoxious glory. And for the first time in so long, I let it fill the room.

_____________________________________

When we're done, I am on top of the world. We say our goodbyes and I am sent home with a box of one dozen damaged, but still tasty, clothespin cookies to share with my family. The sun is shining and it's rather pleasant out, so I carry my coat over my arm. I'm practically skipping down the sidewalk as I approach Malloy's Pub. A lot of people are standing around outside, coming in and out of the place, and I can hear fiddle music when the door swings open and shut. A group of guys standing against the building notice me as I approach the corner where the pub sits. They're in their late twenties, thirties maybe, and their lecherous whistles and gawking send my high-flying mood diving straight into the dirt. I can't cross the street until the light changes so I'm stuck listening to the catcalls. They're smoking cigarettes and cigars and pipes and god-knows-what else and, from the way the one guy is hanging on the other, they are all completely drunk.
"Hey, sunshine. How's it going?" a guy in a black pea coat says, handing his pipe to his friend. He breaks off from the herd and walks up to me. "Come inside for a little. It's hoppin' in there. I'll buy you breakfast and a Bloody Mary."

He thinks I'm older. Ugh. Still, his hands are in his pockets and he's wearing an Irish derby and rocking back on his heels. Even though he's glassy-eyed drunk, he looks fairly harmless up close.

"I'm sixteen," I say and force a smile. Then, I pull out my uncharged phone and pretend to dial someone as I wait for the light to change.

"Whoa, sorry," he says, pulling his hands from his coat and holding up his exposed palms. "You look older's all. I ain't looking for jail time."

He starts to turn away, then pauses, smiles sideways at me.

"Sixteen, huh? You sure?"

"I think I would know my own age," I say, trying to look occupied and distracted with my uncharged phone and box of cookies. I listen to my phone not ringing and wait anxiously for the invisible person on the other end to pick up. I watch the street light and tap, tap, tap my foot. Busy, busy me, no time for chit-chat.

As the light changes, I start to cross. Pea Coat heads back to his crew and one of them gets vulgar. It was bound to go there. It always does when drunk men gather uselessly on street corners.

"Shake those humps, baby! Magically delicious!"

The group busts up laughing. I look back to make sure they aren't following me and see Pea Coat shove a short, chubby guy in the shoulder. Chubby defends himself. "Sixteen? No way! She had tits for days, man! Didn't you see 'em?" and they all laugh.
I head down the sidewalk feeling gross. I put my jacket on while awkwardly maneuvering my box of cookies. They've ruined everything. Still, I try to rekindle the good feelings I had two minutes ago. I say to myself, Corey Livingston is a cute baker. C-U-T-E cute. He bakes waffle-wafer thingies and looks cute doing it. But as I walk home, block after block, the Corey shine refuses to resurface. The butterflies that were floating around in my stomach when I left the bakery have grown thoroughly frenzied, flailing around like hornets in a jar. The brightness of the sun has gone from pleasant to glaring.

I dig down and really concentrate on Corey and the bakery and the fun we had together but the images that keep popping in my head are of drunken assholes and dead kittens. Images of a young Corey standing on a lawn, yelling and crying his eyes out. While he never said he cried, my brain adds that part because, well, he was eight-years-old when it happened so, of course he was crying. Then I think of his words: Rage can do strange things to the mind. Rage can make you forget things.

And before I know it, my mind is back to that night. And then the morning after. And I start thinking maybe I wasn’t drugged after all. I start thinking maybe my brain is choosing to forget all those hours I can’t account for, that maybe it was consensual and things went bad after. There was a lover’s quarrel, his girlfriend walked in on us, or I saw his driver’s license and realized he was like twenty-five or something, there was drama, a verbal confrontation.

I walk faster as I try this new scenario on for size. I run the words and ideas over in my head and try to smash and squeeze the puzzle pieces together. Consensual Sex interlocks with Ski Trip Guy interlocks with Girlfriend Scene interlocks with Rage Amnesia.

I stop walking and stand, holding my box of cookies, staring at nothing. I consider this churning, spinning misshapen picture puzzle that I have forced together in hopes that some kind
of lightning bolt will hit it and it will somehow gel together, forming this crystalline portrait of truth and I will finally see what really happened to me. My subconscious will jump up and down with relief and scream from the rooftops of my mind: *That's it! There it is! It's been there all this time!*

But this doesn’t happen. All I get is the dark, spinning whirlpool of images that makes a hissing sound. And a creep of flesh up my leg, up my thigh.

No. Rage Amnesia is not it at all. As much as I'd like to believe that I've unleashed some superhuman fury within myself that resulted in amnesia, I know this is wishful thinking. There was no confrontation or rage coming out of me that night; the only thing I did that night was lay there while it happened, my mind and soul drifting in the void, my body laid out like a gift.

The thought of this makes me start to tremble. I start walking again, faster this time. I look down and realize that my shaking hand is holding a cookie. I have reached into the box at some point without knowing it. I go ahead and eat it, and then another, thinking, *just two, I can run later.* The fear and paranoia are growing and the need to run is nigglng at me, relentless, like an itch that needs to be scratched. The ringing in my ears is getting louder. The Truth is calling.

So I eat a few more cookies, trying to block it out with the crunching in my mouth. I’m so full and I’ve eaten too much already today but I can’t stop. I pull over into an alleyway and cram the remaining cookies in as fast as I can because I need to get rid of them so I can lose the box and run. I can’t stop myself. I start sobbing as I eat them. I eat them until every single one is gone. I get dizzy as I look into the empty box. I feel disgusting and dirty. I tense up and try to fight it back down but am seized with an uncontrollable urge. The Urge comes to life. It takes form and
crawls up my body, sinking its monstrous hooks into my gut. It leans into my face and with a screaming whisper, it tells me, *Get rid of it.*

Get.

Rid.

Of.

It.

Before I can stop myself, my finger goes down my throat. Far down. And it takes a second, but with persistence, everything comes out in wracking heaves. All my beautifully imperfect cookies are now on the pavement where they are mixed into this grotesque and runny cookie-corned-beef-and-cabbage omelet.

I cough and drop the box next to it

I lean against the building crying. But the tears are not because I feel bad; they’re falling because I feel good. And The Truth is so, so still now.

But the ecstasy is short lived.

When I feel the sick in my mouth, feel the bits and pieces of the food that didn’t make it out, I start to feel guilty. I spit the acrid remnants out and then look up at the wedge of sky, so clear and blue, peeking out between the rooftops and I wonder what is wrong with me.

As I lean with my back against the building wiping my eyes and mouth, an elderly couple walks arm-in-arm by the opening of the alley. They look over at me and wave. I wave back, smiling, as if to signal: everything is fine here, there’s nothing to see, so move along.

When they pass, I stand up straight and step over the mess. Then I start running. I run for over three hours.
As I shlump up the sidewalk, I see my street sign up ahead and a whimper of gratitude escapes my lips. I am exhausted and weak. I lost my zing way the hell down on Lake Avenue, almost into Rocky River, and have been dragging myself home for almost an hour. My house, my bed, my pillow, have floated in my field of vision like a mirage. I seriously thought I would never get here.

Right as I turn down my street, my mom's car pulls up, Liam's in the back seat. She stops and rolls down her window.

"I bought you a phone for a reason, Sid. Please keep it on. I have an open house for a ranch on Belle Street. I have to fill in last minute. Janet’s having gall bladder trouble. Vince is meeting us there to take Liam down to the parade. He said you and Kirsten could join them if you want."

Then her eyes plead for forgiveness, "You're not mad are you?"

"Oh, no. God, no," I say. Then it hits me what she just said. Kirsten.

"Wait, what? Did you just say Kirsten?"

"Yeah, she's at the house. Have you two been fighting or something? When she showed up at the door, I realized how long it's been since she's been over. Anyhow, she could use a parade, she's not looking so hot."

"So, she's at the house?"

"Uh-huh. Anyhow, I gotta run so call Vince if you want him to pick you guys up for the parade."

"Yeah, okay," I say and then lean in to give her a kiss, thankful that I don’t have to go to the parade after all. She pulls away and I think, Holy crap. Kirsten is at my house right now.
Chapter Twelve

I walk down the street and think about how three minutes from now I will be face-to-face with Kirsten Vanderhoff, former BFF who dumped me two months ago. I mean, I flub one time and I'm cast out like the devil? And after all those times, all those years, I was there for her. Countless nights she'd sleep over because her parents were drunk and fighting. She'd spoon in next to me in bed and look up at my sticker stars and wish out loud that she could live at my house, wish out loud that we could be sisters. Then she dumps me flat because of one lousy mistake?

I concentrate hard and summon up images of protection—imaginary plates of armor sliding up and over my heart, rusted barbed wire wrapping itself around me. I lock out all warm, fuzzy thoughts and feelings of Kirsten Lee Vanderhoff, Public Enemy Number One.

Then I think of Public Enemy Number Two and wonder where she is right now. I wonder why Kirsten isn't at her house, looking "not so hot." Paige Daniels with her Harry Potter-loving, closet-gamer, half-bible-beater, half-elf-self, scampering around the gym like a chipmunk, all the time maneuvering so we'd never be caught on the same side of the volleyball net. That little squirm. She took the simple act of ignoring someone and elevated it to an art form.

I see Kirsten's clown-mobile in my driveway and I walk up my yard. I see her sitting on my porch. She looks at me and I give her my best whatinthehelldoyouwant? face. She says nothing but I can tell from her eyes that she's been crying. This makes my insides start to thaw and crackle for a moment but then I think, Good. Cry, then. I march past her up the steps. I go inside and almost, almost find the strength to shut the main door and lock it but at the last second, I can't do it. I let the storm door bang shut but the main door hangs open.
As I walk toward the kitchen, I can hear her creeping inside behind me. I kick off my shoes, dump my coat on the floor and head to the fridge. Leaning on the door of the fridge, I down half a carton of orange juice without getting a glass. Kirsten settles into a seat at the kitchen table. I don’t offer her anything. I put the juice back, slam the fridge shut, wipe my mouth with my sleeve, then turn to her.

"What? What do you want?" I say.

Her eyes slink back into her skull. She shifts, tries to get comfortable in her seat.

"I came to tell you—" she says, pausing, and her voice is like splinters, dry and cracked, like she's been crying for days. "—I came to tell you that I get it. I get why you did it."

"Did what?" I say and I'm trying to stay solid, trying not to yield, but it's getting harder by the second, what with her face and voice looking and sounding as pathetic as they do.

"Why you ran off with that guy," she says. "Why you ditched everyone and everything and took a chance. I get it now."

I say nothing. I don't know what she's talking about. And as much as I'm dying to know what she's talking about, I don't want her to know that I'm dying to know what she's talking about. She picks her purse up from the table and walks to the sliding door that leads to the back patio. She pulls out a pack of cigarettes, slides the door open, and looks at me before stepping outside.

"Follow me, Sid? Please?"

She reminds me of a sad, beaten down puppy who just wants picked up. Ugh, I hate her. I step over to the door and she is sitting on a wrought-iron chair with her knees up. There are no cushions, we put those away in fall, so I know it's probably cold and uncomfortable. Still, the
sun is out. It's crisp and bright, and even though it's still technically winter, you can sense the world is about to melt. I walk out, grab the chair across from her and sit down.

"You remember Patrick Callahan? Pat?" she says, lighting her cigarette, looking out into the yard at nothing, her voice getting faraway. She doesn't wait for me to answer. She knows I know who she's talking about.

"We started seeing each other right after the ski trip. For real seeing each other, not just a hookup like at his graduation party. He came home from OU one weekend for the annual Callahan Manly Man Meal at Bucca di Beppo." And she uses air quotes on that last part, her cigarette flickering up and down between her fingers. "To celebrate all those XY chromosomes his Catholic daddy's been pumping out over the years."

She takes a long drag. Deep, like she invented smoking or something. I continue staring a hole through her.

"Paige and I were there with Celinda Becker and Amy Miller. You should have seen it, every Callahan boy and man crammed into that Pope booth. It was like Callahan Sausage Fest at the Beppo, the Pope's head spinning and smiling in the middle of all of them."

She laughs a tiny laugh. I don't join in because all I'm thinking is how she just said You should have seen it and how I want to yell, Well, no! I shouldn't have seen it! I couldn't have seen it, because you freaking dumped me, remember?

"Anyhow, he called me later that night and we went out the next night. Then the next weekend. And then the one after that. We finally did it on the fourth weekend, seventh date. He got us a hotel—flowers, wine, Jacuzzi—the works. Then about two weeks ago, the phone calls started dropping off and he didn't come home to see me. Said he had to study."

She takes another long drag off the cigarette.
"So, in my infinite wisdom, and against everyone's advice, I decided to drive down to OU Friday night and surprise him."

She makes a self-loathing snicker-snort.

"Oh, he was surprised alright. Real fucking surprised." She turns to me in disbelief, "He's had a girlfriend down there the whole time. Some bitch named Tierney from Nantucket. She's on music scholarship. A flautist."

She chortles with more self-disgust, "He tells me he loves me, sleeps with me knowing he was my first, and then one month later, tells me he's made a mistake and that he's really in love with Tierney the flautist from Nantucket. And he actually said it with a straight face, like he's been saying Tierney-the- Flautist-from-Nantucket his whole goddamn life or something."

She takes a final puff of her cigarette, blows out a long stream and says, "God, I'm so stupid," then leans down to crush out the butt on the concrete.

I still haven't spoken yet. I don't know what to say. I mean, I'm not glad she's hurting, I'm not. She was a technical virgin and that was a shit thing for Pat to do but it's a little hard to feel sorry for her at the moment when…well…there's myself to think about. I was getting to the point where I was almost forgetting what her voice sounded like, what her face looked like up close. I was getting to the point where I was almost done mourning the lost friendship with her and Paige and now she's back and I can only assume that Paige isn't far behind.

"Anyhow," she says, looking at me hard, "the point is, I came here to tell you that I get it now. How it feels to want someone. To want them to want you back and how you'll do just about anything to get them to want you back. I knew it was a bad idea to go to OU, but I went anyway because I wanted Pat and I didn't care that I was ditching out on plans I'd made with Paige or that my parents might find out and take the car or that I might get down there and not
like what I found. Nope, I just went out and bought a pink nighty from Victoria's Secret, hopped in the clown-mobile and headed south. I thought, if he just sees me in the nighty, he'll want me again."

The wind picks up and she wraps her arms around her knees, tucks into herself tightly.

"So I came here to say that I'm sorry I judged you so harshly. The punishment didn't fit the crime."

Then she looks down and starts to rock a bit, rests her trembling chin on her knees. "I'm sorry, Sid," she says, "I want my friend back. I need my best friend back."

And her eyes are filling up now, spilling over.

I get up and walk to the sliding door; I can't stand looking at her anymore. Part of me wants to reach out and slide open the door and go inside, leave her out here to freeze. But a bigger part of me pauses, looks at my reflection in the glass and feels the rusted barbed wire falling slack at my feet and the armor cracking wide open. I wish so much I could muster the resolve to scream, *Get Out! Go Home!* but my heart betrays me and blurts out what I'm really feeling.

"You really hurt me, Kirsten. I needed you too. Back then. God, you have no idea how much I needed you. And you really, really hurt me, you and Paige."

Then I reach out to slide open the door but before I can get it even partway open, she's out of her chair and rushing over, putting her hand out to stop me.

"Wait. Please," she says. She leans her head on the cold glass, puts her hands back in her pockets. She looks at me sideways and is right up in my face when she really starts crying. I refuse to look at her full-on, I look into my house, but I can see her in my peripheral, right there inches from my face, sobbing.
"I'm sorry, Sid. Please. I really am. And Paige, God, she would have caved that first week if I hadn't made her stay mad with me. I stoked the fire on that one and I'm so, so sorry. I just want things to go back to the way they were. Can we try? Please?" She's all-out bawling now, which makes the iceberg that was my heart melt and flood upward, choking me in my throat. Then it just happens—I start crying too, my head leaned forward on the glass. She wraps her arms around me and I can't stop myself, I hug her back. And we both bawl. We say we're sorry over and over and after a while, when we're both cried out, we go inside. We make peanut butter and jelly on Ritz Crackers and then call Paige to come over too.

We check the time. 8:57. Three more minutes until the big hoo-rah. Paige, Kirsten and I lay on my bed crossways, with our laptops in front of us, one, two, three. Paige is hooked into World of Warcraft and her avatar is making her way through the twists and turns of Ashenvale Forest. Mendolora, the purple-skinned night elf druid, is mounted on her sabertooth steed and ripping full steam ahead toward Demon Fall Canyon. She and her Lakewood High gamer-guild plan to gank-in-effigy a fake avatar created in honor of Starsha Lexington, a Horde jungle troll.

Don't ask me what any of this means.

All I know is that Starsha's avatar looks like a cross between a deranged bird and retarded warthog and when the gamer-guild blasts her into oblivion there will be a simultaneous mass unfriending of the real Starsha Lexington. Every kid at Lakewood High who's ever had a reason to hate Starsha plans to flush her down the Facebook toilet at the exact same time.

The clock hits nine pm and the Warcraft circle of Starsha haters let loose their weaponry. Swords, arrows, and balls of fire send Starsha the Jungle Troll plummeting face first into the dirt.
Then all of the avatars start dancing around her corpse, one of them doing the moonwalk back and forth across the screen.

Paige says, "Ding-dong the bitch is dead," and we laugh hysterically. Then Kirsten and I turn to our own laptops and unfriend Starsha at the same time, slapping high-fives. We watch in amazement as Starsha's friend count takes a nosedive.

"Holy shit," Kirsten says. "863 minus 815? That's like, what, forty or fifty friends she lost?"

"48," I say. "No, wait. We got one more. 49."

"Don't forget me and the guild," Paige says, shrinking out of Warcraft and opening up her Facebook. There's 15 of us, so that makes it 64."

And while she still holds onto an impressive 799 friends, it makes me warm and fuzzy inside that Starsha Bitchface Lexington just lost 64 friends in the span of five seconds.
Chapter Thirteen

It’s a Saturday, the first week of April and I need new clothes. Nothing, and I mean nothing, fits now. Kirsten and Paige wanted me to wait so we could all go together and make it an official "Back Together" event, but this is something I want to do alone. I don’t want anyone looking at me, complimenting me, commenting on me, asking how I lost so much weight in such a short time. I’d rather just slip in, buy a few things, and then slip out.

I take the bus to the mall and head directly to the juniors’ section at Macy’s. I start to browse, frustration growing with each item I pick up. Spring clothes are out and everything seems so skimpy. I hold a few tops up to myself and eventually put them every one back. I decide I can do without tops. It’s the pants that I can’t live without. I walk over to the jeans racks and everything is so low cut and hip-huggy revealing. The zippers are like two inches long on some of them. Another girl about my age is browsing too, she has on a hot pink, super tiny baby tee with a cartoon on it. She picks up a pair of jeans and heads toward the fitting room, her lacy red thong popping out the top of her pants. I shudder and keep looking. I finally find some jeans that, while still low-rise, are not super low-rise, or God forbid, super-extra low-rise—Pube Grazers, yuck.

I glance over toward the Misses’ section where the more conservative, mom-jeans are sold. It’s pleated, plain-pocket, nine-inch-zipper-town over there. I’ll try on the low-rise pair and see how they fit before I go that depressing route.

The dressing room is cold and my booth is packed already with piles and piles of jeans from other customers. I take my sweats off and pull on the jeans. I am expecting them to be snug but am surprised when they slide up effortlessly. A little too effortlessly. I button and zip them and then turn to look in the mirror; they’re way too big. It must be a forgiving cut.
Designers do that. They cut everything bigger and put smaller sizes on them so people will think
they’re skinnier than they really are and buy more clothes.

I look around in the piles of jeans strewn around the fitting room until I find another pair,
a size smaller. I try them on, but this time, they're even more loose. I try on four more pairs.
The last pair fits perfectly and it's three size smaller than my old, pre-ski trip jeans. I look into
the mirror with astonishment.

"Three sizes," I whisper to myself, turning around to look at my butt. While it's still big,
it's not huge big, like it was. A grin spreads across my face. I get dressed and go back out to the
main floor where I blow every babysitting dime I've made in the last six months on new clothes.

When I get home, my mom has dinner all ready and waiting. At two in the afternoon,
I'm forced to sit and eat meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and yams. I look at the food and think about
how yams are just orange potatoes and I'm being forced to eat two mountains of starchy
overblown carbs, one drenched in a small pond of gravy, the other in a sludge of cinnamon
butter. I eat it though, because my mom is watching every move I make, every spoonful that
goes onto my plate, and every forkful that goes into my mouth, all the while trying to look like
she's not. I scoop out big portions like "lah-dee-dee, lah-dee-dah, looks good, Ma! Yum!" and
play my part in our ridiculous little dinner theater. When I'm done, she asks if Liam and I would
like dessert, because, well, wouldn't you just know it, she has an apple pie and even bought real
whipped cream to go with it which is sooooo much better than the fake stuff, hooray!

I want to say, Dessert, huh? So, tell me Ma, when did the notion of a Murphy dessert go
from Chips Ahoy with milk to baking entire fruit pies in the oven. Relax Katherine, I ate the
fucking yams.
I don't say any of this. I keep my best game face on and smile through dinner like it is Thanksgiving Day and I am just one hungry-ass pilgrim come to feast with the Indians.

Finally, after we do the dishes, she takes off for a few hours to get her hair cut. She’s decided to cut it shorter, into a bob, so that clients will take her more seriously. I try to talk her out of it but she says, "Sid, I haven’t sold a house in two months. I’m pulling out all the stops here."

So, I am stuck babysitting again. I shouldn’t say stuck because I don’t mind. Liam's in his room playing the Wii that his Grandma Leona got him for Easter. I open my bedroom window. The sun is shining, the birds are singing, and the trees are budding. I take a deep breath of springtime air and think about how nice it will be to run in this weather. As soon as Katherine gets back, I'll take off and that monstrosity of a meal will be nothing more than a distant memory. Those starchy yam carbs that are currently riding a river of gravy straight toward my ass—they won't know what hit 'em. I put on some music and get down to the business of cleaning out my closet. I'm going to make it into a sparkling, shiny showcase for my new clothes.

I put on an old song that I love called "Downtown" by Petula Clarke. It’s perky and upbeat and has that happy girly feel that goes along with my happy girly mood. Even Petula’s name sounds perky and girly. I start pulling all my old jeans and tops off the hangers, throwing them into a pile on my bed. I start bobbing my head, dancing a little, and singing along. Quietly and to myself because my scratchy voice is a stark contrast to Petula’s pure, angelic one and I’d rather hear her than me.

After a few minutes, I am really getting into the spirit of the song, my voice is getting louder and the closet clean-out and the singing are reaching an animated pitch. Ronan decides
he’s had enough estrogen and gets up and goes into my brother’s room. The pile of clothes on my bed is growing bigger and bigger and the song is coming up on its big soaring chorus.

Out of nowhere the merriment comes to a screeching halt. In the back of my closet, stuffed behind a ton of junk, I see something bright green peeking out. It's the coat that I wore on the ski trip, the one I borrowed from Kirsten because I didn't have any gear of my own. The mere glimpse of it slams into me like a bus and knocks me on my ass.

I pull it out and stare at it hanging limp in my hands. The lift ticket is still attached to the front of it. Then my stomach slides down into my feet as I pull the coat off the hanger. The music is blaring and has gone from girly and chipper to a shrieking sort of mockery.

I never even noticed the lift ticket when I put the coat in my closet all those months ago. As I look at it, really look at it, I feel dizzy and I have to sit on my bed to keep from falling over.

The print blurs in and out of focus as I make sense of what it says: Snow Ridge Ski Lodge Group Discounted Lift Pass. 01.10.10 - 01.11.10. C. Murphy. LHS Ski Club, Cleveland, Ohio

As Petula sings, I reach a clammy, trembling hand into the pocket of the coat and pull out the receipt that he had written on.

CLEVELAND ROCKS!

I start to see fuzzy blackness and flitting little dots of light. ‘Seeing stars’ I guess it’s called. I’ve never seen stars before and I’ve always wondered what ‘seeing stars’ looks like and now I know.

The music is even louder now. Petula is really belting out her anthem, really giving it all she’s got and I clench my teeth because this primal sort of anger and fear is building up inside of me, a panicked fury that is burning me up from the inside out. I stand up and stagger a bit. I take off my shoe and throw it at the radio to stop the singing but I miss and it just bounces on the
floor. I walk over and with a swooping hand, swat the radio off my dresser; it rattles over the
side and is lodged between my dresser and nightstand. I jerk at the cord until it comes
unplugged and the music stops. None of this helps because the music is replaced with the
ringing hiss of The Truth. I sit back on my bed, put my head between my knees, and breathe
deeply so I don’t pass out. I put my hands to my ears to try and stop the ringing hiss and I am
shaking badly now and my stomach is swimming with greasy meatloaf, gravy, and yams. The
Urge is tadpoling around inside it, feeding off it and growing bigger and bigger. The Truth
ridicules me, in a sing-songy voice from inside my own heart….I took a class on shedding
accents. I can pinpoint where you live by the way you talk. Blah, blah, blabbity-blah. God, you
are so stupid. Cleveland rocks? Ha! You had it plastered on the front of you the whole time!

I cross my arms snugly over my chest. Hot tears spill down my cheeks. I wipe them
away and try not to listen to the voices inside me but The Truth, it just gets angrier…

You are a fat stupid slut, Sid Murphy. Your chest and ass are still huge. God you’re
begging for it walking around with that disgusting shit bouncing around. Three sizes? Come
on! You can do better than that…

"No." I whisper.

But The Truth is stronger than I am. And as I get up and stumble toward the bathroom, I
know what I need to make it quiet. The Urge swims around inside me, so happy to be called
upon.

I close the bathroom door behind me and turn on the water.

I run the water loud and flush repeatedly so Liam won’t hear.